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What We Need: A Poetic Study in Struggle and Self-Healing

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**What We Need:
A Poetic Study in Struggle and Self-Healing**

A Thesis
Presented to the Department of English
College of Liberal Arts and Sciences
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dedicated to
everything we were
and will be

I. The Preface: A Lost Cause Waiting to Be Found

In many ways, this thesis examines the eternal, repetitive inevitabilities of life. In a collection of poems, these inevitabilities are examined through the eyes of an observant and omniscient narrator: a girl, long in love with a boy, facing the struggles and rewards of learning to be alone in various ways after the 2020 pandemic. The poems were born out of the necessity to live, which is the necessity to create. The reflection was born out of realization. The poems themselves do not ask for understanding, advice, approval. They are a sort of interactive analysis, focused on approximately a year of my life. They are honest, intentional, important. They are unfinished; as I continuously grow further from these moments in time, so too does the narrator. Because this thesis provides an examination of struggles and self-healing alongside its creative centerpiece of the collection, the poems are accompanied by a compilation of memoiristic reflections.

My journey as a poet started very informally in high school after I discovered spoken word via Sarah Kay and Phil Kaye's "When Love Arrives." I held onto the poem closely, as an avid believer in love and as a teenager, still naive and blindly trusting in the favor of life's occasional kindness.

I came to Butler University a couple years later, already knowing I would double major in Middle/Secondary Education and English in order to one day teach high schoolers the beauty I saw in life through language and literature. I also knew how difficult it was to survive high school, how much myself and my peers struggled with mental health, unrealistic expectations, and unknowns in that time. I lived it very closely (as I lived through most things during that time which now makes up about a third of my life) with my then boyfriend.

Soon, a college sophomore enrolls in “Creative Writing: Poetry” for the Spring of 2020. On the first day, the professor asks the poets to write a simile encapsulating their relationship to poetry. The poet calls it, “a lost cause waiting to be found.”

I tried to puzzle together words and phrases into a poem every week for class, but I struggled to grasp the pieces of my existence that were present about me. I wrote about the past, tried on memories just to see how they would fit. I believed in love even more fiercely, though I only wrote about it once, vaguely, as if disturbing it with my poet’s gaze would light an inextinguishable fire. The week after that, and for the remaining weeks’ poems, most of us came with pieces abstractly addressing confusion, shock, disappointment, and grief about the lockdown and threat of imminent infection from covid-19. Especially because of the immediacy of the change, I struggled to balance existing under the weight of my emotions and in the vastness of existence with completing coursework and final exams from a table in my closet, fully in isolation from the world with my parents and sisters. Poetry opened a new space for me to process on my own time, in language that makes sense to me and can unapologetically exist, separate from the outside world’s perception of me.

I learned quickly that poetry became a form of self-expression, introspection, meditation, for me. I continued to write, though only slowly at first, through the summer following my poetry class, through the first semester of my junior year of college. At the time, because my poetry has been a consistently honest, vulnerable, and largely private outlet, I did not consider the possibility of writing a collection of it as my Honors Thesis at first. However, in the past year especially, my growth as an educator has shifted my viewpoint on life in many ways; I learn so that I can teach, in hopes that others may learn more easily than I, or at least know that I too have struggled in learning, and empathize. With great encouragement, I decided on a creative poetry

thesis, accompanied by reflections on the interconnectedness between the process of creating poetry and mental health. As poetry writing is an outlet for me, it has been an outlet for countless writers in the past, as it will be an outlet for countless writers (undoubtedly some, my future students) to come.

The poems featured in this thesis begin to be written then, around February of 2021, the spring of my junior year, and they extend through the present. The focus of my study, my emotional processing through the creation of this collection of poems, found its attention largely aimed on my decision to break up with my boyfriend, who has been my partner in learning how to live life for the past seven years, and the aftermath. More than anything, writing these poems has proven to be a method of self-realization, self-healing, acceptance. This thesis will examine my reflections on the process of creating the poetry collection, as they relate to the interconnectedness between this art and the process of struggle and self-healing.

I want to thank my thesis advisor, Alessandra Lynch, for fostering what was a timid voice and showing me the way of the poet; my academic advisor, Dr. Shelly Furuness, for empowering me in kindness and creativity and full authenticity; my reader, Sam Ferrante, for her continued contributions to helping me explore and understand language. I want to thank my mom, dad, and sisters, for their dedicated support of my education and for their unconditional love in my life. Finally, to the duo at the heart of many of my poems: you and me. My life will always be about love; thank you for inspiring me to inspire myself.

II. The Process: A Reflective Study of Struggle and Self-Healing

Whether I identified it from the initial proposal of this thesis or not, the focus of this piece was always going to be struggle. In many ways, I am sure that every thesis is about struggle, though perhaps more inexplicably most of the time. Although there may be many nuances in this piece, it is always honest, sometimes in a way that may seem too transparent. In the end, I believe this has made the thesis almost as interesting as its author and the subject of its study, and its raw honesty exposes true findings from an individual's first-hand experience of struggle and self-healing. As such, I hope this thesis participates in helping others find legitimacy and value in creative work, contributes to conversations of mental health, love, and growth, and communicates universal emotions and struggles through a unique perspective.

To me, the struggle of this thesis was inherent in its categorization of being creative. After spending the majority of my life as a student constantly in pursuit of her full academic potential, too often I found myself sacrificing creativity for intellect. Learning to prioritize my passion and talent for art is a journey that continues to challenge me. I fell in love with poetry in high school, though too frequently I found the idea of it dismissed as illegitimate. As I have continued to grow as an empathetic appreciator of the arts, I have also found that my artistic contributions, though seemingly minimal, are important, valid, even relatable. It is intimidating, of course, but it is with great pride that I present my life in a series of unfinished mini narratives to whoever stumbles upon them.

At the beginning of this process, to legitimize my work, I decided my thesis would formally study the interconnectedness between mental health and the process of creating art, specifically writing poetry. I collected various poetry books with journals from their authors; I read them cover to cover; I analyzed poems over and over again; I annotated; I left the stories for

months at a time and revisited after much reflection. At the same time, I scoured databases, collected research articles, reinforced many concepts that I have been introduced to about the benefit of art on social/emotional wellbeing.

My studies in Middle/Secondary Education have inspired me to seek out opportunities for holistic growth and wellbeing in academic and creative endeavors, so I was particularly interested in how this research could benefit my knowledge as an educator. It is valuable work that enables me to be a more well-rounded resource for my future students, and although it interested me, it stumped me as a thesis writer. Somehow, in the end, it was not a fitting theme for the year I had just endured and the poetry that was born as a result of it. Yes, the process of creating these poems has allowed me a safe, productive space to process emotions and existence, but the product of the struggle, both in myself and my poems, has been a reward and inspiration that affected the trajectory of this study.

On the other hand, the poems themselves have endured a less complex evolution in many ways; as their existence is constantly evolving, they are under no pressure to be complete or correct at any point. This concept is one that I had an especially difficult time grasping. I hardly believed in my early poems, but I loved them and found peace in writing them. I thought a research paper about mental health would support a collection of creative work, legitimize it. As I grew as a writer and as an individual, it became more clear to me that I still hold some internalized bias against the validity of the things I create. However, the poems and the person who wrote them, every time, were what inspired me to keep going in this pursuit.

The following reflections offer deeper insight into the themes of struggle and self-healing, specifically as their evolution is illustrated in the inner workings of my poetry and

the process of how the poems came to be. Each of these poems holds a glimmer of my life's reality. I hope they provide reassurance, a basis for reflection, maybe even inspiration.

The Morning After

The collection is encapsulated by the sadness of inherent struggle, with its first and last poems being written in the two days consecutively following my breakup. "The Morning After" occurs, perhaps obviously, the morning after the breakup, whereas "The Next Day" is the day following that, even though it appears first chronologically in the collection.

The poems are both written in the same structure of two line stanzas, thoughts that seem to drag the reader along through that struggle of a day. They are some of the more explicit poems when it comes to discussing struggle:

I scrub the back of my tongue until it bleeds

I'm trying to wash out all the words I wish I could take back

I have no one to banter with except the paper

I miss you. It seemed okay until

I realized there was a world outside of my bedroom

And I had to see it without you. (Calabria lines 5-10)

Images of struggle are prevalent, but the thesis itself is not about sorrow. I thought it was, for a long time, and I let that notion prolong my writing of this prose reflection. I was so hesitant to make something permanent that might not be true by the time it is published. Life changes quickly, and I worried I would capture the wrong part of the struggle. It takes a long time to grow through this struggle and to heal from it, but it is a process that I actively participate in every day.

The days fluctuate; every day is not always a distinct step forward, just as every poem is not one distinct step closer to linear healing. When I look back on it now, I have come much farther than I had anticipated for myself when I started this piece. Then, instead of sorrow, I practice allowing this piece to exist as a statement of simply being.

Landline

This is a poem that did undergo many revisions throughout the process, partially because it is one of the oldest poems. A lot of poems, such as the first and last of the collection, are mostly untouched and have only undergone slight edits. This poem, on the other hand, saw many changes. The title used to be “At the End (of the Day)” and, at one point, much of the last stanza was removed. I decided to keep the poem true to its original format in order to preserve authenticity of where I was both mentally and in my process of becoming a writer at that time.

My process of writing poetry is an important component to recognize because that is the basis of much of the struggle. I constantly worry about doing it “wrong” or creating something that is seen by others as a failure. While writing poetry is a soothing process for me, it has also challenged me in various ways. It provides me the space to honestly confront and process the difficulties in my life, but then I must actually address those things in order to stay honest to myself, and that is, unsurprisingly, often a challenge.

This poem is a great example of this struggle because it is present in the fact that I am there, writing poems. The last stanza of this poem talks about my literal location in my home as I make my way to my bedroom to write before I go to sleep:

In front of me, a sliver
of lights licks the darkness

Swallows it whole as I open
my bedroom door
Engulfed and enraged
by the wisdom and words that await me
Here (lines 13-19)

There's a tension in this last stanza. Unlike the first poem, the struggle is less obviously stated here. The tension is present in emotions which are tied to what it means to be left alone at the end of the day, which means I am going to write. Those emotions, those tensions, those struggles are connected to what it means to me to be a writer and a creative person: someone who wants to be a poet and an artist but is too constantly worried about doing it the wrong way.

Doing this reflective work now, at the very end of this process, is some of the only time I have been able to look back and identify what these struggles were. For a long time, it seemed like I was too mixed into the struggle to be able to pull myself out and appropriately reflect on the meaning of the work I was creating. This also is one of a couple poems that explicitly talks about my life at home, which has contributed to my own perception and struggle of my identity as a creative person. It has always seemed to me that creative people, artists, take more obvious failures than intellectual endeavors. There is an obvious vulnerability that comes with being an artist, but there is a confrontation, both internally and externally, that must come along with that.

This thesis started from a writer who did not think of herself as a writer, or a poet, or someone that would actually go through with publishing this thesis. I am not entirely surprised that this process has taken me over a year to achieve this growth. I think having a timeline has encouraged me to continue on this process and persevere, at least for art's sake. I have had some outstandingly low moments in the past year, but deciding to write this thesis proactively set myself up with the support of creating art. There is always part of me that knows what I need, and part of me that fights it because I worry about how I will look to others when I am 100%

myself. That is an audacity I am not sure I have, which is reflected in this last stanza when I am not sure how to confront it all.

What I thought would be a research study on poetry and mental health and the specifics of diction and rhyme and repetition has turned into more of a memoir, an exposure of my own study of what it means to be a young person, a writer, in a new era where all aspects of life have been influenced by some sort of trauma. It is a difficult thing to deal with, and an important dialogue to open, especially for people like me who intend to form genuine, caring relationships with others and help them learn and grow and survive in this world together.

Dread

This is a poem I am particularly proud of, and one I wrote in bed as I was going to sleep. This is a common practice for me; I love to create poetry as I fall asleep because it helps me organize the thoughts that seem to constantly be running in a million different directions in my head. The structure of the poem is the closest I could think to mimicking the way that different thoughtlines in my brain work, like I'm having a conversation with an outsider commenting on it. Also, appropriate to its title, it is the only poem that really fills the entirety of a page.

I wrote "Dread" on a night that graduation and culminations were weighing heavy on my mind. It opens up an internal dialogue so that outsiders may see the process of struggle broken down into its various facets. It is also an early introduction to the poet's natural style of thinking, so its juxtapositions can be compared to those throughout the rest of the collection.

Now and Then

On the contrary, “Now and Then” was a poem I liked less for a long time; most of that time, the title was: “??? take out?”. It talks mostly of the imagery I see in my own life. Sometimes, I like to view my life as a plot, and I think it is interesting to see what details the author chooses to make known to you. In the case of this poem, the image is a ball of red yarn that I acquired during my freshman year of college. There was a night that I shared with my now ex-boyfriend where I knew our relationship was not going to work, but I so desperately wanted to change myself to keep this other person. The yarn, to me, symbolized that string of fate, as I was in a costuming class for the play *Eurydice* at the time and that symbol is explicitly mentioned. The poem, written around the August after my breakup, is reflective on how poetry can be an outlet to look at the struggles in our life in a more beautiful way. We can look at these details as the imagery in our epic love stories instead of seeing it all as a tragedy, or we see it as a tragedy and recognize that that makes it beautiful too.

Going Forward

I have acquired a lot of appreciation for this poem as the process of writing this thesis went on. As a poem, it did not mean much to me until it was included in this larger reflection of my life. Part of this is because of the style in which I wrote many of the poems in this thesis. I kept several journals over the months and had a dedicated notes section for poetry on my phone. I wrote lines and words and mini poems and memories. I took my life out of thin air, and I put it into words that made sense to me. One night, I printed my notes and cut all of the lines out of my journals. I laid them all out on my bedroom floor, like a puzzle, and organized them by the

feelings they evoked. I separated them into three sections and taped each line to a space on my bedroom wall.

One of the first poetry books I purchased was Phil Kaye's *Date&Time*, where the book's epigraph by Jean-Luc Godard reads: "A story should have a beginning, a middle, and an end - but not necessarily in that order" (Kaye 2). After reflecting on this idea, it became clear to me that this organization was putting my story into the categories of beginning, middle, and end, only my story seemed to chronologically move from end to middle to beginning.

The demise of my relationship was the time period of my first section; it earned the title "The Dead End and the Poet," and it is a poem that appears later in the collection. The middle section, or as I titled it, "how not to drown," contains many lines of struggle that never fit cohesively in their own poems. The final section, the beginning, earned the title "A Love Letter to No One," and most of the writing that fell into that section were fully formed poems that appear in the collection as well.

The style of line puzzling and organization was therapeutic for me, and it was a useful strategy for visualizing all of the poetry work I had done. "Going Forward" appeared on the wall as a full poem, printed from the notes on my phone. It eventually got retyped and included in the thesis collection, and it wasn't until months after I originally considered and edited it that I realized I had an earlier draft of this poem with a different opening line. The original version of the poem begins with the lines, "We hold each other's hands / to balance on top of tree trunks." (1-2). Whereas the version I had posted on my wall had them cut off, and instead began with the poem's second and third lines, "A bird hangs / dead" (2-3). I felt that the change in these two lines completely affected the tone of the poem. I had been reflecting on this poem as a moment of assured end. The first lines in the published version helped me paint this situation and the

humans involved in it more holistically. This is about a person that I did hold hands with for a long time and got through a great deal of hardship with, and it became distinctly important to me that the product and the reflection do the goodness of him and our relationship justice.

when i woke up to watch the sunrise from the park

3/10/21

This poem displays the time of my first moments of beginning, the time that I started believing in myself, that I could be myself and make positive change in my life. A large part of that belief came through the empowerment I felt in writing this thesis, that I could create something meaningful and beautiful.

This is by no means a terribly complex poem, but its simplicity speaks to my process of taking small steps and allowing myself to take my time with this project, as well as the struggles I was encountering in my own life. Sometimes, I felt only the pressure of this thesis, that I was expected to do something challenging and almost entirely new, and I had to do it perfectly in a time that I was often really struggling with non-academic difficulties. This poem gave me a simple space to reflect on all the things I seriously consider in my life and throughout this study: being a part of the world and nature, what goes on in the world when I am not around, how can I participate meaningfully where I want to. It holds tensions of a world undiscovered but promotes this sort of peaceful exploration.

Reasons Why I Think We're Going To Make It Out

(a poem of many parts)

I intended to start this poem many times. I would think of a reason my relationship was bound to work, and I would think that sounded like a great line for a poem. I never wrote any of them down. One day, I finally decided to start documenting them in an effort to reason with myself about saving the relationship. I included the parenthetical because I had had countless prior reasons that I knew would be perfect for this poem, and I assumed they would need space. However, when it came time to write those reasons down, I had already forgotten them. I could not explain them in a way that felt right or honest to me, and so the poem remains an empty statement that captures the mindset of a creative writer with little to work with.

three and a half

“three and a half” is one of my earliest poems in the collection, and it has undergone the most stages of revision out of all of my poems. In fact, I shared one of the earliest drafts of this poem with Neil Hilborn and a writing group that he hosted weekly Zoom workshops for over the summer of 2021. Neil’s openness about struggles with mental health and the failures of loving other people has long been an inspiration to me. His collection, *Our Numbered Days*, was one I kept nearby throughout the process of creating this thesis.

This poem came into existence from many random lines of poetry that I had written, or as I like to refer to them as, “Lost Lines.” Often during that time, I found it difficult to piece together all of my thoughts and emotions into justifiable reasons to make a huge life change. Although the poem has evolved a lot with me, I kept it in mostly its original format from roughly

April to June when it was written. The revision process has encouraged me to look back on each of these memories, even the difficult ones, with a certain fondness and nostalgia, and I think it is important that the poems stay true to encapsulating the feelings and thought processes of my life at those times.

Feeling Lonely

I find this poem humorous in many ways, which has been a common resort for my coping mechanisms in these times of struggle. Part of the reason I find this poem funny is because of its immediacy and brutal honesty, which my poems often lack. I tend to hold my tongue when I am writing poetry; I think of a few words then hesitate to make sure I am picking the “correct” word next. It is very rare that I will swear in my poetry because it is unusual that that rashness will come out, that urgency to say something emotional and urgent. I appreciate that this is an honest confrontation to the self on some of the more unspoken tensions that become apparent in these new times when I am often left with no one to love me as consistently as I am used to, except for when I am there to love myself.

Looking for You

I had originally titled the entirety of this collection “Looking for You”. The story constantly goes back and forth between “you” and “I” and “him” and “her,” etc., because I leave room for ambiguity and openness for the meanings of things to change. I think this title has always held the implications of who I was looking for in this relationship, what I thought I

should look like in order to make my relationships work. In the end, it signifies my journey to find happiness and peace in who I am and who I can grow to be. The pacing of this poem slows and speeds with my thoughts. It includes song lyrics and hesitations and reflections on my relationship with myself at the time.

Half Empty/Half Full

About halfway through the collection, this is a poem that I narrated to myself on a drive to my boyfriend's house. I wrote it as a form of processing in a time where I needed to play devil's advocate with myself more often than not. The idea of being happy but having no idea what that exactly looks like burdened me. The poem begs the question: how do you separate a person and their identity from the feeling and experience of being in love with them? Would I love someone different just the same, just as much? This poem frames my life in a way that allows me to see what the situation is and how I might go about handling it.

The style of the poem was inspired by a couple pieces by Sabrina Benaim, whose book, *Depression & Other Magic Tricks* is another that accompanied me this past year. The pacing, the interjections and pauses, allowed me to think through every thought, feeling, and decision surrounding that situation.

those i ~~lost~~ loved a little along the way

“those i ~~lost~~ loved a little along the way” carries a unique tone within the collection, as I find it to stand out from many of the other poems in the way that it positively reflects on my life

and love experiences. The poem is built of two line stanzas, each a sort of ode to a human I have had a little love for, in some capacity. It has been a very ongoing, living piece that I have continued to construct throughout the months. Often, it was the poem I automatically began with when working through revisions, simply because of the joy it brings in its proof that wonder and playfulness still exist in innocent instances that hold little weight. It is a positive outlet to entertain the notion that life is not so bad and does not always have to be so serious.

Home Again

Moreover, it was important to me that the poems be placed out of chronological order because the emotions that they each highlight and the experiences they encapture do not occur linearly in our lives. In the way that I remember my past, certain experiences are nearer to me than others, even though many of them happened several years ago. They carry a weight that I constantly internalize, and “Home Again” emphasizes the way it feels to me to constantly be intertwining the people I love into who I am or who I feel like I should be. It is a piece about how existence often pervades boundaries that we do not want it to cross. Connection does not have to be purely about attachment, it can be about appreciation and growth. This poem does encapsulate that tension, but growth continues to prevail.

Things I Meant to Tell You

There is a desperation in this poem that continues to draw me to it. I was feeling an immense sense of self-betrayal; it was amazing to me that I had found power in growth, but it

was lonely and unsure. This poem was meant to address my ex-boyfriend, but now when I reflect on it, I wonder how much of it is questioning my subconscious or the parts of me I saw reflected in my ex-boyfriend. Now, it seems like wounded parts of me pleading with myself in recognition that the changes I was making for my own betterment were only causing damage and pain. Its ambiguity allows for the endlessness of a question I am not looking to answer.

The Dead End and The Poet

As previously mentioned, this is the only poem formed purely from the “Lost Lines” I had taped up on my bedroom wall; it is the section of “the end.” It is far enough away that I have been able to piece it together into some sort of memory, though the sections of the middle and the beginning seem too soon for me to understand.

As the poet, what do I do with this dead end? How do I make sense of it? I pulled images and unsaid thoughts and unlived experiences and compiled them into this puzzle of words. The poem itself is a representation of what I chose to do with the struggle. It has gaps, it leaves questions, it is continually changing, it carries live emotions.

What I Meant to Say Was: I Know What I Look Like On the Dance Floor

This poem is purposefully a bit more ambiguous throughout, all framed by the title which hints at a missed opportunity. This poem gave me a space to figure out my life unapologetically and at my own pace, and though the specifics of the situation are insignificant, the process of writing and reflecting on my life’s events encouraged me to make mistakes and to be

embarrassed and to experience a new sort of vulnerability with myself and the world that I had not yet been introduced to. This poem encapsulates the messiness that accompanies growth, and it celebrates the process of figuring it out.

Homecoming

I wrote this poem on my university's Homecoming, maybe unsurprisingly because of the title, but I have found this title both interesting and fitting in connection with the ideas in the poem about the cyclical nature of change. It poses questions about how we confront change and the inevitability of growth in our lives.

I want to be the person that embraces change and stays strong. I have often thought of Cisneros' "Four Skinny Trees" from *The House on Mango Street*, which includes a paragraph that I particularly like about being a human in nature:

Keep, keep, keep, trees say when I sleep. They teach.

When I am too sad and too skinny to keep keeping, when I am a tiny thing against so many bricks, then it is I look at trees. When there is nothing left to look at on this street. Four who grew despite concrete. Four who reach and do not forget to reach. Four whose only reason is to be and be. (Cisneros 75).

Nature is a friend I turn to frequently, especially when looking for a safe space to think and write. It is a place where I do not feel rushed, much different than my hurried daily schedule of constant deadlines and rigid expectations. Nature works on its own time, the trees change when they need to; nature always heals. In the end, sometimes one of the greatest perks about writing a poem is that I get to spend uninterrupted time sitting in the grass somewhere.

This Time

“This Time” is an excellent example of a poem that obviously moves at my pace. It speeds and slows with small spirals and tensions that I faced as I was writing it. It grapples with tensions of who I am, who I want to be, and who I feel I should be in order to make others happy. It opens up the heart of the tension and invites the reader to sit in it, observe, and even to criticize. There is inherent judgment of the self in this piece that interestingly paints the author as flawed and almost incapable. This harsh critic reflects my consistent struggle of viewing myself as a poet and exposes dynamics that exist in my head and how I dissect and reconstruct them, if I choose to.

If You Gave Me More Time I'd Have Time

My perceptions of the world around me are often communicated in my poetry through the lens of the nature that surrounds me. In this piece, the wind and the trees are obviously unsettled about me, affecting the entire atmosphere, even throwing my hair around in the mix. To me, I am a part of an unexplainable chaos that moves at rapid speeds, but I am still and slow and need more time. Everything else in the world is participating in this high-speed lifestyle that I did not ask to be placed in, and all I can do is sit and write at my own pace. In this writing, I have been able to find a sense of comfort and peace; it is a space where I can process and make decisions and have some sense of control over choices when they often seem too far out of my jurisdiction.

What's Left

Written in October of 2021, “What’s Left” came about at an interesting time of tension in my life, but what I love about the poem is that it encapsulates a lot of personal joy and humor. This poem was created throughout the entirety of a night I spent in Nashville with my friends for our Fall Break. I was only a couple weeks removed from a diagnosis with mono, one that knocked me out of my typical lifestyle for months. This poem addresses the loneliness and isolation I was feeling as a result of this illness and literal separation, but also as a result of my breakup and realization of what it means to be on my own in this way. As much as I have tried to work on self-preservation and self-care, and it might have been more important to stay in bed that weekend, there was a distinct pull to indulge in the few fun memories I have left to create with my college friends. I want to be a part of the world, but that is not something I feel particularly good at.

The first lines “No ducks / No bucks / No dollar bills” begin with a humorous moment of mispronunciation that occurred early in the night when my friends and I were checking to see if we had any cash for the bars (1). There is a part of me that wants to be recognized in my feelings, a part of me that wants to be given a hug and have tears of sadness be wiped away by someone else, but it seems that I cannot help but challenge that view that reality has to be so serious and heavy all of the time. The lines “The dogs howl at this hour / It looks a lot like me / walking barefoot home from the bars” directly reference a joke between my friends and I: the way we would talk about how badly our feet hurt in our cowboy boots and heels on our half-hour-long walk home from the bars on Broadway (5).

As a poet and as a person, it is important to me that the reality of life is discussed in an honest manner. This poem includes direct evidence of real occurrences, pulled directly from my life that night. It addresses these negatives and my own perceptions of their weight on my life, but it also allows for growth and duality within the poem. It encourages celebration over lucky pennies, it laughs at my jokes, it reminisces on the joy that my friends and I have found in seemingly mundane moments. This poem has allowed me a space to communicate the range of emotions that are present all at once in one's growth: it is disheartening, funny, confusing, busy, comforting, nerve-wracking, real.

The Next Day

Much of this poem echoes the first poem in this collection, "The Morning After." The collection takes a breath before reopening this time period following all of the prior reflection. Written the next day, or two days following my breakup, the poem continues to drag the reader along repeated worries and woes in some of my most vulnerable times. In the end, this poem allowed a space to process regret and uncertainty. It ends with a question of why I had just made what felt like my biggest mistake, and the response: "*For me, I guess.*" (16). This final line, in a way, carries the entirety of the collection's message that healing is possible, though it will undoubtedly face challenges and pauses along the way. After months of writing and reflecting on this exact notion, I have this piece, this collection, an entire thesis that exposes honesty and truth as I have encountered it in my life. It is something to be proud of.

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III. The Poems

What We Need

The Next Day

I got out of bed and got in the shower
Your cologne lingers on my collarbone

From your sweatshirt that I slept with last night
I play your favorite artist and listen to your favorite breakup songs

I scrub the back of my tongue until it bleeds
I'm trying to wash out all the words I wish I could take back

I have no one to banter with except the paper
I miss you. It seemed okay until

I realized there was a world outside of my bedroom
And I had to see it without you.

The day went on.
Yes, I have already thought about shaving my head.

Instead I trimmed my bangs halfway
Uneven. Unlike my muddled memories,

Our songs sound heartbreakingly
unchanged, untouched by the weight of

all those years
unknown to us that October evening in 2014.

Landline

I am floating
Close the door to my younger sister's room
Darkness cradles her
lulls her to sleep.

Outside, my dad is
snoring to the tune of his favorite song
and I am sure my mother is asleep
with two weimaraners at her feet.

Next to me
My older sister's shadow dances around
her empty childhood bedroom
while her heart beats with the sound of the city somewhere.

In front of me, a sliver
of lights licks the darkness
Swallows it whole as I open
my bedroom door
Engulfed and enraged
by the wisdom and words that await me
Here

Dread

It falls heavy over the night
Over a still body on a stiff bed

This is the way
She has always learned
to fall asleep

It's a proactive afterthought

It doesn't leave when
I ask.

It's a song stuck in an already overstimulated head

The time between seconds
The only time you get back

It's a dream and the brakes in my car are
broken, again

And I'm driving
I'm always driving.

It's a curse you keep repeating

That prayer you forgot
you memorized

It's the look on your face when you wake up to only the sun on my side of the bed.

It's everything you've ever done wrong
unfolding like paper

Thin.

It's thin.
It falls thick over the night that cradles a thin body

Lying.

Now and Then

The Red string of Fate
wrapped around my finger, that night
I swore I'd marry you.
It slipped out of every knot I tried to tie
and I cried
knowing we couldn't be
like Orpheus and Eurydice
You used to sing to me.

This untouched bundle of Red
Concealed two years
in the mug I take down now
to pack. Perfectly rolled,
stays with me. I see
what used to be

you and me.

Going Forward

We hold each other's hands
to balance on top of tree trunks.

A bird hangs
dead
in the distance
in front of us.
He always pauses to look
back at me
when crossing an obstacle.
I don't know if I'm offended or flattered.

Birds tweet
bloody murder
over our heads.
He always offers me a hand.
Although
I am the steadier lead
A second set of footsteps
I find flowers in the forest
Slow down only
for poetry.

An odd voice echoes back at me
Find sea glass amongst the stones.

when I woke up to watch the sunrise from the park
3/10/21

distant chatter
I saunter in
amid their chipper chirping

swing sets sway
even after I walked away
hollow house stares into my soul

cool morning
7 o'clock conversation
they're laughing
 at me

the trees in the breeze
willow waving

Good morning

and isn't it?

Reasons Why I Think We're Going To Make It Out
(a poem of many parts)

three and a half

today i cried
real tears from fears
and frustration and separation
from you

my resentment
of the speed at which i took off from you
and how little i felt bad about it
the beautiful shadow that proceeds you
and the pride of seeing you
stumble into it

your face
grasping light through the window
so purposefully defenseless
gloriously lost together
you and i
eyes wide, gazing through skylights
taking turns taking each other's hands

permanence is a phase.

memorized memories
taunt already tear-streaked cheeks
i do not know
how to reintroduce myself to me again

i've written you songs that i can't sing anymore
my voice is a pitch the valley has never heard before

Feeling Lonely

Feeling Lonely Feels Like Frozen Fingers on a Friday Night and (Full-Fledged Panic Attacks)
Full Stomachs Before the First Bite.

Looking for You

It's a story I can only retell
I wouldn't have traded it for the world.
I hear you
when my own voice sings to the radio
No hay despedidas

It is what it is.

Knowing you
has been
Strange.

Loving you has been
natural.

Maybe
in another life.

Leaving you
is something I never thought I'd have to do.
The love of a lifetime;
Baby, we're one for the ages.

Think of me
in moments of stillest silence
feel my love like God.
Just as alone as he left you,

and still.

She calls to me now
and so I must go.
It meant nothing to me then,
but it means everything to me now.

Half Empty / Half Full

On the way to your house / I half / way / prepare myself / to say yes / if you ask me to run away
with you / tonight / I would / would you / give it all up / to stay in a half-happy relationship / we
linger / for the familiarity / of each other's touch / we know / this is not as happy / as we could be
/ but it's as happy as we are / Isn't that enough?

those I ~~lost~~ loved a little along the way

the smell of fresh footsteps in the rain
my bug spray on your back.

a golden glow, when your hands
opened my eyes to her beauty.

code names and slipping notes
through our fingertips.

mispronunciation, shy side eyes
messages I never replied to.

a glass of water, a foot in the door
another night.

that one hug, the way our biceps brushed together, all the dreams
I still have about you.

Home Again

I forget how much of you is here / with me / I cannot see you / you are / the lens through which / I see / Everything / I do not smell you / in the air / you linger in the lining of my lungs / which absorbs particles of raw existence / with every breath / Every step / I fall / away from you / I hear your voice in my own throat / Even without you / I am safe here / My heart no longer aches for you / You are the blood my heart pumps through my veins / Its long term longing for you is a quest I have put to rest / After years / My hands reluctantly / slip / away from the tips of your fingers

My eyes are fixed ahead. Yours look through me.

Things I Meant to Tell You

I am alone in the universe
without you.
Not lost and perfectly aware
of death's slow,
relentless pursuit of me.

Is there a tenderness in your fingertips?
Do you feel where I bite mine
down to bloody bruises?
Your absence weighs heavy on my hands.
They are calloused from the hours I drag them along these pages
looking for you.

The Dead End and The Poet

Two chairs sit facing each other at an empty table
 like dimly-lit strangers in a marketplace
 like sharing fruit with a lover
 like a child lost in store aisles

Notoriously innocent
Rotting like ripe fruit
We discover the clouds together
We are cheek-to-cheek like we should be
 intimate like rain

It's

Futile.

It's quiet

 but still I feel it

I am always leaving.

Failing to outrun memories

His heart sounds

 like running away and

I wonder how far he has gotten

You're in pain and

 I'm getting impatient

When you asked if I was frustrated and

I said I wasn't but I was but it wasn't you and

It didn't matter.

Your words cut corners

I'll write us words to die by.

It's

Feeling like goodbyes these days.

I thought

I would suffer an endless amount of days and nights to be alive and

Living by your side.

It's

Greif.

It's love with nowhere to go

You thief

It was never you
r fault

What I Meant to Say Was: I Know What I Look Like on the Dance Floor

mornings are long alone, and
i've lost most things
that matter to me
anymore. i don't know how to change,
so
i'm doing it
clumsily, making messes where
i don't mean to. i liked kissing you.
didn't see it coming, watch as it
goes. profoundly lonely, i'm
practicing impermanence,
accepting endings;
if the world's not gonna end,
i am.

Homecoming

Leaves fall like deflated balloons
It's a party at the park on a Saturday at seven
Trees bend with the wind and beg me to embrace change
Their obvious contentment is encouraging
Isn't it beautiful
the consistency with which trees change in the Fall?
That when I fall, I can stand back
up a little straighter towards the sky
Towards the person I
Have been dreaming of.

The sun burns through the trees
And everybody knows the Seasons
Keep changing.

This Time

I waited
to unpack this time
Not that I expected it'd be any different
but when my counters were clean
from all the makeup and creams
stowed now under old granite
I felt
oh
at home
again
Not just a trip
A chunk
of who I am
who I avoid growing to be
A version of me.
Longingly
I write squiggles and lines
on notes with half rhymes
Painting stanzas I can't see and
Choose not to listen to but
I'll follow through
with it
This time.

Too scared
to think of a second verse
My words are cursed
The Second could never be
as good as The First.

If You Gave Me More Time, I'd Have Time

inspired by a night of reading Phil Kaye's "Date&Time" on my cold front porch

The trees
sound
angry tonight.
They
are causing a ruckus with the wind.
They
play with my hair,
it dances like the leaves.
Cars drive by
in a hurry. I'm in no hurry
tonight. Hurt hunts me even
in my most well-lit corners, and I
am
Cold hiding under these streetlights
tonight. Girls shout
in the distance
Boys tug on the hair I am constantly
cutting. I am trying to focus.

What's Left

No ducks / No bucks / No dollar bills / It's raining tonight in Nashville / and I look / like some /
body / that no one is in love with / Some man I don't know tells me to smile / Rain drops drip
from bar signs / From the sad eye of the storm / that watches warm bodies pour / under neon /
Maybe I look mean / Maybe it's not my crowd / Lucky pennies / 4 today / 2 yesterday / Maybe
I'm just looking down / The dogs howl at this hour / It looks a lot like me / walking barefoot
home from the bars / collecting shards of asphalt as souvenirs / me / in bed at night / this restless
early morning / collecting shattered moments / in words my body shouts silently in the streets /
to strangers / I think a lot / about what came before / us / what comes / after

The Morning After

I don't put in my contacts
I don't want to see my life without you

Instead, I put on your pajama pants
I worry about how you're doing today

I won't open your text from last night
It says "I love you"

I would build you a castle from all these tissues
I fight for you in every version of my dreams

And in the end, we're happy.
But here I see your name in my texts

Your face in my favorited photos
And I can't decide if you were ever real

Seven years with "the love of my life"
And I "threw it all away"

for what?
For me, I guess.