

Studies

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Thank you to Lauret Savoy. For your conversation and telling our class, “Don’t be precious with your journals.”

Thank you to Jane Crosthwaite. I desperately needed to wrestle with the questions you planted that Fall.

Thank you most of all to Mom, Dad, and Neil.

*Atop the mushroom-
Who knows from where-
A leaf!*

-Basho

These pieces began by keeping a regular journal for a course with John Lemly and Lauret Savoy in the Fall of 2014. The journal became a daily dump: words with their definitions, facts from other classes, puzzling interactions or events, and bits from news articles or books. Underneath I took space to digest and react. In her talk at Mount Holyoke in March of this year, Jhumpa Lahiri explained that for her, “Writing is a form of reading, you can’t contain yourself.”

The journal writing moved from musings to more structured attempts at understanding. Yet, most of these pieces were still responses to something encountered (often not literally) and spun connections that felt natural. My source material was broad in scope, whatever wound up caught on the brain that week. I regularly drew from a deep and steadfast love for *The New York Times*, specifically the Science and Styles sections, occasionally the obituaries (people live wonderful and strange lives). Lectures in and out of class. One poem even came out of an informative mushroom walk with a local mycologist.

Writing meant grappling with, rather than feeling stuck with, a bubbling thought after learning something new or revisiting an old image. What was written down was now ready to be wrestled with. Something tangible was much easier to question. Prod a little. Play with.

I could dwell in something splattered down. Rather than feeling paralysis, writing was active engagement. It put into practice the mindset espoused by Ellen Davis, an American theologian and Old Testament scholar. She has said, “Certainly there is a difference between hope and a foolish optimism. And in order to have hope, you have to see the depth and the dimensions of the problem.”

Most of these poems observe natural phenomena. Focusing on the staggering range of color, movement, and sound around us. Each poem acts independently but together tap into ruminations on family (home), confinement, our squishy color-pumped awe-inspiring surroundings, and by extension the divine. As a result, some poems began recycling religious language. Mostly from Christianity, which is the faith tradition I am most familiar with (but recognizing that Christianity itself is highly diverse, immense, and splintery).

Over the course of this project, attention to sound became more important to the construction of a poem. For example, in the two pieces *Storm over water* which both dealt with the same image but months apart. I am drawn to wordplay, nonsense, and rhyme, both the accidental and painstakingly wrought kind. Points of contrast are delightful diving off points, whether in form, in thought, in scale, in tone. Seeming contradiction abounds. One of my favorite examples comes in Edward Lear's *The Jumblies*. An intrepid two-tone group set sail in a sieve, holes and all, chanting,

“...Though the sky be dark, and the voyage be long,
Yet we never can think we were rash or wrong,
While round in our Sieve we spin!”

How utterly ridiculous! How utterly accurate! The deep rightness in the absurdity of these lines bundle fear, joy, and understanding. My attempt at mimicking this particular poem led to a monstrous hybrid limerick that could barely hold itself up.

So, sometimes when working through a poem the whole thing just went wonky. Out of balance. Lost its kilter, its clip. But other times pushing through what seemed like a mistake made something unexpected. In those instances, incorporating worked. Weaker phrasings were cut if they no longer fit (perhaps they just belonged somewhere else). Occasionally a whole poem simply refused to blow into shapely life. But others reached their fixed proportion and felt

ready, right. Syllabic poetry was a helpful, almost safe, framework that I returned to regularly, an example of this is *Marmalade*. The poems were written by reading parts aloud and were guided primarily by sound. Overall there was a trend toward paring down the language and becoming more purposeful with word choice.

Ruminant

Think warm pink polymer thoughts.

Sink stones in the gummy stew.

Opals.

Amethysts.

Watch them bob, cradled.

Then slowly submerge.

Stretchy taffy words.

Granular sugar melted into a matrix of chew.

Kneaded, rotated, and pulled.

Softest strands snap apart.

Then the whole piece comes together

Into a rolling tongue of mouthfuls.

Ascetic

“...his way of life provided a spectacle at once challenging, repulsive, and awesome.”

-*The Oxford Dictionary of Saints.*

Do you see a small forehead smudge of worldly glory in spectacular sacrifice?

So they built a careful world. Gave slippery livers to calves and us mouths to suckle them still hot. Only once we discover our fill of sanguine paste do nucleated flakes heave from the heavens. Cool dimpled cheeks and shamed lips. We are saved until they pass. Their back part breeze kicks up aromatic rings. Drug us to fearful sleep. We wake groggy, missing an entire organ, eye our new neighbor suspiciously, and stab out in hunt of calves.

Then my moving line moved.

It mists. Air clings condensed with water. Above quickly cooling. Leaches heat from our bodies. Wind whips the sheet of waves. Ruthless. Drops crack against each other, spray out, and get caught in hairs. Dissolved salts cannot dry. Instead they stream down our skin and sting. The shrill of a mind in a lost body.

Go taut. Go limp. Then heft up to shore again. Because of that twinkle. Because some muscle said to. Because we were made to slosh in our sacks and feed each other.

Well, I'd only stopped for a drink when they threw me in the wheelbarrow. Thought best to stay put. Star-nosed down through the velvety vegetative pile and wrapped myself in purple turnip peels. Absorbed what I could while waiting to be dumped somewhere along the path I'd been on anyhow.

Overturning mulchslide on molehill they goad,

 Crevicular drop
 Crepuscular tides
 Cavernous nodes
 Tamper with eyes.
 Simper before us
 Strike out and feast.
 Return on the nose
 To regret your speech.

Indulge our divine chains. Give them a rattle.

In the distance. Upon a fifty-eighty-sixty foot pillar. A calf stands on blistering hooves, teaching discipline by example. *Sir Simeon. St. Simeon. Sir Simeon,* we chant.

Refit the fallen

Refit the fallen, the far-flung, acorns.
Each corn to its own scaled cup.
We find the caps hollow.
Bound in model trimers and tetramers
Or loose like change.
While popped out nuts create a careening carpet.
Take a glide along
Then gather them.
Join these pairs together.
Climb coaxing each back to their heavy blown bundle.
Then to their flower,
Their nascent bud,
And back into the branches.
Begin to pat.
Mold the whole down to a sapling,
Finally an acorn.
To bounce in the drum-skin of your palm.

Naïve

Now, it was not until that windy
December morning
That the remaining leaves
Began to worry.
They had seen many a fallen
But held firmly that they would not be next

Yawning open
The budding leaf delights in the blustery April breeze.

March

March.

Peppery cold. Rapping sharp into grey the woodpecker starts our work. We take to the mounds. Grasp picks squarely and swing. From this side: we tap, dent, and chip at insulating crust. From that side: beans and bulbs moisten. They split bust from jackets. Notice their starches. Some tissues look up; other tissues look down. They ponder and prepare.

A week in.

We've abandoned our picks and are now belly down. Smashing fists against fissures. Scratching at the surface. Frenzied, we even tried stuffing snow under our hats to melt it. The next morning, we found a few with the hottest thoughts stuck solid in their impressive puddles. Chagrined, tugging at coattails. Grumbling back to work, again, there are whispers of mutiny but we have had trouble identifying the proper authorities to target.

Vanity of vanities, sighs the pale yellow winter hazel; all *is* vanity.¹ Below, keeping season in appropriate time, they've carefully and vertically poked their way. What will be a snowdrop, made good progress on Thursday.

¹ Ecclesiastes 8.

Evie Grace

Brand spanking box-shaped
bundle opens her eyes.

Looks askance at the
entranced herd of hands.

Then out with throat croak
rumble belly laugh.

Whole bodies forth a
guffawing,

“Askew!”

Newborn discernment
is quick discounted.

“Gesundheit!” we coo.

Grubs nestle deep

Grubs nestle deep in our carrion. Weigh down the meat and help shake the ghost out.

Spirits are rather sticky. Easily adhered to what has passed. On a walk around the lake, I saw one sunk. Waist deep. Trying to wrench the rest of themselves from a body. Grabbing onto live limbs and long green grasses. Pulling. Hefting. Digging elbows into the dirt. Desperately trying to free themselves.

Often one will have just made a break and accidentally step into a nearby carcass. Stuck. So, the process will start all over again. Pulling. Hefting.

Bits and bobs of decay accumulate on their surface. Especially around the ankles. Overwhelmed, they might take a seat somewhere inorganic and unbur.

Mayfly season poses a perennial problem. Small bodies rain from above, when the flies take flight to perish en masse. Pelt the spirit in a thick chitinous dust.

Back in the fall, I passed one painstakingly snapping away the last few fibers conjoining their foot bottom to the remains of a falcon. I tried that trail again last week and there they were. Still plucking.

But now with Spring. With Summer. With all that wriggling larval motion and breakdown heat the ghosts will move a bit faster. Catalyzed.

Flamenco

Forge Flamenco with a firm red stomp.
Raise an eyebrow. Set the nerve pounding.
Only to withhold your electric body.
Hips twist atop a battered out beat.
As a palmed clap rasps underheel.

Boxing

Agile boxers sink feet to floor.
Fists forward with leg sinews taut.
Squat. Then shoulder roll on a dime,
Into a quick muscle backed hook.

Two Dancers

Their cores were withheld
Their bodies repelled.
Their beings were clearly at odds.
With arms intertwined
Backs curled round like rind
And faces peeled free of façade
See struggle ensue.
One crumples on cue,
Head hung as we burst to applause.

Two Paintings

Facing each other, hang two paintings. Both landscapes in oil.

One. Dusk spills over an airport runway. The scene lit by electric lamplight. Hot white contained and haloed in pink. Two pills of turquoise. And on the horizon a city, a string of dim dots. Sky fills most of the canvas. The day's light has been pulled down, now distant. Only pink and yellow layers linger in the lower left. Haze of liquid brown encroaches from either side. This work reminds me of coming home to JFK, late. Feeling the city still hot from August. Its smell humid and packed. The piece is of a Dallas airport done after the painter's mother had passed.

Two. A rounded stretch of beach. An island out of reach. Dry dune grasses bend. Foaming peaks contend. They race to reach the land. But melt into the sand.

Mom shook the red kitchen mat right out the window. It was flapped up by the piping wind and got carried away. I went down on the drive. Scanned the bare winter trees. Perhaps it got snagged on a branch. Or a wire. Searched down in the park. Maybe it landed in the sand pit. Or on the sledding hill. I asked a woman with a child if they'd seen something red sailing overhead. They reported seeing nothing untoward in the skies that afternoon.

(3/16/15)

Storm over water

I

Night lightning strikes crest
Feel the split roar disperse.
Waves crackle, some spit.
Sense the interface smack,
Ache armpit to valve,
And fall bowling pin back.

(2/15/16)

Storm over water

II

Jagged cut across the sky.
Dagger drags a trail of fire.
Flash of thread snaps in midair.
Roiling bounds rip at the tear.
Listen. For deep calls to deep.²
Singed with terror, held in heat.
Clatter crash it all falls down
What a batter boom of sound!

² Psalms 42:7; but more relevantly from an interview Harper Lee gave to Newsweek with regards to a letter she received from Truman Capote, which was quoted in her obituary by William Grimes, *The New York Times*, 19 February 2016.

Fraud

Face the other fraud.
Share an eye narrow.
Conspire. Then nod
And turn heavenward.
Tug an ironed cuff.
Monitor your mouth.
Try to light your eyes.
They can't know the spark.
Sit into your gait.
Circulate. Circulate.
Lids begin to twitch
And the bulb behind
Twists out of focus.

In his journal, John Cheever described himself as a “walking bruise.”
Do you feel a similar way?
Formed of phagocytic blood decay.
That in slow delicious color burst,
You show all that pains. All that’s hurt.
Loosen yowl or hack nauseous sob
Point a pricking thumb to prod.
From out your back, kidneys, toes
Greasy yellow jelly rolls.
And purpling burping farting pinks,
Green that won’t slunk down the sink,
That navy blue of heaven’s gate
Reflected in a pool of hate.
Til tannish hide of calving cow
Sets to curdle days from now.
Stately copse of gum black trees
Lost to fevered tainted eaves.
Mint of moldering fungal heaps,
Tinge that’s born as waters creep,
Blinded brown swirled up in storm,
Or shivering pale of sheep just shorn.
Citrus touched by festered hand,
Infection travels stand to stand.
Engulfing each extremity
And all is lost to visual reek.

Nonsense Poem

“Who was your spigot blush and bloom?”
Asked the Marble of the Moon.
“Tis the gorgon’s lardy plume,”
Replied the tipsy looming lune.

“Now, were you married to this feather?
Made your hearth amongst their heather?”
Mused the former
Fore thinking better.
For the question raised a rather
Unappetizing swallowed swagger
From the belly of the Moon.

With puff of chest and suck of paunch
Came this viscous smug response,
“Caught agog by my salubrious phase
They staggered out from inside your maze.
Lingered long an extra hour
Til they climbed a nearby tower.
To be but closer, nearly touching,
To my cresting cratered mantle.
Admired every crease!
Considered each angle!

Lo! How I miss . . .
That adoration.
I held them once.
They fell away.
Off the back.
Into the bay.”
Sighed the flagrant fading Moon.

Sweet Nothings

The stern grump hippopotamus
girdled its wry and wrinkled wit.
Until a crow lit upon its back.
Clenched at marbled muscled fat.
Revulsive shiver steeled bird's resolve
That no shake or ply could hope dislodge.
It dug claws deep in toughened clay.
From polished beak came hissing bray,
"But what of that most gentle dish
of lapping glass shot through with bliss
To wriggle in a luscious squish.
To bask. To tremble. Glow amidst
partnered peeling of spanglorious tryst
And feast upon siphon sup of lips.
Hold no thought of prying eyes
Or whispered target blatant lies.
Hold no thought of friends or kin.
Their worries are impoverished din.
They shield you from both rose and thorn
With love that is simple. Sad. Worn.
Heed me. See me. Watch me. Listen!
Do not my feathers glow? Glisten?
Follow me. Bend to my entice.
I offer all that is sweet and right.
Take but one wetted treacle sip
And you'll fall prey to searing slip
Out the shady river bank
To join our feathered fragrant rank."

After serious thoughtful pause
Done indulging these noxious caws
The hippo took a belly breath
And glugged down to a calmer depth.

Dying duck

Duck dying of an aneurysm drove straight into the wedding cake.
Hearing its whistle and seeing the blow, guests dressed in their best
fake smiles felt expressions of horror burst through.
They watched the teetering tiered confection implode.
Frosting and fallacy mixed in the air.
Unleashed a spray of frothy cream droplets.
It glazed updos,
Oozed down shirt fronts,
slathered and spurred
the festooned to flaunt
their proximity to the action.
They couldn't resist
reveling in the fact
that no occasion
of such anticipatory aplomb
goes off without a hitch.

The impact understandably upset the topper fondant swans. They were not found until later that evening. Upside down. Intact. Buried neck deep in a dish of rice.

A drizzle of crystalline slime coated the scene. The saccharine smell attracted wasps. Squeals and strong stomping heels. Women were seen warding off the buzzing. Wielding pamphlets pulled from their pockets. One whipped off her burnished loafer waiting for a lander.

A quivering splatter of white dangled from the priest's nose. When no one appeared to be looking he lifted a long pink tongue and hooked the smear into his mouth.

Now, the ring bearer was most distressed.
Gobs of frosting filled in each finger hole
and quickly began to harden.
"Scape, spit, and shine." he assured the crowd, "All will be well in a lickety-split."
But to himself, admitted the wedding bands would never be the same.
They would always be just that slight bit sticky.

Earlier in the week, Dad and I went to the Portuguese butcher's in Maspeth. Live chickens, guinea hens, goats, ducks, and rabbits. The chickens were frantic. Wings skeletal, already plucked. Some were missing toes. The guinea hens still wore their thicket of dotted feathers and seemed calmer for it. A duck rolled past me in a garbage bin. Curious, craning its dirty neck. Headed for the back room with the swinging door. Chickens are held upside down when they are chosen. Blood rushes to their head and they faint. Wings spread. But ducks are more astute. They must have given a few assistants a snap and chase before the bin transport system was devised.

They creep

They creep. Poison in hand. Then with panther pad, gag, and hush unleash it upon our veins.
Where it snakes through the trumpet of our ear. Smoothed by their moneyed words. Pernicious in
both flow and breakdown.

We grow,
“Most lazar-like, with vile and loathsome crust.”³

See here,
“cows with stringy tails, malformed hooves, giant lesions protruding from their hides and red,
receded eyes; cows suffering constant diarrhea, slobbering white slime the consistency of
toothpaste, staggering bowlegged like drunks.”⁴

Declare! Shout,
“Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.”⁵

Something, some compounded doom
Does life and loving work entomb.
With desperate dread,
Fear their sneak tread.
They clapped PFASs into existence
Which circulate through an endless instant.
Why? With such short sight they cannot see
The cost which goes beyond our paltry fee.
For what pollution kills beasts and men
Shall revert to strike at them.

³ *Hamlet* 1.5.72

⁴ Nathaniel Rich, "The Lawyer Who Became DuPont's Worst Nightmare," *New York Times Magazine*, 6 January 2016.

⁵ *Hamlet* 1.4.95

We nearly lost the bird today. The kitchen window was open and she flew into the evening. Mom went out in our street. In the rain. With no coat. Calling to her red-eyed and frantic. She'd flown down our six stories landing across the street on the brothers' mansion stoop. A vibrant small yellow. When we brought down her swing she climbed straight on. She seemed a little bewildered, having been inside all these years. The mansion originally belonged to a man who made his fortune in salt before it became a religious study center.

Midnight Mass

Smoking smells of frankincense.
Boughs are bent with ornament.
Candles drip, parents shuffle,
Children dare not shift a muscle.
Men hung in silk sweep down the aisle.
Wait a beat. Then clamber out in file.

Marmalade

We stew zests in bubbling sugar.
Above the kettle, a mobile turns.
Strings heavy with curls of lime rind,
Twigs of brush, dried licorice root.
Reach, grate; dust, crush into the mix.

Ginger knobs kept cold at the sill.
Scattered auburn cinnamon scrolls.
Bench bound in white butcher paper.
Where piles of pestled spice repose.
In a dish: tingling smear of mint.

Shelves hold amber pots of agar,
Suspensions of honey and thyme,
Bottled orange oil and anise stars,
Bitter oregano sachets
(Laced with peppercorn and basil).

Fallen Nest

Fallen nest against the ground
Woven round potential sound.
Spent shells in a spent nest.
Tatters of feathers suggest
Parents' plucked downy care,
Now smashed and laid bare.

But
what if suddenly
Clods crumbled and dropped out from underneath me
As I passed across a threshold
Onto fathoms.
I wonder what would matter most in that moment.
Likely at twenty, myself.
Hopefully at sixty, anything else.

Illuminated

Cathedral swells at
Its mortar seams for
Script birthed, in the far
Wave beaten abbey,
From the hands of men
Mindful of the tides
And the day's rhythms.
Simply bent to work,
They follow light from
Station to station,
Carefully kindling
Intricate leaves of
Inks and gilt margins.
Frames in miniature
Hold the heavy word.
But see the artist among them adds a fanciful bee to the upper left corner.

An apple orchard in May

Release bees upon the orderly apples
Knotted, gnarled, and squat
Propped leaning against a metal rod
Nursing sweet warts 'til...
Five arms open. Organs out!
Just longing for the squirm.

Proteins breathe into the contours of their folded shape. But in a moment of shock they spook to a limp peptide line. Losing function and purpose.

*Boil thou first i' the charmed pot!*⁶

Barley straw for limpid brew
Rid of stagnant ghastly hue
Stuffed down tights and pantyhose
Left to sink then decompose
Quell summer ponds' most dreaded doom
A filamentous algal bloom.

⁶ *Macbeth* 4.1.9

Amanita

Lacquer yellow lid opens like an umbrella.
Then curls back its slick cuticle cap, snarling.
Guts forth spores from the innermost combs.
(Smell their faint projectile fizz.)
As an oxidative cut spreads
Across the gills and
Turns its underbelly blue.

Clouds roll

Clouds roll.
Globular and gathering to begin.
Begin to drop bits of themselves
Overbrim. Then spill across stately lines
But splash fiercely before mountains.
Hear the steady beat and notice
The sound gap where the rains stop
Pattering. Under a bridge.

Aerial View of the Rocky Mountains

Snow lined scallops undulate in the landscape. The origins of their beat? Take a gander. Perhaps they kneaded down with the butt of their palm. Pinched each to a smooth caving curve between fore and thumb. Licked a finger, dipped it in white, and drew it along the lip. Composed conical arrays of bristles. Arranged them in clusters. Softened the shear. Encouraged loose dribbling bits. Then they stood back and watched us scramble to scale their work.

This is when we pray,

Yeast. Oblong, ovular and budding
Living to eat and blow.
We ferment.
They incorporate then let their air go.

Fruiting Bodies

The fungus pulses alive
in gaps. It sniffs the currents,
then declares itself, when it
pleases, in a frill of fine
mycelium lace.

Pink matte polyps pop out of
this decomposing log. Raised
sugar dots poke through lignin.
The fungus peers out to be
sure it is wholly alone.

Its pale belly is already
shaded by a concave hat,
still the contented cuckoo
fills up the hollow. Enshrined,
as temporary statue.

Orange intestines squeeze out
of the eviscerated.
They are lobular and tight,
rupture to clear gelatin,
and demand to be looked at.

I jabbed a sagging one and
it slid apart, into the
slurp of many brown sliver gills.
Disembodied flaps slumped
to a slimy organ slip.

A faceted, chitinous,
and low bubo puckers hid,
underneath the evergreen.
I lance through hollow mache;
whisps of spores smoke out.

When the net has been pursued. The lead line collected. Encourage jellies over the net. Barbed gelatin ropes. Before they sink deep. Scoop fish when they begin to collect in folds or pockets. Dump out wriggling dip nets into bins with bubblers and water pumps.

Sort by species and measure to where their tail forks. Smelt seize up. Wide-eyed, frightened and dull. Herring fight. Throw off sprays of scales in violent whiplash jerks. Stickleback raise up indignant red-tipped spines. Refuse to lie flat against the ruler. Flash their green plates. Armored. Chum salmon slither slick away in their thick slime coat.

For opalescent squid measure the mantle. After an overcrowded hour of their squirting around one another, watch white caps bob to the surface of the inked up bucket. Instead of belly up, their brains grow buoyant and turgid.

*you burn me*⁷

If not, snow-blown decadence. Frozen limb. Scratching creek downed and leaning. Gouging into their upright neighbor's bark and soul. After The Fall they snag. Act as habitat and shade. Even engage in their own delicious decay. But dread the naked moment when their parenchyma strips away.

Quickly. Shield your youth! Gird your entrails! For an unabashed blaze is burning in our midst. Hot ash. Spluttered out. Blanched to cold chalk, sifted down through vapors. Settles as mineral substrate. Where only the lichens can live.

Consider who hides above the scuttle clouds and churns underfoot.

Quiver.

In disbelief.

First the bomb burst.

So we bent to pick up the pieces.

Some were tar-sticky.

Needing to be suctioned up or neutralized with soda.

Others gurgled in tributaries.

Easy to get at with a net.

But a few found their way to the sound

And were never heard from again.

⁷ *If Not, Winter- Fragments of Sappho* translated by Anne Carson, Fragment 38, p. 77.

Young twitch

Young twitch. Tap-crack open
Sack then shell. Slimed and sleek
What nostril! What beak!
From fluid coated throat
Plaintive feedback bird call.
Alone, the moan doubtful
Made a dent in silence.