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What the Unburied Said

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for Honors Studies in English

By

Katharine Rees

Fall 2023

English

Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences
The University of Arkansas

for my parents

Unreal City,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.
—T.S. Eliot

I think there ought to be
a little music here:
hum, hum.
—Mary Oliver

Introduction

What the Unburied Said began as a collection of poems written during the early years of the pandemic on bus rides, during barista or library clerk shifts, and on walks to and from class. At the time, I was recovering from two invasive surgeries to correct a heart-compressing birth defect and struggling to answer a question I'd been prompted towards in workshop classes: "why do i write?" As "ars poetica" alludes, a writing habit took firm root in my story at sixteen when a close family member took their own life. As such, my early attempts at poetry slither with grief. They confess, they dwell. Over the course of my time in undergrad, I've been lucky enough to learn from professors and peers whose work prioritizes joy and communication over despair. This thesis is written with the hope that my poetic voice has grown with time, healing, and instruction to be a more generous, outward-seeking, productive one.

In the summer of 2022, I studied abroad in London—the first time that this particular trip had re-occurred since the start of the pandemic. I was inspired by the conversations of strangers and by the strangers I met who became friends. We talked the most about our own curiosities: color-theory, gravestones, people, trees. Home again, I was still confronted by a web of fascinations in the form of the patrons that I answered questions for every day as a clerk at my local library. Some came in wondering what type of birdseed would bring cardinals into their yard, others just wanted to know how to register to vote, one asked my co-worker for a book on how to better understand a child's emotional awareness, and I watched her voice slowly soften around her daughter over the course of a year. In an effort to archive and understand these bright interludes in an otherwise difficult season, I began interviewing anyone who happened to find their way into my life (some known, some unknown) by asking them a two-fold question: what is one thing that you are deeply curious about? Or, alternatively, what is an unanswered question that you have?

My methodological approach was inspired by works like Ross Gay's *Catalog of Unabashed gratitude*, which is built on grief-work and communal joy, and by interview-based poetry, such as Bhanu Kapil's *The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers*, which methodically memorializes the voices of Indian women by asking them a series of twelve questions. My subjects' italicized contributions to this thesis are, perhaps more than Kapil's aesthetic, filtered through and in conversation with my own perception and poetic voice. Some of these

conversations, naturally, provoke an answer-seeking response, but more than offering an answer, my goal was to try and understand why the subject had an initial fascination or wonder with a certain topic. In the end, their wondering seemed to offer a kind of generative answer to post-disaster numbness and to provide an invitation towards community. I am deeply indebted to the sea of unexpected people that made this work possible.

I am also indebted to the words I've studied for the past few years. Poems like Mary Oliver's "Hum, Hum" and Marie Howe's "The Gate," which offer quiet, honest glimpses at trauma and seek to mythologize familial figures, deeply informed pieces like "the whale" and "sidewalk psalm." T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* also left an impression as an oddly recurring text in my undergraduate career. However, I didn't truly take interest in Eliot's epic built from allusions until I studied it for the third or fourth time in a plague literature class in 2021. In class, we would talk about the inaccessibility of Eliot's most well-known poem, its author's narrow, privileged lens into the world, and the narrative's uncertain consolation for hope. The second to last poem in this collection, "notes from plague-lit class," borrows thematically from Eliot and serves to frame the rest of my narrative.

In section five of *The Waste Land*, "What the Thunder Said," the sound of thunder echoes over a desolate landscape. This "thunder," a seemingly powerful entity in Eliot's epic, is a reference to the Hindu *Upanishads*. When the thunder speaks, it mentions three words, "Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata" (line 433), which Eliot translates in his footnotes to "give, sympathize, control" (Eliot, p. 55). The speaker's poetic responses to each virtue, then, explain the lack of these virtues in the human world using short, desperate scenes. He describes humanity as a set of disconnected individuals in "empty rooms" (Eliot, line 410) and represents each person "in his own prison" of the mind (Eliot, line 414). The poem ends with a scene of a Fisher-king still waiting for rain (lines 424-433), and a steady, if uncertain, repetition of the Hindu word for peace: "Shantih shantih shantih" (line 433). While Eliot's post-disaster wasteland centers on a vision of humankind that is continually steeped in death and waiting, my desert landscape seeks to exalt the resilience and beauty of those that help each other live within an often-tragic, always-fascinating world.

As I was compiling these poems, it became clear that the italicized meanderings present in both my narrative-confessional poems and my interview poems constitute a kind of “unburied voice.” In other words, a voice that attempts to resurrect after destruction, a voice that is both human and ethereal, collective and individual. To borrow Louise Glück’s words, the unburied voice is one that will always “risk joy” (Glück, line 13) whether or not the thunder chooses to voice an answer for suffering. In the future, I hope to continue to catalog the people around me (perhaps using different questions) with a stronger focus on place, folklore, and family history. While this project attempts to understand how humans respond to life in a desert-season, the next extension of my work, with a bit of faith, will be concerned with how the living choose to navigate and accept seasons of joy.

Table of Contents

<i>I.</i>	1
inhabit	2
ars poetica	3
hineni	4
the whale	5
sidewalk psalm	6
<i>II.</i>	7
teaching presence	8
metric for meaning	9
weathervane	10
a rough translation	11
an old hope	12
edensong	13
compost	14
sparkling exhausted things	15
soil microbiology	16
on the topic of soil	17
tightrope	18
the state of the world, today	18
electron	19
a little good	20
gospel habit	21
as they are	22
rescue	23
pale yellow	24
muscle memory	25
de perspicuis	26
inside joke	27
devotio moderna	28
just an observation	29
conversations with friends who are graduating	30
<i>III.</i>	31
notes from plague lit class	32

ode to a fourth lap 34

notes 35

acknowledgments..... 36

I.

-ars poetica-

i lose things
 more often than i'd like
 to admit. keys are small,
 and so,
 easy to run your eyes past.
 shoes, on the other hand, (size eight no less)
 shouldn't wander from their place
 between you and the ground,
 save for the pair of black Reefs
 that i left inside a hotel closet in San Diego.
 to be fair, they were freshly given,
 still faint in their un-belonging.
 almost as faint, gift-like,
 as the pens collecting,
 like the last dregs at the bottom of a well,
 in the corners of every bag i own.
 (how am i to know that there's still water
 all those miles deep?)
 on such occasions, i assume that i'm a prophet
 or maybe a 1-800 medium
 visioning forth a trail
 to my former self
 as it let the "precious thing"
 fall from its hand.
 as if, behind my third eye
 lies the space underneath
 the bench in my childhood room,
 my sixteen-year-old fingers
 still parsing the carpet anemone
 for bobby pins, buttons,
 the words we wanted,
 cause and effect of death,
 or the mass-market Gatsby
 i was looking for that morning
 fighting with my black dress
 assuming the answer would come
 like a green light above water,
 and my sister's green eyes the only response
 asking,

why do you need this?
why do you need this?

-hineni-

i keep gathering myself up after the coals are grey
 because the soles of my feet fear the cold familiar
 itch of cedar floors open to the air they fear the more than twenty winters clicking shut.

already, the log-carrier my parents bought has turned a hazy shade, lighter somehow
 waiting for my absence. i stack cedar cuttings from boxes, split red and bleeding
 incense across my palms.

sapling, kindling, severed bough. those too old to be broken are cleaved from the tree.

back through the doorway, past blackened glass, i begin to think of light
 but find the heaviest beams at the top of the pile. how many times have i raised these walls, and still
 i forget to put the largest sticks at the bottom of the bag.

now hands must be scratched, arms swallowed to the elbow by bark and soot
 to pull brush to the surface. i was taught that flames only father warmth
 when fed thin branches, brittle leaves at the start.

i wonder if Abram, still blind to the syllables sprouting at the edges of his name,
 felt as much fear to get it right. reordering, reordering, moving slowly
 so the twigs wouldn't bruise his son's skin. and meanwhile

a hand on a shoulder
 ready to still the knife

wool nibbling at
 the hem of a robe.

-the whale-

I.

we were talking about Melville, i think, and sirens, as the tires settled into the snow:
all that glitter that lured travelers to their deaths, all that sea my father misses so much.

shaking heads at *have you read it?* adding promises we won't keep.

*always liked that movie, though, he says. Gregory Peck had the right sort of face
for a captain. like my brother when he was young*

II.

my eyelids sway and melt with the deep cold of four am even as his voice sparks
into this false evening we have both taught ourselves to yawn through.

and i am told about *The Gunfighter*: how he grew old and tired of bloodshed,
how he told the other, young gunfighters
they really didn't want to be like him, after all.

III.

someone drifts by the cabin. to the left, we hear the nylon shuffle,
watch the robin blue coat curve under a pack.
another face eclipses on the sidewalk, ankles fading in whistled pace.

why are they out so early in the cold?

i don't know. only that they seem to follow the streetlights, heads inclined to some distant song.

IV.

i remember driving just like this across country.

i know, i think—i remember.

all alone. It was such a feeling.

loosed, it silvers over and catches in the traded patches on the truck roof,
burrows underneath the door handle that I'm about to break,

that wonder.

if i tore up the boot-thinned carpet would there be more?
would it have already turned to pennies, gravel: the stray receipts of highways
just near enough to be absent?

V.

maybe, by tomorrow, we'll both be able to make it to work.

he's quiet looking down
from the stars in the dash
to his hands folded.

maybe it was Atticus. i don't know.
but you're right, i say,
there was something about his voice
that put you at ease.

-sidewalk psalm-

it isn't strange to wake up with the dark anymore, to buses and their indigo pews skating across, berating,
a solid oil strip. a left, a shiver of metal, shoulder reaching for shoulder a nudge, and *Blackbird*
spills out from an ear.

step out of the whale's mouth.

already, the tree-like sunflowers, the shifting maple leaves, have begun their root-born chant
beneath the pavement, sipping (*to life, to life*) against the percussion of rushing feet.

can you forget the timorous ache of your past for a minute? set down the marrowless years?

across the street, the campus dining hall fills with a waltz of pens and coffee spoons (a something to have
in their hands is necessary, like it was for mine). soft green voices surface above tables afraid
the barest whisper might conjure home.

*life keeps passing by, all this time, and life
used to pass you by.*

under my nose, the shoes feel right: moss-green slapping pavement, echo skipping
through layers of flesh to the heart of the earth and back. somehow
this heart is not just a sound anymore

but also a thing

that unfurls,

that expands,

that gives
only, an audible sigh, a share in the collective rhythm.

and i doubt it was the world
suddenly become new with a stutter of a groan, a clumsiness of notes—

rather ribs (like a gate) pried open to let the prosody wash where it will, scrape if it must.
and in the dust, a few words stuck repeating:

i will feel. i will speak. i will listen.

II.

-teaching presence-

for Maggie, in grad school for early childhood education

*how do you command attention
or rather—*

make an impression?

*how do i walk into a classroom,
call their names as if i'd always known them:
kind, firm, but not mean.*

*in short, what words sound the most
like permission to exist as you are?*

because there was an allower for me.

Junior year. i still remember her.

you asked me once, coming back
from noticing parents in the park,

*ever love people so much,
you could never tell them?*

and i hadn't known i was allowed
to love in such a soft/silent way.

all spring, you had been asking for butterflies.
finally, river-blue, dust-muffled,
one toppled onto you.
probably, not suspecting you were a flower.
maybe, instead, just gathering enough salt
to carry it to another stranger.
no doubt, more aware of its wings
as you dared a glance back,
asked it to stay for just a few more breaths.

-metric for meaning-
for a stranger in the square

why do humans need to understand things,
so much so,
that we build understanding ourselves, link by link?

i'm not sure i know what you mean—
other than the thoughts
pooling at the corners of your eyes,
weighing creases
against the smile that ravined
when i said you were a little brilliant,
a little kind.

my words want to be needlesome,
questioning the tangle in that upturned expression,
pushing knotted chain back and forth,
dragging a predictably curved line free again.

but you wave as the clouds roll in.

-weathervane-
for Jo, studying computer science and forensics

*i chased a tornado with my dad out in Oklahoma
when i was a kid. just a second—*

settle in. rest your metaphorical chin
in your metaphorical hand,
elbow landing on bent knee.

*i once thought i was going to be a meteorologist:
head hanging out of the window
of my dad's pick-up
on that old afternoon
all i wanted was to take apart
the sky. remind me to tell you—*

picture currents and wires in the wind,
drifting circuitry,
a pulse spinning
through littered mist.
then, the calm
as they dared closer,
an algorithm for clouds.

*i remember the first time i believed
i could be the eye of a storm.*

-a rough translation-
for two daughters and their parents passing through

time, some say, helps you grow loud,
 turns your voice into a trowel:
 sharp or certain enough
 to sow what it wants.
 which is to say,
 they both hid behind their shoulders when asked a question.

mother/father offer a hand, gather their children's words
 before they speak them,
 gather up honeysuckles around a trellis.

i'm curious about what you're curious about.

we're curious about hamsters, how fast they chew.

shoulders sinking in relief, and i remember
 my unclaimed words as a wobbling vine in my mother's/father's voice:
 (*she wants cherry pits, branches to climb, grass*),
 the bramble they became in my mouth:
 (*i want to be the ease in sunless rooms*).

-an old hope-
for Kelli, Star-Wars enthusiast, untirable encourager

*i'm thirty, and i still don't feel like an adult.
 when are you actually one?*

brain development, taxes,
 the first comfortable "i love you?"
 had a professor, once,
 who would give the pre-frontal-cortex-pass
 if you were under twenty-five
 and offered a dull answer.

*are you a nerd? like a lightsabers kind of nerd?
 named my daughter Rey,
 after a gentle/strong desert girl.*
 and she's an Echo.
 and i hear your voice
 minus a little spacetime
 as she begs you to jumpstart a yellow swing.
 blonde ringlets burst forward
 before the apex,
 and this girl/elder,
 sage/toddler,
 already runs towards people:
 arms back,
 a question in her eyes,
 just like you.

-edensong-
for the woman named after a garden

i thought of her the other day:
stepping down from the market
as i was walking towards it.

*what do babies see? perceive?
my friends keep having them.
what are they thinking when they look at us?*

i thought of her just before June
as the baby boy who could be my nephew
sat tangling and untangling his fingers,
his whispers floating towards a spot
on the ceiling if no one else was in the room.

i thought of her as he finally settled:
both palms on the steady bark of a Pecan tree,
the golden hour and my mother's
slanted hymns in his hair,
my sister's key turning in the door
as she came home from giving a sermon.

-compost-
for the mother in the square whose children were picking flowers

how do you dispose of something
properly?
how do you know
when something's disposable?

just think of Chicago.
all that trash,
where does it go?

how does it disperse,
evolve,
become a weed?

shouts firmly over a shoulder—

stop climbing the fence,
stop pulling at leaves,
set that dahlia back into the ground,

so it doesn't go
to waste.

-sparkling exhausted things-
for Macy, social-media-marketer, Disney-fan

why do people stay in jobs that they hate?

but if you want to know what she really wonders over
fairies, in books, paintings.
the preciousness of it all.

but do they ever get tired
of being so small,
so full of flight,
of glittering under their own steam?

do they ever get tired
of us waiting
for something lovely and savage
without offering belief?

somewhere, a fairy is ending the day. they shed their wings on a hook,
sigh a path to the doorway window, and find all of their quick, beaming trails
stitched into sky.

they let the blinds drift down,
promise not to hide too long.

-soil microbiology-
for someone that i sort of knew in junior high

*there's a lot going on
underneath our feet—
you don't think about it.*

*but there's layers—
some kind of homeostasis?
a pecking order of sorts.*

*like the worms,
root-feeders, shredders,
predator and prey,
decomposers
(they turn everything to mush).*

a chorus pulled up
by marigolds. the acidity
of hydrangea petals
reminds us where we came from,
where we'll go.

it's familiar, societal—

remember when your mom
taught me how to hold a bell.
how knowing the air was
as the small, gold thing
sat dormant.

but you don't think about it—

took me seven or eight years
to hear that sound
again

*why do you look
so familiar?*

-on the topic of soil-
for Clancie, sustainable farming educator

what's buried underneath:

small things. what am i missing every day that makes my life flow?

rivulets sifting through Kansas prairie.

the calm and rambling water.

my zucchini failed this year.

and you didn't see it. how could you have?

microbes or some other subtle enemy

fed through the root, slipped under the skin.

i take so much for granted. like manners.

how to stand up straight,

how to say hello.

there's a vocabulary for being human.

what i was taught at a young age makes my life easier,

not knowing can make your life harder.

a couple years ago,

i didn't know how to say thank you,

so i said i was glad we met.

i want to go deeper. keep learning about

cabbage leaves and silt,

unnecessary kindnesses,

the small, unburied things.

-tightrope-
for Starr

*Cleopatra was closer to the Pizza Hut
than the pyramids.*

makes me think of folded paper,
stick-figure on a wire
jumping through wormholes.
Christopher Nolan knows what's up.

we just can't see time.

beam me up
after i answer adventure.
beam me up
after i blink.

-the state of the world, today-
for Starr's friend

upon raking a hand through her bangs:

*we were talking about this yesterday, Starr,
at that dinner party?
(is democracy a farce?)
and i've been thinking,
thinking of orangutans.
fucking twisted social habits, if you ask me.*

otters enjoy autonomy, too
(or so i'm told).
but it's good we discuss these things.
 imagine if we didn't discuss these things.
 where would we be when it all goes dark?
 where would we be without all these petitions
 thrown over tablecloths
 to meet distant eyes,
 returning to our hands
a little notched and unfamiliar.

-electron-
for another stranger in the square

it's everything:

*the media,
mass communication,*

information dancing around, positive or negative charge,

*but what do i want to know?
what do i give my questions to?*

*penicillin and gene therapy,
plague,
new cures for old diseases.*

and of course, Kahlo, Schumann, going to the Opera on a Sunday night,

struggling with/for beauty.

*stop me if this is too much, but it's all so much, all at once,
and i wish
that the arts were loved in theory
and in practice.*

*i mean, i used to work in non-profit.
before the money ran out,
before the world shut down,*

before it felt like there was less to give
to fragrance and soundtrack and prayer?

*but somehow, i still feel
the same.
somehow, i still
wish*

-a little good-
for Aidan B., studying anthropology and religious studies

it's the question.

how do i live my best life?
now? and what is a good one?

if you think of karma systems, you get what you deserve.

if i stop at every trumpet flower i pass,
will the story of my life ripple with a gauzy, orange haze?
if i wave at every stranger,
will i find myself surrounded by friends?

or maybe, in the end, nothingness.
either way, i've left a little good behind.
even if the Earth no longer remembers you,
or me, or anyone else.

trumpet flowers. walking the mile or so to the parking lot each time we missed the bus,
you'd ask me how i was.
eventually, i answered honestly.

eventually, it all works out.
i really hope,
for you,
it all works out.

-gospel habit-
for Josh, pastor, small-group leader

*Jesus deals with it
plainly.*

does it matter what It is?

*no uncertainties
surface.*

does it matter if the question called for
another question?
you always say It's about loving God
and loving people.

maybe, there's something noble about circling
the same canopy, while welcome-waiting on a stoop;
every March or April,
brushing away dead leaves
knowing how fast they'll speckle, burn, untomb themselves;
every morning quiet,
finding a new shade of purple,
a new name, new vertebra hummed in a distant language.

every year,
asking anyone you can
to just look up.

-as they are-
for Lexie, poet, hallway friend

just the stars,
you said.

and i had been expecting an ode
to Lyra or Polaris,
glass-fogged celestial bodies
and a telescope (weak joints, dust in lens caps)
handed down from pensive ancestors.

instead, an unremarked absence:
never lived anywhere that you could see them past pollution.
no more smoke, no embroidery,
i just like them.
i want to know them better
as they are.

-rescue-
for Emma, an old friend

if i had a superpower, i'd want to know every language.
take as many as you can get.
you said, Duolingo's got fifteen?
give or take.

the goal, of course,
of course,
is reuniting a child with their parent.

and i can just see it now:
the scene opens
with you and your dog
in the Bostonian chill.
spent October and red brick.
you happen upon some kid
wandering circles in the park,
Anya's nose nudges an aimless shoe.
„bast du dich verlaufen?“

it's strange the way it works. you don't always have to speak it.
sometimes, a gesture, a shoulder shrug is enough.

when you said hello,
and it's blurry now,
but something like
(these things are always so awkward.)
it was an invitation, a nudge,
(you're not as awkward as you think.)

-pale yellow-
for Leah, roommate, "queer-fashion icon"

*i want to be fluent in the language of proportion,
the language of color.
if i'm wearing sweatpants to school,
check on me.*

how much will-power did it take
to stay silent
when i left the apartment
wearing cornflower joggers
and a knee-length hoodie?

*i can tell when someone speaks the same language,
each personal style is a magical/instinctive dialect.*
walking through London, you'd rubber-neck
at the mumblings of strangers: silver, pointed-toe flats;
shock of tulle worn without occasion;
cotton or wool? (70/30 blend).

*if i had an ability of little consequence,
i'd want to sit in the city all day
and draw out flattering colors.
people don't always know
how to celebrate what they have.*

we took the late train back,
and the past four years
sat heavy in my lap.
i didn't know you then,
but you told me what i was.
(lavender, parchment, dim glow of flame)

you say you're pale yellow,
but after a little time,
i look at you and think:
hazel-bright, deep charcoal,
warmth without the sting,
the right time to call out
someone's honest shade,
a language i am slowly gleaning.

-muscle memory-
for Lia, roommate, violinist

why is everyone so obsessed with what came before?
the 60s, the 90s,
the 1780s, 1870s,
a-lines and overalls,
Mozart and Brahms,
it all circles back.

like that night,
the Requiem,
a set of strings you never expected
would remember your hands.

call it a scale, muscle memory,
or exhaling the past,
but when that stagnant room shuddered
with dead melodies,
i could've sworn someone ancient and familiar
swept by in go go boots and flannel,
concert black to give a competitive edge,
grateful to be given lungs again.

-de perspicuis-
for Zoë, co-worker, learner of dead languages

i don't know so many things.

a running list:
how do planes stay in the sky?
how does water churn to power?
how do speakers give off sound?

yesterday,
(hand off wheel)
my car told me it's more efficient to brake down a hill
than to just roll
no foot, no brake.
don't know how it works.

don't know when we first met,
only that i've gotten used to
green hair? chalk blue? some cosmic mish-mash
jetting past at shoulder level
ready to bite if need be.

also,
electric cars? no, fucking, clue.
also,
digital cameras.
how. do. they. see. things.

what happens in the gaps
between us and the shutter and the negative
to archive the light?

what happened between your rainbow pilot pen
and a season's worth of left-behind stanzas—

(it's going to be a good day,
get some rest,
write your paper and do. not. come to work) —

to get us to this Prius
braking down a hill
towards the bubble wrap
we needed to shuffle away
the contents of Natalie's living room?

so many things
politely refuse your questions.
so many things act
as if they always were.

-inside joke-
for Lily, co-worker, philosopher

*you ever think about how our lives are structured
by interpretations of concepts?*

why do bells come to mind?
dinner, classroom, shift change.

we came up with the alphabet, so that, what, we would have permanence?

Lily, so much of what i do comes down to this.

i'm not a materialist.

i'm not saying you are—
but think of all the times
you forgot your vape on Natalie's lawn.
think of all the cast-away, material things
that bring you to mind.

*if anything, i think it proves the immaterial over the material.
you ever think about average people in history?
forget kings. tell me the jokes serfs told each other.*

something tells me
they would have sounded a lot like a JUUL-pod
falling through the lead-green floorboards
of a porch that held us up for a little while.
a porch that none of us, probably,
will ever sit on again.

-devotio moderna-
for Aidan F., co-worker, studying art history

*where would Schiele have gone
 if he'd survived the Spanish flu?*

you're smarter than me,
 but from what i understand
 he would have been twenty-nine.
 the war was almost over
 (as it always is when artists die).

a crouching room in Vienna:
 Schiele considers himself,
 Klimt, Edith,
 as deathmask/as almost-forever-
 muse/
 as grey-green sepulcher/
 as day-break-goodbye/
 as *no more*

something you mentioned to Lily:

*language distances us from The Real.
 we learn to access a new reality through linguistic constructs.*

now if—

the war is over.
 Schiele goes on.
 puts down his own reflection
 in acute angles, again and again,
 until it sputters,
 becomes a mouth,
 germinates a shadow.

the canvas widens but rarely
 breathes.

-just an observation-
for Natalie, co-worker, running buddy

your cat is in a box again.

why do cats do that?
oh! i'm curious about why cats get in boxes.

thank you.
i've heard it's because
walls are confining.
trace four lines around Eli and Salem
and they feel safe
enough to pounce.

you all should just stay. trying to leave me again?
i see how it is.

and, no, i'm not conflating you
with your roommates (gray with a sharp/satisfied grin)
(night-black, ready to spring for any open door).

but i can imagine the two days you were homeless.
sitting in Zoë's apartment, you'd let your almost-landlord's ears fill for a while.
then, break for beach reads on the couch,

one foot dozing on an armrest,
the other keeping time against the new
pair of Hocas on the floor.

-conversations with friends who are graduating-
for Brendan and Callie, on their way to a new good

*so much of who you are
 is who you're around.
 the collective,
 the individual,
 you're familiar?
 with that theory
 from Hagen or Brecht,
 i can't remember,
 check the footnote
 for control:*

the way we grasp at it,
 the way we learn to let it go.

*the way people gather around a stage for a while
 like a palm closing around a hand
 and scatter when the last word
 is thrown into the air—*

that spectacular nearness of people fraying.

*watch, for example, the familiar trail my words/ eyes make
 to the woman sitting behind you dreaming,
 her unanswered questions:*

[if belief is so noble, why does it hurt so much? how many coats can i hang in a house before i get there?]

*yesterday, we were looking for a fish, waved at a puffer past the glass,
 and somehow it knew what i was saying.*

like knowing that one person will still be around like a laugh
 at the end of a sentence;
 like knowing that everyone you meet gives you something
 to carry in your pocket,
 even if you'll forget their smile someday.

III.

-notes from plague lit class-

1/2021

we take a taste from every century
(cholera, bubonic, our might-be-drowning lungs)
and try to synthesize
the rumblings,
outbreak,
quarantine,
aftermath.

everyone dreads the Waste Land
because it admits no fear.

2/2021

for ten or eleven dollars an hour
i count *coffee spoons* and guess at the shapes
of my co-workers' smiles,
watch as a man's bare-breathed screams
pour over my thirty-years-younger supervisor.

on Sunday,
a pastor-posed question: *are you in a desert? are you waiting for relief?*
in class,
a call and response: *why be a human and be good?*

Camus believes in people and in work,
but i can't understand
how Reix drew up all that love
only from himself
to give.

3/2021

Marquez speaks and magnolias unspool,
smell like arsenic. some sicken
at Florentino Ariza's inability to de-infatuate.
but remember that inescapable feeling? been there, been there,
some harken, seem to drift.
behind my closed mouth: a faint fondness
for sunflowers and coke caps hitting pavement, soft-syllabled eyes,
as i let the lamp-light pool against the door that's
been so hard to prop open.
one weekend in march,
i unknowingly catechize thirty-three pages
on "love and magic" and leaving.

4/2021

i Zoom chat with my group-project partner
until one a.m. most nights.
she tells me about the people she's lost,
about her father's firm and pressing religion.
we agree that there are so many beautiful places to be miserable,
so many ordinary places to heal,
and she asks me not to mention
that she fled for Washington in a van.

when we send notes on Manzoni's displaced, failure-eroded priests,
i don't tell her my margins filled
in a car, headed home
from an odd and self-shaped pain.

a week later,
i wear a high-necked shirt to hide
the extra incision i hadn't bargained on,
while we teach a class on forgiveness and redemption,
and the salvation that comes from accepting what you can't control.

5/2021

by the time we get to Saramago,
patterns appear: there's a time for questioning God, five or six grief stages, then the bodies,
fear of gravediggers, kinship broke down/exalted.

i guess you all have constant reason to question your own mortality, our professor says,
tells us, that she didn't expect for us to go *so deep*.
someone sends pictures of flowers.

the rain always signals the end
and we're still looking up.

6

something like a cloud calls me by another name, and i begin collecting
all those *broken images* that were scattered at sixteen:
prisms of the living (their tenacious, feathered, kindness), every dreg of sunlight i have in me to spare,
the pleasant smallness of branches overhead,
a struggling mass of words,
June heat, my namesake's thoughts on roses,
questions.

in three years,
i turn the hard water on in my apartment
and open my palms—
no tremble of a caveat for tragedy—
to fill with something clean again.

-ode to a fourth lap-
for a forgiving home

the crocuses purple and resurrect
as if they had never been
brittle threads from someone that knew my name,

fire-tongued fronds
for a sixteenth birthday
left antiquing in a drawer,

bag of bulbs my mother helped me thumb into the earth
at twenty, (when nothing could turn me opaque) unsure
if they would shoulder the snow aside to open

meyer-gold eyes
tracing
the running shape that was a girl:

i travel light.
my time is slow.
my breath leaves, sings back.
i make my own warmth now.

Notes

Title: “What the Unburied Said” is a play on the title of the fifth section of T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, “What the Thunder Said.”

Epigraphs: Epigraph 1 is taken from section one of T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, “The Burial of the Dead” (Eliot, *The Waste Land*, lines 62-63). Epigraph 2 is taken from section five of a poem titled “Hum, Hum” from Mary Oliver’s *A Thousand Mornings* (Oliver, lines 35-37).

The Whale: “the whale” incorporates indirect allusions to *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville, its accompanying film in 1956, and a film called *The Gunfighter* (1950).

Sidewalk Psalm: The mention of “*Blackbird*” in “sidewalk psalm” is in reference to a song from the Beatles’s 1968 album named after the band itself.

An Old Hope: “an old hope” is a play on the title of George Lucas’s 1977 classic, *A New Hope*. Rey is a character from Lucas’s *Star Wars* franchise that appears in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*.

Tightrope: An interviewee named Starr introduced me to the phrase, “Cleopatra is closer to the Pizza Hut than the pyramids,” which appears in “tightrope.” Apparently, this idea started as a Reddit phenomenon.

“beam me up” is a quote from the 1966 sci-if staple, *Star Trek*, that appears in the final stanza of “tightrope.” Christopher Nolan, a filmmaker whose work often plays with time and quantum physics, is also mentioned in “tightrope” as is the trope of explaining wormholes through the use of stick figures on tightropes.

De Perspicuis: “De perspicuis” (see p. 25) is Latin for “evident,” or “clear.”

Devotio Moderna: Egon Schiele was an Austrian artist who passed away during the Spanish flu epidemic of 1918. Before his death, Schiele drew portraits of both his wife, Edith, and earlier, his mentor Gustav Klimt on their respective deathbeds. Food shortages due to World War I left Austria particularly susceptible to this disease, and Schiele’s later works are particularly influenced by the physical effects of the war. The phrase, “*no more*” in “devotio moderna” is in reference to a letter Schiele composed upon his wife’s death (see Edwards).

“Devotio Moderna” was a movement within the Christian religion that encouraged piety and mysticism (see “To Live with Christ...”). This concept also inspired a rise in Netherlandish art focused on devotional imagery, such as episodes of Christ’s life and eventual suffering. Looking at art through this lens was an act of piety, empathy, and for some, an obsession.

Notes from Plague-Lit Class: “notes from plague-lit class” makes allusion to themes and/or characters from *The Waste Land* by T.S. Eliot, *The Plague* by Albert Camus, *Love in the Time of Cholera* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *The Betrothed* by Alessandro Manzoni, and *Blindness* by Jose Saramago.

The phrase “i count *coffee spoons*” in “notes from plague-lit class” is a loose allusion to T.S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” In “Prufrock,” the titular character notes that the dull, rhythm of social commitments in post-World-War-I England is akin to his having “measured out [his] life with coffee spoons” (Eliot, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” line 51).

The phrase, “*broken images*” in “notes from plague-lit class” is a direct quote from T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. Eliot’s “broken images” (Eliot, *The Waste Land*, line 22), as far as I understand them, are both a reference to the allusions that he uses to construct his poem and to the fragmented sensory experience of living in the modern world.

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