

KISSING THE CONSOLATION: AN ORIGINAL
COLLECTION OF POETRY

by

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CHAPTER 1
STATEMENT OF AESTHETICS

These beautiful forms,
Through a long absence, have not been to me
As is a landscape to a blind man's eye:
But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;
And passing even into my purer mind,
With tranquil restoration:---feelings too
Of unremembered pleasure[...] (Wordsworth 137)

These lines from Wordsworth's "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey," represent, in my mind, the goal of both poetry and the poet. The goal of the poet is to use language in a way that refreshes images for the reader so it may allow them to see life as they first saw it, just as the woods are renewed for Wordsworth. The goal of poetry is to minister to the soul of the reader, for this renewed perception to allow, as Wordsworth puts it:

[...]that blessed mood,
In which the burthen of the mystery,
In which the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world,
Is lightened[...] (137)

Unlike Wordsworth, for most of us, images replayed and replayed in our minds lose their newness. According to Victor Shklovsky, "[W]e see that as perception become[s] habitual, it becomes automatic," and "[h]abitualization devours works, clothes,

furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war" (23-4). This is where the need for poetry arises. In order to refresh images so that we may see them again for the first time, we must, as Shklovsky states, "defamiliarize" ourselves from the objects surrounding us. We do this by changing the language used to describe the object. For example, if you asked an English speaker to describe a mushroom, they would use words such as "small" or "fungus," because these are the words they've been taught which describe a mushroom. However, these common descriptors perpetuate the common image that we are used to. In "Mushrooms," Mary Oliver says that mushrooms are:

red and yellow skulls
pummeling upward
through leaves,
through grasses,
through sand (American Primitive 4)

All of a sudden, mushrooms, when thought of as skulls, become much more interesting. The mushroom is still the same mushroom, only its signifiers have changed. The power of the poet is not creating language, or new images, only new combinations of familiar words to create new perceptions of familiar images. By using language to refresh an image, re-present an object, language's purpose has changed. It is no longer for communication (to share a common meaning), but to share a new uncommon meaning. The end result is a new perspective of something familiar. As a result, we regain our amazement for the world that has become mundane, thereby improving the quality of life.

If beauty exists in newness, or in viewing an object or situation in a new light, poetry can make even a horrible situation seem beautiful. By writing about a situation

from an unusual viewpoint, the reader is able to see the situation differently. The situation does not become beautiful, but the new perspective in which the reader may view it becomes beautiful. For example, in Adrienne Rich's "Rape," she uses violent sexual imagery to describe a police officer, rather than the rapist (44-5). The situation, the rape, does not lose its horror, her language actually intensifies it; however, the beauty comes from the surprise the reader obtains from viewing a police officer as the violator.

In "Hair and Feathers," one of the poems in my thesis, the speaker is an abused woman, but she relates her own abuse to that of chickens being transported in an eighteen-wheeler. The chickens become a metaphor for the woman's abuse as she connects their similar situations. The two become more closely connected at the end of the poem as she "...held a frozen bag of chicken breasts / on [her] head." The dead chickens are a future picture of the woman, if she "cannot get past" the abuse. While the horror of the situation does not change, beauty may be seen in a new connection.

Through reframing, the poet has the ability to gain control over a situation in which she previously had no control. She may transform the abstract emotion into concrete images, creating a separate artistic entity from the subject matter which inspired it. For example, Sylvia Plath's poems relate to the struggles she found in being a wife and mother, and the hatred she felt toward her father after his death. However, Plath does not simply retell the story of her father's death, and tell us she is upset with him. Instead, she transforms her hate into something completely different than the original feeling by dramatizing it. "I hate my father" is not the same as saying:

You do not do, you do not do
Any more, black shoe
In which I have lived like a foot
For thirty years, poor and white,
Barely daring to breathe or Achoo. (Plath 49)

As a reader I can't connect with Plath's hatred of her father until she gives me something concrete to which I can relate. I don't understand her hatred, but I do understand the worthlessness of an old shoe, and the fear associated with being too afraid to sneeze in someone's presence. In this way she dramatizes the abstract uncontrollable emotion into the concrete, into something which she has control over. By the end of the poem she has given us a hate that is something we can see, hold, taste, and feel. This is the power of poetry; it gives substance to emotion.

In the same way I have turned abstract emotions of pain and sadness into poems such as "Grasshopper" and "Mercury Running." Rather than say, "you hurt me and I feel used," I say, "You have washed your hands in me / and poured me out dirty on the back porch." The language transforms the abstract "hurt" and "used" into concrete objects which readers can imagine, allowing them to experience the emotion for themselves, without being told. As Mary Oliver says, the poet must "observe it and [get] it down in some kind of language so that it can *rehappen* for the reader" ("A Solitary Walk" 45).

The difference between poetry, as compared to other art forms, is its reliance on language, and the fact that language is constantly changing. Metaphors become overused, and therefore lose their meaning. The poet then, must continually recreate the images that

she sees from the outside world with new language, new images, and new metaphors in order to help the reader experience life.

Just as the words say something due to their relationship to one another, so the poems also create a story based on their relationship to one another. In Kissing the Consolation, I wanted the poems to tell a story. I began with a poem where the speaker is recalling a childhood memory. The speaker returns to the event, just as we must return to events and objects in order to see them in a new light. "Kiss" in the title of the first poem also refers back to the title of the thesis. The poems then move through poems of childhood and family. The family poems end with "Family Reunion," at which point the speaker is returning to her family after a time away. The middle movement begins with "Speaking into Existence" and ends with "Fog." This movement is one of exploration, one in which the speaker is looking outside of herself to view the lives of other humans with whom she is not involved. The speaker then begins to enter into the poems once again, this time not with family, but with God, then nature, and then other humans. The bulk of the final movement is poems in which the speaker is interacting in relationships, and the eventual loss of relationships. In the final poem, "Knitting Your Sex," the speaker takes control of her solitude and creates a new person out of yarn. I end with this poem because it relates to the job of the poet. Just as the poet forges new relationships with words, so the speaker creates a new relationship out of yarn. In the end she embraces the thing which she has created in order to console herself. In the same way, the poet embraces the poem, the thing which she creates out of her emotions.

CHAPTER 2

POEMS

My First Kiss

It is July and I
am in my swimsuit
on the edge of the smoldering
sidewalk waiting for the ice-cream
man so I can buy a bubblegum sno-cone,
and though I don't hear him
it is summer so I know he'll be coming.

The three quarters are starting to sweat
in my fist so I begin to shake them
like Parcheesi dice and take a break
from waiting and walk in the muddy
gutter without shoes down the end of the block
to get my best friend so we can run
through her front yard sprinklers and afterward
I feel sorry for her dog as she dresses
him in diapers.

Home again, still waiting
outside for the tum-tee-tum of the truck,
I look up and the neighbor's old gardener
is smiling at me (he's always smiling at me)
and tells me he has something to give me,
so I meet him in the alley like he asks
and he puts his tanned hands
on my cheeks and kisses me,
working his tongue through
to my teeth like the tip of a shovel
in hard earth while I try to shut my lips
like a Venus flytrap.

I run down the street, pretending it away
while my friend chases the dog
around the yard to keep the diapers on
and I am silent.

Sestina

When mother died somebody
explained why people die, and I touched my lips
to her cheek inside the coffin and let tears stand
on my face. At the reception the knife
stood in the butter like a headstone. Leaving
the mourners, I went outside to play in the dirt.

Sundays we visited mom in her dirt
pajamas. Grandma talked softly to the body,
too soft to be heard from underground, leaving
her voice at the base of the stone with tulips.
At home she watched TV church; I watched the cat knife
into the vinyl couch cover. When the man on the grandstand

began to heal, I would go outside to stand
in the garden where flowers, heavy in black dirt
were held up on crosses. Taking a knife
out of the hard ground, I'd wipe its rusty body
before slicing the dead stems of tulips.
I buried the parts, knowing that leaving

them would have been like leaving
corpses above ground. I could understand.
A breeze had blown the flowers' petal red lips;
I could hear them thanking me. I patted the dirt
grave, let myself cry until my body
jerked as though the air stabbed it with a knife.

That was my mother's death. I replaced the knife
in the ground, said goodbye to each flower, leaving
them waiting for my grandmother, whose body
cracked when she squatted from a stand.
She took a hand shovel and unearthed them from dirt.
She did not care for them like I did. I watched the tulips

as she strangled them, their lips
drying out, calling out. She held her knife
like a sword in battle. A real messiah maker. Dirt
splattered through air, the blade leaving
amputated limbs on the floor. I couldn't stand
to watch. She refused to bury the body.

When grandma went under the knife, her body didn't make it.
I opened the casket as she was leaving for the dirt,
to let her understand the tulips.

The Arcade

If Daddy takes you and doesn't bring you back, call me.

The hot rock in my head
presses against the walls of my face
as she presses a quarter in my palm,
and writes our phone number
on the inside of my shoe.

He shuts me in the car and locks it.
I hold my breath and a spider builds
a sticky bridge from my eyes
to the lock.

At the arcade he plays ski-ball with me.
I fetch the falling balls and pant
with laughter.

Going home, we get lost.
He never knew my home.
I hope he steals me.
He takes my quarter
and calls for directions.
In the car I can hear the smoke
from his cigar rising.

Parents

She struggles to sit up, to escape
the honey stain of afterbirth,
and plays with her belly
like an empty balloon.

The baby, like a doll,
rests on her arm.
If she had his number
she'd call her father,
tell him she's got proof of love.

Love led them
fumbling in the ash night,
stumbling to the back
of the El Camino, feeling
each others' soft bodies
like baby blankets.
Love left the upholstery
tracks on her back.

Beside her bed
the great lover toddles
from one foot to the other,
passing her a Tonka truck
She reaches out and takes his hand.
The smell of iron from her blood
clings to the air.

He tells her he will stay up with it at night.
She smiles and drives the truck across her legs.

The Tightrope Walker

Life is being on the wire, everything else is just waiting.

-- The Great Wallenda

Your eyes empty of memories, like the saline
drip of an IV. You forget your wife, your name,
until only the rope is left.

You held me close as the bearded-lady frightened us,
and light glittered off the sword that slid
down the swallower's throat as clowns
extracted themselves from Volkswagen carcasses.
The tightrope walker, eyes like carved bone,
skimmed across the wire as we leaned
left and right in our seats.

Now, I am a woman you shuffle past in the hall.
Swaddled in blankets, you promenaded your IV and enthralled.

Family Reunion

On the outskirts of town
rusted steel rises from the ground
like cotton, CATS and John Deeres
dinosaur on the sides of the road,
and billboards warning against
drunk driving peel like burned skin.
I am home.

They are screaming or laughing,
I don't know which.
You can never tell with them.

We gather underneath the oak,
arrange metal chairs and situate
ourselves, our tribal dance.
My mother's vowels

drop and rise, drop and rise
like a child's swing, threatening
to leave the earth before mechanically
returning. I am lulled
as they pull me in and drop me.
What she says, I don't know;

I have never known. Only sounds,
the buzz of a fly, the soft rustle
of leaves before dinner time.
It's not her fault.

Everything my uncle says sounds
like *catfish*. He could say hypotenuse,
and it would sound like *catfish*.
Catfish, catfish, catfish. Words strung
together like catfish on a trot line.
It all smells like blood and dog food.
Vowels leaning into one another,
like a hypotenuse.

The folds in my aunt's Technicolor
muu muu expand like a hot air balloon,
a pineapple blooming and disappearing
between her breasts as she keeps saying
pillar. Renaissance architecture? No.
Not columns, rather, the thing
you rest your head on at night,
while dreaming of catfish.

Speaking into Existence

He spoke.
Sound waves rippled off the ocean,
the words were fire
that he pulled apart from
the sticky black, like gum
from a child's hair.

Another word and the heavens
poured out of his pitcher mouth,
filling each empty space,
stretching sky across sky,
breathing itself for the first time.

He shaped the land
into a dress form around
the ocean. Water swelled
to fill its curves.

Eggs appear in his hands,
like my mother's on Saturday
morning. He breaks them on clouds,
releasing birds, blue and brown.

All life that was not life
cried to be born.
Uncontrollable now
His face, the first ark,
speaking life.

He mouths their names
like a grocery list.
They fall off his tongue,
fur and all.

Public Laundry, Seattle, 1900

The soggy skirts droop from bones. Witness
the hands, dirty on washboard ripples, sail
like boats on choppy seas. On lines, striped business
suits flail, like rolling waves of air. Hail
the hands, salute the sad washers' sorry
collapsing eyes. These women hold the truth;
while men go tromping inland on safari,
their lives are laid in threads, scrubbing vermouth.
Tomorrow they will wake, throw wide the door
for light to darken their hands and necks, sigh,
and show their knuckles, like frayed rope. Scores
arrive, open hands demand their ties.
Disgusted faces, they brag about stocks and college,
then hand more clothes to those with knowledge.

Luna

Tips of hair on brushes
dipped in liquid radiation
look like tiny St. Basils
on cinnamon sticks.

Women in gingham dresses
paint glowing numbers
on dark watch faces:

Dip and sip, the numbers
go on thin as rice
after puckered lips
sharpen radon tips.

The clock announces the end.
They head home twelve directions
into the chrome night,
their hair sparkling like halos
beneath street lights.

Years later, in bed,
each ticking heart
jumps forward,
then slows. Hands tipped
in glitter blue radiation
move to their sides
and stop. Clocks lift
their hands and sing
their solemn song.

The Size of a Football Team

Struck bronze tolls through chilled air
as victory bells sway side to side.
Fans, chests padded with pride,
march the street like holy Saturday warriors.
Each, a Charlton Heston of a different kind,
believes he led the quarterback through the goal line.

In the dungeons of the quiet stadium
players collapse against steel walls
while sweat in slow drips crawls
down foreheads, anointing them with salt.
Others sink onto cold benches with dropped heads,
oaks arching over a riverbed.
Water and blood trickle between them.
In time they rise from their dead slumps
and survey their blue bodies with their egg-sized lumps.

The fan reclines in his leather castle.
Like a king on a throne, he decrees the story
of how his crashing bodies ended in glory.

Two Drunken Men

hold their bottles
like naked Barbies
and sing into the heads.
Divas in the drunken night;
One is Whitney, the other Mariah.

When they forget the words,
they hoot and holler for each other
like cheerleaders, praising their manhood
and drunkenness until they are swollen up
with themselves and the rouge that rushes
over their cheeks with each drink.

Tears fall from laughter
and make their wet eyes
sparkle beneath the street lights.
Their lips shine with spilled beer.

Giggling, they fall asleep on the asphalt
as the air carries the sweet song of their voices
to godmothers everywhere.

Whale Body

November comes. The North, dark and cold,
shuns the sun, blows its breath. It knows
in cold I struggle with woolen blubber in vain.
The cloud spits its crystals. Blow and wail,
it sets sail to my scarf, attacking skin
with wicked pins, leaving a rouge sea.

From inside I watch the winter wind and see
his crazed maniacal pursuit to cold
me. Still, he brings the charismatic snow-skin
I pin with coals – a friend with a carrot nose.
Let the roguish man abound. I'll pass the whale
of winter knitting slippers, watching the vain

man frost my windows' edges. But vain
am I to think all outside is but a sea
of harmless great white. The virus, like a whale
spearer comes. It creeps about in cold;
waiting, hiding. Back and forth the nose
of the spear points, aims, then lunges at skin.

Doomed to bed and soup, my weakened skin
can't protect the oblivious veins.
I am thin as baleen. Through the nose
the virus enters like the moving sea
swallowed by a leviathan, the cold
killer rushes in. I writhe and wail

on salty sheets. I am a wayward whale
flung upon the shore. My stretched skin
pales as I flop hopelessly while cold
liquids are poured into me in vain
attempts to hydrate. In the ER I see
a holy nurse with large eyes. She knows

death. On tile floors, I vomit through my nose
and mouth. Like water spewed from a whale's
blowhole, so I expel my foul sea
out, hoping to save my rubbery skin.
I lie frozen and still with limp veins
as blankets cover me. I wait on cold

floors for nurses to stab the frozen nose
of the needle through skin to a shrunken vein,
and push my failing whale body out to sea.

Sacrifice

An injured heron stands on a sea-swollen wood pole strung with frayed rope along the channel. It watches water shimmer near my battered boat, waiting for a fish to break its head through, its rubber sole mouth to stick like a V out of water. It's a young heron, clean white chest feathers short and shaggy. The broken wing weighs down the body; its long neck curves in and out of an S, moving in time with waves.

The fish arrives. Its green scales skim the surface. The heron bobs toward the surface like a drunken man making his way across a room, clumsy and beautiful. As the gold beak stabs at the fish, I extend my fishing net and swing it down on the bird.

The metal loop hits its head and I hear a crack before the body submerges a moment in the ocean. It does not struggle as much as I expect. The ends of its wings catch in the holes of the net and feathers spread through them like fingers. I pull it in, feel the cracked beak, how it feels like broken fiberglass. I wrap it tightly in an old towel.

I don't know why I did this, though it didn't come over me suddenly. I packed the boat in the early fog of morning, placed the net, no fishing pole, beside me. I planned to hold the long neck of the pole and swiftly swing it down like an ax chopping wood in two.

Still, it felt different than I expected, not like killing, but like saving a drowning star, softly scooping it with my hands out of a watery sky as its light spilled through my fingers.

Fog

The mid-day fog,
moisture's middle-child,
struggles to become rain.
It swells and presses against
buildings, licks the ground.

Heavy grays pet us
with the dew that comes
after love-making, as though
we each had a partner
to touch our skin at night,
as though someone kissed us all.

It turns the sidewalks into fuzzy mirrors,
so everyone walks with a partner
clinging to them, upside down.
No one is alone.

Knowing Too Much

What a disappointment –
the mind of God
opened like the back
of a doll house.

Mysteries laid out like tiny
porcelain dolls.
Pluck an answer out,
a tiny body removed from its stiff bed
under a kleenex blanket.

What an ugly gift
I have asked for.

Watch it walk to the table.
No. Watch the large hand
which walks it. Fingerprints
a vortex of centipedes
pressing into the plastic waist.

He drags her legs, dead sticks,
across the floor
in His desired direction
toward a man

who wears a tiny tie,
and has a plastic head.
They kiss. It's dry,
like the tips of apple
stems touching. Neither likes
it, nor dislikes it.

Forgiving

Without my glasses, the rooster is in pieces;
sound, beak, head rise
through the fog without a body.
Its hard crow cuts
through the troubled morning.

The sheep, so distant and low
they've lost their legs, are scattered
like my children's teeth
in the bureau drawer. Your body, weak
from yesterday's accusation, falls
heavy on the bed.

We'd found out the preacher cheated
on his wife. Yesterday at the potluck
we smothered the table in food.
He gave thanks; we devoured him
with eyes, holding tight
to forks and knives as he rose
holding the cup, toasting God.

How can I say he's wrong?
I stole those love letters
out of the preacher's mailbox, and read them
like peach juice dripping from my chin,
letting the sin catch in a cup
that I talked over with friends, holding
it close like a whisper, letting
the steam cling to my lips.

Proposal

How can I love you
when you're trying to kill me?

I watch words spill out
the sides of your mouth
like pea soup, thin with lies
sticking to the dent in your chin.

Your mortgage discussion seeps
in like killing gas through the vents.
Threats of children cannot pull
my eye to yours.

Each promise is an earthquake.
The floor creaks,
sucking in the ground below.

I wait for it to catch
a leg and eat it up with shards
of metal floor teeth: framing my leg
in a picture of slaughter.

The waiters carrying white flags
swarm in like bees poured out.

Hair and Feathers

Abuse is watching the Pilgrim's
Pride chickens bundled
together in their wire crates flying
down the highway in an 18-wheeler.
The ones on the outer edge, boxing
the others in, have lost the feathers
from their backsides,
ripped away by the wind,
until their tails look like my balled up fist.

It is not like that with me.

Though there was that time
you held my face over the gas stove;
a single hair escaped from my ponytail
and fell to the fire. How the flame devoured
it like a fuse, chewing its way up my scalp.
But it did not explode. Instead,

it touched the others, and my head
sizzled and smoked like a volcano waiting.
In the end, it was trails of intertwining black
encrusted lava that I wore like a tight knit cap.

That night I held a frozen bag of chicken breasts
on my head, and watched you pop pieces of steak
the size of eggs into your lion mouth.

White feathers keep clicking
against the windshield
as the truck takes up the highway
and I cannot get past it.

Fall

I speak in buttercups and autumnals.
Autumnals--what a strange breaking
of syllables, like we are broken.

All your sugar and light help suffocate,
like taping my mouth shut once you've filled me
with delicacies. Spring and wet nights.

Here come the cool crisp evenings
that draw the night out, one too many
clean sheets strung together before the sun
cracks its head on the horizon.

Your stem shriveling to a fingernail
closes off the tender leaf tissues
that cut out the green and leave
these cranberry hands.

You tell me it is beautiful,
but I know it's because I am dying.

You Make Me Enjoy Everything Else

I bathe in the lake
because you do not touch me
like you should.

The green water lifts all the hair
off my body. It waves in slow
motion to the passing fish,

in unison with the swimming kelp.
I wait for something
to nibble at my flesh.

A storm cloud lies above me.
Its deep voice reverberates
on my breasts.

I lie naked on the flat rock,
its heat pressing into my skin
until red posies bloom on my back.

Mercury Running

Goodbye lover.

You have washed your hands in me
and poured me out dirty on the back porch,
a jig playing in your ear
and a sulfur tear in your eye.
Now I lie about the desert,
tar pits for eyes.

Goodbye lover.

I wish I had been your hate
before you were mine.
But you –
marble full
you escape
everything deserving you.

My fault –

I was a mirror. Up close
you saw yourself in me, like mercury.
Deviant metal, rarely free,
you dropped me and ran.

Grasshopper

Lover, I daydream your death
on a daily basis, hoping until then
each thing you look upon fondly
turns to vomit as its praise leaves
your lips.

You have spread yourself
across my skin, my world,
chunks of you on air and sun and fish.

Fish have been known to eat vomit.
But the vomit of you burns their gills
and they hate you for it.

I wanted to lie beside you, but
now I realize there is not enough room
for you and you and you and me.
Is that why you sleep on a king-size bed?
Though you could fit comfortably on the head of a pin.

Why do you yell? No one can hear you.
You are a grasshopper in the middle of an ocean
floating on a raft the size of a pea.
Oh little man, may you cry big tears
that shake your grasshopper chest.

Echo's Reflection

I just wanted you to touch me,
to place your white palms to my pale
cheeks until my nose touched yours,
your reflection, and then your lips.

Love grows on grief, and either love
or grief, I don't know which,
causes my skin to dry, peel back,
and fall from the bone like the unloved
leaves of fall. I am the absence
of sound waiting about your chin for a word
drop that I may cup, kiss, and blow back.
Even this only reminds you of yourself.

So I went to the pond before you,
wrapped myself in it like a sheet,
lay still and waited for you to come.
And you came. You came and stared
with your love-eyes.
I felt the soft palms of water,
each kiss that licked your lips.
You moaned and I moaned back.

In Your Absence

I watch the stocker
stack loaves like a mason
until a wall separates us.

The wall of mustard stands lonely,
so I couple each one with a ketchup,
his full chest, her long neck,
and take two on vacation, the frozen section
but they freeze like naked lambs.

The lambs' parts wander apart;
I shepherd them back together,
rib, backbone, shoulder, leg,
but my hands cannot heal.

I break each banana from its hand
and place them on different aisles.
They are my fingers
waiting to be found.

Knitting Your Sex

Not like God in the womb;
this is not pure. I sit on the edge
of the bed, start with your toes,
work my way up.

I let you slip
through my fingers,
knit and purl you
into something I can
hold on to.

Your skin is much
too slippery: your meanings
of rock and sun and dress
are always changing,
like seaweed loosening itself
from the ocean floor, floating
like headless birds.

So here I am a fool
scalding yarn
in the kitchen sink, felting
it into a likeness of your chest.
Casting off, I kiss the consolation.
We dance.
This is the real thing.

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