

**THE FACT OF WHITENESS: FEMALE**

by

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## ABSTRACT/INTRODUCTION

Most of the classes I have taken in the Master of Arts in Humanities (MAH) program have explored the concept of the “Other,” approaching the subject through the study of art, literature, history, philosophy, and music. I have considered this idea most specifically in the context of late nineteenth-century realist art, arguing that Edward Said’s definition of “Orientalism” as applied to art by American art historian Linda Nochlin is a valid and even necessary way of understanding representations of subjugated races in paintings by late nineteenth-century artists who come from countries with imperialist ambitions.<sup>1</sup> Nochlin’s argument is that the historical political situation and power relations surrounding a work of art must be understood to really grasp its meaning. Consequently, things are not always as they appear in a painting or even a photo. The painter or photographer shapes the “truth” of a realist artwork. Therefore, the relationship of the creator to the object being depicted must be known to evaluate the merits of the representation. While providing context to a work of art is the art historian’s task, knowing the personal and historical circumstances that inspire an artwork can enhance the layperson’s understanding and consequent enjoyment of a piece of art as well.

Recognizing that subjectivity and circumstance create meaning applies not just to art but to all areas of life. But to step outside ourselves and understand why others come to different conclusions based on the same “evidence” can be difficult. Our current antagonistic political climate in which well-meaning people of the two major parties have such vastly dissimilar opinions is a good example of the extreme form such polarization can take. Sometimes, however, a new paradigm can shake up our world view so we see

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<sup>1</sup> The texts by Said and Nochlin listed on my “Works Cited” list detail the full definition of “Orientalism” and its application to art.

things from a changed perspective. This novel point of view can in turn inspire more empathy, helping us to improve our interpersonal relations and our politics. So although to date my work in the MAH program has been based on the critical study of art, for my capstone project I have chosen to write a series of poems. My hope is that by exploring contemporary topics in poetic form, I can engage the reader in a manner that a strictly research-based paper could not to illuminate subjectivity. Foremost, since I will be revealing my particular point of view on contemporary topics, my poetic fragments will build a picture of my identity. I do realize, however, that though I attempt to self-define through the following selections, the reader will bring his or her own meanings to the work and will create different ideas of me or my subjects than I intend. As Roland Barthes states, the meanings of words contain a whole constantly-changing mythology (227-30). In addition to disclosing aspects of myself, I am hopeful that perhaps even more importantly I reveal some of the points of view of others with whom I do not share direct experience, if not with true authenticity at least with some empathy.

Regarding this last point, two theories pertaining to literary point-of-view are relevant. Mikhail Bakhtin argues in “Response to a Question from the *Novy Mir* Editorial Staff” that in order to understand something, it is “immensely important for the person who understands to be *located outside* the object of his or her creative understanding – in time, in space, in culture” (7). Bakhtin had been asked by the editorial staff of the *Novy Mir*, a Russian literary magazine, to evaluate the state of literary scholarship in 1987. He attempts to provide an answer, but also says that “when evaluating our own times, our own contemporaneity, we always tend to err (in one direction or another)” (1). Bakhtin also asserts that a foreign culture reveals itself only through its examination by another

culture since interaction between two cultures is the only thing that can reveal depth of meaning in both. “We raise new questions for a foreign culture, ones that it did not raise itself; we seek answers to our own questions in it; and the foreign culture responds to us by revealing to us its new aspects” (Bakhtin 7). Although I am writing about issues affecting my contemporary society – not a foreign culture – from which I cannot stand apart, I do explore viewpoints outside of my specific circumstances in several poems. If Bakhtin is correct, my position outside the demographic groups I try to depict reveals aspects of those cultures that their self-examination would not illuminate.

But perhaps these descriptions are mostly for readers like me. For to quote Barthes again, “our society is still a bourgeois society” (249). In other words, the audience with which my poetry will most likely resonate is middle- to upper-class “white” women who have had educational opportunities and cultural experiences similar to mine – and who read poetry. Nonetheless, I attempt to step outside myself in poems such as “The Balkans,” “Common Fruit,” and “White Coal,” in which I distill what I perceive are the political sentiments and personal feelings of individuals with whom I do not completely share characteristics in the hope of presenting commonalities we all share. Illuminating the personalizing details of the “other” is how we humanize rather than objectify each other. So though it is difficult to put oneself in another’s skin, requiring both introspection and listening to the experiences of the “other” through their own words and cultural products, it is a worthwhile enterprise to attempt. By compiling unexpected or highly descriptive linguistic images that unconsciously begin to create a new concept of something or someone, poetry can connect us and bring us greater understanding of



each other. Ideally, engagement with poetry can force us to put aside divisive rhetoric for a few moments and immerse ourselves in the lives of others to create empathy.

Concurrently, it is also important to recognize that human categories overlap. Delineating who is and who is not part of an ethnic or other type of group can be problematic and can fall into stereotyping if one is not careful. Native American writer Leslie Silko once criticized fellow Indian writer Louise Erdrich's novel *The Beet Queen* for not being rooted enough in "real" Native American experience (Castillo 15). In arguing against the necessity for "essentialism" in fiction – the belief that members of ethnic groups have intrinsically different and characteristic natures or dispositions – Susan Pérez Castillo, who discusses Silko's critique in "Postmodernism, Native American Literature, and the Real: The Silko-Erdrich Controversy," points out that "our perception of these groups (and of ourselves as members of one group and not another) is a discursive construct and not an ideal mystified category" (18). She quotes and seems to agree with scholar Werner Sollors' assertion that it is difficult in today's America to categorize a writer in just a single ethnic group since culture in the U.S. is an amalgamation of religions, cultures, and ideas (17). Castillo points out that Erdrich's heritage as a German-American with Chippewa blood is a factor that makes her "Indian" experience somewhat different from Silko's Anglo-American/Mexican/Laguna roots. Consequently, it is more productive to evaluate "ethnic" texts as coming from "a dynamic, historically constructed process" rather than as a static entity (Castillo 18). Furthermore, although the real often penetrates the world of fiction, literature contains vastly "diverse levels of ontological stratification" and is "never an immutable mirror of a static reality" (18-19). So to judge any piece of literature either by how closely it

conforms to the ethnicity of the writer or to reality is folly. At the same time, it would be foolish to deny the real-life referents in a work of fiction. Instead, like Said and Nochlin, Castillo sees value in analyzing “the discursive systems that authorize some representations and suppress others” (20).

In line with the points Castillo brings out about Silko and Erdrich’s ethnicities, despite my genetic “female whiteness,” I am the product of a variety of local influences in an increasingly global community. I grew up in Western Maryland on the edge of Appalachia but have spent most of my life in the metropolitan D.C./Baltimore area; regions which though geographically close are worlds apart culturally. I have been a stay-at-home mother and at other times have been employed full-time in the workforce. The pain of divorce and joint custody along with other personal traumas have shaped my psyche. I have participated in both traditional and liberal religious denominations. Most recently, the classes I have taken in the last couple of years in the Master of Arts in Humanities program at Hood have challenged my perceptions of history. They have given me critical tools to use when evaluating the products of culture. So whether one believes an outside view to come to a “truth” is necessary or whether one thinks ethnic categories are mythological constructs, Bakhtin and Castillo’s theoretical perspectives have informed my approach to this collection.

The poetry I have written covers a variety of issues currently in public discourse and is written using different conventions. The poems touch on motherhood/feminism, religion, LGBTQ issues, bullying, substance abuse, technology/social media, race, and income inequality. Like all art, they are best understood in the context of the times. Some poems have a serious tone, others are more humorous. Most are free verse, but a few

have structured stanzas, rhyme schemes, and other traditional poetic elements. A couple of selections experiment with form.<sup>2</sup> I have been inspired to experiment with mixing styles and forms by the writer Sherman Alexie, a Native American author who blends typically “white European” literary forms in his various works as an expression of his multicultural background; refusing to identify with just one style of writing. He not only alternates between poetry and fiction in his many works, but also experiments *within* each genre’s style, mixing prose in poetry and poetry in prose within the same text. *War Dances* is one example of Alexie’s attempt to mix short stories with poems and is hard to categorize as just one or the other. In his just-released memoir *You Don’t Have to Say You Love Me*, Alexie even mixes poetry with biography in an atypical fashion. Using multiple styles not only points out Alexie’s mixed influences, but also says to his readers that he accepts both cultures. In fact, Alexie refuses to vilify either Indian or white culture, but indicates both the positive and negative aspects of each in his writing. In the process of doing so, he humanizes both. Accordingly, I have also experimented a bit with a mix of genres and have not adhered to the strict “European” poetic forms I have been taught. And though this poetry is “contemporary” since written in 2017-2018 and attempts at times to achieve Barthes’ idea of a regressive semiological system through concision (244), it also sometimes attempts to put meaning into signs by using longer form. By condensing language, poetry tries to get at the meaning of things themselves. The word is just the sign for the object it represents. But sometimes, putting words together in a unique configuration the way some poems do can create new “things” or ideas.

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<sup>2</sup> Notes to go with the poems appear before the “Works Cited” pages. While highlighting major points about each poem, I have not explained every allusion.

Since this is a creative writing project, my “Works Cited” list contains two types of sources. A few texts or authors are explicitly referred to in my poems or in this introduction. Other books and articles are sources that are best understood as inspirational. I drew on these sources for the general *ideas* expressed. I will now briefly put this latter type into some perspective. The longer non-fictional sources, such as W.E.B. du Bois’ *The Souls of Black Folk*, Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Nickle and Dimed*, Ta-Nehisi Coates’ *Between the World and Me*, J.D. Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy*, and Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in an Age of Colorblindness*, describe what it is like to exist in a particular social demographic or as a member of a certain societally-defined race, using first-hand experience, facts, and data. The shorter essays like Frantz Fanon’s “The Fact of Blackness” and Detlev Peukert’s “The Atomisation of Everyday Life” similarly discuss what it feels like to live inside a particular “skin” in a specific place and time. In fact, recognizing that my point of view in the following poems is defined by my race, class, and gender, I have titled the collection “The Fact of Whiteness: Female” as an allusion to Fanon’s essay and an upfront admission that the ideas expressed are circumscribed by my personal position in the world. Just as Franz Fanon laments an inability to separate his self-image from his place in society, I acknowledge and assert that my thoughts have been shaped by my skin color, demographic experiences, and life as a “white” female.

I have also recently read or re-read the works of influential Harlem Renaissance writer/poets Langston Hughes and James Baldwin as well as *The Complete Works of Maya Angelou*, all writers who feature in my first poem and whose voices and styles have shaped my work. The short story “Sonny’s Blues” by James Baldwin and the novels

*Native Son* by Richard Wright, *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger, *The Goldfinch* by Donna Tartt, and both *Flight* and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie all speak from the points of view of young men who have been buffeted and displaced by the forces of society and/or their dysfunctional family situations. The careful crafting of these fictional voices and our resultant identification with their speakers allows us as readers to understand these adolescents' stories in a compelling way that a simple recitation of facts would not as powerfully accomplish. Other fictional works like *A Spool of Thread* by Anne Tyler, *The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver, and *Love Medicine* by Louise Erdrich attempt to tell more complete stories from the often contradictory yet sometimes enlightening points of view of several characters, illustrating that the truth of a situation is always subjective and complex. Thus I consider all these books creative ways of making the aforementioned point I try to bring out in my poetry; that a person's race, class, gender, and the social factors surrounding them influence that individual's way of thinking and inform the basis of their actions.

The remaining sources that have been influential in determining my poetic point of view include two lesser-known history books. I include both *The Invasion Within: The Contest of Cultures in Colonial North America* by James Axtell and *Progressive Inequality: Rich and Poor in New York, 1890-1920* by David Huyssen as postmodern history books that through a re-analysis of artifacts tell a different version of American history than the standard "white" traditional narrative. Similarly, the transcendentalist writings by authors Whitman and Thoreau as well as the philosophical "Allegory of the Cave" section in Plato's *The Republic* have been long-time influences on my overall beliefs and ideas about human experience. Finally, a pocket guide of the moral principles

of my long-time “religious faith,” Unitarian Universalism, is included on the list as having had an undeniable impact on values that appear, if only in passing, in my poetry.

American society today seems more divided than it ever has been in my lifetime. I think it is important for art to address this post-9/11, post-2016 election, social media-fueled confluence of circumstances, hopefully in a way that points to our similarities rather than our often fear-inspired differences. My poetry is an attempt to present alternative voices and ways of understanding how well-meaning people can come to vastly different conclusions about events, others, and life in general as a result of their different histories. Like Alexie, I have also written a couple of more personal poems to deep-dive into my particular experience in the wider culture. Above all, I have tried to provide an authentic, clear poetic voice to add to the complicated political, cultural, and societal debates of today.

## **DEDICATIONS**

First, I wish to thank Dr. Amy Gottfried, my capstone advisor, for agreeing to supervise me on this project. Without her encouragement and support at each step of the process, I would not have had the courage to try my hand at a poetry thesis.

Additionally, I would like to thank Dr. Didier Course and Dr. Aaron Angello for agreeing to serve on my thesis committee and for providing thoughtful, constructive comments on earlier drafts to help me improve the writing in this final version.

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**THE FACT OF WHITENESS: FEMALE**

## My Inauguration

I was born 100 years after Emancipation and now that I'm over 50  
a century does not seem like such a long time.

1965 –

Jimmie Lee bloodied and shot. James Reeb beaten on Pettus. Viola killed by Klansmen.  
Malcolm X assassinated. W.E.B. du Bois just two years deceased in self-imposed exile.

I was barely a toddler when Langston Hughes' dream was no longer deferred  
James Baldwin met the man and MLK merited a national holiday.

But

1993 –

Standing hours fingers cold toes numb heart racing January sun breath white beside her  
Tree near River on Rock of that great wide mall packed red tasseled hats yellow striped  
mittens brown leather coats green twisted scarves blue fuzzy gloves dry tight umbrellas  
puffy white coats black soiled boots blocked view neck straining to see chapped cheek  
pressed against the sleeve of a tall dark man's tense rough wool jacket

I heard the uncaged bird sing

merging the bordered countries of the crowd from her dais perch  
preaching a poetry within our grasp if only we had the courage to look up

Muscle relaxing he glanced at me as I blurred  
hot tear sliding down my face a small wet spot on deep blue plaid

But

2017 –

Exactly twenty-four years later,  
over half my life gone,  
an even shorter time of "progress" in  
a paler hotter winter

She is gone now too.  
How would she trumpet *this* day?

## The Balkans

Rural fisherman  
Factory jobs gone  
Paycheck to paycheck  
Education out of reach  
Traditions important  
Second amendment  
Ironclad values

Transgender person  
Quizzical stares  
Which restroom?  
Navy career at risk  
Surgeries expensive  
Friends support  
Family can't

Stay-at-home mom  
Devoted to church  
Bible the Word  
Society gone awry  
Brassiere in place  
Economic sacrifice  
Family irreplaceable

Urban man  
The New Jim Crow  
Brothers in jail  
Suspicious of police  
Given a wide berth  
Minimum wage  
So very tired

Middle class worker  
Technology bombarded  
Slow ladder climbing  
Paying one's dues  
What privilege?  
No breaks here  
Follows the rules

First generation student  
Second class citizen  
Parents illegal  
Status uncertain  
Dream Act endangered  
Dreads deportation  
Suburban aspirations

Bisexual girl  
Closeted alarm  
Turmoil inside  
Cuts on both arms  
No one understands  
Parents preoccupied  
Never at peace

Professional woman  
Hard-won status  
Some equality  
Still paid less  
All the housework  
Children delayed  
Sometimes indefinitely

United by fear   divided by fear   isolated   marginalized   stressed   traumatized

## Frederick Memorials – Notes for Tourists

It's a street-by-street thing,  
though not exactly clear where the invisible line  
starts, especially if you've never been here before.

Yet you know it does by some subtle indication –  
perhaps the grass is a little browner  
or is it just the faces?

But you keep walking because of course there's nothing  
to be afraid of so you greet a  
young black man  
sitting on a concrete stoop  
and feel brave, then feel stupid for feeling brave

but still can't help the wash of relief when you re-enter familiar territory,  
in fact a monument to territory;  
re-captured lands of a Great World War;  
an octagon of virtue that separates  
"Colored Soldiers"  
on a slab set apart,  
like they could forget they were not on an equal plane.

Taney is memorialized behind a wrought-iron gate just blocks from  
nameless black graves  
Laboring Sons in a small unfenced plot –  
a history you can walk in five minutes.

What if families buried their dead like squirrels;  
pretending to commit their treasures to the ground while whites watched  
but later unearthing their loved ones to hide them  
in unmarked graves that only they knew?

## Common Fruit

up s      b **O** y  
 d      faceless  
 n      sanitized  
 a      red apple  
 hands on steering wheel  
     o      a  
     g      n  
     a      d  
     n      s  
 gang ties      down  
     on drugs  
 weapon-toting  
 gray      hoodie  
 baggie      pants  
 scary      threat  
 shot      dead  
     no      drugs  
     bb      gun  
     name      black  
     in the      news

m **O** ther  
 kneeling  
     gut-punched  
     mortal wound  
 broken heart  
 m      just fifteen  
 i      forever sealed  
 L      eyes booming  
     Cubs fan  
     laugh gone  
     big leader  
     class brother  
     hoopster goals  
     college dreams  
 just a b  
     a  
     b  
 my son  
     All for what?

## White Coal

My brother-in-law was so excited the prisons were coming

Federal *and* State

Crumbling concrete textile plant

“My Pap used to work there”

converted to barracks with barbed-wire,  
decent jobs for hard-working folk  
prisoners corralled in cells  
cindered souls contained.

“Damn, they’re going to live better than us. Three meals a day and a basketball court!”

Good guys once miners, factory workers, farmers, hunters  
now a pile of applications at Wal-Mart and Taco Bell  
resurrected again as guardians of good, wardens of the world;

They’d chip away, mechanize and harvest the new Black Coal.

But now...

“This has got to stop!”

Prison porn staged by citizens sworn to protect  
hungry homeless fires in vacant hundred-year houses  
robberies by jean-clad junkies in the downtown square

and worse.

School-nurse Narcan was unable to save my niece, her  
pale figure slumped over a too-small wooden desk carved with her dad’s initials –

Face of the new White Coal.

## Real Definition of Evil

you're so ugly stay away from us I wish you hadn't been born you're such a bad boy I can't stand the sight of you go to your room you can't play with us why are your ears so big you have such a weird nose I can't believe how stupid you are your feet are too big your hair is stringy what is that odor stay in that closet get out of the way you can't do anything you should be punched you can't be in our club group team class game family

neglected green tendrils of the bullied boy when watered with tears morphs into a hideous black vine that winds to choke and kill or

h  
a  
n  
g  
its  
e  
l  
f

## **The Fact of Journalism**

In a century Wikipedia will say  
Trayvon traipsed sporting night vision goggles  
Philandro ferried an AK-47  
Eric auctioned pallets of opioid pipes  
Tamir's toy was a twelve-year-old glock  
Freddie's feet could have fled and  
Paddock peppered the concert crowing for ISIS.

Once knowing slavery started the Civil War  
Nazis were not Socialists –  
Night of the Long Knives nothing to do with party dinnerware –  
Vietnam a secret war and also started by the French,  
we have already forgiven bombing Iraq.

Facts faded white like Grecian marble  
gone with newspapers magazines telephone lines phone booths  
erased from memory like typewriters billboards Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood  
disappeared with theaters libraries cars you drive yourself  
in a future of devices that recognize but don't see your face

we are head down in Snapchat Halo Facebook Instagram Twitter  
280 characters about all one can stomach  
after a day of feasting on the world's warped words.



## Warning: Now Entering the Age of Said

*“Ideas, cultures, and histories cannot seriously be understood or studied without their force, or more precisely their configurations of power, also being studied...the relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony.” – Edward Said in Orientalism (1978)*

We’re enlightened in this Age of Said:  
proscriptive power the prescriptive lens –  
but what if you don’t have post-modern glasses;  
aren’t even aware you’re near-sighted?

You elect a Baroque king in a guilt-tinged palace  
soap your hands with polluted water as muds rise  
floods rage and winds howl louder than  
Ginsberg lamenting a lost generation

Ignore Latinos gang slain  
girls taken and trafficked  
one in three black men jailed  
GoFundMe health insurance  
neighbor’s child fentanyl-dead  
meaning-twisted tarnished monuments

Deny fellow forty-hour citizens ramen noodle welfare dependent  
immigrants eager for entry who’d shore up your security  
your own daughter sliced up merit honors pressurized  
constantly tested unsupervised loneliness lifetime college cost,  
as you warily piss in a new-gendered stall.

Better to put on new spectacles  
discover the Holbein skull hidden on your face  
before your eyes are forced to bulge in wonder to  
no longer see skin color over character content.

## Nochlin's Novena

*"Only on the brink of destruction, in the course of incipient modification and cultural dilution, are customs, costumes, and religious rituals of the dominated finally seen as picturesque."* – Linda Nochlin "The Imaginary Orient" (1989)

Gentile G r me  
Beloved Bierstadt  
Careful Catlin

Precise painters  
Lush landscapes  
Fantastical faces

Quaint customs  
Bountiful beauties  
Ferocious fiends

Realist recorders  
Sketches sufficient  
Studio scenes

Absent agenda  
Eschewing ambition  
Accurate artists

Dig deeper  
Create context  
Nochlin knows

Nostalgic nations  
Imperialist intent  
Cultures crushed

Indigenous implicated  
Strange savages  
Brutal barbarians

Depraved despots  
Doubling down  
Diminishing destinies

## Indians Have the Last Laugh

*“After this happened, after it began, I decided Custer could have, must have, pressed the button, cut down all the trees, opened up holes in the ozone, flooded the earth. Since most of the white men died and most of the Indians lived, I decided only Custer could have done something that backward. Or maybe it was because the Ghost Dance finally worked.”* – Sherman Alexie “Distances” in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993)

They'll sit around campfires a couple centuries from now;  
the remaining few who defended the Ancestors' foresight  
refusing to forget the furrowed earth

continued the ceremonies, fought against the federals,  
slid into shadows so as not to be blasted and blinded by  
the cost of climate change.

Once the dust has settled and rivers cool and clear again  
stories of wizened white men, ghosts of Galleoned history will  
grace and gall in tales of old

and aboriginals will sadly sigh as the flames crackle,  
recalling these conquistadors who refused to listen to the  
Mother who once made their manna.

### **White Woman's Lament**

The results of my test came back today  
And woe is me, they did not clearly say  
What I'd hoped to find in my DNA  
To rid me of guilt in this current day.

It's not what you think a woman might fear  
The BRCA gene did not oddly appear  
Instead they revealed another sad plight  
No melting pot here – ninety-eight percent white!

I know what you think regarding this "fate,"  
If old-school you are, it's "Isn't that great?"  
But knowing my place in this postmodern life,  
A colonial past now causes me strife.

I always recycle and I drive a Prius,  
So why can't I also be classed indigenous?

## Visit to the African American History Museum

*imagine a tulip, upon seeing a garden full of tulips, sheds its petals in disgust, prays  
some bee will bring its pollen to a rose bush. imagine shadows longing for a room  
with light in every direction. you look in the mirror & see a man you refuse to love.*  
- excerpt from "Poem: & even the black guy's profile reads 'sorry, no black guys'" by  
Danez Smith (2017)

I walk so free this gorgeous day  
October crisp for my foray  
to peek inside proud nation's blight  
white slavers' ships cargoed with fright

four centuries of tragic tears  
compressed in words under veneer  
a legacy to clench my gut  
an ancient guilt I haven't sought.

By afternoon my soul is tired  
though in my mind I have conspired  
to change the way that I address  
the way my "race" has been remiss.

But is it D I should avoid?  
or just down E Street – can't decide  
for homeless black men gather near  
and *still* I cannot help my fear.

## The Walking Dead

Of course I see them in my hometown  
there in ones and twos; manageable amounts  
Social Services supplied for the least of these,  
but this noise is cranked up to a higher volume

Hurrying through city streets strolling wharf  
touristy treks heading up Haight hill  
waiting for the busses to barrel on  
they are everywhere

I hear one calling my harried husband racist  
another screaming at mild-mannered me  
though most are they are everywhere zombie slow which  
I feel bad saying because

this is supposed to be the place of  
cool alternative lifestyles,  
even now a groovy reminder they are everywhere of a  
happy-go-lucky hippie generation but

my muscles tense purse clutched when I  
leave the Beat Museum on the Chinatown rim  
less afraid of Asian faces hawking figurines  
than I am of white walkers everywhere outside arched gates

who slump and drag along *every block* asking for  
change and who definitely deserve it or at least  
some sense that they are seen and heard and  
still alive in this foggy city everywhere by the bay.

With search engines so close by you'd think  
the question would be asked and answered  
a million times everywhere over but at least  
Montgomery Street BART has a pop-up soup kitchen

as we choose not to connect the dot-coms and  
ridiculous rents to the muddled man  
using a water bottle at the train station  
to wash his feet on the subway platform.

## **Revelations**

Not surprised when you told me –  
certainly not disgusted or disapproving thanks to my guilt-free god

but still... unease at the news you bravely shared.

I have known you a long time and love you very much.

Others unfamiliar will decide not to know you  
loving dead theologies more.

And I know it will be hard. Has been hard.

Too many will judge none of their business  
using the blaring trumpet call of their saints.

And all I can do in this tentative age of Ellen is work for further Evolution  
have your back and

Let your  
Grace  
Break  
Through  
Quietly.

## No Answers

My sister and I  
we talk about how much it pisses us off sometimes to hear people talk about their parents  
when ours have been dead so long.

We know it's not right to feel this way, but still we get tired of "mom's slowing down"  
when our mother dropped dead a hundred years ago.

Now we're *both* older than she was –  
you do the math.

And when you've heard your dad's arm snap from being shifted in blood-blurred sheets,  
then maybe we can sympathize that your elderly father forgot where his car keys are,  
since now our dad could be cured.

Or when you've seen a fake-lit Winston dangling from your mother's puffy chapped lips,  
her eyes sealed shut as she still tries to smoke on her lung-cancer deathbed,  
we might agree your mom's soup is too salty for our taste.

Our uncles try to fill in the gaps, but the things they know  
are not what we need, for they don't know

how hard we were to potty-train  
what first foods we ate  
if mom cried after spanking us  
whether dad was mad when we ground the gears

and even if they did, coming from their mouths the breath is not the same.

We long to ask

How do you make that special Crock Pot meatloaf?  
Why did we never see our other grandparents?  
Did you regret getting divorced?  
Were you saddened by the miscarriage?

Are you proud of how we've lived our lives?

So we parent each other as best we can,  
making the mistakes our parents might have  
loving each other as we want to be remembered  
just as when we were children.



## My Ghost

Her arm tightens as she squeezes my chest  
cries as a small mewling cat in my dreams  
plucks my brow birdlike awake in wee hours  
snarls and pounces from behind a morning walk bush  
taps my shoulder when I'm too far from home  
closes my throat as I eat my oatmeal  
sits on my lap on the subway train  
shares my potato chips during rushed work lunches  
echoes my steps on the gym Stairmaster  
slides into shadows in my twilit yard then  
climbs back in bed with me at night.

Doesn't matter if things are going well or poorly –  
there's no way to predict when she will

appear.

I don't believe in Divine Redemption but she proves  
there is eternal life, just not the kind I've been told there is.

I have done everything I can to rid myself of her.  
Therapy prayers deeds money time tears rage laughter and  
though she sometimes fades for awhile and

almost disappears

she always manifests to haunt me when I'm least expecting  
her arrival.

Einstein says time and space are relative  
but I can't go back in time and change things  
no matter how desperately I would like to.

And if there are infinite possible realities why am I living  
just One  
and that One  
over  
and  
over?

## Currents

I

storm

already knowing I'm angry with the wrong man and  
that the other isn't even really who I'm furious with.

Thundercloud eyebrows match

swelling black condensed heart vapor and here arrives the steady d

o

He told me bring the girls with you

w

but spoke it in desperation as I was

n

teetering on the largest brink of my life

p

unsure whether to take the plunge or stay dry.

o

u

My once original him had become caught in Original Sin

r

quickly swimming down shore to plunge over

a w

somewhere I couldn't go in 4.5 billion years.

a

t

Don't let them fool you.

e

"It's never too late" isn't right.

r

Currents change and the shore once near

f

impossible to swim back to when

a

eddies alter to rapids around you.

l

And if you don't want to grasp the truth

l

it simply remains hidden under a

smooth surface

It would have been easy to wade in the shallows hold my breath pop under open my eyes  
discover detritus hidden in the hoarded hogwash of this man's Dreams Deferred.

Instead water shimmered with his savvy and the excitement of living Somewhere with  
Someone Else; a situation a straitened girl imagines falsely in her own Dreams  
Deferred.

leapt

And so I into the sparkling swiftness.

I should have known he didn't really mean it, judiciously trained to be glib, an only child  
who prosecuted low-level dealers (victims of their own Dreams Deferred)  
bars on his rehabbed row house set between ghetto and gentrification should have clued  
me this plunge was going to dr

own me.

So now the latest lover gets anger not really about whether I was pushed into water as we  
both know I

jumped and of course he has his own

Dreams Deferred.

Ripples spread out in all directions so you don't want to flirt with me because I could pull  
you too.

under

## **Joint Custody**

Sterile phrase for a  
broken-wide home  
split-open children  
heart-bent futures

Rules slippery  
strange arms  
multiple mommies  
“She’s not your mother!”

Scars deep  
clothes scattered  
suitcase life  
moving far

New siblings  
confused roles  
secrets –  
Secrets.

Jesus your Savior  
God imagined  
foolish dad  
crazy mom

New stepdad  
new stepmom  
hide photos  
silence memories

## **Repetition**

Dark-rimmed glass  
Special tomato juice  
Locked cupboard  
Just for one  
Don't sip!

Turpentine breath  
Couch prone  
TV deaf  
Dog out scratching  
2 am stumbling awake

Color in the lines!  
Car swerving  
Rural road icy  
Leather bench seat  
Swatting hand

Deemed unfit  
Divorce drift  
Couched again  
Neighbor away  
Unwitting accomplice

Years pass  
New couch  
Special mug  
Smells funny  
Tired tonight

Snoozing early  
Engine warm  
Cash gone  
Bloodshot eyes  
Just overworked

Promotions denied  
Business trip  
No contact  
Cell phone ringing  
Cold fear

Call police?  
Call hotel?  
Freeze accounts?  
Hide the keys?  
Go back to bed.

## Christmas Newsletter Draft

Happy Holidays, Everyone!<sup>1</sup>

This cheerful season finds us all happy and healthy, as we hope it does you!<sup>2</sup> Not much is new here, but we do have a few updates. First, we'd like to announce the birth of our first granddaughter on May 30!<sup>3</sup> Mom, Dad, and baby Chloe are doing well, and Dad was lucky to be able to get some time off work to revel in his new baby girl.<sup>4</sup> Parenthood has been a bit of a challenge for the youngsters, but things are finally smoothing out.<sup>5</sup>

Chris has been working hard at school but has decided to take a gap year to explore a few new paths.<sup>6</sup> We all know how it is to be 20! And our bright girl Beth is applying to all kinds of prestigious schools and has a great chance of getting into a few of them.<sup>7</sup>

Great Aunt Betty is slowing down a little, but still remains a hoot-and-a-half when we see her, which happens quite frequently now.<sup>8</sup> And Grandpa Pete is doing well at the new nursing home in Oakdale that he switched to last fall.<sup>9</sup>

As for Martin, he's looking forward to his retirement, which will most likely happen next spring.<sup>10</sup> He has lots of great plans for the future!<sup>11</sup> I can hardly wait to have him home full-time.<sup>12</sup> Nothing to report for me; I've just been plodding along as usual.<sup>13</sup> ☺  
Going to keep this short, since I have to get the turkey started for dinner!<sup>14</sup>

Love to All!

The Joneses

---

<sup>1</sup> Change to "Merry Christmas" for the MacCarthy side of the family so as not to offend.

<sup>2</sup> Except for Martin's prostate surgery, my cataract operation, the cat's foot amputation.

<sup>3</sup> Push birthdate to July 26 for Maw-maw's letter (since the wedding was in late Sept.).

<sup>4</sup> Do NOT mention that John was laid off last November.

<sup>5</sup> Thanks to the Prozac the doctor finally prescribed for Marie.

<sup>6</sup> So he can enter rehab again for the binge drinking.

<sup>7</sup> Though we'll never be able to afford the tuition without a second mortgage and hope she picks an in-state public college.

<sup>8</sup> Because her dementia is worse, she keeps wandering outside naked, and the police bring her here because our phone number is on her ID bracelet.

<sup>9</sup> Since his pension collapsed and we had to find a cheaper facility that took Medicare.

<sup>10</sup> If the market doesn't tank and erase our meager 401(k), we can unload that West Virginia property, our Social Security benefits aren't cut, and he doesn't cuss out his boss again first.

<sup>11</sup> There might be some Seinfeld episodes he hasn't memorized yet and a credit card he hasn't maxed out on Amazon.

<sup>12</sup> Though I'll have to take up a few more hobbies to get myself out of the house.

<sup>13</sup> Cooking the meals, paying the bills, balancing the checkbook, babysitting Chloe, doing the yardwork, and running our dog Chip to the vet every week for his eye medication.

<sup>14</sup> Change to tofurkey for vegans Sunflower (aka Jane) and Clover (aka Matthew).

## For A

I gaze in wonder at your perfect new face – see unanticipated years of holiday meals team cheering cookie baking playground chasing swing pushing board game playing first tooth milestones; undeserved richness that morphs into fear.

I wanted to worry less about the world's woes, your mother and aunt grown up,  
but your stealthy arrival has me commiserating with a stranger;  
another new grandmother also lamenting still so much overwhelmingly

hurricanes earthquakes fires race riots #MeToo bump stocks North Korea rising waters  
and interest rates –  
market and auto crashes Putin drinking drugging sexual disease explosions Lyme disease  
doctor bills ISIS mountainous debt

out of our control

not to mention abuse loneliness bullying pressure and other unspeakable tragedies that  
can befall a tiny soul born into an income-driven society; pendulum having swung too far  
to protect the small.

You are one of the lucky ones; mother, father, and many aunts uncles cousins  
grandparents great-grandparents close parental friends care for and keep you and I  
confess secret gladness that a few major “strikes” may not [white male affluent home] be  
against you.

I strive to be a blanket haven or once-removed ear to whom you can confess your tales of  
romantic woe, yet does my knee hurt head graying blood pressured body have staying  
stamina or will my surfeit of fries, steaks and sodas cut short my already limited time  
with you?

Or will some tragic car plane pedestrian accident snuff me out too soon for these sweet  
scenarios of succor?

I'm not the first matriarch to be overwhelmed by grand-filial love, but you don't know  
until you're in it how consuming heart pounding hands shaking eyes tearing throat  
closing dreadful it can be;

how you can care so much for one little body;  
the grandson you didn't even know you were missing.

## **Hood Baroque**

Organize and categorize  
My German background says  
As we demonize, theorize  
And step onto the rez.

My thoughts, they swoop and spiral out  
Then pivot, pry, and plunge.  
I travel back and forth in time,  
Soak knowledge like a sponge.

Nazis! Nolan! Fanon! Foucault!  
Alexie! Adorno! Plato!  
Socrates! Said! Erdrich! Love!  
Bierstadt! Catlin! Eco!

Campion! Course! Verzosa! Harrison!  
Reichert! Amt! and Driskell!  
Hoffman! Gottfried! Bohrer! Angello!  
Depending on the fiscal.

Emilys, Amandas, and Sarahs of course,  
But Barcelonans too  
Plus Xiangs and Olawunmis  
Have shared with me their view.

My journey comes full circle soon  
Back to my roots I fly.  
My heart breaks just a little bit  
To have to say goodbye.

But ends await us all you know  
And my fate is the same –  
The masks come off, the curtain drops  
And others play the game.

## NOTES FOR POEMS

### **My Inauguration**

This poem places the speaker in historical context as being an infant or small child when several well-known public figures and writers devoted to black enfranchisement were being murdered or were otherwise dying. Despair at “missing out” on knowing these leaders turns to excitement as the speaker recalls a time in 1993 when she stood on the Washington D.C. mall for the first inauguration of Bill Clinton and heard in person black female poet Maya Angelou recite “On the Pulse of Morning.” The run-on images are meant to evoke the packed in feeling of standing in the middle of a huge crowd. Though not explicitly named, Angelou’s identity can be gleaned from clues such as the allusion to her famous autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The poem also echoes themes in Angelou’s inaugural poem. But after this elation and hope is expressed, the poem turns again to the most recent inauguration and questions whether Angelou would have written the same poem for the most recent POTUS.

### **The Balkans**

This poem is meant to reflect a diverse set of people whose voices are being raised in present-day discourse on a variety of issues. It is primarily meant to show that whether one identifies with each point-of-view or not, it is possible to understand that the same feelings of fear and isolation underlie each position – represented physically by the bottom line. “The New Jim Crow” refers to the book by Michelle Alexander *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in an Age of Colorblindness*, which discusses how the current United States judicial system disproportionately jails black men. The form of the poem is meant to visually represent each person as an isolated entity on the page.



### **Frederick Memorials – Notes for Tourists**

This poem is meant to echo the scribbled notes a walking tour guide might use to take a group of visitors around a few of the memorials in the historic district of downtown Frederick, Maryland. As in many towns, color lines can often be discerned within a matter of blocks, if only from subtle clues. The 1934 practice of redlining to create black and white neighborhoods is alluded to in the first stanza. The poem touches on the speaker's desire but ultimate inability to conquer her fears when walking through neighborhoods demographically different from her own race. The fourth and fifth stanzas refer to the WWI monument in War Memorial Park at the corner of Bentz and Second Streets, which is octagonal in shape and lists "Colored Soldiers" alphabetically on a separate side from the rest of the presumably white soldiers. The two cemeteries mentioned in the poem also really exist, as indicated, mere blocks apart. While recently the bust of Supreme Court Justice Roger B. Taney was removed from the front of Frederick's City Hall, a large memorial with a U.S. flag still decorates his grave at St. John's Catholic Church cemetery on East Third Street. Just three blocks away in Chapel Alley between Fifth and Sixth Streets is Laboring Sons Memorial Ground, a cemetery for free blacks established in 1851, though no headstones mark individual graves in this small plot.

### **Common Fruit**

This poem was written in response to the police shootings of young black boys that have taken place in the last several years, showing that individual circumstances don't seem to matter in these cases or in the news, though they do to each child's mother. The forms of both the boy and mother are represented by the shape of the poem. The mother is

kneeling over her slain boy. The boy's shape is twisted as if he is lying on the pavement, one hand up, one hand down, hands on the steering wheel, gang ties and no gang ties, no drugs and on drugs, with or without a weapon all at once by the shape of the words. The mother's thoughts are jumbled up inside, as are the words that shape her side of the poem. She also reaches out with her "limb" to the broken limb; the fallen apple of her son on the left. The title "Common Fruit" is a play on the song title "Strange Fruit," which refers to Southern lynching of black men in the early 1900s. The ubiquity of television coverage makes what should be a strange and unusual occurrence a common, sanitized one for mass viewing.

### **White Coal**

"White Coal" reflects the attitudes of a specific economically depressed area that lobbied for prisons to be built in its county so that citizens could have jobs, but belatedly discovered that many of the prisoners and criminals would be their own family members and neighbors. The poem strives to expose some of the (perhaps subconscious) racism that informed the county's initial enthusiasm.

### **Real Definition of Evil**

This poem with its run-on stanza is meant to represent the barrage of negative phrases that when constantly repeated can make a child eventually become despondent, perhaps violent, and sometimes even suicidal. It is a response to the constant bullying that children are exposed to in the current state of being connected to peers and others 24/7 and an assertion that when politicians call such acts "pure evil," they are ignoring the societal factors that shaped the perpetrator's actions and made him what he has become.

### **The Fact of Journalism**

Like the title of this collection, the name of this poem refers to Franz Fanon's essay "The Fact of Blackness." The goal is to show how quickly the "truth" can be distorted by time and faulty repetition, made even easier in the electronic 24/7 news cycle of today. It attempts to show how "facts" we know today may be distorted in the future just as "facts" we think we know about past events have been distorted or forgotten over time. The end concedes the difficulty of figuring out the truth in this bombardment of information and distraction.

### **Warning: Now Entering the Age of Said**

A nod to Edward Said's idea in *Orientalism* that configurations of power must be studied if any idea, culture, or history is to be understood, this poem also touches on the idea that we are in a present-day Baroque age while also being written in a somewhat Baroque style – a feature of Baroque poetry being that it often contains a barrage of images, reflecting the explosion and exploration of new ideas, inventions, and cultures in the sixteenth century. Additionally, the poem is meant to echo the despairing and sometimes angry tone of Allen Ginsberg's poem *Howl* while dealing with modern-day themes of racial inequality, ecological disaster, income inequality/poverty, etc.

### **Nochlin's Novena**

Playing on the idea of a novena as a nine-day prayer, this nine-stanza poem in three groups of nine lines attempts to succinctly outline Linda Nochlin's application of Said's definition of Orientalism to art in her essay "The Imaginary Orient." Of the three artists in the poem, Nochlin only speaks about Jean-Leon Gérôme, but in other essays during the course of my progression through the MAH program, I have applied the theory of

Orientalism to artists Albert Bierstadt and George Catlin, as well, who were late nineteenth-century artists from countries with imperialist aims – France and the United States. The strong use of alliteration is meant to invoke the chant-like form that a ritual prayer might take. The stanzas fall on the page as the artists fall from grace.

### **Indians Have the Last Laugh**

Read after the previous two poems, this poem is meant to invoke the style and tone of poetry by Spokane tribe member Sherman Alexie, giving indigenous peoples the last word after the destruction and domination experienced by the white imperialist powers that Said and Nochlin identify. It is also a poetic way of conveying some of the ideas in Alexie's short story "Distances" in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*.

### **White Woman's Lament**

In a temporary lightening of the mood, this poem is meant to position the speaker more firmly in the collection as a "white" woman who perhaps harbors a modicum of guilt after the realizations she has experienced from some of the previous poetry.

### **Visit to the African American History Museum**

This poem demonstrates that even one enlightened by historical education cannot shake her own cultural upbringing as a white woman when walking near homeless black men. Education though helpful isn't the complete answer to understanding and dealing with white privilege.

### **The Walking Dead**

In this poem, the speaker is in San Francisco, on the opposite coast from the Frederick and D.C. walks, and in this selection has a difficult time dealing with homelessness of all colors. The repetition of the line "They are everywhere" or just "everywhere" in

unexpected places is meant to convey the ubiquity of the problem and how overwhelmed the author feels. “The Walking Dead” title refers to the current pop-culture fascination with zombies while also accurately depicting the way the speaker somewhat dehumanizes the homeless in the poem in order to shrug off the guilt she feels.

### **Revelations**

This is the only poem that exclusively deals with LGBTQ issues, from the point of view of a cisgender person trying to handle a loved one’s revelation of falling into one of those categories. Though the disclosure is not specifically outlined within the poem, the first letter of the last five stand-alone lines are meant to clue the reader in if he or she hasn’t yet guessed the admission by the end. The title is also an allusion to the last chapter of the Bible, that book being the basis on which the hypothetical religious person is relying for their judgement of the speaker’s loved one.

### **No Answers**

This mostly autobiographical poem talks about the difficulties my sister and I sometimes have regarding the early deaths of both our mother and father. It tries to express our uniquely shared anger at having lost our parents so long ago and how we attempt to parent each other. The series of questions at the end starts superficially, slowly getting more profound before we finally screw up the courage to ask the last question, the one we most want to ask – are you proud of how we’ve lived our lives. The poem concludes with our knowledge that we can only rely on each other for some of the answers we seek.

### **My Ghost**

Left somewhat open to the reader, the author's "ghost" can be interpreted as the regret or fear one feels and can never quite shake when they are unable to change something very negative that happened as a direct result of something they have done in the past.

### **Currents**

"Currents" uses water metaphors to represent the rapidly-changing situation in which the speaker finds herself both in the present and in a past situation. The repeated reference to "dreams deferred" is an allusion to Langston Hughes' poem "Montage of a Dream Deferred," and shows that black folks are not the only subgroup of people who can lead disillusioned lives. I play with form in this poem to bring out the water imagery in a visual way.

### **Joint Custody**

A distillation of the feelings family members, especially children, might have in a joint custody situation – particularly when not all is rosy in either household.

### **Repetition**

A series of images in this poem tell the story of alcohol abuse in the first column. The second column indicates a repeat of the pattern, but it is up to the reader to determine if this is still the same person as in the first column or another person who appears later in the speaker's life. It could be either.

### **Christmas Newsletter Draft**

This poem is an experiment with using footnoting to provide the real details and is another selection written in the experimental poetic style of Sherman Alexie. Read without the footnotes, this ubiquitous Christmas newsletter is somewhat boring, reflecting

the typical focus on the positive in this type of annual “keeping up with the Jones” missive. When read in conjunction with the footnotes, the letter takes on an entirely different and perhaps more authentic meaning.

### **For A**

Written in response to the birth of my grandson Alexander in July 2017, this poem connects my life directly with some of the larger issues discussed in the previous poems. The title is also a reference to a James Baldwin poem “For A.” in which the voice of the speaker talks not to a grandson, but to a lost lover.

### **Hood Baroque**

This poem was written for and read during my final presentation in my last course in the MAH program, which was the literature core class, “Masks and Illusion in the Baroque Age.” The poem is baroque in style in the way it presents a catalog of fragmented ideas, contains “exotic” elements, concerns itself with death and time, and juxtaposes opposites. It seemed a fitting way to end my coursework and seems an appropriate poem to include as the last one in this creative writing poetry thesis.

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