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If My Daddy Wrote a Poem:

On the Exclusion of the Working Class Within The Writing Community

When I go to write, I invariably begin imagining the poem my father would write. I hear the musicality inherent to his dialect, some heightened emotional resonance illuminated by only a handful of words. I see American landscapes and characters ignored by our contemporary writing scene revealed in grit: trying to pay bills by digging ditches and laying pipes for a living, backhoes with no AC gusting hot smoked air, men nearing their seventies still hard laboring in ninety-nine degree weather only to be laid off come winter, their heat turned off. I imagine a sense of language surprising and genuine in its blemishes and bravely refusing any conformities adopted from higher education, a sense of humor only earned through unrelenting hardships, and a fist-clenched honesty detailing narratives of survival unflinching: what is it to be constantly fighting, fighting to keep the lights on, to put food on the table, fighting your bad health uninsured, fighting everything just to survive? And every time I find myself convinced that the poem written by my father would flip the switch on for those who haven’t seen for themselves, and it would be like nothing they’d ever read before.

But it’s in this moment that my fantasy typically disintegrates and I come up against an ache of guilt instead, because I know why my father doesn’t write poetry, why he doesn’t acknowledge any value in it. It’s in this moment that I recognize my academic pursuit as one positioned in luxury, not survival, and I feel I’ve betrayed my father, my entire kin, my people. My construction worker father who clocked on average seventeen hours a day, who still does to this day at age sixty-eight, to afford me the opportunity he never even got to think about for himself: to attend college. College was his gift of class mobility, what I needed to enter that glorious, glorious middle class. And I spent that opportunity on an art, a luxury: writing poetry.
In those rare moments that my father and I talk about my path of higher education and the choice to pursue poetry at the graduate level, I disguise my worried future, the one that doesn’t promise a dropped latter I can use to climb out of the lower class. Protecting him calls for a revision in vocabulary; I don’t speak of writing as an art during our conversations, since art is a comfort that belongs to the upper class, to the yuppies who own their entire day and spend it on leisure, the ones we mock with our extended pinkies flexing. No, art isn’t something for us, the bottom dwellers with our multiple jobs, fifteen-hour days and nonexistent weekends. So we chase our Old Crow with draws of Pabsts Blue Ribbon and I lie to him in my assurance that I’m going to school to get real job: teaching at a university. I try to cushion his pride, the pride born not of just having a child who attended college and even higher, but more importantly of a relief in believing that social mobility is near-guaranteed, that his and my hard work wasn’t for nothing after all.

What I don’t tell him is, although I am always in some sort of battle with my oscillating feelings about poetry and its value, that I write because I know our stories are every bit as important as any rumination during a trip to Paris or whatever small epiphany is founded while drinking cocktails at some lush party or how many associations can sprout from looking at a chipped teacup. I write because when I flip through Poetry Magazine, there isn’t a single poem that feels or sounds like home, and it is a constant, egging confirmation that poetry isn’t for people like my father, my brother, me; that it is art, and what do poor people know of art? But the writing community as a whole is missing a massive demographic of people whose stories and voices would enrich our collective storytelling. And those working class stories and voices, damned and tough, they are vital and so tired of being discounted and neglected.
But to write is not enough. When writing is a luxury, only those who have the time and resources can participate while reaping any benefits. When someone of lower class standing is lucky enough to even attend college in the first place, they often have to work a few jobs to pay their rent, buy text books, help their parents, all on top of school responsibilities. How, then, can they be expected to take that unpaid summer internship, the one where they can forge those connections so necessary in succeeding in the literary world? Countless are the times in which a writing professor advised his or her students: “No matter how low it’s paid, take the internship. It’s all about who you know in this business.”

The notion of hard work, a creed crooned over and over to and by the working class, is redefined in regards to pursuing a career in writing and literature. To be a hard worker is to be willing to take that unpaid internship, to relocate to a bigger city during the summer, to dedicate all of your free time to your craft, your art. Noble is the writer who puts his craft before all else; but that writer is often the one supplemented in some other way, because when it comes to eating or writing, what would you honestly choose?

And although going to and graduating from college opens many doors, it doesn’t insure the same opportunities to everyone, especially those pursuing that career in literature and writing, whether they imagine themselves as a tenured professor or sitting in a desk at a publishing house. Inarguably is it that class inequality affects any given path, but for those looking for jobs in the writing world, class is a huge, often unspoken of, determining factor, one that can either open or close and lock a door. And when class is one of the forefront determining factors, the swaths of talent and stories belonging to the working class never get a chance to break the surface and enter the scene.
And with the rise of the MFA and its established necessity if one wants to continue down a careerist path of writing spurs another barrier for the lower class folk who got through undergrad still fighting to get into the writing club. Well funded MFAs can offer a writer two or three years to concentrate and hone their craft while getting paid an albeit small but barely livable stipend. That stipend, too, is often financially supplemented by outside resources, such as parents or partners or spouses. Regardless of its small stipend, though, a writer is still given the chance to dedicate their time to writing, a break from the economic reality waiting at its end. However, the high price of the application process itself demands an access to at least a certain level of expendable funds (not to mention all of the funds it took to get one to the application process, typically possessed by those of the middle or upper class), becoming a looming hurdle that many people find themselves unable to jump over.

During my senior year of college, I had decided to apply to MFAs after being convinced by professors it was the right thing to do. In between my three jobs, I found time to polish my portfolio and personal statement while promptly gathering letters of recommendation. I made sure I had everything organized, slept little and worked hard. I was determined. My then mentor, a past professor, suggested I apply to at least fifteen schools to be safe, to give myself as many options as I could. We compiled my list, comprised only of fully-funded programs, and I was excited. We had worked so hard throughout the course of the semester on my writing, I read as much as I could in the time I had, and more than I felt ready, I felt deserving.

But we never talked about application and transcript fees, how expensive the GRE is and the twenty-seven dollars you have to spend on every university you send your score to. We never talked about how with each application costing almost one hundred bucks, I would be out easily
fifteen hundred thousand dollars I didn’t have. Not to mention that MFA application deadlines typically fall around the beginning of wintertime, when work slows down and hours get cut.

Out of the fifteen schools I intended to apply to, I was only able check three off my list, outing me three hundred and fifty dollars, not including the cost of taking the GRE. I was late paying rent, costing me an extra hundred dollar fee. When I told my mentor, a Harvard graduate hailing from the upper class, that I was only able to swing three schools, he was disappointed. He was disappointed in me for not being able to afford more.

I remember talking to a fellow peer who was in the midst of applying to graduate schools while I was. At a party after most application deadlines were over, we shared our experiences and drank to how stressful it all was. When she eventually began listing off the schools she had applied to, so many she’d claimed she was forgetting one or two, I dumbly asked how in the world she had afforded it. “Luckily,” she’d said, “my parents offered to help me out.”

But what of the people who are paying out of their own shallow pocket? My peer got into one of her schools, and I was genuinely happy for her, but couldn’t shake wondering about the students who had just as worthwhile writing to share but would never be able to afford even a chance to get into an MFA, a chance to spend those few years sitting with their writing. The stories and voices that would continue going unheard based on their class standing. I am not questioning the merit of those who are supplemented by their parents or whatever else, but begging for a more critical interrogation into a system that has continuously excluded so many voices of the working class.

With the biggest doors only open to those belonging to a higher social class, the entire infrastructure becomes one too dependent on nepotism; it all becomes incestuous and cyclical and infuriating in its failure to open wider. The individual who is able to get one of those coveted
jobs is often from the same social standing as the individual doing the hiring, the person deciding who gets published often looks for already established names or pieces appealing to their own sensibilities, which whether one wants to admit it or not is hugely informed by social class. We end up with the same socioeconomically privileged group of people dominating a field, inadvertently silencing groups and curating a canon that only appeals to the small group of people running it.

The same group of people who question why in the world people don’t appreciate poetry and writing, why its value isn’t as obvious as a neon sign. But poetry is still in a contained, academic bubble, like a high school clique, only you have to get an MFA and schmooze over cocktails at AWP in order to join. And when only the same people are allowed to join that clique, you get the same voices, and when those voices are only echoes, they’re no longer finding an audience outside themselves. With that continued negligence of those in the working class, they maintain poetry and the writing community as something enjoyable only by someone who has at the very least a college degree. It’s a sign on the door that reads: This Art Isn’t For You.

But I do believe, despite my bitterness, that change can be affected in the writing community. I’m seeing it happen: in recent years, countless discussions have been raised demanding a greater ethnic and gender diversity in the publishing world. And it’s absolutely indisputable: the more voices speaking in contemporary writing, the more honest, interesting and fair we’ll render our world. People understand clearer and clearer that the inclusion of writers of color and women’s voices is necessary in enriching our severely lacking literary environment. Clearly, there’s still a long way up the road yet, but the publishing climate is shifting for the better. We’re finding value in stories and voices that don’t abide entirely by what we expect from
the academy. We’re changing the canon, we’re making it more inclusive and, in that, hopefully more accessible and enjoyable to a wider variety of readers.

But there is still a gross amount of people, their stories and their environments, that remain ignored. An entire class of people, that quieted working class, afflicting across all gender, race, and creed. And our blindness is cruel as it surrenders so much potential to affect change. With limited opportunities for impoverished people to participate in and add to the writing world’s collective storytelling, we find a gaping hole in the canon that these stories should fill.

I am waiting for the day that I open up an established literary magazine and read a poem that feels familiar, one that I would be willing to call my father and share with him. I’m waiting for the day that the word art doesn’t feel wrong in my mouth. I’ve got my ear to the wall waiting to hear that cry for the indiscriminate and silenced underclass, and I still can’t hear it. So I guess this is mine.
Creative Sample from *You Pretty, You Bad*

**For Southeast Ohio**

Sweet as a Beach Boys song boppin’ in the Dollar Tree,
   a teenage girl fingerin’ sale bras, a pink zebra
print push up tried on over her top. Tired as my daddy’s front teeth
   fallen gone from the Dew he drank himself awake
during twelve hour truck routes where he watched the youngest Barstow
   slip baggies of glass into tired trucker’s hands & sighed
thinkin’ on when my brother & that boy used to punt coffee cans far as they could,
   played baseball with a broke PCV pipe & limestone.
   Needy as the Pentecostals sellin’ tomatoes
side the highway, fresh as good soil & vines like umbilical cords.
   They say ma’am, you can take the crate to carry them but please, please
   bring it back. Bless you, lord bless.
Resilient as the wild carrot that always grows back & my ma weed whacking
   that summer swell of yellow, hollerin’ *you pretty but you bad.*
Pained as our mountains & rivers maimed, coal a river of money
   we can’t swallow none of, clean our hands in.
   No, to us it’s wet as a mirage glistenin’ on top the road
that never takes me anywhere but here.
At 3 am Tyler knocks rabid on my window

Blue hues under skin against aspen gold bruises
   complimentary colors beggin’ fast for my daddy’s
backbroke oxy & I am only surprised
   because he didn’t break in this time.
Then his was a different hunger, angry:
   glass & drywall splinterin’ knuckles, chipped tooth animal
   in the crosshairs of my daddy’s rifle
   cryin’ out needy, dyin’ needy, with a pain
that used to be our daddies’ & granddaddies’,
cotton soakin’ up the hurt coal laid heavy on their bodies,
   but now it’s my cousin’s, shakin’ & dirty outside
my window: a canary, darkness & carbon monoxide.
Elegy for Larissa Carsey

Ripe-hipped girl of Poplov in a Pepsi bottle,
   of Pike Perry holding her knee
like it was the last crabapple of the season.
   Daughter of Nida who left and locked her trailer,
      of farmer Barney who won’t respond to Dad.
   Sovereign of eggs broken while rinsing, of touch always labor.
Of sows named Rosalind, boars Tucker, of slaughter.
   Of six sisters, of shared beds and hand-me-down muck boots.
Larissa of the Athens County Fair, never queen,
whose fingers first learned a boy hard on the Flying Teacups.
   Of humming Merle Haggard to the bull mean as splinters,
of surrendering harvests & flagging crops, of acres done giving.
My Larissa of the last cow sold, of a family farm parched quiet,
   her hands left dumb with no land to work them.
Donna Marie's Mississippi Elegy

I didn’t have a car and Mississippi’s last place might as well be five miles underground,

not a shovel around. Between me and Remy, we barely had seven hundred plus his bike.

Paying medical bills out a fucking tip jar, and hell, I didn’t even know I was all that late,

my blood waxed and waned crazy, sometimes all but moonless. And how careful we’d been:

spermicide and diaphragm, I jumped up, down to a twenty count and peed right after. Think:

what’s five weeks to get a year’s worth of savings, five weeks to get my ass cross state to a doctor?

Hell is a trip to Jackson, hell is every murder slut god love sin whore hollered mean as coal

outside the Pink House. Don’t call fate some milked seed spilled or a bumper

to bumper detour, fate isn’t forty minutes late to an appointment with no time left to

reschedule. Elvis on the radio pleaded Love me tender and I still don’t think I can.
Patsy Cline’s Rheumatic Fever as My Defense for Taking Esta & Running From You

The fever affected my throat and when I recovered I had this booming voice like Kate Smith.

- Patsy Cline, 1957

A second chance is my Esta now deaf in one ear
    after you knocked the sound right out of her.
The second chance is a full tank of gas and a state
    bordering a new state where no man’s mean can come
near her again. Know no sense in looking,
    go ahead and call that Sheriff cryin’ bad woman, bad woman.
See now that these mountains are my fists raised,
    the closet where I keep my shotgun. Learn, honey,
that tending a garden is more than throwing your seed,
    & Esta talks loud now, like a president, to hear.
Process Note

I have a real hard time describing my process when it comes to writing and pretty much everything else I do. In my head, I have an album of moments, screenshot snaps or vignettes, moments growing up in Appalachia, and I fixate on the people, the characters, all of who I owe everything I am. I do not shy away from claiming these poems as love songs for Appalachia, I do not shy away from claiming them as a rifle shaking in the air, pointing to America. These poems are impossible to separate from region, and the same goes for me. I am who I am because of this place, this place mocked and downtrodden, of scorch and abuse, of brutal beauty and kindness.

The first poem I ever wrote was when I was 12, high on my brother’s Meigs County Gold weed, and I did it recklessly, fascinated by language and how words, my own words, could be so beautiful. As with most of my relationships, I am reckless, and poetry is no exception. I have hated poetry, kicked its teeth in and called it a waste, a self-indulgent luxury for rich folk who think their voices are prettier than they actually are. I’ve fought nasty with poetry, but I’ve also loved it heavy, always coming back to it with warm water. But I can’t tell you why I write, because that question always falls numb on my tongue. Survival isn’t right, nor would I claim to give voice to the voiceless, seeing my understanding of poetry’s unfortunate limits at affecting political and social change.

Now that I think about it, perhaps, maybe, my poetry did help me emotionally survive graduate school at UM and in Miami in general. Once I abandoned all notions of self-containment, once I broke down all those pretty poetry barriers I had put up around myself for the sake of higher education, I was able to build a little homeland in my poetry. I resurrected Appalachia on the page, where I longed to be, where I truly belong. I have never felt at home in Miami or even in higher education itself, which is no fault of the city or program, but through my
poetry I was able construct the region that gave rise to the writer I am today. It became my
sanctuary, my wild and sad and beautiful sanctuary. It nurtured me and I nurtured it. Through
this experience, I can truthfully say that I have never been closer to my poetry, myself, or
Appalachi.

I am wholly grateful that the faculty at UM never attempted to tame me. I don’t write
conventional poems and here, I haven’t been pressured to do that. Rather, the faculty here
demand you show your teeth, rear your lips back and grin mean. I’ve written through and about
my ongoing and complex relationship with Appalachia, and attempted to render a tender,
vicious, and honest depiction of a place that holds tight my heart. These poems don’t ask for pity,
they don’t ask you to gawk or spit on them, but rather pray that you examine them and how
Appalachia fits into a larger sociopolitical picture. They ask for acknowledgment, for you to stop
ignoring us, to hear our pain and understand that it’s constant, unrelenting.

Appalachia is a beautiful place, and it’s a good place, rich and complicated by a cruel
history, and so much of its badness comes from squelching and inescapable poverty. It was
crucial in building the America we see today with no credit, no benefits, only America keeps
take, take, taking and turning its green eye. Appalachia’s badness is misunderstood; what people
don’t think about is that morality’s got a price. People who one-note treat a place or a person
based on some code they’ve constructed from their God or what be it, don’t know survival
comes before morality, and here, survival is the hardest thing to do.

When I write, I refuse to ignore poverty and I refuse to sensationalize it. America hates
the poor, blames the poor for themselves and tries to leave them out to die, let the vultures clean
up the mess. I grew up feeling gut-punched shame, my parents’ self destruction and humiliation
the constant beads of sweat on their brows. And if I’m being honest, one of the reasons I never
ravenously consumed poetry like so many fellow poets, claiming that books upon books brought them to the craft, is that I never found characters or narratives or even landscapes that looked like me, felt like me, familiar. In undergrad, I could never find that ratty haired, dirty bare foot girl poking blacksnakes, hunger gnawing at her belly. I didn’t see my dad coming home from 14 hour truck routes, or my ma splitting joints with her friends out on the back porch. Poetry felt isolating, felt like I didn’t belong there, couldn’t afford to join the club, to understand its profoundness. Dorothy Allison, a forever-inspiration to me, wrote, “I knew damn well that no one would want to hear the truth about poverty, the hopelessness and fear, the feeling that nothing you do will make any difference, and the raging resentment that burns beneath the jokes.” In my writing, I take that shame and I take that ache—it’s still there—and I chew it up real good and I spit it up on the page, and I say we don’t deserve any of this. I invoke my pride, my fist-fight pride I have in my family, my region, my tongue, that beautiful, musical tongue, and I say, look us in the fucking eye.

My manuscript is a lot of things, and one of them is, at perhaps its simplest, an attempt to join the conversation, to have poems out there that someone from my region could read and confide in, see themselves in, find relief in knowing their narratives are worthy, that they are worthy. They exist. Because they are entirely worthy of a place in the writing community, and Appalachia has been long ignored, slandered as white trash junkies, and vilified, when in reality it’s home to some of the most brilliant and interesting people. We hate things we don’t understand, and this is me trying my damnedest to get people to understand, to show them. And that fuels my writing process, gives me the kick in the ass I need when I can’t write. I feel at home when I write about my place in the world and all the people who I’ve been molded by, people I’m lucky enough to call family and friends, spanning across all the heavy drinking bikers
and hillbillies and hippies to the guy who tried to sell me glass at Larry’s Dawg House when I was sixteen.

I have no doubt that this manuscript will always have growing pains, will break its bones and grind its teeth as it tries and tries to provide insight into the region, so ragged and scarred, that I lovingly and heartbreakingly call home. But if my family and my region has taught me anything, it’s that that’s what it’ll have to do to survive.
Annotated bibliography, 2014-2016


This novel revolves around the Mariel boatlift, and though highly immersive and character-driven, presented many structural flaws that created confusion in our fiction forms class. Though I felt that the book was very engaging in its utilization of history, I do think it would have been beneficial to focus more on certain characters and take emphasis away from other, less narratively consequential aspects.


An essential and expansive text referenced to throughout my poetry forms class with Jaswinder Bolina. It really helped me get acquainted with major 20th century poets such as O’Hara, Ashbery, Ginsberg, Olson, Creeley, Levertov, and Duncan. Though I found many of the poems to be too rigid in their conceptualism, I thought that the artist notes and manifestos accompanying many of the writers were entirely helpful in my understanding. Greatest Hits: *Personism* by Frank O’Hara.


Read outside of class. I found that I am a massive fan of Dorothy Allison. The book is actually nonfiction, but navigates through narrative as experimentally as it does beautifully. She portrays writing as survival, and presents an honest depiction of the familial flaws that run deep, haunt us all. Appalachian-focused and spoke to so many aspects of my writing as well as my own life.


Read outside of class. An absolutely beautiful and heartbreaking novel from Dorothy Allison. Fictional narrative of Bone, a poor Appalachian girl whose continuous sexual abuse from her stepfather grounds the novel. Along with rural sexual abuse, it deals with cycles of poverty, familial flaws, and what it ultimately means to be in Bone’s family. This is easily one of my favorite novels ever.


A sentimental novel about a group of extremely different lives that all intersect in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Read for M. Evelina Galang’s fiction forms course. I liked how Baxter so successfully moved in and out of wholly different perspectives and voice without feeling like an imposter within the narrative.

Read outside of class. As linguistically ambitious as it is heartfelt, this collection of poems about growing up in Middle America never comes off as pretentious. The collection is rambly and self-indulgent, but somehow always comes off as genuine. Bell presents the reader with long poems that seem to exist as a means of sorting something out. Really enjoyed.


Read in Jaswinder’s poetry workshop. Strangely narrative “post-modern” poems that navigate reality through a slightly skewed and often humorously self-deprecating lens. Berman’s work maintains genuine sentimentality and weight despite its indulgence in surrealism. Was really helpful in showcasing how you can be conversational while still flirting with absurdity in poetry.


Highly original and amazing novel that effectively employs the “we” voice throughout. Revolves around a group of young boys living in a suburb of Detroit during the 80s. Its narrative narrows in on issues that arise from father-son relationships, class warfare, coming of age, and the societal expectations of masculinity. Really one of my favorite pieces of fiction.


Courageously and darkly funny, this tragically astounding collection of poems by Belieu easily bounces back and forth between the common daily experience and the transcendent with such a sharpness of language. This book was influential in its ability to play with neurosis in a way that I haven’t witnessed many writers attempt.


A collection of poems that are as surprising in its language as it is in its subject: poems that revolve around and reveal infidelity through the eyes of the “other woman.” Balances evocative and natural imagery of decay with birds of prey to connect the inner world to the external. Is generous with its elegies and nocturnes which helped me open up to new forms.


As expected from Brock-Broido, this collection of lush poems is haunting as it navigates and intertwines the past, present, and future through highly discursive language and complimentary form. Brock-Broido's poems inspired me to try to create language that has
moves and grows on the page. I loved how associative her work is and that inspired me to try to separate myself from narrative here and there.


Truly one of my favorite books of poetry. Often times when I’m stuck trying to generate a narrative, I’ll turn to this collection to help find a spark. I love how widespread her poems feel while still belonging to each other as she navigates through industrial Middle America, rurality, gender fluidity, farming, religion, and even sports. A truly inspirational read.


A quietly devastating novella focusing on an immigrant family’s life in America. Chang’s text brought up a series of important inquiries and concerns during Amina Gautier’s fiction forms course. In particular, the issue of a father’s perceived ownership over his daughters became a specific point of interest as my own writing often focuses on gendered binaries and the power dynamics that result from them.


I can honestly say I had never read anything quite like this novel in its original, anti-narrative climax. Read in M. Evelina Galang’s fiction forms class. Very interestingly presents the angst felt by housewives in the face of inequality they don’t quite understand while also commenting on classism and racism. Conceptually inspiring with a momentum that kept my attention throughout.


Lush but extremely disturbing collection of poems that deal with submissiveness, HIV, and life in the desert. A great example of poetry taking advantage of white space and moving a greater narrative through abstractions and altered perspectives. I loved how the pieces themselves looked like artwork while reference great pieces of art. Was intrinsic in opening me up to ekphrastic poetry. Great read.


A super unique collection as it includes prose, poetry, as well as visual art pieces that create a collage that is playful and confessional. De la Flor ignores boundaries in order to properly investigate the self via pop culture and impressive linguistic association. His collection smashes against history and interrogates stigma relentlessly. Truly inspirational in that it helped me realize just how weird and wonderful you can get in with your writing.

A wildly wonderful collection of prose poems that follows Fidelito, a young boy, as he tries and tries to avoid reality through a series of mounting surrealist dreams, day dreams, and imaginings. I loved de la Paz’s gripping narrative and that he allowed his prose to follow what might be considered a more traditional storytelling while maintaining poetic license on the page. It was helpful as I was at the time working on a series that navigates a narrative more traditionally, but was working within a surrealist concept.


Oh Denise! Out of so many of many awesome collections, *Queen for a Day* might be my favorite. Duhamel is a writer who I so admire for her willingness to include and absolute talent for humor. Juxtaposed with her focus on narrative ordinariness, her work is entertaining, insightful, down right funny and at times tragic. Her writing has always rang approachable and honest to me, which are both attributes that I constantly seek in poetry collections. Absolute pleasure to read!


Really one of my favorite collections because Guest’s poems are so immersive and full of unpredictable twists and turns, both in narrative and language. He is the master of quiet sadness, absurd humor, and strangely unwavering optimism. This collection was inspirational to me in that it allows moments of happiness, of relief. That and the language is so down right wonderful.


This memoir focuses on Guest’s experiences growing up in the wake of a bicycle accident that left him a quadriplegic at the mere age of 12. I absolutely love this book because it is so upfront, so honest in its portrayal of tragedy. But what I think I love most is instead of Guest being a downer or overly introspective, his story reveals a strangely uplifting underbelly while somehow avoiding cliché or triteness. A recommended read for anyone.


A hugely influential collection from a poet I’m a great fan of. Hayes has a wholly unique understanding of the relationship between persona and language and always makes room in his poems for a variety of vastly different voices that have a charge to them that forces them into the reader’s mind. It is exceptional in its pacing and the velocity in which the language travels from page to page. An awesome read.

An amazing novel that takes place in rural Montana and follows a social worker as he investigates issues involving a militant doomsday prepper. Henderson is truly a master of pace and plot, and he constructs his characters and the unique Montana landscape with both great power. This novel helped me think about how characters in opposition so often become dependent on each other.


I hold this collection dear to my heart. Hicok’s capacity for introspection within his poetry, but never suffers the loss of awareness in its own absurdity and self-righteousness. Instead, his work thrives from its willingness to confront its own system of thinking, to admit its inherent flaws. Impressively, his elegies artfully mimic life and tragedy: they’re both haunting and hilarious in the course of a single stanza.


Incomparable to anything I’ve read before. I love how experimental this collection is while maintaining a sense of the personal, and deeply so. Holiday is fearless in his evocation of pop culture and tragedy, all of which implicate the reader within the system of racial oppression and America’s capitalist society. A truly inspirational book.


This might be one of my absolute favorite books. With multiple POV narrative, the novel revolves around two poor girls living in a rural Florida trailer park. The story employs a unique dialectic that not only gives the reader a more nuanced understanding of the characters, but adds an intensity that propels that story forward. It examines issues of exploitation, tumultuous relationships, and self-preservation, and ultimately leaves the reader to ruminate on whether or not some people really don’t have a way out of the struggle they’re born into.


Landingham’s collection is truly inspirational. As a book, its cohesion is provided by individual poems of trauma and failure that all blend into a collage of past, present, and future. Her poems are dark and rich individuals who linger longingly at the end of each page. As impressive as it is on its own, it’s even more impressive that this was a product of her MFA program.


I absolutely adore this book. The author isn’t well known and is actually a bit of a mystery, but this collection is interesting in its noirish, darkly funny nature juxtaposed
with its clever self-reference. This book is a treasure chest for me; when I’m feeling blocked up on the page, I turn to this to find something in the language that flips the switch on. A great read.


A fantastic read that discusses politics and sports, together. Matejka’s collection is a total trip involving compelling narrative persona and boxing language. By focusing on a specific historical figure, Matejka’s poems belong to each other, inform the reader. The collection is truly an experience to read, and I don’t think there’s a single poem I would take out.


A fabulous collection that artfully balances entertainment with deep, personal loss. Inventive as it is brilliant, McCall’s use of the cultural pop phenomenon of superheroes to interrogate society’s persistent mistreatment of outsiders, racial or otherwise, is impressive to say the least. What’s best, to me, is how unapologetic McCall is, and how willing he is to interrogate these heavy issues through an approachable medium. Fantastic read.


I wasn’t very interested in this collection unfortunately. Though inarguably skilled, McGrath’s pieces seemed over polished; this refinement of language, to me, made his poems feel emotionally insincere. I didn’t feel like I could trust the author. I don’t know why, but it felt as though there was always something missing after I read a poem of his.


Though a unique idea for a book, Nelson’s *Bluets* is so tightly tied to a concept that it lost my interest. The book is beautifully crafted throughout, but because of the nature of her subject, Nelson sacrifices the ability to aid the reader in their understanding of what is truly significant to her story versus what seems to be just filler. It perhaps was far too waxing philosophical for me.


I am torn with this text. Enviably stylish, but overly frustrating book. Oates reveals new context and information about the impending tragedy by repeating the scene over and over again, toying seemingly endlessly with readers’ emotions. At first I liked the idea, but like so much of Oates’ work, the gimmick’s charm wore off soon after reading the same scene 4 times.

This novel struck a personal cord with me as it involves issues of environmentalism, Appalachian industry, exploitation, and coming of age in a region I am so familiar with. This book was influential in my exploration of fiction in my first fiction workshop. Pancake’s novel utilizes multiple POVs, creating a sort of collage that details the effects of a catastrophic environmental disaster provoked by strip-mining. Absolutely loved this book.


I loved this collection. It reveals Percy’s enviable gift of rendering male rage sympathetic. He incorporates familiar rural settings in unique and unexpected his way and above anything else, this collection shows a willingness to thrust plot forward through action that doesn’t always rely on logic, but instead invites the reader to watch the disaster unfold before them on the page.


A controversial collection that’s known for being overly hip and crude, and I actually agree with the heavy criticism this book has received. Though I can see why this book has received praise, much of the poems seemed self-obsessed, invoking the voice of a record-store hipster elitist in my head. Some of the pieces too seemed to employ language merely for shock value. Overall, a definite disappointing read for me.


Absurd and sincere, Schomburg’s poems navigate the surreal with approachable beautiful while retaining their charm through simplicity and colloquialisms. I really, really enjoyed this book in how it bravely incorporated aspects of horror and sci-fi, genres I rarely see in the poetry seen. A great read.


I absolutely love this collection. It’s definitely on my list of favorite books ever. Seaton’s is a warmth that makes you fall in love with her words. This book’s honesty in regards to pain and trauma is truly inspirational and I’ve returned to this book time and time again as I try to navigate my own confessional pieces. There is a distinct boldness to this book, to her demand for reclaimed agency, and her openness is almost admirable. I adore this book.


A profound collection that details the experiences in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina. Smith eliminates any sense of protection the reader might have and instead
presents the absolutely disturbing tragedy and negligence of Katrina’s hurricane response through poems infused with dialect and persona resulting in a devastating effect. I loved this collection because her poems dare to engage politics, social justice, and history.


An absolutely brilliant collection. Frank Stanford tragically committed suicide at the mere age of 27, but before doing so he was extremely prolific, producing a tremendous amount of fantastic work. His style is both immersive and lyric and successfully draws the reader in despite their short length. A truly inspirational read.


This collection of poetry is amazingly intimate in that her prose reads like a series of letters. Wade’s writing is so openly personal and honest, it’s difficult not to feel as though she’s divulging a secret to you and only you. Wade stares down stigma bravely and never shies away from genuinely talking about trauma. And perhaps most importantly is the warmth her prose provides; this book mirrors the process of moving past trauma, and provides a beautiful optimism to readers.


An incredibly impressive collection that takes place in the Nevadan desert. One of the things I most appreciate about Watkin’s writing is her ability to render extremely outside characters believable and genuine; she artfully avoids coming off as insincere or exploitive of these outlier characters. Her voice is so beautifully nuanced in its ability to oscillate between an almost journalistic attention to detail and a warm affection towards her characters. An incredible read.


One of my favorite collections of short stories. Wilson so cleanly juxtaposes wildly out-there narratives with a down-to-earth voice that is so approachable. Obviously influenced by magical-realism based narratives, his stories deviate from what we think of when we think of magical-realism in that they always seem to depend most on the intricately intimate and small moments between characters. It is clear as you read that he is affectionate towards his characters, and he reveals that beautifully in his work.

Young, Dean. *Bender*. USA. Copper Canyon Press. 2015. Print.

I’ve been familiar with Young’s work throughout my undergraduate education, and my admiration for him hasn’t dulled. This collection in particular is a perfect display of the vastness in which Young has explored and invigorated language, and I’ve come back to this time after time picking his words like flowers. Young is linguistically fearless, and it pays off; so many of his lines have left me awestruck and at times envious, but ultimately happy that a poet like he exists.