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Safe Passage to the End of Earth

Gregory Martin Chandler
Old Dominion University

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SAFE PASSAGE TO THE END OF EARTH

by

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B.A. May 2014, University of Mary Washington

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Old Dominion University in Partial Fulfillment of the
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ABSTRACT

SAFE PASSAGE TO THE END OF EARTH

Gregory Martin Chandler
Old Dominion University, 2018
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Safe Passage to the End of Earth is representative of my work as a poet and my ideas about the world. It's broken down into four sections that approach the world from different perspectives. Each section reflects my interests mostly independent of one another, though they connect thematically. The order of the sections, and the order of the poems within the sections, reflects what I felt was the strongest sense of motion from one idea to the next, beginning with a poem that touches on many of the themes in a single page and moving through politics, history, religion, and space in a neatly-ordered progression. There are few deviations from these primary themes, and where they exist, I've tried to place them where they fit best. For example, "Discovering Mortality" isn't explicitly religious, but I felt that it belonged in "Some Unanswered Prayers" because it dealing with mortality is often a religious experience. *Safe Passage to the End of Earth* also represents my work because it showcases various forms, from short free-verse lines of "Discovering Mortality" to the sestina, "The Literalist's Bible", with few repeats in structure. There are two sonnets. Otherwise, the structure of the poems in the manuscript varies. While the subject matter of these poems are tailored to my interests, I hope that readers can find something compelling in them.

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This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Jenni and Marty Chandler, for raising me around books and instilling a work ethic in me, my fiancé, Emma Tennant, for not letting me give up, and the staff at various coffee houses in Virginia Beach and Norfolk, who kept me caffeinated enough to work harder than I thought was possible.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Introduction.....	1
Escape Velocity	10
Breaking the Cycle.....	11
Flying Kites after September 11th	11
Hit & Run.....	13
Breaking the Cycle.....	18
Close to Shore.....	24
Invasion.....	26
Whale Fall.....	28
Tourist Attraction.....	33
The Resurrection of Stonewall Jackson.....	35
The Resurrection of Stonewall Jackson.....	35
General Jackson’s Wife and Daughters	38
Leading the Movement	39
Stonewall Jackson’s Foot Cavalry	41
Stonewall Jackson Visits Ellwood Plantation.....	43
Some Unanswered Prayers	44
Discovering Mortality.....	44
Boardwalk Evangelist.....	48
Asking for Forgiveness.....	51
A Test of Faith	53
The Literalist’s Bible	55
New Evangelism.....	58
Safe Passage to the End of Earth	59
Honeybee	59
Safe Passage to the End of Earth	60
Bibliography	63
VITA.....	100

Introduction

Something I've heard a lot of as my peers draw their theses to a close and sum up their experiences as MFA students is the notion that you shouldn't apply for a graduate program unless you already have your thesis mapped out in your mind, wisdom that I never heard until I was nearly 80% done with my own MFA program. Perhaps if I'd come into the MFA program with a concrete idea for my thesis collection, the series of poems that accompany this essay would be more directly connected to one another. Instead, I came in with the idea that an MFA would give me plenty of time, reading material, and inspiration to draw together a thesis with all the focus and power of Joseph Legaspi's *Imago* or Natasha Trethewey's *Native Guard*, but at the price of closing myself off to new concepts in order to focus on what I came here to do, I count myself lucky that I was seeking direction when I joined the MFA program at ODU.

I did not come to ODU as a poet. When I took my first undergraduate poetry workshop, it was to tighten my skills as a songwriter. Though I fell in love with writing poetry in that first workshop, and continued down the path as an undergraduate poet, it wasn't until my senior year of undergraduate that I read a poetry collection in its entirety. Because of this imbalance between literary poetry and popular music in the first two decades of my life, I've never been able to completely let go of the notion that catchy, incendiary language is important to grasping an audience's attention, and my unceasing desire to point fingers at those I think are standing against the greater good shines through the weaker elements of my poetry, exposing my history as a dive bar singer and open-mic martyr. I always have, and still do, feel more comfortable working to Rage Against the Machine than to "Rage, rage against the dying of the light." Still, for all of the less-than-poetic craft that I bring to my work from a decade and a half of

uninformed songwriting, I can thank that history for an ear for rhythm that permeates nearly all of my poems with continual anapestic or trochaic lines that are more easily spoken than read.

Almost every poem included in *Safe Passage to the End of Earth* was written in the past year, because I find myself continually making leaps and bounds in the craft of writing poetry, and every summer I decide that the poems from the last year are not good enough to warrant inclusion in my thesis. The poetry in my first year at ODU consisted almost exclusively of confessional poetry, generally humorous in nature, often sexual and based in adolescence (or preadolescence). None of those poems are included in *Safe Passage to the End of Earth*, because I find those poems nearly void of meaning beyond the humor in them. The fall of the following year, my poetry turned toward the political, but in a way that was dangerously close to inciting violence, and those poems, too, have been scrapped in favor of the poems that make up the current version of *Safe Passage to the End of Earth*. In the spring of my second year at ODU, I found myself regularly blending history with politics, using my experience as an undergraduate in the self-proclaimed “most historic city in America” to fuel the similarities between the American Civil War and today. Some of those poems are included in *Safe Passage to the End of Earth*, but many of them were cut in favor of poems that focus on current issues in politics and social issues.

The final topic that informs my thesis came relatively late in drafting it. I find myself struggling more and more with my religion as the Republican party continues to use it as a weapon for xenophobia, racism, and other bigotries, so a large portion of my thesis is battling religious themes, using ideas drawn from gothic literature to portray the grotesqueness of religion in modern life. Until recently, I’ve avoided writing about the religious aspects of my life for two reasons: firstly, I believed that nearly every conceivable topic under the umbrella of

religion had been covered by poets in the 19th Century and earlier; secondly, religiosity is so far out of vogue among academics and educated Americans that it might as well be disco.

Because so many of the poems are social and political in nature, I find that one of my greatest weaknesses in *Safe Passage to the End of Earth* is its didacticism, often speaking to a specific issue through personal experience or history. In revisions, I've been working to remove some of that didacticism to allow the reader to draw their own conclusions, but I find it difficult because I fear that my work deals with topics that will make me appear sympathetic to conservative America, if not one of them. While I don't believe I'll be able to remove all condemnations and accusations from my thesis, I hope that the final version better represents a clear-headed, unbiased image of America in the Trump era (It shouldn't be difficult to make Trump and his supporters look like idiots without outright saying it).

The poem in *Safe Passage to the End of Earth* that connects most deeply with current events is "Whale Fall." It uses the potential for international conflict and the deaths of many people that the narrator (and author) doesn't know personally to drive the idea that the United States cares about its own secrecy more than the lives of its allies. It speaks to the end of the Earth in a way that most of us expect it, with the actions of the United States angering the rest of the world and risking an international incident that could potentially end in nuclear war. I chose to include this poem because it speaks to the end of the world in its grandest sense, while still operating in what we, as desensitized Americans, consider business as usual. The title compares the submariners to a beached whale, which would be in similarly unlivable conditions and dying outside of its natural environment.

Other poems in *Safe Passage to the End of Earth* toy with the literal end of the world through international conflict, mostly playing with the decades-old paranoia of Russia as the

ultimate enemy, turning the narrators and characters in these poems into doomsaying blowhards. In “Close to Shore”, a group of people see a ship passing close to the beach and mistake it for a Russian spy ship, causing a stir on the boardwalk and inciting unnecessary panic; meanwhile, their dinners are getting cold in the restaurant they’ve abandoned to get a closer look. The characters in the poem are so caught up in the paranoia of the twenty-four hour news cycle that they forget to enjoy the moment in front of them. Similarly, in “Amphibious Invasion,” tourists are brought to a panic by a American naval demonstration on a public beach. To the characters in the poem, the situation is ridiculous, because they have the distance to see the demonstration for what it is. In the original version of this poem, the narrator is looking back on an event in his childhood and relating it to current events, but I believe the poem is better served by a narrator who is in the moment as a young child; it’s a more difficult perspective, but it works well to avoid the trap of comparing the incident too closely to today’s political fears.

The other primary theme in *Safe Passage to the End of Earth* is religion, and while I only address the end of the world using traditionally Christian themes in one poem, the threat of an apocalyptic event is buried in the subtext of most, if not all, of the religious poems. The oldest religious poem in *Safe Passage to the End of Earth* is “Boardwalk Evangelist”, which has taken several forms in the past year, finally ending in the voice of an ineffective evangelist as he loses hope in convincing people to turn away from sin and pray for salvation. The other poems came rather recently and began as a series of connected poems that detailed thoughts on how little the Christian church is doing to connect with young, progressive people and how little it cares to change the hearts of its older, conservative members. That form was dry and, frankly, not particularly interesting, so I’ve worked to salvage the ideas of these poems using different voices and situations. The most recent revision takes a well-known biblical parable and uses it in a

literal sense, with a speaker who has resorted to self-amputation to prevent himself from sinning and earn himself a place in heaven. This revision has changed the poem from loosely-metered couplets to a tightly-metered sestina that uses the repetition of the form to emphasize the narrator's obsession and delirium. Other poems in this series involve a preacher who expects the Lord to resurrect his family after they've been killed in a fire and a preacher who intends to lead the way to colonizing the stars with Christianity, at the expense of his parishioners.

The use of formal techniques was important to me in writing *Safe Passage to the End of Earth*, though I wound up not using many of the more formal poems in the final version of the manuscript. I've always been drawn toward writing poems with strict meters and even rhyming, though generally slant or off-rhymes because of my history as a musician. While only a few poems in *Safe Passage to the End of Earth* follow any easily recognizable structure, nearly all of the poems are organized into evenly-footed lines that make it easy for the reader to fall into the rhythm of the words. For instance, "Discovering Mortality" is the poem with the shortest lines in the collection, with each tercet containing a five syllable line, followed by a four syllable line, and completed with another five syllable line. This sort of informally strict meter was common at the turn of the 20th Century and poets like Robert Frost and W.B. Yeats used even metrical lines in much of their informally structured poetry. Their work has made me more comfortable in using this technique rather than formally-described poetic forms like the sonnet (which exist in many terrible drafts that were ultimately left out of this thesis) and both of their complete poems are included in my annotated bibliography for this thesis.

On the other end of the metrical rigidity spectrum, and whose complete poems are also included in my annotated bibliography, is Amiri Baraka, whose poetry set me on the path to writing politically. There are things about Baraka's poetry that I, a sucker for "correct grammar

and mechanics”, could never bring myself to imitate in my own works (lack of traditional capitalization and punctuation come to mind), but the spirit of his poetry resonates deeply with my interest in the developing divides in American and international cultures. By using a complete edition of Amiri Baraka’s poetry for my thesis, I had the opportunity to experience the development of his style and worldview. In *Preface to a Twenty-Volume Suicide Note*, Baraka’s narrators are angry, pained political activists, fighting for civil rights. By the end of his life, Baraka had become disillusioned with the power structures created by capitalism and the American government and used his poetry to spread his message of uniting against those power structures. The tone of the political poems in my thesis lean more toward that of Baraka’s latter works, though the rage of *Preface to a Twenty-Volume Suicide Note* and *The Dead Lecturer* are often found in early drafts of my politically-minded works. In my political poems, the restrained, targeted political writings are honed during the revision process; I fear that they would fall flat if the early drafts were written without anger.

“Breaking the Cycle,” the poem in *Safe Passage to the End of Earth* that most-closely resembles Baraka’s works, began as an imitation of his controversial post-9/11 poem, “Somebody Blew Up America.” The earliest draft of this poem was titled “Somebody Told the South” and was filled with incendiary images of white supremacy and vulgar language meant to insult deeply-conservative readers. As I worked through drafts of this poem, I decided to remove the vulgar language and to tone down the condemnations of conservatism in favor of drawing a clearer image of those that pose danger to equality in 21st Century America.

As a complete thesis manuscript, *Safe Passage to the End of Earth* is loosely tied together thematically, rather than any sort of concrete connection between poems. The original intention for my thesis was to craft a concrete narrative that followed a single narrator/subject through the

collection as he encountered the current social and political climate. As I worked, I realized that using a single speaker as a lens would be both exceedingly difficult and restrict me to an unnecessarily narrow viewpoint that would most likely mirror my own. In the revision process, the speakers in each of the poems began to adapt individual traits that set them apart from the speakers of the other poems, usually by some flaw that contributes to their view of society. Even the poems that are in the first person and based on my own experiences have been fleshed out to include details that give the speaker a distinct identity that I had to both separate and reconcile with my own.

Because very few of the poems in *Safe Passage to the End of Earth* are directly related to one another, transitions from one poem to another can be jarring, as when the collection moves from a poem about military training exercises to a poem about singing happy birthday to Nasa's Curiosity Mars rover. I've done my best to mitigate the jarring transitions by separating the collection into three sections. The first, "Breaking the Cycle," deals with social issues and speakers who are aware enough of their own contributions to the perpetuation of injustice to acknowledge the issues, but are often unwilling to work to change these issues. The speaker in "Hit & Run" recognizes that his whiteness can be credited for his avoidance of a hit and run charge, but does nothing to address the issue other than acknowledge his own good fortune in the situation. In the title poem of the section, "Breaking the Cycle," the narrator is quick to point out the issues that different voices are creating in America, but does little to offer a solution that might result in real change.

Two poems in the series came from an older poem that directly addressed the fears of a Russian invasion through the "spy ship" that appears in the current version of "Close to Shore." In revision, the poem separated into two ideas, both dealing with fears of naval invasion. The

narrators of both poems are physically separated from the “invaders,” and bear witness from a safe distance. In the second poem of this section, “Invasion,” the speaker is a child whose only sense of invasion is through video games and B-movies, which color his interpretation of the Navy training exercise that lands on the public beach. Another poem in this section deals with a mother trying to shield her kids from the hatred brought on by the 9/11 attacks in New York and Washington D.C.

Perhaps the most interesting poems to write for *Safe Passage to the End of Earth* are the poems in the section titled *The Resurrection of Stonewall Jackson*, which follows the general as he is returned to Earth in the middle of a heated battle between progressives and conservatives who both feel strongly about the representation of the failed Confederacy in the 21st Century. Jackson makes some moves that would surprise many of his proponents and detractors, but fit with the image of Stonewall Jackson that I’ve drawn from recent biographies and some of his letters. In the five poems that use Stonewall Jackson as their focus, he is the recognizably bloodthirsty general worshiped by neo-confederates and condemned by just about everyone else. In another poem, he is tender and familial, though duty bound. In another, he is reminded of his purpose as one of God’s own children.

The final section of the collection, “Some Unanswered Prayers,” contain the newest poems included in *Safe Passage to the End of Earth* and, except for the final poem, these are strung together through religious themes. The most violent poem in *Safe Passage to the End of Earth* is “The Literalist’s Bible,” in which the speaker interprets a passage from the *Gospel of Mark* literally and resorts to self-amputation to prevent himself from sinning. I decided to write this poem in the sestina form because of the repetition involved in writing a sestina and how it

mirrors the repetition of Biblical stories, which were necessarily repetitive because they were part of an oral tradition.

The most intimate poem in the collection, “Discovering Mortality,” is one of the few poems in *Safe Passage to the End of Earth* with an “I” narrator that closely resembles the author. This poem has gone through more revisions than almost any other poem included in the final version of *Safe Passage to the End of Earth*, and those revisions has removed much of the original plodding concentration on the recognition of mortality in a seven year old boy. Instead, this final version focuses on how the speaker and his brother are doing everything they can to distract themselves from the inevitable death of the family member in the room. The speaker is unsuccessful in completely distracting himself and notices some uncomfortable things happening around him. I chose to include this poem because it brings the driving concept of *Safe Passage to The End of Earth* to a personal conclusion, as the speaker is forced to deal with the acceptance of mortality in the hospital room he doesn’t want to be in with a family who is focusing on the dying relative rather than the amusements of a seven year old.

Safe Passage to the End of Earth begins with a reminder that we don’t have anywhere to go once we’ve finished destroying Earth. It ends with the title poem, “Safe Passage to the End of Earth,” which addresses a world where we do have the technology to leave Earth, but have doomed many to starving on a dying planet. The poems that fill the space between the first and final poems are all related, in one way or another, to the potential end of the world, whether it be a literal end of the world or the end of a way of life. *Safe Passage to the End of Earth* is as much about learning to accept that there is no way to control the ultimate fate of the universe, however that universe is defined, as it is about politics, social unrest, and resistance.

Escape Velocity

Imagine NASA not having the budget
to sing “Happy Birthday”
with the closest thing to life on Mars.

Picture how much further we must
be from joining the rover
in escaping this crumbling planet.

This year, instead of counting down to midnight
when fireworks will ring the new year, we push

the hands on the doomsday clock closer to midnight
than the day America went thermonuclear.

Why does it feel like
the president’s mouth
is the only thing still
moving at one-hundred
twelve kilometers per second?

Breaking the Cycle

Flying Kites after September 11th

After Solmaz Sharif¹

Our mother drove us to Kitty Hawk to fly
kites after 9/11 because we lacked religious
support, and she needed a way to keep our
unwarned exposed minds from dwelling
on anger and hate pressed upon our impressionable
nine and ten year old lives. Our community was
a nuisance minefield of retaliatory rhetoric.
We couldn't understand why our neighbors
treated each other like enemy combatants.
The community pool was a zone of combat.

Our mother removed us from the situation before
we sustained more than light damage, let us fight

¹ Solmaz Sharif's *Look* uses terms from the United States Department of Defense's *Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, placing them in capital letters throughout. This poem also uses terms from the *Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*.

with our kites until she heard us call them weapons
of mass destruction, told us war games did nothing

but breed violent behavior. In Virginia, she took us
to church for the first time in our memorable lives,

hoping that hate had a shorter half-life than salvation.

Hit & Run

After Claudia Rankine

The white bicycle cops see
me in the driver's seat. Oh-three
LeSabre. Rusty. I must seem

grungy in chef's pants and bleach-
stained t-shirt. The eleven-hour-
shift in my eyes easily mistaken

for stoned-out-of-my-mind eyes
and I can identify the marijuana
stink from the guys on the line.

My hands shaking on the wheel
seem guilty and I am fearful
of handcuffs and holding cells.

The off-duty Carolina cops
unloading their car must have
called the police on me. Sent

off when the local beat arrives;
must have seen them a nothing
but a group of black tourists,

no reliable witness. Cops don't
take their statements, or let
on if they suspect I'm guilty

of more than poor judgement
and a poor turn radius. My nerves
surge. I search for my registration

and insurance, obscured by years
of glove box litter. I open the door;
empty cups tumble to the parking lot.

No one has committed a crime here;

the officers declare an exchange
of information will do, tell me
to stay patient. The officers

confirm my story, assure

me that the car will be alright,
that it's *only a shallow scratch*,

looks worse than it is; they won't
face my parents, late from work
with an accident on my record.

The owner of the truck shows
up. Blue paint on the bumper
draw his eye, draws his finger

across the scratch and claims

it'll rub right out. Listens
calmly while I complain

that the bicycle rental locked
up too close to me, spot was too tight.
His eyes lock with mine and I flinch

back, insistent my insurance
will pay for damages. He stops
me, tells me he shouldn't have

parked me in, should have seen
the bicycles, says it's not my
fault. My heart is still beating

like it fears we'll be eating
cold cheese sandwiches
for life, but the police say

no crime has been committed.
It soothes me a little; the truck
driver assures me his company

won't notice the blue paint
on his bumper, I won't likely
hear from his insurance; no harm

done. It seems they've forgotten
about the North Carolina cops
who blocked me to stop me

from leaving the scene, told
the VB police that I'd sideswiped

a vehicle and kept on driving; the

cops asked me, once, *did you intend
to leave?* Believed me, shielded me
from the accusations of vacationers,

brushed them from the scene, mediated
between the victim and me, trusted me
over them, all for the color of my skin.

Breaking the Cycle

After Amiri Baraka

I've been told we're in a post-racial society. I'm told that everyone is equal now, at least here in America. Friends have been told to *quit their whining*, they should know *it wasn't a hate crime*.

We're all told he *shouldn't have run from the cops*, that he *shouldn't have been carrying a weapon*, that *second amendment rights are only extended to law-abiding citizens*. Ought we also assume his crime? Carrying

a weapon while black? Forgetting his green book and passed through an affluent neighborhood on his way to the mini-mart. We are nitpicking at best, willfully ignorant at worst.

What about black on black crime? they

ask us at holiday dinners, family reunions,
as if one crime justifies another. *What about
white men who have died in police custody?*

When we refuse to take their baited lines,
they change the lures, *where were their
parents*, as if poor parenting absolves
life-taking, as if murder is not murder
if a parent is not present for the crime.

Where were you while the parents grieved?

This year, let us turn around and ask,
“What if it was us, lying there until
the medical examiner finishes lunch
break and comes to peel grey matter
off the street? Can you blame murder
of your white children on parenting?”

Somebody told the South, no geographical
mass singing Dixie along the thirty-sixth
parallel, but ideology spread through fifty
states, *it's okay to hang your rebel flags.*

Someone is shouting *it's okay to throw
bricks through stained-glass windows,
okay to burn black churches (mosques
of any color), so long as you're not caught.*

In major American cities and college towns
where the default position is progressivism,
someone's hanging flyers proclaiming
that the alt-right should remove the white
hoods and stand behind their white skin.

Somewhere in America, maybe every
small town in America, they are taking
notes from the Islamic State, learning
that the best weapon to protect the state
of white conservatism isn't a rifle, but
a high-speed vehicle on a crowded street.

Somebody told the south that Black
Lives Matter is a terrorist organization,
but the Ku Klux Klan has every right
to protest in the streets, that rioting white

nationalists can expect the protection
of every local police force in America,
but black parents can't count on their
own safety while they march for justice
for their own child in their own towns.

In town hall meetings in all-white districts,
they are chanting that the neo-confederacy
is about heritage, not hate, just so long
as the neighborhood population stays
above ninety-five percent white; the FHA
claims it investigates cases of housing
discrimination, but your real estate agent
is saying that one more black neighbor
could cause the whole market to deflate.

Someone is telling America, since almost
everyone who remembers is dead, that neo
in neo-nazi means that they have turned
around their message, that America first
means that we're leading the way toward
a brighter future, not leaving everyone
behind to deal with their own wars,

own coups, own economic collapses.

Someone is putting together a convincing argument that America first means America first, not white America first, not white Christian America first, not white upper-middle-class Christian America first.

Somewhere in America, people will fall for it. People are going to vote against their best interests because they sincerely believe that America first includes them.

Someone is running advertising campaigns across America, claiming donald trump and the alt-right are going to end the battle of partisan politics, are taking the politics out of politics. And when they take politics out of politics, they are going to inject it with business. Capitol Hill is not getting better. donald trump promises to drain the swamp so that his army of swamp monsters might finally bask in the sunlight.

No one is telling Americans that the donald and his posse of pussy grabbing billionaires have no interest in saving blue-collar labor beyond the interest of bringing them business; they only have interest in cutting out competition by imposing impossible standards on new means of production, eliminating import taxes, closing the borders: first coming in and then going out.

When America is ready and unable to abandon America, they will hire strikebreakers to puncture picket lines at the brand new general motors, ford, general electric, apple, remington factories.

Americans will be willing to kill for minimum wage jobs because companies can afford no more while maintaining nine-figure budgets for job titles that begin with C and end in O.

Close to Shore

The bartender gapes at the nightly news, three hours into a breaking report on a Russian spy ship spotted in coastal waters for the third time this week. Beers are flowing over under the taps. Nothing but foam in the flyover footage, sea too rough to see seamen photographing the Eastern Seaboard, slowing as the ship nears seaports and naval installations. It's been weeks since CNN and MSNBC began to play the President's threats on repeat, the heat of an international scene has seen its peak.

Americans see the world's leaders treat him as a four-year speed bump in globalization. Still, news of cold war is unwelcome.

Our beers can wait. We leave the plate of oysters to get warm, pull cell phones from pockets and purses, searching for the best angle to catch a selfie

with the vessel in the swell.

Invasion

When we finished our chocolate chip pancakes
our father would banish us to the second-floor
arcade where we would play Space Invaders
while he waited tables downstairs all day.

Summer faded and we became jaded
to the place, unable win the game
we'd been playing since the day school
let out. Instead, we sat downstairs

at the table, made games out of the faces
of the tourists who passed by, played I
Spy and, with my little eyes, I swear I saw
the first ship break from the slacking tide.

It didn't have the high-gloss finish
of the black and white cabinet; our
window to the Invasion was colored
with Navy blues. Laser screaming

in bursts replaced by ladies screaming

endlessly and getting to their feet;
tears streaming from the faces of pre-
teens who'd stayed up late to see

Red Dawn. We are slack-jawed
to see our own country invading
the beach. No one has a control pad
to battle back. The beaches cleared,

the hatches on the backs of the battle
tanks snapback and the sailors wave
friendly flags, roll back into the surf,
commander waves the tourists back.

Whale Fall

In the South Atlantic, Argentina
has been searching for the ARA
San Juan. She has had no contact
with the mainland for two weeks.

Long enough to presume. Recovery
will not be joyful. Worst-case
scenarios: uniformed men & women
working through starvation. Hope
in restoring flooded diesel engines
before suffocation fuels another
ghost ship myth.

In Virginia Beach, Navy contractors
watch static on an IMAX screen,
personal theater for the half-dozen
men who use it to locate ships, whales,
submarines, in every ocean on Earth.

For ten days after the San Juan
made final operational contact,

contractors worked their way
up the chain of command,
until given clearance for contact
with Chief of Naval Operations,
who makes the decision to clear
information for declassification.

A private conference is held, worst
fears confirmed as the U.S. Navy
informs the Argentine military
that an explosion was detected
in the South Atlantic Ocean.

Grief does not overwhelm anger.
While the world searched for comfort
or closure, the United States worried
over proper clearance to inform families
of the dead: *I'm sure you understand,
we cannot tip our hand to military enemies.*

The Wendigo

We spun out on the Eastern Shore
in powdered snow. To make it worse
we'll miss your father's funeral.

It was my idea to drive all
night, roll into town in time
to change clothes and find
our place in the front row.

Now you're hoping they will hold
the service and the burial
until we find someone to pull
us back onto the icy road,
but no one's stopping in the storm
and we can't move my car alone.

You heard a stirring in the firs,
jumped in the car and locked the doors.

Out in the snow, the air is cold;
without gloves, my hands are frozen.

I know the lugnuts will not turn
and we'll be stuck until a tow
truck pulls us from the shoulder.

Lord, I do not want to sleep out here.
The low is in the teens; we did not bring
any blankets that would keep us warm

If I knew how far the next town was,
we could walk to find a phone, but here
13 is nothing more than family farms,
fifteen miles between stop signs. Even
convenience stores don't stay open
overnight. You say it's like a horror
film; it's one I want no part in.

I give the lugnuts one more go,
you watch the tire iron finally pry
apart the rusted bolts. Inside the car,
you're feeling warm, but nervous
that I'm all alone You see movement
in the boughs. The wind is noisy
as it blows, howling like the Wendigo.

But if I'm pulled into the woods
you're stuck until the morning comes.
You're always looking out for ghosts.
Now you'll finally have your own.

Tourist Attraction

The bronzed dedication in the center
of town is another sign to ignore.
“Keep off the grass,” “smoking
prohibited,” “slaves stood here for sale.”

The out-of-towners don't come
for the history of the stone beside
the *Olde Towne Butcher*. Their history
is monuments to proud soldiers

and brave rebels; confident it's now
okay to praise them, they bow down
at confederate graves. Let them. This
monument might best avoid their gaze,

lest they haul it from the ground
in their rage, bronze toothache in an age
where pulling teeth is painless. Do they
know that history has been played out?

A veteran in greys disavowed its place

as a monument to the slave trade,
claimed it bore the heels of ladies
descending from horse-drawn

carriages in front of the Planter's
Hotel. That history is for them, not
clippings for the sale of *seven*
young and valuable slaves. Students

see the stone as confederate holdout,
Old South ideology, but it's not out
of place between Union and Confederate
cemeteries, natural in a town where Civil

War musket balls are for sale by the dozen.
Locals laugh at their mindless imitation,
American institution not two-hundred
years dead, always in shackles at the wrist,

silver watches shine like polished
iron; still smiling, they pose as slaves
for smartphone cameras, then turn toward
the riverside, free as the afternoon.

The Resurrection of Stonewall Jackson

The Resurrection of Stonewall Jackson

When Peter saw the stone had been rolled
away from the tomb, he knew that Christ

had conquered death, but when Thomas
was told of the resurrection, he doubted

the man before him was Christ. Likewise,
when I saw the man in tattered grays

standing on the highway shoulder, I
thought him reenactment soldier,

stopped my car, opened the door
and offered him a ride to town.

As we passed by storefronts hanging
rebel flags above their doors,

the general turned and asked me
if we'd finally won the war.

I laughed until the man turned red,
assumed commitment to the bit,

humored him and let him know
it was reclaimed by nationalists

who stood behind the message that white
man's disenfranchisement is the primary

predicament threatening Americans.
The redness in his face grew deeper.

I thought I must have angered
him by misinterpreting the symbol

that he held in high esteem,
but he asked if I'd explain

the new rebellion's reasoning.

I could tell that he was fuming

by the time we got to Lexington.

Stonewall Jackson sees a revolution.

He will be the avant garde

as I have been the starting gun.

General Jackson's Wife and Daughters

In Lexington, Jackson arranges flowers
in the cemetery that bears his name,
lilies on the stones of his daughters.

Wreath of forget-me-nots high on display

for his widow; Anna had never remarried.
though permitted by their Lord. For five
decades faithfully maintained his memory.
He wanted no more than return to his wife.

Dreading the reason he'd been separated
from eternal bliss with the Jackson girls,
he knelt nearby and prayed, only waiting
to hear of God's plan, expecting the worst.

He searched for meaning in the Church;
prayed in vain for resolution through words.

Leading the Movement

Seated on stone-still Little Sorrel,
the statue of Stonewall Jackson flees
the leer of his live inspiration.

Regiment of right-wing paramilitary
white supremacists march the garden;
color guard of the New Army
of Northern Virginia.

The clash commences. Jackson clasps
his hat, commands the captains
Cast off the Confederate coats!

Counter-protestors gloat at prospects
of a Confederate turncoat.

Rebels send up the yell as Stonewall
calls for trucks to tear down his likeness.

Pleas for penitence.

Rejection

of God's plan for Union victory
punctured by gunfire percussion.

Jackson strikes the statue, shouts
for silence.

Riot squad.

Too late for pepper spray. First
bloody day in a bloody campaign.

Stonewall Jackson's Foot Cavalry

Move quickly, Jackson commanded.

In cities across the South, the Foot
Cavalry stand shoulder to shoulder.

Deadliest weapons protected
by the Second Amendment

pointed at protesters in Rebel
regalia. Loaded magazines.
Fingers on safeties. No one
is moving. No one dead, yet.

Police unprepared for protests
in the range of full brigades,
powerless to break the ranks,
limit movement to the perimeter,
wait on the National Guard.

Jackson's Foot Cavalry breaks
for pickup trucks with winches
and chains. Seal them in. Adjust

their aim. Keep the Right at bay.

Mirroring Baghdad's statue
of Saddam Hussein, the trucks
pull the chains tight like reins.
Rev engines. The Cavalry breaks.

Statues come down in a dozen
states; the Foot Cavalry open
their guns at charging brigades
who claim their statues remain
symbols of *heritage, not hate*.

Stonewall Jackson Visits Ellwood Plantation

Alone, standing at the memorial to his own
arm, Stonewall fingers the bullet hole,
personal stigmata, reciting the Apostles
Creed, pauses for reflection at *Resurrection
of the Body*. Returned whole except the hole
left in his left arm, reminder of those warm
May days fighting for his home state. Causes
no pain. Aches in refrain: placed among
the living to break his nation, again.

Some Unanswered Prayers

Discovering Mortality

My brother and I

in the corner

of the hospital

room, everything

to look at but

the crumbling body

propped up in bed.

By the window,

winter sun is spun

into sparkling arcs,

wondrous works.

As they streak

around our minds in

time with the whirr

of life-providing

machines, they create
seams in shadows
cast by our dangling

feet. From the spare bed,
we can see our
family seated

at the feet of Great
Grandmother. We,
uninvited, pleased

that we're high enough
to see passing
traffic, distraction

from the asthmatic
rattle passing
through the lapsed

act of our dad's straight-
face barricade.
On the table, our Game-

Boys sit, battery-drained,
banned for their noise
and the way they make

Grandmother crazy.

We want to play;
instead, we let our

feet swing, impatient,
feeling tension
from the other bed,

desperate for mention
of *goodbye til*
tomorrow. I try

to stay lighthearted.

It's getting late.

The light's sparkle has

fallen out of time
with the heart-rate

monitor's slow whirr.

Boardwalk Evangelist

I swear this is the last time I'll come to this town.

If the coast wants to turn from Him, let them be burned.

I will do my part up here, but they will not turn
from temptation of every kind. This time I've learned

that the root of the issue's not tourists and youth,
but the bold business moguls who moved here from Vegas
to corner the market on boardwalk temptations;
they call them amusements, but I know the truth.

They deal in distractions and neon abstractions
that draw in the gullible beach-going Christians
with crab legs and crushes and inspiring missives
like *Make your own fate and come eat at the Crab Hut!*

I'm standing in front of the restaurant patio,
posters in hand and the message adjusted
for gluttony, greed, and the dangers of lust;
they eat lunch in bikinis, tune me out like radio.

I know someday soon that our Lord will be coming

and, if not for me, who will save them from Satan?
I've seen him in pleasures of flesh; their behavior
is typical of those who have brushed off his Judgement.

I am not demanding that they all stand up
from their lunches, demand a refund, and come follow
me home to a place where the water is shallowed
for us by the Lord. Here, the waters are too rough

for safe passage home, but it's my job to calm
them, my job to convert wayward children of God,
bring them closer to Heaven and further from Sodom
in every way possible. I'm in the palm

of His hand; from this land he'll deliver me home,
and I hope I'm not making this journey alone,
but if no one will come, then alone I will go.

From this world I'll be saved, in the next I'll be welcomed

with the roaring of trumpets. I'm hoping to share
it with souls of the saved that I've worked to displace
from the strong arms of Satan and human temptation,
but I'm no competition with beaches and bare

skin. My message unheard while they bask in enjoyment
of ice cream and alcohol, oysters and sunbathing.

Maybe these sinners don't know they need saving
when life is smooth sailing as much as in turmoil,

but everyone knows only turning to him
in your moments of weakness will not mark you saved.

In your joy, you must praise him; in good fortune, make
it be known that the Lord is still dwelling within

you. In filling yourselves with liquor and seafood,
you're working your hardest to fill up your soul;
Still, you feel empty, for without the Lord,
no tangible morsel is fit to fulfill you.

Stand with me here and sing praise to the Lord,
then return to your hotels and pack up your things.

Teach yourself temperance; the joy that He brings
is more joyous than lifetimes down here on the shore.

Asking for Forgiveness

Most of you sitting here have not confessed
your sin to the Lord. Is Judgement to come
call you at the end, when you haven't been blessed
with the knowledge that Jesus is calling you home?

Your sin, to the Lord, is judgement. To come
into this world with ideas of greatness,
with knowledge that Jesus is calling you home,
and still turn sin is bold. He was raised

into this world with ideas of greatness,
sings praises to God, hurt when we sin
and still turn. Sin is bold. He was raised
to teach us that He is still dwelling within.

Sing praises to God. Hurt. When we sin,
we are reaching out to beg for our God to
teach us that He is still dwelling within,
ask Him for forgiveness, pay him what's due.

We are reaching out to beg for God to

call you at the end. When you haven't been blessed,
ask Him for forgiveness. Pay him what's due.

Most of you sitting here have not confessed.

A Test of Faith

When I lost my family in the courtyard fire,
I did not turn my face from You and curse,
but held that better fortune would transpire.

I knew the work of the infernal liar
was beckoning me to abandon my church
when I lost my family to the courtyard fire.

With blistering hands, I bound them up in choir
robes. I knew Your sign: the soil too cold to turn.
I held that better fortune would transpire,

so shaved my head and wore mourning attire,
waiting patiently for their return.

When I lost my family to the courtyard fire,

I thought, perhaps, that I had drawn Your ire,
but now I know Your righteousness is firm.

I held that better fortune would transpire,

but the bodies smell of rot and there are flies

I swat at them, but every day they're worse.

When I lost my family to the courtyard fire,

I'd held that better fortune would transpire.

The Literalist's Bible

Matthew 5:30

I have made a commitment to combat temptation.

My body is pained but my conscience is lighter.

The Lord is not vengeful. He offers salvation

if I cut myself off from the weakness of sin.

He warns me that Satan has stirred me to action,

has led me by the hand. I took it off at the wrist.

The Lord says it isn't enough. My wrist

is still numb, but I feel the temptation

to cut out my tongue: the sensible action

to rout my insolent prayers for lighter

desires than freedom from bodily sin.

To remove myself further brings hope for salvation.

The blood of the lamb is the way to salvation,

but the blood from my hand as it dries on my wrist

reminds me that the body is source of all sin

and I must stay on guard for the coming temptations.

Heaven is close. If my body was lighter

I think I would float there. Just one course of action

can save me from damnation; in taking that action
I am losing agency. Gaining salvation
is not for the body. The soul is much lighter
without dangling appendages. Why stop at wrists
while the arms and legs still bring temptation?
The devil is begging my ankles to give into sin.

If all of my body can cause me to sin,
then self-amputation is impotent action.
My senses have drawn me to greater temptation
than sins of the flesh. I offer salvation
through self-mutilation that starts at the wrist
and moves up the body. My conscience is lighter,

but without my hands I cannot hold the lighter
to freshly freed flesh leaking blood mixed with sin
to slow down the bleeding that comes from my wrists.

I am finally calm, comforted by inaction.

If I am to die here, I will find salvation.

Salvation. Salvation, but not from temptation:

I fear that my sinfulness led me to action.

I fear that my soul has been barred from salvation.

The mind, not the wrists, must be freed from temptation.

New Evangelism

The Earth is filled with converts; conquered men
are cursed to work until they feel the Lord.

We've searched the distant corners for new land
to send our missionaries with the Word.

The heavens are a Christian's final garden;
the Lord will not stay stranded on the Earth.
If life exists, we must begin the charge
to share the good news of our savior's birth.

The universe belongs to man. Expand
your offerings that we may spread beyond
this atmosphere. The Earth is not the end
of your evangelism. Give your life to God.

We'll populate his spacebound ark;
His Mission is to colonize the stars.

Safe Passage to the End of Earth

Honeybee

Sea of white faces, picked for STEM
aptitude, filtered religion, nation
of origin, levels of melanin, strapped
into bucket-seats, IVs of Dramamine
to combat the 3G of breaking
the atmosphere. Broadcast on screens
across all seven continents, we became
the kitchen team for the first fleet
of engineers to a permanent colony
in the orbit of Mercury. They call
it Honeybee, seed to the galaxy.
From our place in the galley,
we call it the W.A.S.P.

Safe Passage to the End of Earth

Through the smog, the rainbow
seems like seven shades of slate.

It's getting late, but stay with me
in the shade; the shore is a sauna

until the sun comes down. Someone
bet me I can't finish the beer before

before the last cruiser breaks our
atmosphere, saves the human race.

The lawn chair creaks and my ass
is falling through the seat as I lean

back to catch a last look at the ships
offering safe passage from Earth

to anyone who can demonstrate
value in a practical career. We're

no engineers, so we've been left
here; sole remaining *Earthicans*

in a galaxy of immigrants. No need
for forty-hour work weeks or social
conventions; no one will be checking
to make sure we're all at our desks, so
we'll spend the evening drinking, watch
mankind's future drifting across Luna,
silhouettes. Tomorrow, when we get
up, let's quit without providing notice,
find a boat to call our own and spend
the morning on the ocean. Afterward,
we might work out survival plans.
For now, let's celebrate our lives again.

Bibliography

Ashbery, John. *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*. Penguin, 1976.

John Ashbery's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* was one of the first full poetry collections that I ever read, and it was my first experience delving into the work of a modern Pulitzer Prize-winning author. I come back to Ashbery's work on occasion because I am randomly reminded of a line from a poem in *Self-Portrait*, and I think that Ashbery's memorability is what made him such a prominent force in American poetry. The opening poem of the collection, "As One Put Drunk into the Packet Boat" brings the reader immediately into Ashbery's sense of language, as he moves through the stanzas so gracefully that it's easy to get lost in the sound and rhythm of the words and abandon the meaning altogether. Of course, that would be a mistake, because Ashbery's poems are packed with elaborate layers of meaning that are only evident after several readings and with a general familiarity with his poetic style.

My favorite poem from this collection has always been "Worsening Situation," which seemingly details the narrator's thought processes as he drifts farther and farther from his wife, who is unaware of where he is and what he is doing. This poem works in long lines that seem almost prose-like, but Ashbery maintains his fluidity throughout, moving readers from line to line effortlessly.

The title poem of the collection, "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" is a prime example of ekphrasis, which is an area of poetry where I lack, as I generally have little knowledge of the visual arts. While it is the longest poem in the collection, "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" reads as smoothly and quickly as the rest of Ashbery's works. My own ekphrastic poems leave

less room for self-reflection as something so transparent as a piece about (what may be) the world's most famous self-portrait, but there's a lot to be learned about fusing the life of the narrator in an ekphrastic poem and his subject.

Baraka, Amiri. *S.O.S.: Poems 1961-2013*. Grove Press, 2014.

Having only a passing familiarity with Amiri Baraka before coming to this collection (I'd previously read his play *Dutchman* and his controversial post-9/11 poem "Somebody Blew Up America"), I was amazed at the breadth of his work. This collection spans from his first collection, *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note* (1961), to his final works collected in *Fashion This* (1996-2013), with an appendix called *Speech Acts*, a transcription of the works he'd released only as audio files through his own label, Jihad, and with MoTown records. In his works from *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note*, I was blown away by his interconnecting of serious cultural and historical themes with playful ideas and melodious language. "In Memory of Radio" showcases a playfulness with language that continues throughout *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note*, and while Baraka tones the humor down in some of his later collections, it never entirely disappears. Still, between the snarky witticisms and curious observations, Baraka is approaching serious subject matter. Baraka chooses not to capitalize the final word of the collection, "american," a choice meant to highlight his disdain for the term, but also one that predisposes the reader to many of the deliberate misspellings, unconventional abbreviations, and odd capitalizations that occur throughout his later works.

In *The Dead Lecturer* (1964), Baraka begins experimenting with unconventional punctuation, taking to using the open parenthesis mark without closing it anywhere in the poem.

The first time I saw it, I wondered if it was a typo, then I wondered if he was setting himself up to close them all later in the collection, then finally accepted them as an idiosyncratic style choice. These unclosed parentheticals, like many of Baraka's linguistic idiosyncrasies, are most prominent in the collection where they first appear, but never entirely disappear from his writing. *The Dead Lecturer* seems to be where Baraka really finds his early political voice, stepping away from some of the playfulness of his first collection, and really focusing on some of the political and social injustices faced by minorities in America. "A Poem for Neutrals" stood out to me as exemplary of his political work, particularly in the penultimate stanza, which reads as a warning to Asian Americans from Baraka and the African American community.

Black Magic (1969), showcases a more refined political voice from Baraka. There is some irony in his poetry, especially in poems like "The Burning General", or in the title "Death is Not as Neutral as You Fags Seem to Think." "Black Art", though, loses the irony and reads like a manifesto for the Black Arts movement and sets the stage for the rest of Baraka's work.

Hard Facts (1972) gives us a bit of Baraka's disillusionment with the Christian church. Baraka continues his lack of capitalization here, refusing to give figures like Jesus or Nixon capitalization. *Poetry for the Advanced* (1979), *Reggae or Not!* (1981), *Am/Trak* (1979), *In the Tradition* (1982), and *Heathens* (1994) are all longer poems that focus on one or more facets of injustice in Black culture or America in general. *Am/Trak's* focus on John Coltrane and jazz music was particularly interesting, and *Reggae or Not!'s* violent calls to action felt like a natural extension of the poetry that Baraka had already been writing to that point. *Funk Lore* (1995) saw a shift away from the anti-America/anti-white rhetoric of Baraka's early work, as his language begins to take a hard turn against imperialism and colonialism, which he declares as the true enemy of Black culture. In several poems, Baraka declares socialism the only solution to

structural and systematic inequalities in American society, and you can see that his rage turns more toward the government and its systematic oppression than previously. This theme holds true through his final poems, even in “Somebody Blew Up America”, where he blames the 9/11 attacks (and general anti-American sentiment) on centuries of white supremacist attitudes, imperialism, colonialism, and hyper-capitalism.

What I learned most from Baraka’s collected works is brazen and up-front political language that doesn’t alienate the audience. Baraka never holds back his language, but neither is he unnecessarily harsh or explicit.

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner and Select Poems*. Edited by Frederick H. Sykes. Scribner English Classics, 1908.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *Ancient Mariner and Select Poems* was my first venture into 19th Century British poetry as a graduate student, and I chose Coleridge over other British writers because of two poems, “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” and “Kubla Khan”. “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” blends narrative, mythology, and nature to create one of the most memorable poems in British history. In seven parts, Coleridge sets out to tell a cohesive story, following a loose metrical pattern and strict rhyming patterns that allow for easy memorization and a predictable pattern for readers/listeners to follow the narrative. While I didn’t find “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” as useful as some of the narrative works by Robert Frost or W.B. Yeats, it offered a perspective into pre-20th Century narrative poetry.

“Christabel”, also included in the collection, resonated with me more strongly than “Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” possibly because the story is a familiar one, but it seems that

Coleridge's language is more refined here and his meter is more exact. Coleridge manages to build and release dramatic tension in "Christabel" in a way that falls flat in many of his other poems.

"Kubla Khan" was possibly the most useful poem from this collection of Coleridge's work because it uses a historical character in a fictional way to get the message of the narrator, and ultimately the author, across. The introductory note mentions that Coleridge woke from a dream with the idea for this poem, which he embellished with additional imagery and crafted into one of his most well-known works. My thesis also deals with a historical character in a fictional context, though one less immediate to his original context than Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" and much more concrete than the often abstract images of Coleridge's poem.

I'll probably study "Kubla Khan" more carefully before working on a final draft of my own work to see if there are methods Coleridge used that could be applicable to my own fictionalized account of a historical character, and that may tighten my own work and connect it more deeply with the traditional of narrative poetry.

Dickinson, Emily. *Final Harvest: Emily Dickinson's Poems*. Edited by Thomas J. Johnson. Little, Brown and Company, 1961.

There are few American poets, living or dead, who can claim to owe nothing to Emily Dickinson, and for good reason. She laid the foundation for the next century of American poetry, despite publishing less than a dozen poems in her lifetime. *Final Harvest* is an incomplete collection of Dickinson's poetry, edited by Thomas J. Johnson, but it contains nearly all of her commonly read works. While pastoral poetry is outside of my general scope, Dickinson's innate

sense of rhythm and metrics keep my eyes moving along the page even when the subject matter is far from my own chosen topics.

Her works dealing with death, loss, and loneliness resonate more deeply with the current American public than her pastoral works, and I am no exception to this rule. Poems like “Because I Could Not Stop for Death” (290), “I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died (184), and “One Need Not be a Chamber to be Haunted” (274) are committed to memory, and likely will not fade as my experience with American poetry grows.

Similarly, her investigations into her relationships with religion are among my favorite poems. “Some Keep the Sabbath Going to Church” (66) has always been my favorite Emily Dickinson poem, and some of my work also deals with my personal relationship with religion as an institution and religion as faith. Without this poem, I may have never thought to write poetry about my own struggles in coming to terms with organized (and disorganized) religion. Her poems about loneliness are closely tied with her religious poems, and it always feels that Dickinson feels isolated through her religion rather than comforted, though that may be related to her own experience of abandonment with her pseudo-suitor, the preacher Charles Wadsworth. This inability to separate the spiritual world from the tangible one are foundational to her works and permeate American poetry through to the current generation of poets, including myself.

Dobyns, Stephen. *Next Word, Better Word: The Craft of Writing Poetry*. Palgrave

MacMillan,

2011.

I worked with Stephen Dobyns's second craft book, *Next Word, Better Word: The Craft of Writing Poetry* in two separate poetry workshops in my graduate career, finding myself gravitating to different lessons on each reading based on the needs of my poetry at the time. That's probably what I like best about Dobyns's collection of craft essays: there is material in *Next Word, Better Word* that is suitable for the beginning or intermediate poet, but there's also much to be learned as a graduate level poet, so much so that I still return to his essays when I'm lacking the motivation to begin writing or revising my own work.

Dobyns starts broad, which worked well for my needs as a first semester graduate student. He begins with an essay titled *Approaching Subject Matter*, which uses examples from William Blake, Walt Whitman, and W.B. Yeats, among others, to illustrate how to create a flourishing life within a poem no matter the subject matter. While I feel comfortable, perhaps most comfortable, in strict rhythmic and metrical structures, I found a lot to be learned from essays like *Aspects of the Syllable*, *Line Breaks*, and *A Sense of Space*, which all talk about the formal requirements of an effective poem, especially as they operate outside the scope of traditionally structured poetry. I've read through the chapter on line breaks several times and you can see where I picked out different lines as the most important in each reading by the different highlighter marks. I'd begun to understand the importance of enjambment as an undergraduate poet, but Dobyns's chapter on line breaks drove me to the point where I am now nearly-always conscious of where I break a line and how it affects the meaning of the line, the anticipation of the next line, and the broader tone of the poem.

While I've certainly spent more time on some of these essays than the others, I've found this collection immensely helpful from cover to cover, and spent more time reading this craft collection than any other collection in my possession, save possibly Richard Hugo's *The*

Triggering Town (which I've owned nearly twice as long). Without Dobyns's *Next Word, Better Word*, I would likely still be trying to figure out how successful poets know where to break a line and how to choose between two near-synonymous words for their sound, which, while not making the act of creating poetry impossible, would certainly slow the process.

Dunn, Stephen. *Walking Light*. BOA Editions, Ltd., 2001.

Stephen Dunn's book of essays on poetry, *Walking Light*, covers a wide range of topics related to poetry through various lenses presented by an author whose experiences are varied enough to create compelling essays with foundations as wide as sports and Arctic exploration. What was most helpful about *Walking Light* is Dunn's ability to know when an extended metaphor will do and when direct, didactic instruction is appropriate.

In the essay "Basketball and Poetry: The Two Richies," Dunn uses basketball to drive his argument that working with and learning from those that are better than you is the only way to better your own work, on both the page and the court. He continues his basketball metaphor when he asserts to the reader that some lines may be all-stars on their own, but fail to work together with the rest of the lines in the poem, which, while not as stellar individually, make a comparably competitive team. He says "Not to pass the ball to an open man, for example, has many corollaries in poetry writing, all of them equally self-indulgent. To love line too much because *you* wrote it, even though it doesn't work in the poem. Or to put in a poem something that happened to you, whether you've made a place for it or not" (46).

When direct instruction is appropriate though, Dunn removes the metaphor, replacing it with hard and fast rules in imperative statements. "The Good and the Not So Good" is less of an

essay than a series of loosely-connected observations in similar framing. Each observation begins with “The good poem...”, where Dunn describes something that good poems may do or always do. He reinforces this by following up with “The not so good poem...”, where he makes assertions about related techniques that are common in poems that don’t live up to the standards outlined in the first observation. Unlike the basketball metaphor, where a reader could say “that makes a good point, but it doesn’t fit my poetry because,” Dunn’s assertions in “The Good and the Not so Good” and other direct essays in *Walking Light* leave no room for the reader to wiggle his way out of guilt. Either a poem is aligned with observations from Dunn’s “good poem” list or aligned with observations from the “not so good poem” list.

The combination of the two techniques, extended metaphor and direct instruction, allow almost every reader to find something useful in *Walking Light*. Personally, I believe I benefit more from the direct instruction at this point in my writing career, though I may find myself gravitating toward the extended metaphors as I continue to grow as a poet.

Eliot, T.S.. *The Waste Land*. Edited by Michael North. W. W. Norton & Company, 2001.

T.S. Eliot’s most popular long poem, *The Waste Land* winds up on my thesis reading list for its ability to grasp the nature of war and crisis without ever explicitly using terms associated with it. Instead, Eliot’s poem is likely the most allusively dense work I’ve ever read and, despite its brevity, requires such careful reading and extensive notes that it feels longer than full collections by contemporary poets. Eliot’s irregular rhythmic patterns and stanza lengths do not get in the way of a seamless reading of *The Waste Land*, nor do they seem a forced attempt by the poet to draw attention to, or away from, specific phrases and concepts. Instead, Eliot’s line

breaks seem natural in a way that can only be achieved by revision after revision, striving for the most natural shape the poem can take.

While it may not directly affect the body of my thesis, I found it wildly amusing that there is such debate over Eliot's own notes to his text, which the editor says work to further confound the work rather than illuminate its meanings. There is inference, in a footnote to my edition, that Eliot created his notes solely to pad the length of his poem for publication and that many of them have little, if any, connection to the main text of the poem. This irreverent treatment of his own poetry has allowed me to relax a little about the seriousness of my own and return to the enjoyment of writing a poem for its own sake rather than to instill some greater meaning on my readers. I think that, if I had an endless time to work on this thesis, I, too, might work to deliberately obfuscate the meaning of my work behind near-meaningless notes and interpretations designed to throw the reader off the track.

I was also glad that my edition of *The Waste Land*, a Norton Critical Edition, contained many of the primary texts that Eliot drew from while writing *The Waste Land*, so that I could see how he crafted his own work based upon the existing works of others. One of the most difficult things about writing a deliberately allusive poem is breaking away from mere summary or praise of another work and finding a unique angle at which to approach it in your own. In that way, it's been helpful to see how T.S. Eliot drew from sources as widely varying as William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and St. Augustine of Hippo's *Confessions*, both of which are foundational texts in their own fields, but come together to serve Eliot's purpose as though they were designed as Modernist poetry.

Flynn, Nick. *The Captain Asks for a Show of Hands*. Graywolf Press, 2011.

Nick Flynn's *The Captain Asks for a Show of Hands* is a good source for poetry of erasure, which has become more and more popular in recent years, and poetry written in the voices of those you disagree with, which Flynn excels at throughout the collection. From the very first poem in the collection, we get a sense of Flynn's primary theme in *A Captain Asks for a Show of Hands*. He titles the poem as a haiku, despite the lengthy body of the text, and uses slashes to create artificial line breaks that emphasize the poem in different ways than the actual line breaks. His methods here create a sort of ambiguity in the communication from the speaker/author to the reader/listener. This repeats itself throughout the collection as Flynn works with texts drawn from the testimonies of torture victims through erasure, molding their words to fit his intended meaning. Flynn doesn't entirely silence the voices of these testimonies though, as he includes them in full at the end of the collection.

Poems like "Fire" and "Air" display the lack of effective communication down lines of command that create the sort of situations where innocent people are tortured. Flynn uses irregular line breaks and repetition throughout to emphasize the ineffectiveness of the communication and the occasional disbelief of the subordinate officer who often acts as the speaker in the poems.

Beyond erasure and personas of unlikable figures, Flynn showcases his knack for subtly inserting traditional poetic methods into his collection. "Oh here" uses irregular line breaks and Flynn's sentences rarely begin at the beginning of the line, but if you read the title right into the poem, it works in a neatly rhythmic way that alternates iambs and anapests. This sort of subtlety could be useful in embedding traditional methods into poems in a new way.

Frost, Robert. *The Collected Poems, Complete and Unabridged*. Henry Holt and Company, 1969.

The text of Robert Frost's *Collected Poems* spans over 300 poems in 521 pages, of which I was familiar with roughly a dozen poems. By the time I'd finished reading *Collected Poems*, I'd dog-eared nearly fifty poems that I thought would be valuable to my own writing and had found a new respect for the poet my deepest experience with what a harshly-critical close reading of his most commonly-quoted poem. Late in his career, Frost became outwardly political and critical of America's role in the world, dedicating poems to the newfound nuclear capabilities of the United States in his *Steeple Bush* (1947), which was released just two years after the second World War and the use of nuclear weapons against Japan. His critical opinion of the United States in such a celebrated time helped to reshape my opinions of the post-World War II period of U.S. history and contextualizes my own political poetry in an era where outward political dissent is nearly expected of young poets. Frost's careful attention to, and occasional praise of, leaps in technology surprised me as well, as he lauds the Wright brothers in one poem and displays his intimate knowledge of astronomy in several poems in his final collection, *In the Clearing* (1962), released just a year before his death. Of course, Frost also shines in poems about nature and the working-man, the topics he's most commonly remembered for. Besides the well-known "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening," "Nothing Gold Can Stay," and "Out, Out-," poems like "Departmental," about an ant on a tablecloth, and "A Considerable Speck," about another miniscule insect, gave me an appreciation for poetry about the small, natural moments in life. Perhaps the most important of Frost's poetry for my thesis were the final two sections in *Collected Poems*, *A Masque of Reason* and *A Masque of Mercy*, both of which are

designed as drama in verse, and both of which tie Biblical themes and, literal, Biblical characters into the modern world. As I struggle to fit my own drama in verse into my thesis, these poems helped to motivate me into creating something that works as both poetry and drama. Frost's careful attention to rhythmic patterns, often adhering to strict meter, and near-omnipresent rhyming help to structure his longer narrative works into something that could comfortably be classed as poetry. Even in poems that aren't explicitly written as plays, Frost employs a method of dialogue that imitates natural conversation, even as it falls on perfect iambs in predictable rhyme schemes. As somewhat more of a structuralist than my peers, I find myself attracted to Frost's attention to the structural details of his poems as much as I find myself reflecting on the content.

Gay, Ross. *Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015.

The first thing that sticks out about Ross Gay's *Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude* is how many poems he's included that stretch beyond two pages; the title poem rolls in at twelve pages, and his lines in the long poems aren't short. For the most part, Gay succeeds in holding my attention across multi-page spans of poetry where even a careful reader might find his mind drifting from the body of the poem. He does this by creating just enough narrative thread that the reader never gets lost as to what's going on or what's being described, but Gay's writing also seldom, if ever, feels prose-like; not once while reading *Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude* did I wonder whether Gay had drifted into the ill-defined territory of lyric essay.

The opening poem of the collection, "To the Fig Tree on 9th and Christian", sets the stage for the rest of Gay's collection by establishing a tone that follows his poetry from cover to

cover and giving the reader some concrete images and some thematic elements to cling to throughout *Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude*. The figs return in at least one other poem, Philadelphia, and other regions of Pennsylvania, seem to be the dominant setting throughout, and relationships between the speaker and the people around him seem to be the predominant concern of this collection. Despite his focus on the everyday world, the political world is never lost on Gay, and he makes it clear from the opening poem, where he confronts the reader with a tough social realities. This poem, more than anywhere else in the collection, blends the necessity of focusing on the small world while being aware of the social and political ramifications of everyday life. His political voice reappears elsewhere in the collection, but it's often more pronounced than it is here, and becomes the central focus of the poem (or stanza) rather than what amounts to simply an afterthought. It's no coincidence that the subtlety of this line sticks with the reader longer than the explicitly social or political commentary, as the content and the language lend themselves to ideas of natural beauty, and the line "or the immigrants", which holds so much meaning and even more power, does not feel out of place in the poem.

Gay's series of odes were my favorite works in the collection. I thought these were the places where the music was the strongest, and I felt that the short lines he used in the odes worked well with the content and the language. "Ode to the Puritan in Me" stuck with me as one of the most intimate moments in the collection.

Hoagland, Tony. *Twenty Poems That Could Save America and Other Essays*. Graywolf Press, 2014.

Tony Hoagland's *Twenty Poems That Could Save America* is one of my favorite collection of essays on writing and reading poetry. Hoagland combines humor, personal experience, and close readings of poetry to create compelling arguments about how we should read and write poetry and why. I'm really struck by Hoagland's attention to the science behind and history of the English language, and the first essay in this collection, "Je Suis ein Americano" does so much to reinforce how perfect the English language is for writing poetry. For nearly every object or concept, we have a root word from Norman French, the Germanic languages, Latin and/or Greek, Nordic languages, and hundreds of loan words from modern languages. This gives the English-speaking poet a wide choice of words with which to express the same concept. This fascination with language extends far beyond my love of poetry, but is always applicable when choosing words that blend seamlessly or clash in a carefully-constructed cacophony.

Hoagland's adulation for other writers also turned me on to poets that I'd never considered before reading *Twenty Poems That Could Save America*. In "Soul Radio: Marie Howe, Jane Hirshfield, and Linda Gregg," Hoagland dedicates part of the essay to each of the three poets in turn. I'd read selections from Jane Hirshfield's *Ten Windows*, a wonderful, but sometimes frustratingly dense, craft book in a poetry workshop, but I'd never read her poetry. Likewise, I've heard some of Linda Gregg's poetry and stories of her work from an undergraduate professor who had known her. I had never read these poets of my own volition, and I don't believe that I would have come around to reading them right away without Hoagland's introduction. Similarly, in his title, and final, essay, "Twenty Poems That Could Save America," Hoagland challenges the way that poetry is taught in American schools, asserting that we should be teaching easily-accessible, modern poetry to students first, only

reaching back to “the classics” as we grow and have a better understanding of how a poem works. The poets and poems he mention in that essay are under headings that demonstrate what the poem does or intends to do. This makes it easy for a beginning poet to analyze the poems for techniques related to those goals.

Most of Hoagland’s essays work in a more abstract manner than other craft books like Mary Oliver’s *A Poetry Handbook* or Mark Strand and Eavan Boland’s *The Making of a Poem*, but they have effectively guided me toward reading better poetry and being conscious of some of the techniques that I use, whether that means emphasizing effective techniques or learning to pull back on less-effective techniques.

Hugo, Richard. *The Triggering Town: Lectures and Essays on Poetry and Writing*. Norton, 1979.

Richard Hugo’s *The Triggering Town* was the first craft book I was assigned as an undergraduate poetry student, though we only read selections from the first couple essays, and it left enough of an impression on me that I felt it was worth revisiting. While some of Hugo’s language is dated and his topics aren’t as immediate as they might have been when the book was published in 1979, *The Triggering Town* was entertaining to read and full of ideas and exercises to help get a poem started.

The first essay in Richard Hugo’s book contains one of the most valuable lessons that I’ve learned so far as a poet: “One mark of a beginner is his impulse to push language around to make it accommodate what he has already conceived to be the truth, or, in some cases, what he has already conceived to be the form” (Hugo, 4).

Hugo warns against overt didacticism here, and throughout these essays, but he also offers a solution for getting into poems without a strong sense of where it's going. "A poem can be said to have two subjects," Hugo says a few lines later, "the initiating or triggering subject...and the real or generated subject....the poet may not be aware of what the real subject is, but only have some instinctive feeling that the poem is done" (Hugo 6). The triggering subject, which is Hugo's way of describing the immediate subject that leads the poet to underlying topics, themes, etc.

In the second essay in the collection, the eponymously titled "Triggering Town", Hugo dives into the idea of creating a fictional location, however closely based on real experience, to help the student get into their poem without being overly-didactic. Hugo's claim that the poet's "hometown often provides so many knowns...that the imagination cannot free itself to seek the unknowns" but "if you have no emotional investment in the town, though you have taken immediate emotional possession of it for the duration of the poem, it may be easier to invest the feeling in the words" is a powerful lesson for young, and even experienced, poets to learn, as gaining the ability to let go of a detail in the poem simply because it's true is a difficult step for many poets to make (Hugo 12-13). Similarly, Hugo's fifth essay, "Nuts and Bolts", is filled with great one- and two-line bits of writing wisdom that could be used as formal prompts for poems.

Perhaps the most valuable essays in the collection are "Ci Vediamo" and "How Poets Make a Living", because they are the essays in which Hugo most practically shows his readers how to use a "triggering town" to create an effective poem using both elements of truth and imagination. Hugo's inclusion of his own poems, bookended by his experiences in World War II and as a Boeing employee, help the reader to see a small part of how Hugo uses his own life experiences to craft a poem.

While *The Triggering Town* lacks a lot of instruction that I believe to be fundamental in creating a well-rounded student of poetry, Hugo gives drives home some points about writing, truth, and imagination that are indispensable for a solid foundation in writing poetry. There are many craft books out there that focus their energy on rhythm, meter, line breaks, rhyme, imagery, and other such necessary tools for the working poet, but Richard Hugo's *The Triggering Town* is one of the only craft books I know of that takes a step back from the minutiae of poetry writing and addresses the poet on such broad terms with such seemingly simple wisdom.

Jordan, A. Van. *Quantum Lyrics*. Norton, 2007.

I chose *Quantum Lyrics* because the subject matter of the collection focuses heavily on comic book characters and science, particularly physics, both of which fascinate me. The first poem in the collection, "The Flash Reverses Time," is based on a 1990 comic book issue, and it's fascinating because he's worked to make this thirty-seven line poem work as a single sentence. A single sentence this long necessarily gets clouded up in parentheticals and begins to look a bit Faulknerian, but, for the most part, it's cohesive and easily understood. The collection itself is dedicated to his father, who was ill and passed away before this collection was released, and many of these poems are about grief, including this opening piece which finds its strength in images of a red-spandex-clad streak moving so fast that he moves backwards in time. It sets a tone of regret and nostalgia for the rest of the collection, as we anticipate the narrator's descent into grief.

“First Law of Motion” works in short quatrains that focus on the narrator’s memory of a boy asking him to help him read aloud in class, and his regret for not doing so. Again, in this piece, we see nostalgia peeking through, as the memory is brought on by the narrator finding a sixth grade textbook. Van Jordan’s line breaks in this poem are tight, and deliberate, coaxing the reader into the next line almost effortlessly, which is essential for Van Jordan, because most of the poems so far in the collection are relatively long and stretch over two or more pages. “Que Sera Sera” is a powerful piece in quatrains about both race relations with police and the Sly and the Family Stone song “Que Sera Sera.” Midway, the poem shifts tone and becomes less about the nostalgia of the Sly and the Family Stone song, and more about the narrator’s history as a minority in America, coming back to the song in the final stanzas with a slight refrain in the final lines.

The central section of this collection, which focuses on Einstein and his theory of relativity is primarily interesting for the way Van Jordan forms it on the page to read almost like a film script, with headings like:

CUT TO:

EXTERIOR: Grand Canyon, 1931--Day

ELSA EINSTEIN *poses with Albert for several photographs taken at the Grand Canyon.*

followed by a series of couplets in the voice of Elsa Einstein. These persona poems focused on such a major figure are definitely some of the strongest in the collection, and I think I could learn a lot about effective ways to embody others in my poetry through his work here.

Overall, I think what I could learn most from Van Jordan’s work in this collection is the effective blending of poetry, pop culture, and science in a way that appeals to both the poetry

community and the comic and science communities without alienating any of them. His lines are also very tight, and I admire his choices in form, particularly when he works in couplets.

Kelly, Donika. *Bestiary*. Graywolf Press, 2016

Donika Kelly's Cave Canem Poetry Prize winning debut collection *Bestiary* throws the reader into the world of the natural from the very first poem in the collection, "Out West," where the narrator fixates on the fauna of the western states, from the docile and domestic animals like sheep and cows to the wild antelopes, bison, rabbits, and black bears. It's interesting to notice that all the animals she mentions in "Out West" are mammalian, because she spends the rest of the collection focusing on birds and mythological creatures, rarely mentioning these American mammals in the body of the collection. "Fourth Grade Autobiography" grounds the reader with a characterization of the collection's narrator, who seems to be at least loosely based on Kelly's own experiences, giving us a solid account of her family-life, her interests, and her fears. With the information Kelly's narrator offers in "Fourth Grade Autobiography," the careful reader can begin to create a skeleton of the collection's narrative structure, which bounces between personal experiences, birdwatching and the personification of birds, and love poems from mythological creatures.

"How to Be Alone," *Bestiary*'s longest poem, spanning sixteen pages, works to give the reader a better characterization of the narrator's life, introducing ideas like the narrator's desire for vengeance against her possibly incestuous and pedophilic father, her dead (though other places in the collection seem to point to a metaphoric death) mother, and the narrator's attempted suicide. I like the idea of using one or two longer poems to characterize the narrator so that the

rest of the collection is free to fulfill other purposes while still clearly grounded in the voice of that narrator. Kelly is not obligated to continue to mention the narrator's father's abuse or the absence of her mother, but the reader knows that these are likely primary motivating factors for the action of the rest of the collection.

The "Love Poem" series is particularly engaging, as Kelly presents poems in the voices of mythological figures, often serenading their mythological counterparts, as Pegasus thanks Perseus for releasing him from Medusa in a love poem that ends with a darkly-tinted notion that Perseus has a penchant for violence against women, or a mermaid, in reality closer to a siren than Ariel or King Triton, calls out to Odysseus and his shipmates.

My favorite poem in the collection was definitely "A man goes west and falls off his horse in the desert," which speaks to the unpredictability and unforgiving nature of nature. Lines like "The man feels his chest. Am I a ghost? His lungs reply: *You are the bravest stone.*" pulled me back into the poem for multiple readings. I loved the way Donika Kelly repeatedly uses the relative size of objects to make the reader and speaker feel small (and, on occasion, large), especially in this poem, where she gives the second stanza: "He is smaller than the butte, is smaller than the desert,/is smaller than the sky." as if, as each item gets larger, the man has a chance of outsizeing even the sky.

Legaspi, Joseph O. *Imago*. CavanKerry Press, 2007

Joseph Legaspi's *Imago* is probably the most intensely personal collection in my thesis readings, but Legaspi is doing so much more than than letting the reader into the most intimate moments of his narrator's life; throughout the collection, Legaspi is using everyday actions and

objects to create an image of his narrator that resonates with readers who have little in common with the surface level movements of a Filipino-American immigrant's everyday life. So many of the images in *Imago* recur throughout the collection that it becomes difficult to separate the author from the narrator, creating an illusion of memoir that would be impossible to decode (if biographical readings are in any way valuable to a reader in the first place) without the help of Legaspi himself.

Imago's near-obsession with circumcision and phallic imagery work in a way that hardly, if ever, touches the explicitly sexual; instead, Legaspi uses the moment of circumcision as the dividing line between childhood and manhood, though it's clear that the author Legaspi is not so convinced of the circumcision as a literal shift as the young narrator is. This openness of the sexual natures of human bodies without drifting into overt eroticism strikes me as one of the most technically difficult aspects of *Imago*; the difficulty of this same separation is part of what shifted me away from writing poems that struggled with sexuality as the dividing line between childhood and maturity. Legaspi's collection makes me want to give it another try, though it would be difficult to do so with even a fraction of the success that Legaspi deserves for his accomplishment in using circumcision so precisely and thoroughly in *Imago*.

The part of *Imago* that is most likely to influence my thesis in a significant way is his ability to use everyday motions like cooking and cleaning and playing with cousins and neighborhood children and turning them into meaningful poems beyond the narrator's own life. I often write about the ordinariness of life, but fail to craft it into something meaningful beyond those readers who share the acts with me. Legaspi turns his mother cleaning fish into a mermaid that lures his father in, transforming what is generally seen as a menial, but necessary, act into a

moment of beauty and meaning. This kind of transformation is what Legaspi excels at and what I hope to draw from *Imago* and use in my own works.

Merwin, W.S.. *The Moving Target*. Atheneum, 1979.

W.S. Merwin's *The Moving Target* is probably the collection with the least concrete imagery and the loosest narrative elements that I've read for my thesis, but it's also the one with the most interesting use of language, imagery, and music, which work together to propel the reader through the collection whether or not he/she understands the minutiae of what's going on. Often I found myself looking at Merwin's lines trying to decipher which use of a homonym he intended in a particular instance, noticing that both work depending on how you break his sentences up, which is exasperated by his frequent lack of punctuation. All of these combine to create a series of poems that are easy to read, easy to love for their sounds, but difficult to decipher.

Some of my favorite poems in Merwin's *The Moving Target* were the short, single stanza poems, which Merwin often conveniently arranged on the same page to save space (something you don't see often in poetry published in the 21st Century). I copied both "Separation" and "Savonarola" into my notebook in their entirety, and I'll reproduce them here as well:

Separation

Your absence has gone through me

Like thread through a needle.

Everything I do is stitched with its color

Savonarola

Unable to endure my world and calling the failure God, I will
 destroy yours.

Both of these poems give the reader very little concrete imagery to cling to, but they both create vivid emotions in the reader (or, at least, in me), enough that I've got them both essentially memorized at this point. These short, very pointed poems remind me of some of Stephen Crane's short poems, which also tend to dwell on some of the universe's big questions.

I also found it interesting how often Merwin recycled his images from poem to poem, often in an unrelated manner. Animals like "the spider" and symbols like "the flag" appear throughout the collection, and phrases like "good-bye" appear in various form and in various poems, more than a reader would find natural for a poet to use unless there was a persistent obsession with the images/sounds.

Merwin's collection wasn't the most overtly political collection I've read for this independent study, but I could appreciate its subtleties, especially in the poems where Merwin dwells on flags, which are, of course, nothing more than symbols of ideology.

Neruda, Pablo. *Canto General*. University of California Press, 1991.

I was blown away by the depth and breadth of the history covered by Pablo Neruda in *Canto General*, which stretches over 400 pages and thousands of years of South American and Central American history. Jack Schmitt, who translated my edition of *Canto General*, left many words in the original Spanish language, presumably when there simply wasn't an adequate translation to capture the full meaning in all its context. Thankfully, my Spanish is reasonably

adequate, though I wish I was fluent so that I could appreciate Neruda's masterful writing in its original language.

What caught my attention most about *Canto General* was Pablo Neruda's ability to characterize major events in both natural history and the history of many South and Central American nations with small images and lines that stretched no longer than a page or two. His focus points in the section of the conquistadors left nothing to be wanted, and never left me wondering how many pages were left until he moved onto something else.

Neruda's not-so-strict chronology was also interesting to me, as he moved forward in time in discernable leaps, but, within about a century's worth of time, he would jump back and forth through time across subjects depending on the story and images that fit his narrative best. I find this ability to craft an engaging story without sticking to strictly chronological events is one of Neruda's strongest techniques. Through it, I felt myself getting a feel for how historical events influenced each other without necessarily feeling like I was being taught about American history.

**Oliver, Mary. *A Poetry Handbook: A Prose Guide to Understanding and Writing Poetry*.
Harcourt, 1994.**

Oliver's *A Poetry Handbook* is 122 pages of sound advice on a range of topics in poetry, beginning with the pre-writing process, through various tools and tips for writing good poetry, and ending with revision and workshopping completed poems until the writer feels that they are ready to be published. Mary Oliver supplements her advice with anecdotes from her own life as a poet and provides examples using some of the most well-known poets in history. Using works from such poets as Walt Whitman, Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore,

Lucille Clifton, and Elizabeth Bishop, *A Poetry Handbook* breaks down the seemingly difficult facets of poetry into pieces that are manageable by even the most inexperienced writers.

There's not a moment of this book that feels wasted, as Oliver has found the perfect balance between definitions, anecdotes, and examples to keep the reader engaged until the next change of topic.

Oliver starts the reader with several chapters on the prewriting process, offering advice on how to get in and out of a poem effectively, using examples from her own experience to strengthen her case. From there, Mary Oliver moves on to seven lengthy chapters stuffed with invaluable information to a poet in the writing stage, taking the time to give adequate examples from well-known poets, but careful to remind the reader that the masterful examples she gives went through many revisions before taking the form presented on the page. Oliver concludes her book with two chapters on revision and workshopping techniques, in which she justifies her own need for "forty or fifty drafts of a poem before [she begins] to feel content with it." Oliver writes that "What you are first able to write on the page, whether the writing comes easily or with difficulty, is not likely to be close to a finished poem," reinforcing the idea that revision is a crucial part of the writing process.

Poe, Edgar Allan. *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*. Barnes & Noble, 2015.

Edgar Allan Poe was not an exceptionally good poet; in fact, if it weren't for his prose, I don't believe that he would be an accepted part of the traditional American literary canon. While "The Raven" is certainly included in most high-school English curriculums and "Annabel Lee" has

been put to music and recorded by Stevie Nicks, most of Poe's poetry goes unnoticed by the American public. Personally, I find Poe's prose, both fiction and criticism, much more compelling than I do his poetry, but there are three factors to his poetry that make me feel I should include him in this bibliography. The first is his ear for meter. While he did little to challenge the ideas and the forms of poetry in the mid 19th-Century, his works were tightly rhythmic, always falling into near-perfect anapestic or trochaic lines, to the point of him forcing awkward syntax and grammatical forms to make a meter and rhyme fit. The second is his use of the supernatural. In the section of my thesis called *The Resurrection of Stonewall Jackson* and in the poem "The Wendigo," I use or refer to supernatural elements, though it's generally possible to dismiss the supernaturality of the poem with a little thought. This technique was common in Poe's work, where supernaturality seemed to be present, but there was often a rational explanation to the actions and it was left to the reader to determine which was true. The final technique from Poe that I use in my own work is one found in his long-ish poem "Tamerlane," which uses a real historical figure to expand on some of the author's own ideas. Stonewall Jackson, in my own collection, acts in much the same way as Tamerlane in Poe's work, which itself was an imitation of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Kubla Khan". Though I don't use the first-person perspective that Poe and Coleridge, my writings that use Stonewall Jackson definitely draw inspiration from Poe's use of historical figures in his poems.

Rich, Adrienne. *Diving Into the Wreck: Poems 1971-1972*. W. W. Norton, 1973

I started my reading for this portion of the collection with Adrienne Rich's *Diving into the Wreck: Poems 1971-1972*, which won the National Book Award for poetry. The very first

poem in this collection, “Trying to Talk with a Man” opens with an evocative, violent line. “Out in this desert we are testing bombs.” I knew immediately that I was going to love Adrienne Rich’s language, and she didn’t let me down in the following stanzas, where she describes “what we’ve had to give up to get here” and walks the reader through the dangers of the titular activity. The second poem, “When the Dead Awaken,” has similarly beautiful language, but what I think I can best learn from this poem is her method of dividing the piece into sections rather than stanzas. I’ve always struggled with doing poems in sections, and she does so effectively here, braiding each section together, while allowing them to stand on their own. The next piece, “Walking in the Dark” does more with different formal elements than “When the Dead Awaken,” ranging from sparse single-line stanzas to large blocks of text on a variety of subjects that seem only loosely connected at best. I think working with a loose connection through different forms and sections could help me flesh out some ideas that may be lost in more traditional stanzas and formats.

The titular “Diving Into the Wreck” is powerful for its mixing of mythology of shipwrecks and mermaids and the history of Jacque Cousteau. Her perspective shift, from the singular I, which she specifically indicates as alone, to the plural we, when she reaches the wreck and becomes mermaid to the drowned man is so effective that it’s hardly even noticeable. I don’t think that I’ve ever attempted a perspective shift, let alone a successful one. “The Phenomenology of Anger” is the longest sectional poem so far presented in this collection, and each section feels like an escalation of the last. What begins with freedom and Broadway moves to hay bales and machinists, then, eventually, to murder. Rich does interesting things with the lineation again, offsetting lines as if they were a sub-stanza to the primary lines. Of “Merced,” which starts section III, I can say that the language was beautiful, divided into three long stanzas,

focused on aging in different ways. My favorite lines were “to speak to another human/becomes a risk” and “a thing that feel neither guilt/nor rage: that is unable/to hate, therefore to love.” The epigraph to “A Primary Ground” sets the tone for the poem, both with the text of the epigraph and through its source. I don’t often use epigraphs in my own work, and so this may be a point that I could study more closely.

“Living in the Cave” speaks to the pretentious attitude that many people get after reading philosophy, particularly something like Plato’s “Parable of the Cave” which inherently otherizes those who have seen out of the cave. Rich doesn’t make the narrator of her poem feel pretentious or divisive except in the last stanza where she looks at the bats and proclaims that “None of them, not one/sees me/as I see them.” The key to “The Ninth Symphony of Beethoven Understood at Last as a Sexual Message” is in the title itself, and the most interesting lines are the opening ones. The images of this poem are evocative and easily visualized, but I don’t think it has quite the power that some of the earlier poems in the collection had. “Rape” is powerful for both its subject matter and Rich’s mastery of language. The scene is familiar. The cop has implicit power over the rape victim, taking down her report, but may also be the perpetrator of the crime. Rich doesn’t make the obvious choices in language and images though, and she keeps the poem fresh by remaining ambiguous in perspective. The repetition of the line “and if, in the sickening light of the precinct” haunts the text with the image of having to live something twice, like reporting the details of the titular rape. “Burning Oneself In” and “Burning Oneself Out,” juxtaposed on the left and right sides of the page, work in tandem to create a sense of the fire that rages in and out of a person, in through external stimuli in the first, and out through fueling literal fire in the second.

The intimacy presented in “For a Sister,” about a Soviet woman who was incarcerated two years for her political activism, makes it feel as though Rich (or Rich’s narrator) knew Gorbanevskaya personally. This poem is presented mostly in quatrains, with a final addendum of two words which make the last stanza a quintain. Breaking a strictly metered form such as stanzas of quatrains can be difficult for me, as I fall into the rhythmic patterns after a while and struggle to break out, yet Rich does it so subtly that it’s hardly noticeable. Certainly going to try to break form in the near future. The topic of one more conversation with a deceased relative or friend feels overdone lately, but Rich is restrained in her language in “For the Dead,” even in the last stanza, where she describes the inability to escape the sensation of burning to death. This poem is immediately followed by one titled “From a Survivor” and also records a person’s experience with coping with the death of a loved one, long passed in this case. She uses irregular stanzas, which I occasionally struggle with, because without the regularity of tercets, quatrains, etc. it can be difficult to know where one stanza should end and another should begin.

Roethke, Theodore. *Words for the Wind: The Collected Verse of Theodore Roethke*. Indiana University Press, 1968.

I first read Roethke’s collected works in the gap between undergraduate and graduate schools, having been told by a professor that I would be able to relate to his style and sensibilities. Since then, I’ve read parts of *Words for the Wind* dozens of times, looking for inspiration or an answer to a craft problem. With such a span of poems collected in *Words for the Wind*, it seems like there are countless things to be learned from the way Roethke puts words to the page. Roethke’s early poetry, which are the works I feel the closest connection to, artistically,

follow the traditions of poetry up to that point: most of them are rhymed and follow either an iambic tetrameter or some blend of regular tetrameter and trimeter. As the collection continues, Roethke breaks away from the regularity of poetic tradition and begins to do strange and interesting things with the words on the page, starting with works from his 1951 collection, *Praise to the End*, where he abandons the short, neatly-ordered forms of his earlier works and writes in long, sectioned works that span up to a dozen pages. What Roethke loses in structure and narrative, he more than makes up for in the intense, and often surprising, imagery that he uses in *Praise to the End*. The final section of “Where Knock is Open Wide”, the first poem in *Praise to the End*, resonates with familial tension and a (mild) rejection of God’s presence, a long way from the barnyard imagery that opens the poem, but Roethke makes the right moves to get the reader from point A to point B without having to make too many unsupervised leaps. This is not true of all of Roethke’s longer poems (or even his shorter ones). It’s clear that Roethke trusted, even expected, his readers to be able to make successful leaps in logic to get beyond the surface level of his later poems; it’s likely that his readers were more willing to do so than today’s readers.

I find it interesting that Roethke (or the editor) divided his poems by type, collecting all the *Lighter Pieces and Poems for Children* into a short section that calls itself an intermission, presumably from his more serious work, though I find it hard to believe that he did not take these poems any less seriously than his *Shorter Poems* or *Love Poems*; they simply do not fit thematically with anything else in *Words for the Wind*. These sharp lines are made less clear by the content of his poems, especially the *Love Poems*, which seem to often have a loose association with love.

What I think I have taken most from Roethke's *Words for the Wind*, besides some memorable lines and poems, is the idea that I should be able to trust my reader to make jumps in logic without my having to hold their hand through each line break and stanza break, though to a lesser degree than Roethke did. Roethke was an established poet in traditional forms before he began to abandon strict rhyme and meter, and the poetry-reading community has shifted in the last sixty years, leaving readers more willing to abandon works that they do not understand, at least on the surface level, after only a handful of readings.

Trethewey, Natasha. *Native Guard*. Mariner, 2007.

Native Guard has long been one of my favorite contemporary collections. Trethewey's work helped to shape the way I view contemporary poetry, especially because she does not shy away from using traditional (and not so traditional) forms throughout the collection. "Theories of time and Space" works well to place this collection geographically in the American South, using couplets to create a sense of intimacy between the narrator and the addressed "you," who may be a specific individual, but is also representative of the reader. Trethewey uses sections to highlight differences in temporal space in "The Southern Crescent," moving from her mother traveling in 1959 to the final year that the Crescent rain runs. She keeps her content divided into two nearly square stanzas of nine lines in each of the two stanzas, creating a visually symmetrical appearance. "Graveyard Blues" operates as a sonnet in our tercets and couplet, with an additional layer of repetition where the first two lines of each tercet end identically and the third ends either on a rhyme or a near-rhyme. "What the Body can Say" uses couplets again to create a layer of intimacy, moving from the personal to the religious.

“Photograph: Ice Storm, 1971” operates as an ekphrasis about a picture of her family from a particularly brutal ice storm, which operates nearly entirely as a reportage of the obvious until the last tercet, where Trethewey’s narrator mentions the absence of abuse in the photograph, where it is elsewhere present. These sudden turns are difficult, and Trethewey manages them quite deftly. “What is Evidence” takes the shape of a sonnet, this one unrhymed, and presented as a single stanza, but the neatness is there, juxtaposing itself against the brutal nature of the content of the poem. “After Your Death” operates as an incomplete sonnet, appropriate as the narrator talks about the death of a loved one, likely her mother, based on the poems around it. Her tight focus on making space after death leaves us ready for the final line, “tomorrow, the bowl I have yet to fill,” which leaves us prepared for the missing couplet at the end of the poem. “Pilgrimage” uses varied line positionings to create a sense of movement in the poem, setting up the title piece “Native Guard,” which operates as a crown of sonnets surrounding the Native Guard, the first fully sanctioned regiment of black Union soldiers in the Civil War. I love what Trethewey does with this crown of sonnets, and I worked a lot with sonnet form in undergrad, so I’d love to work on my own crown of sonnets in the near future. Her historical context makes this series even stronger. I think I may try to find something historical to write about since I often write solely in the realm of the personal, or, at best, in modern culture.

Trethewey, Natasha. *Thrall*. Mariner, 2015.

I came to *Thrall* expecting to love it. I’ve been a fan of Natasha Trethewey’s work since I read *Native Guard* as an undergraduate. I’ve seen her read many of these poems, so I was hit with moments of familiarity as I read the collection, though I was often surprised at the forms

she chose to present her poems in, as unconventional forms don't always come across in readings.

“Elegy”, the opening poem of *Thrall*, does well to set the tone of the collection by characterizing the narrator as someone who loves and fondly remembers her father, but is still conflicted about some of his ideologies and opinions.

Trethewey wastes no time in getting political, and the next poem, “Miracle of the Black Leg” shines light on a long history of expendable black bodies for the sake of white healing and superiority. She digs into the history of the grave-robbing of black bodies, and how that history seeps into our language with “Even now, it stays with us: when we mean to uncover/the truth, we dig, say *unearth*.” Later in the poem, she explicitly addresses the perceived worth of black bodies vs. white ones: “How not to see it-/the men bound one to the other, symbiotic-/one man rendered expendable, the other worthy/of this sacrifice?”

In the title poem, she addresses her own identity through the Diego Velázquez painting *Juan de Pareja*, a portrait of Velázquez's slave, who was his assistant in the art studio, and an artist in his own right, continuing to paint after being given his freedom in 1650. Trethewey deals with heavily with ekphrasis in *Thrall*, using portraits and other works of art from various cultures and centuries to firmly ground the history of mixed-race children in centuries of European and American culture. I struggle with ekphrasis in my own poetry, so it was refreshing to see Trethewey create such engaging poems from these works of art.

Trethewey also has no reservations in addressing the injustices caused by America's founding fathers, as she uses Thomas Jefferson as a neutral ground to meet her father's prejudice on in “Enlightenment”, where she describes a visit to Monticello and the relationship between Thomas Jefferson and his slave, Sally Hemmings. Trethewey digs deeper than simply racism in

this poem, though she addresses that too, and takes a stab at colorism and Sally Hemmings when she repeats the words of tourists, then chastises them.

I see myself returning to *Thrall* often, particularly when dealing with identity politics and ekphrasis. Trethewey is one of my favorite contemporary poets.

Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings*. Norton, 2002.

Walt Whitman, the other foundational American poet, popularized free-verse poetry in the United States, a trend that has never disappeared; honestly, the trend toward free-verse poetry has only strengthened since his death. *Leaves of Grass*, a collection that I resisted reading for too long, does well to address the United States, or its citizens, in a plural you that resonates through American poetry. Recently, my own work has begun to use the plural you, or “America”, as its addressee. This trend coincided with my rereading of *Leaves of Grass*, and while I don’t think that I’m writing work in the same vein as Whitman did, I undoubtedly owe a debt of gratitude to the way that he addressed the American people, the American landscape, and the American culture.

Formally, I still find it difficult to grasp some of Walt Whitman’s choices, particularly when it comes to line lengths that sometimes vary from 6 or 8 syllables to 30 or more syllables in the same poem (sometimes even the same stanza). Using such different line lengths in succession can be jarring, and while it is less so in Whitman’s work than in some of the more recently published works I’ve read, it’s still unnerving to see such a disparity when the longer lines could easily be broken into smaller, more manageable, lengths.

I admire Whitman's ability to address a culture that he understands with an intensity seen by few after him, and also his ability to reach outside of the United States and connect America with cultures around the world, often linking them through geographic similarities or cultural reflections. This globalism far precedes the movement of America to join the greater world as a key player (the U.S. was still essentially isolationist when Whitman was writing), but he is an early reflection of the narrative that will encompass globalism in literature in the 20th and 21st Centuries.

Yeats, William Butler. *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*. Wordsworth Poetry Library, 1994.

William Butler Yeats is one of those poets read by everyone who has taken a survey course on English literature. There are few people with a degree in English that haven't sat through lectures on or written papers about one of Yeats's most well-known poems, whether it's "The Wild Swans at Coole," "Sailing to Byzantium," or "Leda and the Swan". His collected works offer a deeper insight into how Yeats crafted his poetry and, while there were various notable exceptions, I was largely disappointed by many of his lesser known poems, finding them too absorbed in pining after or winning the affections of Maude Gonne to have any lasting impact on me, especially being someone who doesn't write a whole lot of traditional love poems. When Yeats is on, though, Yeats is on, and he crafts memorable lines about well-conceived subjects. A poem like "The Dolls", which examines jealousy from the perspective of a dollmaker's works on the arrival of a genuine human baby, delves into more interesting emotions than many of Yeats's earlier poems were capable of, captivating the reader with the conflict of imitation versus reality.

Similarly, “Two Songs of a Fool” examines whether it is the caretaker’s responsibility to take care of helpless individuals or if nature can be expected to take its course. In the first half of the poem, the narrator worries about forgetting to feed his cat or rabbit, or leaving the door open and allowing the rabbit to escape, where it will be inevitably hunted. In the second half of the poem, the narrator realizes that he did fall asleep with the door open and that the rabbit had escaped while he and the cat slept. Yeats is ambiguous as to whether the fool in each part of the poem is the narrator or the rabbit, though arguments could be made for either side.

Yeats’s narrative poetry is his most memorable for me, and the most influence my thesis directly, because works like “The Shadowy Waters” work to blend the line between poetry and drama, allowing Yeats to use poetic forms to craft rhythmic dialogue for his characters. Even when he’s not using direct dialogue, his narrative works do well to blend traditional narrative structures with loose metrical forms and predictable rhyming patterns, making it easy to follow the progression of the narrative and, if necessary, to memorize large chunks of the poem.

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