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"Before the Rain Came" (poems)

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“Before the Rain Came:” An Analysis of Accessibility through Poetry

Surrounded by a citadel of poetry chapbooks is what I determine as home. For most, the ideal home is a place of familiarity, and a place that allows for one to embrace vulnerability without hesitation. Leafing through the bent, tea-stained pages of my poetry collection has become that ideal home for me. The stability that is needed for the ideal home is one that I found throughout the extents of poetry. Typical outside perceptions of poetry are often those that are paired with pretentiousness and an incapability of reaching a varied audience. Poetry is often thought of as only appealing to a sort of elitist expert, one who relies on showcasing poetry as something so unique that it cannot be understood by most individuals, something that removes itself from being a form of human expression. For me, poetry is not this.

In fact, poetry changes according to its readers; however, for me, poetry’s “aboutness” is not something that requires hidden symbolism, complex linguistics, or a consistent theme. Poetry is not some sort of multiple-choice test with discrete answers waiting in bubble markers on a Scantron sheet. Poetry is not something that only relies on the abstract, nor is it something that only relies on the concrete. For me, poetry’s aboutness is something that invokes feeling within its readers. Poetry is often presented as something unnecessarily complicated, which, unfortunately, gives way to its contagious image of it being conceited. Walt Whitman claimed that poetry was comparable to one’s speech of everyday language, how poetry “is in the air, [it is] in you... / Human bodies are words” (5-9) and for me, this shows how poetry is something other than how most individuals present it. Poetry calls upon one’s emotions, and this uniquely human form of expression is one that allows for me to embrace familiarity and vulnerability.

I think describing the process of poetry writing is something that varies from individual to individual. I once compared it to putting together a jigsaw puzzle, but, with hindsight, looking

back on that response is something cringeworthy. This is not only cringeworthy due to my own distaste of jigsaw puzzles, but also because of the realization that putting together a jigsaw puzzle does not typically invoke a series of human emotions through a dynamic lens. Poetry writing is more complicated than putting together a jigsaw puzzle, and this can be said for art overall. A jigsaw puzzle is something that contains unambiguous directions. One simply takes the scrambled pieces of the puzzle out of its container, and they match the pieces together through trial and error. This may involve some frustration throughout the process, and of course patience; however, poetry writing involves more than taking pieces out of a container and matching them together accordingly.

Poetry writing may be similar to a jigsaw puzzle in the sense that it aims to place rhetoric amongst a series of metaphors in a form that one hopes to create an overarching message, or picture, for the reader, but with this explanation, it feels as if I am not providing a complete response. Before one begins to do the actual placing of poetic elements to form a poem, those poetic elements have to first be created. Anne Lamott, author of *Bird by Bird*, describes this sort of process as “filling up when you are empty” (17), by which she means one must restore creative inspiration within themselves. This inspiration must come from somewhere, and as with other forms of art, this can also express experiences. With this in mind, the origins of this inspiration are brought to question.

According to *Daily Rituals* by Mason Currey, “one’s daily routine is also a choice, or a whole series of choices. In the right hands, it can be a finely calibrated mechanism for taking advantage of a range of limited resources...a solid routine fosters a well-grown groove for one’s mental energies” (xiv). Though the thought of routine may be something banal, routine allows for the opportunity to experience, as it can free the mind of strenuous thought. With this, one

may embrace a space for creativity in a daily routine. Art is often perceived as something that is spawned from entirely random moments with the aid of what many deem as “God given talent;” however, I believe this perception is incorrect for most cases. Art, and in particular poetry, can be composed when one begins to adopt a mindset that allows them to notice the details of life. Writing poetry does not have to require a specific formula or a to-do list that must be checked off in order, one by one. Writing poetry has a subjective nature, but despite this individualistic effort, there needs to be room in order to write and find the inspiration for writing. An adapted awareness is the start to doing so.

Paying attention to detail is a phrase that is commonly used, but not fully understood by most that use it. This is where routine comes into play. When one has accustomed themselves to a habitual lifestyle, the mind is free to discover interest in places where interest may have not been present otherwise. While the individual is switched to autopilot, the mind is free to wander. This preprogrammed phase leaves one with the recognition of details that are often bypassed. Repetitive motions of the body such as walking, swinging (on a swing set), and dancing allow for the body to automate itself, like a sort of hypnotism that sharpens the mind. This form of experience can be a simple one, but it serves as an opportunity to gather inspiration that can later be translated into rhetoric and imagery. As one goes about collecting these inspirations, a poem’s foundation solidifies.

Though this method may not be as beneficial for all artists, it seems that the adoption of a routine, and in specific, incorporating automated motions of the body into this routine, can encourage the initiation of poetry writing. After a group of ideas are recorded, whether this is through electronic outlets or something many would consider “old-fashioned,” say a pencil and paper, then a poem begins to flourish. Victor Hugo, author of *The Triggering Town*, recommends

“a hard-covered notebook with green lined pages” and with “number 2 pencils” that give one the “most sensual satisfaction” (37). Inspirations found amongst a routine may accumulate as a sort of sub-conscious expression. The poet may not necessarily be aware of the contents of the poem or perhaps even its overall theme, but as rhetoric and metaphor are compiled together, these elements begin to become noticeable. As Stephen King notes in *On Writing*, “If you can go along with the concept of the story as a pre-existing thing, a fossil in the ground, then symbolism must also be pre-existing, right?...if [symbolism] is there and if you notice it, I think you should bring it out as well as you can” (198). The expression already exists, meaning the poem already exists; however, its contents must be realized through the process of writing.

Sometimes, it seems that poetry writing requires a sort of epiphany-like occurrence, some sort of riveting strike of lightning sent to an artist from God or the universe, or whatever ethereal being that seems more real in the moment. Maybe this is true for some instances, but despite however romantic this may appear, this is not the case for most works of poetry, or at least, this has not been my experience. Creating art is similar to doing science. There is a process that is followed, though this process may vary and occur during differing intervals, whereas science, more often than not, tends to follow a stricter, more procedural process. Both demand practice, and both demand patience, and as with the sciences, the arts require a focused mindset, and a mindset that carries a goal. Poetry, in specific, contains a questioning of expression, and this can be found within the title of the poem. With this, it is arguable that the title of a poem poses a hypothesis, and the content of the poem, which is comparable to an experiment, attempts to answer this hypothesis. This form of art can be viewed as a proof that can be conducted through taking on a daily routine, and through this, the curiosities of one’s mind are liberated. To produce

good science and good art are something that takes time, and the observation of other good science and other good art.

Taking in others' work is an exposure to diversity and can provide room for improvement within one's own creation. Humans learn from one another, and as art is uniquely human, one can learn more about the self and the expression of the self through this channel. Sharing this with the world is something that improves humanity. It gives way to empathy, but to do this efficiently and innovatively demands moving through life in such a way that balances the monotony of routine and the urge for adventurous experiences, collecting viable inspirations for a work of poetry, and piecing it together in order to fully realize the feeling produced by poetry, and how this feeling can be uncovered through means of artistic expression.

As for my endeavor to create artistic expression through poetry writing, I have found that the process that was previously described best composes my methodology. There are some variants within my own process, which seem to differ with regard to my choice of automated actions and my lenient adaption of daily routine. Time constraints with regard to my academics along with my spare time muddled with several of my part-time jobs often overwhelm my ability to establish consistency within my routine. Though this may present itself as a nuisance (which it often is), it grants me the opportunity to experiment with scheduling and reassures my anxieties to continue writing poetry. Many artists appreciate dedicating vast amounts of time to their work, solely focusing on creating; however, my immersion within areas that deviate from the arts grant me a brief break from creating, which I find to be comforting. Through this, I tend to not exasperate myself when creating my art. It takes time to fill oneself up with inspiration for creating, and demanding that this take place daily, particularly when one is faced with other obligations, can be a straight path to frustration and disappointment. Art can be something that

happens every day, and this can prove to be an abundance of practice, but for me, art happens in waves. Grasping onto the sparse, vacant moments throughout my day to think, and feel the inspiration for art, is something that I have grown accustomed to, and as I mature along with my art, then perhaps one day I may adopt more of a daily pattern that focuses on creating.

My poetry portfolio followed this procedure throughout the course of a year. Building a tendency to write after episodes of heightened emotion allowed for me to notice the details of my emotions as well as the details of my surroundings. Subjected to my own mental illnesses as with many other artists, I found myself take the products of these extremities and convert them into inspirations for my art. One does not have to experience mental illness in order to produce art; however, in my circumstances, art served as an outlet for my frustrations, as it can serve as an outlet for any series of human emotions. As each episode spurred by mental illness heightened and then tapered off, I began to recognize the pattern that my mind was habituated to, and I used this awareness to mold this pattern in such a way that leaned towards my art. I took something potentially harmful and aimed it towards cultivating something potentially healing. This healing was, and is, art. My art, my poetry, has served as a way to alleviate the strains of mental illness, and over time, it has grown into a viable form of expression that not only aids the harshness of my mental capacities, but also strengthens my perceptions of the world.

A theme that permeates throughout my portfolio is one of body and reminiscence. The collected poetry for my Honors project shares a consistent speaker that expresses an anxiety of not only the self, but of the presence of religion and the overbearing longing for confidence in letting go of the past. The body is evermore existent within these poems, and the speaker seems to be using the body as a reminder of their present moment, and as a way to experience something other than their lack of stability. The speaker describes religious allusions through the

extents of the portfolio, often referring to a moment in their past and comparing it to a moment in their present. These images and rhetoric host an aura of discomfort. In “Portrait of the Girl with Head Lice,” the speaker describes what is suggested to be their childhood as “knowing the taste of peppermint gum on Sunday mornings... / the singing of *redeemer* a breath above my head” (1-2). The mention of this religious element brings readers to question how influential religion was within the life of the speaker, and as the poem continues forward, how religion changes from one form to another. The speaker initially depicts religion as “*redeemer*,” but as the past fades into the present, “*redeemer* now *ar rahman ar raheem*, I tried to relive the smell of sage in my clothes, the moment when I / denied that the westward interstate existed” (12-13), readers may notice that the speaker is attempting to accept the difficult change of belief, and how this is something necessary when living and growing in the present moment.

The poems “Before the Rain Came” and “For the Big Horns” also seem to center their focuses on the body and reminiscence. The speaker is faced with further recollections of their later past, and the acceptance of this past can be found within these pieces. This later past does not contain a strong presence of religion, as these poems offer a brief separation from the influence of religious elements, allowing for the speaker to reflect on times before religion re-entered their state of being, thus forever changing their perspective of themselves. “Before the Rain Came” constructs a scene of older childhood when the speaker recalls:

When I was little, I used to thank the water
 for its taste of grey that lapped at my ankles.
 My footsteps were a braided river behind me,
 coarseness as veins that cut into Earth

and ran over my tenderness (1-5).

The poem moves forwards in time where the speaker is plagued with the desire to blossom into an identity that they may find comfort in, one that seems to allow for them to reach their full potential. This is particularly noted when the speaker says:

I would one day try to scrape the sky,

knowing that I'd cut my hair,

that I'd cover my hair,

to be told that no one deserves anything" (19-22).

"Before the Rain Came" describes the transitory phase from childhood to adulthood, a sort of "coming of age" that tends to invoke emotions of confusion, pessimism, frustration, and yet, also emotions of hope and persistence that allows for one to dream of a better, more stable future.

In "For the Big Horns," a similar reminiscence is embraced by the speaker; however this transitory phase seems to shift to a different state of being. This state of being is one that still regards the struggle to find an identity while also looking back on the past in comparison. In "For the Big Horns," the speaker describes their challenges of accepting their past and their want of forgiveness of the self. These seem to cause the speaker uneasiness and longing. The speaker describes escapism when reflecting on who they once were:

And soon I became snow,

kneeled beside a highway headed north.

A place where the belly of a mountain

compares death to sleep—

a place where I sleep with the rest (16-21).

Religion has yet to act as a prominent influence within the sequence of the poem, and this shows readers that the speaker has yet to embrace the reentrance of religion. It seems that the speaker is relying on their patterns of learning that, “the brain’s way of protecting its body is to forget. / So, I forgot this warmth through an entity of snow” (14-15). The speaker’s fear of their past self is one that continues throughout this portfolio; however, as these poems show readers a picture of slow acceptance while looking at reminiscence through images of the body, the speaker begins to process these comparisons of the past and they come to find a sense of alleviation through belief in religion and its capabilities of providing a remedy for the faults of the self.

In “God Above,” religion and body act together as a mechanism that allows for the speaker to fully realize their current state of being. In “God Above,” a different scenario greets the speaker as they discover shame in their body, and this shame in their body has seemed to have originated in shame from their past. Initially, when turning to religion, the speaker is faced with a sort of with rejection and betrayal. The speaker voices their pain when they claim “God Above had become comatose on the sidewalk next to something unforgiven” (7-8), meaning their past overwhelmed religion’s capabilities of providing healing. The want of forgiveness stand as a motif in “God Above,” enveloping the speaker in conflict with regard to the promises of religion; however, this begins to show how the speaker embraces a change in religion as this image of “God Above” undergoes a change that provides the speaker with the urge to take a different religious path, one that allows for the speaker to discover an outlet for endurance and the will to persevere.

With this, the influence of religion comes about once again in “Poem in Which I Play the Pathan.” Here, the speaker describes the suffering of a loved one, but instead of rushing to the past for an escape, the speaker, despite their dismay, turns towards this suffering through the lens of religion. The religious allusions used in “Poem in Which I Play the Pathan” are those that tie with the practices of Islam. In Islamic culture, it is custom to say the phrase, “*inshaAllah*,” which translates into “God willing” after one makes the choice to follow through with an action. In “Poem in Which I Play the Pathan,” the speaker depicts the dissemination of a loved one through the ties between a fading body and a prominent presence of religion. The speaker notes, “You ate the aloe, but the fire chose to lick your lips / and suck on what was left of you. The chants of *inshaAllah* were the last thing that you heard. / *God willing she’ll wash clean*” (8-10).

The extents of the speaker’s feeling of helplessness and sorrow are almost overwhelming for the speaker, and when looking at the gentle company of religion throughout “Poem in Which I Play the Pathan,” one may note that there is a metamorphosis of religion when looking back at “Portrait of the Girl with Head lice.” In “Poem in Which I Play the Pathan,” religion acts as a sort of comfort tucked between layers of hardship, and as the speaker states, “you chose to declare the stupidity of it all, like the serrated porcelain of a cup unable to be / drunk from, yet it is full and willing to be touched” (7-8), it can be seen that that the bitterness of life may be eased through the subtleties of religion. Here, it can be noted that religion does not remove suffering from the perspective of the speaker, but it allows for the speaker to embrace suffering with the knowledge that religion offers an outlet for endurance.

It is arguable whether or not the speaker is able to find fulfillment through religion; however, this resonates throughout the course of the poems found within this portfolio, as it depicts a story of growth within the speaker and an attempt to find a place of being. This

depiction seems to control a vast portion of the portfolio, despite other poems that incorporate themes of the past through the use of imagery of the body and the speaker's reminiscence of the past. The presence of religion provides the speaker with an ability to cope, and as the speaker blossoms, facing hardship and learning to cultivate a need to process this hardship is something that is described throughout the familiar, yet often uncanny display of imagery used throughout this portfolio.

In "Dead Antelope Parts Startle Me West," readers may notice an attempt at a conclusion with regard to the story of the speaker. Though the speaker has yet to reach a complete state of stability within their present moment, the speaker tries to come to terms with their past, utilizing their previous experiences alongside of a religious presence to survive. The speaker states:

The mountain told me that we are all animals without blueprints. That people are no longer people without fear, and that fear is a root. I wanted to thrust my hands into the mountain's granite, become an intrusion of heat, listen to what was said. But I knelt on talus that bit into skin behind my knees. I moved forward (10-12).

It is unclear whether or not the speaker has, in fact, "moved forward," towards further healing, but "Dead Antelope Parts Startle Me West" shows the speaker's want of this, thus their attempt at coping may be realized within readers.

My first formal introduction to the art of poetry writing revealed itself to me throughout my first undergraduate semesters at the University of Akron. With this, I realize that poetry writing has become a prevalent influence throughout my life. My formal introduction of poetry through my undergraduate courses showed me how to mold poetry and make it something my own. The diversity that exists within the poetry community showed me poetic license and with this, I was able to shape my own style of poetry. With poets such as Kaveh Akbar and Cate

Marvin waking me to a world of wonder and familiarity, I learned that engaging with the poetry community gives way to learning and then refining your own style, which is what I aimed to do throughout this portfolio.

In the fall semester of 2017, I was acquainted with Kaveh Akbar's *Portrait of the Alcoholic*. Akbar's work instilled rawness within my own poetry. Akbar's speaker in *Portrait of the Alcoholic* depicts their recovery from alcoholism and the influences of family, religion, and acceptance play a significant role in this journey. The transformations that Akbar utilizes throughout *Portrait of the Alcoholic* are those that reveal a confessional-like style, grasping onto his readers and leading them through the labor of rehabilitation. Akbar's speaker showed me a vulnerability that allowed for me to become more comfortable with the use of exposure throughout my portfolio. In "An Apology," Akbar's speaker describes their experiences with religion as a small child, incorporating remnants of the speaker's past that have encouraged me to incorporate similar aspects within my own work. Akbar writes:

As a boy I tore out
the one-hundred-and-nine-pages
about Hell in my first Qur'an.
Bountiful bloomscattering Lord,
I could feel you behind my eyes
and under my tongue, shocking me
nightly like an old battery" (25-31).

The surrealism of Akbar's imagery resonates within my own poetry, encouraging me to write about religion as a notable theme.

As with Akbar's work, Marvin's *Fragment of the Head of a Queen* also integrates rawness within her own work; however, this is done so in a way that differs from Akbar. Marvin often veers her writing towards the strange, an uncanny perspective taken with regard to the body. Marvin's speaker in *Fragment of the Head of a Queen* establishes their presence within Marvin's poetry as boldness, as one with vigor and perhaps even anger. Marvin's end-stopped lines leave readers stunned with bizarre, yet alluring imagery that, when I read for the first time, left me numbed and in awe. The power behind the images intertwined with her rhetoric is one that has sparked my poetry into delving into the realm of the weird, a realm of fantastic realism, unlocking the aspects of humanness that reminds one of the intensity of emotion. An example of this that particularly influenced my work can be noted in Marvin's, "Cloud Elegy." Marvin writes:

The world felt bad. Every leaf looked
 like it needed a cigarette.
 Gutters took
 cups strewn at their lips, turned them
 upright to offer tiny pleas for change" (1-4).

Marvin uses simple sentences amongst her personification, amplifying the weirdness of her imagery while inspiring me to unhinge my own writing. Marvin's ability to induce feeling within readers is one that I aim to replicate within my work. I have learned that poetry does not have to

have an immediate, surface level symbolism. Sometimes, poetry is simple in the sense that it stimulates human emotion, and this is apparent within Marvin's work as well as in my own work.

Justifying poetry as something accessible and familiar is an overdue necessity within a world that seems to turn its back on understanding the arts. Poetry is language that speaks for an individual's humanness. As a future NEOMFA: Northeast Ohio Masters of Fine Arts student, I wrote this collection of poetry with the intention of not only using it to express the importance of vulnerability, but also as a gateway to this program, so that I may learn more about the justification of poetry and its receptiveness to a diverse readership. Poetry is capable of restoring the wonder that can be found within human emotion, and this collection of poetry is the beginning to this journey.

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