Heirlooms: A Poetic Exploration of Inherited Mental Illness, Language, and Domestic Violence

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HEIRLOOMS:
A POETIC EXPLORATION OF INHERITED MENTAL ILLNESS, LANGUAGE, AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
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in

The Department of English

by
Stephan Antoine Viau
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for mom and dad
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Abstract

Heirlooms is a collection of poems, which traces a fictionalized version of my own history of mental illness, domestic violence, and familial childhood trauma. At the epicenter of each poem is a television screen, which continuously reflects a scene of domestic violence from the kitchen. The glare on this television pursues the narrator across all periods of his life and through all reconfigurations of the living room furniture. There is no angle the television can be placed in that does not catch the kitchen light and reflect back that traumatic image from childhood.

The work recalls Stein’s *Tender Buttons* in the way that the languages and images are cubist. The inherent subjectivity of the words, lines, and syntax in these poems vector and refract into new meanings when read in different time and at different angles. The enjambment of the lines is tenuously suggested through the breakage of language and the leaking of meaning left over after the full stops at the ends of each line.

Heirlooms is a work of failings. Where the narrator suggests his failure to have become anything separate from this childhood trauma, the lines and language themselves share in this failure. The poetics represents a poetic language that, in some light, appears harmless and in others suddenly turns violent and dangerous.

The work does not necessarily begin, progress, nor end in any discernable or distinctive way. Instead, the memory sticks within each poem and becomes a fluid aspect of the work’s consciousness—in the same way that there is no permanent erasure or healing or discernable progression in my own mental illness and trauma. Heirlooms is something we learn to live with.
for all of time, the TV shone.

against that mirror-blasted vocabulary of the kitchen.

how incendiary!

how the bedroom sunlight rose to watch it.

I was an infant for a million years

while the house was doused in threnody.
I was a wonderful imaginary child.

I was playful a mid-morning.

these things are plain and obvious.

the dishes were infinite and in a corner.

there was the lonely heirloom.

there was the family keepsake.
we painted our hands in a dark room.

it didn’t feel like holding us at all.

that branch that rubbed against the window creaked like a front door then.

I didn’t know sounds were so unnerving.

I didn’t know TV was the intermission.
in the midst of it, there was a shaded sunlight blooming.

there was a windy freeform worry.

whatever happened to your kitchen memory?

was the canopy always over you this way?

yes.

and eyes like water ripple.
this is a fine encasement for it.

this is where it is like to be.

I’m thinking of the season when it was all arranged.

the TV plays the passion loop.

there is the water clock.

there is my wishful thinking.
are these the only channels that play on TV?
are they the pastime trouble?
they ache like something toothsome.
they make it trying to wake.
now, there's that floodlight from the kitchen.
on everything like a faded jewel.
against the window there is a torrential tear.
that element we are of
we don’t save in this home economics
and are we ashamed of it?
and are we drifting further and further?
in its wake
it seems I made a lonely feedback system.

I watch TV and hear it well.

but the kitchen light causes such a glare!

I can see myself like in a mirror

it was a cornered childhood.

it was angled for ruin.
the TV plays out in my sleep.

while every border of the fever forms.

a little while is certainly a way to be.

a little less of that aging tenderness.

oh, is this my morning dew?

my daily afternoon?
why was it something meaningful?
is it that we see the same?
where was that twisted beginning?
along the kitchenful of light.
I still hear my heart like a steel drum.
that sound is so annoying.
even though my legs keep longing.

what part of this is unfamiliar?

at the edges of the TV, I can see my skin.

that's where the fever feels.

I guess the thoughtful way was painstruck.

I guess this sadness is collegiate.
it isn't a nude hour, but I am naked.

I am painting a picture in the mirror.

if I have learned anything, there it is.

does it have a special song?

this way I capture of

like filling the water clock, or dressing up the wound.
I think about outside the window.  
so what if this archway gives?  
the TV that inside wound.  
you used to wash up to all the furniture  
and try to make amends for it.  
but that was just a fever dream!
now, I am the consequential evidence!

in a seasonal way, it is the afternoon

which hasn't ended.

in a seasonal way, this is eternal.

I must have borrowed this from him

the afternoon-like algorithm.
I couldn't sleep until a few hours in the morning.
I dreamt of being a student a little longer.
today I’m cleaning up the dust from the air.
after a month of cleaning, I’m going to take a nap.
I'm going to look through photographs
and find us not yet wavering.
after all, that home it was an aching village.
ours was made of detachable hearts.
and you never did return the phone call.
it must have been from unforgettable sorrow.
you rummaged around that awful season
and dreamt of tangents in the afternoon.
the room it reeked of air conditioning.

everything pulsed on and off like a heart monitor.

even through the rainswept window, was the TV kitchen.

you didn’t see.

I was a feeling at water’s wake.

I was also faintly crying.
when I was young the tower filled in granularly.

the sky was bent in groves.

on the day I was given this I knew

I could have been a humming bird.

who is less anxious and amphibious?

who sips the bending rose?
this is a placard board.
on it are the sensible acts.
hi, mom.
I'm leaning on the TV in this one.
I'm searching for a deeper feeling.
that's where the toothache angles in.
and carrying on is like a slow film.

the fever is the televised constituent.

it is.

the kitchen rewound.

mom is here.

I am so wrapped up in Christmas paper.
was it only for the afternoon?

each seam sewn unraveling

as though the morning and you split up.

no, you said, this is just a solid earthquake.

no, let’s just float down the hallway.

what did dad call to say?
can I ask you what went on in that kitchenette?

I want to, but I can’t help but sleep quietly.

I’ve become a skin.

what will even notice?

there is dust in that corner.

there is a very clear justice.
here comes the morning lamp!

oh, its shaded sting appears.

I laugh…

the window rain is a season crying.

I am me and missing mom.

the evening sun feels elbowed in.
in the afternoon, the fever speaks into the TV.
	his is such a poor wall.
	his should be angled steeper and repeating.

it is a bigger kitchen.

I am years old.

I try to think about things that don’t mind.
but, ah! the weather is here.

now, what little wisdom is unknown.

though I know that formulaic compound.

it is me in the bathtub sobbing.

it is hanging out in the hallway

until somewhere can be clearly and truly left.
I don’t know what else to wish for.

it’s been a lot of musical prodding
kept inside a limelit room.

it’s been a sordid weathered timekeep.

does this season have any other name?

it could be a wailing in an instant.
this is a little bit of a different story.

there is still a mind that plans and seeks revenge.

it is our natural mouth to wonder

when the winter will be over

but I've grown up so well.

this is a little bit of a family at the edges.
the kitchen knives don’t hurt one bit!

like this, a mountain sidled in.

a huge mountain used the computer.

quickly, the purpose became apparent.

this one and this one don’t know how.

I’m transparent.
there is the kitchen essence in the TV.

oh, to focus on the corners is a wonder of the world.

and it's a proper thought to understand how.

day by day, the act is frustrating.

I am made of water.

I am made to spill it.
I'm not concerned because I did not do anything.

but why was I soaked and heart-broken?

the front door creaking shut tricked us in the night.

mom, was that a lonely droplet from your eye?

I wish now we could sing that unsung blossom.

tea time in the valley of the rain!
wow, how soon the kitchen light closes in.

it could be a necessary condition.

it could be that we were given this.

so I was taken out of water, and put back in.

when the tooth aches, it smacks the face.

last time you called to say dear heart, be pretty.
who else has been tied along this heartstring?

I sweep and I weep.

this cradle now around the room.

that’s a tiny canyon peak.

that’s an eventful circumstance.

but we are eventual and eventually…
the coursing kitchen light
does everything in its place.
does a circumference frenzy ache.
there looks to be a lighter alternative.
but no.
no wholesome otherness.
how did the floodlight reach this far?
I called the TV wretch.
and I pampered other weather.
I wish there was a smaller cup to put this in
in light of the encroaching rain
but this is a growing community.
when a melon eats, it tugs at the vine.
that TV is acting toothsome these days.
it makes a sounding call.
it used to be a kind of capacity void.
now, the kitchen light is mirrored here.
now that’s a ripe melon!
up the wall is where I've hung the structure.

isn't that how we put an essential feeling?

the fever is a nightlight swoon.

and when I creep into the kitchen for a cup it's something motherly

I am asunder.

I am this litany.
I sense the season coming now.

do you feel the interpretation fold?

these days the fever is too dry or aging.

I watch it lightly lean.

at a slightly hour, I watch TV.

is every part of us deviled so evenly?
seeming better, I wrote the auspice piece.
mom, I remember the kitchen well.
wasn’t it a throwing image?
you used to belt in the composition.
maybe it was a swollen tongue.
a punctured star lit through
it is not an autumn flavor to remember.

it is not a faithful time warp.

the TV is for effortless turmoil.

I call it soaking trail.

oh! this fever takes all afternoon.

this light it takes good molten care.
at the edges it was a frayed betrayal, wasn’t it?

there was an eye instead of I

and my loose tooth hurt!

why was the television so plainly roaming?

to stop toward the kitchen light?

I saw a flame go out.
the last time I thumbed through the receiver
I paved the way to that awful season.
I mulled an incandescent water work.
the last time I had such tangle thinking
I saw it also in your eyes.
I wished there was another you to mother me.
were those wasted years by the cabinets, then?
is all of this sounding still too small?
there is a wall worth wading through.
I am trying to be saintly sometimes.
I am throwing out the candid soup
making this edible.
why now does the windswept whisper?

mom, it’s from the splendid hammer.

after the iridescent climb, there will be a blown out wall to watch from.

it is this TV’d kitchen.

yes.

these playful sparkles don’t mean wanted.
calmly, I heard my sunbaked father.

I spoke the simple etiquette and unsalted flavor.

he said it was the loneliest shape to lose.

his eyes showed streaks of rain.

it must have been a dinner-time wallop.

it must have felt like pruning on the vine!
this is cause for sentiment.

I think about how circular.

the mind is on TV.

there isn’t a common name for this.

I wish and wish and wish.

there was a less toothsome vocabulary.
around the kitchen strain in the TV, I see an etching.

who is this sudden tremor for?

that’s a fine bit of it.

it’s a weary frown painted at the edges.

I wanted it to be a lot of golden sentiment.

but it’s a peeled-back photo of a family.
here I am aging voluptuously.

and what films have I seen?

and what is this TV engraving now?

my memory still shows it.

I guess my pretty toothache reeks indefinitely

like sorting mesh from wiring.
this is a kitchen caked in grease.

how it penetrates the vein!

mom, have you found the warmer weather?

I think I lost my heart in this home.

I always lean on a toothsome want.

through the passion, I watch the promised hurt.
that's our family tantrum spin.

to sense a fever moving in.

I share the space respectively.

I open up the room to give the TV light.

there is the kitchen floodlight reflection.

there is all I see.
I called to chip away the cryogen.
to act like foundry shutter.
I chew through ice like gristle
but I have a soft feeling about it.
I am not that punishable.
in the TV that is just a worried corner.
still, I will recall the TV memory.
there is a ready static cling.

mom, I wanted a lavender soft.

I wanted us to see a sunlit window.

but that season of things took over.

it must be our wanton way.
sometimes, the center of it has a timeline ending.
the father and the mother stay together on the TV.
but who is that special vocabulary for?
who was made to make it?
in our rainy weathered eyes
mom, it must just be we see the light bent.
Vita

Stephan Antoine Viau, born in Rockville, MD, grew up in Montreal, QC. The son of a French-speaking father and English-speaking mother, Viau has always had the instinct to investigate languages, their intersections, their political volatility, and the potential for meaning and metaphor to be stretched, misremembered, and shared across languages and cultures. After completing his undergraduate degree in creative writing from Shepherd University in West Virginia, Viau spent four years living and teaching English in Seoul, South Korea. As a speaker of French, English, Spanish, and Korean, Viau writes poetry in English that often displaces meaning, syntax, and phrasing, in an effort to show how the native quality of the tongue disintegrates and shapes a language that is instantly more honest and borderless, if full of errors. Following the culmination of his Master of Fine Arts, Viau plans to continue his efforts in publishing manuscripts in translation and plans to return to Seoul to continue his efforts in translation and translation theory.