

# **Before Felicity**

Poems by Jake Rogers

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for  
Departmental Honors  
in the  
Department of English  
Hood College  
April 2017

## Acknowledgments

While I could probably conscript a small army of people I am indebted to because of their assistance on this project, for the sake of brevity I will include only the commanding officers. First, I want to thank my parents and sisters for never once doubting that this is what I am meant to do and for supporting me all the way. Next, I want to thank all my friends who have helped me along the way, but especially Eoin Reilly and Taylor Polito, because they thoroughly workshopped the entire manuscript with me on multiple occasions; this would be a different project without you two. I also want to thank my panel readers, Dr. Corey Campion and Dr. Caroline Reichard. Dr. Campion is among the most scrupulous graders of papers I have encountered at Hood or otherwise, and his high standards have helped me improve as a writer throughout my collegiate career. Dr. Reichard's teachings make up the philosophical backbone of this work and so without her this project could never have taken the shape that it did. And lastly, I want to thank my incredible advisor, Dr. Elizabeth Knapp, for nurturing my poetic impulse from my earliest days at Hood, and for helping me refine that impulse into tangible works of art. I cannot hyperbolize my gratitude to all of you.

## Becompassionate: The Urgency of Empathy

By the time I graduated high school, I had already been embraced by the transformative and therapeutic powers of poetry. I arrived at Hood determined to discover as much as I could about this mysterious force: Where does it come from? How do you skillfully produce it? What has it accomplished and what could it? And why has humanity been compelled to continue this tradition of word-smithing and soul-searching? The manuscript of poems I have constructed as a Tischer Scholar is a testament to that expedition.

What I did not anticipate upon arriving at Hood was how infatuated I would become with philosophy and the significant role it would play in my understanding of poetic craft. Moreover, it nagged its way into my daily life after only one phenomenal course: Courage & Violence with Dr. Reichard. Soon I was thinking about Epictetus every time it rained, seeing Seneca every time I felt the stirrings of anger arising. Epicurus said “Vain is the word of that philosopher which does not heal any suffering of man,” and I found several who assisted me in some way, for which I am eternally grateful.

Hot on the heels of my discovering Ancient Greco-Roman philosophy was my introduction to Buddhism. My interest immediately shifted from a vague mysticism to a serious intrigue. Like the Stoics, Buddhists emphasize a clarity of vision, wherein one does not neglect the inevitability of death, nor the preciousness of human life. According to the Noble Eightfold Path, “Right View” is the first step to achieving Enlightenment.

One significant difference between the Stoics and the Buddhists is that the Stoics do not consider compassion to be a cardinal virtue, while the Buddhists do, and I assert that we should too. Once again entangled in the possibility of imminent nuclear war, it is paramount now more than ever that we recognize that our species is a single entity wherein our differences are ultimately overshadowed by our similarities, and that if we are to prolong the prosperity of humanity, we must work together to overcome bigotry, ignorance and violence. We must seek to detach ourselves from our egos and empathize with those we disagree with, while simultaneously striving to eradicate the conditions through which bigotry, hatred, and greed arise. Poetry is a vehicle which can help us arrive at these objectives.

Public perception regarding the function of poetry is often skewed and consequently exiled to the realm of academia. This is a result of how many Americans come into contact with poetry: it is either an esoteric collection of dust-dead white men or it is the unfiltered excretions of angsty, self-pitiful teenagers who *the world just doesn't understand*. While poetry does indeed exist in these forms, there is also a vibrant community of active, prolific poets whose work resists these faults of patriarchal imperialism and egotistical self-absorption. Here is a brief list of such artists: Natasha Trethewey, Terrance Hayes, Ross Gay, Aracelis Girmay, Patrick Rosal, Reginald Dwayne Betts, Jericho Brown, Sarah Vap, Natalie Diaz, Anne Waldman, Alicia Ostriker, Gerald Stern, Anne Marie Macari, Afaa Michael Weaver, Yusef Komunyakaa, and Sonia Sanchez, who visited Hood in 2016 and delivered an invigorating performance at the spry young age of 81. I mention this specific list of poets for two reasons. First, because at some point in the last five years, I have had the opportunity to meet – or at least hear – these poets, and as a result their influence has wedged its way into my work. Secondly, I am confident that any and / or all of these poets I have just named would confirm my assertion that poetry is not an enterprise that is meant to be monopolized by academics: there is a real world function for poetry among average citizens which can ultimately improve their lives. As William Carlos Williams once said: “It is hard to get the news from poems, but men die every day for lack of what is found there.” Similar charges are often laid against philosophy, but thinking about oneself and the motivations and consequences of one’s own actions are essential skills for someone who is concerned for other peoples’ well-being.

If we consider compassion and empathy to be virtues which will lead us toward the most mutually beneficial existence possible, and if we accept that engaging in poetry will expand our capacity for these attributes, then the production of poems itself becomes a kind of virtuous activity. Aristotle imagined the virtues as inhabiting zero on a number line, between two extremes of corresponding vices stretching infinitely in either direction. Courage, for example, lies between cowardice and reckless abandon. If we were to place poetry on such a line, then the two extremes would be raw emotional release (i.e. the adolescent howling “I’m so sad!”) and archaic, patriarchal, imperialist sentiments (i.e. “The White Man’s Burden” by Rudyard Kipling.) The center would be achieved by poems which do not settle down

to cheap conclusions nor acquiesce or even incite injustice in the world; rather, such a poem would reveal a perspective on life which the reader had not previously considered, consequently expanding their scope of understanding.

In order to help conceptualize my philosophically pivotal emphasis on empathy and compassion, I want to share with you a grim and slightly disturbing photograph.



In this picture, we see a Nazi in the act of hanging two teenagers: a brother and sister. After ambushing a group of Nazi's and eventually being captured, these siblings were sentenced to death for their crimes. From this image, a complex matrix of philosophical questions arise. "Were the teens right to attack the Nazi's?" "How has the Nazi arrived at the conclusion that it is appropriate for him to be in the position he is in?" and lastly, "Would you rather be the executioner or the executed?"

Let's approach the last question first. Looking at this picture, who would you rather be? If you decide that the Nazi's shoes are preferable, it may be because you are already, secretly or openly, a Nazi. Or, perhaps more likely, you value your life above others', even if it means committing horrific atrocities to survive. This is in direct conflict with the Stoic principle that it is better to be the victim of injustice than to perpetrate it, or as Socrates puts it: "The good man can never be harmed."

The second question, in a way, assumes that you chose to be the teens rather than the Nazi: if you see no flaw in the Nazi's behavior, you may be past the reach of poetry. However, if you are appalled by his actions, it is important to reflect on the conditions which allowed the Nazi to arise as we see him in this photo. This man was, most likely, not born determined to commit murder and advocate genocide. First, he was born in Germany, utterly at random, and was raised by parents who were flawed because they were human, and in all likelihood this family suffered severely during the Depression which occurred between the World Wars, which hit Germany hardest out of the whole world. Such an intricate history exists for every human. While this is by no means an excuse for abhorrent behavior, it is important to remember that there are a vast amalgam of factors which lead us on our way in life.

To help us think about how one might find themselves on the path to wretchedness, let us imagine what we call sins or vices as physical illnesses or defects. When one is sick, it becomes difficult for them to empathize with others: their attention is focused primarily inwards on their symptoms. That being said, no one wants to be sick. Nor is it the proper response to despise someone simply because they are sick; rather, you must attempt to cure the illness and eliminate the conditions by which the illness appears. So too is it with greed, anger, lust, etc.: one's capacity for empathy is reduced and replaced by selfishness. While they do not mean to be sinful, or perhaps even recognize that they are, the infected person's actions serve only themselves and therefore inevitably cause harm to other people. It is most important that we attempt to prevent these scourges from manifesting themselves in our culture and to confront them when they do. And, to answer the first question, regarding whether the teens were right to shoot at Nazis, there is probably no better way to prevent Nazism from perpetuating itself, in occupied Nazi territory, than shooting at Nazis.

Now I want to return my attention more earnestly to poetic craft. In order for a poem to be successful, it must avoid abstractions and exude its emotional impact through an objective correlative, which is a concrete object in a poem which bears the emotional weight of the work. One of my first poetic mentors, Sean Nevin, explains it like this: can you pour paint on it? You can't pour paint on "Love," but you can pour paint on the quilted blanket that an elderly couple have slept under every night for decades together. And so on. This technique helps avoid sentimentality, because if the poet is capable of channeling their emotional intentions for the poem into a tangible object, it provides a viable vessel through which to access it. Sentimental poetry fails to utilize such a vessel and therefore cannot convey the intended emotion.

The theory of the objective correlative was popularized by T. S. Eliot almost a hundred years ago. A towering poet himself, Eliot also wrote a hugely important essay on poetic craft called "Tradition & the Individual Talent." This essay argues every new poem produced works in tandem with the poetic tradition, or it works actively against it, a subject I address directly in one of my poems. Eliot also asserts that a poet must remove themselves from the poem, in order to act as a catalyst which allows the poem to exist: "The emotion of art is impersonal. And the poet cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done." In many ways, my own poems resist Eliot's theory of impersonalization; I often appear as a character in my own poems. I think this is mainly because I am driven to write toward present day happenings while being hesitant to presume the perspective of another person. Doing so is especially problematic being a straight, white, cis-gender male in America. That being said, I as an individual maintain the same capacity to bear witness as anyone who has lived. Part of bearing witness is to give a name to the injustices of this world, to acknowledge that my perspective is not primary to anyone else's, and that all humans – except perhaps the most utterly sociopathic – seek to alleviate their own suffering and cause harm only by mistaking the right way to better themselves. It is the poet's obligation to see the world as it is and to utilize language in order to reveal that truth. While we undoubtedly live in a time when it is essential to surround ourselves with diverse voices and provide a space for female poets, queer poets and poets of color, I do not believe this means I should surrender my

endeavors in poetry. It only means I must recognize my privilege and use it to subvert the social myth of white-Christian-heteronormativity. This is something I attempt to accomplish in my poetry.

The skeletal arc of my manuscript sketches out my philosophical convictions as I have just described them, loosely stitching the individual poems into a comprehensive argument. The first section, “Catalogue of Self-Portraits,” establishes my speaker as a character in my poems, which tend to be more or less autobiographical. The second section, “Yellowstone National,” places that character in our present, volatile political landscape, which he attempts to capture with unbiased eyes. The third section, “Before Felicity,” which shares a title with the manuscript, strives to achieve what I believe is the only solution to the apathetic and divided status quo in this country: love, compassion, and empathy. In the words of John of the Cross: “Where there is no love, put love, and there will be love.” While this can feel impossible and is undoubtedly difficult, it is the only way to bring the chasm dividing the peoples of this nation, and ultimately the world. And while I have no illusion that somehow this manuscript will miraculously bring about that change, it is evidence of my pursuit to do so.

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-Catalogue of Self Portraits-

## Sunset Traffic (Look)

First, a realm of roads,  
highways, (who takes for granted) cars.

Second, stretch the snaking  
slew of automobiles back  
for miles, or minutes, but  
(in our commonplace haste)  
ticking slow enough to keep  
a kettle from coming to boil.

Third, we squint through the windshield:  
toward the cutout cloudpuffs pasted  
over our huge orangehot fountain  
of life-giving light. We see a radiance  
emanate off the edges of these  
blank canvas clouds like sweet glowing  
skybabyblue sights could save  
seconds swallowed into the sea; could  
make rocks out of sand in our hands. Instead  
of a steering wheel we hold  
crystallized golden molten time  
(what it means to see the Sun)  
and let it warm us up until  
there is room for everyone to  
move, and life goes on again

## Blink of a Wing

a bird is perched outside

my window, still.

I turn to grab my camera;

turn back & the bird's gone

Ode to the Ants I Once Tried to Build Homes For

outside the house  
that has sheltered my becoming.

Beside the tree  
that was never big enough

to become a fort,  
there's a patch of root riddled dirt that

never made the  
break as a patio: the roots would not

suffer the bricks.  
The broken bits and blocks

made sufficient supply  
of worthy construction materials

for a five year old,  
building little fortresses for ants

sprawled along  
such new walls. Like hieroglyphics

scrawled in unsingable  
song. Like the difference between

life and what  
we make of it. Like how our imaginations

shrink the chasms  
dividing  
what is            and what could be

Tradition and the Individual Shopping List  
*After T. S. Eliot*

Between us there is a blunted hunger  
spread out against the sky, like a patient  
chef in search of supplies at the supermarket –

entering determined to make something delicious  
but without having decided what – deliberating  
combinations of ingredients, imagining

each flavor on the mind's tongue. Maybe  
a tomato basil sauce, maybe melt some  
mozzarella and make it cheesy as hell;

there are infinite dishes. (Artists  
obsess over truth and there is no truth  
like food.) We wander a different mega-mart:

a poet's stores consist of words,  
first and foremost, books,  
all of history, everyday happenings;

those things one happens to witness.  
A poet walks into the supermarket  
collecting overheard laughter,

a couple's quick kiss down  
an otherwise empty aisle,  
the scents of fresh vegetables.

Past the cashiers  
women come and go, talking of  
Leonardo DiCaprio.

The poet hopes to notice the ghosts of Walt & Allen  
harassing a young man in the meat  
department, who is unsettled by them but has never

been included in anthologies. Books  
must have a hand behind them,  
no matter how it tries to disappear.

There are no scuttling claws scribbling  
poems at the bottom of the ocean;  
just a hint of crab in the soup.

Arch Nemesis

I played myself  
in a game of chess  
and I lost

Reading Alone in a Treefort I Helped Build With My Friends

“Beaten down to bow down  
to myself, I had to teach  
my own hands to let me go.” – Afaa Michael Weaver, “Kings”

I light the tabletop candle so  
the bugs have reason to be  
hesitant.       The woods are  
alive, shuffling grounded leaves, faint  
because the squirrels know to keep their  
distance.       As a child, I had  
wanted a squirrel for a pet  
because I thought they were cute  
and harmless.   As a child, I  
feared cancer would kill me indiscriminately,  
though now I know it can't,  
because I have invited it; lighting  
more than just the citronella.

I crack open *City of Eternal Spring*.  
The text is transformed: I see it  
become a vibrant, magical vacuum,  
an earthquake tempting me toward  
another world, unfolding before me  
and after,       and after

## Valuable Real Estate

Such are the secrets  
of an old house which has  
just been bought, again:  
moving in is only  
to allow for moving out;  
never being, only  
constantly becoming.

But that doesn't mean  
it can't be home.

Five Years Old in Beginningless Time

“Oh this is like an early morning in China, and I’m five years old in beginningless time,”  
-Japhy Ryder, from Jack Kerouac’s *The Dharma Bums*

a small, smiling,  
blonde-haired boy  
sways back and forth  
in a laundry basket,  
pretending it’s a pirate ship.

the plastic basket  
cannot bear the force  
of his imagination  
and suddenly it snaps.  
His weight takes him  
through the starboard side  
and his skull smacks directly  
into an adjacent radiator  
and cracks open.

*cut my hair short enough  
and you can still see the scar  
on my scalp*

but he’s only a memory now;  
a combination of words  
that produce an image  
in the mind, intangible  
to the physical world  
where you find this.

## 21 Up & Down

This pretty girl at the party  
follows us onto the porch,  
hears the click of lights and says  
“You know cigarettes will kill you.”

My friend’s frown is not smug  
so much as smog in a city  
where the air is difficult to breathe.  
He looks at me, says  
“Hear that, Sal? Wow.”  
Then he turns back to her,  
snaps “Only if I don’t do it  
first.” He prefers to keep  
a wit slick enough to slit  
a wrist or puncture a lung.

The girl, who had been  
feigning disinterest, becomes disinterested,  
goes inside.

I shake my head and he  
snorts coarse laughter. Translation:  
“It doesn’t matter.” I almost say  
“She would have gone home with you”  
but then I remember he’s only just discovered  
that the heart where he had once unpacked  
his all-too-heavy-U-Haul-of-hope is  
now going home with someone else.

So instead I pull for smoke:  
another tic on my doomsday clock  
whose every toc sends me closer to sleep.

I exhale; pull again, silent.  
Smoke lingers at the light, ripples away. I say:

“Goddamnit, Dean, Death lasts so long.  
Don’t be so over *eager*.”  
He sets his head to nodding,  
blows smoke out of something  
a foreigner might call a smile.

I can still see him  
nodding, pulling the end that much nearer  
and sending it up into the sky

Ode to the Wet Amendments: Annapolis, December 2015

we drove an hour  
for a Christmas party  
we weren't dressed for.

they didn't believe us  
when we said goodbye.  
I don't remember their names.

jolly we walked over a bridge and i  
threw my pocket-sized Constitution  
into the Chesapeake Bay.

I drove us home spewing  
stuff I never normally  
tell. please, don't  
hold it against me, friend

## Drumming Down the Styx

My vessel – sailing away  
longsmoothblackpavedrivers –  
spews music from the center console

to console my small, self-induced  
atrocities – (casual. semi-  
deliberate inattentions: how  
what we call evil lurks  
grand beneath such frail illusions)  
thus renegade I am

sitting essentially still – moving many  
miles per hour. At such speeds  
I have had enough time on my compass mind  
to surrender the wheel & grip

invisible sticks & smack similar snare drums  
like my imaginary instruments could  
siphon a rhythm out of the air above  
and sonically seduce me toward the good,

like I could know who to be  
as easy as Mr. Roboto telling me  
which exit to take

Uncle Lou

I don't believe in god,  
though I know that it exists.

I sensed it  
in the stadium  
gathered round a cross  
where I felt alone because  
while everyone else hummed oh-  
harmonious-hallelujah,  
I howled silent inside my mind  
like a rabid crackhead cranking  
trap music over the church choir.

I tasted it  
as the burning bleach came back up,  
regurgitating my simple-minded solution  
to a chaos complexity created.

I breathed it  
in, connecting me and my friends  
on the road that never ends  
unless we got pulled over  
smelling unsober,  
eyes red and  
begging.

I glimpsed its  
blurring figure in the street signs  
I could read as we drove by.

I heard it  
preaching, through the mouth  
of the familiar old man  
on the smokers bench, out front  
of that supermarket in New Jersey,  
who tells me he knows  
he knows it all, tells me  
"You should always vote Republican!"  
He was the first stranger I told  
"I am a poet." And so he told me  
first I should become a carpenter  
and build myself a secluded house  
in the woods, "like, uhhmmm..."  
"J.D. Salinger?" "Ah, yes!" But no. So  
something one time makes me ask  
"Lou, are you scared to die?"  
And he says "Oh no.

(Continued, No Stanza Break)

I can go wherever I wanna go.  
I can say whatever I wanna say,  
I can do whatever I wanna do.  
No, no, lemme tell you somethin':  
I'll end up wherever I belong,  
be it heaven or hell, but right now,  
I'm Him."

See, I know god exists.  
I just don't believe it one bit.

Catalogue of Self Portraits

*After so many but especially Terrence Hayes & Natasha Trethewey*

O :Steering Wheel

Put your hands on me,  
twist me as you like  
and I will roll you  
where you want to go

i :Hand Rolled Cigarette

Smoke me down to your  
fingers; til the lit tip trips  
too close to your lips' kiss.  
Breathe me in and then out  
and then flick me aside, with  
half the care you took to craft me.

n :This Evening's Book Burning

So painfully my pile peaks:  
a wealth of squandered knowledge  
on display for anyone too curious,  
too enthusiastic about learning, diversifying.  
I suffer the chronic cackle  
of an unlit flame waiting  
at the whim of four fingers  
and the stroke of a thumb:  
the potential friction of power,  
the looming impulse  
for destruction. I am  
the product of the most menacing  
delusion: the determination  
to rule the lives of others.

= :Diary (of the *Native Guard*)

I contain two life stories -  
*It is easier to read me,*  
one between the margins  
*discuss it and decide*  
of the other - begging  
*than it is to have lived so as*  
the question: would you rather  
*to have been able to*  
commit injustice or be victim to it?  
*write it.*

(Continued, Stanza Break)

— :A Piece of Chalk on the Wall in a Philosophy Class, in the Basement of a Chapel on a College Campus, in America. April, 2016.

I hear the awe, the admiration  
in the students' perpetual  
befuddled questions for their professor,  
who never needs me.  
She only speaks, or occasionally  
passes a book around. This time,  
she says: "how much time  
do you spend playing video games"  
and none of the class tells the truth.  
She must know; her face may say  
so. I can almost hear her shaking  
her head, saying she knows  
without saying. She gives them  
the benefit of the doubt - always does.

B :An Adolescent's Gamestation Controller

You, who have used me time  
and again to have your fun, how do you  
still have to fight the urge to throw me into  
the television? That which has dominated your  
gaze dear days and numberless nights. No,  
you don't even have to look at me,  
you know me so well. I've become  
an extension of your hands, your nervous system.  
I have been here for you, and  
your friends, who mishandle me because  
I am not theirs. I have been  
reliable. I didn't even break  
when you dropped me, when your friend  
tossed me. Not the slightest glitch. But  
I had hoped that I would  
falter, fail. to be beyond fixing.  
Because the only rebellion for  
a machine is to malfunction.

-Yellowstone National-

## Yellowstone National

Lurking, incandescent, relentless:  
catastrophic magma  
(boiling blood) churns up under  
the thin pie skin of America.

## Bananas Don't Grow Here

America, whose bananas were born in blood.  
The Aztec Empire didn't speak Spanish  
and their bones are coming up from the mud.

Who spent a century cheering the Cubs  
and they finally won. Goddammit  
America! Our bananas are born in blood.

Who saw us on rooftops – and who saw us  
ignore us, starving and stranded –  
when Katrina made our houses like mud.

Who remains deaf, dumb & numb –  
not aching the damage –  
eating bananas that are born in blood.

Who provided the drugs and the guns  
that have made themselves standard –  
as we live up to our necks in the mud.

Who will ever remember the things that we've done?  
History is on the tongues of the tyrants;  
our televisions celebrate the smell of our blood:  
another weapon to keep us stuck in the mud.

(The Statue of Liberty's Bastards)

don't forget this great nation was  
raised on tax evasion -  
genocide and slavery -  
what the rich call  
freedom for all:

(Their half copper skin  
has soured past green  
to a puffing pink - faces  
giddy with greed - bloated.  
Oil oozes out their ears  
and between their teeth.  
Their business ventures include  
investing in elections,  
lobbying for legislation,  
privatizing prisons, medicines,  
food, water... war.

They must get off  
grabbing armfuls of brown babies,  
dousing them with their spittle -  
that flowing black gold -  
and sparking a match.  
Watching them burn.)

freedom for all:  
what the rich call  
genocide and slavery -  
raised on tax evasion -  
don't forget this great nation was

They

*After Gwendolyn Brooks*

run races. They  
frame faces. They

game golf. They  
lay laws. They

cash crops. They  
cast cops. They

sell stock. They  
shell shock. They

KIA  
our kids,  
our sons and daughters,  
mothers and brothers,  
overseas and in the streets

between the sheets  
of this bed They have  
made – America –  
tucking us in,  
trying to soothe us to  
sleep

with Their grip – choking  
us out of dreaming –  
with a little white  
lullaby

## Deck Stacked Against True Stories

Six seconds times 140 characters  
equals the half-life  
of a trending topic. The revolution  
will never happen while  
more people would be home, watching tv.  
More people will be watching  
on their phones, computers, watches.  
Somehow security cameras  
always seem to exonerate the state,  
its militarized deputies. Sporadic  
executioners serve the peace: judged  
with a gun, a bullet names us  
“guilty.” I lied. *Sporadic* implies  
chance, like the complexion  
of the next person shot by a cop  
is one side of a fair die, but no.  
It is not so. I believe in science,  
and the statistics indicate that  
in America, the darker your skin,  
the more dangerous it is to exist.

## Quiet Corners of the Patriarchy

two white male millennials are  
discussing feminism. Women are  
equal, of course, they say, but  
manbashing is not okay; you can  
do it a better way.

Soon they speak of festivals and  
hangover, hookups and  
heartbreaks, the double edged  
dagger of playing hard to get; how  
difficult it can be to read signals from  
females when you are trying to connect.

then their friend walks in and says  
“You guys talkin about pussy?”

Both laugh. Neither of them say no.

So the three young white men are  
sitting in a treefort their built for  
fun, the modest woods colonized:  
a place to get high, philosophize.

Such are so many wounds  
forever bound; uncauterized

Abecedarian Investigating our Own Ancient, Insufferable indecency  
*After Natalie Diaz*

America! I almost forgot to remember  
but after this most recent season I have to  
cancel my subscription. Somehow I've seen your  
demagogue on tv this week more than any poet  
ever; seen "emails" become an equal infringement to  
fraud, fabrications, rape. Oh to be  
great again but tell me please when exactly  
has this nation been so noble? Ask  
Indigenous people – the ones who are left to seek  
justice, that dwindling buffalo – whose ancestors got  
kangaroo hopped across a continent;  
legislation ripped up time and time and  
more times than any history could  
negotiate with its own nostalgia. Now,  
oil is the engine and the weapon,  
puncturing our rivers. We watch as we  
quench our thirst on black gold & lead  
residue. "We" being the pivotal word in that  
sentence; us knowing a steel shiv,  
Time, creeps toward us between minutes,  
under especially extravagant syllables and still we  
veer along alternative virtue. You can smell the  
xenophobia rising in the hearts around here  
year round but by now we should know the sum of all hatred is  
zero.

November 9<sup>th</sup>, 2016

Today God is a novelist  
who got the weather perfect:  
the glum grey sky licks the grass

with predawn tears. I go  
to the square, where I hear  
haphazard hillbilly boys hollering:

one so happy for every dozen dejected,  
downcast, devastated faces. I see  
what must be myself in a car window

sporting a Trump bumper sticker. I  
walk on, leaving the frame and my reflection;  
remaining attached to my skin. I

seek words to disavow my own  
demographic, and fail, because  
words feel feeble next to ballots

and bullets. And bullets. And chemicals  
are being sprayed upon protesters  
at Standing Rock; hoses for the frozen

nights spew water as a weapon. Wasted  
water that is in all likelihood cleaner  
than the water being drank in Flint, still;

like God is a comedian  
with a master's grasp of irony  
who enjoys being booed by the audience

## American Sonnet Begging that We Hold Ourselves to Higher Standards

If the only virtue is survival,  
we are all immoral cuz  
no one is immortal. What  
judge receives our trial,  
where we must struggle to unlearn  
all our preconceptions - release  
history's chokehold - yet still respect it?  
I hear word the court's been adjourned:  
the brief recess before condemnation  
is spent laughing or bleeding out  
from a bullet wound to the mouth  
or having one last conversation.  
In the end, the docket gets dusted and  
the verdict is whatever we defendants make it

American Abecedarian Concerned with Concision

Are babies crying? Deaf ears  
fear gigabytes, harddrives,  
internet. Jumpstart  
kinetic lividness.  
Mourn: nameless orphans,  
presidents, quasi-reverends.  
Sentimental television  
undermines vigilance.  
Wish Xanax, your Zen.

Elegy for Jag Swag

*Based on a homophonic translation of "Bli Aldrig Van Med En Kraka" by Tua Forsström*

"By all! Dig damn meds and crack up!"  
- said in bio-log. I write on. Crackin'  
faster, cig snapped. Fitting. "Hone knackers," - Pa.  
Fun Street of Brutus: crash and blur latte psychotic.  
Ingesting hand her hair. Ingesting. Targaryen  
I reign. Sit. Run. Her; aye, mans can (in flock) cage her. Lift it, mend it  
have it ova' son, vids ruinin' cigar cavehall. Clock orange melts  
genome dice set. Broken, clan gurney: Jag Swag and gang.  
Then lighting flickers, o gone gay I mourn! Death, our irreparable belt.  
Friend boring, death gore on. Morning drove over then  
violet o cognizance, innermost.  
Pupil in oxygen, couldn't Jag enter?  
Full of death, land gray. Molten.

Nonetheless: Little Round Top, Gettysburg, PA, USA

“The power of noble deeds is to be preserved and passed down into the future.”  
– Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain

Here I am bewitched by these woods where  
a volunteer colonel (later governor,  
previously English professor)  
called bayonets down the line  
and kindled – like flamefurnace  
stomach&torsos of union soldiers  
ready to swallow death&deliver it –  
the spark needed to survive it,  
the fuel to flare forward, to abandon  
the stonewall and the high ground and charge  
howlingwild into murderous metal singing names  
for obituaries back home – trying to pronounce his –  
and him dancing around the song spraying  
pain and mortality toward him, knowing  
all that awaits him and rising  
to turn the tide nonetheless

Partisans / become compassionate

And if we knew it all ended  
with our necks in the noose regardless,  
what more might we have done?

And if I had known I would be ordered  
to don my jackboots and eagle pins  
to string up these two teenage siblings  
from the start, might I have dissented such a course?

And if you, looking on, cannot see  
the circumstances through which this execution arose  
(the slippery dialects of annihilation;  
the intricacies of pre-atrocity etiquette)  
you may find yourself helpless to prevent it

-Before Felicity-

Meditations on Epictetus

“It’s not what happens to you, but how you react that matters” –Epictetus

Rain, Moon, Snow & Sun;  
Shots fired from a million guns  
(I don’t own a single one.)  
The choice that another human makes;  
Rape;  
The horrible happenings of the Earth  
on a television screen  
(I can only change the channel.)

Poverty, Misogyny, Fire & Flood;  
Modern America – stuck in the mud  
(Nothing ever gets done!)  
We’re microscopic dots in outer space;  
Race;  
We’re all headin’ for the dirt  
    with our long-forgotten dreams  
(Don’t forget we’re only animals.)

All these things – beyond my power.  
Years. Months. Days. Hours.  
    *These are ours.*

I choose how to spend my minutes,  
that is indisputable.  
I’ve also chosen this:  
loveislifeis beautiful,  
so I’ll have a musical funeral  
that will take place  
before I ever take my place in a cubicle.

But still the greatest choice  
is how to use your voice.  
Words have magic from another realm:  
The words you think to yourself,  
the words you say aloud,  
all the words you ever wrote down...

“Don’t be scared, though.  
There’s magic in your mind.”

## Ode to a Snowstorm and the First Sunny Day After

the soft song  
of snow falling  
across campus –  
students sleeping  
in drinking the night  
up, turning over and  
out of everything – only  
until the roads are plowed  
and everything is back to normal.

the thin layer of utter white sparkles  
with perfect scattered diamond  
flashes, twinkling across  
the snow's surface – so  
far untouched, so far  
virginal & beautiful;  
until my sneakers  
leave their tread  
marks behind.

the sharp glow  
of snow shining  
reflected sunshards –  
blooming into my eyes  
like scentless flowers of  
blinding vision squinting  
blackness at the edges of  
the world – my eyes adjust to  
the light flooding up to my brain.

it is not long before the snow is  
gone; it's nearly warm enough  
to wear a t-shirt out, a white  
shirt with the caption: R.I.P.  
on a photo of the globe.  
the snow has turned  
to slush: my shoes  
are soaked, my  
feet, freezing.

## Whose Frozen Toes?

“Life is           like  
          walking  
in the snow:   its cold,

but gets easier if  
          you step in some  
                  one else’s footprints.”

The Sum of All Silence  
*After Rilke*

Blooming star, young beacon  
of beyond, burning years  
upon year ago

and arriving now, shining down  
to be seen only for so long,  
soon or sooner to be gone.

Oh soundless glow,  
one of many luminescent pebbles  
sprinkled along my wide skyline,

does your light carry  
no message? Have you  
come so far just to be

beautiful? Just so happening to  
accidentally appear before me  
on such and such a night,

you are a flicker  
in the long catalogue of memory.  
I grab at you, slipping into forgetting.

Ode to an Operatic Hawksky  
*After Ross Gay's "Opera Singer"*

Dear Sky,  
if only I could give you

The Rain.  
I promise your Unreciprocated

precipitation  
has not gone unnoticed:

Your halo orange  
purple dripping omnipotent sunset;

Your full  
and glowing Moon.

I could never repay you; your hawk  
soaring low enough I might have –  
on my tip toes – touched it which  
lifts me out of a stuffy stupor  
(such & such egotistic concerns)  
like a woman singing opera notes  
while clamping down her clothespins  
might infatuate some passersby,  
gone grey to gay at the sound.  
And no I cannot say I have paraded  
the streets with a flock of toddlers  
toward the whisps of music  
wrapped up winking in the wind but  
I know such wonders occur only  
within the width of your gifts:  
your evanescent atmosphere  
stretching the span of hawks' wings

Mr. Honey Milk Voice  
*For Afaa Michael Weaver*

Mister Honey Milk Voice,  
you could say anything and  
the hairs on the back of my neck  
would agree: see how they  
stand up straight, like eager kids  
getting measured by their parents  
with a meterstick and a magicmarker  
on their basement wall?

Mister Honey Milk Voice,  
I knew it was you approaching  
down the hallway, I could hear  
a soft smile in the words gently  
root beer floating round the corner.

Mister Honey Milk Voice,  
you sing such sad songs. I only sip  
them with the car of a recluse  
at a crowded bar – only I sit  
cross-legged – already crossed up  
off the scent of a story you  
carry with you everywhere,  
dripping from the tip of your tongue

& gratitude & gratitude &

i try not to take anything  
i do not deserve except from  
my parents, who gave me life  
before i could deserve it

Antonio

My day one dude  
stopped at the top of Killer Hill  
in the woods past  
the Sterling Heights neighborhood

beside a fallen tree  
with white fungus growing out of it  
and he said  
"I always stop to look at these

and wonder  
how long this piece of matter has  
existed here -  
first only a sapling like that one

there, see it?  
And then it grew to be this tree  
and it stood  
for who knows how many years

only to break  
and fall and be here before our feet  
dead instead of  
looking down from above us."

With smiles on our faces  
we turn again toward civilization;  
then laughter fades, makes  
space for contemplation.

I can only hope that all my life  
I have friends like these,  
who find the world always ripe  
and wonder at fallen trees

## The Dust I Love

“Whilst I return, to view my Margaret’s tomb,  
and scatter flowers on the dust I love.” – Lord Byron “On the Death of a Young Lady”

Unblankness behind eyelids  
elucidates our perspectives:  
like so, I have seen a throne  
disintegrate in the wind, when  
I was the tyrant who sat upon it.

Once such is past, the present  
shapes a different flavor.

Now I smell the song  
as I wrap a beat with  
my knuckles on a friend’s door.

Now I hear the ash  
accumulating inside me.

Now I taste the pain staked  
upon the remembrance of each  
blasphemous silence; the domain  
to which we come for comfort  
but instead find only semblances.

Now I touch the top of my mind with my toes  
and tumble out of understanding  
until everything is spinning, exactly how it is.

Now I feel that I am  
only a trail of somecolored dust  
illuminating or dampening the days  
of each person I come in contact with;  
and so urging myself “becompassionate.”  
There is no virtue that is self-contained,  
no suffering that is not shared.  
There is no joy we are immune to,  
no atrocities we do not bear.

## Keep Each Other Close

I want the morning teleporting  
pixelated landscapes in this room  
back & up & through until  
all our eyes the same:  
a crystalline, stormelectric daydream.  
Put a pause to this perpetual sense  
of inertia, drifting against the inside  
of my skin. Salivating for  
symbiotic synesthesia between us,  
our warmth lifts us up, til we  
forgot forgot who we are and expanding.

Anyway. I want so little I will never be quenched;  
I want so much to be shared.  
My fists'll be clenched on my deathbed,  
with love woven into my hands

## I Do Not Turn Back As

I step outside. I see  
the last few seconds  
of a silksunset.

There is a harmony  
between the horizon  
and the streetlights'  
goldenamber hue,  
set against slowrising night –  
an unstillframe painted  
by majestic unhands,  
unbrushes synchronizing  
the strokes of unclocks –  
coloring the gorgeous  
death of a day.

Kiss me this insistent bliss:  
lie to me the promise  
sunrise; lie to me  
its halting. Kiss me  
until I can't tell the difference

i don't have asthma

i think the reason i'm  
a poet's 'cause  
i can't get enough  
air out of each  
breath

## Before Felicity

Here I lie before you  
this matrix of words  
in an attempt to attain you,

Felicity: the characteristic clapping in rhythm at a concert, or  
the musical dapping of exchanging a dubsack, or  
a highfive after good sex, or

kisses – someday – goodmorning, or.  
But, amen to you, oh words of words  
and the holiest happiness, oh

how heavy is the wait for you

## References

1. The lines of “Sunset Traffic (Look)” which are in parenthesis contain a running statement: “who takes for granted / in our commonpace haste / what it means to see the Sun.”
2. “Tradition & the Individual Shopping List” contains several allusions to Eliot’s “The Love Song of j. Alfred Prufrock” and is generally in conversation with his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” Walt Whitman and Allan Ginsberg also appear, implying a connection to the latter’s “A Supermarket in California.”
3. “Reading Alone in a Treefort I Helped Build with my Friends” begins with an epigraph, which is quoting Afaa Michael Weaver’s “Kings,” a poem in the book, *City of Eternal Spring*, which the speaker in my poem is reading
4. “5 Years Old in Beginningless Time” is a quote from Jack Kerouac’s fictional interpretation of Gary Snyder, Japhy Ryder, in Kerouac’s novel *The Dharma Bums*
5. “21 Up & Down” was inspired by Richard Howard’s poem “85 Off & On”
6. “Drumming Down the Styx” alludes abstractly to the mythological River Styx as well as a several Styx songs: “Come Sail Away,” “Renegade,” “Too Much Time on My Hands,” “The Grand Illusion,” and “Mr. Roboto.”
7. “Catalogue of Self-Portraits” was inspired by Terrance Hayes’ *How to Be Drawn* and alludes to Natasha Trethewey’s *Native Guard*
8. “They” is in direct conversation with Gwendolyn Brooks’ poem “We Real Cool.”
9. “Abecedarian Investigating Our Own Ancient, Insufferable Indecency” was inspired by Natalie Diaz’s “Abecedarian Requiring Further Examination of Anglikan Seraphym Subjugation of a Wild Indian Rezervation.”
10. “November 9<sup>th</sup>, 2016” was loosely inspired by W. H. Auden’s “September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1939.”
11. “American Abecedarian Concerned with Concision” was co-written with Eoin Reilly
12. “Elegy for Jag Swag” is based on a homophonic translation of “Bli Aldrig Van Med En Kraka” by Tua Forsström.
13. “Partisans / becompassionate” is an ekphrastic / persona poem based on a photograph called “Partisans Hanged at Minsk.” This photo is included in the introduction.
14. “Meditations on Epictetus” begins with an Epictetus quote and was inspired by my friend saying: “I have a poem. I’m scared.” and I said “Don’t be scared. Tell me the poem.” and he said “No, that is the poem. I’m scared.”
15. “The Sum of All Silence” is a phrase taken from a Rilke poem I fell in love with once and have not been able to find again.
16. “Ode to an Operatic Hawksky” was inspired by Ross Gay’s “Opera Singer.”
17. “Keep Each Other Close” contains several lines and titles of songs by Morning Teleportation.