Final Portfolio

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Tuesday Ordinary

“I think the hoodie is as much responsible for Trayvon Martin’s death as George Zimmerman was.” – Geraldo Rivera speaking on Fox and Friends March 23, 2012

T, the storm clouds are glaring blue today,
but we walk the blocks to the gas station anyway.
   The stone polishing sweat of you in my pocket.
   My throwback cotton blend,
   my name-fuckin’-brandness.

When you put me on I hang loose from your body
because even in February this is still boiling Florida
and we have survived our whole lives here, ground
into parking lots like asphalt and beach sand
from better places.

You know I hate the closet and the bedroom floor.
Hate that there are months when you do not pull
me on over ratty t-shirts or the kick of new cologne.

No doubt the snow won’t show up again this year.
How much I want to lock in the stick-thin heat of you,
to keep out whatever bad day is always following us home.

And I do love the fat sidewalks in Sanford.
Love that we tour them alone during weekdays
built like intermissions, the whole town
slouched down in their seats, every neighbor
calling out for back-up as we pass.
Across Town, Three Arrests

I.

Love, the lights are on in the farmhouse
and I’m not ready to die.

All spring I brought you fresh eggs
and watched them turn to blunder
in your bowl. Tonight I bring you the F-250
and the livestock trailer. I bring leather
gloves and a sorting pole; my own daddy’s
mix of ‘shine mash and sweet feed.

The prize bull is always in the pole barn,
and the pole barn is across the yard,
and even if I don’t make it into the stall
you will still think of me fondly, won’t you?
My body traced in floodlights, siloed
like grain into an arriving cop car.

II.

Like grain into an arriving cop car,
we see how they palm the top of your head,
pack your bruised load into the backseat.

I hate this for you. Hate that golf-courses are not like woods
back home, every hole crowned with cameras. Here, the rough
is just grass grown two days taller, some small wild
to press against the concrete.

Yes, the TV condemns you.
Yes, the state does too. Mom
says we’ll smuggle sermons
in through your lawyer.

Just this once, I think you should tell it straight.

What good’s the fairway brother, if you can’t even walk a line?
All summer this town looked feverish on you; blonde hair
we bought in a bottle from Walmart, county roads
like legs you could drive through.

III.

Like legs you could drive through
in a car of your very own stealing.

Never again with the old dog-fighting days,
when a body was all yours if you could
just turn it over in the driveway.

That first exhaust from a muffler is like smokes
after sex, you said. A turn signal was some shit
you didn’t need.
Big Wheel

- *For LA Horn Excavating*

You were eating up real estate
like you do. Already there was a road
between Denny’s house and mine,
but you laid down a wider track
for those 18 all-at-once tires,
black and convincing as industry
ought to be.

Once in Missouri,
somebody thought to crush a Ford
with a bigger Ford and that
was the Monster Truck.

*(could have been you)*

Later that day,
Dad finally fixed the F150’s engine
and presto! *Mom’s ciggs in the fridge again,
the sorry rest of us hauled back to school.*

Yesterday, someone called the semis
a job incubator, just like you do. All day
I was holding roadkill in my mouth,
gnawing a speedometer’s
orange tooth.

You awful long haul.
You obsolete. What America called
a week’s worth of work
before the workweek was won.
37.7300° N, 119.5700° W

That we are bad people on bad land
is a given.

The Roman candles we shoot into unincorporated Washoe County
ignite brush on the valley floor below, stitch
their chemical heat together against firebreaks
we dig ourselves each winter for want of quick cash
and drugs, for want of our dead fathers’
40-hour workweeks.

After all, the state of Nevada was born crooked,
a grid of circumnavigation to tax
water away from mountains.
PVC pipes we bury for dams
and casinos, for Vegas mouth
mouth
mouth.

That we return to this same no name ridge
every weekend to hunt the desert’s
silver wallop like prospectors,
or our New Age neighbors,
should come as no surprise.

After all, we were raised as alloys here, plutonic and wrong-headed.
Bodies left to deteriorate in our hand-me-down bed sheets,
in our time spent at home plate where we would swing
and miss and swing until the aluminum bat flew from our palms,
headed straight for the dugout or down the line
where white paint was all we had to tell the fair dirt
from the foul.

That we are cursed people on cursed land
is too simple.

After all, Reno’s money is a green hissing sun above the I-80 horizon,
but out here we re-open each mine with sticks of black powder,
every radiated stream arriving as post script,
roiling like a forgery.
Family Rules

To the naive we say,
Don't be so naive.

Reunions work like this:

Please daughter, no more tatted stars running up the legs.
Son, no more blind-siding the derby champ in the Winn-Dixie lot.
Leave the Africanized bees to boil in their hives.
Keep the hounds in heat away from their brothers.
No more damn kids.

Even the in-laws show up to shed old tires at the burn pit,
eat whatever’s left of the pig. We torch the mahogany dresser too,
cousin Elle naming off the pills she kept buried there; oxycontin, percocet,
the morning after.

She holds her empty belly like a quarry now.

Tarnation must be stripping nails
from her good cherry cradle.
This flame the damnedest thing
I’ll do with my hands all week.

To the invincible we say,
Don't be so invincible.

We pass time rolling logs in and out of the ring with our boots.
Smoke drifts east into a trailer park, a play-ground.

I'll quit talking about family ties when ash blocks the sun,
when exhaust fills the garage.

Exoneration works like this:

Bring debris.
Bring dead weight.
Use lighter fluid, hairspray.
Consider it a comeback when it ignites.
Consider the size of it this year. Bumper crop.

Leave now
and we'll make it home for Wheel of Fortune.
Leave now and the hot water is ours.
First to cleanse. First to blacken the sink
like we were raised this way, soaked in gasoline,
combustible as all hell.
Self-Assessment:

During the last two years I can say I’ve truly found my voice as a poet. My time in the University of Miami’s MFA program has in large part been defined by my journey toward gaining the confidence and expertise that for so long had been a source of anxiety for me as both a young poet and academic. In looking back over the last four semesters of writing, teaching and coursework, I realize now just how much my work and outlook on writing has evolved to better fit my goals as a storyteller and teacher. By simply existing within an environment as welcoming and close-nit as UM, my approach to poetry has benefited from the specificity and enthusiasm of feedback that I’ve received from both faculty and peers. This is all to say, that for me personally, what’s been vital about this particular MFA experience hasn’t at all been about the prestige of the program (something I was very concerned about during my initial application process) but has instead been dictated by the unique mix of diverse opinions and voices that have nurtured and pushed me to become a more well-rounded member of the writing community.

Throughout my first year in the program, I often found myself feeling very uncertain about the new writing I was producing, sensing that though it was taking on the themes I was most invested in, it was lacking the kind of clarity necessary to draw in and keep readers engaged. The struggles involved in that first school year in the program helped reevaluate what characteristics were going to be the most important for me to develop as a writer. The new poems I began writing started to focus more on depth of characterization over experimentation with language. The themes of poverty, environmentalism, and gender became more overt and less dependent on longer storylines, finally gaining the context and assertiveness to stand on their own.
At UM I’ve always found plenty of space and guidance for my work. I came in with a much more rigid set of ideas and opinions from both fiction and literature courses that I knew I would need to reevaluate. As Maureen Seaton continued to push me toward the investigation of narrative sequence, my mentor Jaswinder Bolina was pushing me toward a greater investment in language. It was between these two places that I was able to find balance. In the coming months after joining the program I would often begin my poems is fairly unremarkable rural settings and then set my writing off on an unexpected path. As my characters roamed, so did my language. It was always a challenge to find the right blend of poetic language and colloquial language. I wanted to keep those parts of spoken word that translated a specific place and time to a reader, while not falling into the trap of didactic writing that seemed to exist only to inform the audience, not immerse it.

At UM I discovered that language could be exciting and unexpected without the extra weight of pretension. Like car parts, I would switch words in and out of different poems. I would drop entire lines into unrelated pieces and pull inspiration from unfinished projects floating in the dark corners of my computer. It always felt right to my further my work linguistically. It was there that I could elevate a conversation in an empty parking lot into a lyrical discussion between brothers about the failures in personality inherited from their father. I could push a poem into a few spare inches of airspace in a collapsed coal mine, and then I could bring it back out to a dining room table where a wife waited for news on the radio. As my confidence in language grew, I was able to write pieces that were far more political and risky than anything I’d attempted in the past.

As I’ve begun to push myself as a writer and student, an undeniable desire for context has formed in me. Though I do feel many of these poems and characters could exist in very different
places, there’s a certain back and forth between physical space and the body that has always implicated itself in my writing. If I am going to describe someone’s hands, then I should also describe the shovel they’re using to dig a hole. If there is a gun on a table, then there should also be the bird it shot down. So often, I read poetry that seems devoid of tactile language and imagery. Yes, the mind is thinking of the physical world and commenting on its particular design, but there is so little pinching or catching or throwing in contemporary poetry. I push my characters into interactions with the world. This is the only way I know how to preserve the excitement of the unexpected in my own writing process. When I physically cut my character off with a speeding pickup truck on an Alabama highway, I know that something has to happen next, and that the character, even if he simply pulls off the road, isn’t going to be allowed to exist in peaceful introspection. It’s a method of anxiety and paranoia, and it’s also an essential part of how I ask the audience to engage the poem as a distinct piece of narrative, separate from their initial understanding of lyric or prose.

The program at UM pushed me toward a more expansive understanding of what makes not only a single poem, but a book of poems. I learned to push outward, into a space where I could write those essential poems of place and home that I felt I needed to engage, while also venturing into politics and things I initially had little experience with. Being in an MFA program like this one is an experience in provocation. My teachers and fellow students provoked me into challenging situations that I had no choice but to write my way out of. The result of that provocation and encouragement has been rewarding in so many ways for my both writing, and my confidence as a poetry reader and first responder.

All in all, I’m leaving this MFA program with more than I could ever hope for. Not only have I gained confidence in my work, but I’ve also developed an intuition for what does and
doesn't work not only in my own writing, but also the writing of others that I’ve encountered in workshop. I’ve also had an unexpected amount of success in publishing a number of poems from my thesis. All of the poems that have been accepted for publication so far, have been poems that I originally brought in for workshop with either Maureen or Jaswinder. These successes are the essence of my experience at UM; initially small and uncertain pieces of narrative that were given the essential close attention of others that was necessary to help them evolve into pieces that demanded attention not just from my cohort, but from poetry readers at-large in the world. Knowing that the work I’ve done here has some merit to the anonymous editors of literary journals and anthologies lets me know that I really do belong in this world of writers and readers. My time at the University of Miami has prepared me to keep moving forward as an artist and educator. Being a member of this MFA program has been an invaluable experience, and has set the foundation for whatever comes next. I can’t wait to use all that I’ve learned in whatever new role I find myself in as writer, be it a PhD program or something else.
Critical Sample:

Poetry on a Hunch: Our Necessary Conjectures

The Horse

Where in this wide world can man find nobility without pride,

Friendship without envy,

Or beauty without vanity?

- Ronald Duncan, (1954)

The persistent jockeying of numerous poets, on behalf of themselves and those they genuinely revere, for pole position in the approaching sprint towards a new American canon of poetry is amusing for its insistence on the tenuous relationship between personal taste and imminent historical validity. Less amusing, but gobs more troubling, is the impressive stamina a certain type of dog-eat-dog rhetoric has maintained in this race, especially amongst many of poetry's most read and celebrated voices. The reasons for this vehemence vary in nature; fear of being usurped by a younger group of writers, fear of formula, fear of its opposite, fear of no-one remembering the best bits of one's work and life, fear of acclaim for other less deserving writers, fear of the wrong type of acclaim. As always, there are countless, mostly worthwhile, things to grumble about. Some are maybe even worth a shout or two in the pages of Poetry, or The New Yorker. Likewise, they might find their way into the encrypted archives of Pank or Anderbo. In this age of stringent individualism there is no lack of venue for even the most specific and topical of conversations. As a young poets, this landscape brings about a great thrill in me and many of my contemporaries, who are always looking for communal spaces of dialogue and experimentation. Now, imagine the bummer of constantly smacking up against an otherwise
reputable voice of reason, Marjory Perloff for example, screaming from the top of one of the publishing industry's tallest mountains about one revelatory injustice or another. They assure us that theirs is a uniquely verifiable vision of poetry's end-times. “Rita Dove curates a biased, inconclusive anthology.” “Natasha Threthewey's poems lead us by the hand too often.” “Contemporary poets are too inward looking.” “Poetry is too quiet in 2013. It no longer changes anything. Not really, anyway...” The drone is endless.

It's curious that after a long and successful career many writers feel they have obtained the authority to pass often condescending judgment on the work of their contemporaries. I like to believe that, more often than not, the intention of the author is not to offend or hurt anyone, but instead to point out significant flaws, as they appear to them, in such a way that will attract readers to engage in a critical reassessment of their pre-existing ideas and biases. Honestly, I think that it is just too tempting for many “masters of the craft” to engage in the type of academic, witty rhetoric that lands with such force and particular weight as to crush any small snippet of verse from whatever unlucky poem ends up in the line of fire. I truly believe that any writer of merely moderate skill could draw out a handful of lines from even the greatest poems and make them look utterly preposterous and sophomoric without their natural context to surround and inform them. It's easy to go along with what a skilled author is writing about a piece of poetry because the language employed is often that of certainty, passion, and what passes for a complex understanding of the elements that make art worthwhile and memorable. Conversations about poetry, like all art, function within a rhetoric of binaries, contradictions, and variations. While this is an incredibly useful mode of conversation there is too often a distinct strain for conflict and objectionable offenses that appears in otherwise logical and becoming essays. A pessimism about the future of poetry runs together with an unusual nastiness that looks
to single out those pariahs who are doing the greatest disservice to the field. The art of restraint is too often absent in these dialogues of poetic merit. To be frank, the absence is a notable one. The type of criticism presented in many literary journals, online and in print, tends to fall into unhelpful generalization and vitriol about the direction of poetry and this-or-that poet's newly observed, and wholly unwarranted, recognition. It is, in large part, why so many potential readers view the world of poetry as one of inaccessibility and snobbery. It perpetuates a message of insensitivity that undermines the vision of “poetry for all!” that I believe almost every poet would tell you is, and always has been, the ideal path forward for the craft. In her essay “Poetry on the Brink” published in 2012 by the Boston Review, Marjorie Perloff approaches the Penguin Anthology of 20th Century American Poetry (2011) and its editor Rita Dove with an especially critical and demeaning tone:

Accuracy is not this editor’s strong suit: the “serious artists” of the early twentieth century were not “affected by” modernism; they created it. The Beats did not “clear a trail” for the Confessionals: the two groups coexisted and sometimes overlapped throughout the 1950s and ’60s. And higher education may be credited with many things but perhaps not with casting a “spell” over fledgling poets. As I was reading these curious assertions, it occurred to me that perhaps this Penguin anthology was designed for Junior High School students—kids forced to study something called poetry, who would find those references to “crawling out of the wreckage of the Civil War” or to the “take-no-prisoners approach” of the
Beats both accessible and colorful. “Into this disquieting age strode Wallace Stevens”: it sounds like a sentence in a Victorian children’s book. And since the editor is an indisputable star, the recipient of just about every prize and award there is, a former poet laureate, and currently a commonwealth professor of English at the University of Virginia, one evidently wants to read her anthology to learn not about American poetry of the twentieth century but about her likes and dislikes.

The criticism Perloff levels here is aimed at both Dove's editorial voice, which she earlier describes as “homely”, and also her personal vision of the history of modernist poetic movements. Lastly, the take-down lands with an air of conclusiveness on the impossibly broad criticism that Dove's particular anthology isn't worthy because its content is subjective and, evidently, not aligned with the specific structure and content Perloff would have composed under her own editorial vision. In my opinion, there is nothing more useful to poetry as a whole than the subjectivity of each individual poet and editor who is tasked with creating a collection of others’ very best and essential work. It's a necessity that ideas on poetry and its historic arc are never conclusive or settled upon. Rita Dove's anthology may or may not be a hit-or-miss affair, but that’s what makes it a vital inclusion amongst all of the other poetry collections and anthologies in the world currently. It's a vision of poetry's past and present through one influential writer's gaze. It is wonderfully and frustratingly subjective. It acknowledges a specific and much discussed canon and then musses its hair a bit, applies blue nail polish where another would have chosen peach.
Perloff is greatly distressed by this demonstration of Dove's “likes and dislikes” at the expense of some seriously notable poets who are left on the outside looking in. Really though, when have we ever come across a contemporary anthology that is beloved by all for its comprehensiveness? Some deserving individual or group is always going to be left out. Those perceived injustices are the life-force of so many of our on-going conversations and debates. Dove, in creating her version of an ideal 20th century canon, is now an even more active part of the great debate, not just for her own writing, but for her prowess, or lack there of, as a curator. Why Perloff doesn't celebrate the incompleteness and subjectivity in Dove's anthology seems based purely on a lack of perspective on contemporary editorial choices as opposed to those from a past generation. Indeed, Perloff sounds downright smitten with this same debate as it played out in the 1960s.

It was not always thus. The poetry wars of the 1960s—raw versus cooked, open versus closed, Donald Allen’s New American Poetry (1960) versus Donald Hall and Robert Pack’s anthology New Poets of England and America (1962)—produced lively and engaging debates about the nature of poetry and poetics. What made a lineated text a poem? Did poems require some sort of closure, a circular structure with beginning, middle, and end? Should the poet speak in his or her own person, divulging intimate autobiographical details? And so on.
In this day and age, there is an unfortunate expectation for some accomplished artists to demonstrate their continuing relevance by adding unnecessary and often near-sighted, if not purely unfair, criticism to the discourse of what's worth praising and dismissing across an impossibly broad spectrum of inherently subjective creative work. “What should we tag as worth remembering? What essential voices must we be sure to pass on?” Many poets, Perloff included, seem to believe that their answers to these questions, and the action they to take to ensure it plays out just so, is as large a part of their legacy and life's work as their creative endeavors. The reality is that Dove is also a verifiable and welcome player in this game. She acknowledges early in here introduction to the Penguin Anthology of 20th Century American Poetry that “Although I have tried to be objective, the contents are, of course, a reflection of my sensibilities; I leave it to the reader to detect those subconscious obsessions and quirks as well as the inevitable lacunae resulting from buried antipathies and inadvertent ignorance.” If Dove had offered up a rousing and authoritative defense of her selections as the conclusive vision of 20th century American poetry than Perloff's negative assessment wouldn't sound so jaded and misguided. I think Dove herself would likely agree that her selections are open to a very lively and useful debate, but that they should ultimately be introduced to the debate as she intended, through a lens of subjectivity that has always been the essential entry point to any conversation about poetic merit.

As tempting, and necessary, as it is to formulate and adequately express personal opinions in poetry, as in all art, the notion of historical relevance that Perloff binds her argument to is ultimately beyond our means. Of course everyone wants to curate and pass on anthologies of truly fundamental work, but that isn't our decision, or anyone else's to make. Judging the future importance of works of literature is a game of tenuous assumptions at best, and random guesswork at worst. It's a far better idea to celebrate and protect the vast plurality of voices and
aesthetics that appear in poetry as we act to ensure the advancement of the craft for future
generations. We can’t be sure what will stick in the coming decades. It could be conceptualism,
as Perloff hopes. Or its near opposite, neo-confessionalism, ala Tao Lin, who is arguably doing
better than the whole lot of us right now, anyway. It could, and likely will, be something entirely
different from either of those sub-sections of writing. In his brief response to Perloff’s essay, poet
and critic Stephen Burt notes the importance of learning not to fret over the limits of our abilities
as taste-makers for future readers and writers.

We have, at this point, so many techniques, so many existing
ways for making poems, that we could spend—poets do spend—
many fruitful decades finding new uses for what we already have,
from the minimal to the neo-Baroque. Most of those uses won’t
last, because most of the art from any time won’t last, but that’s
no reason to reject the lot.

Variability is a particular element in poetry that allows new works to better fit into the context of
pertinent issues in the current world. As each impending generation experiments with form,
content, presentation, and delivery, new genres and sub-genres will continuously offer exciting
entry points to writing for both well versed readers and those who are engaging poetry for the
first time. In arguing against the inevitable existence and implementation of bias in publishing
and anthologizing, Perloff is failing to understand the limitless usefulness of bias in self-
reflection and the necessary proliferation of variety. In any art form, stagnation occurs when
biases align so completely as to render pieces of work as perfect, untouchable masterpieces.
Perloff argues, correctly I believe, that, for better or worse, the modernist canon is all but closed to variation or revision in this day and age. Her essay maintains a great nostalgia for a historical vision of vitality that she believes has gone missing in the last 60 odd years of poetry, due in no small part, to a perceived lack of loud consternation of rabble-rousing.

At this point, the lack of consensus about the poetry of the postwar decades has led not, as one might have hoped, to a cheerful pluralism animated by noisy critical debate about the nature of lyric, but to the curious closure exemplified by the Dove anthology. Today’s poetry establishment—Robert Pinsky and Robert Hass, Louise Glück and Mark Strand, all of them former poets laureate—command a polite respect but hardly the enthusiasm and excitement that greeted and continue to greet such counterparts of the previous generation as O’Hara.

From here, Perloff launches into an especially harsh critique of a Natasha Trethewey poem included in Dove's anthology. Her gripes are with the poem's “reaffirmation” of a certain type of formulaic style and process in its predictable quest toward epiphany. As an alternative to the drudgery, Perloff urges use to consider Conceptualist poetry as a chief strategy in adding genuine variety back into poetry. The plea for a new “type” of poetry that re-contextualizes contemporary art and meaning is a familiar and necessary one. The fact that the claim shows up and uses the entire second half of this particular essay as its vehicle is curious, though. Perloff argues that there are already far too many new ways to write and understand poetry. Then, in
somewhat contradictory, or at least uncomfortable, fashion she recommends we start using a relatively new and unique strategy to expand poetry even further away from what has become an “all-but-classic reenactment of a paradigm” that shows up in journal after journal. The confusion of her message in the essay is paramount to the troubling trend of wanting to examine different avenues of art, but only with a personal specificity that is rigid instead of open; informed by egoism instead of a more useful sense of communal conversation.

Reading Marjorie Perloff's Poetry on the Brink, and the many responses it's received online, has forced me to question the role of bias as we attempt to move poetry forward toward its most ideal purpose in our modern world. Perloff demands that we take more risks in creating poetry through experimentation with form, revision, and reflection that calls into question the binaries that separates the “creative” world from its “non-creative” refraction. I agree with this proposed strategy, but believe that experimentation shouldn't be utilized exclusively within writing, but also in editorial work and anthologizing. The over-whelming perception of poetry in society is of exclusivity and fierce judgment of one's identity and most valuable beliefs. Ultimately, this vision of poetry's place in the world is a damaging one. It is too often reinforced by well meaning and extremely capable voices like Perloff who enact a dangerous condescension to their peers and contemporaries. Rite Dove's introduction to the Penguin Anthology of 20th Century American Poetry may indeed be homely, and is indeed incomprehensive. I'm led to believe that Marjorie Perloff’s version would certainly be vastly different in a number of key ways. What's important from a wider base perspective though, is that neither should be singled out as unworthy or inconsequential based purely on the variability of taste and bias. History is its own master and will determine the viability of Dove's collection based on components we can't hope to accurately predict. In 20 years her edition may have all
but disappeared from publication. Or, it may be into its 4th or 5th printing. It's impossible to predict. Either way though, its existence in the contemporary field of poetry is essential if only for its ability to give us another version of one artist's perception of a century's worth of work that we can use to re-examine what we individually do and don't believe about poetry, art, and the value it accrues from reader to reader.
Annotated bibliography:

This novel about the Mariel boatlift, though immersive and character-driven, presented a number of structural flaws that caused confusion in our fiction forms class. I thought the book was very engaging in its utilization of history, but wished that it had stuck with certain characters for longer while taking the emphasis away from other, less narratively consequential perspectives.

An essential and expansive text used throughout my first poetry forms class with Jaswinder Bolina. Helped me to become acquainted with major 20th century poets such as O’Hara, Ashbery, Ginsberg, Olson, Creeley, Levertov, Duncan. Though I found many of the poems to be too rigid in their conceptualism, I especially enjoyed the artist notes and manifestos that accompanied many of the pieces. Greatest Hits: *Personism* by Frank O’Hara.

Likely the most emotionally influential text I encountered during the MFA experience. Read in Manette Ansay’s Fiction Forms class, though the book is actually nonfiction. A vision of writing as survival, but also an honest depiction of the familial flaws that have the capacity to haunt us all. Focused on Appalachia and spoke to so many of the themes that dictate my poetry and psyche.

Another incredibly influential and heartbreaking text from Dorothy Allison. Read outside of class. Fictional narrative of Bone, a poor Appalachian girl who is sexually abused by her stepfather throughout the course novel. Deals with cycles of poverty, familial flaws, and the ties that we all are told must keep us bound to those we call “family”.

A nostalgic and sentimental novel about a set of very different lives intersecting in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Read for M. Evelina Galang’s fiction forms course. Really enjoyed how Baxter was so successfully able to move in and out of very different perspectives and voice without feeling like an imposter within the narrative.

A linguistically ambitious, but heartfelt collection of poems about growing up in Middle America. Bell’s work is rambling and self-indulgent, but never suffers from pretension, instead presenting the reader with long poems that seem to exist as a means of sorting something out. These are active poems, as uncertain of their final destination as we are. A great read!

Read in Jaswinder’s poetry workshop. Playful collection of “post-modern” yet narrative poems that engage reality through a slight skewed, often humorous lens. Berman’s work is able to maintain true sentimentality and weight despite indulging in surrealism and absurdism throughout. Usual in testing different types of experimental writing within my own work, while working to maintain intimacy.

Excellent and original novel that utilizes the “we” voice throughout. Involves a group of young boys living in a Ukrainian suburb of Detroit in the 80s. The narrative focuses on issues of father son relationships, class warfare, coming of age, and the expectations of society on young men. A gorgeous read and an all-time favorite work of fiction.


Darkly funny, but tragic collection of poems by an astounding writer. Belieu easily bounces between the everyday and the transcendent with hardly a line of verse to separate the two. This book has inspired a series of neurotic and fruitful pieces that deal with the chasm between what the world sees of us and what actually goes on inside. Illuminating and unlike anything else I’ve read before.


Beautifully rendered collection of poems dealing with infidelity through the lens of the other woman. Uses evocative natural imagery of decay and birds of prey to connect the inner world to the external. Contains many elegies and nocturnes which were helpful in opening me up to new forms in my own work.


Haunting collection of lush poems that intertwine past, present, and future through discursive language and form. Brock-Broido’s poems inspire me to use language that has room for movement and growth within a piece. Her work is more associative than mine and offers a great example of writing that feels first, and organizes later.


Has become an all-time favorite collection. I’ve frequently used this book to generate narrative ideas based on how Calvocoressi creates her perspectives and then thrusts them into the jaws of actual historical events. Tons of great poems her about industrial Middle America, gender fluidity, farming, religion, and sport. Exceptional read and a poet to admire.


A quiet, but devastating novella that focuses on an immigrant family’s life in America. This text brought up a series of important questions and concerns during Amina Gautier’s fiction forms course. One in particular, the issue of a father’s perceived ownership over his daughters became a specific point of interest in my own writing that often deals with adult men who misunderstand their status in an evolving world.


An entirely unique and fiercely anti-narrative arc novel that left a profound impression on the particular reader. Read in M. Evelina Galang’s fiction forms class. This book seemed well ahead of its time in presenting a heartbreaking depiction of postmodern angst in the life of a 1950s housewife. Everything here is understated and yet the book maintains an alluring momentum that pulls the reader to the gentle and inevitable conclusion. Conceptually inspiring.


Lush and disturbing collection of poems dealing with submissiveness and life in the desert. A wonderful example of poetry that engages place and “tradition” through an altered perspective. Very usual in presenting new forms that push the limits of intertextuality and ekphrastic poetry.

A wholly unique collection of prose, poetry, and visual art pieces that create a collage of playful, confessional art. De la Flor knows no boundaries in investigating the self through pop culture and linguistic association. The pieces in this collection brush up against history and stigma like a baseball bat through a windshield. Many of the poems here were helpful in providing me “permission” to be weirder and more openly confrontational with conservative ways of thinking/reading.


A wonderful collection of prose poems that follows the narrative a young boy, Fidelito, as he attempts to hold off reality through a series of greater and greater surrealist imaginings and dreams. I loved how this book looked on the page and found de la Paz’s embrace of narrative to be very freeing for my own sensibilities of storytelling with poetry.


I think we all knew Denise Duhamel was going to show up here eventually. Out of her many superb collections, *Queen for a Day* is my favorite. Duhamel is a writer who possesses a gift for humor and narrative ordinariness which makes her work so approachable that the reader often feels like they are the one being tossed aside, interrupted, ignored, etc. Like some of the other texts listed here, this is another book that gave me a certain type of “permission” within my own writing. In this case it was the permission to be more conversational and honest when writing about myself. I learned to stop hiding so much behind my language and poetic voice.


Another all-time favorite collection from a poet with an insurmountable optimism and wit. Guest’s poems are immersive and full of unpredictable twists and turns. More joyful than most of the poetry I read, but also capable of a quiet sort of sadness that makes them poems unexpected gems. This collection was especially helpful in showing me how I could incorporate a litany of different moods within the same poem.


Another text from Paul Guest, though this one is a short memoir focused on his experiences growing up in the wake of a bicycle accident that left him a quadriplegic at the age of 12. This is one of my most treasured books because it is so matter of fact with its portrayal of tragedy. Instead of being a downer or overly introspective, Guest’s story is strangely uplifting and never once feels cliche or trite. A recommended read for just about anyone.


An extremely influential collection of poems from a poet who has a unique understanding of the relationship between persona and language. Hayes makes room in his poems for a bevy of different voices that often speak over each other and force themselves into the reader’s mind. This collection opened me up to a different type of language that is predicated on momentum and velocity, instead of subtlety and precise metaphor. An exceptional collection and influence.


A whirlwind of a novel that takes place in rural Montana and follows a social worker as he investigates a militant doomsday prepper. Henderson, though young, is a master of pace and plot building his characters into the unique Montana landscape with both grace
and power. This novel was a great read and helped me think in new ways about how characters in opposition often become dependent on each other. Basically, this book posits the notion that we all rely on antagonistic forces as a means of motivation and purpose.

An extremely important collection in my progression as a poet. Hicok is a master of the introspective poem that is aware of its own absurdity and self-righteousness. His work gains strength and beauty from its willingness to confront its own system of thinking. The elegies in this collection are often both haunting and hilarious in the course of a single stanza. This book showed me just how huge and intricate the world could be when I allowed my poetry to speak to different aspects of experience and failure.

Like nothing else I’ve ever read before. This collection of poems is experimental, but deeply personal in its movement between history and first-person narrative. I love Holiday’s fearlessness in evoking pop culture and tragedy to implicate the reader within the system of racial oppression and America’s boom-bust system of capitalism. An astonishing read that I think of often as a near perfect book.

The work of fiction that I thought and talked about most during my MFA. This novel is a multiple POV narrative about two poor girls living in a rural Florida trailer park. The story is written with a unique dialectic that propels every moment of the plot forward with an unwavering intensity. Issues of exploitation, loneliness, and self-preservation play a huge role in this book, which ultimately leaves the reader questioning whether or not some people really do have no way out of the struggle they’re born into.

One of the best and most inspiring books I read during my time in Miami. Landingham is a fellow young poet who wrote the manuscript for this collection during her MFA. As a book, Antidote works by assembling individual poems of trauma and failure into a collage of past, present, and future. The poems here are rich, nocturnal beings who linger at the end of each page. This collection showed me how much was possible in an MFA program, even with little experience and few publications to my name.

Has been a massively influential text during my time in the MFA program. Despite the author not being well known in poetry, and frankly being shrouded in mystery overall, this book is like nothing else I’ve ever encountered in poetry. It’s noirish, darkly funny, and cleverly self-referential. I find myself returning to this book often to try and parse out what exactly makes it so surprising and intoxicating. Not sure I’ve figured out the answer yet, but I’ll let you know when I do.

One of the first books that got me into poetry that engaged both sports and politics. Matejka’s collection is a tour-de-force of narrative persona and boxing language. As a concept, I don’t think I’ve ever read a more necessary and immersive poetic text. By focusing on a specific historical figure, Matejka is able to write poems in such a way that no individual piece is separate from the one before or after it. The whole collection seems propped up on itself, making the book a true “experience” that must be swallowed whole.

An extremely enjoyable collection that balances adventure with deep personal pain. McCall’s book is inventive in so many ways, using the cultural pop phenomenon of superheroes to interrogate society’s persistent mistreatment of outsiders, racial or otherwise. I love how unpretentious McCall’s writing is. He relies on imagery and a welcoming tone that makes his work accessible without losing the edge of his cultural insight. An influential book for my own writing on oppression and not fitting in.


Not my favorite collection of poems, though usual in its specific version of place and time. McGrath’s collection is lush and skilled, but there always seems to be something missing from his poems. I think that the problem is a lack of sincerity, not necessarily, in emotion, but in presentation. The poems here are so finely polished they lose all sense of humanness and relatability. This one was a letdown for me.


A great example of a book that is so tied to its concept that it loses some of its initial weight and momentum. Undoubtedly a unique idea for a book, and certainly well crafted, *Bluets* is something of conundrum as the writing is very deep and beautiful throughout. However, because of the nature of her subject, Nelson loses the ability to help the reader understand what is truly significant to her personal story and what is just filler or afterthought. Interesting, but less inspiring than I had hoped.


A stylish, yet frustrating read. Oates toys with her readers by repeating the same scene over and over throughout the entirety of the book, offering new context and information until the final tragic conclusion is revealed. I liked the idea of the book in some ways, but after so many pages of repetition the gimmick overstayed its welcome and I felt Oates was no longer working the narrative toward an enjoyable/compelling final act. A helpful read in helping me learn when to pull back from an idea and allow space for nothing new.


An excellent novel that speaks directly to my core interest in environmentalism, Appalachian industry, exploitation, and coming of age. If there’s any fiction writer I hope to emulate, it’s Ann Pancake, who writes with such love and regret for the region she came from. This novel utilizes multiple POVs to create a narrative collage detailing the effects of a catastrophic environmental disaster brought on by strip-mining. I learned so much about writing in different voices through this book, and began experimenting with writing from perspectives of characters who are different in age, gender, sexual orientation, and other aspects.


My all-time favorite short story collection. In these pieces Percy shows an incredible gift for writing the rage of young men in impossible circumstances. I love how Percy incorporates familiar rural settings in unique and unexpected his way. Above anything else, this collection shows a willing to push plot forward through action that doesn’t always rely on logic, offering the reader the opportunity to watch the disaster unfold on the page like so many acres of forest fire. Great read!


A very controversial collection that’s known for being aggressively hip and poppy. I enjoyed much of this collection, but certainly understand that criticisms leveled over its self-congratulatory nature. The pieces here associate between 80s and 90s pop reference
like rapid gunfire, leaving little time nor space for the reader to contemplate the language. Overall, a fun read that got my gears turning about all the new types of media I could work into my own poetry.

This collection is a great example of a poet who is able to balance absurdity with sincerity. Schomburg’s poems venture deep into the surreal, yet retain their charm through down to earth language and colloquial dialogue. I really, really enjoyed this book and found it gave me a lot of new ideas on how I could incorporate weird elements of horror and sci-fi into my writing without be pretentious.

A wonderful memoir that is so personal and open-minded that you can’t help but fall in love with it. Seaton’s writing is full of warmth and humor, yet never lets go of its agency as a corroborator of real pain and trauma. I am fascinated by the structure of this book and have been very influenced by its use of short vignettes that fall somewhere between poetry and prose. Such a worthwhile read!

A profoundly affecting and disturbing collection detailing the experiences of the city of New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina. Smith takes no steps to protect the reader here, instead opting to present the tragedy and negligence of the hurricane response through poems that use dialect and persona to devastating effect. This has been an extremely inspirational book for me, as it has shown me all the different ways a poem can engage politics, social justice, and history.

A recent addition to my reading list that has completely knocked my socks off. Frank Stanford committed suicide at age 27, but before doing so he wrote a tremendous amount of incredible southern gothic poetry. His work is both immersive, but lyric, managing to pull the reader in despite there often only being a handful of lines in each piece. This has been a great new find and promises to bear ever-growing fruit for my own writing in the future.

This collection of poems reads like a series of letters. Wade’s writing is so personal and rich that there is always a sense of shared experience between the reader and the author. Wade doesn’t shy away from stigma and shocking trauma, but her language is so generous and warm that even the most terrible sequences in this collection feel like triumphs over past suffering. This is a book about getting over pain, not digging back into it.

An incredible collection of short stories detailing life in the Nevanadan desert. Watkins has an amazing gift for writing stories about characters far outside of society without being either exploitative or too gentle. Her voice reminds me of Joan Didion in the sense that it fluctuates between an almost journalistic attention to detail, but also has the tremendous capacity for intimacy and affection for her characters. This collection has influenced how approach writing about characters and communities that have long been stigmatized in media and art.

One of my most prized books. This collection of short stories is both wildly imaginative and impressively down to earth. Wilson is a fan of magical-realism based narratives, yet ultimately his stories always seem to hinge on the most intimate, small moments between characters. This book has always inspired me to show affection and respect to my characters despite the terrible circumstances they have gotten themselves into. Very highly recommended for every reader.

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

It's very fitting that my annotated bibliography should end on an anthology of Dean Young’s work. After all, Dean Young was the main poet who inspired me to begin writing as an undergrad at Ohio University. This collection is a great display of all of the different types of language and styles he’s worked into his writing over the years. I’ve always loved Young’s fearlessness on the page and the way refuses to settle for the familiar phrase or image. This is a truly wonderful book and one that I’ll return to for years to come.