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Creative Sample

For Lack of Atari, 1983

The mango tree with its arms spread like an embrace is home base. The green grass is boiling lava and the coiled garden hose is an island you can land on if you don’t want to turn to ash. The porch can be safe but only for a flash because the old lady with the broom handle will cast a spell on you in Spanish. Sin verguenza, maldita, hija del diablo, desgraciada.

The pit bull tethered to the avocado tree is a snub-tailed devil. If you get too close, he’ll munch up your soul with his rotten teeth, and you’ll have to sink down to the underworld to steal it back. The kitchen is the underworld where fire licks the popcorn ceiling but never burns the Formica cabinets. The old witch stirs all the souls in a steel pot, takes tiny sips from her ladle, throws in pinches of dirt.

If your soul ends up in her brew, it will turn the color of dishwater. It will be gritty until your dying day. Sneak in through the back door but don’t hide under the eaves because that’s where the wasps hang and their poison will paralyze your legs. If you can’t run away the Palmetto bugs will come and burrow under your skin, make nests inside your bones and you’ll hear them skittering whenever you fall asleep. If you see any yellow mangoes on the ground, scoop them up. You can bite through the skin with your teeth and suck out the juice which will give you extra life. The blackened ones are atomic, throw them against the old Impala, explode them against the house.

Don’t lob them at the witch, she will catch them in her arthritic fist then stare you dead with her lazy eye. She’ll turn you to a pile of sea salt, sweep you into a dustpan, sprinkle your remains over every dish. Sin verguenza, maldita, hija del diablo, cabrona.

There’s no finish line, dummy. Just be glad there’s something to eat.
Boys Will be Boys

what do our mothers know about defending the earth,
about what lurks in soft light, we’re waiting for aliens
to blink-in on laser beams and cat-step behind us,
to crisp us up like duck skin while we nap.

who knows if we’re good guys or bad, we’re war worn
and muddled, climbing vines and battling sycamores,
trust us to bury the bodies, momma, we will shoot
lickety-split between the eyes of anything that moves.

momma watches from the doorway, the boys beet-faced barbarians,
grasshopper guerrillas, let them out of her hair for as long as the sun

hangs there, she’d wanted girls, mermaids in training, instead these boys
with their father’s mouth, alien in corduroy, what does she know

about boys who will grow into men with ridiculous beards,
she had only sisters, all who knew how to break down a rifle, but

none interested in aiming the barrel or pulling the trigger.
And the boys are still two years away from sneaking cigarettes,

three from stealing vodka sips from the liquor cabinet,
four years before joy rides and knocking into mailboxes

but already she’s stopped telling them when to wash the grit
from their skin, poor things, they don’t even realize,

she doesn’t miss them already.
Postcard from the Corner House

Greetings from the grayish tides of The Dishwater Coast, where soapsuds blossom and salmonella schools colonize the Teflon reefs. I haven’t found a way to salvage these ruined fingers, the skin that puckers and peels away.

I’m up to my neck in porcelain and crystal, but there’s charm in the music they make, like prisoners dragging tin mugs along iron bars. In Laundry Canyon, the children cast off their clothes like people they’ve been, then offer them up to the gods of stain-free and whiter whites. They don’t know they’re losing themselves on a cellular level, childhood floating on the rinse water like sea foam. On the Push Broom Plains, the dogs fold at our feet, sleep as people sleep, weary from snout to spleen, when they get up, they leave behind outlines in fur, fuzzy tumbleweeds that travel the ceramic landscape propelled by our own shuddering breaths.
Space Invader

You meet him at the bottom of a Government Center stairwell in downtown Miami, a sweet-faced creature with swaying eye stalks and a wormhole for a mouth, and you think this guy gets me like nobody with a proper nose can. Maybe cobalt light arcs from his fingertips. Maybe inside his ribcage there is a hive of bees instead of a heart. Not Earth bees of course, but some interplanetary equivalent. When you put your palm to his chest, or what amounts to a chest, what you feel is an electrostatic hum instead of a rhythm and you know this is what you’ve been waiting your whole life for, this skin the color of a January sky. Maybe all you want is to take this alien to a small Nebraska town where you can start a family and raise alpacas, because my God you’ve never even been outside the state of Florida, and alpacas are the new lamb’s wool, but this alien’s got other places to be. There’s a whole universe out there to be discovered and you have to understand, but the loneliness that follows is bigger and bluer than any you’ve ever known, and you pray to the stratosphere to please, please bring his galactic expedition back your way, so you dream that he’ll return with an army of his friends to colonize the heck out of your small muddy planet and you, you will either be his exalted Earth queen or highest on the list of people he wants to devour.
Missed Apocalypse

On the day the world ends, of course the sky rains fire, first a drizzle then fat drops that burst into sparks as they collide with the asphalt, a million tossed cigarettes, a billion orange contrails.

On that day a tsunami rises out of the Pacific like a monster claw that drags all of the west coast to the sea floor. In central Florida, the earth yawns and swallows an entire town—street lamps, abandoned theater, the laundry where they wash, dry, & fold by the pound. A belt of volcanoes sneezes fire all along the equator, birthing lava islands, bringing the oceans to a slow boil.

Armageddon comes on the day it was foretold, except nobody truly expected it, believing it just another fundamentalist hoax or the network’s attempt to boost ratings and the sale of asbestos umbrellas.

By the time people notice, apocalypse is only another event in a series, a point of reference in their collective memories. They talk of going off to work in cars whose tires have melted, not even realizing the highways turned to ash. How just for a moment the children glanced up to see a tangerine sky, their mouths loose, their small fingers twitching as if dreaming.
Critical Sample

Poetry is Probably Not Dead – A Response to Alexandra Petri

According to Donald Hall in his essay titled “Death to the Death of Poetry,” published originally by Harper’s magazine in 1989, the question of Poetry’s health and well-being is often being examined: “Poetry was always in good shape twenty or thirty years ago; now it has always gone to hell. I have heard this lamentation for forty years, not only from distinguished critics and essayists but from professors and journalists who enjoy viewing our culture with alarm.” The fact that these types of examinations keep cropping up should be some sort of evidence in favor of poetry’s “living” status. After all, if something is effectively “dead,” people rarely feel the need to debate whether or not it is still in its casket. Yet in keeping with the tradition of questioning poetry’s liveliness, journalist Alexandra Petri attempts to answer the question “Is Poetry Dead?” in her 2013 Washington Post opinion piece.

In her article, Petri identifies a singular question that can establish whether or not poetry still has a pulse. She challenges her readers to hold poetry up to her standard of vigor: “You can tell that a medium is still vital by posing the question: Can it change anything?” The question itself is broadly framed, yet the requirement for the type of change effected is narrow. While “anything” could mean just about anything, Petri doesn’t seem to be referring to change on an individual or personal basis, rather she implies change that is political or revolutionary in nature. She later states: “But it used to be that if you were young and you wanted to change things with your words, you darted off and wrote poetry somewhere. You got together with friends at cafes and you wrote verses and talked revolution. Now that is the last thing you do.” It’s difficult to
pinpoint what era she is referring to when revolution was brewing in coffee houses, nor what it has been replaced with now that composing poetry is the last thing you do when you want to effect change. If a medium has to foment revolution in order to assert its vitality, then very few, if any would pass Petri’s litmus test. Reality television is hardly exacting any positive political change, yet how many Real Housewives spin-offs remain on the air? It’s also dubious as to whether poets ever had revolution, or even understanding, as their end goal. In Frank O’Hara’s “Personism: A Manifesto,” he rejects the idea that his poems should somehow enrich his audience: “But how can you really care if anybody gets it, or gets what it means, or if it improves them. Improves them for what? for death? Why hurry them along?” Poetry, or at least his vision of it, was not meant to illuminate, much less transform any type of political landscape.

But Petri doesn’t consider the fact that not all changes have to be broad, sweeping, and world altering. Dismissing small scale and personal changes, diminishes poetry’s power. Not long after her article was first published, people in Lexington, KY participated in a project that challenged the idea that “poetry was outdated, irrelevant, and useless.” Using a collaborative concept, Bianca Spriggs created a love poem to her city of Lexington, which over 247 residents volunteered to have lines of tattooed on their bodies. Spriggs’s poem and people’s willingness to incorporate its words onto their bodies: “changes our ideas about poetry, tattoos, art and love.” In an article published January 13, 2012 by The Washington Post, Lauren Wilcox also examines the notion that poetry is dead, though she yields somewhat different results than Petri. Wilcox references an after-school program in Washington D.C. called the D.C. Creative Writing Workshop. At the time the article was written, the program was in its 12th year, containing at least as many members as the school’s football team. For a dead medium, poetry offers the students, many of which have been referred by social workers, an avenue to challenge
themselves through creative work. Perhaps it hasn’t bred the type of revolution Petri expected, but it changed and continues to change something within these students.

Throughout her article, it seems Petri doesn’t want to explore the state of contemporary poetry as much as she wants to pronounce the medium deceased in a way that is both humorous and readable. She succeeds at the latter by making sweeping, often unsupported generalizations and using familiar poetic devices like hyperbole and metaphor to illustrate her points. It is an interesting strategy; though not necessarily one that furthers her argument. As a print media journalist, she asserts: “If poetry is dead, we are in the next ward over, wheezing noisily, with our family gathered around looking concerned and asking about our stereos.” This type of writing is hardly straight journalism, but rather one that relies on imagery to convey its ideas. The reader is invited to think of poetry and print as inhabiting human bodies, with physical human frailties. This is not proof of poetry’s death, but rather hints that its heart might still beat.

In his defense of poetry, Hall suggests many English majors abandon the medium after college: “They become involved in journalism or scholarship, essay writing or editing, brokerage or social work; they backslide from the undergraduate Church of Poetry. Years later, glancing belatedly at the poetic scene, they tell us that poetry is dead. They left poetry; therefore they blame poetry for leaving them.” He makes those who deride poetry and its state seem like jilted ex-lovers. I don’t know whether this is the case with Petri, though she certainly seems concerned with language in a way that is less about reporting and more about clever word play. Her rhetorical strategies often rely on poetic elements. She exaggerates rather than consult actual data: “There are about six people who buy new poetry, but they are not feeling very well.” And often times her conclusions are stated in a literary rather than journalistic form: “But I think what
we mean by poetry is a limp and fangless thing.” Though she is trying to establish poetry’s dwindling value, she at times seems to borrow from its features.

Perhaps some of the difficulties she has determining poetry’s liveliness come from Petri’s limited understanding of poetry: “We know, we think, from high school, the sort of thing a poem is. It is generally in free verse, although it could be a sonnet, if it wanted. It describes something very carefully, or it makes a sound we did not expect, and it has deep layers that we need to analyze.” Yet this definition, or a version of it, is one I’ve often encountered. People who don’t read poetry remember it as something that appears in books with yellowed pages and is taught in public school classrooms or forced upon degree seekers as some sort of requirement. The analysis of poetry is led by someone who’s had training in the field of English or Literature and is taught to a collection of students who can barely prop up their heads for the boredom that weighs them down. Tell someone you’re getting a Master’s Degree in poetry and often their eyes will glaze over—haikus? they think, limericks?—it seems altogether impractical. But how can a person assess the vitality of something they can scarcely recognize? Petri dates poetry’s prestige back to “The Odyssey,” then seems to gloss over thousands of years’ worth of writing. She suggests movie technology with its crystal clear images has supplanted poetry, as if the purpose of poetry was always to reproduce visual images with 3D clarity. It shows an acute misunderstanding of not only contemporary poetry, but poetry throughout history. She writes: “All things poetry used to do, other things do much better.” However, she gives no evidence that she understands what poetry “used to do” other than transmit news and recreate images.

As someone embarking on an MFA degree in poetry, it’s difficult not to bristle at Petri’s assertions and assumptions. I suppose it’s not that different from having to justify my attempts to earn a poetry degree to concerned friends and neighbors, “It’s okay. I haven’t taken any loans.
I’m being funded.” However, in this first semester, I am only barely coming to understand how rich and manifold poetry is. How overwhelming it seems at times, the sheer numbers of poems being written, poets penning them, the styles, purposes, poetics and history behind them all. Petri wonders: “[…] poetry is the strainer through which we glimpse ourselves and the true story of our era. But is it?” This isn’t entirely fair or accurate either. Poetry is not just a filter for how an individual views themselves and their surroundings, but a way of thinking, of processing, and understanding the world and experience, or confronting our inability to do any of that. In his poem, “Poetry, a Natural Thing,” Robert Duncan writes: “The poem / feeds upon thought, feeling, impulse, / to breed itself, / a spiritual urgency at the dark ladders leaping.” Poetry as he sees it and writes it, perpetuates itself as a result of various sources. It grows from an impulse to say or work through something that needs to be said in a particular way, through its own logic. Barbara Guest conveys a similar understanding of poetry in “A Reason for Poetics.” Guest reflects, “The poem is quite willing to forget its begetter and take off in its own direction. It likes to be known as spontaneous.” For Guest, the poem seems to have its own consciousness apart from the poet’s. The poet is learning as the poem is being composed, rather than simply conveying her knowledge or understanding to whoever is willing to passively receive it. Guest says: “Each poet owns a private language.” Yet this language does not exist in exclusivity from the reader, rather: “Poet and reader perform together on a highwire strung on a platform between their separated selves.” She envisions a sense of community and kinship between the poet and the reader, who uncover the poems meaning cooperatively. In his essay “Thingitude and Causality,” Tony Hoagland states while that while “modern consciousness may indeed be splintered […] it is one function of poetry in our time to fasten it back together.” For Hoagland,
reading a poem can strengthen his sense of self and living through the clarity it might offer. Though this is only one interpretation of what a poem can and should do.

Yet while Petri may seem uninformed in many regards, she does introduce some valid concerns, ones that in this first semester I may have contemplated myself. According to Petri: “These days, poetry is institutionalized. Everyone can write it. But if you want a lot of people to read it, or at least the Right Interested Persons, there are a few choked channels of Reputable Publications. Or you can just spray it liberally onto the Internet and hope it sticks.” Her claims are generalized and vague, but that doesn’t make them any less concerning. All of us who study poetry, who write poetry, simultaneously exist out in the world that poetry rarely touches, a world in which it becomes challenging to explain what poetry is or what we write about without being perceived as somewhat eccentric. Poetry rarely covers mortgage payments and groceries for a family of six, yet it has become my pursuit. Getting your work published is a competitive endeavor, one rife with rejection, self-doubt, and insecurity. I wonder what the expectations are and whether or not I can meet those expectations, or whether I can navigate the academy that controls these narrow streams that lead to publication. Still, none of these ruminations necessarily point to poetry’s death but rather hint at the value society assigns to art versus entertainment.

But poetry is being published, being read, being performed, being studied, and practiced. According to Hoagland, “there are many kinds of poem in the universe, and room for them […]” This by itself does not appear to be enough reason for Petri to establish poetry’s life, but her standard is flawed. Held up to her own measuring stick of whether or not change is being effected, work like the one she presents in her blog post would hardly register a blip on an EKG. Her topical piece is not exactly journalism and it’s not exactly satisfying an “insatiable hunger
for news” either. Yet it is out there, stuck on the internet and spawning conversation, reactions and rejection. Poetry isn’t dead, nor does it have one of its iambic feet in the grave, but it is hard to pin down, particularly for people who don’t read it or write it. The state of contemporary poetry can’t be resolved or summarized by answering a single question, it is complex and changing. While I expect there will always be people to defend poetry and its relevance, I’m sure the speculation about poetry’s death will arise just as surely. Though considering the responses fielded by Alexandra Petri, I don’t think she will be the one to pose it.
Works Cited


Self-Assessment

Entering the MFA program as a non-traditional graduate student and parent was a daunting experience. One I was both prepared and unprepared to confront. While I was eager to dedicate myself to growing my body of work and improving my craft, I was also worried that I did not possess the skill and the knowledge to navigate a graduate curriculum. This sentiment was reinforced early in my MFA career when we were assigned a summer reading by our poetry workshop professor Maureen Seaton. The book was *The Life of Poetry* by Muriel Rukeyser, a challenging title that attests to poetry’s vitality and essential nature. Rukeyser’s ideas were complex, and the beautiful language she used to present them was often loaded with abstractions. I was completely intimidated by the material which I felt incapable of understanding. If this was our summer reading, what would my first semester hold? How would I get through it?

My first semester was indeed arduous, and my trepidation was an anchor that weighed down my entire spirit and demeanor. I was incapable of masking my anxieties as I made my way across the campus, attending classes and tutoring at the Writing Center. I often felt overwhelmed by the reading and writing assignments which I had to balance with a home life that was equally demanding. There were moments when I was barely staying afloat, my head bobbing along the surface as I treseted water to the point of exhaustion. Yet somehow the deadlines forced poetry out of me. Between the struggles to keep up with the work, I was producing writing that was both new and unexpected. This was due in part to my sense of obligation to the program and my professors, as well as a desperate need to avoid humiliation. I certainly did not want to be the only student in a class of four who failed to complete her assignment. This drove me to push beyond my doubts in order to put something down on paper, often yielding surprising, satisfying results.
Though Maureen’s summer reading assignment had terrified me, her workshop in particular offered a welcome respite from the week’s anxieties. That first semester I was taking Poetry Forms with Jaswinder Bolina, Fiction Forms with Zack Linmark, and a Composition Practicum with Joanna Johnson. I was also tutoring 10 hours a week. Maureen’s class on Thursday afternoons was a peaceful end to a bustling schedule. Her classroom was a space of nurturing and acceptance. This was not to say that it wasn’t challenging or educational, I learned immeasurably from the poetry collections we were assigned to read and use as springboards for our own writing. Oliver de la Paz’s *Names Above Houses* was among my favorite readings, both in this class and Fiction Forms the following fall semester, and inspired a series of prose poems I continued to develop for my thesis and hope to expand even further.

Figuring out my place in workshop was also a learning process. My anxieties and insecurities plagued me as I commented on the work of my peers. I worried I would say the wrong thing, or offer the wrong advice, only realizing later that my opinions couldn’t be wrong, rather they would simply be commentary that the poet being workshopped could either consider or dismiss in relation to their own vision for their work. The goal of the workshop was to help one another strengthen our work and there was never a sense of animosity, but rather a feeling of community in our mutual desire to improve our own poetry and that of our peers. We were also equally vocal in praising particularly strong and surprising work. As I progressed through the program, I believe I was able to develop my ability to comment intelligently on the work of my peers, as well as learn to accept their criticisms openly and as opportunities to push my work to unexpected places.

While each of the poetry workshops that I’ve taken has been different in terms of how it was led and the dynamics of its participants, they were all vital in helping me to improve and
develop my craft. The feedback from my professors was always insightful and vastly helpful as I moved forward in the revision process. During my time in the MFA program, I believe workshop has given me a better awareness of the shortfalls in my own writing. I am able to identify places where the language could be strengthened and words could be culled in favor of more concise, more potent imagery. I can also recognize the places where I’ve taken shortcuts, as well as the places where something crucial is missing or needs expansion or clarification. I’ve also learned to trust myself, my work, and my ideas.

Workshop, as well as the experience developing my thesis under my advisor, Jaswinder’s guidance, has also given me a deeper appreciation for the process of revision and its crucial role in improving my poetry and carving from the work its most successful rendering. Initially I viewed revision as a process antithetical to the process which created and inspired the work. Revision implied that my instincts in writing the poem were somehow wrong or misguided. I now view revision as a necessary function of the writing process. Very rarely does work emerge fully formed and flawless, rather it takes a period of tinkering and reimagining, of setting it aside and examining it with fresh eyes, to draw the most out of it and be able to identify what can be eliminated and what needs to be further developed.

I also appreciate the opportunities I’ve had to study across genres. While I haven’t dedicated as much time to fiction as I have to poetry, I have thoroughly enjoyed my forays into prose. Even within my poetry, I have narrative inclinations and being able to explore those more fully through fiction has satisfied a certain desire I’ve had to write longer pieces. Though I still have trouble plotting the arc of something as lengthy as a short story, in studying various works of fiction, I’ve been intrigued and inspired by the shapes some of these books took, not all of them traditional novels. As a result, I’ve discovered there are blurred lines between genres.
Rather than having fiction and poetry exist in separate and tidy boxes, I’ve learned that there are many opportunities for crossover and fusion, as well as with creative nonfiction which we were also able to explore. These are all areas I hope to approach in my writing, as they offer opportunities to expand and examine the subjects I hope to write about.

Self-doubt is one of the biggest challenges I’ve encountered during my time in the MFA program, and one I am certain will plague me my entire life. That inner critic can be difficult to subdue and mine is quite the harpy, eating away at my liver, chewing up my eyeballs. While I understand almost everyone battles their insecurities from time to time, particularly artists, I also wish mine weren’t quite so obvious. Listening to Jaswinder’s recorded introduction during the 2nd Year MFA Reading helped me realize how visible those insecurities are to the people I’ve worked with, both the professor’s who’ve tried to guide and encourage me, as well as the peers I’ve worked side-by-side with in class. There’s a certain amount of shame that comes in knowing your weaknesses are so readily identifiable, that they are one of the first traits others recognize in you. As I emerge from my MFA experience, into a possible career in writing, I know I need to project a more capable image, one that reflects my experience, education, and abilities, rather than my frailties. There is also a certain amount of confidence to be mustered when it comes to embarking on the road to publication, be it in literary journals or as an honest-to-goodness book. I want my work to speak for itself, but who I am is a framework for the poetry I present, and if I am too afraid to stand behind and support it, who will?
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This novel about the Mariel boatlift was not received well in Fiction Forms class, though I did find it had some merit. I found the chapters that took place in Cuba particularly compelling, and I’m always excited to see Miami depicted in fiction. Acevedo’s characters felt real and familiar, though at times a bit too melodramatic or sentimental.


From my first semester Poetry Forms class with Jaswinder. Familiarizing myself with the important poets of our century. (Last century?) O’Hara, Ashbery, Ginsberg, Olson, Creeley, Levertov, Duncan. I was overwhelmed by these history lessons. (I thought I should have known more.) To be revisited in a less harried manner. That first semester—yikes.


This memoir made powerful use of refrain and photography. An exploration of the women in her family, suffering, self-loathing, her own sexuality, experience with abuse. How she came to writing, how it saved her. Allison’s voice and the heartbreak of her story lingered long after reading.


Baker writes about his nonexistent relationship with John Updike, whom he is obsessed with and finally meets. Awkwardness ensues. I enjoyed his sense of humor, particularly in relation to his anxieties, though at times the concept feels a bit drawn out and Baker becomes more difficult to connect with.


Essays on writing. I had trouble connecting with some of Baxter’s ideas. I found it much easier to read Baxter’s fiction than Baxter writing about his ideas about fiction. Intelligent, analytical, insightful, not entirely inaccessible, but required focus. Essays on the craft of writing, focus on “Against Epiphanies,” “Dysfunctional Narratives,” and Chekhov.


A novel about the character Charles who is and is not the writer Baxter, interviewing various characters who give first person accounts of their experiences, both successes and failures, with love. The multiple POVs and Baxter’s sense of voice were engaging, though there was borderline sappiness to the tales that I wasn’t sure were either satire or sincerity.

The casual language, sharp observations, self-awareness, and wit, grabbed me. The whole thing felt so cool and clever, like the poet is someone you could have a beer with yet still be intimidated by. “The Charm of 5:30” was a poem I could read, re-read, and maybe live inside.


The poems were accessible, richly detailed, nostalgic. Very prose driven, and linear, which I can appreciate. There’s a sweetness to the collection. I loved the bilingual poems, how fluid they felt, and how he relates and examines the exile’s experience. And of course Miami in poetry. I loved “América,” the fusion Thanksgiving is so familiar.


The only square book on this list, apart from Ono’s *Grapefruit.* Some poems were, whoa, meaning I wasn’t sure what was happening. Some of it very much like a radio, tuning in and tuning out of stations, snippets of conversation, disorienting. I’d feel like I was following, then suddenly, clearly, I was not. Great titles, cool lines, and me just not getting it.


This collection featured the titular novella among other short stories. “Hunger” was beautifully told. The first person narrative is delivered by the protagonist, a Chinese immigrant who struggles to find her voice in a family torn apart by disappointment. The reader discovers near the end the protagonist is already deceased, which neither comes as a surprise nor feels contrived, but rather leads to a graceful close to the family’s story.


Stunning language and imagery throughout. Chang explores her family’s history through her lush, richly imagined poems, at times adopting the persona of relatives. There’s a dreamlike quality to the poetry that appealed to me though the tone and voice was too consistent at times.


Very revealing and emotional collected journals, providing glimpses into Cheever’s creative processes and interior life, revealing struggles with alcoholism, gay affairs, and resentment toward family with moments of profound insight. Exposed his vulnerabilities, challenges.

India Bridge is a 1950s housewife trapped in her role from marriage to widowhood. Her story is told in vignettes that convey vividly the trappings of the privileged women of her era. I had empathy for her as often as I wanted to shake her for being so passive. I loved the vignette format which made writing a novel seem slightly less daunting, also made for an easy, energetic read.


One of my favorite things about this collection was the way Corral seamlessly wove Spanish and English into the poetry. It reminded me of the snake cover, how each reptile is separate, yet tangled in a way that appears impossible to unravel. Being raised in a bilingual home, in a bilingual city, the fluid nature of language is something that is part of my identity.


One of the first poetry books I read during the MFA program. I loved the cover, there was a joy in it, though there was sadness in the poetry too. I was challenged by this book at times, dizzied and disoriented. Worried I would never understand any poetry. Though it was slippery, I loved the voice and its confidence, the way it played with form, prose, and language was enviable.


This coming of age tale is part novella and part lyric poem. Fidelito’s story begins in the Philippines and spans the family’s migration to the U.S. There is a magical element to Fidelito’s narrative and his attempts to fly. The beautiful language, brief glimpses into this family’s struggles, and shape this book took inspired a series of poems. Assigned twice, twice read, with pleasure.


This is the poet’s last collection, he died of AIDS related illness in 1992. There is grief here and sorrow. “I’ll Be Somewhere Listening for My Name” closes powerfully, leaves the reader aching.


A collection of essays and criticism about art, photography, music, literature. Dyer is funny and insightful. Personal essays at the end about being an only child, getting fired from his first job, doughnuts.

Dyer is neurotic. Attempting to write an essay about D. H. Lawrence he can’t wrap his mind around. He is distracted, procrastinating, traveling and thinking about other things and Lawrence. Moments of hilarity, tenderness, and occasionally impatience with the writer.


The play with sound, with rhythm. Some poems were more straightforward, others thump and bump, hear their own sound and echo off each other. The language is accessible, the ideas, the poetic moves more complex.


Faizullah recounts history through beautiful language and gut wrenching imagery. She bears witness to victims of rape and torture by the Pakistani army during the 1971 Liberation War. It was a tough read emotionally, difficult to get through in a single sitting. The interviews with the birangonas (war heroines) were overwhelming as I imagine they were for the poet as well.


An old woman in a Hungarian village finds love during a trip to the market. As a protagonist, Valeria was fascinating, brusque, passionate, and an unlikely heroine. Depicting an older woman’s sexuality with such charm was unexpected. I loved Valeria and was inspired by the possibilities of exploring characters frequently left to the margins.


“My advice to all parents is beat your children moderately and moderately often…” O’Connor’s personality and sense of humor are present in both her personal correspondence and writing/publishing/business correspondence. Her need to communicate and engage and joke despite her health issues. Another reason to love her apart from her fiction—her gumption and determination.


This short story collection explored what it means to be Puerto Rican on the island, on the U.S. mainland, and in-between. These characters struggle with identity, both personal and cultural, as they navigate relationships fraught with tensions. “Now We Will be Happy” is the second story in the collection, my favorite for the tenderness explored between the lovers who connect beyond the physical in a way that doesn’t feel sentimental. There’s a subtlety to the stories that appealed to me.

Griffiths plays with persona and ekphrasis to powerful effect, a wonderful combination of inspiration, admiration, and imagination. While I wasn’t familiar with all the works that she referenced, I admired her confidence and capability with language. She honors the works of the writers she draws from while creating something wholly original and her own.


The opening poem “Preparing the Tongue” was my favorite and set the tone for reading the rest of the book. The language throughout is visual and concrete. Food imagery abounds. The Spanish threaded throughout is thoughtfully incorporated and the rooster on the cover—fantastic.


Heart wrenching autobiography about Guest’s paralysis as a result of a bicycle accident at 12. Told vividly and viscerally, though not sentimentally. It tore at me, the grief, the disappointments, the triumphs. How hard it is to be at the mercy of your own body, your dependence on others. An honest, compelling story.


Much of this collection was written in the months following the unexpected death of Hahn’s mother as a result of a car accident. There is a fractured nature to these poems that gives them a moving authenticity to their depiction of grief, how thoughts and memories don’t present themselves in a linear narrative, but rather as independent ideas and images that connect and that build upon each other. The zuihitsu form lends itself well to this.


Mariette displays signs of possible stigmata and throws the convent into upheaval. The omniscient POV is effective. There is an uncertainty in the events. Lush language, almost poetic at turns. The story was so compelling and deftly crafted in its manipulation of time. A page turner. It never truly reveals what is occurring, leaves the reader to interpret or wonder.


Conceptual poetry. There was a playfulness to this collection I could appreciate. Though there were many times I didn’t know how to enter some of these poems. The ones I could connect the most with were the longer prose poems. Among my favorites were “First Person Fabulous” and “Once Upon a Time: A Genre Fable.” Though subverting narrative by playing within narrative, the humor in these was engaging and surprising.

A collection of essays by acclaimed German philosopher, much of it tough to unravel without a good bit of professorial guidance. “The Thing” with its “thinging of the thing” and whether or not the “thing is thingly” also led me to reconsider my place in the MFA program. It made sense in class, briefly for a fleeting moment I thought “YES, the thing! Of course!”


Hejinian’s work is a poetic autobiography told through fragments presented as prose blocks. It was hard at times to orient myself as I grasped at the fleeting narrative. The repetitions throughout gave the impression of narrative, little threads that felt so familiar in their refrain, yet remained elusive. Though I enjoyed writing my own poem in the style of Hejinian. There is something to the fragmented form that serves/mimics memory well.


Assigned during the first semester of Poetry Forms before I had encountered Hejinian’s poetry. “The Rejection of Closure” identified the differences between “open” and “closed” texts, in favor of “open” which invites the reader to participate, rejects authority of the writer. Very scientific and methodical way to examine writing and poetry. Another challenging, intelligent read.


Way more accessible than Heidegger or Hejinian. “Fear of Narrative and the Skittery Poem of Our Moment” made an impression on me, or rather echoed? articulated? my own sentiments about dissociative/language-y poetry.


The CD enclosed with the book was clearly the key. It changed everything. There’s a music to these poems, they almost beg to be read out loud. And the poet with the perfect poet’s name.


This fat anthology made me feel humbled by how much I don’t know about poetry. More Ashbery, Ginsberg, Levertov, Creeley, O’Hara. Plus Statements of Poetics and more recent poets. I enjoyed O’Hara’s “Personism: A Manifesto.” Another anthology I will have to take my time reading through over the summer(s).

So much personality in these letters, in the voice that comes through them. Hurston is confident, energetic, perceptive, and determined. Assertive and shrewd. Tragic that she faded from the public and struggled so much toward the end of her career to get her work published.


Mia’s lyric memoir was beautifully rendered, as she searched for her father, for connections, for her heritage. There are lovers along the way, continents traveled, an island explored. I love reading about her experiences in Cuba, the music, the dancing, the sensuality among the ruins. An honest portrayal of a woman’s search for identity. A daughter kept at arm’s length, I could relate with.


This lyric collection feels raw, bare, and honest. The poems are sensual, musical, bilingual. Explorations, lovers, father, food. I was impressed by the passion in the writing, how unselfconscious it felt, how powerfully female.


Poetry collection with sections divided by portraits. Zack plays with form and language, bringing in Tagalog to talk about sex, love, heartbreak, Ingmar Bergman. “I’m your heart’s biggest yesterday’s hit” and “Your heart is a smalltime poem.” Poet’s visit to Forms class to read and answer questions and discuss process brought new insights.


The poems in this collection engaged me. I loved how he played with elements of pop culture, mythology, and imagination to write about universal issues and the challenges of just being human. The language was really accessible and conversational. The way this book was organized impressed me, how one poem built upon the next, felt carefully crafted.


This young adult novel about a young Nepalese girl sold by her stepfather into sex slavery told an important story based on the author’s research and desire to bring this barbarous practice to light. The 1st person POV was a bit problematic in terms of authority, and the inability to truly convey the character’s thoughts and suffering, though this may be a result of the YA audience.

Collection in the romantic lyric tradition, lengthy meditations about Florida. Is there such a thing as too much Florida? Lush, rich descriptions, lots of nature imagery, details about flora and fauna, scenic beauty, but still I had trouble connecting or feeling interested. I wanted more conflict, more disruption. Something else. “The Florida Poem” was so long, an argument against the long poem form that I want to experiment with.


The poets felt like they were in sync in this collaborative collection, their poetry unified and seamless. I wondered if this effect was something that came through revision and experience, or whether it was more of a chemistry this pair had. My attempts at collaboration were more disjointed. The poems were clever, referencing pop culture and literature, though at times they felt like an inside joke between the two poets.


An extended meditation on marathon running and training and how it relates to the writer’s life, the writing life. The determination and discipline it takes is impressive and beyond me. But reading this book was also in a way like running a marathon, the coverage of the topic felt exhaustive. Perhaps because I’m not a runner, I tired of the running writing and wished he’d write more about writing than running. I loved his voice though, personal and confiding and intimate.


A lyric essay that examines heartbreak and the color blue in numbered fragments that build perfectly on one another. Lovely poetic language in prose blocks. Wonderful use of research, nature, Goethe, Van Gogh. Sadness, sorrow, beauty. Lines borrowed from here for found poetry assignment. A little book to revisit.


This short novel, based on the Chappaquiddick incident, was dizzying in its delivery. A young woman on a ride with a drunk senator winds up drowned in a river. The narrative is told from the point-of-view of the victim whose fate is clear from the opening, yet the reader still hopes for a different ending. The story is grim and gripping, told in a stream-of-consciousness style that at times makes the reader as if they were indeed drowning.


A wacky, experimental work that I expected to dislike but nonetheless charmed me. I loved how she trusted her own creativity and seemed to embody art and free spirit. A lesson in ephemeral art.

This lean book includes the short story “The Shawl” plus its sequel, the novella “Rosa.” “The Shawl” is the heartbreaking tale of a mother whose young child is murdered in a concentration camp. “Rosa” is the story of that mother who survived unspeakable horrors. Ozick’s lyrical prose is striking. Rosa’s character—her anger, grief, inability move past the events that defined her—are deftly imagined and written.


Reflections, ruminations, meditations, journal entries by one of Pessoa’s heteronyms, Bernardo Soares, a book keeper in Lisbon. So much of it is sadness, resignation, loneliness. Lines borrowed for found poetry assignment. “I aspire to nothing. Life hurts me.” Angst to the extreme.


A found autobiography cobbled from pieces of actual celebrity autobiographies. Notes in the back reveal sources, but the way the lines are strung together to create a narrative is genius. The gender, class, and race shift throughout. Entertaining and original. Inspired found memoir poem.


Tips on reading like a writer, essays that address different elements of fiction writing. Revisit “Reading for Courage” which talks about literature being a “source of courage and confirmation,” reading as inspiration of what can be accomplished, what others have courageously accomplished, more than breaking the rules, realizing there are no rules.


The title won me because Sci-Fi. The collection was maddening, disorienting, yet throughout it the direct reference to song lyrics or movies or pop-culture that made you almost feel like you were in on the joke. I kept trying to follow a narrative thread but it was illusion. These poems were about the music and the language, or maybe about its shortcomings. Though at times the surprises and the voice were too consistent, monotonous. The same.

The language is so accessible but what she does with it, the turns of phrase were so original and surprising: “Late that night it rained so hard the world / seemed flattened for good.” No sentimentality, but something more subtle, a writhing, thrumming energy in each poem. Each a living thing almost. Her reading in 2014 was fantastic, the hidden humor, her soothing voice. I was wowed.


My first assigned book in the MFA program, by Maureen, the summer before my first semester. The title sounded breezy easy. The contents frightened me and made me consider dropping out of graduate school. I wasn’t prepared for it, the density, the theories, the significance of poetry. Even now I’m still intimidated by it.


A dreamy, playful, and surreal collection. I appreciated the humor of this work and the invention, which inspired similar experimentation in my own work. The poet’s ability to take the familiar and turn it on its head was a draw.


This autobiography written for Maureen’s daughters feels personal, like the poet/memoirist has sat down with the reader to relate her experiences over coffee/tea. The poet’s language is present throughout these vignettes that cover childhood, alcoholism, recovery, divorce, and sexuality. A quick pleasure to read, a unique, original poetic approach to memoir.


Such diversity in this collection. I admired the way Shockley experimented with form—white space and dense blocks of text and ekphrasis. Some of the poems were accessible, others more of a challenge, made you work to get into them, others focused on language left me out completely. All of it was exciting, electric, powerful.


Winner of the Pulitzer Prize. The language was accessible, though sometimes too clean, or plain spoken when combined with complex ideas about space, time, existence. The loss of the poet’s scientist father added something of the personal, an emotional element. Very readable. Maybe doable.

Varied. Tough to crack. I liked it but mostly because I didn’t hate it. I sometimes felt excluded or disinterested, maybe this wasn’t the fault of the book. Maybe it’s my attention-deficit. I wasn’t sure what I liked about it. It seemed concerned with history, time, man’s place within all of it. I was not a fan of his use of the word “cunt.”


This collection was accessible and well-focused. Vera incorporates Spanish, but never alienates the reader. Many poems have a conversational quality that make them feel intimate and easy to engage with. The book is rooted in memory, language, and identity and how these are inextricably tied together. Made me contemplate my own roots, both familial and linguistic.


A lyric memoir. Stunning in its language, its use of fragments. Wade talks about her sexuality, reimagines, re-envisions, her family’s history, meeting her parents in the past, a sort of time-travel memoir, such a fascinating, original idea. I loved its depth and vision. Wade visited Maureen’s Poetry Forms (Memoir) class, she was lovely and engaging and down to earth.


David Hayden is the narrator, telling this retrospective of events that took place the summer he was 12. His father was the sheriff, his uncle the town doctor and resident war hero who molested Indian girls and murdered David’s Sioux housekeeper Marie Little Soldier for speaking up. The book feels focused and deliberate, my first example of a literary novel in the Western tradition. Very readable, had a calculated momentum that kept the story moving.


Autobiographical writing. Woolf recalls her mother’s death, its effects on her demanding father. Sketched in vivid detail, frank and carefully rendered. Colors she remembers, flowers and impressions made on her child’s mind viewed through the writer’s lens as she examines the past. She is vulnerable and distressed by criticism. Dense and compelling.
Nearly every poem has the same shape. Each with its own logic, the poet’s logic. Sometimes I followed along, seeing the breadcrumbs, other times I was trailing too far behind the birds and so I lost my way. I enjoyed this collection, the clever, surprising language, the twists and turns of each poem, the randomness, and strangeness that invited me to be random and strange in my own work.