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# SPEAKING TO HONEYBEES

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SPEAKING TO HONEYBEES

A Creative Project Submitted to the  
Office of Graduate Studies  
College of Arts and Sciences of  
John Carroll University  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

By  
Alexander J. Wells  
2017

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## Introduction

In constructing this collection of poetry, I attempted to capture with language glimpses of particular images, conversations, or experiences that struck my spirit, whether through their oddities, uniqueness, or simplicity. Each of these poems can be thought of as an imaginative polaroid print, represented and articulated linguistically. I use the metaphor of a polaroid print because the image printed instantly from the polaroid camera offers a snapshot of a scene, but the coloring, lighting, and sharpness of the print are altered in comparison to the image seen with the eye. Sometimes the print's image is focused, concrete, and tangible, while some prints, on the other hand, appear obscure or unclear. Regardless of the contrasting content, tone, and voice of these poems, each operates as a linguistic expression for how I have perceived certain aspects of the world around me. Ultimately, this collection of poetry attempts to mimic the experience of an individual stumbling upon a pile of discarded polaroid prints, flipping through the stack of photographs, and purposefully leaving the pile discarded for the next passerby to examine.

In essence, this assortment of poems – seemingly random and whimsical in nature – echoes T.S. Eliot's conceptualization of a "heap of broken images" (ll. 22) in *The Waste Land*. As is the case for Eliot's shifting voices and narratives in *The Waste Land*, this collection of poems similarly functions dualistically: each poem can exist as its own, individual piece, communicating its own narrative, but the collection of poetry as a whole also communicates its own story as a unified work. In other words, the poems fit together in order to express my poetic vision while individually articulating their own narratives.

Much of the disjointedness among topics in this collection may seem unintentional because of their lack of centrality. I suggest, however, focusing less on the logical connection from one broken image to the next, ignoring the urge to search for the collection's skeleton key, and turning attention to experiencing the language and exploring whatever internal response develops from this experience. Reiterating Billy Collins's "Introduction to Poetry" in light of my own collection of poetry, I ask my reader to "walk inside the poem's room / and feel the walls for a light switch...to waterski / across the surface of a poem / waving at the author's name on the shore" (ll. 7-11) instead of seeking to "tie the poem to a chair with rope / and torture a confession out of it...beating it with a hose / to find out what it really means" (ll. 13-16). The interaction with the text of these works should allow one the opportunity to enter fully into the image, story, or conversation of the poet without dwelling in the bleak distraction of discovering a poem's hidden meaning.

Beyond merely discussing how to approach this collection of poetry, I also wish to situate myself as a writer among other, established poets. Foundationally, I am most indebted to the writing of Billy Collins – the ease with which he grounds his poetry in concrete images paired with his conversational poetic voice pulls me towards contemporary poetry. As Collins's poems unfold, they reveal thoughts about the universe (both far-reaching or entirely practical) through the illustration of simple images, allowing his work to be experienced by anyone regardless of his or her prior exposure to poetry. For example, in his poem "Forgetfulness," Collins details the process of forgetting – a natural function of the brain which evokes a somber response if considered from Collins's perspective:

The name of the author is the first to go  
followed obediently by the title, the plot,  
the heartbreaking conclusion, the entire novel  
which suddenly becomes one you have never read,  
never even heard of,

as if, one by one, the memories you used to harbor  
decided to retire to the southern hemisphere of the brain,  
to a little fishing village where there are no phones.

Long ago you kissed the names of the nine Muses goodbye  
and watched the quadratic equation pack its bag,  
and even now as you memorize the order of the planets,

something else is slipping away, a state flower perhaps,  
the address of an uncle, the capital of Paraguay.

Whatever it is you are struggling to remember,  
it is not poised on the tip of your tongue,  
not even lurking in some obscure corner of your spleen.

It has floated away down a dark mythological river  
whose name begins with an L as far as you can recall,  
well on your own way to oblivion where you will join those  
who have even forgotten how to swim and how to ride a bicycle.

No wonder you rise in the middle of the night  
to look up the date of a famous battle in a book on war.  
No wonder the moon in the window seems to have drifted  
out of a love poem that you used to know by heart.

I cite this poem because it exemplifies Collins's ability to invite into his writing, allowing the reader to feel as though he or she is a part of the process of making the poem. This journey of forgetfulness is not solely one for the narrator of the poem; it also encourages participation in each line of the poem. A trademark of Collins's writing, which I struggle to use in my own writing is humor. Though my writing has humorous elements to it, it does not reach the peaks of Collins's poetry. Despite lacking Collins's ability to be funny through writing, I still view him as my primary resource as a poet because of his

straightforward voice. This mastery of invitation to poetry ultimately draws me to recall Collins's work as I write my own poetry.

This influence of Collins in my writing can best be seen in the poem "Grandfather" included in this collection. The poem details an image of the speaker's grandmother in her garden watering sunflowers, but bridges this image to a broader historical context. Like Collins, this poem emphasizes the simple, focusing on the image at hand, adding noise into the background of this poem:

When I still had strawberry blonde hair,  
my grandmother spoke to honeybees  
while she watered sunflowers  
with a rusting copper can.

I listened to her stories  
through the dusty screen of a window,  
standing on a leather ottoman  
pressed against the wall.

She told the bees of her husband Mykhaylo  
who raced from his childhood home  
with arms hugging cups of water  
for families packed inside railroad cars  
coasting through uneven Ukrainian farmland.

I wished the bees would have asked  
what the word *Nazi* meant, or  
where the trains were going,  
but they hummed into the sunflowers,  
dressing themselves in scarves of pollen.

When her can emptied, my grandmother  
smiled beneath the shadow of her sunhat,  
stroked the fuzzied neck of the tallest flower,  
and turned her attention to the red impatiens.

Reading this poem, the narrator presents the scene of the boy watching the grandmother water her sunflowers with ease. The language and images are not overly complicated,



and the piece reads rather conversationally. As stated earlier, the poem exists to mention also an enormously horrific history that the grandmother's husband experienced, but the poem does not shout this memory. Instead, this memory is approached through the eyes of the young narrator, unsure of the gravity of the entire memory being detailed by the grandmother.

In addition to the work of Billy Collins, Robert Hass's poetry similarly has molded my poetic voice. Hass writes with such colloquial language that his poetry is accessible to all, whether trained in contemporary poetry or not. Moreover, his conversational poems depend upon concrete images to communicate their stories. The balance of conversational writing with concrete images flows into my own writing as I strive to ground my work in this same notion of tangible sensations. Specifically, Robert Hass's poem "The Image" demonstrates this poetic style that I have described:

The child brought blue clay from the creek  
and the woman made two figures: a lady and a deer.  
At that season deer came down from the mountain  
and fed quietly in the redwood canyons.  
The woman and the child regarded the figure of the lady,  
the crude roundnesses, the grace, the coloring like shadow.  
They were not sure where she came from,  
except the child's fetching and the woman's hands  
and the lead-blue clay of the creek  
where the deer sometimes showed themselves at sundown.

Each image in this poem – the blue clay, the figurines, the redwood canyons, etc. – is vivid, stimulating the imagination. These images help progress the vision of the narrator, moving the piece beyond alphabetic letters embedded into a page and into an entire narrative.

My experimentation with incorporating Hass’s vivid images most clearly appears in the first stanza of “Grandfather,” as the narrator describes the grandmother in the garden: “When I still had strawberry blonde hair, / my grandmother spoke to honeybees / while she watered sunflowers / with a rusting copper can.” The images in this stanza – the strawberry blonde hair, honeybees, sunflowers, rusting copper can – function as visual anchors in the same way that the images of Hass’s “The Image” do. By including such clear images, I hope to produce the same sort of linguistic suspension into imagination. In other words, my intention behind using such clarity in my writing is to provide access into the story of each of my poems.

Beyond the works of Billy Collins and Robert Hass, my writing echoes the voices of other contemporary poets such as Tony Hoagland, Denise Duhamel, and Charles Simic. Each of these authors were recommended to me as I began this collection of poetry, and their individual tones, voices, and language may have unintentionally permeated into my own writing, and I would be remiss to mention them, though briefly.

Of these three authors, Duhamel’s poetry pushes me to rethink the endings to each of my poems. Often, her poetry ends on an unexpected note, creating the feeling of being off-centered, allowing her to conclude with any type of ending regardless of the subject matter of the poem. She succeeds in using playfulness to ease her poem toward a sour or blunt statement, keeping this sharper phrase or line from being overwhelming. For example, Duhamel’s “Kindergarten Boyfriend” ends with a jab at men in its final line despite the playful tone of the poem:

My kindergarten boyfriend  
said his mother had taught him to waltz,  
so I told my mother about how he’d taught me,

how we glided around the schoolyard during recess.  
How all the other kids dropped their balls  
and abandoned their jump romps to watch us.  
My mother said, *Really?* like she didn't believe me,  
which made me angry even though my story  
was totally untrue. I liked to color with the boy,  
who was quiet like I was. One day, after biting  
into a cracker, he spat out his front tooth,  
which looked like a tiny ice cube  
on the pad of his finger. The teacher  
made a fuss and wrapped his tooth in tissue.  
During naptime, he slept on a plastic mat by my side.  
I stayed awake trying to will him to give the tooth to me,  
but when I asked him his plans, he told me  
he was going to take it home to put under his pillow.  
I flung puzzle pieces and started to cry.  
Even then, my expectations were too high.

The final line of this poem: "Even then, my expectations were too high" changes the entire direction of the poem, giving a different person, and unexpected tone. Without this final line, the poem still works, but lacks the flare and originality of the final line.

My own poem "Chocolate Rabbit" includes a similar tone to "Kindergarten Boyfriend," as I attempt to exit the poem with a final line that shifts the experience in the poem:

Three days before Christ rose from the dead,  
I took a trip to the candy store  
to buy my sister a chocolate rabbit.

Streamers – pink and yellow –  
braided the pillars of the storefront  
like the tentacles of an Easter octopus

Waving on the sidewalk,  
wearing overalls with a whicker basket in-hand,  
the Easter Bunny greeted shoppers:  
his hair white and synthetic,  
his face frozen, grinning.

I saw the corpse of another rabbit

with a bite taken from its side  
lying in the grass.

The Easter Bunny danced  
on the grave of his authentic cousin—  
blowing kisses to children,  
concealing the bloodied body.

I bought my chocolate and drove away.  
I never cared for celebrating Easter Sunday.

The final line of this poem turns the poem slightly, shifting the personality of the narrator at the end. The pessimistic attitude contrasts with the concern the narrator seems to present earlier as he observes the mascot dancing near the deceased rabbit – reminiscent of Duhamel’s closing of “Kindergarten Boyfriend.”

My relationship with contemporary poetry is not all positive, for I struggle to engage in works that require reading into the poem instead of participate in the unfolding of the poem. By this statement, I mean to say that some contemporary poets push boundaries so far that their poems become inaccessible. The poet demands that meaning be read into the poem in order to make some sense out of its content, and this movement in contemporary poetry does not appeal to me in any way. Specifically, Nick Demske’s often falls within this category. For example, his poem “Kissmarriage” gives little in terms of concrete imagery, distancing the poem from comprehension:

Dead baby; shaken, not stirred. Dead baby –  
Do not disturb. From happy meal to happy  
Hour: dead baby. I’ll tell you when you’re older.  
From a staunch belief in the martial art of spanking.

To the raunchéd grief in the marital alter, *thanking*  
Me for this when you’re older. I am the tribe elder  
And the dead baby inside your dead belly. I am childproof. I say the dar  
Ndest things. Expecting mothers  
Breed disappointments and I am the father of modern

Dead Babyism. Don't make me pull this carriage over.  
Don't make this honeymoon last forever,  
This honey mood swing like fists at lovers' first trimesters.

Hush little baby. How far along was she? By the power invested in me, I pronounce you  
Dead on arrival. You may mourn the loss.

Ultimately, this topsy-turvy poem is certainly a unique form, but its arrangement and  
style keep readers a bit too removed from the poem.

Before I conclude this introduction to my collection, I must mention a selection  
from Tony Hoagland's essay "On Disproportion" from his book *Real Sofistikashun*  
because of its overarching influence on my perspective of poetry. Prior to beginning this  
project, my conceptualization of the modern poet was a man or woman isolated in an  
obscure, dark room lit only by the flame of a single candle, writing about heartbreak and  
intense human emotion. Contrasting with this naïve perspective, Hoagland says: "it is the  
job of the poet to give pleasure, to amaze and exhort as well as to testify to the real; to  
demonstrate the capabilities of human genius and job. Song is heroic. It has its place  
even at a funeral" (Hoagland 127). Hoagland's insight pushed me to contemplate my  
own understanding of the poet of this century: one who must be fully present in order to  
translate aspects of this world into poetry, whether this means smoking a first cigarette in  
a decaying gazebo in Jamaica, laughing beneath the sun's fading rays as the chill of fall  
approaches, or opting to drink cheap liquor at the dirty pub instead of writing that  
procrastinated term paper.

In the end, I believe that this notion that a poet must insert himself: involve  
himself in relationships with others, and experience the grandiose and miniscule moments

of life ultimately exists in some capacity in this collection of poems – my own heap of broken images.

“He looked at her and for a moment she lived in the bright blue worlds of his eyes.”  
-F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Tender Is The Night*

## Grandfather

When I still had strawberry blonde hair,  
my grandmother spoke to honeybees  
while she watered sunflowers  
with a rusting copper can.

I listened to her stories  
through the dusty screen of a window,  
standing on a leather ottoman  
pressed against the wall.

She told the bees of her husband Mykhaylo  
who raced from his childhood home  
with arms hugging cups of water  
for families packed inside railroad cars  
coasting through uneven Ukrainian farmland.

I wished the bees would have asked  
what the word *Nazi* meant, or  
where the trains were going,  
but they hummed into the sunflowers,  
dressing themselves in scarves of pollen.

When her can emptied, my grandmother  
smiled beneath the shadow of her sunhat,  
stroked the fuzzied neck of the tallest flower,  
and turned her attention to the red impatiens.



## Five-Year Reunion

Clutching the invitation, I see men  
shaking hands, hugging, and posing  
with arms around shoulders.

They laugh about our failure of a football season  
and the bottle blonde Spanish teacher  
whose pencil skirts make boys stare.

None of them remember I ate lunch alone  
at a table in the corner of the cafeteria,  
or had my ass grabbed at prom on a dare.  
They don't remember copying my chemistry homework  
because electron orbitals came easy to me,  
or throwing pen caps at Zach  
because of his flamingo-pink button-down.

I see myself clanking longnecks with former jocks  
now overweight with guts hanging over their belts,  
and we grunt at the words of a toast  
about the brotherhood of an all-male high school,  
and our wrinkled khakis, shirts, and navy blazers.

## Academy Award of Merit

I keep dreaming of Hollywood.  
Last night, I sat in the Dolby Theatre  
And watched a rising starlet in a dress  
Like a glass of expensive champagne  
Read the nominees for actor in a leading role.  
I knew she would announce my name,  
And I would race to the stage in a white tuxedo  
To clutch my golden statuette.  
I'd first thank my mother,  
And then the cameras would cut to a shot of her  
In the audience:  
For fleeting a moment,  
Viewers would live in the bright blue world of her eyes,  
Shimmering like a sapphire caught in the sun's light.  
In just three seconds, America would love my mother.

When I tell my friend about the dream,  
He asks if moving to Los Angeles  
Is worthwhile because I am  
Going to become a dentist  
And raising a family  
In Cleveland is much more practical.

## September

Lying on your futon,  
I say goodnight at 1AM  
only to begin listening.  
You tell me that you  
resent your father,  
how he kicked you out  
and you slept in the car parked  
in the driveway of your home.  
You mention  
your dog Jenny,  
her goofy smile and  
her epilepsy.  
You remember  
sitting through her seizures,  
and loving her until her end.  
I listen,  
hearing you admit  
to being too unattractive  
to ever ask a girl out.  
In that night-filled dorm room,  
I knew, somehow,  
that you would be okay.

Your room was decorated  
with admission statistics and  
university pamphlets.  
An oversized  
periodic table of elements hung  
on the wall instead of  
the Earth, Wind & Fire poster,  
which surprised me  
because you would call and ask  
“Do you remember,  
the 21st night of September?”  
waiting for me to finish  
the lyric.

We stopped speaking, Anthony,  
but I know that  
medical school is going well.  
I saw a picture of you  
in your white coat,  
your curly hair and

dark-rimmed glasses  
the same as always.

I hear you have a new friend  
who laughs  
at your quirky stories  
and listens to you  
spew information about  
the latest in cancer research.  
I hope you tell him  
about Jenny  
and your dad and  
the nights we talked  
and refused to sleep.

If you read this poem, call me.  
I mastered the lyrics to *September*  
since we last spoke.

## **Foley**

Once,  
from a balcony,  
I watched  
lightning strike  
a pier –  
the electricity  
extending  
from the blackened sky  
like the tongue  
of a chameleon  
propelling  
towards an unsuspecting  
cricket.

The spearing light  
branched and  
bended  
like the dendrites  
of a neuron –  
the shape  
of unearthed roots  
connecting  
sky to ground.

The sonic boom  
vibrated my ribcage,  
echoing in the cavity  
of my chest,  
symphonizing  
my heartbeat  
to the pulsations  
of the vibrating  
glass door.

Now,  
when I watch television,  
I am unmoved  
by thoughts  
of a man  
in a recording studio  
rolling metal spheres  
in a plastic box  
to create

foley thundercracks.

### **Chocolate Rabbit**

Three days before Christ rose from the dead,  
I took a trip to the candy store  
to buy my sister a chocolate rabbit.

Streamers – pink and yellow –  
braided the pillars of the storefront  
like the tentacles of an Easter octopus

Waving on the sidewalk,  
wearing overalls with a whicker basket in-hand,  
the Easter Bunny greeted shoppers:  
his hair white and synthetic,  
his face frozen, grinning.

I saw the corpse of another rabbit  
with a bite taken from its side  
lying in the grass.

The Easter Bunny danced  
on the grave of his authentic cousin–  
blowing kisses to children,  
concealing the bloodied body.

I bought my chocolate and drove away.  
I never cared for celebrating Easter Sunday.

## **Batman and Robin**

After my bath but before bed,  
I wore footie pajamas  
with Batman and Robin covering my belly –  
hero and sidekick on either side of my zipper.

I imagined the duo protecting me  
from The Joker and Harley Quinn,  
Two-face and Mr. Freeze,  
and the shadows lurking in the open closet  
cast by the glow of my nightlight.

After Adam died in that car accident,  
and I knelt before his mahogany casket,  
I wore that nighttime outfit less and less.

Last week, I found a soggy cardboard box  
tucked away in the corner of my attic  
with my old pajamas inside,  
and found that even Batman and Robin  
couldn't withstand a leaking pipe and mildew.

## November

Once, from an Adirondack chair,  
I saw my friend trip on the sidewalk.

For a moment, he was suspended  
between concrete and azure sky,  
gravity pulling his smile straight,  
his body horizontal.

His palms, cheek, torso  
smacked the cement –  
and my face reddened.

I thought of the time he kissed me –  
our bodies above the auburn duvet  
and the November light lingering  
in his childhood bedroom.

I wonder if he told his girlfriend  
about my scruff tickling his chin  
and the twin freckles on my hip.

Probably not –  
she offered her hand,  
brought him to his feet,  
and kissed him hello  
on top of the sidewalk.



## Mosquito Bite

The mosquito sails in the breeze –  
its wings patterned with veins  
like curling roots in a drought.

Poised on a brown puddle  
left behind by the July rain,  
its tongue is a whip unraveling and striking,  
piercing the water.

With ease it climbs back into the air,  
legs like branches of a weeping willow  
hanging below the insect fuselage.

The mosquito is the uninvited guest,  
buzzing its way into the family picnic.

It smells the redness of blood,  
searing its hiss into ears,  
humming about its *Goddamn right*  
*to fly the Confederate flag*  
before landing on a forearm.

Stabbing through the skin,  
drawing blood up its tongue,  
the mosquito leaves a souvenir on the flesh –  
the small, red sting:  
a Confederate memento.

## **Lifeguard**

I watched a boy begin to drown in July.  
His head bounced like a fishing bobber  
sinking and surfacing as though hooked to a bluegill.

The other children continued diving for rings  
and dancing around the mushroom fountain  
singing camp songs about swimming starfish.

There were no screams, no flailing arms,  
just wide eyes without irises –  
pupils as full as ripened blackberries.

I blew my whistle and lunged into the pool,  
springing the boy from the 4-foot zone,  
snot streaming from his nose past his bottom lip.

Wadding through the water with child in my arms,  
his head in the crease of my elbow like an infant,  
I carried him to his mother –  
the only parent unaware of her son's drowning.

## Happy

At the second stop on the city route,  
the bus driver welcomed a young mother,  
carrying a mumbling baby in one arm  
and a stroller in her right,  
her hair unwashed, makeup smudged.

The mother handed her baby to me –  
“Hold him for a minute” –  
and the pudgy child was in my lap:  
his white onesie yellowing,  
his socks darkening from wear.

Her son’s name was Happy,  
and he squealed with delight,  
exuding joy to the gray-face passengers,  
unaware of the adults rolling their eyes  
and shaking their heads at the child’s babbling.

Happy clapped his hands together,  
drool falling from his perpetual grin  
while he squawked and smiled,  
his freckled nose matching mine.

The bus whistled as it stopped,  
and I handed Happy to his mother,  
hoping she had a clean diaper for her son  
once they returned home.

## **What Do You Want for Dinner?**

Do you want Chipotle?

*No.*

Do you want McDonald's?

*No.*

Do you want The Cheesecake Factory?

*No.*

Do you want Geraci's?

*No.*

Do you want Don Tequila's?

*No.*

Do you want Ho Wah?

*No.*

Do you want Chick-fil-A?

*No.*

Do you want Barrio?

*No.*

Do you want Flannery's?

*No.*

Do you want Best Gyros?

*No.*

Do you want Skyline?

*No.*

Where do you want to eat?

*I don't care – you pick.*

## Twenty-First Century Evangelist

Twenty-seven of my Facebook friends  
shared a video of a girl who fled North Korea:  
she speaks in broken English  
of her barefooted journey to China –  
her overgrown toenails scratching and chipping  
on stones guiding her bloodied feet  
still too youthful to callous.

These twenty-seven evangelists of social media  
are the same twenty-seven who offered  
*thoughts and prayers*  
after bombings in Paris and shootings in Orlando.

I fear my generation is a lost generation

because

we believe sharing videos on the internet  
means we can sleep in California kings  
while this girl flees North Korea without shoes,  
her dirt-framed toenails and lesioned feet  
longing for the fifteenth pair of sneakers  
in my closet.

## **Marshmallow**

My cat is colored gradients of brown –  
like the browns of a toasted marshmallow  
melted between chocolate and Graham crackers  
at the first bonfire of summer.

His eyes are silver moons like the stone blue  
of the snow-kissed caps atop the Himalaya mountains –  
the namesake of his breed.

He is fourteen years old  
with chronic kidney failure and the occasional UTI,  
so he eats medicinal foods  
that smell like spilled milk –  
dried and forgotten in the backseat of a minivan  
on a July afternoon in Cleveland.

He naps away his nine lives,  
finding pools of golden sunlight  
that warm the off-white carpet of the family room,  
lifting his head only at the sound of my footsteps.

He listens for my voice  
on evenings when I haven't been home –  
trotting on his cotton ball feet to be cradled in my arms  
because no one else at home does it quite right.

## Half Moon

My forehead wears a vein  
in the shape of a crescent moon,  
catching more eyes than the smudged Catholic  
on Ash Wednesday.

Subcutaneous canal  
connecting widow's peak to left eyebrow,  
only appearing after nights of Corona seasoned  
with lime.

Yesterday morning – or late last night –  
(or some moment between the two)  
Maggie rubbed between my shoulder blades  
as I heaved over a toilet,  
awakening the vein after it went back to bed.

She laughed at my burps,  
traced the meniscus on my forehead,  
pressing it with gentle touch into my skull,  
curious about its origins.

Chin on the lip of the toilet,  
I saw my reflection in the brown water,  
vein now throbbing before me,  
wishing I'd learn to drink fewer beers  
to keep him resting within the skin of my forehead.

## Put-in-Bay, Ohio

Floating in isolation  
like a fallen leaf in a backyard pool,

the island inhabits the waters of Lake Erie,  
enchanted the debaucherous –

shores promising interactions with  
toothless locals and images of decaying wooden cabins.

Traveling to this lake-anchored village means  
entering the twilight of a dream:

its air reeking of deep-fried chicken tenders  
and nights of drunken regret.

The Miller Ferry paddles vacationers  
across the River Styx,

putrid green water pulling passengers  
towards a civilized dystopia.

Eager college graduates  
crack and chug beers on the deck,

and a young mother distracts her son  
from the scene distantly familiar to her.

One girl barfs off to the side,  
shouting *Five fucking shots wasted!*

The island welcomes visitors  
with tie-dye t-shirts and paint-peeling road-signs.

The van-taxi drops us in front of the sun-faded *Cabin 4* –  
built to sleep six but housing sixteen for the weekend.

A herd of at least eighty college classmates  
arrive to celebrate at our same compound,

each with a duffle bag over a shoulder  
and cases of Miller and Bud Lite in-hand.

We parade towards the center of the compound



carrying bottles of vodka and boxes of wine:

the gifts to be sacrificed to the gods.  
who inhabit this land.

With stacks of red Solo Cups and bottles of cheap liquor  
we become an unruly mob,

and I root for Markus  
gulping his beer with one swig.

In his own Mystery-Machine Volkswagen van,  
Coconut Poms arrives,

his sun-beaten face and bandana  
marking him a permanent resident of the island

as he hands me his business card  
promoting his taxi service.

I watch Callie slide  
into the shadows of a cabin with Matt,

and Michael stands on a decomposing picnic table,  
raising his cup towards the setting sun.

## The Foley Artist

He grunts into the microphone an airy sigh:  
mouth expanding from “Mmm” to “Ahhh”  
as his voice climbs octaves in artificial ecstasy.

He slurps on a firecracker popsicle –  
red, white, and blue juices drip from his chin  
while his tongue wraps around the treat  
as he slaps the popsicle against his face.

With a jar of mayonnaise in hand,  
he stirs a butter knife through the thick cream,  
pushing air into the plastic container  
while whipping for the perfect sound.

He claps slabs of uncooked chicken breast  
like the percussionist with a pair of cymbals,  
letting the meat glop into the microphone.

After work,  
he drinks red wine with his girlfriend,  
and they fuck in her bedroom –  
his hands covering his ears  
because the thud of the bedpost against the wall,  
the clapping of his thighs against hers  
never compare to the audio he is recording  
for *Tits a Wonderful Life* – the next great porno.

## Route 44

Crows exchanged morning gossip  
perched on telephone wires studded along Route 44.

Eliot said  
“April is the cruelest month,”  
but was he ever teased by a Cleveland February,  
plagued with blizzards that melt into seas of mud  
destined to freeze again by the end of the week?

Do we know why the hissing glass of ice and Coke  
tastes better than the one with Pepsi,

or

why you never called after I told you  
I loved you?

I enjoy driving before sunrise  
because memories of elbowing my sisters at the sink  
while brushing our teeth in our pajamas  
come back only  
when I am on the road.

## **Slicing Onions**

My mother slices a purple onion into ringlets,  
soaking the countertop with bitter juices  
while holding the wooden handle of a serrated knife.

I watch from the seat of a kitchen barstool  
as she lathers and rinses her hands in the sink –  
her ring finger naked without its golden band.

Wiping her hands with a checkered towel,  
she traces the skin of that left finger,  
and I wonder if it ever scratches from the wind  
brushing the peach fuzz on her knuckle.

With everything dried, my mother  
stretches her hands open like the petals of a lily,  
wiggles her fingers in the open air,  
and strips the leaves from the head of lettuce.

## Queen Victoria

I hate driving my mom's car because  
its Cadillac smile gleams like a diamond ring,  
brighter than crown of Louis XIII,  
overshadowing minivans in the carpool line.

Named *Charlemagne* by my brother,  
*Victoria* by my sister,  
the SUV swims through rush hour traffic  
like the Great White gliding after its prey.

The Escalade embodies Suburban Bourgeois –  
but she's raised five kids on her own,  
each day wearing her only pair of jeans,  
hair graying at its roots before she can dye it again.

She deserves that ship fit for a queen,  
the car – a spoil of war – her royal carriage remaining  
after my father left her on the front step  
on that autumn afternoon two years ago.

## Bed Sheets

My sheets were striped in lines of sky blue,  
patterned with bears dressed as athletes,  
clinging to blended odors of childhood:  
lilac fabric softener and spilled black cherry Kool-Aid  
smuggled upstairs while my parents slept.

Today my bed wears white sheets  
reeking of thrown up whiskey and sweat –  
musk poisoning my nostrils,  
firing messages to my neurons  
who tell my brain to remember  
the high-top table on a Tuesday night,  
the karaoke rendition of *Brown Eyed Girl*  
with lyrics switched to *Blue Eyed Boy*  
as your girlfriend sat at the table to my left.

## **The Superior Sex**

Nipples are slices of pepperoni  
slapped on the chest:  
some sliced large,  
and others small  
in shades of  
reds, browns, and purples.

They tell stories of rebellious teens  
with diamond-studded piercings,  
or reveal mortality:  
blank skin after a double mastectomy.

Physiologically void  
on the bodies of men,  
like miniature cowboy hats  
sitting atop hair-ridden pecs.

On a mother's body,  
the faucet of nourishment,  
the mammalian trademark –  
our source of survival.

Why, then, do we think it so radical  
that a woman demand to be  
an equal?

Without her sacred nipple,  
we wouldn't have a history of mankind,  
a society to improve,  
a world to call our own.

The human species would not exist.  
Our extinction prevented  
because of the nipple of Woman.

## **Morning Coffee**

How lucky I ran into you  
in the booth at Joe's –  
my plate of French toast all but gone,  
and the coffee bitter like snowfall in April.

You joined me,  
and spoke of your father's affair  
while sweetening your tea  
with crystals of artificial sugar.

You stirred the drink with a spoon,  
and I said my father had done the same.

The waitress brought waffles –  
butter and syrup dripping,  
and you asked what I did next.

I said I pretended  
he still kissed my mom goodnight,  
and they slept in the same bed  
with their fourteen pillows all in a row –  
but I was young then.

Now, I said,  
I tuck her into bed each night,  
and wake up when the sun is new in the sky  
because her favorite smell  
is that of brewing coffee collecting in the pot  
before her alarm sings her awake.



## Toyota Camry

On Wednesday, my car was towed to her grave  
after being crushed by her peers at a red light –  
her Sanibel Island bumper sticker defiled by a Honda Civic.

I wonder if she felt at peace before the accident  
and remembered our trip to Detroit in November  
where she lost two hubcaps in the Wendy's parking lot.

Maybe she was ready for her work to be finished,  
reaching 100,000 miles while we drove through  
a Cleveland blizzard, gliding down I-90.

Cars must tire of highway driving:  
all that forward running without complaint  
of the gray slush of winter splashing their chrome faces.

Sometimes pretending to lack air conditioning,  
my car would burp and exhale stale air  
on my sweaty face in the middle of summer.

Other times we sang to the oldies station on the radio,  
tone deaf renditions of *Love Shack* and *Jessie's Girl*  
sung to invisible passengers in empty cloth seats.

I hope she isn't upset with how we parted last –  
I didn't mean to spill my morning coffee down  
her door and on the seat when I stomped the brake.

## **To My Mother**

It occurred to me at lunch,  
while we shared orange chicken with fried rice and egg rolls,  
that my mother was beautiful.

Something about the slanted shadows  
cast by the lantern with painted azaleas  
made her curls lay just right –  
hugging her face like thick lace embroidering a valentine.

The creases of her face chronicled  
vacations in the Florida sun,  
evening walks through the park,  
and late-night shopping as Santa Claus.

My mother greets the spring like the budding daffodil –  
first to breathe the forgotten warm air  
or catch drops during humid rainfall.

I hope she takes a moment and looks in the mirror  
to trace the creases of her face  
that tell stories of her beauty.

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