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## The Only Thing I Ever Got From You

Janet Edwards

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The Only Thing I Ever Got From You

by

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Undergraduate honors thesis under the direction of

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the Upper Division Honors Program.

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*Can you tell me what happened?*

## Dedication

~~How do I live with this knife in my heart?~~  
~~My smile is bright; my soul is dark.~~  
~~This is my story, sad but true.~~  
~~Goodbye—it was nice knowing you.—~~

To:

Andrew

Aaron

Shelton

Kris

David

H

Joe

Doug

CJ

Ben

Tyler

Jack

Alex

Adam

Clint

the freshman

Cooper

John

## Sugar

Trees whose branches shed Apple Jacks  
on grass that tastes like dyed coconut shavings  
shade that famed gingerbread house:  
corners missing from its crumby frame,  
Hansel and Gretel buried beneath two  
toffee tombstones quite near where  
Aunt Jemima has waddled to the edge  
of the property and is looking out  
over a lake filled with boysenberry syrup.  
She climbs into a canoe at the syrup's edge  
and nearly tips it over; she shouts  
for the kids, Sara and Duncan,  
to come in for lunch, and her thick voice runs  
like melted butter over the short stack hills.  
In the distance, marmalade drips from the sky  
and drips through the top of my French toast tent.  
There's sugar in my hair and sugar on my teeth.

## The Only Thing I Ever Got From You Was a Poem

I keep memories of you  
like a bag lady, a drawer full  
of old tshirts, holes on the seams  
from overwear, love  
that resulted in general destruction.  
I wear you like my skin, feel you  
like a sunburn—deep  
red itch, tan lines etched  
for seasons to come,  
tender white.  
I count the years without you,  
make hash marks in my hip to remember  
how long. I fucked you that one time  
after we broke up so I could leave  
you. But there's meaning there  
and I can't throw myself away.

## Hometown

*Club 4*—not 1, not 2, not 3,  
but 4. Yes, that's 4,  
where Thursday it's \$4 cover,  
and \$1 beer, \$2 wells, and \$3 shots  
last all night long.  
A few hours there and you're missing  
a \$20; later you remember  
where it went when your head  
is in the toilet—you swear  
that the beer in your hand  
is your last drink.  
But outside the bathroom  
he walks up *Want a shot?*  
And you say *Sure*  
until 2 am when you're  
*Can you take me home?*  
He grins  
*Home, or to your house?*  
You choose home;  
3 minutes there and you're  
*Do you have a condom?*  
20 minutes in smells  
like liquor sweat, and he's  
*Oh, did you want to get on top?*



## Strawberry Candy

“Remember when I was little and wouldn’t let you dry my hair unless you gave me a strawberry candy?” I say. My mom laughs on the other end of the line. “I’d give you the candy and plop you up on the counter, and you’d put on my jewelry and just sit wrapped in your towel, little belly sticking out, elbow on your knee, one gold bangle fallen all the way up your arm. You knew you were getting the candy, and I knew I was giving it to you. It was a funny little play. I really just liked watching you sit there, small, and quiet for once.” I run into the doorway while she’s talking and shout, “Fuck!” My mom says, “I’m appalled,” and hangs up on me, a soft click. I give her a minute to shake her head a few times, maybe pour a glass of wine, and then I call back. She picks up and says, “My ears are still burning, you know.” I say, “I’m sorry, I’m just about to start my period, feeling volatile—you know how I am.” She replies, “I figured. It’s okay.” And it’s the strawberry candy all over again. I know she’s not really mad, and she knows, too. This happens a lot. But this time I think of my writing. I’ve never let my mother read a poem I’ve written. I can’t just show her “Ode to a Condom” and say, “I’m sorry, I wrote it when I was about to start my period.”

## Two Days at the Beginning of Something That Lasted a Lot Longer

Thursday: the phone rang  
and what the voice said cracked my head  
open wide—startled  
I sat down, lumpy on the couch,  
scratchy fabric on my skin a reminder  
that I was raw just sitting there, quiet  
on the bed of the defeated.

Friday: back on the couch,  
feeling empty, ice cream crusting  
on the hem of my robe, sticky in the fuzz.  
A voice that didn't belong to me whispered  
in my head: "I only wanted  
to lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty."  
The clock ticking in the background.

## Bingo

I've been sleeping on top of the covers for a week now like an old lady who says the comforter is too heavy for her to bend over and pull up every day and it hurts her back to try so she just sleeps on it not under. I've let my hair get matted in the back because I fall asleep on the couch watching daytime tv. When I've been awake I've just padded around this too-big house in his too-big shirt. I've skipped the process of becoming my mother and turned straight into my grandmother all disheveled and alone. I'll put curlers in my hair and wear a tracksuit to play bingo and it'll be the highlight of my week. This thought makes me cry. It's two am and the carpet is filthy and I want to vacuum. But he took the vacuum so I wallow in the crumbs and dirty footprints left by the movers. I hope he's awake too crying because he's hungry and realizes I kept the microwave.

## Your Hands

I still want to tell you how much I hated your hands—one around your dick when you pissed in the yard every time you were drunk; your hands limp at your side when you threw up all over me and yourself. Your hands with the white cauliflower scar where you cut off that wart; I was always afraid I'd find its remnants growing somewhere between my legs because your hands were on me, knew the places where I liked them: on my stomach in the morning and anywhere you put them in the dark. Your hands clenched in those midnight fights, empty beer cans lined up and turned over on your headboard and you lying there while I shouted until you unfurled your hands and they just threw back the covers and you walked out and walked back in with a bloody fist. One night while watching a movie I said, "I want to fuck you right now. No one's home and we can be loud." Your hands just stroked my hair while you laughed a little. And then your hands were done with me—I knew because they always told the truth—and they found beer, your couch, and that bartender, your hands on her, finding their way to places where she liked them; and the next day, your cell phone, to let me know what they had done.

## Yellow

My mouth is sour with bile;  
I spit yellow into the toilet,  
grip cold porcelain with sweaty hands.  
I killed you just now, in my sleep,  
woke relieved that I wished you dead  
and ended it.

Numbness spread through me  
with each visit—blood tests and near  
deaths I handled out of obligation,  
more to myself than to you.  
I wore your t-shirts to sleep,  
lost in the too-big definition of myself.  
Centered on you,  
I postponed three years of me, and for what?

I knew where the nurses kept your ice cream  
for the better days, reminded them to clean  
your IVs with alcohol—your veins  
hardened after weeks of antibiotics.  
I thought in measures of what you drank,  
penciled piss records and drained catheter bags.  
My seasons were marked by hospitals,  
disinfected springs and summers,  
bloody falls and recovery winters—  
antiseptic motions and tired existence.

You had the surgeries, but I needed the recovery.  
I lived you for years, willed you healthy  
when you were content to wallow  
in the fluid in your lungs, morphine quiet  
under the gurgle of the chest tube filter.  
Meanwhile I formed invisible scars  
to match your real ones, fat and pink—  
your chest: a map of my dying heart.

Now I let this yellow acid  
burn my throat and sand down my teeth,  
let it remind me of all the things  
I never took into account when I loved you.  
I let it come, let it purge you from deep.

*Birthday Letters*

Saturday night on my bed,  
half-drunk and thick with tears,  
lonely like you.  
Even with her, you lived alone—  
something dark kept you from each other.  
You were a bastard,  
and then you were a lonely bastard.

## Red

You always stayed up later than me.  
Drinking. I'd try to wait up and instead  
fall asleep mad.  
That night I heard thud thud  
and woke up. I thought you'd dropped  
something. But it was you—  
fallen into the coffee table corner, body  
pitched forward, crumpled on the floor  
in a pool of bright alive blood.  
I said Babe?  
You didn't even  
grunt. I knew it was deep and I should  
call an ambulance.  
Or something.  
But I just stood there.  
It was the best you'd ever looked,  
your head in that red halo.

You were

the smell of a hotdog  
my acid reflux  
that piece of hamburger meat that never chews up  
the freshman 15

a wine stain on the carpet  
a bleach spot on my favorite tshirt  
eraser shavings in my sheets  
mildewed towels

that girl's short story about a girl named Kendyl who gets stabbed outside the library  
hair gel that makes my hands stay sticky  
that ingrown hair on my inner thigh  
eczema

pms  
the price of tampons



## Shoney

When I was a little girl, my grandmother called me Shoney because I'd eat anything. I'm thinking about this now as I stare at the peanut butter I bought that happened to be from the batch with salmonella. I want to eat it. My roommate is on food poisoning suicide watch, making sure I don't have a few spoonfuls when she's not looking. That gold is my recipe for good, and I just want to eat it like normal: hand to mouth, hand to mouth, repeat, but this time taste ConAgra's neglect, ignore invisible shit speckles from the rats, the salmonella culprits, partners to my perversion: an attraction to a stomach pump—I'd take it like a champ, swallow the charcoal down and feel myself empty up through a tube.

## SAD

When I was sixteen I carved the word SAD into my left hip with my mother's seam ripper and underscored it with one precision stripe. I was on my bed, legs crossed and my dad came in. I was staring in the mirror and he said *What is the matter with you?* I just let the tears come. He said *I said What is the matter with you?* I cried harder and said *I think I need to see someone about this.* He said *What are you talking about? What is the matter with you?* shook his head when I didn't answer and left the room. I raised up on my knees, tugged down the waist of my shorts, ran a finger over my work—one word amid a picket fence of scars under my tan line—whispered *See what you do to me?*

## My Hands

on the back door while I begged you to come inside  
on your vomit sheets and vomit shirt over your washing machine at 3 am  
on my vagina looking for nonexistent warts  
on you in the morning or in the dark or just whenever  
on the covers I pulled back up after you stormed out and in again  
on you on the couch that time you didn't want me  
on your hands the night my hands lost you  
on the picture of us next to your bed that I smashed over the headboard  
on your baseball bat (lucky you caught my arm)  
on my wet face  
on an orange vial marked with my name and Phenobarbital  
on my old math compass still good for cutting angles into my hip  
on your key to my apartment that I made you give back  
on my phone at midnight  
on my car keys at midnight  
on your house key I eventually gave back  
on your best friend  
on you that one last time seven months later  
on my wet face  
on your best friend  
on that familiar orange vial, then a wine bottle after my roommate took the orange vial away  
on my pen as I write a poem in which I kill you  
on my wet face as my professor makes me read aloud the poem in which I kill you  
on your best friend

## Zwieback

That teething toast didn't soothe me. Back then my tiny teeth ground away not at each other but at those hard sweet blocks of bread I ate as a snack even after I had all my teeth, preparing my jaw joint for popping when eating, cracking when yawning, locking when laughing; for soft food diets and bite block prices; for general temporomandibular stress, a literal dysfunction junction, earache pulses where the lower jaw's connected to the skull bone.

## Lipstick

I saw you today, cheap red lipstick  
on your teeth; you get that from your mother.  
I felt the familiar churn in my stomach  
that always comes with seeing you—  
too many ex-best friend memories:  
We locked ourselves in your room  
with your sleeping pills,  
broke them open and shook out the powder,  
snorted up the white lines with a dollar bill,  
pretend cocaine that still fucked us up.  
We laughed at how our nostrils glowed green  
in the blacklight and lay on the floor staring up  
at the Jim Morrison poster on the wall.  
But then one time you stopped breathing,  
and when you came back, white was your color.  
The lipstick was gone, and I was, too.

I see you and I write this and I want  
to end it like a poem, say  
something about how red lipstick stains,  
or be truthful and call you a bitch.  
But the truth is that this is a poem,  
and I don't know how it ends.  
I don't even know how I'd end it  
in real life.

## Confession

I wash my hands longer when someone's looking.

## Taking Inventory

Scale   you don't use that much  
Contact case   maybe you weigh when you can't see the numbers  
Lortab   heard you were into that  
Toy Story Band-aids   pathetic  
Abreva   great you've got mouth herpes  
Tub of Vaseline   bet you use it when you jerk off  
Skintimate Raspberry Rain shaving cream   seriously?  
Bathrobe   what the hell is that stain  
Box of Trojan Magnums   maybe you're not so bad

## I Fucked You and All I Got Was This Lousy Poem

I thought you were terrible  
in bed. Even my mom says it's not worth  
it if you have to work at it.

I hated your dog. That time  
I gave him all those grapes and he threw up  
in the kitchen, it made me really happy.

Your skin always creeped me out. So did  
your hands. They were stumpy and splotchy  
and out of proportion with the rest of you.

That night you threw up on me  
in bed I wanted to let you sleep  
in it. Maybe even suffocate.

I hated every gift you ever gave  
me. Even Tiffany heart jewelry  
is not okay.

I also hated your crooked bottom teeth.  
I was glad you learned to smile  
so that they wouldn't show.

I got back together with you to cheat  
on you and show you  
how it felt. I wanted to say HA!

I kept waiting for you to die  
after your surgery. I wanted that flat yellow line,  
that steady beep.



## Free Association

You asked *Has Erato graced your pen lately?* I thought *Erato...Erato...does he mean the muse?* and said *You mean have I been writing?* *No, not really.* to which you responded *Don't worry—a muse will present himself soon.* I said nothing but thought *Oh are you supposed to be my muse?* Next you offered *Maybe you should try free association writing.* I could only say *Okay* and think *Erato...did he Google that? Wikipedia perhaps?* And then I did—muse of lyric poetry, associated with erotic love. You are not erotic. Men in uniform are erotic. Good poetry is erotic; that said, it appears you have killed Erato—she's dead, the smoking gun in the fat hands of an old lover with a non-erotic wheeze.

After 2 Weeks, During “Lost”  
(You wondered why I said I didn’t want to date you.)

*Are we dating?*

*Do you want to be dating?*

*Was it that you got to know me and didn’t like me anymore?*

*What if you met the right person?*

*Would you want a relationship then?*

*Were you lying to me last week at my place?*

*Can you tell me what happened?*

Scene:

*In which a woman reverses typical gender roles thinking herself empowered—but still makes women look bad...*

Guy on couch in robe eating Ben and Jerry's Half Baked ice cream from the pint, watching Grey's Anatomy reruns on his Tivo. Dove Dark Chocolate wrappers are scattered around the perimeter of an empty Kleenex box. His face is puffy and his skin looks crusty under his eyes. She broke up with him via text message. He doesn't understand what he did wrong. Women are so cruel.

Girl on couch scribbling in journal: *He thinks "broken up" but there was never anything there in the first place! It was a random hookup. Not an extension of rights to my body and my bed. This is the vaginization of the men of America. He really did say, I just am in a really fragile state right now. Can I please just come over and sleep with you? Being next to you comforts me.* She thinks she'll take her brother's advice and buy the douche some tampons.

## The Commando Inn

Uniform on the floor,  
your last name stenciled in black—  
I want to salute you  
with your short hair and hard muscles  
and emotional detachment,  
brushing your teeth behind me,  
hand on my ass, smile in the mirror.  
You spit, and I turn around,  
start walking you backwards,  
our mouths pressed open in a laugh—  
the broken headboard propped against the wall  
was just the first joke of the trip.  
Later we eat peanut butter crackers  
in sandy sheets, lie in the crumbs.

## Piano

Your ebony is thick velvet  
in my fingers; your ivory  
cake batter silk, sweet and smooth.  
I run my hands over your keys;  
they shaped these knotted fingers  
and strong forearms now poised over you,  
waiting for you to move with me.  
I lean into you as I press down, give in  
to the strong vibrations  
of your copper strings.

## The Journal of Statistical Computation and S(t)imulation

Who cares about numbers?  
I've never had any complaints.  
I'll teach you about technique.  
You'll say Where'd you learn to do that?  
Give you a lesson on Topology Proceedings.  
Bedroom geometry:  
bend me over, stretch me out—  
you can study my limits (wink).  
Next cover Physics of Fluids  
*Oh you're so viscous...*  
and Turbulence—  
*Mind the headboard.*  
Study carefully The Smooth Compactification of Locally Symmetric Varieties;  
I look at (I like) how good we fit together.  
Later write my Physics Letters:  
Dear \_\_,  
We're like a vector problem. Length magnitude force how long how fast.  
XOXO –

### Not Even a 3

They flashed cards numbered 1 to 10  
at girls who passed them in the quad: 4  
for a pretty face but biggish thighs, 7  
for some cleavage, 9  
for a nice ass in tight jeans.  
I sat and watched, wondered how  
they could judge. Because  
I thought that if I spent three  
weeks locked in a room eating nothing  
but oatmeal, I would want to die less than I did  
right then looking at Chris and Nick.  
I wanted to shout You're not even a 3!  
It's your clothes: that lavender v-neck  
exposes too much body hair;  
the grey dress pants circa Goodwill 1978  
flatten your ass, Nick. I hope you get lice  
from weeks of refusing to bathe or wash your hair.  
And how's the syphilis you got  
from that whore in Geneva?  
Chris, those not-quite-madras boxer shorts worn  
as real shorts look infested with scabies,  
and that's the dingiest old wife beater  
I've ever seen. And that grimy rhinestone cross—  
you should've left it in that store in Switzerland.

## Ridiculous

Driving home for a holiday and my knitting needles  
are sticking blue and tall, point up, out of my bag  
on the floor in front of the passenger's seat.  
I look in passing at the speed limit signs, cows, dive bars,  
people in other cars, but always those needles  
in the corner of my right eye—  
it shifts over there and I find old physics vector problems  
in some fold of my brain and figure all the ways  
my car could be hit and those knitting needles could impale  
me at points a, b, c—eye, neck, between ribs.

In line for early voting for the election,  
my favorite way to spend Saturday afternoon.  
A child on the marble steps to my right  
draws my stare in his direction.  
The camo-clad toddler is rolling on the floor—  
which looks clean, but *still*—  
and there's a rim of sucker drool around his lips,  
which are parted and squealing with glee.  
I tell the man in front of me, "I wish I had his energy."  
Really I'm concerned that the father  
of the baby with the sticky mouth  
is buying the kid M&Ms from a vending machine.

With my family after Christmas Eve Mass,  
my mother wants us to take a family picture,  
just be happy and together but I screw it up:  
I delete a picture my father took  
that I deemed very unattractive—after all  
it was my camera and there were better pictures—  
and then my father accuses me of insubordination,  
yells that he bought that camera!  
so technically I had no right to delete the picture,  
and he doesn't want me here if I'm going to act "like that."  
So I grab my bag, my mother begs me not to leave,  
and I slam the door screaming.



## Tacky Christmas Lake Weekend

Red patent pumps  
Red turtleneck  
Gift wrap bows for hair  
Beaded poinsettia vest  
Bell earrings  
Bell necklace  
Wine  
Beer  
Tampons  
Cigarettes  
Blow-up penguin  
Cream cheese  
Pickapeppa  
Triscuits  
Magazines  
*Mean Girls*  
*Eurotrip*  
N'Sync Christmas  
Britney  
Deck of cards  
    Never-have-I-ever  
Locals  
    Kitchen fight  
    BITCH  
    Fingerprint bruises  
    Drunk tears  
Martha Stewart moment  
    Countertops  
    Dishes  
    Laundry  
    Patio  
    Trash  
        Raccoons  
Roy's Store  
    Omelets  
    Spicy fries  
    Corn nuggets  
    New tshirt: "It's not how deep you fish, it's where you fish!"  
Diarrhea  
More trash  
    Beer pee down the hall  
    Pool of leakage on the car carpet

## Ode to a Condom

In the back corner of the bedside table,  
you wait in dark silence, having flashbacks  
to your earlier years as a useless status symbol  
in adolescent pockets and dresser drawers,  
hiding from mothers beneath socks and dusty bibles.  
By now you're overeager for friction action,  
ready to serve your tour of duty in bodily orifices.

You rot in hot wallets or wither up,  
a faded white outline on brown leather,  
a morning-after eyesore on clothes-strewn carpet.  
One day long ago you shriveled on the grass  
next to a swing set—two fourth graders  
found you warped into a crunchy circle,  
the smelly, sticky end of innocence.

You stay safe and protected in your plastic pouch—  
nobody likes to feel you squeak, hear you squish—  
packaged away from lies they'll never acknowledge:  
the guy cheats on the girl, and the girl doesn't know  
she got herpes from one of three random partners.  
No, they scorn you, for you hinder perfection:  
that slip-and-slide skin-on-skin sex,  
the significance of their eye contact  
during loving fucks.

But the ones without trust or birth control pills  
keep you close, grope in the drawer and pull you out,  
let you gasp one breath of sweaty air  
before you're opened up, slicked on, filled up,  
hot rubber like a grownup water balloon.  
Before they slide you off and throw you away,  
let you get cold and dry across an empty can of beer,  
you wrinkle into tiny smiles all stuck together  
as you leak just a little from your reservoir tip.

Does it ever bother you—fucking people over  
when they're just trying to get laid?  
No, you understand your power:  
you break, and while you smirk  
in a college girl's bathroom trash,  
she speeds to Walgreens for a pregnancy test,  
and that plastic stick on the counter

ruins her life while you get to be proud  
of how much jizz you can hold,  
of how good you look in ribbed glow-in-the-dark.

## Ten Years Later

I made a cake this morning and they were just asking for some. But it's gone—I pressed the knife into chocolate over and over and ate it all in neat squares. I told them Daddy took it to work. They went outside to play, and I pretended they were gone, walked to the bathroom and knelt, relieved to touch cold porcelain. Two fingers down and liquid up, hot in my throat and in my mouth, some turkey flesh and carrot flecks floated in brown. I breathed easier as I stood to rinse my hands, until I heard one of them shriek. In the mirror I saw frosting on my shirt and licked it off. The years they were born were the hardest—endless leglifts and situps and mixing smelly formula bottles. I refused to nurse and lose my breasts along with the rest of me. Because I wasn't me anymore—just their mother, now a sounding board for “Mommy, more...!” They never say please and I never correct them, not the kind of mother I wanted to be at all. Something about marriage made me selfish, and kids made it worse. I have nothing to myself. I take a shit and the boys burst into the bathroom, asking for something, always asking. I always say “Just a minute” and hope they forget. Sometimes when they're really loud, I want to tell them to go play in the street, but I just tell them to go play, and then I eat all their snacks: Fruit Roll Ups and Goldfish by the box. Or a cake. And then I have lunch, turkey and carrots or something healthy to make me feel better about what I've just done. But I never feel better—their toys are on the floor and their baby bird voices are coming from outside, and I eat and eat, my mouth around food. I watch them through the window, their little beaks opening and closing around their noise, high-pitched, uncomfortable sound.

## Hot June Sun

Your mother touched your casket;  
lines of pain creased her face flushed with heat,  
her eyes bright with tears, mouth set in a firm line.  
She shook her head in slow motion  
as she gripped your brother's hand  
and climbed into the big, black limousine.  
Our crowd smiled weakly, blotted our faces,  
and walked away.

I got into my car and didn't care  
that the steering wheel burned my white-knuckled hands,  
eyes shut tight as I tried to stop thoughts of you—  
beer and cigarettes in your big, green truck;  
dead face white as the pillow in your coffin.  
How I once told my friend you were kind of an ass.

## Graduate School

You hear about people making collages  
of rejection letters. Fuck that—

I'm a poet.

I made failure a poem  
on my hip,  
9 little tally marks.

After  
(My To-Do List)

Swish with Clorox  
instead of Listerine;  
finish with ice cream.  
Bleach my teeth even though they pulse  
like a migraine and get white spots  
where the enamel's worn off.  
With a real migraine *wear a pair of dark sunglasses*  
and listen to Rage *calm like a bomb*  
bang my head to the flash of a strobe light  
(*ignite ignite ignite*).  
Turn in a poem for my Spanish test  
and draw a chain of butterflies across the top  
for extra credit. Forego all personal obligations  
except sexual frustration. Pop the blister seal  
on every pill in the pack and flush  
\$50 of pink and white dots down the toilet.  
Keep taking my Accutane.  
Spend my paychecks on pregnancy tests.  
Check the negative ones 3 times a day  
to see if the lines have changed or the digital reading  
reads differently. Knit pink booties for a positive one  
even if it's a boy!  
Eat brownies for breakfast and brownies for lunch.  
Drive around with knitting needles balanced on my dash,  
my jugular ready to take the hit.  
Hang the pink booties from the rearview  
and play Rage as loud as it goes—  
*turn that shit up*.  
Get a chain of butterflies tattooed  
on my right wrist. Start writing with my left hand.  
Buy a gun maybe for two ex-boyfriends  
or maybe for the shooting range.  
Befriend my one night stands and say  
What a lovely dinner, please don't be offended  
if I throw it up later—my morning sickness lasts all day.  
Just chew up my food  
and spit it back out on the plate.  
Wash my face but not remove my eye makeup.  
Tell everyone to call me Rocky Raccoon.  
Get a Star of David tattoo on my left palm  
and an infinity sign on my left wrist.  
Erase them if I want  
and ask for new ones for Christmas.

Keep the butterflies though and add some rainbows.

Stop punctuating everything I write like I cant even remember what punctuation ever was just look at my scarred left arm the booties on my rearview the knitting needles on the dash the food on the plate the puke in the toilet my shiny new gun and listen only to loud loud Rage feel my headache pulse behind my eyes look at my right arm think butterflies and rainbows butterflies and rainbows butterflies and rainbows



Afterward  
Dialogue and *Duende*: A Poetics

## Dialogue and *Duende*: A Poetics

Poetry is the ultimate dialogue which requires no conventional dialogue at all. W.B. Yeats said that we make poetry out of the arguments we have with ourselves—but I think that the dialogue extends further than just within a poet's mind. Poetry is a conversation a poet first has with herself, and then with other poets, with fictional characters, with real people. You write these conversations down, craft them into a poem, and by doing so you create an opportunity for a deep engagement with the reader. You tell the reader your stories, real or make-believe, and they listen; they respond, and another dialogue begins. “No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader,” said Robert Frost. This is exactly the kind of connection for which you're aiming. You wrote about it so you clearly feel strongly about it, and if you tell your story right, the reader will feel strongly, too. How raw, how vulnerable, how angry, how passionate your speakers are in your poems...that's how raw, vulnerable, angry, and passionate your readers will feel, if you do things right. Pound said, “Only emotion endures.”<sup>1</sup> Use your emotion to create something for your reader that she will have ringing in her head forever. Yet be wary: Pound warns against “emotional slither,”<sup>2</sup> and you should, per Frost, take care to express grief, not grievances.

Pound commented in “A Retrospect” that poetry of the twentieth century would be “as much like granite as it can be, its force will lie in its truth, its interpretative power.”<sup>3</sup> He recognized that poetry was moving away from more traditional forms; Pound said that the poetry of the twentieth century would be a spontaneous, redefined expression of imagination through precision diction. This redefinition of poetry in precision spontaneity ensures a growth in poetry; if you write the truth and concentrate on explaining your feelings in definite, not abstract,

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<sup>1</sup> Ezra Pound, “A Retrospect” in *Toward the Open Field*, ed. Melissa Kwasny, 258 (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

images, you get less of that “emotional slither.” In “Hot June Sun” (a poem about the death of a high school classmate), I aimed to address the situation in a way that was concrete for a reader but still conveyed the emotion surrounding the friend’s death. I used physical descriptions to tell the feelings of the funeral party: touching a casket, lines on the mother’s face, her mouth in a line, a gripped hand, weak smiles. There’s a despondence in all of it; it’s almost like a movie scene, still frames and slow shots, each painful in its own way. When the focus zooms in on the speaker, the discomfort grows; even though she did not lose a child, she has her own terrible burden—perverse, irreverent memories that she cannot quell. As she grips the steering wheel, it’s almost as if she welcomes the heat, the pain; it distracts her from what she wants to avoid. I also used the actual setting to add discomfort to the poem. The poem happens under the hot June sun—the mother is flushed, the crowd is sweaty, the steering wheel burns the speaker’s hands. There’s physical irritation to add to the emotional disturbance.

While “Hot June Sun” does address an actual event, the stories you tell don’t have to be true; they just have to tell the truth. The truth doesn’t have to be normal or factual or rational—it just has to be what you felt, what you wanted to sit down and write about. That’s what makes a poem powerful: its truthfulness. Those honest thoughts everybody has that nobody wants to admit—I like to admit them. I like my speakers to admit them. I like my readers to hear them. Poems don’t have to be something you want your mother to read; you don’t have to feel morally proud of what you write. But if you’re being truthful about what you as a poet feel, what your speaker feels, and what you want your audience to feel—then neither you nor your readers can ask for anything more. In “Hot June Sun,” the last line of the poem (“How I once told my friend you were kind of an ass”) hurt me to write, to admit; it hurt me to know what my friends would say if they read it, to know how insensitive they would find me. However, I think these friends’

reactions, at least in part, would have come from guilt, because I imagine that they themselves have probably said or thought the same thing—I just voiced it on paper.

This last point brings me to the content of my poems. My subject matter is dark, gritty, sexual, even slutty. A lot of people might wonder why it's necessary to write about death, sex, eating disorders, self-mutilation—and to write about them a lot. I am not going for the shock factor; I don't think it makes me “cool” to try to get away with talking about sex or using the “f word” as much as I can. I address this gritty content in my poems because it is important to address the things that almost everybody thinks about but won't talk about, first because they are universals—we all have a darker side that we try to suppress as much as possible—and thus there is an inherent connection with the reader. Acknowledging and embracing the dark and passionate and real is not a bad thing—it's Lorca's *duende*, that “from which we get what is real in art...a mysterious power that everyone feels...a power and not a behaviour...a struggle and not a concept.”<sup>4</sup> It's Rimbaud; it's Poe's imp of the perverse. It's hard to get at, to convey, to accept. But it's truthful, and it can forge a connection—a dialogue—with a reader and between readers.

The second reason for exploring the subject matter I do is that the connection of which I just spoke can breed a discomfort that forces honest reflection of oneself and of society. Take, for example, the fact that I used the word “slutty” to describe some of things about which I write. Maybe I—and the majority of people—feel that some of my content is slutty—but by whose label, and by whose definition of what is socially acceptable, am I defining that word? Does it necessarily have to have a negative connotation? I think women from many backgrounds and generations struggle with wanting to be more in control of their sexuality, but at the same time

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<sup>4</sup> Federico García Lorca, translated by J.L. Gilli, “Theory and Function of the *Duende*” in *Toward the Open Field*, ed. Melissa Kwasny, 198 (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004).

worry about how they will be perceived and are still held back by established definitions of what is acceptable in terms of gender roles. Whether it is sexual expression in a poem like “Hometown” or a reaction to a breakup in a poem like “Scene:,” I think this discussion is important for women to have with themselves and with each other: Is there a way to act according to one’s feelings or desires without having a typical gender role—male or female—prescribed to her? Who says a woman is acting “like a man” if she chooses to have a questionable sexual encounter, or if she responds coldly to a breakup? And what makes a man seem “like a woman” if he reacts to that same breakup by crying and eating chocolate? There are many layers through which to dig before one can find the answers to these questions, but I think that makes it all the more important to present subject matter that starts the search for a redefinition of self and society. With that sort of difficult process begun by a poem, we’re back to Lorca’s *duende*, and back to the struggle that reinforces a connection through the medium of art.

Now how do you make this happen? How do you make a poem that gets a reader to see and feel that *duende*? First, you read...a lot. Pound said that “all the old masters of painting recommend to their pupils that they begin by copying masterwork, and proceed to their own composition.”<sup>5</sup> With poetry, you pick an author you like and mimic poem after poem until you’ve got a grasp of his or her style, and then you move on. You go from poet to poet like a parasite, and you glean all you can from the people who know what they’re doing until you learn what you’re doing. Teachers call it stealing, but they also acknowledge that it’s necessary. Again, per Pound, “be influenced by as many great artists as you can, but have the decency either to acknowledge the debt outright, or to try to conceal it...don’t allow ‘influence’ to mean merely

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 255.

that you mop up the particular decorative vocabulary of some one or two poets whom you happen to admire.”<sup>6</sup> So read a lot, and get an understanding of what you think poetry should sound like; how it should connect to an audience; what works; what doesn’t work; how to acknowledge that something you’ve written needs a ton of revision. If you do it the right way, you won’t just act like whichever poet you’re working from; you will have learned a legacy and then created your own style, crafted your own truth.

So you find your style, but you then have to learn how to talk. It’s like everyone’s first poems, all full of angst...and prescribed language—even if the words sound good, there’s a pervasive disconnect in the work. In my “old” poems, there’s nothing for the reader to grasp onto; I wrote the stuff, and even I am disinterested. To draw a reader into your work, you have to sound good while remembering that you’re speaking to an audience and attempting to share with its members exactly the experience you had when writing the poem; this is where the image comes into play. Poetry that lacks images is most often full of abstractions and long descriptions of feelings that include superfluous adjectives and adjectival prepositional phrases. For example, I start the poem “Dedication” with sappy couplets that give the reader nothing but an abstract rhyme about feelings—it’s all grievance and no grief; it’s completely emotional slither. Pound advised against this kind of work that “mixes an abstraction with the concrete.”<sup>7</sup> He said this habit “comes from the writer’s not realizing that the natural object is always the adequate symbol.”<sup>8</sup> Pound understood that flowery language and abstractions took away from what readers could see, what they could experience. Thus good images—tangible descriptions of the “natural object”—are like the larynx of poetry; they are the way to connect a reader to your

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<sup>6</sup> Pound, 249-50.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 249.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 249.

work. They're the biggest part of your dialogue. You may be telling the truth, but if there's nothing to make the reader see, feel, understand, there really isn't anything there at all. In "Dedication," the poem becomes tangible when I cross out the sappy stuff—and the names of the people to whom I've "dedicated" my work. Though this poem has no traditional images, it embodies Pound's "natural object" in that it exploits both the people discarded by the speaker of the poem as well as the speaker herself. The scores through the words speak to anger, to the desire to forget—and there is no flowery language to describe either fond memories or sadness about having lost these people. It's simply there, on the page for readers to see and experience, and hopefully to understand.

So "go in fear of abstractions"<sup>9</sup> and use your senses. Make the reader smell, touch, taste, hear, see...you know the drill. Get them right in there with your speaker, reacting to your words and images because somehow they get it. They get what you're saying, and they feel it. You know how you feel when you read an incredible poem, a poem so chock full of emotion and images that it's like a sensory and emotional overload? Cliché or not, you can't breathe. It's as if you're in the words, in the poet, in the speaker, and it's beautiful—it's that *duende*. Pound would have said that good images made this kind of experience possible, because by his definition an image is "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time," and the "complex" means that in the moment of reading there is "that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the greatest works of art."<sup>10</sup> (That's a much better, less trite way of saying what I was previously trying to describe.) An example is "Visit" by Ted Hughes. It's a poem from his last collection called

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 249.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 248.

*Birthday Letters*, and all the poems are about his dead ex-wife, Sylvia Plath. The end of “Visit” goes like this:

Suddenly I read all this –  
Your actual words, as they floated  
Out through your throat and tongue and onto your page –  
Just as when your daughter, years ago now,  
Drifting in, gazing up into my face,  
Mystified,  
Where I worked alone  
In the silent house, asked, suddenly:  
‘Daddy, where’s Mummy?’ The freezing soil  
Of the garden, as I clawed it.  
All round me that midnight’s  
Giant clock of frost. And somewhere  
Inside it, wanting to feel nothing,  
A pulse of fever. Somewhere  
Inside that numbness of the earth  
Our future trying to happen.  
I look up – as if to meet your voice  
With all its urgent future  
That has burst in on me. Then look back  
At the book of the printed words.  
You are ten years dead. It is only a story.  
Your story. My story.<sup>11</sup>

Hughes’ images make his poems happen; he exhausts this technique in “Visit.” He’s not only provided readers with vivid images; he’s working within an image family as well. He uses the same images to create physical as well as emotional tangibility for the poem. “The freezing soil of the garden” tells us not only that he’s in the garden but is also desperately trying to find something that’s dead or has been killed by coldness. “That midnight’s giant clock of frost” tells us when and what temperature, but we also see that all the actions of this night are fruitless; no matter how much time passes, no matter how much action is taken, no matter how much that “pulse of fever” is trying to bring life back to things, the future can’t happen. The garden is dead like the speaker’s lost relationship. The passage begins with reading and ends with reading, with

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<sup>11</sup> Ted Hughes, *Birthday Letters* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1998), 8-9.



a moment of feverish hope in the middle. We get a definite sense of reality in the beginning and the end, and the sense of sad hope that characterizes the middle, because the images that Hughes uses are both concrete and figurative. The imagery in this part of the poem creates an arc of emotion in a physical space. You read this and you're there; you're in it and are changed because of it. It's truly painful; as Lorca says, "The *duende* wounds."<sup>12</sup>

Images cannot take all the credit for making a good poem; sound and rhythm play a huge role in poetry as well. As images in a poem put readers in a certain place, rhythm must bring them there just as effectively. If a poem's verse is too choppy or too end-stopped, a reader will lose the feel of the sound as it puts him in a moment and takes him along with the words on the page. Pound advised poets "to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome."<sup>13</sup> This is not to say that a poet should disregard form and breaks as he pleases; one must simply take care to craft his verse to sound out the emotion; the music of a poem should move with its images. Pound wrote, "I believe in an 'absolute rhythm,' a rhythm, that is, in poetry which corresponds exactly to the emotion or shade of emotion to be expressed."<sup>14</sup> Back to "Visit"—there are breaks with surprise, enjambed lines with surges of emotion or appropriate language ("floated" quite literally floats at the end of a line; "alone" is alone at the end of the line), end stops where things are final or harsh for the speaker. To have a brilliant poem, the words must carry the rhythm of the emotion brought by the images.

With that last statement, I feel the need to wish myself and every other aspiring poet a great deal of luck in developing a talent for writing poetry—a talent that lies in the ability to figure out how to develop the writing into something that connects somebody besides the author

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<sup>12</sup> Lorca, 205.

<sup>13</sup> Pound, 248.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 253.

to the work. “Visit” is very much a personal poem, but it still moves most readers. You can write something that’s totally autobiographical, completely yours, but if you want people to feel it as you do, you must create for your audience a poem with music and images. Tell your readers the truth, through dialogue, through *duende*, through rhythmic emotion they can feel.