

FRAGMENTS

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May 2008

Submitted to the Department of English of Mount Holyoke College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts with Honors

Faculty Advisor: Robert Shaw

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project would not have been possible without the encouragement of my thesis adviser, Robert Shaw, and my academic adviser, Bill Quillian. Both have seen me through the challenges of thesis production, continually answering four or five (often panicked) e-mails in a row and supporting me in my poetic explorations, wherever they took me.

I would also like to thank Maryanne Alos, the administrative assistant in the English Department; it is because of her that I first heard of Mount Holyoke, and she has been a constant friend and support for these four years.

My deepest thanks are also in order for Kathy Binder and Michael Snediker, two of my favorite professors who graciously accepted my invitation to be on my thesis committee. I thank them for their time and encouragement.

It is necessary for me to acknowledge that without Mount Holyoke College—the entity, the landscape, the community—I would not be the writer that I am today. It is thanks to Mount Holyoke that I am a poet.

Thank you to Mairi Cameron: the first, last, and always; the “you.” Without her and (need I say it?) her love, so many of these poems would not have been written. Her support of my project, despite the long distance, has been invaluable.

Finally, thank you to my families for their support and love; it is an honor to have two (one in Oregon and one in this little town of South Hadley) and without them I would not know who I am today. Thank you to my sister and parents who support me despite their concerns that I will one day be a starving artist; thank you to my roommates and best friends, my second family who endured numerous “opinion checks” about a poem’s wording or meaning. I cannot adequately express what their praise and encouragement has meant to me.

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The Beginning of *Fragments*

As a self-identified writer, setting out in the fall of my senior year to create a poetry thesis was a simple and obvious choice. Better yet, while many students have to sit down at a computer with a stack of primary and secondary sources to begin their work, I had the benefit of composing poems for my thesis while standing in line at the grocery store, driving through the hills of Massachusetts, or scribbling on a napkin in a restaurant. But the reality of writing poems for inclusion in a thesis collection turned out to be less romantic and more challenging than I initially imagined.

The less romantic part of my process came when the poems didn't. The inability to harness the inspiration around me, losing a line, losing sleep over the missing perfect word—these aspects of writer's block affected me all the more as I began to write for others (my adviser, peer editors) and for a deadline. If the poems wouldn't write, the thesis wouldn't happen, a condition that enforced discipline: I wrote almost every day of the past year, even if I deemed the resulting fragments unacceptable. In order to obtain the quantity needed for my thesis collection, quality was sometimes compromised—I knew it was better to write a bevy of “bad beginnings” that could, with time, be edited to my satisfaction than to have nothing to show for an hour's worth of work. My quotidian struggle with the writing of my poems has a place as the concluding poem of *Fragments*, “Ars Poetica”: “You'd think the poem would be easy, you're alive!” and so on.

As a perfectionist, my prominent concern with including any one poem in the following work was whether or not I deemed that poem “finished” enough to be read by the general public. This apprehension highlights the extent to which any poem can be “finished” in the eyes of its writer. There is a story about one of my greatest influences, notorious perfectionist Elizabeth Bishop, detailing her revision process for her famous villanelle, “One Art.” Bishop explained that

the poem came to her quickly, but soon metamorphosed through fifteen drafts. “One Art” did not satisfy her completely until she inserted the word “shan’t” into the last stanza of the poem, in a phrase that remains there today.

Like Bishop, it is difficult for me to think of a poem as “finished” when there is opportunity to improve it. Naturally, the revising process for the poems in this project is incomplete, but the poems gathered here are what I think of as “finished” works because they have presently reached their zenith; they may not be “finished” next week, but at a certain point I have to let go of a poem, even if it is not what I consider “perfect.” The title of this collection reflects this ongoing aspect of my work because it is possible that these poems are mere fragments of what will come in the future.

What They Said

Appropriately, my young-adult introduction to the writing of poetry began with former Poet Laureate Billy Collins, author of the poems “Introduction to Poetry” and “The Trouble with Poetry.” His frank and conversational poems were some of the first that I read closely and with interest. Collins’s work plays a pivotal role in my collection because I try to emulate his informal and accessible style in a number of my poems, including “Highway 26, 76 Miles to Tillamook” and “Questions of Travel, 21st Century.” My poem “Graceful Drowning” is in direct response to Collins’ work, “The Art of Drowning” and explicitly invokes the poet: “Mr. Collins called it an art....”

Former Mount Holyoke professor Mary Jo Salter also strongly influenced my writing career; it was Salter who officially introduced me to formal poetry in her course Verse Writing I. When I presented Salter with my first poem in iambic pentameter, I wrote a note explaining that I

needed help to understand meter. To my surprise, Salter responded that my poem was already in exact iambic pentameter. As my experience with meter grew, I realized that I had, unknowingly, been hearing and emulating meter from a very early age.

If there is one artist who daily informs my writing experience, not to mention a number of individual poems within this project, it is the inimitable Elizabeth Bishop. Bishop, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and the aforementioned Billy Collins are some of the more contemporaneous voices that I heard in my head while writing my collection. An older guard of poets such as Christina Rossetti and Edna St. Vincent Millay informed much of my early experimentation with verse; I read many of Millay's sonnets before writing my modern sonnet, "Tuesday, or Why I'm Grateful for Target.com's Rain Boots."

Thematically, all of my significant poetic influences generate works that can be called, for the most part, accessible and personal. While I admire and am in awe of poets like T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, the impersonality of their poetry is not something that appeals to me. A glance through the poems collected in *Fragments* reveals that many of them rely on personal experience and subsist on my emotions

While the personal plays a pivotal role within *Fragments*, I venture into the impersonal in the second part of my collection, *Paintings That Write Poems*. On the whole, the poems in this section veer away from my own experiences and focus instead on external and imagined subjects. In telling the stories of these subjects I have attempted to adopt an impersonal voice; while emotion still percolates through the poems, it is not *my* feeling that drives the poem, but the imagined feeling of the subject(s). These poems are still accessible to any reader and would not raise questions of narrative or speaker, as in Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" or Pound's *Cantos*.

In light of the presence of the personal in this collection, I must emphasize the significance and influence of the “you” within my poems. Although it may seem like an inherent aspect of any poet’s work, when the subject of my poem is “you,” it rarely refers to a generalized or unidentified subject. The majority of my poems frame themselves around a “you,” an addressee, one that is often an actual person, as in “Edinburgh Sestina,” but sometimes a hypothetical one, as in “You, Venus.” The “you” is the centrifugal force of these poems and my work in general; the “you” is the person driving the narration, and without whom the poem would not exist.

A question that I have asked myself during this project has been the extent to which my poetry can be classified as queer poetry, inasmuch as the most simplistic interpretation of the term “queer” indicates same-sex desire and love. In many poems of this collection I am a woman writing about women—writing about one woman, in particular. Explicitly stated or not, many of my poems’ cores situate themselves around my first long-term relationship. While I have tried to avoid elementary love poems within *Fragments*, this woman’s presence within and influence on my work is noticeable and important; she is the “you” for whom so many of these poems were created.

Personal inspirations aside, there are few identifiable professional influences regarding my queer poetry or its greater role within my work. I pay homage to Bishop, a canonical poet who happened to be gay, in several of my poems, including the frontispiece of my collection, “In Honor of Elizabeth Bishop.” This poem explicitly addresses Bishop’s queerness, “her love for Lota [de Macedo Soares],” Bishop’s partner for 15 years, and draws attention to that queerness not as a sensational and anomalous characteristic of Bishop’s life, but as a part of her creative genius.

One of the most salient aspects of Bishop’s work as it relates to my own collection is the poet’s attention to visual detail within her poems. Descriptions of Brazilian jungles, of assorted

writing instruments on her desk, of the colored scales of a fish—Bishop describes all of these with a tangible imagery that I try to recreate in my poems, particularly in the ekphrastic poems, that is, poems inspired by visual art.

Moments and Marvels

The first section of this collection gathers together the poems that do not definitively fit in either of the categories of *Fragments*. While sometimes I have referred to this initial section as a “miscellaneous” compilation of poems, that qualifier has more to do with my inability to classify these poems as either ekphrastic poems or as travel poems, than about their lack of theme. While there is less a unifying concept within these poems than the other two sections, the poems in *Moments and Marvels* contain themes that recur throughout the project, including ambiguous time and space, qualities of light and sound, and loss.

Two poems in *Moments and Marvels* are aubades, poems about an early morning parting of lovers or, more generally, morning lyrics. Both of these poems address the impermanence of relationships through two different metaphors: “Once” features a symbolically ephemeral pattern of light while “No Unicorns” more bluntly presents impossible imaginings within a relationship. I have put these two poems side-by-side for readers to identify similarities and nuances between the poems. These aubades serve as a prelude to another poem of that form in the *Questions of Travel* section, “Departures Gate, First Time.”

The poems in *Fragments* are written predominantly in free verse, but some formal poems are present, including a modern sonnet in *Moments and Marvels*, “Tuesday, or, Why I’m Grateful for Target.com’s Rain Boots.” The unconventional rhyme scheme of “Tuesday” may cause some

readers to question its credibility of form, but a rhyming, 14-line poem in iambic pentameter signifies a sonnet to some contemporary critics.

The concluding poem of my first section, “What She Grew,” honors my time at Mount Holyoke and the school’s founder, Mary Lyon. I have placed “What She Grew” at the end of the section because it serves as a foundational, experiential poem that I want to resonate with readers. I hope the poem’s emphasis on progression leads the reader easily to the following section.

Paintings That Write Poems

Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts hosted a John Singer Sargent exhibition in the summer of 1999, the summer I was 13. I pushed my way from room to room through sweaty strangers, still managing to “ooh” and “ahh” over Sargent’s exquisite works amid the crowd. Entering the last exhibit room I rounded a corner and gasped aloud—I was face to face with the most striking portrait I had ever seen: *Ellen Terry as Lady Macbeth*. I was mesmerized by the shock and longing in the subject’s eyes as she raised the crown above her head, by the dramatic cascade of her vibrant, red hair down her torso. A poem wrote itself in that moment and the majesty of the painting and the minuteness of my improvised words synchronously rushed through me. I lost the poem as the seconds passed; all of the words were gone by the time I emerged from the show into the gift shop—but the feeling of magnificence and awe remained.

Little did I know it, but my 13-year-old mind was already engaging in a process that would become one of my most productive endeavors for my senior project: ekphrasis. I was introduced to the term by my thesis advisor, Robert Shaw, in his Verse Writing II course, and a significant section of *Fragments* is devoted to ekphrastic verse; indeed, my preliminary conceptualization of my thesis was to write a collection of solely ekphrastic poems.

Without abstraction or nuance, ekphrasis is the process and result of writing poems inspired by visual art. All of my ekphrastic poems explicitly engage with a painting (and one three-dimensional box) through a variety of optics: formal, imaginary, and historical are three of the most common, but these lenses often fuse together within a poem.

My ekphrastic poems engaging a formal optic emphasize the visual aspect of the inspiring artwork: literally describing the scene, relying on tactile imagery, or focusing on the formal attributes of the work, including brushstrokes or, for example, the contents of a three-dimensional box, as in my poem “A Valentine for Tilly Losch.” More so than this formal optic, however, the majority of the ekphrastic poems within *Fragments* demonstrate an imaginary lens: in writing the poem I have imagined the story of the painting and its characters beyond the edges of the frame. In some poems, like “9:00, Any Time” and “You, Venus” I have created entire worlds out of the brushstrokes, imagining emotions, conversations, and relationships within the painting. An historical optic for my ekphrastic poems attempts to situate the painting within the context of either the subject’s history, as in “Ophelia is Speaking Still,” or the artist’s history, as in “A Valentine for Tilly Losch.”

During the writing and revising process of this project, my adviser and I wondered the extent to which my ekphrastic poems ably stand away from their corresponding paintings. In a poem like “Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose,” the description of the setting provides enough concrete details to have at least some vision of the represented painting: “...two girls, / awake with wonder glowing in their hands / the carnations listening...” However, in a poem like “A Valentine for Tilly Losch,” the line, “everything I have, / wrapped with love into this shiny, red ball,” and a later description of linen ties sewn into the crinoline of a dress might not make sense without at least a

picture of Joseph Cornell's three-dimensional box, *Untitled (Tilly Losch)*, in front of the reader. An appendix to this collection includes all of the corresponding artwork to which my readers can refer.

Questions of Travel, 21st Century

Although I have not been to the jungles of Brazil, Bishop's travel poetry and my own journeys to Great Britain and Australia play pivotal roles in my last section, *Questions of Travel, 21st Century*. In a modern counterpoint to Bishop's poem by the same name, my questions of travel typically are literal and applicable to 21st century experience: post 9/11 flight debacles, the rental car at the edge of a cliff in Australia, the frequent early morning and midnight journeys to the airport—all of these aspects of modern-day travel feature in *Questions of Travel, 21st Century*.

The poems gathered in this section do not limit their areas of travel to the geographical; the geographical register mingles with the emotional register in a number of poems, including "Highway 26, 76 Miles to Tillamook," and even with the academic register, as in my concluding poem, "Ars Poetica," which can be seen as a description of the poetic process for this collection, of the academic "journey" from concept to actualization.

Repetition of place is significant among the poems in *Questions of Travel, 21st Century*, and readers will see the same cities referred to in several different poems: descriptions of London, Amsterdam, and, particularly, Edinburgh are the most prominent locations in my travel log. Monotonous repetition of the events of travel also features in these poems: how many times can one take off and land at an airport without the moments blurring together in the mind?

In conjunction with the subject of travel, the motif of time seems appropriate and relevant to *Questions of Travel, 21st Century*. Many of my poems occupy a specific temporality, predominantly early morning and late at night, two temporal registers that I would identify as

liminal and ambiguous spaces: where does night stop and morning begin? What kind and amount of light differentiates late night from early morning? What can happen in these ambiguous spaces, and are they related, if not identical? I do not have the answers to all of these questions, but poems like “Amsterdam in Color” and “Highway 26, 76 Miles to Tillamook” attempt to posit solutions to the questions inhabiting these travel poems.

Finishing *Fragments*

Reflecting on the past eight months of this project, I see significant changes in both my approach to writing poetry and in the poems themselves. While I do not yet have a voice entirely my own, I am proud of the influences that have shaped my developing poetic sensibility and hope that my own grows stronger and more defined with time. The greatest challenge has been to stand back from the individual poems, to view them as a whole and in relation to each other within the collection. Upon discovering that I had several predominant themes in my work, I could not have been happier—or more surprised. In light of the themes within *Fragments*, it makes sense that as I make “final” changes to these works I would be left with one last question of travel: where will I go from here? I turn again to Elizabeth Bishop: “repeat, repeat, repeat, revise, revise, revise,” she writes in “North Haven.” Repeating and revising will be my current and future modes of travel; I look forward to the journey.

In Honor of Elizabeth Bishop

I long for Brazil, if only to feel
your love for Lota still hanging in the trees
as I walk amidst its verdant jungle.
To see your hands lather shampoo
through her black hair—I'd praise the country
from the pullulating canopy
down to the dirt: rough and bumpy, like
your love for her, for her hair, for Brazil.
You are always with me and I wonder—
would I have words for the wild or words for loss
if you hadn't lost Brazil and Lota?
Without you I would know nothing
of planting jungles or poems or tears;
I would know nothing of the marvel of morning rain
beginning suddenly over the roof.
Kisses are but kisses, unchanging, without you.

I**Moments and Marvels**

Graceful Drowning

Mr. Collins called it an art:
That is, the way we submerge ourselves
beneath oceans, struggling
for breath.
Myself?
I say we must drown
gracefully.
Throw a kick to the side, just so—
Dive down once, twice, to apprehend
that shock in the lungs, the water's
unrelenting press.
Water mirrors sky mirrors water—
And,
where those converge—
The not-quite-life
and the not-quite-death; the in-between—
That is where we drown:
Almost-specters,
sighing.

Tuesday, or Why I'm Grateful for Target.com's Rain Boots

I'm jumping puddles in the driving rain,
My plastic boots protecting dancing feet.
I splash and bounce about the riverstreet,
And wish my days could easily remain
This blissful. Watching from the window, you
Invite my gleeful antics with your smile—
I damn the rain and know I'll stay awhile
Because I'm quite enjoying this milieu:
Procrastination with the luxury
Of knowing I'm the only one you see.

If I could spend eternity below
Your window in a puddle and my boots,
I would forget about my dry pursuits,
And stand forever here, come sun or snow.

Non Sequitur, or Aspartame Makes me Ugly

Scrubbing pots and pans *why are you here? why are you here?* but
the gurgle of the garbage disposal chops my words and
you aren't really here.

I don't drink Coke, or even Diet Coke, but for you
I drink Diet Coke with Lime
and savor the crackle of synthetic sugar
against my teeth and tongue.

The August evening's clouds and colors
spread across the sky in ripples, like the waves
of high tide washing over the beach rocks.

I changed my shirt and removed my bra
with the blinds pulled up and the window

open for the benefit of non-present you.
It's too hot, it's too hot, and pearls of sweat
are forming in the crevice of my

Oh, look at that lavender sky!
Yet you can't see the sunset,
and don't care that I can.

Campfire light casts your vertical shadow on the sand
but all I want is to have you horizontally.

You are exquisite in every way:
Vertical horizontal frontal dorsal.
Yet *I am so ugly, I am so ugly*
now that you have left me
with nothing but pots and pans.

Different Dirty Things

Five minutes to your happy new year.
 I am on a dirty Greyhound bus, trying
 to keep you on the phone even though
 the alcohol has gone to your head. You call me
 beautiful and think you're whispering
 words of a different dirty nature through the static,
 but your friends can hear the words
 and so can the woman seated next to me.

The distance is a bitch. You say it at least once a day
 because it's true; I say it because I want to jinx
 the five thousand and something miles
 between us into oblivion. *Happy new year,*
 I say eight hours before the fact—at least
 on this side of the world. I hang up the phone
 to the sound of fireworks popping, drowning
 out your slurred words.

The old woman eight rows in front of me has lice.
 I press myself against the opposite seat as I pass her,
 only thinking of my fear and not about her dirty,
 worn hands or what she could be doing, sleeping
 on the 4:00 Greyhound to Seattle on New Year's Eve.
 No one smiles and everyone pretends not to be vexed
 by my lengthy trans-Atlantic phone call to next year.

The words I write look childish and saccharine
 on the page of the notebook you gave me as a valentine.
 Maybe this isn't love and maybe this isn't a love poem,
 only an imitation of lines someone else wrote
 in a much more eloquent way, or a prelude
 to something I might someday feel.

I stop writing the poem to look out the fingerprint-
 smudged window at the passing interstate.
 Watching the late winter sunset fall
 on the barren trees, I think of how I celebrate
 the new year eight hours early because of you,
 of how I celebrate one more day crossed off
 until the phone line's static won't damage
 your dirty whispers, of how I celebrate
 the sun diffusing through the trees
 even without you.

Lightning Storm

Being from the West I am uneducated
in the temperament of lightning at this magnitude,
unready for its impulsive bursts across the sky,
its illumination of the hills in their entirety
with fluorescent whiteness.

Look! A sheet of it, bright enough to show your face,
fully featured, in the darkened parking lot.
And there, in the middle of the sheet—
a single bolt, a zigzag of Zeus sent
to strike breath back into me, and
not only breath: the shock of lightning
left your face in my mind, the flash of you,
brilliant, glowing, grinning, then—
gone.

Hours later the 2 a.m. darkness chills.
I read Bishop by flashlight, waiting for another
electrical storm to illuminate her pages.
Sitting on the worn couch I listen
to the radiator, restless with the memory
of the lightning, as if it's still flickering in the distance,
surprising me with every burst of electricity.
Unable to shake off the image of you
standing in the brightness, I wonder if I have
fallen asleep here, if I am only dreaming the poem.
Perhaps I am dreaming of this pretzel-covered couch
and its scratchy upholstered pillows;
perhaps, too, I dreamed of your illuminated face
and perhaps I dreamed the entire storm:
you, the lightning, the brightness
flashing only in my imagination as I slept.

No Unicorns

We wake together, groggy and whispering
in the morning's half-light. You dreamed, you say,
the strangest dream, your voice tinged with lingering awe.

You remember a dark, dense forest;
you try to describe the exact way the sunlight fell
in stripes through the trees (even out of the dream
you remember the warmth of the light on your cheek),
but the Platonic wood only grows in your imagination
and doesn't withstand waking description.
We were together in the forest, you said,
cooking a breakfast of eggs and hash
on a Bunsen burner at the base
of an enormous pine tree.

An embarrassed smile spreads across
your lips as you speak. *Does this sound
foolish?* you ask, closing your hand
around mine. *There's more.*

The traveling scent of our breakfast
attracted them, you said—the unicorns.
One, two, then six or so, gathered around us
and our eggs cooking on the Bunsen burner.
In the warmth of your Platonic forest
we ate breakfast beneath the pine tree
while the unicorns watched.

You finish relating the dream with a sigh;
I know you can still see the mythical creatures
and the blazing Bunsen burner in the back
of your slowly widening eyes,
but Sunday morning pulls us from our bed.
We rise, opening the curtains and letting
the graylight in.

There will be no more sleep now; there
are no more unicorns.

Once

We didn't wake together,
but I liked watching you sleep
in the calm of Sunday morning,
the light and sounds of the outside world
dimmed and muffled through the curtained windows.
When you opened your eyes we marveled at the bright sunlight
seeping across the ceiling like long blades of golden grass growing in a field.

I was amazed you asked
where the pattern came from,
because I'd wondered too—and you don't like
noticing these things the way I do. On any other morning
you might have scoffed at my vulnerability, fascinated as I was
by glowing strips of sunlight that would only remain ten minutes, at most.

But this morning you wanted to know,
so together we discovered the light coming through
the gap in the curtains, glancing off the grooved window casing.

Together, too, we watched the pattern blur
across the ceiling as the sun moved west, the bright blades
bleeding into each other in morning's widening light.

What She Grew

Late April; ladybug season in New England: twenty, thirty, even forty of them in one room, nestled together in the windows, red and black beads decorating

desktops and hands. Fragile and skeletal, we find carcasses strewn on windowsills, tucked into our beds. *This would never happen at home*, some of us say,

the eke and ebb of ladybug season still surprising us after four years. In May, greens, pinks, and yellows start popping from the trees like confetti,

the bare branches of winter finally giving way to what we hope is spring. Surrounded by the colors, it's easy to forget that it won't always be like this.

It's the migratory part of the future that unsettles me; a Diaspora the likes of which we've never seen, spreading us across the country and continents with purpose.

We leave behind the hills of Massachusetts in order to conquer the world and every foreign or domestic dictator with our principles and our education;

sometimes I wonder if the woman sleeping unobtrusively in our midst watches us, marveling as her dreams extend into the future. What does she think of us, growing

up from the ground she planted but living in a landscape she finds unrecognizable? Does she think we, too, will change the face of the future?

And does she see that, destined to change the world or not, we have already changed each other, raised each other—without even knowing it?

II

Paintings That Write Poems

Ophelia is Speaking Still
after Sir John Everett Millais

The way Millais depicted it, Ophelia is
speaking still, her lower lip dropped open,
a whisper to the floating violets and rue
barely audible as she drifts downstream.
She drew her last breath mid-sentence,
still rambling of he who loved her once,
the Danish prince who spent her like a coin.
A lonely robin watches her, the silent
witness hovering above the singing girl.
I imagine what Ophelia is saying
to the wilderness, her submerged anger—
for Hamlet, for Laertes, for Denmark—
rising in her final living moments.
I hear her coarse but fading voice still
emanating from the painting's oils,
Goddamning the bastard to Hell as she drowns.

9:00, Any Time

after Dante Gabriel Rossetti

The sunrise takes her breath away,
closing her eyes with brightness.
Her hands fall open,
as if they have
released the poppy
from the sudden glare of sunshine.
She is unaware of the mystical wings
taking the mortal flower from her palms.
The lover, the painter, the writer—
expectant, hopeful—
waits for her in the shadow,
asking Love to let them
live forever in the light of morning.
She, *beata, beata*,
blossoms with the brilliant rays,
rising with the sun.

The sunset takes her breath away,
closing her eyes to awaiting darkness.
Her hands slowly fold,
as if they might
curl around the poppy
and carry it with her into the night.
She is unaware of the mystical wings
lifting her soul from its mortal house.
The lover, the painter, the writer—
heartbroken, helpless—
watches her from the shadow,
begging Love to let her stay
longer in the twilight.
She, *beata, beata*,
has one last burst of breath
before setting with the sun.

A Valentine for Tilly Losch
after Joseph Cornell

I. The Artist's View

He knew Tilly came from Vienna,
but it was her dark, chestnut-sized eyes that allowed him
to fantasize: she was from the East, exotic, and entirely his
when they were together. She danced for him,
barefoot and in pointe shoes, because she liked the way
he smiled as her feet bent and bounced
over the creaky floorboards of a random hotel room
they did not share except to talk about Pavlova and
their favorite brands of cigarettes.

His idea for the valentine came one night as
they strolled around the city. It was his home,
not hers. Talking just above the sounds of
street vendors and passing taxis, Tilly said
she missed Austria so much that she'd started
superimposing the Alps on the skyscrapers of New York.

With care he built one of his boxes for her,
suspending a miniature paper doll from lengths
of string that he tied to the speckled frame.
The paper doll had hair like Tilly's; in her hands
he placed a Victorian toy to make his dancer laugh.
He sent the box with a note: "Whenever homesick,
look at your valentine and imagine you are
about to land in Austria. Fondly, Joseph."

He was really trying to say, "Run away with me,
I will keep you safe, take you home
to your mountains and give you everything I have,
wrapped with love into this shiny, red ball."

II. The Poet's View

Alone, she had to save herself somehow.
There were whispers rumbling in the streets,
microcosmic echoes of the mountain, gurgling
and spitting like a recalcitrant infant:
What are we going to do when the quakes start?
How will we evacuate the children?
No one asked after Tilly.

It was late August and the island throbbed
with malignant desire, threatening to spill the civilians
from their beds, or worse, without an escape plan
once the ash began to rise from the mouth of the mountain.

Before the quakes worsened, Tilly diligently wove
linen ties around the whale-bone crinoline
of her favorite blue petticoat. This is how she wore the dress
for the next week, prepared for the ash diluvium,
with the sturdy ties tucked into little pockets
she had sown beneath her skirts.

At night she snuck into the linen cupboards
of the unsuspecting island residents, appropriating
all the silk sheets she could carry. With her weight,
the balloon would not have to be too large, but
durable enough to last as she floated over the Sunda Strait.

When the eruption came Tilly struggled out of town
over the quaking earth, clutching her silk balloon to her chest.
On top of the highest hill she could reach in the chaos,
she released the ties from their pouches, fastening them
to the balloon as quickly as she could.
Harnessed to her silk balloon and
taking nothing with her but a bright red ball,
Tilly flew up into the ashy darkness
and away from Krakatoa.

You, Venus
after Paul Delvaux

The crescent moon illuminates the eerie
marbled square. Night falls onto Brussels;
so, too, returns the fear—of bombs, of beasts,
of soldiers: taking women, taking lives
while covered in midnight's mask. You, Venus,
reclining in the sharp moonlight upon
a purple velvet chaise, sleep surrounded
by your ladies—and the threat of death.

Delvaux would be surprised to see you push
the skeleton aside, emerging from
his darkened canvas just to kiss my lips;
you're wide awake—not from the blitzkrieg's blasts
—but from desire.

Yet in your languid pose
you smell of fear—perhaps the screams of your
attendant ladies seeped into your skin
as you slept; perhaps you never slept at all,
only pretending not to hear the cries
that rang throughout the waning moonlit square,
even as your naked body chilled
at the sounds of the approaching scourge.

Your story's subtext seldom garners notice:
She, in blooded ostrich feathers, was
in love with you, and while you slept she paced
along the marble columns, dreaming of
a future (you, Venus, waking with her
always) that the German bombs destroyed.
She shakes you as the sirens wail, tugging
at your hands, begging you to follow her—
she will keep you safe, she says—will you come?

But you choose me, the artist—not the painter
but the poet—to pull you from the moon-
lit square and clothe you in my waiting arms.
I tell you, softly, that the velvet chaise,
the pacing, ostrich-feathered woman,
the blitzkrieg's blasts and screams—everything
but the kiss—was nothing but a dream.

Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose
after John Singer Sargent

Eden could have been like this: two girls,
 awake with wonder
 glowing in their hands,
the carnations listening to the swish-swish-sway
 of fabric in the breeze; nothing else
 touches them here.
But someday the lanterns will hang from a veranda,
 and even the roses will have lost
 all memory of the earlier garden.
Years after tonight, the lily's pollen
 will be found, sprinkled
 in the ruffles of a yellowed linen dress.

III

Questions of Travel

Questions of Travel, 21st Century

Two hours sitting on the tarmac; seatbelts fastened.
 Nothing about the darkness reveals our whereabouts.
 We could be in Amsterdam, looking out
 at street-lamp-lit canals; we could be in Edinburgh,
 an eerie early-morning landing
 an hour before sunrise over Arthur's Seat.

But we are in Chicago, that windy city with
 machine-gun-toting bandits—
 that's how I imagine it, stretching like
 a seedy crime novel beyond my oval window.
 Two hours sitting on the tarmac; seatbelts fastened.
 I'm going crazy if I'm superimposing
 Amsterdam and Edinburgh on the Chicago skyline.

It's difficult to picture any city
 when the only thing to see besides the darkness
 is the airline magazine's partially-completed
 crossword puzzle penned in someone else's hand.
 Nothing—not knives nor love nor loss—pains me
 as much as *this is your captain speaking; we
 apologize for the delay and will update you shortly.*
 What does a passenger have to do to get
 another package of peanuts while she waits
 for nothing to happen?

I decide that getting off the ground
 is not much easier than it was in 1903, when Wilbur ran
 beside the flyer's wing tip, trying to get his brother off that
 North Carolinian sand dune, biting his tongue in earnest hope
 for what they might achieve.
 Could they really pull off the whole scheme?

Endless delays—always sitting, always waiting, always
 wondering if this will be the moment of take-off—
 invoke the same anxiety in me that Wilbur felt: still on the ground,
 I imagine the blinking airport monitor pushing my flight further
 and further away, until it makes more sense
 to zip up my carry-on, disembark the stagnant plane,
 and start walking.

One Dancer, One Painter, One Poet

The force of the canvas pulls the dancer in,
 unwraps her and lifts her
 into the ambiguous, vibrant space
 that is covered with words and paint.
 She looks like Africa, or what I
 imagine Africa to look like—
 alive, flourishing, and splashed
 in colors for which we do not have names.
 Growing up from the dusty ground
 rising out a geological genesis,
 she moves into the air,
 unfolds her body, piece by piece,
 without knowing where or why
 she is moving—
 perhaps that is how the trees and
 animals in Africa move, aimlessly
 but with the movements of the hot wind
 and timpani rain, an impromptu collaboration.

With Africa comes the beginning, the center
 of the world, the “how everything got started.”
 She understands these implications, painted
 and dancing as she is without pretension
 or clothes. She does not hesitate; watched
 or unwatched she moves the same,
 something like sagebrush or the Marula tree
 that doesn’t understand and does not notice
 the gawking tourists and clicking camera shutters.

Simultaneously: she is the painting
 but also the root of the painting, the root of the words
 being written on the page, on their own canvas.
 How would I know what to write and
 how would we know who I am
 without her body against the canvas,
 reminding me that I am only
 a word, an image, splattered paint on the
 infinitely expanding and collapsing universe?

Departures Gate, First Time

“I think what luck it is to say goodbye to trains and not to other people.”

—Mary Jo Salter

We emit vaporized clouds of breath
 in the unheated car, whispering
 in the darkness. It is below freezing
 outside—perhaps in Celsius *and* Fahrenheit
 because it is December at 55 degrees north.
 No light around us but the lamps of your sleepy city
 and a few loitering or passing taxis.
 No bird songs; this could be night.
 No bars open; this could be morning.
 We drive through the ambiguous space,
 certain only of where we’re going
 from your family’s single-car garage.

You sit in the left front seat because this is
 Great Britain; I lean forward to touch your shoulder,
 feigning accident. You aren’t brave enough
 to reach behind for my hand; not yet.
 You bullied your father into turning on the radio
 but the poem writing itself in the moment
 is so loud I can’t hear the music.

The departures gate looms in front of us
 in what feels like a mere three minutes
 since we entered the car; without watches
 we still don’t know the time, except that it is time
 to say goodbye, hurried by the thought
 of your father, circling the airport
 until you’re ready to return to his side,
 to pretend your bleary eyes
 are from the lack of sleep and not from
 the words we whisper with cracking voices.

The prefix, the “good” is too hard to manage;
 I eke out the “bye,” wishing we could stretch the
 remaining minutes into hours and days.
 Watching you return to the darkness,
 I wonder how many more times
 we will do away with the “good” here, in your city,
 in this sleepwaking space.

Highway 26, 76 Miles to Tillamook

In the cocoon-like darkness we roll the windows down,
 letting our hair form knots in the August wind.
 Only speckled with dim streetlamps,
 the highway yawns before us. Squinting, I try
 to locate the mountains—somewhere to the north—
 to show you what it means to be
 in my part of the country.
 With you in the passenger seat
 I am delirious to the point of tears.

Where did you come from?
 (And I don't mean Scotland)
 Where did my bad luck go?
 How am I allowed
 to be here? breathe here?
 with you beside me?
 I want to stay behind the wheel
 with you until our skin shrivels
 and our coffin lids close.

In this muted light I could believe
 we are the only two in the entire valley,
 the only two traversing this highway to the sea.
 Perhaps if I drive faster
 we will merge into outer space:
 what we thought was the highway, what
 we thought were lamplights and hills
 will become sky, constellations,
 and the base of Olympus Mons.

With the windows still rolled down
 to feel the rushing solar wind,
 we will drive in circles 'round the planets,
 not because we are lost, but because there is nothing
 to stop us. Earth's gravity
 is eight-hundred-twenty million miles away
 and counts for nothing now.

Amsterdam in Color

three views from Schipol Airport

I. Gold

The sun is sudden, striking, rising over the planes
 like a tightly wrapped orb of Gouda cheese sold
 for an exorbitant amount of Euros at a tourist shop.
 The growing light glints off the jet wings, waking anyone
 lucky enough to find a place to sleep for a few hours.
 I talk to myself in a waiting area, wishing I could rest,
 wishing for an earlier flight, wishing I spoke Dutch—
 or German or Hindi or anything but English—
 yet still thanking God I'm not flying through Heathrow.
 The widening light colors and warms the whole city,
 or what I can see of it from Schipol Airport's windows.
 Turbines spinning at the edges of the canals gleam, too,
 giving me the impression that gold plate
 covers everything in Amsterdam.

II. Sepia

The city, still under patches of dirty mid-March snow,
 looks barren and dead. Empty, skeletal trees reach up
 from the scrawny grass toward a gray sky threatening
 more rain, snow, or sleet. The brown, exposed bark of elms
 blends with the trodden tufts of meadow lining the runway.
 Fall's battered leaves, finally uncovered by the melting snows,
 lie scattered across the dirty ground in piles, as if they've only
 just landed from their dead descent. Cold has washed away
 all vibrant color from the landscape, leaving the city
 in these faded, earth tones. Lifting off in the afternoon half-light
 I wonder, fleetingly, if it is only the landscape that has faded
 in the winter's cold and not my gaze.

III. Black

On the return we land in darkness. Like an animated force
 it presses in on us, even inside the airport. Schipol's glass ceiling
 reveals the sky; staring from a lounge chair up into the moonless,
 starless black, I wonder how long the January night will last
 at 52 degrees north. The distant street lamps are faint; no traffic
 on the highways or canals. There will be no sight of Amsterdam
 this time. Gazing at the shrouded, sleeping city, it's difficult to remember
 that black is not the absence of color, but culmination of it.

London: Two Approaches

1.

Smoke pluming over London in early morning's rising light brings 1666 to mind; perhaps the red-orange sky is not an antecedent for the sun, but a reflection of the flaming capital. Perhaps we will find the city in tears and ashes, every hand old enough to hold a bucket struggling to squelch the blaze. I think of Pepys, rushing up the Tower steps to observe the conflagration, still composing for his diary in the chaos:
*The sooty sky holds more than clouds as burning pigeons fall,
descending in a plume of smoke as their wilted wings catch fire.*

2.

We think we see the lights of London, even if, at 21,000 feet, we can't tell London from a brilliantly lit, pulsing amoeba. The city unfolds as we fly, but nothing is distinguishable in the mass of lights. While the city twinkles in the black sky I think again of the Great Fire, imagining how much more thrilling and bright London life must have been in September, 1666.

Misnomer

Edinberg.

Edinborrow.

Edinburgh.

Tourists are all the same, effusing love for a city
they walk in, sleep in, and drink in,
but a city that doesn't exist—
not the way *they* say it.

The bones entombed along Princes Street
splinter under the soil at the sounds
of foreign passersby, suffering the abuse
of the well-meaning but ignorant:

Berg: the ice of titanic implications suddenly
makes an appearance in Scotland.

Borrow: to take, for example, a kilt, with every intention
of returning it to its owner.

Borough: who knew the ancient city, too, had partitions?
Perhaps the Grass Market has been renamed “New Brooklyn.”
And then I hear it: Edinburgh.

Quickly, it sounds like *Edinbra*—true indication
of a local, truncating the third syllable
for brevity's sake.

Slowly, *Edinburra*—
beautiful, it sounds like the kooka kind of burra,
rolling from the back of the throat
and finally assuaging the ears
of the city's living and dead alike.

Edinburgh Sestina
for Mairi

A hush; only the routine late-night sounds
of a toothbrush tap against the porcelain
sink and hissing pipes. In the quiet room
these noises build rhythms, make music
in the sleepy stillness, keeping me awake.
It is after midnight; the air is numbingly cold.

At the museum we were awed by the cold
eyes of the ancient chessmen. Ignoring the sounds
of the city outside we imagined them alive and awake,
battling each other, fighting over the porcelain
vases from Indochina. Our voices made music,
echoing as we wandered from room to room.

On the roof terrace that night, the room
in my heart grew with love for your city. It was cold,
January; the bells of St. Giles carried, their music
traveling through the streets, mixing with the sounds
of the sunseting city. We almost froze into porcelain
figures up there, but the bells kept us awake.

We went home and lay in our bed awake,
playing shadow-hand games in the dark room.
we laughed as my shadow-wolf chased your porcelain
doll; we were young, feigning younger. Cold
seeped through the window panes, as did the sounds
from the street—bicycles, drunkards, dogs—the music

of our laughter mingling with the music
outside; we remained blissfully awake.
But too much time has passed: the sounds
of St. Giles, the city streets, our room—
I strain to hear them, now. November's cold
coats all with frost, spreading a porcelain

sheen over the hills. Your face, a porcelain
apparition, appears in dreams; the coarse music
of footsteps and clanking pipes fills the cold
nights. My bed is mine alone. I lie awake,
listening to memories. With more room
I could locate myself without you, ignore these sounds,

sounds that leave me chipped like porcelain;
there is no music here. Now: night; it is cold—
the room, empty. Is your face the noise that keeps me awake?

Upon Reaching the Edge of the World
Broken Hill, Australia

Cranky, we emerge from the rental-car-turned-home
(what but home after 1,000 miles and thirty days?)
onto the windswept cliff, into the vortex of time.
Looking across the Outback, we could have been
transported to the world two million years before,
when the only life was the hot wind and the geckos.
Clusters of brush speckle the landscape like
tufts of hair on the exposed, wrinkled skin of earth—
nothing more: no trees, no hills, no grass.
A single, straight road—the very one from which
we veered to the cliff—stretches in front of us
until it vanishes on the horizon. We could be
the only humans for hundreds of miles; we could
start a fire in the desert without the fear of
getting caught; we could die in the torrid heat
without ever being found. Watching the wind
blow the dust beneath our feet across
the yawning expanse and out of eyesight,
I could believe that we are all there is;
that the world is flat and this is its edge.

Ars Poetica

I. You'd think the poem would be easy, you're alive! Words fall from trees,
from the sky in all kinds of weather, from the faucet—when all you want

is to drink a glass of water and not the consonants and vowels pooling
in the basin of the dirty, aluminum sink. But the words don't write as easily

as they fall; even beneath the bright Big Dipper you hear the poem in your head,
yet don't know how to put the words on the page. Words falling from trees are

impotent in your hands, words falling from the sky drip off your pen, and words
falling from the faucet cluster in the sink then twist, together, down the drain.

II. You'd think the poem would be easy, you're in love! There are words
in her mouth, in her eyes, in her hands, in the way she kisses you one last time

before turning off the reading lamp. But the page stays empty—and when you write, it's crap. For
example: "There are words in her mouth"—well, obviously,

as long as she's talking. "There are words in her eyes"—you really shouldn't
have put that down, the cliché will make your readers cringe. "There are words

in her hands"—that line's all right. You can see a critic reading it in a manuscript,
chewing the inside of her lip, unsure of its meaning, and putting the poem down.

NOTES

In Honor of Elizabeth Bishop

This poem invokes a number of Elizabeth Bishop works, including “The Shampoo,” “Sestina,” and a previously unpublished poem, “It is Marvellous....”

Lightning Storm

The title of this poem is a nod to another poem of Bishop’s called “Electrical Storm.”

What She Grew

...sometimes I wonder if the woman sleeping unobtrusively in our midst.... This is a reference to Mount Holyoke’s founder, Mary Lyon, whose grave is situated in the center of the Mount Holyoke campus.

9:00, Any Time

An aspect of the painting that does not feature explicitly in the poem, but is invoked in the title, is the time, 9:00; the number nine was significant for Dante Gabriel Rossetti because it was pivotal in Dante Alighieri’s *Vita Nuova*, the text from which Rossetti gleaned inspiration for the painting, *Beata Beatrix*. It is no coincidence that the sundial in the painting reads 9:00. I have imagined the painting taking place at two 9:00 times, morning and night. While a 9:00 sunrise is feasible, a 9:00 sunset in London, where Rossetti worked, is a bit farfetched; I hope the reader will suspend belief for the latter half of the poem.

A Valentine for Tilly Losch

The second half of this poem, “The Poet’s View,” takes place on the Indonesian volcanic island of Krakatoa. Krakatoa erupted in 1883, decimating the island, its villages and villages for miles around the island. I jumped to the concept of Krakatoa when I saw Joseph Cornell’s *Untitled (Tilly Losch)* because of the little girl suspended beneath what appears to be a balloon; the 1947 children’s book, *Twenty-One Balloons*, written by William Pène du Bois, imagines the eruption of Krakatoa and the inhabitants of the island flying away to safety with the aid of massive, silk balloons.

You, Venus

Sleeping Venus by Paul Delvaux was painted in Brussels, Belgium, during the World War II German occupation and frequent bombings. Delvaux discussed the contrasting images in his painting as significant, the calm of Venus compared to the alarm of surrounding scene.

Blitzkrieg. This German word literally means “lightning war.” While often abbreviated to “Blitz” in reference to the Nazi aerial bombing of London, “Blitzkrieg” in its entirety can refer to any technique of warfare involving a surprise bombardment of an enemy followed by mechanized mobile weapons. Brussels was a city that endured a Nazi Blitzkrieg.

One Dancer, One Painter, One Poet

This poem formed as an experiential, “on the spot” poem written in collaboration with Mount Holyoke’s dance and visual art departments. My instructions were to write a poem (or several) inspired by what I saw. A dancer and a painter joined me in the collaboration, which is where the poem’s images of canvas, unfolding, etc came from.

London: Two Approaches

The sooty sky holds more than clouds as burning pigeons fall, / descending in a plume of smoke as their wilted wings catch fire. This is not a direct quote from Samuel Pepys’ diary, but he did write about the strange sight of burning pigeons during the Great Fire of 1666.

APPENDIX

Paintings accompanying the ekphrastic pieces



Ophelia

by Sir John Everett Millais



Beata Beatrix

by Dante Gabriel Rossetti



Untitled (Tilly Losch)
by Joseph Cornell



Sleeping Venus
by Paul Delvaux



Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose
by John Singer Sargent