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Seismic Waves

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Seismic Waves

Abstract

I was studying abroad in Florence, Italy on November 9, 2016, when I awoke to the news that Donald Trump had been elected President. To say it was a shock was an understatement, like many Americans, I had never dreamed the scenario possible. At that moment, I felt more powerless and disconnected from my country than ever before. For the next few weeks, I struggled to comprehend how I personally could combat the assault on my political views and values, what stand I could take, and what impact it might have. Finally, on one of many emotional phone calls with my father, he reminded me that positive change can happen regardless of who the President is, so long as people like me refuse to be silent on the issues that matter. When I was presented with the offer to participate in the English Honors Program, I knew I wanted to use this opportunity to understand and give voice to my unique perspective on this unprecedented political moment.

This collection of poems is titled Seismic Waves in allusion to the seemingly unending series of events that have rocked this nation since the election of Donald Trump. Travel bans, healthcare battles, the firing of James Comey, Neo-Nazis marching in the streets, the ending of DACA, an ongoing investigation into Russian collusion, the looming threat of war with North Korea – and those are just the highlights. But the waves have come from more than one side, as we bear witness to the rise of everyday revolution and resistance. Black Lives Matter, the Women's March, #MeToo, Time's Up, and #NeverAgain are just a few of the movements that have garnered unparalleled support and spurred incredible action throughout the world with their clarity of message and strength of conviction. Finally, Seismic Waves deals with my personal aftershocks, exploring the lasting ways the result of the 2016 election has altered my life and relationships, and allowed me the catharsis of working through painful memories and emotions by the age-old act of putting pen to paper.

Seismic Waves is everything that we've lived through since the election and everything that waits in the future. No matter what happens next, we'll certainly feel it coming.

Keywords

Poetry, Political Poetry, American Politics, 2016 Presidential Election

Disciplines

American Politics | Poetry

Comments

Written as a senior thesis for English.

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Seismic Waves is everything that we’ve lived through since the election and everything that waits in the future. No matter what happens next, we’ll certainly feel it coming.

*“In Plato’s Republic, there’s a reason
Socrates kicked out Homer and the other poets.*

You don’t banish the silent and powerless.”

-Airea D. Matthews

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The New Atlantis

We didn't know there were fault lines there, we weren't worried about losing our grip. But we should have felt the vibrations. With every indignant stomp of the red and blue above, long, gaping cracks snaked beneath the surface, forging their way from the Atlantic to the Pacific along our two major borders, just waiting for the right moment to snap.

An earthquake shook us loose that November and we split, saltwater erupting through the cracks and dousing the crowds of distraught Mexicans and appalled Canadians who had felt the seismic waves. They could only jump back and watch in horror as the neighbor nation they had known disappeared from sight. It didn't take us long to sink.

Down into the bitter, frigid ocean we went, the water chasing us through our streets, flooding our houses, filling our sky. It choked the voices of the rational and plugged the ears of the ignorant. The salt stung our eyes and the cold shocked us senseless. We lost our hold on reality, let fact and grotesque fiction blend. We hit the bottom of the ocean and we stayed there.

Our allies mourned us, the great nation we had been, now lost to the sea forever. They wondered where we had gone, and if we could ever be found. Rumors whispered in the streets became myth and legend, and tales were told far and wide of America: lost civilization, self-proclaimed land of freedom and truth now sunk deep in the dark clutches of alternative fact and fraud. Their divers are still searching for our remains.

We peer back up through the eddying waters,
and watch the scanning lights
of the search parties glide by.
Every day we close our tired eyes
and pray: *please, don't let us
drag them down here
with us.*

Evolution

I.

I'm crying again. You're in England
and I'm in Italy curled up under my covers
and we're on the phone again
trying not to feel the distance,
and my eyes are almost swollen shut
from all the saltwater that's been washing
out of them. You tell me
it won't be as bad as I think and I tell you
I don't believe you.

For a moment, you accidentally rub it in
that he won and it feels like my insides
have been filled with lead
with the way they're dragging
downward. You take it back.

We've been saying the same things
for days and we keep saying them.

I'm afraid. Please don't be.

This was a horrible mistake.

Please give him a chance.

And we go around and around
and around until the distance is gone
and we're in a bed in Paris and I beg you
to understand my fear and you acquiesce
that you do. And that has to be enough
for now.

What Lives in a Body, Part One

Families in suburban neighborhoods
are locking their doors, bringing
the spare key inside
from under the welcome
mat, latching heavy deadbolts
as they shut out the quiet street.
They've never bothered to do that before.

Parents are keeping their children
home from school until the danger
passes, swaddling the unaffected
youth in thick blankets and unplugging
the television.

In supermarkets and department stores,
people are covering their mouths
and noses with their sweater sleeves,
hurrying away when someone
speaks too frankly
about the state of our nation, desperate
to avoid the contagion
released swirling into the air,
mingling with the dust mites.
Fear is spreading, quickly.
And there is little anyone can do
to slow it.

Each strain begins somewhere new
and circulates, infecting
those that have managed
to remain healthy with every
passing day. Casual conversation,
online debate, anchors on 24/7 news
outlets desperately trying
to fill time and increase ratings:
there are few places the virus
cannot infiltrate. For those unfortunate
enough to be exposed,
there is no vaccine,
no herd immunity,
no defense,
no antidote,
no precautions to take.
Soon there will be no one left unharmed.

We are the hosts and fear is our parasite,
burrowing down deep inside us
and nourishing itself
on that which we do not know,
that which we cannot understand.
What label we choose to brand
ourselves with has no effect
on this epidemic; we have all
been infected, and we have all
suffered.

We are locking ourselves away
from the world, cowering from
each other in an attempt
to preserve our safety,
but the danger lives inside us,
in our bodies, in our fear.
It's in our muscles, eating away
at the soft tissue and tendons,
keeping us from acting
with unity and strength.
It's in our eyes, degrading the retina
from the inside out, preventing us
from seeing what truly threatens us.
It is everywhere, in our blood and bones
and in all the flesh in between.
We are one with the parasite now,
engulfed entirely
by our fear.

Walls

We are going to put up walls.
Not just the wall, the great big beautiful wall. We'll put that one up soon. Think bigger: hundreds of barriers, thousands of screens. Walls with wood and bricks and cement and steel and miles of barbed wire and maybe some sharp rocks at the bottom for good measure. You can dig those out of your garden, can't you? Walls running through your state, cutting off freeways. Walls snaking through your town, splitting up neighbors. Walls cutting right through your house, standing between bedrooms. Mattresses ripped down the middle with the springs exposed, broken bedframes. You built the barrier yourself. Walls so tall you have to crane your neck to make out the top, and even then, its hazy. The sun gets in your eyes. Look away. Walls so long you'll wonder if they ever end. You'll never know. Imagine them running off the edge of the land and down into the water, dividing the light and dark fish. Make the dark fish pay for it. We just want to be safe. Seal them out. Do your part to keep us safe. Seal yourself in, put yourself first. We're going to burn all the ladders. Watch the smoke in the air, climbing higher than any fleeing human ever will. We're going to unravel all the rope. Fraying cotton scraps on the ground, and no more knots. We're going to break all the shovels and bury the pieces. We're going to be all alone.

Monster

Since that November, reading the news
has become a heinous ritual, a ceremony
of stress, a daily obligation
that makes my stomach turn
and my skin crawl.

Only after I remind myself that four
years isn't as long as it seems,
can I bring myself to drag
my scathing, red eyes over
the day's articles about Donald
Trump—the executive orders,
the wild accusations, the whines
of “fake news,” the collusion
denials, the tweets *oh,*
my God the tweets—it is never-ending.
With every word I can feel my hair
morphing into snakes:
furious, writhing, venomous;
my frustration incarnated
into physical forms,
each one pulling the skin
on my scalp in a different
direction, screaming into my ears,
the pain and the noise
making my world go numb.

I wish it wasn't like this. I tried to give
him a chance. I don't want to fight
with my Republican parents or friends
or boyfriend. I don't want to be a sore loser
or to widen the divide. But
my name is Medusa,
and Donald Trump is the President,
and every time he opens
his ignorant mouth another person's life
is damaged and *I* grow
a new snake on my head,
so yes, I think I have a right
to be angry.

This is not going away.
I will not hide my snakes;
I will not be silent,
and he cannot make me.

I am the ugliest, scariest
monster the Greeks ever saw,
and if Donald Trump thought
Hillary Clinton was a nasty woman,
he's got another thing coming.

The Facts

The reporters stood in the marble room and asked the president, “Why did you wait so long to denounce Neo-Nazis?” And with thrashing hands and an indignant air, he answered:

I didn't wait long. I didn't wait long. I didn't wait long. I wanted to make sure, unlike most politicians, that what I said was correct. The statement I made on Saturday, the first statement, was a fine statement. But you don't make statements that direct unless you know the facts. It takes a little while to get the facts ...

The reporters were frenzied, buzzing like a swarm of locusts with all the questions they were raising. You couldn't pick one voice out of the many, but it was clear what they were remembering.

*The audience was the biggest ever...This crowd was massive!
(We knew it wasn't).
I won the popular vote
if you deduct the millions of people
who voted illegally
(We found no evidence of this).
No administration has accomplished more
in the first ninety days
(We'd reported on the several that have).*

*(Imagine how lonely
a person must be to have to dream
up all those people, we thought).*

***... I don't want to go quickly and just make a statement
for the sake of making a political statement.
I want to know the facts ...***

*I guess it was the biggest Electoral
College win since Ronald Reagan
(We were sure it wasn't).
I don't believe in climate change*

(That doesn't mean it isn't happening).
*We're the highest taxed nation
 in the world*
 (We know we're not).

(We wondered why
 a person so smart and so rich
 didn't seem to have access to Google).

***... When I make a statement, I like to be correct.
 I want the facts ...***

*Terrible! Just found out Obama
 had my 'wires tapped'
 in Trump Tower just before the victory.
 Nothing found. This is McCarthyism!*

(We found no evidence of this).

***... Before I make a statement,
 I need the facts ...***

*ISIS is honoring President Obama.
 He is the founder of ISIS.
 He is the founder of ISIS, okay?
 He is the founder.
 He founded ISIS.*

(We found literally zero evidence of this).

... I don't want to rush into a statement ...

*He doesn't have a birth certificate,
 or if he does, there's something on that birth
 certificate that is very bad for him.*
 (False accusation).

*I would like to have him show
 his birth certificate ... if he can't,
 he wasn't born in this country.*
 (Another false accusation).

*An 'extremely credible source'
 has called my office and told me
 that Barack Obama's birth certificate
 is a fraud.*
 (Another false fucking accusation).

... And honestly, if the press were not fake,

***and if it was honest,
the press would have said what I said
was very nice. But unlike you —
But unlike you and unlike the media,
before I make a statement,
I like to know the facts ...***

*I watched when the World Trade Center
came tumbling down*

...
*And I watched in Jersey City, NJ,
where thousands and thousands
of people were cheering*

...
*There were people over in New Jersey,
a heavy Arab population,
that were cheering as the buildings came down.*

(There are no words
we can write to combat
such ignorance and such bigotry,
it dawned on us).

***... In fact, everybody said, my statement
was beautiful, if he would have made it sooner,
that would have been good.***

The reporters are still trying
to have their questions heard,

***I couldn't have made it sooner
because I didn't know all of the facts.***

but to no avail.
The President railroads them, raising
his voice and drowning
their pleas for answers out.

Frankly, people still don't know all of the facts.

Evolution

II.

It's 2 AM and I have to get up for work
in four hours but we just stopped texting
about Charlottesville and Nazis
and "fine people on both sides"
and I can't sleep. I'm sitting
on the bathroom tile rereading
and rereading, wondering how one comment
got so out of hand. Our opinions
aren't even that far apart, but we've both
dug in our feet over the details.
I told you *Trump needed to be more careful
with his language* and you told me
you're reading too far into it and I told you
*I can't help it because I'm an English major
and words fucking matter, okay?*
And you asked *can we please stop
talking about this* and I said *no* and *no*
and *no* and then *yes* when I was too sad
to fight anymore. We're both timid
in the morning and you say *I'm sorry,*
I didn't see it from your side, and I say *I'm sorry,*
I wasn't trying to attack you,
and we make up and move on
and you retweet a black woman
on twitter who explains why white pride
is a farce and I hold on to that retweet
and hope it has replaced
your insistence that there must
have been some good (not racist,
not Jew-hating) people standing there,
among the torches.

What Lives in a Body, Part Two

He wakes up itching like an addict, blinks
 hard against the sun in his eyes and reaches
 for the poison phone on his bedside table.
 Fingers twitching, he indulges.
 He reads and reacts to his preferred headlines
 in almost the same moment, spews
 his rhetoric into the shallows and depths
 of his social media, and watches
 as his words float into conflict.
 The posts percolate for a few hours,
 accumulating comments and likes, until he creeps
 down after them for his daily fix
 of fighting with family and friends.

The man who owns that telling
 red baseball cap reads Breitbart
 on his breaks, and shares another Tomi
 Lahren video every time he logs onto Facebook.
 He knows her infamous rants condemning
 those goddamn liberal snowflakes
 will antagonize every person
 who has ever scolded him for his “offensive”
 opinions. He craves their vitriol;
 wants them to feel just as attacked,
 just as alienated, like their bodies
 have been shoved down,
 crouched and cramping
 in an ideological corner,
 just as he has all these years.
 He relishes in their indignation, and delights
 in the feeling of stretched limbs
 and cracked joints as he refutes each shrill,
 critical comment appearing underneath the image
 of the shouting young blonde.

The man whose car is branded
 with a *Hillary for Prison* bumper sticker scoffs
 at the intellectual elite and their mainstream
 media. Who are they to tell him
 how to live his life? He chooses
 InfoWars podcasts instead, letting the unfiltered
 rage of Alex Jones blare through his speakers.
 The sputtering host stumbles through his arguments,
 bellows out his conspiracies, accuses
 the immigrants, and calls on his listeners

to protect their country from the imminent threat. The driver lets the noise fill him with an identical anger, riling him up until he is yelling at the windshield about the injustices of this forsaken world: how could anyone not want to build a wall? Even out of breath and red in the face, he feels better.

The man who has vowed to boycott the NFL until those ungrateful players show some respect, lounges in the living room while his wife prepares their dinner. He eats the chicken and doesn't comment on how dry it is, he puts away their dishes, and he falls asleep on the couch, all while Fox News drones endlessly on in the background. He lets the talking points soothe him, the familiar words burrowing themselves into the smallest, safest corners of his brain, convincing him he has been right all along. As he dozes off, he feels warm in his heart, secure in the fact that he knows the truth. He'll make a post about it in the morning.

I don't know this man. But I see pieces and parts of him in family and Facebook friends and twitter followers and neighbors and old classmates and in every internet comment section I've ever peered into. He is everywhere. When I'm feeling intellectual I want to debate him, and when I'm feeling spiteful I want to label him *ignorant* and *bigot* and *racist* and *sexist*, and when I am faced with the chance to I usually stay silent. Should I stay something? Stand my ground?

Probably, but no one ever told me how to confront the poisoned people, those who have let the Conservative rhetoric spread like venom through their veins, curdling their blood, making them angry, so very angry, making them lash out at strangers who have no effect on their lives,

who do not cause their problems.
How do you appeal
to those who have been taught to fear
all that they do not know,
all that they cannot understand;
those who fell victim to hatred
invading their hearts, who cannot rid
themselves of it because they do not know
it lives there?

I'll let you know if I figure it out.

Example

The humming and chattering breaks
 and slows when the lights flick
 off in one of the two sorority suites
 housed in the basement of Ice House.
 Confused heads turn to the front
 of the room, eyes straining
 not towards our chapter President
 or our volunteer advisors, but towards
 a spotlight that has appeared
 in front of the kitchen door.
 A pale-yellow light
 stains the nervous face and wringing
 hands and trembling body
 of the small brown girl
 who stands in front of us, alone.
 She is our sister, our friend,
 but we do not know why
 she is presenting herself to us
 this way, so vulnerable,
 her face so afraid.

She opens her mouth to speak but the words
 don't come at first, her eyes well
 and she stares at her sandaled feet, those small
 silver toenails instead. She doesn't want
 to be political, or divisive,
 she's sorry for even bringing it up.
 She is stalling.
 The steady hum of the spotlight above
 is all we can hear besides her quiet
 sniffing, we are afraid of what she will say.

Then it drops. She is a DACA recipient,
 and Trump has just tossed her life in the air
 by ending the program
 that has been her salvation.
 She tells us the truth, it spills
 out of her like she had sliced
 herself open with a gleaming knife
 to her stomach, her intestines sliding
 out onto the floor. Breathless,
 she reveals that she left
 Latin America when she was only four,
 that this is her home, that she could be deported
 in just six months, and that despite

still feeling ashamed
 of who she is, she is so afraid
 that she just can't hide it from us
 anymore. She asks simply for a friend.

There is a beat in which no one
 moves, can only stare in shock
 at the girl trapped in that spotlight,
 every secret she has ever held in our full view,
 the most exposed and defenseless
 I have ever seen one person be.
 The beat ends, and abruptly
 the "we" of our sorority is split
 into two groups, the us and the them.
 Those who voted for Trump
 and those that didn't
 (those that knew something like this would happen).
 There are tears in every eye, Republican
 and Democrat alike, women from both sides
 going to her, hugging her, reassuring her.
 "That is so sad," one especially fervent
 Trump supporter sympathizes. And as hard
 as I've been trying to understand
 why
 some of my friends voted for that monster,
 in this moment all I want to do
 is shake them, tattoo
 the image of our sister crying
 on the insides of their eyelids, and shriek
 in their faces, "Don't you see
 what you've done? Don't you see
 that you caused this? Don't you see
 that *her* pain and *her* blood
 will be on *your* hands?"

And later, when my frenzied rage
 on her behalf settles,
 I am left with a twisting feeling
 deep inside, a building nausea
 because I realize I am relieved
 this happened, that after all this time I finally
 have a flesh and blood example
 of the damage Trump is doing, a specimen
 to put under a spotlight
 and show to my peers, to make them uncomfortable,
 force them to admit their regret,
 a selfish act done

to validate myself, and the fact
that I was right and they were wrong,
with my sister, my friend,
as the unwilling martyr.

Dead Weight

Dreary, dreadful flags
 hang at half-mast again
 on the flagpoles outside my apartment,
 the Gettysburg College
 and Pennsylvania state banners so heavy
 in the third day of rain they do not move
 from their places, wrapped
 around the slick metal poles
 like they're afraid of falling
 any lower. Only the stars and stripes
 in the center show a bit of life,
 struggling to catch the November wind,
 but I can still feel the weight
 of the water bearing
 down on their threads.

It is the third time in a month
 that the flags have hung
 this low to the ground, stuck in
 a treacherous cycle of hoisting and lowering.
58 dead in Las Vegas.
 Each time the dead have been properly honored
 and the country is told to move on,
 another tragedy appears on the screen—
8 dead in New York
 —and the flags are struck down,
 seeming lower and lower
 every day, taking any hope
 of a better country with them.
26 dead in Sutherland Springs.
 It does not stop.

There are some who believe
 if we think and pray hard enough,
 and often enough, we can will those flags
 back up their poles inch
 by painful inch, and lash them there,
 forever preventing another national
 heartache—that only positive,
 supportive thoughts (and nothing else)
 can stop the bullets from being bought
 and loaded and fired and felt
 shredding through innocent flesh;
 that prayers whispered before
 bed can stop madmen in cars

and trucks from barreling down
busy city sidewalks. But I know
the truth: that no number of thoughts
or prayers simply said and not clearly
acted on can bear the strain
of that heavy fabric, keep it from slipping
further and further down the flagpole.
The evidence is there: the cycle
hasn't stopped.

As I walk below the flags each day,
I feel their weight inside, even on clear days
when the rainwater isn't helping drag
them down. It is like I have swallowed
the wet polyester, the damp material
piled in my stomach, filling me always
with dread, with the knowledge
that this will happen again
and again and again,
though I can't possibly know
where or when or to whom; a foreign object
making me hopelessly
ill, a constant reminder
that after all this time, nothing
has been done to keep the flags
flying high, weightless
in the gentle air.

Anchor

When Trump was elected President,
 John Oliver told me to write
 “This is not normal”
 on a post-it note, and I did,
 block letters on hot pink paper
 taped above my desk. I brought it with me
 when I moved into my last college apartment,
 placed it in the center
 of a collage of poem ideas
 and pictures from abroad,
 promising myself I wouldn’t forget.
 I thought it would be a necessary
 reminder, a diligent guard
 against the complacency that always
 tries to settle into American life,
 something to hold the *this is how it’s always been’s*
 and the *there’s nothing we can do’s*
 at bay.

As the time has jolted and stumbled by,
 though, that note on my wall has been
 less of a guard and more of an anchor:
 something to grasp at when I’m shaking my head
 at the headlines, pressing the heels
 of my hands hard into my eye sockets,
 wishing the blackness would blot away
 the utter ridiculousness I’ve subjected myself
 to reading. *This is not normal.*

I whisper it to myself when
 I listen to the morning news as I shower,
 imagining I can wash the bad stories
 away, watching them swirl down
 the drain along with the soap bubbles
 and hair stubble. I use it as an exasperated
 punchline when I’m arguing
 about politics with my boyfriend,
 trying to break the cycle of back
 and forth we seem to go ‘round and round in.
 It has become a mantra, a plea
 to myself: please don’t stop listening,
 please don’t stop hoping.
 Dammit, Aubrey—
 This is not *normal*.

From the beginning pages
of an anthology of American essays,
Leslie Jamison urges me to search
for the political in my personal,
her tone suggesting I might need
a magnifying glass to go find it.
There may be others who need this advice,
but I am certainly not one of them.
Every day, I am drowning in the political,
headline after headline washing
over me each morning,
knocking me to my knees
and besting my attempts to orient myself.

Every time my mind has forced itself
into some solace, I happen upon
the most important news
in the most insignificant ways.
A short tweet referencing the deadliest
shooting massacre in our history.
A passing comment from a classmate
about Title IX being dismantled.
A professor informing me
that Trump is set to destroy Obamacare
with an Executive Order,
just as I have finished complaining
that I'm struggling
to keep up with the news.

It is endless, and I am drifting,
legs kicking but weakening,
struggling against the riptide of chaos
that threatens to drag me under the water
and hold me there. I cling to my anchor,
that little pink note I wrote almost
a year ago, the ink fading now.

This is not normal.
I tell myself, again. And again.
I know this is not normal.

When will everything be normal?

At the Feet of the David

I press as close as the glass barrier allows
and let the yellow light
from the windowed dome above
wash over me, neck dropping back, mouth
falling open, like a baby bird
just minutes old, calling to be fed.
I wait for him to bestow upon me
the knowledge, the perspective
he has, the understanding I crave.

He is everything they said he would be.
Massive but delicate, more beautiful,
more human than stone should ever be.
I see what every art professor
has always raved about: the defined
musculature, the contrapposto
stance, the smoothness of the marble,
the steady gaze into the distance,
the legend reborn, and me, standing
here so small in his presence.

But there is more than that. The look
in his eyes and the gears turning
behind them, the rock
that hasn't been thrown yet resting
gently on his thigh. I can see
him deliberating, planning the battle
to come: how his agile feet will spring
through the grass, how his shoulder
will drop back, how the muscles in his arm
will tense and release, the air
in his lungs forced out with a grunt
as he does so. He calculates the trajectory
of the airborne stone before he lets it fly.
He knows where it will strike.
He knows how his opponent will fall.

How is he so confident in the face of a Goliath?
How is he so assured of his victory
when so much stands in his way?
How do you beat a giant
when you're just one woman, little
more than five feet tall,
twenty-two years old, disgusted with the world
you live in and desperate to fix it?

Throngs of tourists with their cameras and guidebooks
and *Top Ten Things to do in Florence* checklists
wade around me, like swells of the ocean
trying to loosen my grip on the pier.

I do not let go. I cling
to the David because he has the answers
I need, I'm sure of it. He knows
how to beat every Goliath plaguing
this anguished world.

He must know. He's survived
every other Goliath he's faced, looked Hitler
and Mussolini in the eyes and watched
them fall. He can tell me how to defeat
the Goliaths we face today, as long as I wait
here long enough to hear him speak.

Reminder

Three years. I hadn't seen her
 in three years, but I knew her voice
 when I heard it, drifting softly
 out of the phone in my hands and floating
 through the still morning air.
 I squinted through swollen
 eyelids—groggy and smeared
 with dark eyeliner from the night
 of drinking before—at a video
 of a girl with an angular face
 and thin, light blonde hair peeking out
 from a podium emblazoned
 with the Peace Corps logo.
 Lilly was standing on a stage
 in South Africa, chosen to rouse
 her fellow volunteers with a speech
 before they were officially sworn in.
 Slowly, I remembered the pictures
 she had posted the day before, how official
 she looked standing in front
 of all the flags, how proud
 her sweet parents must have been.

Though elevated by position and platform,
 she still spoke the way she used to
 when she would read her budding poetry
 to our eager English class. A voice quiet
 but jarring, dry jokes interwoven
 into philosophical musings, crafting images
 with such detail, it was as if she had spent hours
 painting masterpieces on my eyes
 themselves. And I would be left rocking
 in my seat, wondering how
 she could possibly find such perfect
 words. Three years apart, but I knew
 her skill with word and pen
 and paintbrush had only strengthened.

On that stage, she spoke of disarming herself,

of realizing how inherently we ignore
 those we have so clearly seen,

*(I am learning how to break
 down an 'us and them' mentality)*

*(When I learned that the Zulu greeting
 means 'I see you,' I was struck)*

of her fear that she will cause more harm
than healing

by its humanity)

*(As a Peace Corps volunteer, it is easy
to feel like the hero
of your own incredible story...*

in a place that has experienced
such profound hurting.

*...but decentering yourself from your experience
opens up the overwhelming reality
that people are not pawns
in your latest adventure,
but main characters
in somebody else's intricate story).*

My already puffy eyes welled
as I listened, cradling the phone
to my ear. Selfishly I was jealous,
so jealous that she had found the perfect
words again, the words
I have been searching for
as I try to understand my privilege,
as I wrestle with what kind of role
I should play in this so wounded
world. But rippling underneath
the thin skin of jealousy, my heart
surged with pride for my friend,
who once stayed out all night
protesting deportations in her college town;
for my friend, who has never wavered
in who she is: feminist, atheist, goofball, activist;
for Lilly, who always stood up for me,
who welcomed me into her circle
with outstretched arms when I had nowhere else to be.
She said,

*I don't know what world peace looks like,
but I do know friendship. I know the kind of friendship
that moves mountains. I know the kind of friendship that reaches
out and holds your hand in the dark.*

And it did. How lucky am I
to have held that hand, to have felt
that potent friendship? Oh, how proud
I feel to have returned that gift
with love and support of my own.

I wiped my eyes and commented on the video

how beautiful her speech was. Later, I wrote
her lines down in my journal to ensure
I would remember. That night, I went to sleep
and dreamt of the classroom
she'd be teaching in, the walls and ceilings
and chalkboards and children brushed
with layer after layer of brilliant color,
her words floating
above their heads, gentle
and clear.

Evolution

III.

You're sitting in your Jeep and I'm standing
outside the driver's side window
and we're in the empty parking lot
of a Midas repair shop, and even though
you just did me a huge favor
driving me here, we're bickering
about politics again. This time
it is the kneeling players of the NFL
and to sum it all up I think
it's a perfectly valid peaceful protest
and you think
it's completely disrespectful to veterans,
but when I point out
that *Republicans haven't exactly cared*
about the Democrats they're offending,
you do admit that *they have every right*
to protest, even if you don't like it.
And that feels like enough,
and it seems like a victory
that the Midas lady didn't notice
the young couple arguing
in her parking lot.

Empathy 101

I am a person surrounded
by people. I have always been aware
of this truth. I've learned
to make a habit out of trying on
other people's shoes, feeling
where the heel on their boot
has worn thin, or where their toe
has poked through the canvas.
I have a teacher for a mother but this lesson
didn't require her classroom.
She teaches second grade,
not Empathy 101.

I look around and see pupils
for that class though, people
turned inward, people who assume
only their story is worthy
of the great author's pen,
to be preserved in ink on real paper;
people who have already labelled
the rest of us minor
characters, disposable, our stories
unimportant, our suffering unseen.
They see differences as division,
variation as violence. They guard
against the other.

I imagine my mother and father
at the front of a classroom filled
with students unaware of the lesson. I see
seats emptying
when the syllabus is passed around.
I want to lock the door and force
them back to their plastic blue seats, scream
in their faces that they have to change,
make them listen to someone – *anyone* – else.
But a shake of my father's head
keeps me still.

My parents hold their heads high
as the numbers dwindle;
they will not force someone to hear
what they refuse to learn.
They know that you cannot make
someone understand their fellow man

or woman. You cannot teach
what should be known innately.
You cannot reveal that the misery
in these people's lives stems directly
from their absence of kindness for others;
they have to learn that for themselves.
Only empathy breeds empathy.

Despite how much I dislike the lesson,
I listen to my parents. I try not to hate
those that don't understand. I try
to have empathy for the empathy-less.
I hold my face in my hands.

There is the quiet shuffling of feet
in the hallway. A red-capped head
pokes back in at the door.

Evolution

IV.

It's starting to rain
and I'm hurrying through the parking lot
with my roommates to go grocery shopping
and they ask how my day's been
and I tell them how we lay in your bed
and watched a movie and talked
about the government shutdown
and DACA negotiations
and didn't get angry. I tell them that we listened
and we questioned and we spoke
in soft voices and they smile
at me and I feel warm
under my dampening raincoat.

Before the Spark

I sit on the freshly-split wood
of my funeral pyre and wonder
who will light the match.
I try to imagine if I'll be there
when they do.

Some days I find myself
preparing for the flames,
crumpling newspapers into wads
and stuffing them into the spaces
between the kindling. I want
the words to burn with me.
You must understand; haven't you
been paying attention? For who
can read the news every day
and not want to set themselves
on fire?

Other days I stray far
from the structure and exist
somewhere calmer (somewhere
only a person without real stakes
can go). I read headlines
but not articles, I smile
at fundraisers but don't reach
for my wallet. I watch ally battles
but do not fight in them.
I do not commit
to the cause.

Self-immolation: I read
about it in textbooks. I study
pictures of men meditating
on the streets while they abandon
their bodies, the inferno
claiming them in a frenzied twister,
reducing them to nothing but
ash and memory and political
power. I feel myself
in my skin and try to envision
flames singeing my dark
arm hair, to smell the scorched
gasoline, to imagine the numbness
of dying nerves. I struggle
to grasp how those men

stayed so still through
such intense heat.

I sit on my funeral pyre
and decide that only my feet
will burn. I am tired of martyrs.
My cause does not need suicide
on its behalf. We will act before
it gets to that. I drop the lit match
and watch the fire take hold.
I stumble over the glowing red coals
and wrap my blistered heels
and leathery toes in wet bandages.
The funeral pyre burns alone.

enough is enough is enough is enough

1. Seventeen dead in Parkland, Florida
2. and I don't have to look at the tweets
3. to know what they said. They think
4. they can think and pray the hurt away
5. while boys with hands and feet and wallets
6. and smoke grenades and gas masks and a whole
7. goddamn arsenal walk the streets
8. and everyone thinks twice but no one stops them.
9. They look at blood on the linoleum floors,
10. blood on the chalkboards,
11. blood on hands,
12. blood on hands,
13. blood on folded, praying hands,
14. blood on stupid, tweeting hands
15. and say everything but do nothing.
16. My heart is so tired of breaking.
17. I'm so sick of your fucking praying.

#PrayForAubrey #PolicyChangeForAubrey

If the unthinkable happens – if the wrong boy
 gets a gun, if what we thought
 could never happen here happens here,
 if despite planning hiding places in
 and mapping escape routes from
 every classroom I enter,
 I am killed in a mass shooting,
 gunned down in a bleeding crowd
 of my peers – please,
 I have a few requests.

Don't be kept silent by pleas
 to let my family grieve,
 they will grieve how and when they want to,
 and without a politician's permission.

Don't let my death slip by
 as they call for time to scatter my ashes
 in the air, before they let you talk
 about my untimely end – there is not enough time,
 and the countdown to the next shooting
 has already begun.

Don't let them put their words
 under my picture. Use mine. Listen.
 I am tired of the right to shoot
 Being put above the right to not be shot at.
 I am tired of the curdling feeling
 in my chest every time I read another
 gun violence headline. I am tired of wrestling
 with the sick compulsion to know everything
 about the shooter and my refusal
 to grant him the infamy he craves.
 I am tired of weeping in my bed
 over lists of the victim's names instead.
 When so many people are killed,
 it is such a long time to cry, and my eyes
 are so tired of puffing up and swelling shut.

I don't want to suspect every stranger
 on the street. I don't want the nightmares
 of bullets ricocheting through my mother's
 classroom. I don't want to see my baby sister
 tweeting at politicians that she is scared
 to walk her high school hallways.

I am alive now, and I want gun control *now*,
and if anyone says anything different
when I am dead,
they are lying to you.

If I am brought down by a spray of bullets
in a place that was supposed to be safe:
rub my wretched story in their faces.
Turn my face into a billboard,
my pain into a hashtag,
and my heartbeat into the rhythm
you'll clap your hands to at the rallies.
Let the tears of my loved ones wet
the ink of new laws,
and please,
let my death make them safe.

The Nature of Poetry

Underappreciated, underestimated, understudied
art form, I see you. I watch how you slink
around the edges of the industry, shadowed
by the moneymaking forms, the prestigious
pens: unseen by many but felt
by all, eventually. How you sing, art form,
how your words do echo when we bother
to listen for your reverberations. How you move,
fluid: one moment quiet, a soft hand on
my cheek, the next raging, a windstorm
yanking my hair, whirling it into knots.
Shapeshifter. The world may change, but you evolve—
you fit like a key in its lock
in every context.

Poetry, pure soul, how you can say
what nothing else can, your words
informing and observing, sharing and reaching.
How your voice lilts and enraptures
and captures my spirit. Oh,
how I feel hope when I read you,
how I feel powerful when I write you:
my voice, entwined with yours, climbing and straining
towards something with meaning,
I am singing, I am screaming,
I am changing, I am thinking,
and for what? Something, surely.
Someone, certainly.
Myself, absolutely. If only to understand
what I am feeling, to declare
what we are enduring.

What Lives in a Body, Part Three

To be a boy is to be broken, to harbor
 a hurt inside.
 Spend your life trying to keep it from peeking out
 behind your eyes.
 Push it down and away, just out
 of your mind.
 Let it live somewhere deeper, keep it
 confined.

You are supposed to be strong,
 move on.

You feel it cutting there inside you, sharp
 like broken glass,
 the bitter feelings that you fear will rate
 you second class.
 You are not supposed to fear and you are not
 supposed to grieve.
 You are not supposed to wear your struggling heart
 on your sleeve.
 Let the pain rage within you,
 let it tear you to shreds,
 hide the bleeding from your loved ones, sew
 your wounds with broken threads.
 Other men do not struggle,
 and other men are not weak.
 Better men hold their ground when they start
 feeling meek.

You are supposed to be strong,
 move on.

Most boys will make it, learn to let the hurt
 out in bursts,
 with sports and fistfights, some harsh words
 interspersed.
 But some boys can't take it,
 some boys will shatter:
 get angry, get a gun,
 blow out someone's gray matter.

Is this what they thought of as strong?
 Hold on.

America's boys are broken
and there's no obvious fix
in our counties and cities
and divided politics.

We have boys who are bleeding,
boys long since scarred,
but we forge on uncaring
of broken boys who are armed.
We have to shift our perceptions
and our preconceived notions
to let our boys feel okay
sharing their deepest emotions.
I want us to put down the weapons
and bring out the gauze,
wrap their wounds in fresh cotton,
remind them feelings aren't flaws.

Boys don't have to be strong.
But everywhere, they must forge on.

Evolution

V.

We're lying in my bed with our feet
where our heads should be
and you are holding me. I feel safe
in your arms, even if I don't feel safe
from the guns. Parkland happened
a few weeks ago and people
are still talking about it, and of course
we are too. You tell me
that you thought you agreed with Trump,
(that we should arm the teachers)
but that you changed your mind.
That you thought of my mother
having to shoot her own student
in her classroom,
and that you just couldn't bear
to imagine that. I nod into your chest,
and you hold me tighter and together we hope
for higher age restrictions and banned
bump stocks and better mental healthcare.
I wrap my arms around your back
and feel your warm skin through
your t-shirt and even though
you're not sure if AR-15s
should be banned, I'm sure
that this is better than it was before.

Ode to the Parkland Activist

Too young! Too young!
 They're trying to claim,
 those running out of things to say
 to pivot away from the kids
 who weren't killed in the spray—
 they're just children.

Too unpracticed in guns. Too unseasoned
 in politics. Too loud to be listened
 to. Too crude to be heard.
Too young.
 Too young to have looked down the barrel
 of the murdering gun

and have the audacity to be angry
 at more than just
 the man holding it.

They are too young. Too young
 to have spent hours hiding
 in classrooms and closets, unsure
 which friends lay
 blown apart and bloody
 outside locked doors.
 Too young to have texted
 their parents goodbye. Too young
 to have to fear
 for their lives, that day
 and today and tomorrow.
 They're just children.

But too young is no label
 that has ever silenced
 the calls for change
 from the mouths of babes
 turned activists. Tell *too young*
 to Malala and she'll answer
 with grace that she wasn't too young
 to be shot in the face.
 She was just a child.

But children have voices. Children
 have minds. These children
 are not going to just get back in line.
 Not this time.

They have bared their faces
and fury, they have spoken
their names and their pain.
They have demanded
America listen, and they're assigning
heavy badges of shame.
Cameron Kasky calls out Marco Rubio,
David Hogg the NRA,
Samuel Zeig questions the President
himself, while Emma Gonzalez,
through her tears
and without hesitation,
handles anyone left in the way.
Their eyes may be hardened
by unspeakable scenes,
their sense of safety blown
to dust. But when these children
stare at us through all those cameras,
I can't help but feel
that someday
their world will be just.

It has taken too long and so many
have died, but finally it feels
like they are a sign
of change
in this gridlocked America.

End Notes

Page 6

The title of “The New Atlantis” was inspired by Eavan Boland’s “Atlantis” in her 2007 collection, *Domestic Violence*.

Page 9

The series of three poems titled “What Lives in a Body” were inspired by the line “Essays take the political and make it something that lives in a body” in Leslie Jamison’s introduction to *The Best American Essays 2017*.

Pages 14-16

Excerpts from Donald Trump’s August 15, 2017 speech on the White Nationalist Rally in Charlottesville are represented in bold, italicized text. All other Donald Trump quotes are represented in italicized text, and were referenced from the following sources:

- *The New York Times*, “Trump’s Lies” and “With Document, Obama Seeks to End ‘Birther’ Issue.”
- Politifact, “All ‘Pants on Fire!’ statements involving Donald Trump.”
- Climate Action Reserve, “Climate Change Facts.”
- Factcheck.org, “Trump’s False Obama-ISIS Link.”

Page 26

The John Oliver reference in “Anchor” refers to a quotation from Season 3, Episode 30 of *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, which aired on November 13, 2016.

Page 27

The anthology of American essays referenced in “Anchor” is *The Best American Essays 2017*, edited by Leslie Jamison and Robert Atwan.

Pages 30-31

The italicized lines in “Reminder” are from a video of a speech given by Peace Corps Volunteer, Lilly Perry, to her fellow volunteers, posted online on September 23, 2017.

The speech can be viewed at this link:

<https://www.facebook.com/lilly.perry.90/posts/1686746038004946>

Page 42

The lines “Turn my face into a billboard / my pain into a hashtag” in “~~#PrayForAubrey~~ #PolicyChangeForAubrey” were inspired by the lines “replaced my friend / with a hashtag” in Danez Smith’s poem “summer, somewhere,” from his 2017 collection, *Don’t Call Us Dead*.

Page 45

The line “America’s boys are broken” in “What Lives in a Body, Part Three” was taken from the February 21, 2018 *New York Times* article, “The Boys Are Not All Right” by Michael Ian Black.