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### Take A Moment

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Take A Moment

A Thesis Presented

By

NICHOLAS HOWARD

MAY 2022

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Take A Moment

A Thesis Presented

By

NICHOLAS HOWARD

Submitted to the College of Graduate Studies

Bridgewater State University

Bridgewater, Massachusetts

In partial fulfillment of the requirement for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in English

MAY 2022

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## DEDICATION

To My Parents:  
For their love, support, encouragement, and affirmation.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the editors of the following magazines and journals where some of the pieces first appeared:

*The Graduate Review*, “Take A Micro-Moment”

*Wild Roof Journal*, “Take A Seat”

## PREFACE

*“your heart*

*wants more, you’re ready*

*to rise and look!*

*to hurry anywhere!*

*to believe in everything.”*

*- Mary Oliver “Morning at Great Pond*

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## Critical Introduction

The poems, essays, and flash pieces in this creative collection, *Take A Moment*, engage with the promise of being present. We currently live in a time in which so many people simultaneously busy themselves with noise and distractions while also wishing they could step away from it all and experience the world around them. This paradox is nothing new and is central to the American identity. Henry David Thoreau wonders in his chapter “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For” from *Walden*, “Why should we live with such hurry and waste of life?”(396). Contributing to present day’s hurry and waste of life is an overwhelming amount of language the average person encounters. Scholars H.K. Hummel and Stephanie Lenox calculate the daily intake of language, “the average American consumes 100,000 words in traditional print media... it would mean that the average American reads the equivalent of Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*. We are not, of course, reading every one of these 100,000 words. Rather, we are seeing the words everywhere from billboards to flyers posted on telephone poles” (17). As can be expected, people have to tune out, “this stream of information, (which) swells every year. Out of necessity, we ignore much of what we hear and see” (17). Also important to today’s dynamic is the idea that something is missed when we do not take the time to notice. Ross Gay takes the time in his project *The Book of Delights* and recounts “it didn’t take long to learn that the discipline or practice of writing these essays occasioned a kind of delight radar. Or maybe it was more like the development of a delight muscle. Something that implies that the more you study delight, the more delight there is to study” (XII). Perhaps, the more a person chooses to be present, the easier it becomes. For

me, my ability to be attune to my environment arises from what is dubbed “sensory defensiveness.” In other words, the noise, the sights, and the rub of this world are more intense for me. In my own words, I have heightened sensory awareness. The cool comfort that washes over me when diving into the ocean is that much more welcoming. The view from a bench onto a brick patio with a splashing fountain is that much more awe inspiring because I can focus on the individual bricks and listen for the falling drops. My thesis utilizes this unique, personal experience to craft a hybrid collection universal to a reader. The aim is that a reader could, to steal Gay’s word, learn to delight in whatever time they have to be present. For example, even ten minutes of not looking at a screen and listening for whichever birds will sing will feel like enough.

I chose to write a hybrid collection of essays and poems so as to achieve a sense of contrast. It is a concept today’s readers are already familiar with and often it frames how they process the wide variety of their experiences. There are times of being hyper-busy and there are times of doing nearly nothing. There are moments of being in-person gathered near others for learning, reading, or for worship. There are other times of doing the same by way of faces on a screen. In prose, there is a play with rhythm and pacing that arises from choices such sentence length, lyrical voice, and point of view. In my prose, I invite a reader to linger as I string together long, stretching sentences involving the senses. I can move a reader a long through short, quick ones describing actions. Both are used in service of being lyrical or as Phillip Lopate describes in *To Show and To Tell*, “an attention to the movements and undulations of language as a subject in itself; a replacement of the monaural, imperially ego-confident self, the I-character voice, with a

more multivalent, realistically unstable, collaging system” (122). I do not fully agree with the idea of instability in lyrical prose but I do seek to temporarily shake up the reader when they arrive in the poetry of my collection. I want for them to consider the implications of so much blank space within a poem through enjambment and form. The blank space surrounding a sensory detail can have a reader sit with it longer. In fact, both blank space and text can work together to co-author the reading experience. Put simply, Muriel Rukeyser writes in *The Life of Poetry*, “The silences, here, are part of the sound” (116). Perhaps a little silence can a long way for the reader.

In addition to this contrast, the two genres will complement one another in the sense that one moment can be presented in both forms with similar lyrical flourishes. Concepts such as “found time” or a “micro-moment” populate across pieces. A collection in which pieces can be in conversation with one another endears a reader to the collection and compels them to continue reading. Terese Marie Mailhot begins her collection *Heart Berries* by introducing several of the characters and stories in snippets to then later develop and lengthen them in the following essays. In *The Book of Delights*, Gay continually returns to t-shirt ideas, songs he enjoys, and what exactly is the definition of delight. A reader is invited to work these items out right along with him. Readers can feel equally compelled to be in the conversation of my collection. The experience of trying to hold and balance an object between my two hands and having to negotiate the muscle spasticity of my left hand can manifest while I am in the garden snipping leaves and while I am flossing my teeth in the early morning. They can track how a single

experience can unfold and fill out over the course of several pieces. They will take notice how key themes will arrive in several pieces in different settings and still feel connected.

This collection utilizes short form writing. A reader engages with this type of writing when stepping into a moment by way of reading an essay of more or less 1,000 words, a flash piece of five hundred words or less, or a poem of approximately fifty to one hundred words. A vast majority of contemporary communication and texts classify as short form writing. Social media posts, text messages, and comments online come to mind immediately. Going back to the fact that we live in times of hyper-busyness, much is asked of writing so as to keep the reader's attention. Dinty Moore observes in his introduction to *The Best of Brevity*, "a sentence in a flash piece is most effective when it introduces a character, while she walks across the room, during a summer heatwave" (xi). With such expectations, the rewards can be many. Moore celebrates, "flash nonfiction allows us as readers to visit many worlds, many realities, many perspectives, in brief succession" (xii). Hummel and Lenox speak to what makes short form writing effective for a reader and define the form as "any type of writing that prioritizes brevity over page count, compression over expansion, and distillation of image and voice" (xviii). It is not to say that some pieces in my collection do not push towards a double digit page count or do not incorporate outside research. I simply work with the edict to make each word count. In my shorter pieces, both prose and poetry alike, I am guided by the three qualities Hummel and Lenox ascribe to successful short form writing: "insist on silence, white space, and subtext, assert that less can be more, and leverage the power of the small, the overlooked, and the underrated" (xix). All three work nicely with being

present. It is my intention to show, similar to the aim that even five to ten minutes of being present can be enough, that less than 1,000 words can craft a space for a reader to be present and moved by art.

Central my collection will be themes of feeling connected to the natural world and celebration. For the former, there is a long established relationship between choosing to be present and choosing to do it in nature. In his foreword to the 1949 edition of *The Outermost House*, Henry Betson offers “It is the privilege of the naturalist to concern himself with a world whose greater manifestations remain above and beyond the violences of men.” Betson did this in his house out on Cape Cod. I do this with heightened sensory awareness in a variety of natural and constructed landscapes I choose to explore what. E. B. White wrote of the ability for writing to transport the author, “each new attempt differs from the last and takes him into new country” (vii). But similar to Betson and his room overlooking the ocean and sands, I find refuge in wherever I strive to slow down and be aware. Contemporary poets Forrest Gander and Tess Gallagher retreat into the natural world to observe animals in their habitat and pull out for the reader touchstones of human emotion. Writer and environmentalist Paul Kingsnorth makes a connection between love of place and love nature in the concept ecocentrism. He defines it, “in simple language, the love of place, the humility, the sense of belonging” (75). For Kingsnorth, this is where his environmentalism comes from, “I became an ‘environmentalist’ because of a strong emotional connection to wild places and the world beyond human” (68).

My collection also works toward the act of celebration. A book with a similar intent is Ross Gay's poetry collection *Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude*. The title poem begins with "Friends, will you bear with me today." Should the reader oblige, Gay rattles off "thank yous" to people, to animals, and to objects. It sets the standard for gratitude on such a precise level. It is spoken in an address fully aware that it is speaking to the audience. This move suggests that gratitude can be in direct conversation with the reader. I write with a similar purpose. Also in a move to curate celebratory pieces, James Crews has compiled a collection entitled *How to Love the World: Poems of Gratitude and Hope*. It gathers together the work of a multitude of contemporary writers all aiming to find joy in a moment. For example, Jack Ridl's "After Spending the Morning Baking Bread" invites a reader to "Say yes to wanting to be this cat. Say / yes to wanting to lie across the leftover / warmth" (6-8). Yes, it is a command, but it is one given from a place of knowing the joy can be missed in life. It encourages a reader to say yes in similar moments away from the poem. On the whole, Crews's anthology serves to lay out a landscape for my collection to arrive and be read.

Mary Oliver is the writer who best brings these two themes together. She cannot write of nature without also celebrating its wildness. She masterfully pulls off this two-step approach in *American Primitive*. She opens the collection in August pulling blackberries off the branches and gains a "happy tongue" she uses throughout the collection. She uses it to scribe a "Postcard from Flamingo" and be attune to natural happenings such as "dark palms clicking in the wind," at midnight and the fact that "soon the driven sea will come lashing around / islands of sunrise" (2, 12-13). The conceit of a

postcard is that the poem is a snapshot not aiming to be an exhaustive portrait of a place. That does not mean that there cannot be space for the reader to be present in. Later in the collection, Oliver crafts a speaker present in “Morning at Great Pond.” It opens with “It starts like this:” and unfurls as a naming of creatures and light all in motion and all in one, long stanza of short lines. It ends with a speaker renewed and ready to be present in the world. Employing the second person, the speaker announces:

and you're healed then  
 from the night, your heart  
 wants more, you're ready  
 to rise and look!  
 to hurry anywhere!  
 to believe in everything! (31-36)

A reader has little choice not to take their queue from this passionate perspective.

My own work is in conversation with this tradition. I also early on hone an attentive and celebratory voice with which to speak in the pieces unfolding in my collection. I speak with this voice as I take in a variety of setting and moments. In fact, I use it, in a manner similar to Oliver to speak both to what is meeting me in the moment and speak from the moment so as to invite the reader to do the same should they, for example, find themselves close to a plant, submerged in the ocean, catching a glimpse of the moon, or simply satisfied with themselves for having flossed.

### **I: Take A Moment**

As mentioned previously, collections in which the pieces, regardless of genre, are in conversation with one another endear a reader to the work. The first section of my collection aims to endear the reader to the work being done by the pieces. In other words,



my book opens by engaging with the practice of slowing down and noticing in several different settings. The aim is to show how these choices apply to all kinds of moments within daily life. Of course, I am working with the assumption that any experience I choose to detail and explore in writing would be of any interest to a reader. It is something all writers must consider. E.B. White wrote, “the essayist is a self-liberated man, sustained by the childish belief that everything he thinks about, everything that happens to him, is of general interest” (vii). White’s contention that this belief is childlike implies several things. Yes, there can be stubbornness in the nature of a child and a streak of insisting on one’s way. I am insisting that my readers be there in the garden with me snipping the leaves off my squash plant in “Give A Squash Plant A Haircut,” an essay that opens the collection before the numbered and named section. This piece is similar to Ross Gay’s delight of “Tomato on Board” in which he is also in close proximity to a plant while taking it on a plane. In my essay, I am seeking refuge from an over stimulation of language akin to what Hummel and Lenox attest to by providing care to a plant at a season’s ends. As the pieces continue, I give the reader no choice but to sit down with me on the bench in “Take A Seat” or to not pull away from the red light in “Take A Moment Not to Take the Right on Red.” But I am sure even White would acknowledge that “childlike” brings to mind the unbound sense of wonder so innate in children as well. Wonder and awe are emotions I draw from and tune into as I am present in the world around me. In a sense then, a reader may begin to look at their own world with some of the gaze they had when they were young.

In “Take A Micro-Moment,” the focal character is gazing around in their room and seeing bits and pieces of their childhood. This piece is unlike the others in section one in that it is told in second person. Further, it fuses together elements of genre from both prose and poems. It lands somewhere in between both. By having read several similar pieces already in section one, a reader can step into the hyper-noticing going on as the focal character prepares to put on their coat and leave. It is because in the other pieces, I have taken a moment that an even smaller amount of time can be explored in earnest. The use of second person in this piece is similar to Oliver’s in “Morning at Great Pond.” Her reader perhaps finds themselves announcing the happenings around the pond with joy for having been a witness. My reader will slow down to notice all the clutter curated in the room of “Take A Micro-Moment.”

## **II: Found Time**

By this point in the collection, the phrase “found time” has already popped up in two essays. “Take A Seat” introduces the concept as “a stretch of it (time) understood not to be long or lasting but equally inviting to be present in.” It comes up again in “Take A Moment Not to Take the Right on Red” when I describe the size of the moment I present in, “Luckily, this red light has gifted me a pocket of found time. Front pocket on a button down shirt size, but pocket all the same.” The intent behind repeatedly using this term is that it becomes associated with my work at large and that a reader would recognize the term when they see it different pieces. I am confident this would be possible regardless if the pieces are bound together within a book or published individually in literary

magazines. The intent behind naming the second section of the book after it is to further step into moments and spaces otherwise missed. In other words, once a person is practiced at taking a moment, they can fully experience found time.

The first two pieces in this essay provide contrast in their form and length but at the same time serve to harmonize on the larger intent of immersion. “Take A Lap at La Salette” sees me “exploring all that an extra 45 minutes or so can offer.” I am stepping into a finite and fixed amount of time. That is important because I can only walk for so long at La Salette Shrine in Attleboro, Massachusetts before I am to leave and go see a friend. In that sense, the piece operates in a similar way to “Take A Seat.” However, I am not seated nor am I stationary. I am on the move in pursuit of somewhere to perhaps sit down and write. Never satisfied with my options and more enthralled with walking through areas of the shrine sacred to me, the movement quality to the essay comes to define it. It is reminiscent of the way in which I celebrate walking in “Take Your Walks” in section one:

My experience, more lived  
 than tangible,  
                                   of many parts  
 one purpose  
 it extends out into my body  
 all of it           working together  
                                   to move forward.

It matters not  
 to the back of my knee  
                                   or the bend of my elbow  
 if I am simply  
 ambling about.

Once more, the pieces in my collection are in conversation with one another.

Next comes “Meditations on the Beach in Three Parts” and there is not a finite or fixed amount of time or space. Two of the three sections employ second person and they all recount time spent in the water. The third section opens with “You are alone and inverted. Upside down and submerged, deep enough that maybe a toe or two on your longer leg is poking out above the surface.” A reader should be able to step into the “you” in these moments even if it’s me because it comes in the form of the familiar “found time.” Further the way in which the “you” is being welcomed into a moment of “fleeting equilibrium” serves to both communicate the sense of embodied acceptance I feel in the natural world and to give a reader stakes in the piece, “To your delight, the water does not work against your fingers as they transform into flippers. It does not pay them any mind if one is quicker in its flicks and one is more methodical. It simply welcomes them as a way of you staying level in terms of being vertical.” A reader will want to know how long the “you” will maintain the position in the water. Turning the page to read more, they too will feel the pull to turn right side up.

### **III: Blank Space**

If someone is able to pause and be present in a variety of experiences, and if they are able to immerse in a variety of environments, then they should be able to see the worth in the moments and spaces designated as blank or lacking. Just as pieces in section two echo the ones in section one, the first piece in this section, “Flossing at 5:45 AM” operates within found time. A reader will recognize this. Seeing it, they then will consider the space, newly free of plaque and build up, between my teeth as blank space. It is small

and designed to go unnoticed as a person goes throughout their day. And yet, I push against this with a moment towards the end:

“Delighting in this embodied harmony, I take a breath.

I do not hold it in any longer than normal but I allow myself to feel if any more of it enters and exits through spaces now freed up.

While tracing its arrival and leaving through a system of pockets, I aim to be present in more of it. This aspiration will perhaps be the parting gift from all this. An affirmation of celebrating all the places in which a moment can be felt.

It might just be a matter of seeing fit they remain uncluttered.”

This breath I take is in relation to ability of, to quote my poem “Take Your Walks,” the “many parts” of my “one body” to work together to accomplish a task, much like the moment in which it occurs, often taken for granted. By being a particularly brief offering of short form writing, the elements of distilled image and voice that Hummel and Lennox spoke of are present and working to define the piece. However, I would contend that my move to end in a place of air and peace of mind freely flowing away only to return perhaps pushes against the mandate of “compression over expansion.” I chart the stability and surety of hand brought on by some simply flossers. I want my breath to expand in the final, reflective moments. I know comfort in the blank space of being at the end of something I set out to do.

From here, the section continues through several pieces, both flash and poetry, all in succession and speaking to areas that would otherwise be considered blank. This includes the spaces between blinds and the lines on paper, the bottom of a pitcher of iced

coffee, the branches of a Christmas tree, and the sky on a December night. All of these pieces could be characterized under the header of “odd object” pieces that utilize items from everyday life that do not normally get anything more than a passing glance. Casting an observant gaze onto such an object is central to Ross Gay’s work in *The Book of Delights*. In “Coffee without the Saucer,” Gay recalls his admiration for a server carrying his “small coffee drink” without a small plate underneath. It is a bizarre thing to applaud someone for but it speaks to what can be appreciated when a person takes the time to look at the world around them. My writing works to recast the gaze looking out onto these spaces. As “Exhausted In The Evening” reads “What is blank is not an absence. / It is merely contrast.” A reader should begin to see that contrast between two things does not divide them and can even strengthen their connection.

On the whole, my collection echoes the words of Hummel and Lennox in regard to what literature can do in these days of inundating stimulation, “literature of any length aims to refocus our attention, to make us see clearly, and hear anew the essential human history” (17). If I am to accept that I am working with such purpose, it would require of me to submit my work for publication so as to reach readers.

As of this writing, I have found success with one prose poem and one essay. “Take A Micro-Moment” was published in Issue Six of *The Graduate Review* in Fall of 2021 and “Take A Seat” was published in *Wild Roof Journal* in March of 2022. I plan to continue to submit pieces individually with the plan to consider relevant and applicable chapbook submission calls.

Looking forward to the world in which my words will be read, people will be striving to be present in whatever moment they find themselves. A collective reflex is developing to push back against the non-noticing so easily trafficked in. My pieces will align with this desire simply for the qualities inherent in highly crafted, lyrical writing. As Rukeyser observed of poetry, “because it demands full consciousness on the part of the writer, and full response on the part of the witness/reader to the truths of feeling, because there is this genuine exchange” (xv). This quality extends to all my pieces and my verses participate in a similar exchange. Also in the years ahead, we will not be leaving behind the immersion of technology into our daily lives. Kingsnorth acknowledges how these “advances” can creep even into natural landscapes and interfere with being present, “(there is an) accelerating immersion of people in their technologies, even outdoors, even in sunshine” (65). But perhaps the stories of being present in nature, the stories in *Take A Moment*, regardless of genre, can also offer a balm to this bombardment. Kingsnorth outlines what nature offers him, “I am going to listen to the wind and see what it tells me, or whether it tells me anything at all... I will follow the songlines and see what they sing to me and maybe, ... I might bring with me a harvest of fresh tales, which I can scatter like apple seeds across this tired and angry land” (82). My tales in this collection will scatter also in anticipation of readership, consultation, inspiration, and to foster more writing.

## Give A Squash Plant A Haircut

The noise of the day remains within me. It pings as fatigue back and forth between limbs and joints at a near arresting level. I seek solace in the care of the my squash plant. Together we're in a side yard long and thin.

A roster of peppers, tomatoes, beans, and a rose bush are individually spaced into square frames of secondhand plywood. This plant grew beyond its frame, stretching into space reserved to be a path. Perhaps it found the worn dirt comforting. Maybe it was an act of survival. Even yet, earnest exploration of pushing up against the finite and defined.

Despite this instinct of aspiration, the nubs still on its stem will never be nurtured into shape. Summer, which has not fully left us, can only muster enough of the sun's energy to warm the afternoons. This is solely in response to Autumn's nightly cooling that seeps into the morning. Now in the evening, like the seasons, there are textures of both leaving and arriving.

Among the sounds that linger internally, an impression of every sentence, regardless if I spoke or heard it, remains like liquid fading off concrete. They can replay one, two, or three times more.

Trimming my plant's leaves, they are pointy and thumb shaped. They are curved like a palm and sometimes unexpectedly prickly. Their shape expresses both a rising up towards the sun and being set up to gather rain so as to direct it down towards stems and roots. They are able to enjoy the light and warmth offered everyday and still do their part for the plant. A balance of celebration and utility. Of course, any and all rays that meet the



leaves are also felt by the plant at large. I like to think that the leaves get some individual thrill out of the sun.

Once I am done, all of tonight's offerings will be shuffled among a leaf collective. They will join a seasonal mix of colors furnished from raking, green and thin ones plucked from Tomato plants, and large, sprawling, spotted ones from the lily plant that never flowered. They will all be tossed into my compost pile and jostle among the layers of yard waste and food stuff from the summer that is already being worked into becoming soil. Soon enough they will lose any sense of themselves for a larger identity.

So, I pause briefly before snipping a leaf and aim to extend it a moment all its own.

I place my left hand just below where the leaves bud. More specifically, I pinch my left thumb and pointer finger at the spot and balance the leaf on my remaining three fingers. My left ring finger and pinky often move more smoothly in unison with the other two fingers due to a dexterity deficiency. Tonight, having these three all in the same angle feels more like collaboration than a concession.

My right hand is charged with the snipping. I move scissors' blades into place to slide just below my pinched finger and thumb. So far, I have not nicked or snipped myself. My two hands are able to harmonize. Perhaps something unspoken between them invites this to be so flawless.

Without looking directly down, I think of the two blades coming together, moving past one another in a pattern carved by the tightness of the screw that holds them close. A

pattern not wholly unique to this pair, one imprinted onto countless scissors. And yet, they traverse it as if each cut were their only chance to move as one and for one another.

I begin to anticipate the sound of each individual snip. To my delight, each is as rich and crisp as the last. They book end intervals of quiet. They contribute to a soundtrack of rustling scurrying across branches, buzzing hovering above blades of grass, bird calls chirped in correspondence, and neighbors conversing like musicians back and forth in an instrumental break. None of which are rather dominating. They are at a level in which they do not compete. Perhaps that isn't ever a threat and it is about being able to be together in the same space approaching harmony.

Almost done and pausing to look directly down, I look at stems now bare. Like the leaves, they too are rising up towards the sun. Counting them would be too precise as I admire their multitude. They present as an all-hands-on-deck operation. All and anything within the seeds that carried the ability to be a stem became one. Yes, it was for the summer of growing. Yes, it was for the squashes formed. But it was also so that these stems could discover themselves and have a presence above the earth.

My eyes also catch the upturned barrel lid resting on the soil. It has been commissioned to collect the clippings. At this time that I could not assemble any words if I had to. Sure, some come to mind but they appear to almost float with great space between them. Perhaps, that is simply the image of the leaf snippets floating down onto the lid being imprinted onto my mind. Perhaps my mind leads me here so as to be able to recognize itself in the external.

All the same, I am with more snippets than complete sentences.

After simply standing for a few moments and feeling the days language almost fully fade through this uncluttered sonic landscape, I decided it is time for one last snip. To my delight, it takes no special effort to savor it. That is muscle memory by now.

And so, the squash before me is feeling the breeze in a way it hasn't since the spring. Its bareness is a representation of its impending exit. It has no more within it to grow, to come into its own, and to add to the plant as it participates in a season. But it isn't gone yet.

With some warmth still in the air, but it too fading and the cool of the night having not yet arrived, I feel present in this balance of seemingly competing seasons.

**Part One: Take A Moment To...**

## Take A Seat

It is just before 6 PM and I am fresh from the wake for the spouse of a treasured acquaintance, one always affectionate in speaking with warm tones from a place of shared faith.

At the wake and up and down the receiving line, mourners formed pockets of consolation.

I am sitting in something amounting to a formed pocket of time. It rests between the first item on this evening's agenda, the wake, and what comes next. I am too early to arrive at the restaurant for the reservation I made for dinner with an old friend, even if all I did was sit in the parking lot and read in my car.

So this becomes found time. A stretch of it fully understood not to be long or lasting but equally inviting to be present in.

I am here now on a bench. Constructed in memoriam, it reads, (I look back over my shoulder to look at the plaque) "John, Judy, and David Luke, Always in Our Hearts." A finely tuned sentiment with a human starter pack of names. It is nothing against John, Judy, and David Luke, their names are just familiar.

Perhaps there is some comfort in that.

This bench sits on a patio made of brick in rows running North to South. Little plants (I hold off on calling them weeds, who I am to judge) have wedged their way in between the bricks and grow up in the openings.

I like to think these subletters do not widen the gaps out of respect. Similar to these twenty or so minutes I find myself in, these plants know that they can only grow within a fixed space. And yet, they revel in it and rise up.

Still, the space they are gifted may be the product of people who's names are not carved in remembrance.

Something working within the subconscious of the brick forger paired with the grip and steadiness of hand of the brick layer.

While ruminating on those thoughts, a bug landed in the space between the two knuckles of my right pointer finger. A little dot of black that sort of rolled around and fidgeted as my hand bobbed up and down traveling across the page.

In the blank space in between this paragraph and the last, I decided to poke (perhaps not lightly enough) my new friend. He simply rolled over and tumbled onto the page. I mourn that he will not be with me to the end of this essay.

I celebrate that perhaps a small patch of my finger was contoured in such a precise way so as to communicate a sense of rest and comfort. That a few mere micrometers could be a pocket of consolation and in place of mourners gathering in shared grief, my friend was in the presence of himself for one final breath.

So this piece is now in memoriam to that little bug. Forever just above my knuckle.

I would be remised if I did not credit (I look over my shoulder one more time just to double check) John, Judy, and David Luke. It was the love and magic of their lifetimes

that led their loved ones to seek comfort in their act of remembrance that sets up this place of rest.

I would be further remised if I did not welcome in the artificial pond that sits before me. The bricks form it within a rectangle. All across its surface, a layer of algae rests. It is a striking green, light but not faded.

The algae is held up and in place by the water below. I wonder if the water counters the heat of the sun with a cool embrace that holds off any fading. Or maybe the algae forms, matures, and washes away all before any indication of its age could present. The algae always in its prime, living out its quick incriminate of reign over the pond, only to be succeeded with no one the wiser.

The sadness in this thought works to counter the first impression that came to mind as I walked into this outdoor seating area and saw the pond sitting center stage. The algae is the end result of over fertilization, a habit and practice of modern gardening I can only do so much to balance out in my own garden.

I share my frustration with a couple as they walk by. The woman slows down her gait ever so slightly as to indulge me with an “Oh yeah.” The man more passively listens as he passes through being within earshot.

I immediately judge him as not caring about the environment and tuning me out after assessing me to be, based on my straw fedora and Thoreau-quoting t-shirt, an environmentalist.

Most likely he just wants time to walk with the person he cares most about and had heard enough idle chatter over the course of a day.

I am wrong to consider him any less of this scene than me. That this place be any less perfectly tuned for him to welcome in the calm that comes in an early summer evening. Maybe he “tuned me out” (I have no real proof) so as to tune into the leaves as a breeze rustles them.

Admittedly, the algae has a raw scent that is equal parts grass and flora. It is not overbearing and could possibly even serve to orient someone to being outdoors.

Anyone in this space is also treated to the spattering and splashing of water coming from the fountain that springs up in the center of the pond.

Sculpted children hold up the main basin of water. Around the rim of the basin are four faces adorned with horns and beards. They are equal parts goat and Greek God. The four faces spit water forward in a steady stream. Above the basin is a figure that looks to be older than the children but still projects youth. This figure holds what appears to be a wreath and water trickles out of this object.

Perpetually in motion, a constant rhythm forms of water landing and splashing. It is a rhythm of returning.

The fountain draws the water away from itself only to send it back without ever actually separating. The water remains a part of what it is leaving and traveling to.

Being a conduit to this harmony, I wonder if this cancels out how the fountain strikes me as foreign and invasive. Does it actually reflect an experience that this space has always longed to achieve?

There is always water in the ground and in the plants that grow up. It is present in the bugs that hover and buzz about. The humans who visit are almost completely



comprised of it. Same for the humans remembered so that other humans have a place to sit while they visit.

Perhaps the fountain is a perfect distillation of this reality.

In these twenty or so minutes, I have been drawn away from my own reality and soon I will return to it, without really stepping away. True also is the fact that this pocket of time is happening but once.

This is an understanding that brings joys worth capturing in words, solace deserving stillness, and the promise that much of this may be met again in resting and writing in nature.

Sitting quiet to comprehend this, comfort arrives.



## Take A Moment Not To Take the Right on Red

My car has just settled to a stop at this traffic light and there is but one drop of iced coffee on my lips. The last one from a sip no more than 30 seconds ago.

Very soon I will lick my lips and smear this loiterer into untraceable, thin oblivion. At the same time, sending the taste into my mouth and pulling a micro-jolt of energy by way of it's caffeine.

I wish to let this drop linger and consider if this is a fitting final moment for a deposit representing so much more.

There are the coffee grounds brewed that gifted me this afternoon treat equal parts stabilizer and indulgence. There is the dirt that held close the plant the beans grew on and gave them a home through maturation.

I am truly in debt to all the energy that went into harvesting, roasting, and trans-nationally transporting the beans to An Unlikely Story in Plainville, MA. I am in debt to all the hands that held them, and possibly took a whiff for quality control and a cheap thrill, before the barista, with wear and stain on their hands, slid my re-usable cup across the counter.

In respect to all this red in my ledger (\$7 dollar phrase for debt) I will let this drop linger even longer.

Luckily, this red light has gifted me a pocket of found time. Front pocket on a button down shirt size, but pocket all the same. I have the window down so as to invite some fresh air.

I try not to think of the pollution most likely circulating above, around, and unseen nonetheless. I try to think even less of the amount I contributed through getting this coffee to me. Not to mention the amount that simply arises from me sitting here at this red light and from lighting up the light itself.

It is almost too much to recognize with a mere drop that threatens to dry before I do anything.

Still I am letting it rest.

It is as if during my sitting here, the red burning within the stoplight is intensifying. Perhaps I am staring too intently.

All the same, it seems to be gaining color as the embers back home in my fire pit are losing theirs. They sit smaller than how they started as logs, sticks, newspapers, and cardboard. They rest subtly smoldering, offering heat that ascends

Perhaps this heat temporarily halts the fall of a leaf. Suspends it in a space, yes lower than its original branch, but also affords a better view than gazing up from the among the blades of grass destined to catch it.

Buzzing above and seeming to jump from one blade to the next are bugs too small and quick to classify in a passing glance. Pushing forward and rushing through the grass as squirrels caught in a loop of leaving their nests for twigs and returning with snacks for their babies.

If any of them were to hold a paw or hover above the pit for more than five seconds they would feel a remnant of warmth and a reminder of what entered the flame fully formed.

The log I added once the initial kindling was aflame was from a fence post. An anchor post to boot. It was cut and carved to be sturdy, to be a support for all other posts and panels, and to be something depended on through season after season.

And so it saw each arrive and leave. Felt their presence in its pours. It cracked and widened with freezing and thawing. It held this within its muscle memory as it once again performed for others.

It became a base to build around. It held the flame so it could climb up and onto the logs I laid at an angle over it. Logs with less of a story but still given a chance to burn brightest, even it is for just a moment.

I mourn at the prospect that this sense of kinship would simply dissipate into the atmosphere and that this instinct could be lost forever.

I consider also the thought and design in the Reese's Puffs box I threw in for its ability to burn hot and long. A catalyst and a conductor to get the flame going so it could rise up and around the log. I always shudder as the chemical coating bubbles up a little. I know those chemicals do not belong in the fire, let alone the atmosphere. They were simply unseen ingredients in the box's coloring. A scheme intended to slow down a shopper's passing glance while moving both up and down the aisle.

Still, they serve a purpose and provide me with a space to sit, with something to sit before and around, and a presence if not for, I might be inside and not witness to the glow of moon and its contrast to the dark of the sky.

So whatever those embers are still sending up, it is party favors from a celebration of sorts.

I scan around the radio and the sound of cheers burst in. There is jubilation in New Mexico. A successful launch and return of Richard Bronson's VSS *Unity*. Even with Bronson onboard and the intended blessing of the carrier plane being named for his late mother Eve, it is still a gamble until everyone is back on the ground.

He and the crew are up and back within a morning. High enough that it counts as space. Long enough for hours long coverage across cable news. Commentators and reporters heralding the new technology and possibilities for travel. Faster, quicker, and yes eventually, just be patient, available to those outside the 1%. It will come in time.

My thoughts to turn the equivalents of dirt worn down or bush and brush beat back these trailblazers will leave in their wake as they traverse in the name of a simply getting there quicker

Undoubtedly they will run counter and perhaps even cut into the original, genius schematic of the atmosphere that holds everything and all of us in a way so that we can simply catch our breath.

These ships, these vessels, these voyages just seem out of proportion to the space they wish to claim.

Still, I cannot help slipping into teacher brain and I am already drafting a writing prompt for my middle schoolers. Something along the lines of "Would you go on one of these initial flights or wait for a few more successful tests? Would you even go at all?" An exercise crafted for the maiden steps towards forming an argument and finding a voice.

I scan around a little more. Two presets later, I lick my lips and the light changes, almost in unison. A good omen.

The roar of a lawnmower reminds me what my father is up to today. Part of his weekly routine. He has a pattern of pausing midway as he goes back and forth, up and down the side and backyards.

Whoever is at work on this nearby yard is treating all of us to the smell of fresh cut grass. A reward for work, for caring to the grass in a way that perhaps becomes familiar. Blades anticipating the blade and a following breath.

The trick is to leave enough to grow back in a week.

A send off and salute to what grew. An invitation for more. An honoring in ritual. A harmony perhaps.

## Take a Micro-Moment

### I

You are standing facing the back door.

Just to the left of it is a hook with your jacket on it. Well, your grandfather's jacket. The long, green one with a hood full but not heavy and a lining worn but still warm. He sent you home with it once while you were visiting for an afternoon and it unexpectedly started snowing. He knew it would snow.

He stood in the back hallway where he hung his coats and held it up as you slid your arms in one at a time, not making note of your left arm needing an extra micro-moment or two to extend. "Muscle Spasticity" were two words you couldn't spell individually or together but you knew them in the tightness you felt and continue to feel. It lives somewhere between your shoulder and elbow and always feel released as your fingers find their way out on the other end of the sleeve.

He said nothing as they made their journey that day. Well, he probably said something but it was most likely about being one day closer to Spring or how the Red Sox would be starting Spring Training soon. It definitely involved either Spring or the Red Sox. Probably both.

### II

You are standing facing the back door and so much behind you is half-done.

On your desk is the past week's worth of mail, opened but not properly sorted. Piles are simply plopped and stand almost like stalactites except each layer crisscrosses the last. BRE envelopes build off of promotional magnets on top of restaurant menus resting on campaign flyers. Halos of coffee accent the space next to where your laptop sits closed and charging.

You do not need to worry about leaving it plugged in too long. You will be back in time.

You should probably worry about the amount of crumbs whisked into every corner and the spot where maple syrup and dried almond milk hold close a semi-sweet chocolate chip.

Under your bed are shoes unpaired and sticking out. You made quick work of them, wading through as you stood up from your bed, as they seemed to briefly latch onto your ankles, only to be kicked a few inches from their original spot. But also maybe closer to their mate.



On your bookcase, space is at a premium. A whole month's worth of *New York Times Magazines* are folded, each on a shelf clinging to less than two inches of room. There is the collection of Robert Frost and E.B. White you patched together from what your uncle left you from the PhD he started in the 60's and what you have found secondhand. Each time you look at them together you seem to pause, bite your lower lip, and stare off at nothing for 30-45 seconds.

The same can be said for when your eyes get to the shelf second from the top. No, it is not the unopened Kleenex boxes and ink cartridges. It is the collections of Mary Oliver and Maya Angelou. You have attempted to write odes to them half-a-dozen times each. You just keep coming back to their own words believing they said it best. You just want to capture their capacity for inciting wonder.

Just above you is the ceiling fan spinning. Just above it is the layer of dust courtesy the Fall and first half of the Winter. You want to leave it on but that much spinning through the air will only incite a flurry of sneezes. Reach up and pull on the string. Well, it really isn't a string. What do you call that thing that dangles down and adjusts speed? Whatever it is, interlock its tassels with your fingers and pull down.

### III

You are standing facing the back door and about to leave all this behind you as you hear neighborhood kids shoveling.

Your shoulders, both left and right, sting. At this moment, the mail carrier crunches on the crust of ice leading to your first floor apartment. You sense he nearly slips but presses on and presses the slightly melted upper layer into the lower four-to-six inches of snow.

Your back bellows in tightness. It won't have an opportunity to be tested. Same for your knees. They will work with the rest of you to balance the best you can while getting to your car. The drive is quick and you can't visit long anyway. After twenty minutes she sometimes blurs together who is who.

If that happens today, she'll run her thin fingers with skin withdrawn through the jacket's fabric not yet fraying. You will ask what she is doing and she will reply, "what I always do" and stop at a pocket to utter "Pete."

You will wait a micro-moment or two before replying, "No, it's me."

**IV**

You are standing facing the back door and you tug on the collar of your jacket so that it's close against your back and falls forward slightly.

No need for Nana to reach too far.

## Elegy for a Tomato

soggy and sitting  
on the cardboard boat host  
to my avocado toast. It slid off the bread  
in between bites #2 and #3.  
I reach for it with fingers slightly sticky  
and I first smush before grasping.  
Finally with it just before my mouth  
as no longer a perfect circle, I think  
of what structures of engineering I bludgeoned  
in the name of this juicy bite  
and of how many seasons of ancient crops  
came and went so as to forge the perfect firmness  
for an outer skin. How many of them,  
generations now lost to rot and return as soil,  
budded, grew, and went unnoticed. Never sliced,  
nor picked, or even spun through fingers  
while still on the vine. What of my fingers  
and their schematics passed down to me?  
Designs with limited dexterity  
that also invite a certain care to be taken  
some intent before holding  
so as to provide a space  
within a palm  
within a pause.

## Apology to a Shattered Mason Jar

In a moment, you were nothing. Well, it's not that simple. Shattering in an explosion that bellowed within the space of a second, you scattered in shards across the teacher's copy room and splattered water in puddles and stray drops alike. I feel terrible in my lack of preventing such an untimely end. With little thought, I slid you into the mesh pocket on my backpack's right side. You were familiar with that spot and probably felt the tension slack in its stitching over the last three weeks. A tendency for which no clear reasons present. All the same, it was prone to tear and rip and eventually have less a grip to hold you close. I feel even worse for my disregard of all you held within your form. Contoured by hands whose impressions were in the rounding and curving of your glass. All intentions for security and comfort unceasing and abiding in place. Still, your broken pieces huddle close. First in a dust pan and then in the bottom of a plastic bag, held itself by a barrel. Perhaps it feels like a pocket you get to scratch in little bits at different angles, creating little pockets onto themselves. In the wake of your end, a succession. A continuance not bound by shape or form.

## **Part Two: Found Time**

## A Lap At La Salette

I am exploring all that an extra 45 or so minutes can offer.

That is roughly how long I will delay before heading to a friend's apartment. His request. Fifteen minutes for him to settle in after work, while also tending to chores. Thirty minutes for nap. I know that ratio well. But instead of heading home to close my eyes. I am here at La Salette Shrine.

When a person arrives, they pull down and into an expansive parking lot that seems to sprawl into the surrounding three-fourths circle that makes up the shrine. The grounds are equal in their parts both natural and reclaimed. Trees, shrubs, and grass populate the grounds along with statues, memorials, and spaces, such a recreation of Christ's Tomb, designed for intentional reflection. On the whole, the aesthetic is prepared but not perfected.

I am arriving here today at the end of a week's worth of teaching. Daily I delight in the high volume of language exchanged in the name of ELA skills practiced and affirmations offered. Still, it tires me out. I am seeking to be in the presence of quiet and less.

Stepping out of my car and into the parking lot, I have my journal in hand. I have never written here before. Sure, some words have arrived but they been invited to simply arrive and leave without being spoken aloud or written down. Tomorrow I will be away all day blissfully busy with plans with three different friend groups. A triple header. In the downtime of the day, I will sneak away to a coffee shop or a library so as to draft an essay

or play with a poem. Processing the week today would make being social and getting some writing down even more accessible.

In the car I leave an iced coffee. Decaf, pumpkin spice. A true treat in every sense of indulgence. I enjoy it for the flavor and hydration. Today it came with a free donut. An offer from the sole person behind the counter. Closing within the hour, she did not want to see another go to waste. I delighted in the opportunity to enjoy the chocolate frosting with fall-colored sprinkles, but also to enjoy something as itself.

It was just one donut and there only so many sprinkles, but it was for me an unexpected embodiment of kindness and invitation to be present with a presence of joy for however long it shall last.

I waited until I got to La Salette's parking lot to dive in. I took small bites.

Walking away from the car, I am not sure of where to go for a writing spot. I venture first to the benches that compose the pews of the outdoor chapel. The canopy above casts shade over some rows. My preferred spot for outdoor Mass, I could sit there within the positivity.

Just as I approach, the benches do not feel right. It is no slight against the folks having a conversation fairly close by, this is their afternoon too, but I might give into eavesdropping too much and attempt to make sense of them instead of myself.

I decide to make my way to the rosary pond. At least that is what I call it. Suspended in the air and strung along the perimeter of the pond is an oversized rosary. Perhaps there is a plaque formally naming it the rosary pond but I have not, to my

recollection, read it. I have forged my own identity for the pond, both sacred and mystical.

I step onto the path around it and head right, just as I did about five years ago on Valentine's Day. There was a negative wind chill paired with persistent sunshine. Walking around was tolerable. I moved quick and found myself for the first half of the lap around the pond ruminating on my writing ability. Offering praise for it and how it felt like an invitation to forge connection to a scene around me. To gaze out onto a sky and not look past it. To listen for what fills a moment while sitting and strive to not fill it too much myself. On that frigid lap that day, it too felt an invitation to guide others to this lens. I would do it for myself so as to do it for others.

For the second half of that lap, I reflected on the bliss that comes with purpose and asked that another would join in my life so as to provide refuge and comfort in moments not writing or working. That another could know me so well as to call me into an embrace when I would need it. Reflecting on this at the time, I felt affirmed that my faith would be awarded.

I have retraced this path of prayer countless time since, always able to step into that original emotional, spiritual space.

Today as I round the first bend, I find myself not praying. Or at least not like those other time. I am not forming words within my mind. I am simply moving, feeling a presence of joy close. It does not present as something I am calling for or will be working towards. Instead, it is the delight I know in quiet moments throughout the course of my normal days, almost feeling like an affirmation of my choice to turn off a screen, to sit



still by a fire, and to simply be content with one less item accomplished. This form of prayer feels like listening from within.

Struck, but not stopped by this, I continue onto the second half of the lap. Once more, my praying is different today. I find myself not calling out for another but, in place, a sense of gratitude washing over me. Thanks for who I have worked to become. That my personhood reflects who could truly join me in this life. That my identity now could be a starting point for someone to build off, just I would off them. Perhaps that's partnership.

With this settling deep within me, I arrive at a bench I first knew in a lap last December on a gray afternoon. It is three fourths of the way around the pond and happens to fall between the signs for the letters "Y" and "Z" within a display for "The Alphabet of Christmas." Early arrivals for the full-on Christmas display to be assembled some time in the middle of November. I hold nothing against the shrine for getting a head start on its decorating.

On that day of discovery last December, I looked up and onto the tops of evergreens. I do the same today as they bounce back and forth within a breeze in front of a sky of uninterrupted blue. I feel myself full unwinding and forging a connection with this moment.

It is a connection for myself as I attempt to step away from any thoughts from the week. Muffle the echo of conversations, dim the afterglow of screens, and alleviate any tightness felt in my body. I periodically kick my legs forward and my back begins to loosen as I sit with less than perfect posture. It is past the seasonal point of truly worrying

about a burn from the sun. Its warmth, along with comfort of resting, invites me to revel in sitting.

As I stand to get up, I offer out loud, “God, thank you.” Even if there is no former to know the latter, the expression remains as one addressed to whatever surrounds and composes us in this life. It leaves me as a caption for the afternoon.

Having finished my lap, I make sure to pass by the plaque with the prayer of St. Francis of Assisi. It sits in a patch of grass separate from rosary pond. I read it every time before leaving:

*Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace  
Where there is hatred, let me sow love.  
Where there is injury, pardon.  
Where there is doubt, faith.  
Where there is despair, hope.  
Where there is darkness, light.  
Where there is sadness, joy.*

As much as I walked today making note of moments I could purpose for prose, Assisi’s prayer rings true about a different kind of purpose. One tuned to what needs meeting. Maybe not the same as a donut to add flavor and sweet or a window of time for two friends to rest as they see fit, but of the same intention. To meet the moment as it is. To walk the lap and know it for its one occurrence.

## Meditations on the Beach in Three Parts

### I

Your hair and skin hold close salty drops from the day's first swim. You can almost feel them dry but you're paying more attention to how the soft sand is absorbing your steps. The grains are working together. As usual, you are in the space equally between where the blankets end and the waves' breaks begin. The framing almost seems to form a lane for you to take your post-swim walk. It is welcoming but a little lonely.

Looking down to avert your gaze from the nearly blinding glare coming at you from every angle, you witness your right toes press into the sand and notice a small, nearly silver dot. Looking closer, it is a rock partially poking out of the sand. Submerged three fourths of the way in, it appears to be out of everyone's way. You instantly recognize through footprints scattered about, folks simply step onto it and do not stop to say sorry.

You do a little digging and retrieve the rock. Even before you can fully process it in your palm and as some wet sand clings onto its bottom, you think in your head "it's a him." Without over thinking it, you go with that idea.

You roll him around in your palm, careful not to disorient him, but you want to gage how long he has been under. Given that he is cool but not cold, it can't have been long. Pausing once all the sand is off, you take in his color. He is white but not as polished as pearl, with swirls of light gray. If these were the work of a painter's brush strokes, there was no trepidation in the wrist, only reverence.

Marble sized but not so perfectly rounded so that he could roll if you were to simply toss him away from you at this time, he would tumble a few feet before coming to another rest, inevitably set up to be stepped on again. You decide this would be a cruel casting out. You open the pocket of your swimsuit and drop him in. He's coming along.

As you approach the jetty, you wonder if some part of him can sense how close he is to rocks so much larger. Maybe he once broke off from one of these bigger rocks that are jagged and pointed but smooth enough on top for folks to walk on. You observe how careful they are with every step on these rocks that can obviously see them coming. Why not the same for your small friend as they walk over him?

Heading back towards your beach chair, you also observe a change in your steps. Not anything in terms of how your legs and feet move as parts within a larger gait but in how it feels between steps. When one foot is traversing that micro-space in the air, it is even surer of itself. You are even more balanced. Not that you were ever for want of stability but today you are feeling more of it. Perhaps you just needed a few extra ounces able to fit comfortably at your side. If you are walking in your own lane, you can further claim it with your friend.

You are equally stabilized as you wade into the water. Together, you are not fazed by a wave rushing towards you. None of them push you back or cause you to wobble. Once out far enough so as to not hit your head when you dive under, you spring forward under a wave just before it breaks. Once under the water, you seem to be gliding.

You get out far enough to where you can still touch the bottom if need be but you are more free to bob up and down. After spinning around a little to get a sense of how

much of the crowd is left, you extend onto your belly and paddle in a patch no bigger than a half bathroom. You also dive under and eventually indulge in bodysurfing every third wave. In other words, all your greatest hits. Today, they are duets as you and your friend are equal parts washed clean and eroded.

After running your towel down the back your legs, you drape it on your neck as you pack up magazines and sunscreen to compete with a change of clothes for space within your canvas bag. You collapse your camp chair stilly soggy and slide it into its case. But what of your new friend?

Are you simply to leave him in the sand, hoping he will catch the eye of another kind soul who will be equally taken with his touch?

You think of your own souls.

Within him are perhaps whittled down sediments from boulders once gigantic and hurdling down a hillside only to flatten the toes of a mammoth or mastodon, which in turn were shaved down and through into the mix, along with flakes from a fern's massive leaf.

Maybe not in that order.

He rests in your palm and you read legends within a mythology into him. He could say the same of you.

You sport a torso equal in proportion to your grandfather's. You battle burn along a hairline the same as your father's. At the itch of a stray grain of sand caught up in the wind, you crinkle a nose mostly your mother's.

You and your friend meet today as ambassadors. Must this joint session simply end over a cold shower and change of clothes?

You're dry, powdered, and mostly sand free. You are moving your fingers from the radio knob to the steering wheel when you think your friend might like a better view than being buried in your shorts' pocket. You ease him into the slot of your center console too small for a large ice coffee but perfectly sized for spare change. It jingles under him as he lands and you drive away. It becomes a familiar sound throughout the summer. Perfectly reassuring while changing lanes on a crowded highway on a hot afternoon and already running late. Perfectly accenting the crack of a bat heard on the radio while en route to ice cream. Perfect "hello/welcome back" after buckling up and backing out of a driveway late at night.

Come Labor Day and the summer seeming to end, you know even if he isn't riding along, he will always be able to echo these moments. You want to give him a rest from the road that will soon have a string of potholes stretching onto every other street. You bring him in to settle atop your dresser. Plus you need that space for gloves once snowing mornings become a regular feature. He does not need to bathe in drops from their melting snow.

Admittedly you do nothing to hold off the clutter that circles him from September to December. A ring of receipts, books, and junk mail all sprinkled with dust. Not to mention Christmas gifts both on their way out and after coming in. Still, an invisible

shield keeps his view of you unblocked. More importantly, your view of him is unobstructed as you open the top drawer for that pair of socks that fit best with your boots. You can maintain eye contact as you sit on the side of your bed to put them on.

Ignore him as he points out you wore them last Tuesday.

Gladly accept any other observations he has. Reach for a pad and pen when he recounts the poem you recited in your sleep last week. After the first of the year, move him over to your desk so he can be closer and read “over your shoulder.” In reality, he rests at the base of the lamp that once sat on your grandfather’s desk. The bulb warms his colors more than any part of him.

Glance over at him in between stanzas, paragraphs, and lines. Lengthen your gaze and get lost together in blank space.

Yes, on your page but also supposedly in him. Can you really tell which of his colors is filling the space and which one is supposedly the space to be filled? Both have presence, both invite a pause.

One warm afternoon of writing with the window open and while you are both lost together sharing a gaze, yours focuses ever so slightly to notice his gray swirls have begun to fade.

Perhaps it is the handiwork of the heat and light from the lamp’s bulb. You reassure yourself that you really didn’t leave it on that long over the course of the darker

months. Plus it is supposedly better than the overhead lights. All of this is of little consolation or re-colorization.

Perhaps it is a side effect of the sunlight you have only just begun to welcome in so as to set the mood and invite inspiration. Both noble intents and if they are sins, every writer imaginable is guilty. Or least all the ones in your workshop group who, given the chance, will ramble on about their workstation. None of that hot air and none of the glow of golden hour can hold off what seems inevitable.

Both of these sources are acting on him like water slowly poured into paint and stirred over time. You dare not see what he looks like once the proverbial paint stick is pulled out.

All of this is on your mind one morning as you find yourself again in the soft sand.

More lingering than leaving a trail, you once more pay no mind to those passing you on either side and hear almost nothing of what the beach roars with. You feel your friend rattle around in your bathing suit pocket. He cannot seem to get settled. Truth be told, neither can you.

You are leaning down to open your pocket and treat him to some sunlight in his natural habitat when you notice a small patch of rocks. They scattered no more than two inches apart from one another and the string of them together is no longer than eighteen



inches. Each is of varying degrees sunken into the sand. In front of one still sitting on the surface are two footprints faintly visible. They linger like a note's echo.

Knowing that he would not be alone and that he could be renewed by plunging once again in grains both washed over and through, you find a spot next to a couple of rocks that look freshly returned themselves. One is more flat and has streaks of green running through blue. It is teal not fully actualized. Perhaps he will witness it come to be.

Before bending down, you slide him between your finger and thumb to share one last hug of sorts. You whisper some prayers he taught you.

Notice as the waves subtly sink you.

You look back at the tracks that you left walking here. You catch them being simultaneously walked over and washed away. This is the way. You can anticipate wading in later. It will feel familiar and it will be okay swimming alone. Muscles have memory. Stability leaves a tangible impression to rediscover.

When it feels right, bend down and gently place him on top of the sand. Let him catch his breath before you rise to walk alone.

The whole way back to your stuff, you look forward in gratitude. You know he is still looking up as he sinks in anticipation

of another soul,

of his next ambassador.

## II

By the time the waves spill onto my feet and wet the hair above my ankles, each one is thinned and detached from the sea that sent it forward. Gazing out at the horizon, I try to mark how long I have been standing by how much the waves subtly ease me into the sand. I almost notice my line of sight lowering. Any one of the people standing around me could more easily see me sink. It isn't happening fast enough to hold their attention.

Same for how my walk sped up with each step on hot sand as I made my way here only moments ago. It is not like I went from a leisurely walk to a charging sprint but I could feel a jolt arising from the bottom of my feet as they pressed into grains both burning and scratching. No one appeared to look up out of curiosity from a book or screen. The soles of my feet are soothed standing here. My thoughts widen to the idea that the beach is where the fleeting and the infinite intersect.

The ocean, never at rest, is constantly crashing and refreshing. Each wave granted just a moment to rush forward crowned in white, only to melt back, and be lost forever. Each tide, both high and low, is passing and comes but once a day to either grant space or reclaim it. All of us here are witness to this and many, myself included, are renewed through today's specific intervals for their uniqueness and how they reflect larger cycles.

That is how I enter into my pre-swim ritual. It is secondhand and equal parts my grandfather and father. Simply by dunking my hand for a palm's worth of water, I can invoke both men. I alternate in terms of which one I honor first.

For my grandfather, I splash some onto the back of my neck. Feeling the relief it brings, I think he must have started this after remembering what his great aunts taught him about where to best cool the body. I am sure they had him put a damp washcloth on his neck in a time before air conditioning. I never saw him do this before he swam. I only have memories of being in the water with him, holding me around my torso as I float on my belly, and encouraging me to kick. Each “you’ve got this” and “keep going” embedded with command and comfort. I hear them again faintly the moment the middle of my neck first feels wet.

Just as my father does every time he stands in this moment, I use wet fingertips to make the sign of the cross. Based on what I have overheard him whisper as we drive past Saint Mary’s, he searches for more blessings than forgiveness. I imagine for him, his quick pre-swim intention is to guide him safely in, out, over, and under waves taller and stronger than he can fashion himself. I’ll take the same.

As I do it today, maybe I am reaching into the same water they did. Somehow the same molecules swim about just below the surface. Even if after landing back in the water from falling off them or through their fingers, the molecules were carried out to travel the world, and were brought back to this exact spot at this exact moment for me to reach into.

Turning back briefly on reflex as a baby cries, I spot a mother standing up to rock an infant and sway back and forth. She reaches for the sunglasses atop her head. She knows it will be while. Looking back toward the water, I hear in my head my mother retell the story of how she bolted across this beach with me as a young child in her arms.

It was quicker that way to get me to the closest bathroom. I am sure she turned a few heads but they nodded in respect to her as a young mother as I do to this one today. I would even add that the mother today stands in some of the same sand my mother turned over in her sprint. I bet I even displaced some of it in my approach to the water earlier.

I look to my left to see how the waves are breaking. Sometimes they are more across than straightforward. My gaze rests for a moment on the jetty that extends into the horizon. Given the distance and that I'm without my glasses, there is no way I can see if anyone is out walking on it. But just as I did not ever see my grandfather walk into water and my vantage point from within my mother's arms did not grant me a full view of the beach around us, I do not need to see them to know they are stepping onto the rocks that form the path and that they are most likely might slightly stumbling with some of their steps. Perhaps that is their intent so as to regain their balance in the same spots each visit. To reawaken something within them that always stabilizes. That is why I take my time as I walk into the water. It matters not if even anyone stops to watch. Better yet, let them be fully in the moment of making their own way in.

I reshuffle on my feet and foolishly look up at the sun. I know better. The freckle on my eyeball is a battle scar to prove I know better. Putting my hand up to shield my view, I feel the handiwork of the sun's heat. Since I've been standing here, streaks of sweat mixed with sunscreen have flowed towards my eyebrows. I feel the heat baked into my forehead.

Also since I've been standing here, the water has been unceasing in its arrival and equally consistent in its leaving. Standing in that thought for a moment and resisting the

urge to lift up my right leg to scratch an itch on my left, it feels my own arriving and leaving is affirmed. Yes, to the water for swimming, bodysurfing, and bobbing, but also to the beach itself.

To grains of sand I hope are never cycled out.

To water molecules I pray linger.

To reassurance that can be reached for and sanctified as it spills off of me.

Still dripping in it, I step forward.

### III

You are alone and inverted.

Upside down and submerged, deep enough that maybe a toe or two on your longer leg is poking out above the surface. Certainly a sight for anyone standing at the start of the water slowly making their own way in. Maybe a marker for anyone as to how far they should go out. All the same, it does not matter from your viewpoint.

You are in an episode of fleeting equilibrium. Breath held in your cheeks and chest, you paddle around with your hands so as to hold off the pull up to the surface. It is about maintaining your position. To your delight, the water does not work against your fingers as they transform into flippers. It does not pay them any mind if one is quicker in its flicks and one is more methodical. It simply welcomes them as a way of you staying level in terms of being vertical.

All the while you look around, searching through the murkiness, and achieving a passing clarity. The brown of the ocean floor coming into focus as you get within an inch.

The green of small plants filtered but not washed out. Seaweed not staining the water's color but adding an effect normally just stepped through or thought of as muck. You are captivated and recognize you can only get glimpses. More paddling or you'll be pulled away.

But you have to acknowledge that this space is not natively yours. You are a visitor and your clock always runs out.

You are careful about what you reach for. Once in water as shallow as six inches you reached for what you thought as a rock. The crab's claw on the base of your thumb proved otherwise. You were cautious for the next few weeks that summer. You have left that fear go but admittedly you still get spooked a little if you spot a fish any larger than a guppy fluttering about in the water.

You did once try to dive into a school of guppies as they darted in several directions. You have learned how to be a better guest.

Before you get ahead of yourself, you are not the ocean floor's sole champion or saver in chief. You simply really love diving under the water to look around and it makes you feel affirmed that you can will together all your strength to keep you down there in what seems longer than most folks care to. It is about unlocking ability that if you lived in a landlocked portion of your country, you may never have discovered it. There is something thrilling about that.

Even if it does not feel like a clock is officially running, it is limited how long you can do this. You would not want to know an exact count of long you are really down here. Once you do feel the pull to go back up, you can fight it for a while before having to

acknowledge the truth within it, that some spaces can only be entered into but never permanently claimed. That's part of the deal.

Before today's immersion must end, you scratch the ocean floor with your fingers. It is almost clay-like to the touch and you find a rock flat, wide, and circular. It is smooth. Did someone skip it out once and it sunk here, slowly getting buried with each tide? You quickly toss it out of view from your bubble of vision. Maybe it will be carried toward the shore in the pull of a massive wave gifted from a storm far out to sea.

Today you are given a gentle pull back up. You flip so as to be on your back. You can see a circle of light. It is the underside of what bounces off the water. As you get closer, it is harder to keep your eyes open. You close them just before resurfacing.

On instinct, you lower your legs below you to find your footing and take a few quick breaths before returning to your normal rhythm. Once you simply stand for a few minutes and the roar of the chatter coming off the beach slides once again into white noise,

you feel the pull again.

## How to Not Write After Supper in the Summer

You're in the garden weeding, watering, encouraging.

A storm earlier broke the humidity with a flash of rain and thunder and no more than five lighting bolts. The air is settling into a texture soft and inviting.

The squash plant sprawls far beyond her intended plot. Her flowers are folded but unfurl each morning in a dew-dipped glisten.

The pepper plants display their stocky sprouts. They have yet to lengthen into their shape. Give them ten days or so.

Turn to the compost and turn it over. Work with not against its consistency somewhere between mud and soil. Stir in any tomatoes that have prematurely dropped off the vine and plopped onto the dirt. Add any grass clippings hibernating and fading in the mower's bag.

Step up onto the deck. Notice the air now fully cool and open. A breeze passes, seeming to touch all the leaves woven into the co-authored canopy. They all come in on queue. No branch sits silent.

Clouds, long and thin, hover above. Perhaps they are lingering. Perhaps they are arriving. All the same, you notice together the light growing into its gold.

Sit down in a chair faded but sturdy. Find your right ankle instinctively rise into its familiar spot atop your left knee. Glance up and welcome the role of quiet and listening.

Within minutes, allow your right ankle to slide down so as to rest your leg at a 45° angle. Perfect position to balance a notebook buried in a backpack still in the house.



Another breeze passes, carrying the end to a poem that also remains buried in the house. Third scrap of paper down from the top of a stack clinging to a corner of your desk. A draft with more scribbles and scratch outs than complete stanzas.

Out of sight in backyards not directly adjacent, two dogs bark.

Their back and forth cannot drown out the chorus of rustles so perfectly pitched that no human hand could ever so precisely place the leaves or gage the wind speed to inspire such harmony.

You're caught between the appeal of doing nothing and the mandate of making use of longer days.

Still you do not stir but instead gaze out at the grass.

A bug buzzes just above, nibbling on the microscopic. A squirrel races up a tree's trunk with twigs in his teeth to tend to his nest in a crevice. A bird calls out with what translates as either "good night" or the morning's chores.

Accept lines that arrive and seem to land in your lap. Moments of being in scene and quick flourishes of sensory language. They neatly pile up.

Pause and welcome your eyes to close. Remain silent for one long extended breeze that ends with a tinge of chill. Open again and cast one more look out at the garden before heading in.

Reach for the screen door and listen for its cadence in closing.

It almost matches your whispered "thank you."

### Can Leaves Be Jealous of a Blister's Scab?

Raking the former forged the latter  
in the bend between knuckles  
on my left thumb as I gripped  
an imitation wood handle between  
10 and 11 on a Saturday morning.  
The leaves would ask why they too  
were not allowed to simply rest  
as wild, striking, and fighting to maintain  
a position against a process designed  
to enmesh them into  
the surrounding area. A process that once  
ran through on behalf of their later growth.  
The leaves would attest they too deserved  
the right to be ugly, unruly, and slightly sting.  
Okay, those might only apply to the scab, but still  
they are tethered and the story of the trees  
behind my mother's house is expansive enough  
to include an October's splattering of colors  
and the earnest blistering of an attentive son's thumb.

### In Praise of Rain at Night

or at least that is what I believe  
is currently rustling and working  
its way through the slim alley  
of my side yard. Even if it is just wind,  
I still appreciate the fleeting flash  
of movement in contrast  
to my stillness and quiet. Other forces awake  
with an abundance of energy  
among the cold and dampness  
of a November night.  
Or if something wild and natural  
is at its day's end, it may not be  
as worn and wrung out  
by and through language  
as I feel around now.  
Still, it is this working over that churns  
a cherished, distilled listening.  
So please, that which stirs out of sight  
in uncontested darkness  
listen for my heartbeat and its lub-dub  
as two hands coming together  
in applause of a fervor  
of and only of  
this moment.

To A Full Moon at 4:14 PM

We just shared the road's bend.

Part of the road curving back towards itself while also leading me, I mean us, forward. You seemed early. Not in the bend, but there to catch my glance. Yes, the sun is down by now in this December evening but much of its light remains. Lingers maybe.

Perhaps that is why you arrived. The sky's blue warm in its hue from the light still exiting and illuminating a path to my glimpse. Perhaps you two have a deal. You indulge all of us down here in casting you two as opposites. That one cannot share the space with the other as alternating tenants of the heavens.

All a ruse so as to foster awe in moments like now. In reality, you pull your identities from one another. Each a starting point for the other.

Truth be told, you are using the sun's light in ways it never could. It cannot shine onto itself. Of course, it would aim to share. More than reasonable it would start with you.

This is your moment.

## Dandelion Sounds

With eyes closed and the opening lines to a poem running through my mind, a metallic “bing-bong” of sorts rings out from the other room. It pierces the air. It seeps into the uncluttered head space I am striving to forge for fear that too much input so early will whisk away words still arriving.

I am awaking still on overload from yesterday. The corresponding consequence of too much socializing with sensory defensiveness. The impression of each moment lingers and almost seem to stack up on top of one other. It is only once the succession of one after another stops that they can begin to dissolve away. The back and forth of this noise is counteracting my ritual of sonic cleansing.

The sound continues and it clicks into place as my fridge’s alarm system. I can acknowledge that it is a measure in place to defend against warm milk, melted butter, and spoiled eggs, among other perishable tragedies. But it jerks me in and out of rest, springing me from the stilling tranquility of doing nothing. Later on this morning, once I properly sit up and slide into slippers, I will tend to the door. For now, I will lay and oscillate between origin stories for these peculiar notes paired together as a jingle

...

The ability to record sounds so as to play them back later was not always heralded as progress. In June of 1906, composer John Phillip Sousa testified in front of Congress on behalf of his fears over how the copyright laws of the time were allowing for rapid production of “mechanical music.” Perhaps he walked up the stairs to the Capital Building in a frantic 8/4 pattern, feeling his fervor deepen but still counting his steps.

Prior to this time, a composer such as Sousa could control the printing of sheet music for his compositions, along with having a say over any public performances. But the transformation of a composition into a copy a player piano or phonograph could play was not under the composer's control and could be mass produced. Now all an American needed was another machine and the music was theirs. Simply, one more thing in the house could translate into far less trips to the local bandstand or concert hall.

...

Picture this: A refrigerator product development team, no more than 6-8 individuals, behind deadline and scrambling to figuratively piece together all the parts of the model due out later that year. Working with a modest budget and what remains of a dozen donuts from the morning, they are charged with responding to reports of young children leaving the fridge open for hours after innocently peaking in to gaze in awe of brownies or birthday cake. Youngsters simply wanting to count the number of chocolate chips in the former or follow the flow of frosting as it rises and falls no more than a micrometer on the latter.

Suddenly a member of the team remembers a bouncing back and forth between two notes in the instrumental break of a beloved song. Two notes so distinctively native to that song but endowed with the potential to stand on their own. At some point in the past, these two notes nestled in the person's mind as an endearing echo.

Internally tuning back into them, this fledgling of a composer goes over to a keyboard and begins to play around. They cycle through presets that call up different

instruments the keyboard can play as. For example, a xylophone feels too striking and chimey. Likewise, a saxophone lands as too soothing. Eventually, a setting that sounds as a cross between a synthesizer and a drum feels right and the person searches among the scales for the two notes. For argument's sake and at the risk of leaning too much into the story of the three bears, they find them around the middle. Next, they play them back and forth a couple times before calling over the team. They all agree that together these two notes would get their attention from several feet away and quickly communicate that there is something that needs resolving. They have their warning system and they can celebrate by finishing off the remaining chocolate glazed donut with everyone getting a piece to raise in the air in toast to their breakthrough.

If we accept all of this as a possibility, then the celebration extends to include the sheer fact that the warning exists. It serves its purpose along with representing a long lost song. It functions as an ambassador of sorts, an introduction even. A fridge owner might unknowingly be predisposed to recognize the song should they ever hear it on the radio. Embedded in the assurance of unspoiled perishables are bread crumbs leading to a new favorite song.

...

The notes play out today as I ease into ignoring the alarm and cease listening to hear pattern. Still, the sound springs up again and again like a string of weeds woven within grass. Much is the same of dandelions. Like so many, I wondered at one point as a child why they are considered weeds. I can recall standing in the side yard of my childhood home and seeing a string of them growing together in a line. Their leaves

jetting out over the ground, their stems standing up in a fairly straight fashion as they were swayed by the wind, and their heads round and only a little larger than a quarter. They looked complete and fully formed. Given that I did not share either of those qualities as a child and I, with a left leg shorter than my right, a left hand less nimble in the fingers than my right, and a slight and nearly subtle limp, I did not yet view as simply my unique gait, most likely admired those dandelions in that moment. It was only later learning that they are considered weeds that this experience of awe soured a little.

....

Fear was central to Sousa's testimony. Perhaps raising and lowering his fists in a muffled and measured pattern so as to accent his argument, Sousa cautioned against what "mechanical music" would mean for the collective American sense of creativity. For his plea he turned to childhood memories, "When I was boy... in front of every house in the summer evening you would find young people together singing the songs of the day or old songs. Today you hear these infernal machines going night and day." It is possible that members of Congress paused for a moment in their chairs recalling similar moments, perhaps sitting up straight just as they were instructed on their front porches growing up and swaying in a shared back and forth.

From there, Sousa's warning becomes quite dire about the future ability of someone to sing out or play an instrument, "We will not have a vocal cord left. The vocal cords will be eliminated by a process of evolution, as was the tail of man when came from the ape." He saw the ability to press a button and conjure sounds as a path that would usher in lazy listeners just content to consume sounds that previously required true



talent and earnest effort in order to know a song in a moment. He saw humanity radically transformed by convenience.

It is possible that Sousa felt a deeply personal sense of pride over his ability to welcome music into a space and he did not want to see his craft be replaced by an artificial means, especially if it meant he would be out of job and no longer occupy the same place in society. It is also possible that Sousa sincerely believed that a real loss was on the horizon and that he was the guard against an entire generation's sense of discovery going by the wayside.

He spoke all the same with words we can read today as almost out of time with how applicable they are to today's ease of calling up any and all sounds. It is worth considering if Sousa could delight in how much emotion a short snippet of a recording could bring.

...

Let's return to that scenario of a product development team and slightly tweak the song that enters the scene. In fact, let's add to the backstory of the person who introduces it to the others on the project. Let's say this person was once in a band. Yes, garage tested. Yes, known to local open mics and talent shows. But never grew beyond these amateur arenas. It is possible that this person and their band had a lone, greatest hit. One that pulled together all the band's sonic possibilities. It opened with acoustic, emotive strumming by the leader singer. It expanded into a chorus sung in unison as everyone played along. It finished with a synth-filled instrumental section that saw the members

slightly sway in joy for playing their creation to its finish and the audience do the same for having heard it. The notes that become the warning could be lifted from this song. If true, a fridge is the final and everlasting stage on which they play. A basic need to close the door so as to not let out the cold ensures that they will play on forever. How tremendous is it then that alarm could gift an enduring afterlife to youthful, musical experimentation and yearning. How marvelous that innocuous human carelessness could invite the need for such an alarm. Perhaps the benign tendency to rush away is a measure secretly in place to gift art an afterlife?

Staying with this musician turned fridge developer, let's picture them at someone's house for a party. A home that includes a curious young child with a sweet tooth. As the fridge warning plays, the composer begins to tap their toes in a rhythm once more familiar. It is a cadence of triumph.

...

I am still with today poem's opening stanza. Truthfully, none of it is remarkable. At least not yet. There are images cast in nouns and adjectives. I am crafting the space in which the voice will observe in search of wonder and of awe. But it has not yet begun speaking. And it has nothing to do with the alarm.

The warning has a curious pattern in that it does not pause before starting back up again. It begins and ends, begins and ends, begins and ends, and so on without any space in between iterations. I wonder if this practice makes each occurrence any less significant. Or do they get to share an identity that each together forms and would be incomplete without any one of them?

Obviously today I am letting them pile up by laying here.

...

Beyond making money for composer, part of the reason why the copyright laws of Sousa's time were so restrictive about reproducing sheet music or play someone else's song in public was to inspire original work. Think of a musician set to perform for their community. They are unable to track down the sheet music or permission from someone the likes of Sousa. In turn, they must write something new. It must be unique and original to them. This type of pressure is enough to certainly burn someone out and cause them to not want to sit before a piano. But is also enough to invite play in the sense of experimentation and eventually even innovation. Every performance was an opportunity for creation. Sousa maybe didn't want a slowdown of this curation of talent and art.

...

Let's return to that party and the sight of someone tapping their toes and standing within earshot of the fridge's alarm. Now let's also wipe away the backstory we have just crafted of them being a fridge developer. Instead, they work some other non-musical job but have a music obsession. They, like most to whom music is a vital part of their lives, have roughly ten albums that can recenter themselves should they feel they have strayed away from their core self.

Let's suppose that upon hearing this alarm it becomes an instant ear worm. But not in the sense that it squirms around and feels like it won't roll away. Instead it has a

charming, albeit small, presence about it. Sure it is metallic in texture but it is also kind of catchy. This person, along with tapping, might start to snap or clap in rhythm.

The noise they find themselves making rises to the level of a fuss and draws in the party's host who swiftly closes the door and wonders, "What are you doing?"

Without thinking the person responds, "I don't know."

Also without much thought, they open the door again and wait until the noise returns. They record a few seconds of it and close the door again so as to not invite anyone else to enter the room. They have just enough to be able to play it back later.

Embarrassed slightly, they still have a new favorite sound to carry with them. Yes, as a tune to whistle, but thanks to technology Sousa feared and testified against, they can capture a recording to use as a starting point for exploration and experimentation in a computer program with a name most likely more clever than "Mechanical Music."

They might stretch it out or slow it down. They have the freedom to loop it and splice it. It transforms and grows in ways not first imagined by a development team looking to move onto their next product.

Maybe it becomes their alarm in the morning and it invites a more enjoyable wake up. Or it serves as the sound a timer at work makes when its been 20 minutes of concentrated reading for them and their team. If they are a teacher, it could be the sound signaling to their students to change stations during partner work. The possibilities are really endless.

...

Dandelions are also something seeming to present purposeless only to then be applied to a societal need. Despite being regarded as a weed, there is a persistent chorus of gardening experts who advocate for Dandelions to fill a role. For example, a brief blurb in my copy of *The Complete Vegetable and Herb Gardener* reads “creating a weed-free garden is the goal of most gardeners, but you may want to leave a few edible weeds or harvest rather than discard them.” It goes onto to list dandelions among others as “first-rate when added in small amounts to green salads.” Later on in the book dandelions are included in a chart as a potential ingredient for mesclun.

All of this is partially wonderful in that dandelions are no longer cast aside among other plants that grow in a side yard’s garden. But I wonder about a utility needing to be established. I have heard of dandelion salads being a meal substitute during the Great Depression. Last year I saw the dish listed on the menu of a restaurant in Boston as a callback to this practice and a shift of its social status. It is as if now that dandelions are no longer going to be ignored, they are going to be put to work. I go back to the image of me happy just to notice them and take them in one physical feature at a time.

...

My pre-disposition for sensory overload has brought unusual sounds in close proximity within my life from an early age, and before I could purposefully communicate that a day’s worth of language, noise, and social engagement has tired me out, worn me out essentially, and effectively wrung me out. As a baby, I communicated this experience in the manner, aside from smiling and laughing, that I had the most mastery of. I would get upset and stirred up and need my parents to settle and sooth me. My father turned to,

of all things, the Weather Channel. Specifically he sought the ambient background music that accompanied the forecasts played every ten minutes.

My mother recounts to me that she once walked into the living room to find me swaying in my swing with the Weather Channel on in the background.

She asked my father about the arrangement, “What are you doing?”

He replied, “He likes the music. It calms him down,.” I am sure speaking with joy in voice for having carved out his own unique facet of fatherhood.

And so I am also sure we sat together there for no more than twenty minutes until I was not only quiet but maybe even asleep. I have no specific memories but I guarantee he repeated this time and time again.

I do remember being under ten and instinctively changing the channel, number 47 in those days, to the Weather Channel for good background as I played with action figures and animal figurines all across my playroom. Maybe it was an unconscious balancing of noise volume as I brought to life with excitement a meeting between my Superman with an African Bull elephant. Maybe it was just an imprint of care living out again. Nevertheless, I am indebted to musicians whose names I’ll never know and to those who taught them their craft. Their songs did more than just serve the purpose of filling silence.

...

I suppose it is time to go close the fridge door. It will be quick and I can slip back into bed if I want to lay and ruminate with this poem more. Even if it does float away in the space in between, I can begin my day.

But before I do, I will listen once more for the back and forth and try to hear the space in between the two notes. Is there a gap that goes unknown if the fridge is closed too quick? I know some force at work carved that space out and gifts it perhaps as a hand me down from a beloved song. It deserves a moment too.

Under a Bridge, Within an Embrace, In-Between Rain Drops

On the drive here, drops flattened-  
on the windshield  
before we could process  
in glances  
each one's  
minute circumference.

Listening now            we guess  
by the size        of reverberation.

You call them ripples-  
as each does  
                  stay with us  
                  into the next.

Yes, they are paced  
with gaps        defined and finite  
but one is that much richer  
and crisper  
for having the last  
within us.

I am that much more soothed  
for each inch of me you reach-  
with fingers extended  
leading palms to press  
and settle  
                  into  
                  touch.



**Part Three: Blank Space**

Flossing at 5:45 AM

Is it too much to ask to have the passing but smooth rub of floss's waxy fabric up and down the sides of my teeth and into the soft tenderness of my gums be the touch that welcomes me into today?

Yes, I am only in pursuit of this delight given that it is less than two weeks until my dentist appointment. This is akin to cramming before a test. After today's effort, perhaps my lack of regular flossing will be less presented in my gums' color. Have them not so clearly be a throbbing red. A hue closer to a healthy pink.

Still I am here standing in my bathroom with less than half an inch of floss in my fingers. I just pulled on the thread rising up out of a plastic dispenser, perhaps not the right word, of floss and it ran out. Obviously floss has to run out but to witness its end feels like the dental hygiene equivalent of a lunar eclipse. An occurrence covered on NPR in a quick report played throughout the day on the hourly updates.

Perhaps that is too convenient of an analogy as NPR is currently playing out in my bathroom. The morning economics report picked up from London. They are fully into their day thanks to a five hour head start. The host ends an interview with "thanks for breaking that down." That's what I am trying to do.

My aim, along with not being on the receiving end of a warning subject to slide into a scolding from a fellow adult standing over me poised and prodding in my mouth, is to make smaller the compact and complicated.

The little bits between my teeth built up one bite at a time. Pushed onto and into one another. Fusing into a mass larger and foreign to themselves. It is time to free them away from this hold and back onto themselves.

Having located another dispenser of floss, definitely a freebie from my last dentist visit, and peeling off the thin slip of plastic that aims to protect the string from germs and dust, I am able to draw out enough to thread through the loop of a plastic flosser that serves to guide floss into the barely perceptible crevice between my two lower front teeth. From there I am able to pull it through and work back and forth between a permanent metal retainer and teeth. I pace myself so as to be sure to also go up and down along each tooth. There is some blood that oozes more than flows, along with some debris from breakfast discharged.

Having burrowed out as much backup as I can, I move onto using a different type of plastic flosser to de-clutter between the rest of my teeth. It looks almost like the arm and hand of a T-Rex with plus or minus one centimeter of floss held between points that look like fingers. On any attempt of wrapping floss on two of my own fingers, one on each hand, and going up and down, an awkwardness brought on by a dexterity deficiency within my left hand would only leave parts unattended to.

Getting the last of my back teeth that I can reach on my right side, it dawns on me that this tool relieves my left hand of its duty. Honors it as it is. Acknowledges that its muscle spasticity is not, like today's plaque, a presence invasive in its impeding and unhealthy occupation of space.

My flossing on the whole has been an act of doing for the parts of me, my teeth and gums, that could not do for themselves.

Delighting in this embodied harmony, I take a breath.

I do not hold it in any longer than normal but I allow myself to feel if any more of it enters and exits through spaces now freed up.

While tracing its arrival and leaving through a system of pockets, I aim to be present in more of it. This aspiration will perhaps be the parting gift from all this. An affirmation of celebrating all the places in which a moment can be felt.

It might just be a matter of seeing fit they remain uncluttered.

## Eavesdropping on Ocean Waves and Snowflakes

A convergence of water  
rendered  
in diverging mediums

How truly fixed  
is the line-  
solid and liquid  
populating in intervals

Snowflakes number  
on a loop not allowing  
visible gaps between

A current in concert-  
each wave afforded  
an approach full in form  
and force  
before crashing  
so as to  
thin, retreat, and leave  
soaked sand  
a moment  
equally in anticipation  
of the next arriving  
and leaving

Each flake pressed into wave  
is an embrace  
of changed expectations  
and refuge in a ritual  
of lesser demands.

## Not So Parting Words to the Last of a Batch

as you pool in about a micro-meter  
at a plastic pitcher's bottom,  
swirling within you is regular and hazelnut,  
caffeine and decaf, and you are all that remains  
from the last week's iced coffee.

You are understandable cloudy,  
excuse me, smokey, in color  
and obscure from view  
any stray grounds that tumbled in  
as you flowed down and sank  
like soft stones to the bottom,  
positioned to be steadfast deposits  
of flavor and texture  
renewing and ensuring  
each cup as familiar as the last.

I promise not to pour your out  
before adding this week's offering.  
I need you there to welcome, to provide  
a smooth absorption and to serve  
as an ambassador for what once was  
fresh and full, perhaps with lingering drops  
similarly and tenderly mixed in.

I invite you to receive this batch  
as a welcoming home-  
a part of you just formed  
and finding its shape.

## Swaying in the Dust of a Basement Already In Place

is what I am spare you from  
my Christmas ornaments  
through my annual adorning  
of artificial branches  
guaranteed not to sag or droop.

You'll be a better judge after I  
bend down or reach across  
with your looped string  
or the crook of your hook  
perched between  
knuckles and nail on my finger  
and find your spot for the year.

For me, an act of discovery  
pondered in the subconscious  
over micro-moments.

For you, an acclimating  
by settling your weight  
and accepting a view.

Forgive me if this year you are too high  
after being too low a year ago  
or if you're too close to light that blinds in white  
as you wish it would twinkle in color.

By now you know I curate  
from a place of poetry  
and you all are pieces in a collection.

Your assortment forges relation  
as members in alignment  
where the marvel of one  
can invite wonder for all the others.

## In Praise of Rain at Night

First forecasted to flurry  
as snow thin and paced,

instead you drizzle  
in deposits cold and unceasing.

Still, you are in conversation  
with the moment's urgency.

Less than a week until Christmas,  
your slow slithering down buildings

and off cars onto the street  
invites puddles astir and indiscriminate

in their soaking and presents contrast  
to the frantic folks darting

from buildings as they dangle  
bags at their sides like pendulums

subject to sway in tandem  
with a rhythm perhaps unnecessary.

You respond in steadfast embrace:  
each drop falling full in its form,

intervals if not for the last  
could not together form

a sheet thin and translucent  
that filters so as to focus

the glisten and sheen of an evening.



## Dispatch From Flipping A Record

Like an oversized quarter paused in the air, a vinyl record rests between my fingers. Specifically, my left and right pointer fingers are roughly 180° apart from one another as they press with a firm tenderness into the disc's side. It is mid-flip and mid-album. A pause designated within the songs. A tradition almost as old as recorded music itself. Something of a sacrament perhaps. A chance for the listener to play a role in the arrangement. To stop after Side A or to repeat it. To author a remix and begin with Side B to start with. Nevertheless, there is space to step into between record sides.

Tom Petty immortalized his respect for this moment on the original CD pressing of his 1989 release *Full Moon Fever*. Before track six plays, Petty announces “Hello, CD listeners. We've come to the point in this album where those listening on cassette, or record, will have to stand up, or sit down, and turn over the record, or tape. In fairness to those listeners, we'll now take a few seconds before we begin side two. Thank you. Here's side two.” It is pre-determined that Petty's songs should not be rushed. It is proper to welcome and embrace a gap.

For me, I am in a gap between drafts of a poem.

Back on the page on my desk, my progress can be more properly tracked in eraser shavings, eye lashes, and coffee stains. More subtle is the dullness of my pencil as lines smudge and run together. Perhaps it is my fortune that this blurs both mistake and flourish alike.

My eyes glance down to scan the record's grooves precisely carved so as to play as intended and forge a space accessible the same and same again at the drop of a needle.

Each song allotted space within the vinyl. One can never run long and spill into the next.  
Each has its turn to be all that is present.

There is comfort in this in its contrast to my poem in progress. No line tonight on  
my page is locked in.

Perhaps, there is a revising and reforming at work within the record's grooves.  
That each time the needle runs through, it alters both form and shape. I can accept this as  
it works with a different perspective of time.

However, we are both working with the remaining side of songs. Turning over to  
see them, they preview what is possible for my poem's lines. They too can be brought to  
life in intervals. A reader can repeat them fast or slow, in succession, or strung together  
anew.

So maybe, my lines will cut in on another. Or linger so as to halt others from  
having their moment. Still, they will have their slot among each other and travel together.

And much like the sight of a finished vinyl side, they could be gazed upon as  
refuge. They too could be spaces stepped into again and again.

## Exhausted in the Evening

and drooped like a rag doll  
     with arms and legs sprawling  
                     despite a tired tightness  
     not concentrated enough  
 to fully sting as spasms,  
     I admire blinds  
 who allow their strings to lax  
     ever so slightly in tension  
 but still hold their panels  
     in pattern,  
     porous  
 for sunshine and air alike

at the same time, I'm soothed  
 by lined paper and its space  
 between lines

designated     fixed

    steadfast

    it rests in contrast  
 to my inability to settle  
     and still from within-  
 the noise of the day  
 remains built  
 and bunched up  
 souring any quietness  
     that arrives  
         in earnest

on the page, an understanding

one line is not to run into the next

so that all can exist

what is blank is not an absence

it is merely a contrast

I was forged in a pause

hours away from birth and breath  
a skipped heartbeat

resulting damage and scar  
right frontal lobe  
together endowed me

muscle spasticity  
sensory defensiveness

I live in reverence for this original absence

perhaps I felt infinite

in this supposed nothing

my limbs mourning  
their touch to kick and grip  
being remixed  
into a budding limp  
subtle stiffness  
benevolent imbalance

facets of my experience  
fully presenting by age two

Sparking a quest for diagnosis

Launching a dialogue

in the language of my difference  
shared by my parents

along with acceptance  
no clear cause  
may ever present

a sacred mystery  
reclaimed

in myths I forge:

that it was a swelling of love  
an overabundance  
my heart needed a pause      a poem  
understands  
in blank space

Seeking blank space              I find myself in pauses  
or at least the presence of less  
in pursuit of self-soothing

that fosters endearment  
to all a moment offers  
and finds its presence in  
as an instance  
as an occurrence  
onto itself

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