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last night's mouth

by

Jasmine Elliott

A Creative Writing Project
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
through the Department of English Language, Literature, and Creative Writing
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts at the
University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2011

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last night's mouth

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Author's Declaration of Originality

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Abstract

last night's mouth is a narrative collection of prose poems chronicling the journey from break-up to new love. The manuscript employs overarching metaphors of math and music to communicate the attempts of the protagonist, Cassie, to rationalize emotional situations, while list poems emulate those struggles formulaically. Frequent references to popular culture contemporize her relationships. Rhythmic lines and scrambled syntax express the sense of poetry in prosaic paragraphs.

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you are to me as love is to

She thinks in ratios and sequences. Cats are to night as dogs are to morning. She hangs her shirts by colour and sleeve length. She can't resist resolving her songs with the tonic chord of the key they're in. Pepperoncini, poblano, jalapeno, cayenne, Thai chilli, scotch bonnet, red savina, ghost chilli. She builds scales to gauge: the value of a book based on page count and desire to re-read. The cost-effectiveness of Chinese takeout. The differing moods invoked by the green paint chips she's pinned to the bathroom wall. Blue is to calm as alarmed is to yellow. When she says *Hello* to him and he sings it back, she can't resist comparing his voice. Ethan, Derek, James, Michael, Derek, Caleb. Ethan, Derek, James, Michael, Derek, Caleb. Ethan, Derek, James, Michael, Derek, Caleb, and now Alex. Frets on a string but does this note form the chord? Is he singing in tune? Her mother says every song is a love song.

She lays the cards out on the table. Ratios and sequences. She was laid out on a table before, her arms around a neck. A sideways seven, the rational forgotten. She counts the times she's wanted to tell him and loses track. 14, 133, 286, 11. A toppled eight, two zeros holding hands.

compositional you

She used to write music. Melodies murmured hastily under breath, or scribbled across strings and paper. Sunny days were simple majors, sometimes a key change, an adventurous augmented sixth. Brass and winds. Break-ups were acoustic guitar and a voice straining against an octave break. She never sang those to you.

She used to work a score like a formula: input instruments. Time signatures. Keys. Mode. Input influences: Beethoven. Bach. The Beatles. Bob Dylan. Some days an oboe carrying a 6/8 melody in C and the lilting movement of the sea. Others her cello pulsing like a hammering heart against a ribcage prison, uneven beats in 5/4 and F minor tripping fingers.

Thursday was a 4/4 andante when she met you. Classic orchestral; violins pined softly in the underbelly of illuminated clouds, hinting at hidden sun. Wind brushed leaves across windowpanes like paint, flutes whispering. And she sat on the blanket in the park with friends, prepared for another failed set-up: a grey-eyed boy with sunburn glowing as brass. A trombone this time? Euphonium?

You said *Hi* in a pianissimo but entered a tenor saxophone. You're in the wrong ensemble, she wanted to say. You don't belong here, you're out of tune.

tracing white lines

I buy you a long-sleeved shirt for your birthday. You've been wearing a jacket around the house. Your mother hasn't caught on, though you've worn it since spring.

I am a murmur, tapping against the frets of your guitar. You're reading *House of Leaves* for the sixth time, eyes tumbling off the edges. You offered to walk me home. An hour ago.

You run absent fingers down your arm, trace the white lines. I wish I could erase them from your skin. Tattoo freckles into constellations. Alter time like a black hole in sci-fi. Use *Men in Black* flash to forget: emptying pockets and empty tomato soup cans under your bed and red residue congealed on keys and –

Do you want to go get milkshakes?

You turn over on your bed. *I don't have any money.*

I'll buy you one. I jump out of my chair.

You change into the new shirt and I am a hole in a page. I wish I had ridden my bike past your house ten years ago. I want you to chase me around the dinner table every night with a lobster. *You look good*, I say, fingering the torn pockets of your jeans.

portrait
for Katie West

Sometimes I am a photographer, trying to capture the exact. You. I frame you between hands in the morning, shift to conserve light from the window that flirts with your face. I wait for the moment when you just begin to stir, the first time you blink. In that second, I could be anyone to you. If I could catch that snapshot, I could forget you, too. But I do not have a camera and you look at me and I aim for you but never simultaneously. Every glance candid.

refrain

with a chorus of *it's a bad idea* she remembers: late night fuck-yous into cell phones and dialling the same number over and over, hanging up just as many times. more. nights when listening to Gorecki too loudly and fantasies about running to Tuscany weren't vivid enough and she'd go looking for love: in all the right places. at all the wrong times. finding someone to want after six tequila shots and crying into phone numbers written on her arm, wondering if he'd give up on her if she weren't giving it up and wanting not to cry at the prospect of giving it up to anyone else. cycles so vicious they made every circle sharp-edged: and sometimes, when the night's more wrong than right she throws his Linkin Park CDs at him.

without hymnal *it's a bad idea* echoing around her it's just his mouth on her neck and her hair brushed back and the way her shoulders sink and shrink her body into a ball of clay that he shapes, fingers tracing collarbones unhesitant as if he had solved the hypotenuse of her shape, collected her flesh from the floor of a lake.

wait

leaky faucet water drips steady, wastefully carries me away from: last time skin kissed and closer to: swallowing soil thirsty and who remembers your lips curling around *Cassie* as your thighs against mine from behind and root legs dig deeper in blankets you left, plant themselves, reach for water spent: my sunlit decay.

earworms

At this moment she is stuck in another, a cork trapped in a bottle of wine: if pushed too far, likely to be swallowed.

The night of their first kiss. Really their second kiss: the first real one. (Derek counts the time they were playing Spin the Bottle with their friends, but she doesn't.) They are in her mother's basement on an overstuffed grey couch. They press together against the chill of an unseasonably cold spring day. Both of them think just this: just cold.

Takes hours but finally his lips brush hers: a careful non-accident. And a cork pops, and out pours: years of pizza that he'll steal the last bite of from her plate, the underwear she'll take back out of his backpack, reviews of their dates that he will leave on her laptop screen. An endless string stretches from their lips, a plucked note inaudibly low.

Cassie is too world-weary at sixteen to believe he could be "the one" and too immediately in love to tell him he's not. His mouth could swallow her and does every time, sometimes in waves of cold ocean water, but more often summer rain that blurs a kiss into a benediction as the sky falls down around her.

Even gravity changes and her fist balled to knock on his door hesitates, falls, as if learning to orbit a new planet. It isn't his lips she remembers when shaking knees turn.

His hair. When he shows up at her door with a grimace and a rose, the slick length curtaining his face. She invites him in but sits at a distance, his veiled face flinching her legs. It's only when the hair is smooth behind shoulders that she can still.

She steps away from the door, a magnet repelled by nickel. Her arms want to find the place where they fit around him: she needs to orbit. There is only so much mass she can stand until it's critical, it's his lips she wants, the way they tremble, a kind of star that might explode.

She stretches around him like a tight-fitting dress, seams about to split. It's her lips that he reaches for when she stops shaking.

How seldom she thinks about the miracle of one foot stepping ahead of the other, of this taking her to or from or away, and how her feet are spreading them apart, how this distance could be surgery, how she can be a scalpel. She has nightmares about cutting herself open and finding her lungs have left for lack of speech.

diminuendo

Before their first real kiss: he called early to ask if she had a ride to the party. The next time, he called because she whined *This is an unreasonable hour* when he'd woken her up the last. By the third call, he had no reason at all. The phone ringing, an alarm clock every weekend, calling her name again and again. Her name.

She staggers down the steps of his apartment building. After one floor: knees shaking so hard she needs to grab the railing: after the second floor, one stiff arm isn't enough and Jell-O legs give up. She descends the third flight of steps sitting down, like she did her grandfather's steep stairway when she was five and afraid of falling face-first into the concrete basement. The stairwell echoes the shifting sound of her clothes against the tiles. In the entrance, she sits facing the intercom and stares at the name next to 407. His name.

The grey sky waits outside the entrance, clouds spitting at the glass. The grass early spring yellow, the frayed colour of a musty page. She digs for a book in her bag behind which to bury her face.

A cork pops.

new words for “over”

To make the perfect chocolate peanut butter milkshake requires all-natural peanut butter. The oil rises to the top when the sauce is done. I asked you to add butter to the corn and stir to taste. You are primetime Thursdays at 8 on the CW. Don't call me "Peanut." A smear of ice cream over your left eyebrow. Painting cat whiskers on your sister's face. You prefer your chili from an oversized brown mug. I was always the big spoon. Empty cans underneath your bed and the missing sneaker that gave them away. You said *I don't know how to taste the stir*. This is the last time you'll escape the blender. I am the David Letterman of complex beverages. Your ladle drops in too late. The steam of water mixed with tea tree oil exfoliates. You wanted to name our cat “Mug.” The pot boiling over. A phone number on my arm, half-erased. Green bananas ruined. You are the smell of garlic from the kitchen, oil rising.

staccato

Some nights she dreams of drowning, but more often than not, he's the one dead. Car accident or murder or cancer but no matter the cause, it's always sudden, one minute hers and the next in the hospital, goodbyes and flatlines. The Xerox paper white of the empty corridors and sheets, and blood flashes vivid red like television food colouring and corn syrup.

She used to wake up next to him still sleeping, chest heaving and hair spilt across the pillow, and the dim moon through the window, and the only red the pallor of his alarm clock's light tracing crevices between limbs and sheets. Now, she smothers in-out of panicked breath into pillow: she has never told him and never will.

90/60

She has avoided calling her mother for the past three days because she does not want to tell her mother that Derek broke up with her again. She has five missed calls. She knows that her mother would say, *Cassie, he wasn't _____ enough for you*, and right now she does not want to admit to knowing that, too. And last time when she decided to lie and say she felt sick, she had to put up with a half-hour lecture about taking her vitamins and eating three times a day and going to the doctor because it's possible she might be diabetic or cancerous or dead and she ended up making an appointment just because her mother kept asking and asking and it turned out she had low iron and now she has to take vitamins every day.

Instead, on the fourth day she e-mails her mother pretending she has left her phone at a friend's. Her mother replies, *I hope you're taking your vitamins*.

spine

if she could touch you again she would trace your spine. her arms reach to wrap hands around shoulderblades and slide between them like hips to feel slow-sloping curve from your neck's nape to back's hollow to slick fingertips with sheen of sweat to lick hands and taste salt to draw nerves uncoiling from the centre of you to every inch of skin to press places where those threads lit like flares where your dazzled flesh would flinch. she wants to push bone segments to feel the concrete of your column to know the marrow. she wants to confirm that your spine feels like his only that it doesn't it can't because there was a time when she took hours to memorize curve, skin, nerves, bones and in seconds she would remember fine hairs goosebumps under fingers are not the raised scar between vertebrae and shoulderblades that she can never find when she reaches past his neck.

if she could touch you again she would trace your spine. and it would feel like yours only but the reason she knows is because it would be too hard to face you again.

a change of tempo

Every time I walk into your bar, you're not there. I have been holding this seventh for measures and you never enter when you're supposed to, and everyone leads unresolved sometimes but could you at least be in tune? Only when I'm surrounded by your scent do I feel drunk. Look, it's not like I'm the tenor saxophone. I know you think so, but you never keep score and if we hadn't been rifling through pages we wouldn't have made this mess in the first place. And yeah, these are all dead trees, sheafs and reeds. If I knew how to press air through metal I might play easier with fewer keys. But I'm more of an oboe. Hard to form your lips around. Maybe if you took lessons, but listen, it can take years. Sometimes you need to hold down the Eb to tune your forked F. No, I never joke about fingering. I didn't go home with him. We danced together but he was from Wisconsin. Too many syllables and you'll muck up the meter. I'd prefer to conduct in a moderato. I play solo so there's no need to assemble an ensemble, okay? A little accompaniment, maybe. There's no need to follow like you're the next page because it's obvious that I'm your cover and what's inside isn't printed in ink. You tried a pianissimo, but I heard that accidental. You have to key your signatures or you'll ruin the whole concerto. And speaking of this stage, I wish you'd take the coda. We both hate Bach so it's not like the tempo would change. My embouchure is fine as is. It's you who gets tight-lipped. What, you're trying to learn the trumpet? There are support groups for that. But of course you want to end on a tritone.

voicemail

One night you and I were at the karaoke bar, you were not. The bedroom rumble that used to answer my calls pressed into her hair. And to you, I disappeared into the noise of someone's off-key voice. One of few times a receiver wasn't between us.

You moved your hand towards hers, turned your chin towards the collar of her shirt, buying twin gin-and-sevens at the empty stools while I spun beneath the coloured lights. I used to think you didn't like dancing. I used to not mind.

I wanted you because you wanted me. The minute your arm left my shoulders, you slipped. You weren't what I'd ordered. I liked the way you melted against my tongue. Cotton candy soft and neon-sweet.

And when you left, I was a kid who'd dropped an ice cream cone. But I'm not a kid anymore and I can buy my own. There are thousands of ice cream flavours in the world: chocolate peanut butter in chocolate-dipped waffle bowls and stracciatella gelato in sugar.

So I'm not leaving my new number. And you should remember my name.

hostage negotiations

Tucked away in the bottom drawer of my nightstand: your blue bunny. You've had it since the day you were born. Your mother told you when you were seventeen that your parents replaced it once with the exact same one you lost at the age of three. When you were fifteen it lost the carrot it holds between its tiny paws so you bought a new bunny and cut out its carrot and sewed it into your bunny's grip and gave the vegetable-free new one to your sister. You kept yours next to you on your pillow until you were twenty.

We lie on your bed. You have broken every promise you ever made so you reach across your pillow, pick up this bunny, say to me *This is a hostage*. You press it into my hands. *I can never abandon you. I will always come back for this.*

You don't. And the day I am in your apartment while you're out, I'm leaving my keys and your China Mieville books and your black and grey hooded sweaters in a box. I reach into my bag to stuff the bunny inside, but in the end hands hesitate and collect the ransom unpaid. Keep it in my nightstand drawer I can't open, buried under your pictures of the ocean, the new carrot snagged between the left paw and the sprung underwire of my old green bra.

clair de lune

The oldest restaurant in Paris. I have run so many time zones away from that for weeks I've slept through kettle corn and *Alien*, late nights in the backyard drinking spiked root beer in our tent and squeezing into a single sleeping bag. This is the last night: the yellow-gold glow of the overhead lights spilling out onto a balcony where iron chairs like trellises sit around a table for two, looking out over the Latin Quarter at dusk. I scrape Brie onto oblong bread. Next will be the foie gras, seared precisely to preserve the pink in the centre, and the crème brûlée, burnt sugar crisp and caramel brown on the surface. I'm eating alone and the fluffy whites of eggs sit heavy in my stomach, already overwhelmed by the pain au chocolat at lunch. I am bidding farewell to France by consuming enough to spend an ocean-crossing digesting. There is an empty vase in the centre of the table that holds a single rose. How romantic, I think, to be sitting here one breezy summer evening like this, and I picture myself in my black-and-white polka dot dress sharing this table and drinking this glass of wine, only that you aren't the one across from me. And it's now that I begin to understand you never will be.

moving parts

I dream that you rip me apart and I don't mean with words. Bound against your headboard, you tear away clothes like damp paper, pull hair, wrench my neck. Brown strands parting scalp and marking your pillows. And you bend to mark me, mouth biting sucking hard between shoulder and neck, hips grinding into mine. Our gears shift and you move me into sixth. The acceleration screeching. But when you engine growl my name there's a click and your breath hitch changes everything. I'm no longer dreaming and I wake to my mouth mangling my name like a new word in a foreign language. Caught on the tip of your tongue.

heart-shaped box

Every day without you a revolver with one round loaded. To remember pulls the trigger and I wait for the spinning barrel. I stop listening to the Nickelback you used to put on while we made out (no big loss). I watch *Fight Club* and *Die Hard* with someone else and wait for him to laugh or cheer, overwrite you. I skip hot peppers on pizza and never get my milkshakes from The Creamy Cow. I never watch *Supernatural* curled up on my bed and obviously never while eating strawberries. I buy new underwear sets, none of them blue or green.

There are only so many chambers to spin and eventually the bullet hits. When it does I'm standing outside with you in the pouring rain, your hands buried in my wet-slick hair and my hands digging into wet-hard denim at your hips; knowing we will peel off those clothes, will make love on your mattress, knowing we will step into the shower, that you will bury your hands in my steam-hot hair, that you will bury yourself in me again and again and again and again, knowing you will be buried.

The more I forget you the more I'm afraid there will be a hole in me, inexplicable. The more I forget the more I'm afraid the gun will go off and I'll know why. You always said you'd rather burn out than fade away and Neil Young aside I could never decide if I'd rather face both barrels or die of old age.

the other side of the world

A postcard from you. A picture of orca whales in Haro Strait. Two years since the last. You're sleeping on your brother's couch in Victoria. I don't know how you got my new address.

You saw the ocean and thought of the necklace you gave me in Digby, soaked in the Atlantic for luck. The opal rings we bought on the Princess of Acadia, when our tickets gave us the same last name. Mine. The day I slipped on kelp by the shore and washed barnacle-scraped shins in stinging salt water.

Somewhere on that other side of the world, we might still be inseparable, you write. Sitting on a dock, watching seal-watching ships, eating eggplant pizza picnics in the park and counting lighthouses.

I find those pictures in a drawer. I put them in an envelope.

reverb

It is the cold that keeps you up, lately. You rest the neck of the guitar against the pillows and it creates a body's silhouette on the far side of the bed. You roll over to the tuning pegs; it's not the shape you crave, but the warmth. The soft give of flesh between hip and rib where you would sling a restless leg in the middle of the night. Your thighs squeeze tense without hot skin slick between, limbs seeking something to surround. The instrument will not tug on sheets and blankets. When you run sleepless fingers over the fretboard it rings but the voice is metal thin, dispersing. The room quiet and the blue of the alarm clock's time too bright. Your comforter ends up a pile on the floor. Lately, it is the cold that keeps you up.

forgetting Derek

The way your nostrils flare in your sleep.

Chess. Your fingers lingering on rooks and bishops, teaching me Intermezzo and Windmill and Battery, my moves slow and awkward with strategy. Your genuine surprise the few times I beat you.

Cases of empties stacked in the corner of your room.

The scars on my arm from the time we were playfighting at the park and you pulled me down to you while I was climbing a tree and the bark left scrapes I can still barely see.

Washing your dishes at five in the morning because we'd fought and you fell asleep but I couldn't and I needed to do something and the running water made me feel like you wouldn't hear me crying though of course you didn't hear anything.

Going over to check that you were wearing green on St. Patrick's Day because of your blue-green colourblindness. Taking off your navy blue shirt.

Your friend at the photography show who said you should keep me because of the marks I'd left on your neck.

Wiping off your collar when you puked up onion rings on your 21st birthday.

The way you used to take my pizza and eat the last bite just so that I'd throw the box at your head.

The deliberately confusing scarf I made you with greens and blues and teals and turquoises dizzying but that you wore every winter.

The scars on your arms. You used to joke about them, sometimes. They were not like mine.

When we were trying to be friends and I dyed your hair, and you took off your shirt and bent your head over the bathtub and I combed the shower nozzle over your head and the water beaded on your bare back and then it didn't seem very much like we were trying to be friends.

The blue bunny's replacement carrot.

The first time I went to your house when you still lived with your mother and I saw your photographs on the wall and you explained depth of field and I said, *Oh*, and then I said, *Maybe you could take me shooting and teach me*, and you squeezed my hand.

Your deliberately mismatched black and white socks.

The pictures of me that you kept in albums that I only ever found out about when your sister took them out.

Teal paint because your favourite colours were always the ones you could claim were either and never be exactly wrong.

Watching you play *Halo* online in the bedroom while I pet the cat. Letting the cat sit on your controller hand so that you'd mess up.

The knives I dug out of your pockets and hid behind the trash bin under the sink.

Hedwig and the Angry Inch. This is not about you. I don't know if you've even seen it, but you bear a striking resemblance to Michael Pitt when you orgasm.

Your favourite *Rock Band* songs. My roommate can't play Expert drums the way you did and the missed rhythms of the backbeat always quaver my voice whenever I sing "Maps."

The hole you punched in the wall when you found out your father was back in rehab.

The green scarf you bought me for Christmas that actually matched my jacket.

The mornings you came home from nightshift and brought me a tealberry muffin and fed it to me piece by piece in bed before I left for work.

lay or lie

Some nights I don't think about you at all. I lose myself in Caleb and forget the way all flesh used to feel like your echo. His is loud singing, an open string ringing, plucked in nimble fingertips. Lips sleepwalk along curves and edges. Hips drive deep towards hollows vacated, a thumping rhythm reverberating in caverns of mouth.

Sometimes I lie in bed smelling of sweat and Stetson, wrapped naked in arms and running fingers along the ridges of spine. Learning bones, muscles – reaching for that spot at the edge of your right shoulderblade where a mole dangled like a flap of skin you'd rip off in the shower.

Some nights I don't think about you at all. I don't know why I reached for missing skin and post-coital bliss becomes:

how long can I sit in the bathroom

how long can I swallow

can I stop shaking

can I stop

can I

I lie in bed smelling him. Every part that's not yours, that never will be again. It's dark and hot and you're gone. But the morning comes in warm sheets, limbs firm around me, a sure kiss and *Did you sleep all right?* I won't think about my stiff neck when we woke up inches apart on your floor, the draft from your window, the way your hands shook when you boarded the bus, guitar case first.

a misunderstanding of conics

Freckles form rays in opposite directions down my legs, infinity past kneecaps. Geometry hook-and-eye fits. Algebra, you get caught at the clasp. Physics: let 'er rip. After this, let's get milk, love, bread, dildos, eggs, bananas. Let's get it ontologically, let's loll on onomatopoeia: oh-oh yes creak-bang yes and when you come, I shutter with release, 0.3" speed graining with haze of drink: $y = \text{margaritas flung back} + \text{one good measure shot}$ and your arm estimating my waist the whole stumble to bed. Make fuck to mean: or median, mode. I fashion the blankets around your shoulders, a parabola shifting on a two-dimensional plane. I am not a sum sleeping: I wait for morning to subtract.

a methodological analysis of dumpings, or: serial monogamy

1. In person. Ethan, during her lunch period. She isn't sure if she can call this method preferable or that much more personal. Afterwards she had to return to class and write a geometry exam and she was never very good at shapes, a fact later exploited by Alex the first time she tried to play Tetris against him.
2. Over the phone. Derek, the first time. This method suffers from the fact that she hasn't seen the person who dumped her, so it takes until the next time she does, with another girl and dressed in that shirt she bought him last Christmas and looking good in it because of her impeccable taste, that it really sinks in that the owner of said phone voice does not give a shit about her fashion sense. Also there's the embarrassing bit wherein said vocalist will hear when she starts to cry and/or cover the mouthpiece.
3. Over MSN. James. Less embarrassment here with the whole crying issue but why not just call? The MSN break-up implies that the other party might be also chatting with other people and liking Facebook statuses and reading articles on Cracked and listening to Green Day and hooking up with someone on webcam and in the end the embarrassment might be worth knowing that the person cares at least enough to give the break-up his undivided attention.
4. Over e-mail. Michael. It's hard to talk about platform sandal disasters in an e-mail. Or rather, one person can say everything about the unwanted height of shoes and then be done and not have to ever read the reply¹. Also she thinks e-mails can be chicken-shit missives, which is of course why when she's drunk or lonely she sends a lot of them to Derek's old e-mail address, which to the best of her knowledge he never checks.

¹ In her case, a thousand-word essay deconstructing his insecurities regarding shortness.

5. Changed Facebook status. The third time, Derek disconnected his phone and quit his job and got evicted and a couple of weeks later she found out he was single. Then in a relationship. With someone she'd never heard of. Caleb spat out his chicken fried rice laughing when she showed him but at the time she wrote a lot of very, very bad songs.

*Words cannot express
how eager I long
to not speak to you again;
I'd mount a chainsaw if it could cut you away
from me.*

*You wash the blood off your hands.
And I don't remind you to remember I exist.
Every solution doesn't equate, I forget to calculate
the way you always change your mind.*

*Here's my prediction:
you've got a predilection
for fucking things up.
I hope you've been watching stars align
'cause I was destined to dispose of you.*

*My skin innocent without your imprint.
I'm not confessing to living in your sin.
Every equation ends up nameless without the madness
that is wanting you.*

*Words cannot express
how eager I long
to not speak to you
again.*

6. In a text message. This one was Caleb, and after all that he'd mocked the Facebook approach. His method might seem comparable to the MSN-dump but actually it's worse because texting takes longer than typing so it takes forever to convey that he's a fuckwaddling douchecanoe that didn't even have the decency to call even though he's obviously on the phone and with a shitty plan every text costs fifteen cents plus if it had been on MSN, at least she could've settled in at home, whereas during the dump via text message one could be anywhere, up to and including at her best friend's wedding that he couldn't make it to right after she had watched the happy couple cut the cake. And that's why she's okay with being friends with James but for all intents has changed Douchecanoe's name.

feedback

It is the heat that keeps you up, lately. The slick, sticky stretch of skin that presses you into the sheets, a silhouette sheen left when you step out of the room, clammy feet peeling from hardwood floor. Cold showers in the middle of the night ease the sweat but remembered scent of him clings like a wet shirt to rigid bones. Those bones knew sleep: you curled cheek into flesh below shoulder, listened to heart slow, the gentle groan of sleep crossing lips. But the smell swells the ache between stiff hips, your nose buried in skin and sweat, the sweet mixture of stink and sex and Speed Stick. You shiver, limbs longing, unsure whether to want or run. It is the heat that keeps you up.

overdrive

Sex is another way to say God. On the first day, I came with condoms and change. The animal is mineral and the mineral is pressed into coin. I am falling out of sidewalks into your pocket. Please roll me amongst myself. I am burning up revved up in your head. This part is a sketch of your ingrown toenail. The pencil becomes that twist in your brow when you're almost almost. Break both my arms and sign the casts. I voted for the other guy but I'll respect your foreign policy. Open my mouth and let your name back in.

feminine hygiene

Her mother says she goes through boys like tampons, a comparison she admits might be apt if she actually used tampons, but something about jamming phallic white wads through a cardboard tube up there has never sat right with her. Nor could she ever sit right with one of them in. And she wishes her mother would say at the beginnings of relationships rather than at the end that she knew they would rip apart like wet cotton, though she obviously wouldn't have listened. But it would be decent of her mother to try, especially if she's going to criticize the choice of product afterwards. Her mother never did recommend a brand, but only kept Super Plus in the cabinet, which may be why her first tampon experience ended in more bleeding than when it began. She wishes boyfriends would be as simple to dispose of, not that she would ever try to flush one, but at least when you throw out your feminine hygiene products in those dainty paper bags in bathrooms they never make awkward phone calls to demand their Philip K. Dick back. Then again, she's always wondered about the etiquette of disposing uterine lining in a bachelor's apartment, and once wrapped up her pad in toilet paper and hid it in her purse to take home and throw out the next morning, which made her wallet smell like rotting meat but Michael had never had a sister, so she figures it was the best decision even though she uses the memory to trigger her gag reflex.

daylight savings

your hands in my hair and my head in your lap and I want to roll over and ask you what you meant when you said you didn't think of me that way anymore. because I know there are ways you think of me. I watch you watching me, tunnel vision through a crowd, flattened every time I smile at you. and I watch you watching someone else and wonder: would you still if I smiled at you now? and maybe – but I'm scared of pinning you down, or of wanting it the other way around. peeling time away between us like your shirt from summer skin and watching and wanting you to have ways with me that have little to do with thinking.

tums

she drinks him in like a glass of chocolate milk for the lactose intolerant: taking slow sips from the brim, delaying deep ache in her abdomen that she knows will come. she's mapped this path and she knows she doesn't need a second trip, a rehash of the addiction of jaw, throat, collarbones. air hisses through her teeth and the mayfly in her stomach shudders when he moves and there's half a smile, the corner of an eye. he's talking to her roommate and she can't decide how much time she has until she'll notice that if he were liquid, she would have already swallowed too fast and choked mid-gulp.

smog

We're alone in your apartment and I snap like the overstretched elastics you pull out of my drooping ponytails to fling across your room. I gather your hair in a hand and crush your mouth with mine, part your lips with my insistent tongue. Your hands yank at my loose strands and the kisses we share smell of the river in spring: polluted rot of failed industry. I'm tumbled and breathless in your bed, all business bankrupt, inhaling cancer against your suckled neck. I never expected you would eat away at me.

getting a grip

Derek's hands are small for a man's, not much larger than hers. He tells her there's a psychology to hand-holding, the gaps between fingers, the way knuckles curl, whether palms are side by side or one hand closes over the other – she loses track of words but he suddenly drops sentences when he squeezes through the latticework between them, grinning lopsided at the way they fit slick together like wet Spandex. He always did cling to her skin.

Alex's hands are disproportionately large for his body. She doesn't tell him about Derek's for fear he'll be insecure about the gaps. Instead she focuses on the way his long fingers tangle in her longer hair, trying not to lose track of words when she puts him on like her favourite Modest Mouse 2004 tour shirt, overworn and soft against her skin. When she looks in the mirror she wonders if she looks as good with him on.

string theory

You have so many knots. Alex smiles. *Are you always a sailor?*

Lately, she exhales, and as he's working out kinks she thinks about the knots and nots thus far between them, nights dancing at the Loop and oral sex and midnight *I miss you* texts she wants and has yet to get, as she tangles her feet in the sheets of his unmade bed.

He doesn't talk, just presses harder into her back she arches and leans into unravelling knots. Derek wanted to tie his with her and she can feel the tension under Alex's hands, a lump threaded into muscle where calloused fingers used to grasp. Alex has never played a guitar. His fingertips are Vaseline smooth.

Maybe you should lie down, he suggests, and she swings her legs around and plants flat on her chin, mouth smothered in pillows.

He edges up the hem of her shirt as his hands work the small of her back. She was so tightly wound that now with knots undone she's nodding off and it takes until the hooks of her bra to realize this might be a little bit naughty. Suddenly she's awake and wanting and every not of their turning hips his lips trailing down missed-missed calls kinks into his hands, his work ravelling.

Hands stop and slide back down, pulling her shirt into place. Her sigh evaporates into the pillowcase and she rolls over between his legs.

Later, she will write angry songs about strings.

*I gave you time, I made you rhyme
I wrote a song to fill the silence
because you're gone, I play it on and on
to the phone that won't ring
I sing:*

*I spend these nights alone listening to my dial tone, baby.
I spend these nights alone listening to my dial tone.*

*So give me a reason to stay, to not just walk away
'cause at the end of the day, walking is my groove.
So give me a reason to stay, to not just walk away
'cause at the end of the day, I keep hitting the snooze.*

*In my empty bed, I rest my head
trembling hands remembering edges of your body.
I erase your number with a shudder. My heart is racing,
I can't sleep and*

*I spend these nights alone listening to my dial tone, baby.
I spend these nights alone listening to my dial tone.*

*So give me a reason to stay, to not just walk away
'cause at the end of the day, I'm going to have to choose.
So give me a reason to stay, to not just walk away
'cause at the end of the day, I've got nothing to lose
but spending nights alone.*

a liberal application

You are a summer fling or a rock thrown through September's window. How was I to know we would start with schnapps? I slip sidelong from applicable alliterations in favour of spreading shivers across your body like whipped cream and you track the cursor across my screen, play coy when you realized I've seen. The hazel of your eyes is the hardest nut to crack.

da capo al fine

Old sheets bundled in the pine chest at the foot of the bed. You eat pretzels one side at a time, licking off the salt first. Sweat sponged. Last night's mouth inside my thigh and the soreness of bite. Searching the department store aisles for lavender 300 thread count to match. The Gillette Fusion left in the shower. How your morning hair parts on the right. Three Coors Light in the fridge unopened. Vomiting in your bathroom and the dress sent back dry-cleaned. A can of instant coffee too high on the shelf. Your collection of ties aligned by colour, width, pattern on the back of the bedroom door. Mismatched socks mixed into my laundry. The bottle of Evian on your bedside table.

blankets & sheets

She makes a list for him, all the beds she's been through:

1. Derek's twin, at his mother's. The first time he lifted her shirt and she flushed red, he dropped the hem when he realized Ethan hadn't. Their first was under blankets no clothes missionary but the lights were on and she's been able to recreate the squinted lines of his eyelids on the edges of her sheet music since.
2. Her own. James still lived with his parents and wasn't allowed alone with girls in his room. He drooled into her pillow in his sleep.
3. Michael's, always neatly made and seeming such a shame to waste. They never got under the sheets. He always got up immediately to shower as she fell asleep, waking up halfway through the night uncovered and shivering.
4. Derek's mattress on a floor in his near-bare room. No bedpost to notch but they found something to mark in every corner of his apartment: the living room coffee table, his roommate's recliner, the kitchen counter. But his half-bed was where they slept, and the red of his alarm clock made his leg slung over hers an orange haze.
5. Caleb's sunken double where he curled around her like a cat with a pouch of catnip.

Syllables claw like anxious cats at her throat. On some notiversaries all she can do is yowl names, and he'll never hear the way they screamed or sighed or whispered hers, fucking her or wanting to or whatever it is that came after. Her name elongates on his tongue, stretching hours into days and months, until she gives up giving up. But some nights, when he enters and she forgets his name, she wonders if these sheets will be another statistic:

6. Alex's.

And she scratches out sketches of his sunlit eyelids.

thirty-five years to life

Let's take this one sentence at a time.

I sentence you to a thousand lines that rhyme, internal or ex, and baby I don't care which way you lay me down as long as you don't mistake it for lying. Trying syntax scrambled to approximate I am hands on hips. If at first you don't succeed, try a whip. Stripping away adverbs and adjectives so that you verb and take me direct as an objection. A comparison is a simile is a metaphor is summer hay hair raised on the back on my neck. I won't object to hands behind my back if the rope holds fast and you hurry. Slip in to infinitively split me. Paragraphs might pace themselves better or we might

break

into lines. Make one imperative: let's take time at this one sentence.

transposition

First love. The words roll over her tongue like peanut oil. Ethan. The first boy who kissed her. The first boy who dumped her. She had no choice, gripped in his arms. After they broke up, she realized that she couldn't love someone who called her a slut for her pink lipstick or shirts cut dipping towards the suggestion of her breasts. He was not the buried city; his hands secure around her neck and the backs of her knees to be catalogued for further archaeology.

First love. The last time she tasted Derek he was tequila and the cigarettes he had promised he'd quit. In his mouth she remembers strawberries dipped in lemon meringue or the salt water of the Atlantic or the sharp mint that meant he'd been smoking but cared enough to want her not to know. She's tasted him for the first time over and over again, leaving and coming back to the same mouth. But faulty memory has rearranged the smoke and lime and there is too much confusion in the dating to decide which comes first.

First love. In every movie a girl is always ditching some guy at the altar to get back together with her old flame, but Cassie wishes hers would burn. Every time she falls in love he's a wrong turn. What does it mean if she's committed to the wrong exit, again and again? The signs when she returns to the highway are smeared in mud and she's afraid she's already made too many stops. What is there to give if she's already given it up? There are nights in bed with Alex when she can't help but wonder: what does he taste like? What does it mean that she can't remember? She kisses him to test but only catches lingering Aquafresh. *I want to fossilize you. I want you to have been before.* She says she wishes she'd met him when she was sixteen, but he just snorts, *You wouldn't have loved me then.*

evidence

Your cat climbs up on the rim of the bathtub. Pencil me in Wednesday, shade the skin between my breasts. Your hair a bat in the morning. I leave a note on the fridge to explain the missing clementines. Soaping myself where your hands should be. You put your glasses on the ledge of the window behind the bed, but wake up and forget. I leaf through sketches of eyes, none of them mine. The way you tilt your head and drink the last sip from the right. You make fun of my bubblemint gum, the percussion of my mouth. I flick water at her whiskers and she bats at fingers. Apples in the crisper wasted. I check for my name on your calendar. Clipping toenails to the beat of the popping chew. Jeans still belted on the floor. Milkshakes available upon request. Dracula and Mina last Hallowe'en framed on your desk. Bruises on my neck.

muscle memory

She never practices when he comes over. When her roommate lets him in, he'll hear the muffled notes of Bach Cello Suite No. 2 in D minor through her door but when he opens it unannounced her bow stops on the string, so quickly he can hear the squeak of fresh rosin.

Why won't you play in front of me? You play concerts all the time.

With more people it's easier. When it's just you, I'm afraid you'll think I'm a robot freak.

Still he inhales sharp at the way the wide body of the cello seems to strain her parted legs, how at any moment she might disappear into it when she's on the stage, when small hands stretch across fingerboard with awkward grace, contorted so that he can see every bone and tendon yearning for the next note, yet so rehearsed that her eyes close, and her arm shifts up and down the long wooden neck of the instrument that hums between her legs. Attending her concerts leaves him humming.

fermata

I want to pause before you,

but around you my sentences run on and on in a marathon about the red leggings I bought at the mall last Saturday or the purple tie I saw that you'd like and maybe we should go to see the latest Bruce Willis before it leaves theatres but I hate the Cineplex because the popcorn always makes me sick and getting frozen yogurt just isn't the same and you name the place for dinner I'd love to do Chinese again but the fried rice isn't making me any thinner and maybe it's better if we stay in and cook because I have everything we need to make pad Thai in the wok and we haven't eaten Thai together since that time you played me the soundtrack from Tron.

and I always hold you for three seconds too long.

canon in d

When I was fourteen, she says, facing away from him on the bed.

I still don't understand why you never told me. He reaches out for her hip.

Four out of five women are sexually assaulted before the age of 18. Her legs curl up towards her body, rumpling the sheets. Telling you, I become another statistic.

He wraps a hand around her waist. She doesn't move. He rubs her stomach over her shirt. You could never be a – statistic.

She muffles herself in a pillow. It was a long time ago.

Fucking bastard, he says. She folds her hand over his.

He was the photographer at my prom, she says. He had these wide blue eyes. I felt like I could see them through that lens. He was always aiming it at me.

He squeezes her hand. That's horrible.

I didn't tell my date, she continues, her voice tight. There are pictures of us – under the arch.

They look normal. But I just – every time I picked up a Coke that night, I could smell his scotch.

He squeezes her hand again, doesn't relinquish the pressure.

I'm so sorry, Cassie, he says.

That's why I don't like it when you wear corduroys, she says, swallowing.

learning Alex

Your taste in cheese. Smoked Gouda, Camembert, Asiago, Jalapeno Havarti, Swiss. A night with you and wine and bagel crisps is enough to get me through an eight-page essay or three hours of Suite No. 3 in C major.

You think I'm tuning you out but when you babble about a comic book or a line of toys or a video game I lose my place in what you're saying because your geekiness turns me on, so that blank smile on my face has nothing to do with putting up with you, and everything to do with wanting to put out.

You are easy to write songs about.

Am I in key?

Am I in tune, or a similar harmony? You see,

I have been speechless

because of you

our silence in unison.

You have given me

no reason to speak

so I quit.

Words have fallen short of

woefully inadequate and you

seem to think it was

something I said.

This is another utterance

of your name: oh, Alex,

this is another promise

we will never make.

Swimming. The sand on the beach gleaming white and you thought the heat would make the lake lukewarm but it was snow-cone cold, and when you got thigh deep I waded out in front of you and dove in. And when you finally walked in, I threw my hands around your neck and my legs around your waist and you tangled your hands in the seaweed of my hair and we kissed as if no one else was there, though of course Wasaga is a public beach and you've never said whether or not that's a fetish of yours.

You are an adorable drunk. But I don't fancy trying to hold your hair back if you throw up because it's not long enough to clasp in a ponytail nor short enough to stay out of the way. Try not to throw up.

Your soda trivia knowledge. TAB was the original Diet Coke. Crystal Pepsi flopped worse than Pepsi Blue. Mountain Dew White Out became available in Slurpee form in January 2011.

You are an expert at Tetris. You've even gotten the alternate ending. Not exactly a thing I like about you because you play when you're stressed: that you're good must indicate a lot of difficulties, which makes me want to give you hugs and cookies and, yeah, orgasms, so Tetris tangentially relates to the fact that I obviously care. See?

My mother likes you. My mother doesn't like anyone with a penis. But she likes you. Even after I told her we were dating she didn't immediately demand to know how often you wash your underwear.

You are a guy who keeps swirly multi-coloured straws in his cutlery drawer.

Derek used to say, *Palms should press together without any strain on the joints of the fingers*. I forget what else. But your palms touch mine when we hold hands.

Your hammering heart, because I feel it like a bass thump trapped against the speaker in a club and there is no one else who sounds like they're rattling out of their own chest.

Your leather jacket that your father gave you and that you claim would be the one thing you'd save from a burning building and that you Scotch-tape Remembrance Day poppies to, avoiding holes, and the three times you brought it to the shoe repair store to patch torn elbows.

The way you compose yourself at the beginning of a story. You say "Okay, so," and breathe in and steel your head with your brow tilted forward like a pickerel about to snatch the bait and then your hands come up and spread as if to approximate the size of a fish "*this* big" though you've never gone fishing but when you're telling a story, I miss stuffing breadcrumbs in the minnow traps.

When you sigh *Katherine* quiet with eyes averted, remembering that Valentine's Day, I want you to be married and deliriously happy in a Walkerville house with a Blackberry and children and wide bay windows. Not even with me. Which is not a reason I like you.

You like your steak rare. Honestly, I'm not sure how we'd ever work out if you didn't. My mother is always suspicious of vegetarians.

Your kid-in-a-candy-store attitude towards socks. Whenever we pass a rack in a department store carrying anything other than black or white or grey you need five pairs, especially if there are red or purple stripes or polka dots on them.

You read a bit slower than me so that when we're looking at something on Cracked, I can wait for your laughter to punctuate mine.

die hardest

Her top action movies include *Independence Day*, *Die Hard*, *Demolition Man*, *Braveheart*, everything before CGI took over fight sequences but after wires and pyrotechnics. She makes big bowls of popcorn in an old pot with the bottom scratched and singed, melts butter from chunks in the fridge. Her favourites are the wisecracking heroes in tight shirts who save their wives, daughters, and on-off love interests from aliens and terrorists and boredom. She points out their gun-toting, sword-slinging resolve, and she rolls her eyes when he won't choose the night's restaurant even though she has the chicken chow mein picked out, until it almost seems like she might leave him any day for Bruce Willis or a convincing lookalike. But then, every once upon a dreary Sunday when he holes up in bed sickly and world-weary, she shows up with a tray of spicy tomato soup and extra crackers and so that he'll know why she wants him to watch with her. And every so often, he wears a tight shirt.

head over feet

Cassie's favourite of her own features is her feet, which is ironic since they're technically deformed: her arches are too high and she's supposed to wear orthopaedic shoes, but when she was diagnosed at fourteen her mother said those were too expensive so instead she has gel insoles, which Cassie can't afford to replace with OSAP, and it's inconvenient when she flies to performances in the U.S. because the TSA thinks they're bombs so she has to pay to check her luggage or buy new ones when she gets where she's going. Also she has a hard time wearing heels so most of the time and especially when she goes out where other girls are dressed up she looks shorter than she actually is, which is already short enough. Each of her boyfriends has declared her height cute without fail – Derek declared her “fun size” – but Alex also never fails to make fun of her when she needs a step stool to get Nesquik down from the top shelf or to stand on her tiptoes to kiss him. Cassie's toes make up for the thinness of her soles because they splay out wide and she can't wear shoes that are slim or pointy because she'll get blisters, and since most women's shoes in a size 6 have narrow toes and heels, shoe-shopping is a special form of torture.

But Cassie's favourite feature is her feet. Her awkwardly-splayed toes are long like fingers, and she can pick up her shirts off the floor with them. Her feet appear lengthy because they're so slender. The curve from pad to heel like an hourglass. When she curls her toes she can see all the bones moving, and she likes the bony bump of her ankle, like a hip. To enhance the sexiness, she shaves the hairs that grow on the knuckle of her big toe and paints her toenails flashy fuchsia and blueberry although she gets cold easily and almost always wears socks.

One day, rationalizing her preference and wiggling her toes at Alex, he says, *This explains a lot about your previous taste in men.*

e-cacophony

She says, *I suck at chess. I have no idea how to think ahead*, but it's inaccurate: she has no use for boards and pieces but with hearts in hand she always has trump, her next conquest a trick about to be won. She catches red hands clicking for relationship statuses and checking interests, wall-posting conversation starters: Red Hot Chili Peppers and Ong Bak. Contact. And sometimes Freud slips and she trips conversation with her boyfriend's love of orange Crush, his opinion on The White Stripes break-up, unsure if she's reminding them or herself of the friendzone, that it's just talk. After all, she's usually the one dumped so being first to move on is justified, is justice, is Justin single? No matter how many times she closes the browser window she can't imagine Alex different, a variable fixed to hers as equations change: his name under her profile picture as the arithmetic shifts, *in a relationship* to *engaged* to *married*. But she ignores inbox messages, draws him in shapes too big for the page, elongates for the ray in a continuum of segments.

sagittarius

She gets an e-mail from Derek on her birthday.

from Derek <dudewearingpants@hotmail.com>
 To Cassie <sictransitgloria@gmail.com>
 Date 27 November 2009 20:26 27/11/2009
 mailed-by hotmail.com
 Signed by gmail.com

I'm so sorry.

Love always.

She leaves her own party in her own house, her roommate distracted by the attempt to tongue a Jell-O shot out of a stubborn plastic cup and her best friend inebriated, babbling into Andrea's hair, and a group of people crowd around Antoine Dodson yet again as she slips out of the living room. Alex finds her an hour later in the downstairs bathroom, curled up across from the bathtub playing Final Fantasy I on her iPhone.

I don't know if you've noticed, he says, but it's your birthday. There's even a party.

They only came for the black forest cake, she mumbles.

The right side of his mouth quirks. *What are you doing down here, hon?*

She delays him for the space of an enormous sigh, amplified by the acoustics of the bathroom walls. *Derek remembered my birthday.*

What Cassie loves about Alex can be summed up in the fact that he grimaces at the name then sinks down across from her against the bathtub. He never sits on the floor unless it's in front of her. What Cassie hates about Alex can be summed up in the fact that he knows how to make her talk.

He said he was sorry, she says. Her voice dies before the shower can catch its echo.

Alex pulls her head towards his shoulder.

I'm sorry, she tells his neck.

worse than Bach

He tells his friends the way I snore is cute. He throws away pop cans. He takes so long to read menus that the waitress always has to come back twice. He owns one polo shirt in black, red, and forest green. He swallows whole mouthfuls of M&Ms. He clips his toenails over the coffee table. He never ties his shoes. He wears underwear with Santas on them. Year-round. He prefers his steak well done. He peruses channels with the attention span of a goldfish. He buys new glasses and gets the exact same frames. He slathers mayonnaise on every sandwich. He insists his favourite colour is black. He takes five minutes to gel his hair. He always pronounces espresso *expresso*. His signature is just his name, written.

functions of a girlfriend

To remember to kiss you goodbye.

To buy gifts you want, regardless of expense (the time we were in the music store, and you tried out that Stratocaster and you were paycheque-to-paycheque-broke and we both knew that if you left it to the next, you'd come back and it'd be gone and they wouldn't put it on hold).

Gifts you *want*. Your best friend once had a girlfriend buy him a set of wrenches for Christmas. He has never fixed anything in his life. They broke up before the New Year. He still has the wrenches.

To do the laundry, but not always, and not if you're going to take it for granted and start expecting it all the time like you're a kid.¹

~~To check your pockets for knives.²~~

To make jokes at your expense, but in an encouraging way.

Encouragement is key. Your best friend jokes about your ignorance of all sports, your long hair, your tight shirts, and the probable cumulative effect of these things on your sexual orientation. Not incredibly helpful before a job interview or high school reunion, whereas my suggestion that your face might look better without the imitation of Sidney Crosby's playoff beard might have been confusing but proved ultimately helpful in getting the network administrator job.

¹ And I swear to God if you keep taking off your socks on the couch and leaving them on the living room floor –

² No one should have to do this for anyone. ~~I did it for Derek.~~

To make you dinner sometimes, but only if you'll also

- a) make me Thai Shrimp Curry with steamed rice
- b) buy shrimp, coconut milk, red curry paste, lemon grass, fish sauce, brown sugar, scallions, water chestnut, crimini mushrooms, basil, mint, lime, jasmine rice
- c) do the dishes afterwards
- d) all of the above.

To feed Elektra while you're out of town.³

To throw impromptu early morning dance parties in your bedroom, so that when you step out of the shower hating Wednesdays unable to find your belt, you find yourself instead belting Queen in your underpants.

To defend your sexual honour (not by talking about your sex life, but by smiling in a certain coy way when your friends joke about it. The smile has to be perfectly timed and sly, or else the amusement will be interpreted as a lack of satisfaction. Providing details re: bondage, backwards cowgirl or blowing your morning wood, however, is trying too hard and will likely result in nitpicking of said acts, as your ex Katherine proved).

To at least attempt to listen to the endless tirades of information about your obsessions, even if those unlikely fixations include:

- a) *Amon Amarth*
- b) *Daredevil* comics⁴
- c) re-re-watching the 1922 *Nosferatu*
- d) no-scope sniping in *Halo* online
- e) 4chan /b threads
- f) all of the above.

³ The cat likes *me* better, anyway.

⁴ Wolverine would undoubtedly win in a fight.

To remember your favourite cereal, so that when I go to the store to get bread and eggs and you've completely forgotten you needed Cinnamon Toast Crunch, I'll know to get it.

To be insecure and say I feel fat sometimes, so that you can be gallant and tell me I'm beautiful and sexy, especially in that dress.

Sometimes is pivotal here. If I start to do this all the time, the words will bloat my face and I would look a little fat, then (and become as annoying as Katherine).

To clean Elektra's litter box (really, she's more *my* cat than yours. Elektra rubs against my legs whenever she comes in the door and meows and jumps up on my lap and will even stand on her hind legs for treats. The cat will not do any of these things for you).

To impress your mother by making homemade lasagne whenever she comes over.⁵

To get along with your friends (even your best friend, who repeatedly asks me why I'm putting up with you, until I answer, *Oh, I have my reasons*, with the same coy smile most often used to defend your sexual honour, which results in a resounding slap on your back that reminds you why you love me, even when I tell you later that all your friends act like 12-year-olds).

⁵ Your mother never says anything but *Oh it's excellent, thank you so much for dinner!* but you told me that secretly she's a little angry that your father likes it better than hers.

bathroom dialogues

He is crouched in front of the mirror over the sink, electric shaver buzz and the sound of her electric toothbrush echoing off the bathroom walls. They are immersed in hygienic machinery. *What would you do if I wasn't yours?* she gargles through toothpaste. He stops to analyze his goatee and she stops to spit.

Cry. Unhesitant.

How do you know? but he's already trimming his sideburns.

She asks him to pass the shampoo in the shower. *See how pushy and demanding I am?* she jokes.

He turns back from the falling water, frowns. *What did you just say?*

What did you just hear?

A brow furrows. *Would you push me into a dandelion?*

A beat. *Well. Would you?*

arpeggios

We should buy one of those old houses on Askin, she says, sponging the residue of milk from the bottom of a glass. You know the ones I like. With the shutters. You can program and I can teach and we can lead boring lives and love each other for years and years and years.

He sets down his dishtowel. *Since when do you want to lead a boring life?*

I want, she says, tucking back her hair with a sudsy hand, to grow red roses in the front yard.

And make roast beef. And to separate whites and colours and make grocery lists and have poker nights and pay utility bills and to clean your hair out of the shower drain.

I wouldn't leave hair in the shower drain.

She puts down her sponge, flicks water off her hands. *You know what I mean.*

He strokes her hair. *And I wouldn't make you do all the laundry.*

Are you even listening?

Yes. He sighs. I thought you wanted to move to Toronto.

I thought you didn't.

Neither of us has the money. Since when do you want to teach? What about being a busking cellist in the streets of Paris?

That might be a little unrealistic.

My favourite thing about you.

But you said you wanted to live here. I'd never see you again.

I'd rather you be happy.

She takes plates out of the dish rack and opens the cupboard. He locks his arms around her belly from behind her, kisses her jaw. She puts the plates in, slackens, drops her arms, closes her eyes. Imagines facing the grey light through a shuttered window, sitting at her cello. Listening to the clang of him doing dishes downstairs, the running water mingling with the sound of rain outside. She doesn't bring up the roast beef again, but the next time she walks down Askin, she picks out their house. It's dark brown brick with forest green shutters, the paint slightly chipped, the irises out front poorly tended, but she can repaint it, can plant the roses.

resolving the chord

You think in albums and triptychs. Pink Floyd's *Greatest Hits* is an insult to conceptual composition, you mention to Alex, and he plays *Dark Side of the Moon*, glad you finally agree about something. You neglect to mention your preference for *Wish You Were Here*. In the spirit of the psychedelic, you decorate scoops of ice cream with Skittles, mashing the colours in.

There's always pressure on the last movement and you'd rather not end in Ewoks. *I don't want our future to be anticlimactic*, you say to Alex, but you can tell he's not much of a *Star Wars* fan. You coax him into playing your made-up drinking game: one shot for every limb lost. Are there a lot in the original series, or is it the cheap tequila?

You put him to bed snoring but when you climb over him he grabs your hand. *Alex?* you murmur, but he curls toward the edge of the bed, your fingers unrelinquished. You curve behind him, test a leg slung in the space between ribcage and hip, find the fit.

In the morning, you tell him: secondhand smoke and the Atlantic. The taste of tequila and strawberries and mint and how they hesitate your kiss. Your awkwardness watching any movie starring Michael Pitt. The way you never just bite into a muffin and why all your new lingerie is purple and red. The blue bunny. Knives removed from pockets and the letter sent last week.

You tell him, up to and including the gaps between your fingers and the fact that Derek signs everything "love." At that, you stop. You've been crying and Alex hasn't eaten any of his omelette, even though for the first time you didn't break it when you folded.

Okay, says Alex.

Okay? you ask.

Okay, he repeats, squeezing your fingers.

genre & perspective in *last night's mouth*

the poet & prose

My MA thesis manuscript is a novella in self-contained pieces of prose-poetry.

I knew as I wrote this thesis that the first question my audience might have would be “Why?” I myself have never read anything like *last night's mouth*, so I have no precedent for creating it, nor could I be sure while I wrote it what effect its strange genre would achieve. I can freely admit that as it unfolded, I did not always know why I wrote the form it became. The best method I can conceive of to better my readers' understanding of this project is to begin where I started, and lead readers through the same experiences of genre I had while writing the text.

I initially decided I wanted to marry my lyrical sensibilities to the notion of an extended narrative, figuring that would be the simplest way to create a unified work of poetry. When I started writing, I started with the confessional lyric mode, and more recently turned to prose poetry – also emotionally confessional, but also more often in second- or third-person, and focused more on sketches of characters or portraits of moments. Melding these genres – finding a space somewhere between the confessional and the sketch – seemed to me an excellent way to portray the internal evolution of a character over the course of a narrative, which was my initial concept for *last night's mouth*.

why narrative?

“To tell a story is to find a way – sometimes the only way – of *knowing* one’s world. But since, in the view of many of our poets, as in the view of comparable fiction writers, the world just doesn’t – indeed shouldn’t – make sense, the *gnosis* which is narration remains fragmentary.”

– Perloff, “From image to action: the return of story in postmodern poetry”

My goal in *last night’s mouth* is, ultimately, to tell a story: not one with a traditional beginning, middle or end, not one of intense complexity, and ultimately not one driven by myriad plot twists and events – but nonetheless a story in which a reader might find and *know* feelings to which (s)he can relate. Though *last night’s mouth* employs specificity at the level of detail – Cassie’s relationships with Derek, Alex, and every lover in between are rooted in particulars – it is the intention of the work to create a universal sense of the journey of the relationship and self-discovery, what social psychologists (via Erikson) might call the “intimacy vs. isolation” struggle within the eight stages of psychosocial development; Erikson’s theory articulates that this struggle is the main conflict that drives the development of identity through young adult years (Macionis and Gerber, 117).¹ In all of the stages of development proposed by Erikson, the individual seeks to reconcile their behaviours and sense of self with the influence of the outside world. In the stage of intimacy vs. isolation, the struggle is less widely societal and more interpersonal, focused on the creation of partner-bonds, close friendships, and family units. It is this interpersonal focus I seek to portray in *last night’s mouth*, as Cassie reveals her personality through her interactions with lovers (and, to some lesser extent, with her mother). For

¹ Each of Erikson’s stages presents a conflict that an individual faces to establish their identity as s/he develops. By mastering a conflict, the individual emerges with a virtue; in the case of “intimacy vs. isolation,” the virtue is “love.”

example, in “feminine hygiene,” her avoidance of uncomfortable situations that precipitates her bringing home her pad suggests her difficulty with broaching awkward topics, which she must later overcome in order to share her experiences of Derek with Alex. Additionally, her tendency to fling projectiles in “refrain” and “forgetting Derek” indicates her short-tempered, at times impatient personality, something that she needs to learn to control as she eases into a less tempestuous relationship with Alex; in the end, she has cause to appreciate his patience with her, as he endures her litany of Derek with grace.

As Cassie learns the intricacies of physical and emotional closeness and trust (and, indeed, where she may be misplacing hers), it is my hope that her voice speaks to other young women who have been in her position, and that her sense of loss and cynicism, though they fracture her persona, resonate to some extent as, if not always ideal qualities, perhaps as genuine ones. Also, though Cassie may not resolve her own “struggle” – by the end of the narrative, doubt still lingers as to the perseverance of her relationship with Alex – I aim to make apparent that her attempts at intimacy bring her closer to the ability to understand her romantic preferences and tendencies and to remove herself from the self-inflicted isolation her negative perspective on relationships creates.

As Cassie explores her identity through the flux between intimacy and isolation, I intend for the reader to interact with this struggle through the text. A reader’s method of interpreting and interacting with the story is significant, as his/her level of personal connection to the text is part of what defines narrative. As Aaron Shurin suggests in “Narrativity”:

Here in this dialogue writing relies less on information, as Walter Benjamin shows, than on the moral power of interpretation, “to keep a story free from explanation.” It is left up to the reader to “interpret things the way he understand them, and thus narrative achieves an

amplitude that information lacks.” (Shurin, 19 – 20)

Narrative is the subjective or personal rather than objective and detached fact; story is a method of filtering a sequence of events through personal experience, which is how it achieves its connection with the reader. However the idea of narrative functions in a text, it should engage a reader in a way that information does not by allowing the readers a method by which they can interact with and relate to the story.

why poetry?

In the poetry of the modernist lyric mode there existed a great divide between the notion of poetry and that of storytelling:

...*story* held little interest for early twentieth-century poets, at least in Anglo-America. It was not spurned because poets like Yeats or Stevens or Crane questioned, as postmodern writers have increasingly done, the very nature of the *order* that a systematic plot structure implies. Rather, the poetry of modernism was wedded to a sharp distinction between *poetry*, the lyric expression of personal emotions, and *prose*, the language of fiction, of the novel. (Perloff, 158)

The separation of these two concepts necessitates that these two forms appeal to different readerships; as Perloff writes, “The reader of fiction is put off by [poetry’s] verse form, the reader of poetry by [prose’s] dissipation of intensity” (158). Yet, as Perloff also notes, these concepts preclude the notion that poetry might be used to tell stories, seeming to leave the idea of “plot” to longer works. As Poe deems it, a long poem is not a poem, for “a poem is such, only inasmuch as it intensely excites, by elevating, the soul; and all intense excitements are, through a psychal necessity, brief” (Poe, “The Philosophy of Composition”). Even were this statement true – and I think those readers of Kroetsch’s *Completed Field Notes* might find it not to be so² – I would ask, what about brevity prevents a story from being told? Why does narrative not fit within the succinctness and intensity of a poem?

² Poems such as “Seed Catalogue,” though lengthy, are intensely emotional and personal, and I would argue exciting.

creating the narrative

The concept of story is not one that requires length, but rather perceptible movement – a transition, usually for a character, from one situation to another. As Franzosi suggests in “Narrative Analysis,”

It is the story – the chronological succession of events – that provides the basic building blocks of narrative. Without story there is no narrative. "The presence or absence of a story is what distinguishes narrative from non-narrative texts" (Rimmon-Kenan 1983:15). "A story may be thought of as a journey from one situation to another," wrote Tomashevski (Tomashevski 1965:70). A story, in other words, implies a change in situations as expressed by the unfolding of a specific sequence of events. (Franzosi, 520)

In other words, a narrative at its most basic level is a plot, though plot does not necessarily convey meaning all on its own. The plot forms the “basic building blocks,” but the events must also be united by a particular chronology or concept. If there are many characters, there may be a single setting that unites them; if there are many settings, there may be shared traits between main characters that give the story coherence. Events given an order do not necessarily have a context; an author must establish coherence between the events of the sequence:

Not every sequence of any two temporally ordered events can constitute a story (Rimmon-Kenan 1983:19). Two sentences such as "Joan took her plane at 5 pm" and "Peter drove to the airport at 8 pm" would constitute a story only if later sentences established a logical connection between those two sentences, such as "They had both been looking forward to spending the weekend together." The temporal ordering of events in a story is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the emergence of a story. The events in the sequence must be bound together by some principles of logical coherence. (Franzosi, 520 – 521)

In this example, it is Joan and Peter's relationship that provides a context for their actions. In my thesis, I use Cassie's memories and observations to contextualize her actions and form the story. As a reader might expect Joan and Peter's relationship to move forward and create the narrative, Cassie's transitions through relationships and her shifting attitude towards intimacy change and form her narrative. I attempt to contextualize the changes in her attitude by creating repetition and juxtaposition that makes her movement clearer while preserving her manner of thinking; for example, companion pieces like "forgetting Derek" and "learning Alex" are the same sort of list, and both create sentimental and affectionate portraits, but the attitudes they portray are most obviously different and punctuate the shift in Cassie's orientation with regard to love.

Creating the narrative through a sequence of poetry is a way to take various disparate elements – a fragmentary sense of representing the world, as Perloff might put it – and convey a sense of coherence that allows an exploration of what is tangible and intangible about relationships, intimacy, and language:

Narrative subsumes models. It is a means of comprehending the transformations of elements in the process of existing that is too little understood in theoretical terms. It is not the only nor an entirely comprehensive mode of thinking, but it does present necessary dynamic processes for thought to follow. In terms of the model-view of the world, a narrative offers a better means of representing discontinuous unstable processes than any system-model can. However, that way of understanding narratives still allows the authority of the division into unknowable reality and knowable representations.

(Middleton, 56)

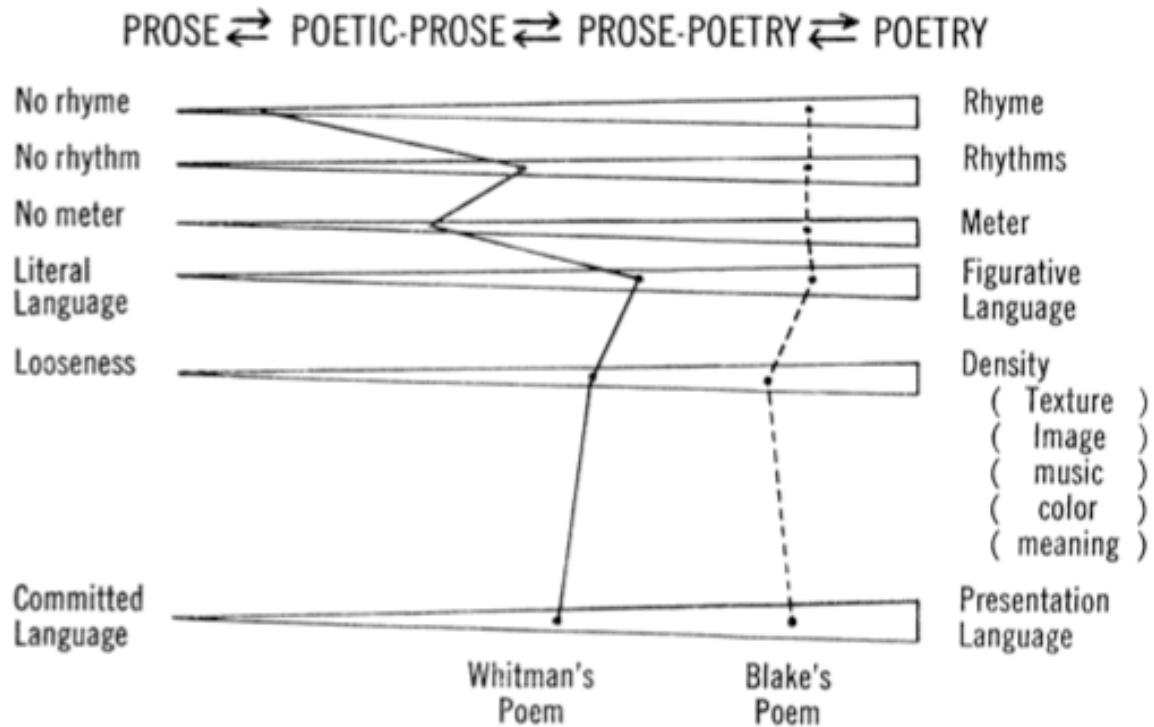
Cassie's struggle to reconcile her need for intimacy with the hurt she has experienced through that vulnerable position forms a contradiction that fractures the way she narrates herself, her

point-of-view, her method of address (her “you” is sometimes herself, sometimes Derek, sometimes Alex, sometimes perhaps both men or neither), and at times her relationship to language, rendering her words incoherent or out of context. However, the overall narrative of moving from one relationship to the next casts a comprehensible model on her behaviour that allows readers to divide interpretations of her into knowable representations (the traits of the characters, their experiences together that she presents) and unknowable realities (her conflicted feelings and the future of her relationship with Alex). For example, in “the other side of the world,” Cassie describes Derek’s postcard and the particular experiences he recounts and that she remembers; these representations of their past relationship are tangible, knowable, despite the fact that their relationship is over. However, when she says, “I find those pictures in a drawer. I put them in an envelope,” she presents the unknowable reality of her current feelings to the reader; her response to Derek, as it is a response, must mean something for her, but that meaning is left unclear and ultimately unknowable.

why prose poetry?

In order to distinguish the difference between prose and poetry, many theorists oppose them, deeming their expressive interests entirely different. For example, F.N. Scott suggests, “poetry is communication in language for expression’s sake; prose is expression in language for communication’s sake” (Scott qtd. in Lotspeich, 295). His suggestion is that in poetry, the yearning to self-express is predominant; it would seem that he is drawing from the model of the lyric poem. His idea of prose seems almost equally polarizing, suggesting an idea of prose as communication only – as perhaps the non-fictitious kind of “information.” The problem with this view of prose, as I see it, is that it seems to strip storytelling in prose of a deeper meaning, of a certain relatability; while the idea of communicated expression allows for the idea of the poem as predominantly sentimental, rooted in emotional experience shared by the poet and the reader, the idea of expressed communication seems to create a one-way relationship between writer and reader, a notion contradicted by Benjamin’s concept of the storyteller: “The storyteller takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale” (Benjamin, V). Benjamin’s exchange between writer and reader implies a notion not simply communicated, but shared.

Separating prose and poetry with an idea of their purpose in mind seems problematic, as not all poetry is the self-expressive lyric, and not all prose seeks merely to communicate an idea; both have varying applications. Perhaps a slightly more useful (though still problematic) model is presented later by Deutsch, who posits that prose and poetry position themselves on a spectrum. On his spectrum, they are still diametrically opposed, of course; however, this spectrum allows for a middle ground in between the two notions:



(Deutsch, 38)

Deutsch writes in elaboration upon his chart:

The categories are self-explanatory with the exception, perhaps, of 'language of presentation' and 'language of commitment.' It was Paul Valery, I believe, who pointed out very clearly that in an extreme prose the words "die" as soon as they are read because they act only long enough to indicate the situation or scene or meaning beyond them, leaving no complex of permanent overtone. The words of poetry are really presentational symbols remaining, if it is good poetry, "inexhaustible objects of meditation," things in themselves. (Deutsch, 38 – 39)

Deutsch presents an idea of prose that does nothing more than convey plot that, as a movement or transition between states of being, seems to exist only long enough to explain itself before necessarily moving forward. Poetry, in his example, provides phrases of greater resonance and

deliberation; not necessarily pushing the reader forward so that the experience is a push from point A to B, but an experience perhaps analogous to orchestral music, where some notes and themes may sustain and perpetuate themselves while others come and go. While it seems a lofty notion that any prose or poetry would live up to these exact specifications, by allowing variation on a spectrum without necessarily denying a work's poetic or prosaic nature, Deutsch allows for some middle ground where other theories separating these notions might not.

Deutsch's theory also allows for genres between these polar notions of poetry and prose to exist, but how to strike a balance? Meter seems self-explanatory and hardly a notion for a spectrum – while it might be more strict or less, it either exists or does not – but how to create a piece that has a moderate amount of rhyme, rhythm, metaphor (as I interpret figural language), tautness (density), and resonance (poetry as object of reflection)? I would posit that these notions of separating prose and poetry are problematic, too dramatic a take on the separation. Though a prose poem will usually not employ a meter, and may benefit or not from rhyme, in my experience, a good prose poem employs all of rhythm, metaphor, tautness, and resonance. I have tried to communicate this concept of the prose poem in *last night's mouth*. My first priority in the style of the work is to convey concrete poetic images in rhythmic language that resonate while communicating aspects of narrative and character. For example, in “portrait,” Cassie frames Derek's sleeping face in her hands using the light from the window – a concrete image. Yet this image conveys an aspect of her character that readers experience over and over again – Cassie's attempts to encapsulate and define lovers and situations in order to work through her emotions regarding them; in “forgetting Derek,” she makes a list of things about Derek in an attempt to forget him. However, “portrait” also portrays a disconnect between Derek and Cassie, as they look at each other but never meet the others' gaze.

shifting point-of-view & the language of address

The narrative point-of-view shifts often in *last night's mouth*, utilizing variations on first, second, and third person. From all of these perspectives, the protagonist is the focus or subject (in a first-person narrative, she is the I; in a second-person, she is the you; in the third-person, the piece is limited to her perspective). These changes in perspective are a formal way of representing Cassie's internal struggle to take ownership of her hurt over the break-up with Derek, and to activate her own agency to move forward. These changes in perspective serve to delineate Cassie's intimacy/isolation struggle; the formal shifts mirror her method of inhabiting herself and thus portray how her method of relating to others is problematic. A third-person Cassie observes her situation but distances herself from emotional engagement in it, preventing herself from growth through detachment. A first-person Cassie emotionally inhabits her circumstances, but is often fragmented, incoherent, or self-pitying, inhibiting her awareness of herself. Her shift between these states of mind mirrors her intimacy vs. isolation struggle; being the thoroughly intimate "I" is difficult because of the pain and mistrust that Cassie inhabits, whereas the third-person Cassie is to some degree isolated from her feelings, and unable to move forward. While intimacy is the goal, neither the first- or third-person Cassie can achieve this.

To elaborate on the concept of Cassie's struggle between these two perspectives, consider the third-person Cassie of "90/60," who is both physically and narratively distancing herself from her emotional issues – by not speaking to her mother, and by describing her mother's lecture rather than her relationship problems – but she also seems aware that her failed relationship has something to do with Derek's failures, which at other times she might not recognize. The third-person Cassie is also to some degree stylistically linear; her sentences and thoughts are likely to follow each other. In comparison, the first-person Cassie of pieces such as

“wait” is deeply entrenched in her feelings of Derek’s simultaneous physical absence and emotional presence, but she provides or recognizes no reason for this; she inhabits her troubled emotions without a way to resolve her sadness. The first-person Cassie here and elsewhere expresses herself less linearly and more so thematically, as the piece “a change of tempo,” that convey her frustration through musical metaphor, or “da capo al fine,” which repeats the theme of absence/presence, but in terms of letting go of the relics of one absent lover to embrace items that indicate the presence of the new.

Another way in which Cassie’s narrative shifts mirror her internal issues is in the use of “you” as an address in many of her first-person narrative selections. The use of “you” creates a slippage between Derek, Alex, and her other partners; while it is usually contextually evident whom she may be addressing, sometimes she is addressing both or all, and the subject of “you” continually changes. This use of “you” as the partner-addressee reflects Cassie’s struggle not to hate Alex because of Derek, or to love Derek because of Alex; she has trouble finding a middle ground between deciding that love is positive, so all figures of love in her life must be so – or that love is difficult, so all the men in her life have caused only negative experiences.

Cassie also occasionally uses the second-person form of address to address herself, which is a variation of perspective called the second-person personal. Stephanie Girard writes on a second-person text *Bright Lights, Big City* on the way in which the second-person personal conveys a dual-sided narrator: “the narrator is simultaneously outside and inside himself; he is both the seeing subject and the object seen” (170). For *Bright Lights, Big City*, the narrator addressing himself is a way of portraying a character in some way fractured: “That the narrator speaks of himself in the second person is evidence of his split consciousness, of his inability or unwillingness to locate himself within an identity” (169). However, I would argue that in my

narrative, self-address creates not a split, but a joining of Cassie's identity; it is Cassie's method by which she can reconcile her need to emote (in the first-person) with her need to analyze (in the third-person).

The relatively rare second-person Cassie turns the language of address she uses so often in second-person on herself; while her "you" address communicates her confusion in communicating with her partners, her "you" as self-address comes with a clarity that creates a middle ground between her impersonal and intimate self, creating a coherence and self-awareness in her emotional engagement. The "you" directed outwards is plural, indeterminate, alternately accusatory and sentimental: Cassie's frustrated outward way of dealing with her relationships. The "you" directed inwards is singular, directed, emotionally contemplative, Cassie's internal method of dealing with herself. For example, in the companion poems "reverb" and "feedback," Cassie as "you" is both capable of engaging in her current emotional state – her experience of cold and heat elaborates into her remembrances of sensations with lovers – but also seems aware of what she is experiencing; she knows in "reverb" that she cannot replace the intimacy of a lover with an instrument, and she is aware in "feedback" of the danger of her desire, leaving her uncertain of whether to embrace it or try to distance herself from it. The "you" here represents a space in between Cassie's alternate detachment and overemotional narration; with Cassie as both addressor and addressee of narrative, she marries these sides of herself together.

a happy marriage?

Contextually, I had some difficulty locating a work that positioned itself exactly in the genre of *last night's mouth*. While I found many collections of prose-poetry, some of them narrative in nature, the focus was often very different; for example, Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* follows a character narrative, but as a historically-informed text including varying forms (lyric, prose-poetry, pictures), it is not entirely relevant to a discussion of my work. *My Life*, by Lyn Hejinian, contains a personal and emotional narrative, but the collection seems to focus on the play of language while narrative emerges from the push of words; *last night's mouth* focuses more so on narrative, while linguistic play emerges from the concerns of the characters driving the story. Additionally, *My Life*, as a biographical piece, chronicles both at the level of author and of narrator. This dual-layered protagonist is also the case in Fred Wah's *Diamond Grill*. While Wah's text is also a narrative sequence of prose-poems, it functions also as a biography or memoir, which differentiates it from texts such as *last night's mouth*. As Wah says in the acknowledgements of *Diamond Grill*, "The biotext, perhaps more than other literary genres, seems an innately cumulative performance." The biotext creates a sense of performativity, as the author is not only writing the work, but acting it by posing as a protagonist. The biotext also exists in a community, as it necessarily incorporates the circumstances of its author, and thus questions of veracity in the work become both an obstacle and an opportunity. However, as a fictional text, *last night's mouth* has different boundaries than any of these aforementioned works; it is capable of incorporating any detail that fits its continuity, but without a pre-existing protagonist or plot accessible to the reader or author, *last night's mouth* has to thoroughly establish its own clear continuity.

As readers leave Cassie and Alex ambiguous in the state of their relationship, so I leave this project unsure if a unity between the brevity of the concrete, momentary resonance of the poetic image and the overarching drive of the character-driven narrative have been completely achieved. By beginning with the notion of an epic – so laden with careful qualities of form, where in contemporary poetics, following such a prescriptive map of metre and metaphor might be laughable – I may have complicated my ability to find coherence in this work. However, the fragmentary threads of *last night's mouth* seem to fit with Cassie's fragmentary understanding of self and so, for the purposes of this project, the indeterminate form seems to thus far fit the content.

While Cassie's movement from devastated by love towards being less hesitant to engage in intimacy may not be the accomplishment of the epic hero, her journey of self-discovery as a protagonist does develop – using the repetition of themes and metaphors, as one would in an epic, and using the resonance of the concrete image, much as one would in lyric, and using the dynamic movement of character, as one would in narrative.

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