

Hostland

Poems by James McKenna

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"Dear god, if you *are* a season, let it be the one I passed through
to get here.

Here. That's all I wanted to be.

I promise."

—Ocean Vuong, "Notebook Fragments"

Bottom Feeder

Like a pig in its shit, I knew nothing
else and had no intentions of stopping.
Look at the ground long enough, it becomes

a sky. Look at your face long enough: yes,
it is a wound, some broken sluice. I was eighteen
and rootless. I would plant myself in any ground

that would take me. I would beg the earth stay
beneath me. I would take shelter in men
triple my age. Loneliness multiplies like this,

has no mirror. Not even in the motel rooms.
So I would ask them to describe me to myself.
They would hand me loose buttons, pencil shavings, rides

home, dozens of other apologies. I would
cook instant ramen when I got inside. I would
laugh at the inevitability: I would always

know my knees better than I would my face, I would always
lose at least one noodle in the draining exchange.
I must have bowls of them by now, scattered through pipes

all across central Florida's sewage system. Given
the chance, I would devour each of them, slurp them
without hesitation. I know I would.

self-portrait as cumulonimbus
with a line from Ocean Vuong

no one had warned you about the clouds, how they do not move here,
the night before what you will years from now call the storm, there was
a heady fog, or river, and it will have been either the fourth night or year
with this fog, or was it with him, or them, but again the clouds here,

the night before the years that you will call storms, there was
smoke, or was it a promise, your fingers threading the winds
of this fog, or was it their fog, or his, again, with the clouds, here,
you cannot be certain, but they are pouring into the streets

smokey, or with promises, your fingers threading the wings
of each body, a patchwork of them, cutting grays into the night, or
you are certain that they are you, you are pouring into the streets
ablaze, a blade, *a field full of ticking*,

each body, patch after patch of them, the night a deep cut, a grace,
you left the house for this, for fog, or the clouds were telling you to stop,
that to say your name is to hear the sound of clocks being turned back another hour,
your name, an offering, or you stepped outside for the fog but it was a river

you left the house for, the clouds came down a fog, told you to stop,
but no one had warned you about the clouds, how they move like a river
or their names are the river or you are the fog or they stepped inside of you,
you, a river-heavy fog, and it will be years before night.

Ode to the Facial

because you wanted
to be alone
because you
wanted
just head & no face
you sink your left hand
into hair burial
your right hand raises
thumb tilting
my chin up as you
cover my face
with you all over
my eyebrows ruining
down my cheek
tongue outstretched
for sacrament
bless me with seed
if it means you
will save me this dumb prayer
my dumb mouth
never learned to be soft
forgotten the mercy
of lips all they do
is harbor razored teeth
O bitter string of pearls O
rumored exfoliant
O death mask
no fingers to pray I
practice primal rituals
hardened hands sewn
to clasp scooping you
from my eyes clawing
to bathroom mirror
staring at myself
& all I find
is dazzling hunger
dripping from my jaw
all I am is spread
out before me
skin still soaked
it's fine I don't need
a towel I know
I missed a spot leave it

Understall

Swans, in orbital silence, garble questions, one after the other.
Your feet try to pace an answer back. You walk how clouds
move, noticeable only in increments, only upon
return. Yet still, you have rushed your way
to him, the unlit public restroom forty-nine degrees
& dropping, you spread your legs over the piss-slicked tile
for a stranger resting on all fours, car parked
with the engine running, crouching down for you
to enter, you press your face against the night-dank metal,
you think about the swans, but please, remember: this is falling
to your knees, this is ghost prayer, & you will confess
each shivering sin of your want into his wet, disappearing mouth,
& as if it were contrition, you exit first. You do not look behind you.
The swans much louder the distance home, they were asking what
his hands would be like. There isn't much to say, you explain, except
that there were fingerprints. As there always are, have been, will be.

For the Woman at the SuperAmerica Gas Station on Broadway & University Who Called Me
a Pink-Haired Faggot

know this if anything / my laugh / is usually much softer / i'm sorry /
my throat tightened like that / you see / my comebacks / are always
on tape delay / an angel sent / after the flood / what else were we /
to do but shrug / our shoulders splash / a wing or two stomp / our feet
in the blood / puddles / call it / grace / what i'm saying is / i know
too much / of shallow wells / sister / may i call you that / as i was
leaving you / in the parking lot / your son / banging on my windows /
i mistook each thud / for a kiss / no / i thought / you were asking me /
to stay yes / as i drove into oncoming traffic / i thought / of what
it meant / to careen / into mercy / could i swerve / toward salvation /
is it odd i loved the sound / of his fists / on my car / i caught myself /
yesterday / four in the morning / night-blue / palms flattened /
onto steel / why is it / that i want / a man's hands / on any body
of mine / even when they want me / dead / his spit dried / to the glass /
there are 14 car washes / with america in their name / within 10 miles
of me / how many of you / i need not search / long / or at all / but also
know this / i wasn't trying / to laugh i was trying / like any good
faggot / to say hello / back to you / to speak when spoken to / like any /
good faggot / i wanted / the gasoline / to smear / slick / over
my mouth / to split my tongue open / to flame / to lap / up my lips /
& swallow

Swailing

It has to be the smoke of their own burning parents.
Forest fires have been multiplying for at least a month,
and they are in a room with no furniture, watching
men busied with their lawn mowers, the sidewalks
begging for trimmings, for a respite from the sun,
softly, steam speaks against the window, muffles
cover us please give us anything, they listen
to the bleating engines, the two of them men learning
the difference between motor and murder a turn
in tongue, a distant pitch, they wanted to make
better mouths but shame has a way of swallowing
all their lips could ever touch, they forget how often
wildfires are planned as a preventative measure,
sometimes used for regeneration, the foresters could not
understand at first how plants were blooming within
a year of any given blaze, the answer: smoke signals
the karrikins, proteins born from their ancestors'
burning, a message in the soil sent through the char to sprout,
again, the room with no furniture has a single window,
as they finish forgetting each other into flame, the sound
of the lawns long drowned, the sky a sudden bruise
of crimsons, scarlets screaming, the lawnmowers have ceased,
and yet the grass clippings continue to rain, piling
halfway up the window, the steam spilling
into the room, they hear it clearly now:
leave this place leave this place leave this place
leave this place if you wish to survive, but fire,
the promise of lives beyond this ruin, opens the door
to a wingless thrush, which is to say the fire keeps
them in the room, breaking violins with their knees.

Grindr Triptych

In 2018, the Center for Humane Technology released a study estimating 77% of Grindr users report feeling regret after the using the app.

sup
• online now
0 ft away

hosting
• online, on his couch
you know the place

& who is it
• i mean to ask
to misuse

trust your skin
• this time, now
skin-close

& still not
• an alley
7 yrs away

looking
• online now
486 ft away

familiar head
• on you
been here before

you want to
• whose hunger
to whom

only wants
• now
in your fingers

your skin
• you stand in
milk-blue morning

nsa4fun
• now
approaching

& foreign face
• now
here, too

[
• have you chosen
will you mis-]

another's skin
• *right now*
& still beyond reach

your skin still
• yellow pallor
further than distance itself

Looking

listen
I can
barely make it through
night I'd like
right now I can meet

always every day
same same
I need to away hear me

need good time
how can I resist
looking for good time
better this

they say I spend
I couldn't tell you where I spent night
I'm sorry I'm in
I just like fun now

a toast to
breaking
wanting life a crime
Lord, put me away

I need good time
I look for good time
I need time
I don't get better
I don't get better

*This poem is an erasure of the song "Nothin' but a Good Time" by Poison.

Self-Portrait as Quick Proposition

Bottom to top, have at with me, I offer you
not much else. I've whittled myself
to throat & hands & no face, just a head
of want. I'm afraid I am not much more
than a public bench for every man within
a four mile radius of here. I can give
you my fingers, though each one is a tree
where everyone we love is gathered, watching
us. Take off my shirt. I'm not sure
what color it is by now, but you
can stretch it into night regardless.
Nothing more will I scrape from my ribcage
for you in return for the gift
of your pulse & its brevity. A toast—
let us drink each other's blood
until we cannot recognize our own faces.

elegy for

months spent listening to songs I knew
I would not care to remember the names of
summer of not knowing much
how the body numbs from its tips to core
that your life follows suit first forgotten
songs & the men who touched them
into sound never asking for a name
forgetting their faces even as their foreheads
beg into yours forgetting meals forgetting
to call those who rely on your calling
remembering to sleep at night but not
& hearing a name & feeling his name
break you out of sleep morning splayed
across the pillow your face is held against
sound sudden currency your mouth
a coin slot jammed with paper clips & string
legs dumbled arms stumps of pulpy blood
smack of hips drips of bruises
onto the bed sheet I am thinking
of the last time my mother wiped me
another mess I have made of myself
I do not know how to clean I cannot learn
this music what if I miss the sound
of choking

bǎi sàn

the dead need spending money or at least
a meal or two my mother feeds flame
at her sister's plot says *yi ma's got stacks*
wherever she is gonna make it rain down

the cemetery white people staring
at my family holding this bonfire
before our people's graves throwing míngchāo
with abandon i'm remembering the language

i removed from my resume this year míng
meaning underworld chāo meaning money
how a word for currency rhymes with the word
for burn but i'm standing on ceremony

i'm nursing fat oranges when the rinds start
melting into my hands i let the fire feast

::

hands melted to burnt wicks fire feasted
on my skin charred flesh that i offer
to anyone to river to flame even & still
the word echoes back to me *guílóu* still

as alabaster still *guílóu* & i can choose
to translate *guí* as meaning either ghost
or demon *ghost man demon man guílóu*
is slang for white man

(or foreign invader)

for years i learned to hold this wind of my
family's tongue translated it as *you are*
bloomed jasmine & your mother's milk yes you
are congee before vinegar our rain

& blood yes you certainly are bone yes
you certainly are not one of us

mother's mother

the closest i've ever come to my jie pua
was a hand searching
under her bed splashing into a cold steel

bowl of her piss
how i wailed in a tongue she'd never
learn but a sound

we shared i know my jie pua more
by myth than mouth
her parent's worst fear another daughter

the first family
to buy her demanded a return of course
when jie gong's

her third family that year told her to sleep
under the dinner table
she said thank you she went to sleep
::

mercy was an ox
missing her eye
mercy was minimal
scarring a run down
her nose mercy
was being here
was not being
the other 60
million girls
so who needed
a pair of shoes
or date of birth
when you're born
to no one every
day you turn
alive years old

::

a village boy makes a promise
when he returns from war
they'll marry he's dead before
she decides whether to believe

him anyway jie gong who
is chuen chung at this point
has already decided to take
her kam lan chan the moon

scoring her skin into glow
she has no say in the matter
in the paddy she would work
that morning soon

chairman mao commands
china to leap forward & they
knew it was famine when
neighbors began eating pieces

of clay they didn't know
it would poison their blood
distend their soft bellies jie pua
born midst the blight a boy

but jie gong is leaping & she is
coming & she is leaving the boy
a year old an infant a risk
to their escape & so she leapt

::

my mother & her siblings remember hong kong
like all children's memories operate in pieces

jie gong has already left for america returning
once a year to plant another child she has american

money now she doesn't want these kids she
doesn't understand needs beyond hunger

they remember her being gone
they remember her gambling

they remember mahjong tables
& banging on the door for food

they don't remember being told
about an older brother years

later who appeared at their door
kensington philadelphia under the el

my mother & her siblings playing
rock paper scissors loser having to

check if the burglars have left
their restaurant his name is

david & his parents were defectors
& so he was kept in a bamboo cage

unable to stand & unable to sit
jie pua tells my mother to fix him a plate
::

my mother says jie pua couldn't love
her children because she never witnessed it
that we only can do what was done
to us that she doesn't blame her
for being called a slut more often
than her name as a child that being
descendants of farmers meant we
must know our roots we must
know the soil we have been planted in
& it helps me understand why my mother
would call me a faggot

& bit my father's arm until it bled
jie pua took jie gong's pistol
& narrowly missed him
not upset he cheated but furious
she was korean
i love my mother & that is why i must dig
a grave deep enough for the three of us
::

we share the same language one day
she's sitting with the night's chicken dead
in her hands limp-necked & plucking
the feathers away & i ask her

why couldn't we go in your backyard

I keep bear traps there, you liked to run too much.

do you ever want to go home

There's nothing to return to, you wouldn't understand.

how did you keep going

*They told me I was lucky, a pretty girl
can do things to stay alive others can't.*

i'm sorry i cried when you skinned the rabbit

*I drowned it first, it felt nothing.
Did you not pay attention?*

i'm sorry for sticking my hand in your piss

It's good for the crops, I've raised this family on that piss.

i've been broken by a man before, too

*It's okay, you keep going.
You'll drown until your lungs become gills.
You'll live in the river.
It's not so bad here.*

she strokes my cheek & calls me lu lu boy
a word none of us know the meaning of no

translation maybe a word she invented to survive
but it sings a roadmap into my every nerve

[My mother is feeding the better half of her arms into the year,]

My mother is feeding the better half of her arms into the year,
and I am trying to talk to her like a son talks to a mother, like how

children learn the shape of their mouths by screaming. Not scared, we are
on the other side of fear. In some mother-son hideaway, a crawlspace where

we speak baldly about the truth, where sunlight is a myth we burn with our teeth,
here, I ask my mother like a son asks a mother if she plans to see 49, and before

she can answer, I am at her feet, a child again, gnawing on her bedpost, the gold flecks
stuck under my tongue and that underblanket heat only a mother can radiate, and wait,

I wasn't finished: I am trying to talk to her like a son talks to a mother he knows
he is losing. And yes, every reason of mine is selfish: when my mother is gone

whose cool feet will I ache to feel against my forehead? Whose shadow will I beg to swim
under, to drink with my groveling hands? This is an easier way of saying: I am greedy

and cannot survive her leaving. I cannot outlive a grief
mothered by wind—known only by touch, untouchable.

Primer

We had put it off too long: the wasps' nest
above our front door had to go. The small,

unbothering comb. A hive of them no more
than ten in number. Burrowed quietly as any

other neighbor might. We had the usual,
ignorable reservations. Kept our heads low,

then didn't. Staring at the dead wasps
later that day, we pleaded our case:

*Only wasps. Used Raid to be sure.
Made it quick. We are told one death*

is a tragedy, one million a statistic.

What about ten. 11. 17. 49. 58. What about

the wasps that flew away

are flying away

No

this was not about wasps

but I am going to tell you

about them anyway

they return every morning crawl

over their dead swarm our threshold

we use the back door now

so what about

the wasps which is to say what

about the living

and the dead

at our feet

and what about the ant colony,
the hills we burned this morning.

transubstantiation

all of the boys herded into a line
told to ready themselves today
they will see god & the boys
like boys don't notice anything
beyond arms fidgeting one boy
in particular even his knees quaking
dumb at the thought he slaps wrists
front-seat-back-seats to ringside
the altar unobstructed he's told
he's in there, he's inside & the boy
like us struggles to trust
in the shrouded in a cloaked god he runs
to tabernacle rips off the brocade breaks
open the marble box & butterflies
escape the boy is pinched at the ear
the boy is pinned to the altar
the monarchs fall from flight land
around his face paint melts off the wings
moths drowning in their orange & the boy is told
that mercy is hearing them patter until they don't
is hearing anything at all the priest doesn't look
at the boy as he says this his eyes transfixed
on those gods writhing scattered around
the boy's head he fishes one out into his hand
stands the boy back upright tells him to *take this,*
all of him, & eat of it & the boy eats of it
stumbles back into the line of boys
they close their eyes they genuflect or they pray
or they eat or the boy isn't sure what they do
he's cracked open his eyes he's watching
the moths lift from the altar from the afterlife from god
himself from the corners of his eyes he sees them
eating holes into their blind clothes

Diurnal

Lately, there has been more daylight
than I deserve, than I could ever know

what to do with. I brush it into your hair
thinking of Plato's story—the cave people. Oh,

I know a life of shadows. Void a word
I stepped inside of, zipped over my skin.

No, I am not a gorgeous thing, but I am
learning. You hand me shell after empty

shell, teach me to listen for their fullness.
I am not alone in sound, in the roundness

of this light. You are the day after which
other days follow. That is, you are first

to step outside of the cavern, bending toward
the horizon, vanishing into the sudden world.

Note on Memory

The cotton-stuffed mouth believes it to be sap
the longer the chew. Does it matter, then—
the throat ran thick. Lips bruised damp. Time
has a sweet stick for your gnawing & begs you not
to bite. But the splintered tongue swills
fibrous ichor, glories against teeth.
Mouth brims with mead,
gags syrup praise.

Critical Analysis

I'm fascinated by shame—its ubiquity, the silence it yields, the power it possesses as a result, the trauma it both inflicts and sustains. I was asked, once, if there was a point in my youth when I realized I was experiencing a queer childhood. I couldn't answer. I was faced with what I couldn't say: *of course I knew, it was all I knew—I've always known*. But, I learned with my hands. Shame, in so many ways, brought me to my knees. And from there is where my poems come. My poems are, then, an affirmation of shame's presence, a reckoning with it. Memory in my writing is the primary channel through which my shame is conjured and released; the poems a landscape of both burial and exhumation. My writing is heavily concerned with the ways in which the queer body both connects and disconnects with its surroundings as influenced by the conflation of shame and memory. Staring down the barrel of literary tradition, I find that queer people of color poetics extend and renew form and poetic traditions in a way that makes marginalized narratives more visible.

In an interview with poets Danez Smith and Franny Choi, Emily Jungmin-Yoon, a Korean writer, talked about the translation work she does with women writers in South Korea. Only male writers are taught there, she explained. "I have no ancestors," one student told Jungmin-Yoon (16:03). My writing is in a similar orbit. There is no queer, biracial, first-generation American-born Chinese, white-passing poet in the canon. There is certainly not a line of them, at least. Not all is lost, however. Gloria Anzaldua so aptly describes these infinitely varying queer POC intersections as "nepantla," an "in-between space, an unstable, unpredictable, always-in-transition space lacking clear boundaries" (Soto 1). She goes on to say that "living in this liminal zone means being in a constant state of displacement... Most of us dwell in nepantla so much of the time it's become a sort of 'home'" (Soto 1). Residing in

nepantla enables me to look wide and pull from many different voices. Ultimately, then, I'm looking as far back to the mid-19th century while also spending time looking laterally for my poetic ancestors, at the contemporary moment in queer POC poetry.

Tradition is, simply, that which we stand upon. The two primary traditions that inform my work most are the ecstatic and confessional. The ecstatic tradition is a poetics born from rapture—while building toward a new one entirely. In this vein, the ecstatic poet tackles the bigness of both the world and the self through observation, and threads what is observed into their own being. Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson are primary examples of poets crafting with the ecstatic mindset. As scholar Ryan Fabrizio explains, Whitman seeks to transcend the physical body through his surroundings: “This journey of ecstatic experience in which he loses his physical bearings causes him to indefinitely expand his sense of self and the world” (Fabrizio 29). In Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, the poet orients the bigness both outward and self-contained. In the 52 cantos that comprise “Song of Myself,” Whitman seeks transcendence, sees himself reflected in a spotted hawk, for example: “I too am not a bit tamed... I too am untranslatable, I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world” (Whitman 3286). In the assigning of the self to animals, the earth, other people, and so on, Whitman builds toward connection. In this forfeiture of the self, he affirms the actual bigness of the self, finding resonance in the ever-expansive world around him.

Whereas Whitman tackles the self in a single poem spanning numerous cantos, Emily Dickinson examines the self in brief, yet dense, abstractions. In looking over her collected works, one finds that she doesn’t often go beyond 30 lines, with some poems as short as eight. In this condensed form, however, one finds that Dickinson directly confronts the conditions of the soul: madness, grief, agony, death, love, and much more. A seminal poem of hers, “I felt a Funeral, in

my Brain,” confronts the natural, human anxiety regarding death, and describes a funeral happening within herself: “And then I heard them lift a Box/ and creak across my Soul/ With those same Boots of Lead, again, Then Space—began to toll” (Dickinson 3352). By positioning the abstract ideas of the soul and death within the confines of the tangible images of a funeral and coffin, one understands better the state of despair that death inflicts on those who think about the subject often, Dickinson certainly being one of them.

In an interview, contemporary poet Angel Nafis continues this discussion and describes the ecstatic as “emphatic noticing” (20:37). While one singular event takes place, so too is everything else happening in the world. The ecstatic poet leans into that self-awareness, even in their singular obsessions. That singular concern, the sole image so closely observed, is still only temporary. Nafis expands on this, defining the ecstatic as having:

the following qualities: an interdependence of metaphor and image, sensory overload (we call it synesthesia), doubling of metaphor and meaning, outward gesture that then releases some of the speaker’s interior as well, spontaneity, intimacy, immediacy, and a pinnacle sense that all of this is fleeting and only momentarily grasped (21:07).

Looking back to Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, both of their writings tread the line between the self and all else, and further, blur the line between them; beyond this, they reinforce the idea of the transience of these experiences either formally or through content—often both. My poetic consciousness is informed by this take on the self, pushing both what it is and what it is not, and for how long either one is true.

The confessional movement of the mid-20th century builds on the ecstatic concern of self, then looks around at both their own actions and the people who have informed the poet’s experience. The personal life of the poet enters the arena. Specific locations, dates, and names become as instrumental to the poem as the long-standing tradition of the natural world in poetry at the time. There is more to confessional poetry than personal specificity, however. To

confess, after all, is to come clean for that which is viewed as wrong. In the poems of Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, often looked to as two of the premier confessional poets, one sees this act of coming clean on the page. In Plath's collection, *Ariel*, published posthumously after her suicide, one finds an exploration of her depression as well as how it affects her ability to be a mother. In her poem, "Morning Song," Plath admits indifference to her newborn child: "I am no more your mother/ than the cloud that distils a mirror to reflect its own slow/ effacement at the wind's hand" (Plath 1). She struggles to feel the conventions of motherhood—namely, the simple idea of claiming her child as her own—which she knows will portray her to the reader as a failure as a mother. In the collection's penultimate poem, "Edge," Plath provides a third-person description of her corpse: "The woman is perfected./ Her dead/ Body wears the smile of accomplishment" (Plath 84). In these opening lines, one realizes that the Plath is resolute in her desire to commit suicide. Writing at the same time as Plath is Anne Sexton, whose collection, *Love Poems*, also confesses the poet's shames. The reoccurring line in her poem "The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator" insists that she is the one to whom the ballad belongs: "At night, alone, I marry the bed" (Sexton 33). In her use of the first person singular, Sexton admits that she is the lonely masturbator, and owns the subject that is largely considered taboo.

Plath and Sexton do what confessional poets do best: tap into human's affinity for voyeurism, and articulate what is considered the "unsavory" experiences, because there is as much to learn from them as there is in anything else. In thinking about its effects today, many feel galvanized by the way confessional poetry and factual information exist. Many feel they are irreconcilable, that there is no room for artistic interpretation of an event, or else it is no longer honest or true. The argument is worthy of its own discussion, but Carl Phillips describes it succinctly in his poem "The Dark No Softer Than It Was Before," opening with the lines: "How

I say it happened, may not be how it happened” (Phillips 36). The speaker in the poem, assumed to be Phillips, is insisting that memory is impossible to get completely right, and acknowledges that writers are fraught with their shortcomings in attempt to write memories exactly as they occurred. Overall, Confessional poetry is concerned with exposing the writer’s vulnerabilities, and made shame worthy of writing about. Ecstatic poetry redefined what the self is capable of becoming. Ecstatic and confessional poetry wrote my world into possibility, and they are the shoulders my writing stands on.

Just as it is important to consider literary traditions, so too should I mention queerness in the theoretical context. I don’t self-identify as gay, rather queer. This is because I think queerness is praxis, is action. Queer theory, as theorist Mimi Marinucci explains, is meant to disrupt the binaries and the asymmetrical distributions of power between them (Marinucci 34). Man, woman. Straight, gay. These binaries reject nuance, exclude the many floating between them. This disruption is imperative, and my poems seek out this objective doubly. Not only on a craft stance do I find disrupted narrative and defamiliarized imagery to be central, but also the mere act of writing down the queer experience is disruptive. It resists the heteronormative, patriarchal demands. Queer poet, Richard Scott, in an untitled poem, states “even if you fuck me all vanilla... it’s still not regular intercourse... we are still dangerous faggots” (Scott 12). At the intersection of my queerness is my biracial, Asian-American and white race, which complicates my overall identity. As mentioned earlier, there is no literature on this specific identity. The erasure of the queer POC community is expansive, as Robert Dale Parker’s text explains: “queer of color critique argue that the belief in the definitional power of individual categories erases much of queer life in general and especially erases the specific conditions faced by queers of color” (Parker 212). With this erasure in mind, I write in a way that is disruptive in order to make

my voice heard, my identity seen. My poems cannot possibly come from me without being queered, mostly by disrupting and subverting classic poetic forms, which leads to my poems.

The ode is one of the longest standing traditions in English-speaking poetry. There are much longer ones: epics, which come from Arabic-speaking nations; and haikus, which originated in East Asian countries. Originally in the Greek usage, the ode was a lyrical dance set to music. In the Romantic age, however, odes shift to being a vehicle for expressing deep admiration. Typically, these odes were addressed with strong sentimentality to people, events, and locations. As the tradition has progressed, however, writers began shifting the focus of odes from honorable recipients to more jarring ones. Yusef Komunyakaa, for instance, wrote “Ode to the Maggot.” What originally evokes disgust in a reader soon is realized to be a profound meditation on death. In his closing address to the maggot, he states: “Little master of Earth, no one gets to heaven, without going through you first” (Komunyakaa). Sharon Olds, in her Pulitzer Prize winning collection, *Odes*, writes odes to blowjobs, condoms, the penis, and the clitoris. Poets Ocean Vuong and Hieu Minh Nguyen join this conversation as well, with their poems “Ode to Masturbation” and “Ode to the Pubic Hair Stuck in the Back of My Throat,” respectively. These queer Vietnamese poets, both use taboo subjects to express deeper concerns about loneliness. In my poem, “Ode to the Facial,” I attempt something similar to these aforementioned writers. The act of ejaculating on someone else’s face is taboo, yet well-known. It’s even referred to as “the money shot” in the porn industry. I couldn’t view the facial as just that, a sex act. To me, it is a product of rape culture, where a man exercises his power over his partner by ejaculating onto their face, rendering them invisible. It is an act of erasure. Yet I enjoyed receiving them at one point. I wanted to be invisible. I did not want to face myself, and thus figured it best I have mine taken from me. Since the ode doesn’t have an established, rigid

form in terms of meter, number of lines, and such, it allows for more liberty in the shape it takes. I chose this piece to be one singular stanza, utilizing caesuras within the line both to warp the shape of the piece and also inflict multiple meanings on the language. I wanted the piece to look globular, thinning at some points, chunkier at others. Form and content work best in tandem. I think in writing about sex, it can easily slide into being gratuitous, and it is language, being incredibly purposeful and precise with word choice, is how to best execute the subject. I do not use the actual words for semen. Instead, it is called “you.” At one point it is euphemistically referred to as “seed.” I felt that it is easier to focus on what is happening beneath the surface by stripping away the more graphic words. The speaker in this poem is the recipient of the facial, addressing the man as he does this act. The poem follows the speaker into the bathroom, where he confronts his desire, the primal way it has manifested, and chooses not to clean off, instead wanting to remain gone, to stay erased, to not exist.

I also look to the sonnet, another classical form, in my poems. One typically thinks of the Petrarchan or Shakespearean versions when sonnets are mentioned, and it makes sense. Literally, the sonnet means “little song,” and Petrarch and Shakespeare instilled musicality into their sonnets—especially Shakespeare’s introduction of iambic pentameter (Richardson). As time has progressed, however, more and more writers are pushing the boundaries of the sonnet. Poets such as Rita Dove, Diane Seuss, Valerie Wallace, and Danez Smith break the classic sonnet’s rigid meter and rhyme scheme. Though the need to rhyme has diminished over the centuries, the most elemental forms of the sonnet persist: 14 lines and the insertion of a volta. The latter is best understood as the turn in the poem, what connects the situation of the opening lines to the resolution or reconsideration found in the closing lines. Still, the forced brevity of 14 lines instills a clear boundary, or border, that creates a sort of compression. Two-time United States

Poet Laureate, Rita Dove, explains her employment of the sonnet in the modern and contemporary context: “[I]f the ‘true’ sonnet reflects the music of the spheres, it then follows that any variation from the strictly Petrarchan or Shakespearean forms represents a world gone awry” (Dove 223). She uses the sonnet, its strict borders, to do exactly that: depict a chaotic world. Her sonnets in the collection *Mother Love* chronicle the kidnapping of Persephone by Hades, using the timeless form to capture timeless grief. Other current examples of sonnets breaking from the older traditions include Danez Smith’s poem “crown,” a crown of sonnets that explores their HIV-positive diagnosis (Smith 56). The term crown is used to describe a sequence of sonnets, and offers the opportunity for the poet to explore different themes that lie within the broader topic. Smith considers how they contracted the disease, what it means for their blood, how they cannot have children, and more. In my ongoing project, a crown of sonnets entitled “bai san,” where the two sonnets are in sequence and thus under that title, I am also using the form of the sonnet to capture a disrupted world: my relationship to my Chinese heritage, biracial identity, whiteness, and more.

The Chinese tradition of *bai san* is one that is not widely practiced. Even finding literature on this form of ancestor veneration is difficult. In this ritual, the family of a recently deceased loved one gather, start a fire, and burn items ranging from food to fake money to accessories and clothes. The idea is that what is burned is sent over for the loved one to carry on the other side. When my family gathered to do this for my Aunt Linda (*Yi Ma*, as we called her, the matriarch of our Chung family), I couldn’t help but notice the stares of other people in mourning. I felt the tug between my whiteness—which makes spectacle of anything registering as different—and my Chinese identity, which is built on respect for family and tradition and not questioning either of these things. Beyond that, in “bai san,” I then go on to explore the

nickname I was given by my cousins as a child: “gui lo.” This word is slang for white person, and this name insulated within me a sense of never fully belonging to the family I have always felt most rooted in. As I work through this, however, I look to my *Yi Ma*, who was nicknamed “pai gwat” (spare ribs) as a child, for how skinny she was. The sonnets in “bai san” are beginning to look toward the way my family uses something seemingly negative to show membership. Since I break from the tradition of meter in my sonnets, I instead make sure to focus on the volta. I also decided to use caesuras in these sonnets, providing the false idea of a clear boundary, when my identity is constantly spilling out from these seemingly clear lines. At one point, I have the translation of “gui lo” appear far to the right of the page, completely breaking from the rigidity of the concrete form. In this decision, I felt that it conveyed my outsider-ness doubly: it’s almost unnoticeable if one is scanning down the page. This sort of invisibility in my life, being white-passing and lacking a firm root in my heritage, yet still being first-generation American-born and also suffering the implications of intergenerational trauma caused by my family’s immigration, felt important to display as much as possible. As I continue to work on this crown, I plan to consider the future of this ritual in my life: what will my relationship to my identity look in the future? How long will this tradition continue in my family? Will we have a bai san when my mother passes? More importantly, what will happen when my mother dies? Thinking through the sonnets led me to these questions, and the form offers a chance for me to contain grief that can feel insurmountable, indescribable at times.

In addition to these classical forms, I also draw from recent and less-established ones as well. One example is the “slash” poem. In this form, the poem is kept as one singular block with justified margins, almost appearing as a paragraph of prose, and instead of using the traditional line break, forward slashes are inserted instead and act as the breaks between lines. A recent

example is Hanif Abdurraqib's poem "For the Dogs Who Barked at Me on the Sidewalks of Connecticut," published in the May 2018 issue of Poetry Magazine. On using slashes, he said that "a block text poem asks a reader to speed up their reading of it... the slash is somewhat of an aggressive hard stop... it asks a reader to pause" (1:20-1:37). Another example is Jan Beatty's poem "Shooter," where the speaker of the poem shoots each man who has assaulted her, the slashes forming a litany as the piece progresses (Beatty). At the 2018 Dodge Poetry Festival, she explained that she viewed the slashes in "Shooter" as a form of protection. With my poem "For the Woman at the SuperAmerica Gas Station on Broadway and University Who Called Me a Pink-Haired Faggot," I look to the slash poem. In writing this piece, I had two objectives: to recount the events as I remember them, and also to think about what is constantly on my mind in my poems: touch and disconnect. As one might guess, the woman and her son certainly don't connect with the speaker, yet I couldn't stop hearing the sounds of his hands on my car, the inflection of her voice as she harassed me. I couldn't help but think about my desire for touch from men in particular. I found myself wondering: what does it mean to exist in a country where people want you dead? People not only far off in capitol buildings, but the people who stand in front of you, see your pink hair, painted nails and jewelry, and feel called to violence. What does it mean for the queer community to be built on a history of court-ordered chemical therapies, castrations, lobotomies? The gas station being named SuperAmerica almost felt surreal upon reflection. As the speaker reaches the end of the piece, he wishes for combustion, he accepts what history has written, swallows it like a pill.

In addition to newer forms like the slash poem, I also try to experiment on the page with my poems, creating forms as I write. In my poem, "grid," I use the gay dating app Grindr's interface as the form of the poem. The layout of the app is three columns across, each three

squares in the row are three profiles, and as one scrolls down the screen, the profiles are people further and further away. In each profile, there is three pieces of information: a username, whether they are online now, and how far away they are. By using this form, the poem looks on the page exactly how Grindr would look if opened on one's phone. With this experimental form, the poem can be read multiple ways: each column from left to right, each profile (all three pieces of information) from left to right, or in the traditional form of top line to bottom line working left to right. Considering the opportunity for multiple readings, I made the language sparse. It is a poem of few words; this both provides ease in many readings, and also mimics the language of gay hookup culture on the app, which is largely anonymous and rushed. As someone who has used the app many times, I realized that there is a huge disconnect due to the ways people use Grindr. I'm not going to suggest that there is a right or wrong way to use it, but rather point out that Grindr users are highly concerned with the body's means to a physical gratification for sexual attraction, one considered so shameful that it forces users into hiding their faces on the app. I wanted to work toward this point no matter which way the poem was read, so I made sure that the top left corner—which is always the starting point—spoke to the simplicity and directness of the app. The bottom right corner—which is always the ending words—spoke to the distancing and disconnect the users are reinforcing.

Another way that I could ensure this message was to utilize a statistic as the epigraph of the poem. This move was very much influenced by Danez Smith's poem "1 in 2," which opens with a study from the CDC claiming that 1 in 2 black men who have sex with other black men are expected to contract HIV in their lifetime (Smith 61). The statistic I found was from the Center for Humane Technology, which found that 77% of Grindr users report feeling regret after using the app, making it number one on the list for apps with the most regretful users. Another

influence I found was Valerie Wallace's poem "McQueen Tartan," published in her debut collection *House of McQueen*. The form of the poem is meant to mimic the pattern of tartan plaid, making a crosswork on the page (Wallace 28). This also enabled multiple readings, and after reading the poem, I made sure to make my starting and closing words as clear as possible. Though an experimental form, and thus lacking a clear conversation to join, I find that it was the most honest to the subject.

Ultimately, my poems are articulate one queer man's experience and navigation of queerness, to give voice to what—for so long—registered as some sort of distant haunting. Beyond that, I hope that I can affirm the queer existence in my poetry, insist on it. On the page, I can refuse to be erased, and anyone with similar experiences can feel visible. I'd be remiss if I didn't look to Ocean Vuong in closing; encountering his work was the first time I felt seen. In his poem "No One Knows the Way to Heaven," he ends with telling the reader: "I will leave this page open so you can find me. And when you get here, I will tell you everything. I will show you what incredible things we can do to mirrors, just by standing there" (Vuong). So, let these poems be that mirror. Let poetry be our place to reflect, see ourselves, and be bewildered by the sheer impossibility of our very being.

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