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# Letting Poetry Inside, to Stay

Erin Siegfert  
ems166@zips.uakron.edu

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Erin Siegferth

Dr. Mary Biddinger

English Honors Project

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### Letting Poetry Inside, To Stay

Before I had been formally taught what poetry was, I was writing it. As an anxious little one, finding words to define my vague nervousness and dread was comforting. It gave me a sense of agency. The only words that seemed appropriate came to me in the form of poems. Eventually, however, poetry was bound to be taught. When it was, it was taught with rigidity, rules, and logic. I came to love it, if only because I could make reason of what so many of my peers found enigmatic and unreachable. According to my test scores, I was skilled at determining the “correct” answers and meanings to poems. The sense of achievement and superiority was satisfying, but not a source of comfort. The better I got at defining poems, the fewer I found myself writing. The right-or-wrong attitude that accompanied studying modern and historical poems was alienating. I had no idea new poems were being written, published, and enjoyed. Though dissecting them was gratifying, poems seemed to be strictly literary, elevated, and unachievable. It wasn’t until my second year of college that I found the freedom that comes from absorbing poems without rules or guidelines. This freedom was delivered in the form of contemporary poetry, and especially the poetry of Ada Limón.

I enrolled in American Women Poets expecting to read work by the great women poets of the past—a demographic my education had been lacking until then. What I got was even better: a reading list full of women, still alive today, who were not all too different from me. Among these

books was Limón's *Bright Dead Things*. Immediately, I was enchanted by the lack of pretense in Limón's work.

In the title poem of the collection, "I Remember the Carrots," Limón begins, "I haven't given up on trying to live a good life, / a really good one even" (1-2). The opening is accessible in its simplicity, yet not tired or shallow. Limón's language is familiar and immediate, as if she were writing to a friend. This lends itself to more unabashed emotional truths than might be achieved by writing for a lofty, academic, somewhat distant audience. While loftiness and academic language certainly have their place in poems, they tend to require more untangling before the reader enjoys their payoff. By using unpretentious, casual language, Limón is able to remain close to the humanity and truth that resonates at the core of successful poems.

I also find myself particularly moved by Limón's ability to give spotlight to the beauty and magnitude of ordinary situations. "I Remember the Carrots" continues, describing the time the speaker ripped up carrots from their father's garden. They conclude, "What I mean is: there are days / I still want to kill the carrots because I can" (15-16). While the same effect could have been achieved through a more academic metaphor—perhaps something with an allusion to classical literature—Limón stays rooted in easy-to-recall, ordinary vegetables. Reading her work taught me to embrace my inclination toward assigning meaning to everyday occurrences, and to use that meaning in poems. This was a freeing lesson to learn, because I no longer felt I needed profound or remarkable subject matter in order to write something worthwhile.

For example, in my poem "Valediction," there are two main images. First, a "you" figure lying on a sofa, and second, a dripping refrigerator. Before reading Limón's work, I doubt I would have considered these images poem-worthy. The real-life inspiration for the images

probably would have passed me by, without notice. But once Limón expanded my threshold for what deserves to be in a poem, the world around me became a field of images, ready to be harvested. I keep a note on my phone for recording “poem moments,” and with a non-exclusive idea of what poems may include, the list began to grow much more rapidly. The images themselves no longer have to be inherently perfect or unique to be worthy. Moments that stand out do so because of the significance and truth contained within them, which is the true root of most poems. It is certainly the case for my own. In “Valediction,” it isn’t the person lying down or the dripping refrigerator that matters. It’s the person’s smell, which lingers in the speaker’s memory, that’s emotionally significant. It’s mistaking a refrigerator drip for distant sexual noises that says anything true about intimacy or separation. Limón’s work taught me not to dismiss the ordinary. If an ordinary moment feels significant, it’s probably worth writing down. There’s a poem waiting to be unlocked.

Limón and the other poets from *American Women Poets* taught me a second, equally valuable lesson: someone like me could write poems of value to other people. After all, Limón’s poems stayed with me long after the semester ended. My concept of poetry shifted away from being either solely educational or personally therapeutic, as well as predominantly white and masculine, and toward an existing, thriving, diverse community of artists. I wanted to be part of it. So, I enrolled in Advanced Poetry Writing. The class also provided me with a contemporary reading list, from which I was especially inspired by the poetry of Ashley Capps in *Mistaking the Sea for Green Fields*.

Like Limón, Capps uses ordinary images to convey meaning. Capps, however, often takes her ordinary images to a shocking, unusual place. The resulting freshness demands

attention. For example, Capps's poem, "The Sign Said" is a breathless run-on sentence ending with an image of hope. After being rudely commanded to clean poodle vomit, the speaker says, "the only reason I didn't quit right then / was an ant crawled out / of a pile of toenail clippings lifting / the largest one like a sail (28-31). Like Limón's carrots, Capps's toenails are down-to-earth. Toenails, however, seem to contrast actively with clichés symbolizing hope—white birds, bright lights in long tunnels, green sprouts emerging from soil. Toenails don't quite fit into this group, and their reputation for grossness lends a level of grittiness and determination that compliments the content of the poem. Had this poem, which laments phone sex operation and poodle vomit, ended with a white dove flying overhead, it would have felt artificial, stretched, and false. In life, sometimes hope has to come from toenails. Shouldn't poetry capture this truth?

After reading "The Sign Said," I embraced the idea that images need not be traditionally beautiful and pleasant, or even ordinary and pleasant, but have full permission to be gross and unpleasant. These types of images can create contrast between form and content, leaving the reader with an unexpected and somewhat inexplicable emotional response that is more memorable than traditional images. In my own writing, I have practiced this in poems such as "Learning to Love the Dirty World." I use an image of "Days-old lentil curry soaking in the kitchen sink" (3) to discuss the realities of spiritual enlightenment. This subject, like hope, can easily be simplified or glamorized by images of mountaintops, sunshine, or even arbitrarily appropriated eastern religious symbols. By using a concrete, dirty, unpleasant image, I hoped to discuss the topic as it manifests itself in life. Spirituality doesn't exist in an elevated, pristine vacuum. It exists in the background of everyday occurrences, which realistically include moments of untidiness, poor mental health, and fatigue. This kind of emotional honesty,

conveyed through unashamed diction and matter-of-fact tone, was not previously something I associated with poetry. Beyond that, however, it is not something that is perceived to be traditionally acceptable for women—femininity, we are told, is not to include toenails or anything of the sort.

One poet who is not impeded by the way women are told to exist is Anne Barngrover. Her collection *Brazen Creature* includes a number of poems about romantic relationships. Women tend to be criticized for caring about love, which is why writing about it, in a way, is a form of rebellion. There is no shame in doing what is traditionally expected of women, so long as it is done by choice and with pride and ownership. Consider, for example, the difference between today's full-time mothers who choose the vocation and those from the past who were given no other choice. Today, choosing a career in a formerly male-dominated field—or, in this case, avoiding feminine topics in one's poetry—can be empowering, but choosing to take ownership of full-time motherhood—or writing about love—can be empowering, too.

Many of Barngrover's relationship poems are about the failure of relationships, including "Questions for When We Meet Again." The title is accurate; the poem is composed entirely of questions. The speaker asks a series of them that slowly reveal the nature of the relationship, beginning with "Remember that time I asked you to be nicer to me / and you said no?" (1-2) and progressing to questions about a hypothetical new love interest for the "you" figure. When this hypothetical woman asks the "you" figure to be nicer to her, the speaker asks, "Do you still say no?" (51). Aside from addressing a scandalously feminine subject like love, the repeated questions mimic the sound of "uptalk." Women are especially criticized for this manner of speaking, characterized by rising intonation at the end of sentences. The poem, however, is not

trite or air-headed, as critics might feel inclined to label a woman talking about love or using uptalk in speech. Instead, it tackles the almost serial disrespect this “you” figure inflicts upon the women they date. The poem shifts from questions about fond memories, like “Remember when we slept in that room / with all the bowties?” (16-17) to questions about negative aspects of the relationship, like “Remember when / you told me to shut up in front of all my friends / at the oyster bar?” (28-30). The shift from positive to negative is abrupt—much like it can be in a relationship—switching from inquiries about unlikely animal friendships to the oyster bar incident without a buffer or transitional question. In doing this, Barngrover gives her speaker the ability to care about this person and recognize their disrespect within the same poem, depicting a dimensional, realistic, and relatable relationship in just fifty-one lines.

“Questions for When We Meet Again” is about more than just love. There are religious anecdotes, hints at rivalry between women, and examples of disrespect. But mostly, the poem is about love. Examining a variety of issues through the lens of romance is an effective method for linking the issues together, while adding depth and dimension. After reading *Brazen Creature*, I wrote my first love poem in months, called “It’s Been a Privilege Flying With You.” I had been trying to steer myself toward more “serious,” more “respectable” topics, but experiencing such a fresh, skillful handling of the subject made me ashamed to have shoved it aside. Love is often serious, and deserves respect. I admired the way Barngrover examined relationships at the intersection of other human experiences, so I allowed my poem about love to include one of its primary obstacles: fear.

While drafting love poems in the past, I often struggled to find images or metaphors that felt fresh and unique. I now see that the problem may have been how self-contained the poems

were. Since love does not exist in a vacuum, a love poem probably will not feel true if it does not include specific interactions with or elements of the world “outside” of love. Musing only about the emotional or cognitive experience of love can produce an intangible and distant poem. Tethering this experience to concrete images, however—and not just romantic ones like kisses, hugs, and bouquets of roses—makes a poem feel grounded and real.

I open the poem with contrast between the speaker’s fear of heights—a vibrating windowpane—and the comfort of being wrapped in a “faux down comforter” (3) with someone they love. Both cases invoke vulnerability, though one is positive and the other is negative. The poem then shifts between descriptions of Tom Hanks’s actions in the film *Apollo 13* and moments of the relationship between the couple watching the movie. I chose images and comments strategically to craft a contrast between the two people and their innate levels of fear. For example, “Frankincense vapor settles on our huddled shoulders, tethers me to Earth” (11-12) is meant to emphasize the speaker’s need for safety and security. The poem continues, “You muffle a cough” (12), indicating a discomfort with the very vapor—that safe, secure feeling—that comforts the speaker. There is a clear discrepancy between their mindsets, but it isn’t colored with contempt.

I didn’t intend for the poem to pass judgement on either character, but instead to truthfully and accurately illustrate the way fear and love intertwine. I began writing the poem with the intention of writing about fear as it interacts with love, but the specific angle presented itself to me during the process of writing. In “It’s Been A Privilege Flying With You,” the two characters tolerate each other’s differing levels of fear, presumably because of love. In the final haiku, the fearless “you” invites the speaker to the moon, even though the speaker is clearly not



one for adventures as risky as space travel. Despite this seemingly inconsiderate offer, the “you” character does not chastise the speaker for their compact comfort zone. They “muffle a cough” (12) instead of openly, passive-aggressively coughing. In the first line of the haiku, after the speaker begins crying over the stress of Tom Hanks’s reentry into Earth’s atmosphere, they “Kiss [the speaker’s] head” (16) rather than scoffing or poking fun. Neither party pretends to be more or less fearful than they are. Instead, they challenge incompatibility by simply being together. The “you” character must know that the speaker wouldn’t accompany them to the moon, but I wanted the poem to suggest that what’s really important is the loving act of offering.

The haibun form of “It’s Been a Privilege Flying With You” was inspired by another poet I read for class. In *New Poetry*, we read *Night Sky With Exit Wounds* by Ocean Vuong, including the poem “Immigrant Haibun.” This poem simultaneously chronicles the journey of a couple immigrating from a “smoldering” city (8) and the journey of a family through history, reality, and time. Water surrounds every motion, both figuratively and literally. The poem opens, “...as if breathing, the sea swelled beneath us,” (1), personifying the water as something sentient with a belly that rises and falls with breath. While it is literally supporting the couple on their journey, but when read more figuratively, the water is the material that moves the couple forward in space and in time.

“Immigrant Haibun” consists of six prose stanzagraphs and one final haiku. I found the form to be effective because of its lasting effect—after reading long stanzagraphs, the brevity of the final haiku is haunting and memorable. Form, however, is not the only way Vuong’s work influenced my own. Vuong’s willingness to make bold, wise statements was inspiring to me, too. While Barngrover’s *Brazen Creature* gave me an appreciation for concrete imagery, Vuong’s

*Night Sky With Exit Wounds* released me from that restriction and gave me the right of way to make statements. Of course, neither poet exclusively uses lyric statements or concrete imagery—in fact, the use of the two together is what makes their work so striking—but Vuong’s lyric statements are what have stuck in my head. I often find myself thinking of them as I move throughout my life. For example, “the most important part of your body is where its headed” (30-31) from “Someday I’ll Love Ocean Vuong” comes in moments of insecurity. From “Immigrant Haibun,” I remember “a woman on a sinking ship becomes a life raft—no matter how soft her skin” when I notice strength in femininity. I use “If you are given anything / be sure to leave / no tracks in the snow” from “To My Father / To My Future Son” as a reminder to be gracious and non-harming.

As these lines continued to present themselves to me in my regular daily life, my appreciation for poetry grew to a nearly religious level. In an interview with *The Iowa Review*, the Poet Laureate of the United States, Tracy K. Smith, said “I liked the idea that a poem was small enough that it could get inside of you and stay” (Schwartz). This is what Vuong’s poems do—whole poems, but also individual lines. This element of Vuong’s poems reminds me of zen koan, which is unsurprising given his practice of Zen Buddhism. Koan are meant to “get inside of you and stay” (Iowa Review), the same way great poems do. The idea that poems could function on such a spiritual level wasn’t a shock, but experiencing it for myself continues to be moving.

Though I don’t consider myself to be especially wise, reading Vuong’s poems kept me from ignoring these statements of apparent truth when they crossed my mind. Reading Vuong’s slow, considerate poetry tuned me into the thoughtful brain-frequency necessary for even

recognizing these thoughts when they come along. Just like Ada Limón taught me to write down any mundanities that felt significant, without judgement, reading Vuong's poetry gave me permission to record the less tangible, more cerebral ideas that I began having throughout the day. Some lines from my Honors Project that feel particularly influenced by Vuong include "all this could be over, should you forget to hold your breath" (7) from "When Everything Seemed to Happen for the First Time Ever," "I love // your camera but these birthdays make me nervous" (8-9) from "Self Portrait in Akron, Ohio," and "Neither of us had ever been the type to push things where they don't belong" (9-10) from "Resistance Training." While I am still working toward the level of memorability and significance that Vuong is able to achieve, before reading *Night Sky With Exit Wounds*, I do not think I would have allowed myself to type such straightforward statements without trying to convey them through concrete imagery instead. This freedom has given my poetry a new kind of balance between imagery and narration.

I read *Night Sky With Exit Wounds* for a second time the semester after it was assigned. One of my poems that I believe came from this second reading is "Resistance Training." Vuong's influence can be seen in the slow, hazy, unhurried mood of the poem. I was not in a rush to get to any certain conclusion, choosing instead to honor the emotional truth of a moment. I wanted the poem to feel suspended in time, the way so many of Vuong's do. To achieve this effect, I focused on small details not only to create a more vivid environment within the poem, but also to slow down the speed at which a reader would move through it. For example, the poem opens with the speaker's sisters "crooked teeth" (1). It also pauses for a moment of stillness as the speaker "[fiddles] with the lamination on the menu" (3). Near the end of the poem, I list oddities: "the patter of a dropped marble upstairs. Commuter headlights through a tiny window's blinds

(12-14). This sequence of images contributes to the poem's mood and pacing, but also contributes to its themes: inheritance, family, and estrangement. Midway through my poem, the speaker says, "I wore a plain cable-knit sweater I'd inherited from our mother. We both sat there like our mother, on our hands. Bare-faced" (7-8). The mention of a mother and the inherited sweater was intended to imply a sense that the source of tension between the sisters in the poem is also somehow related to the mother, or at least the family structure that mothers can represent. Vuong explores similar themes throughout his collection, and does so in a way that observes without judgement. I tried to emulate this in "Resistance Training" and other poems in my project, such as "It's Been a Privilege Flying With You."

Another poet who inspired me to investigate themes of family and inheritance was Kaveh Akbar. His chapbook, *Portrait of the Alcoholic*, was also assigned reading for New Poetry. Akbar's chapbook clearly influenced the subject matter and form of my poem, "Portrait of a Loaded X Chromosome." It is apparent that Akbar's theme of alcoholism had the topic centrally situated in my brain, since my poem also addresses it. Even the title is a portrait, like the title of the chapbook. Akbar also uses creative and unconventional forms, using white space as an opportunity to slow down or pause the flow of the poem. Many of the poems forgo punctuation, letting white space set the pace instead. Although I had read plenty of poetry that used white space, *Portrait of the Alcoholic* was the first instance that was not extreme. His poems use whitespace, but are relatively conventional in syntax and straightforward in their rhetoric. When I had attempted to use whitespace in my own poems before, I felt compelled to alter my natural style of syntax and rhetoric to match the unconventional form. This resulted in inauthentic, scattered, and shallow work. I had never been satisfied. Akbar's style of white space, however,

did not seem too far from my comfort zone, but still presented an opportunity for experimentation and growth. With this new role model in mind, I wrote “Portrait of a Loaded X Chromosome.”

I decided to maintain a semblance of stanza organization for the form of “Portrait of a Loaded X Chromosome.” Instead of left-aligned, single-spaced stanzas, I tabbed new lines according to where I felt a pause would be beneficial. Like Akbar, I omitted almost all of the punctuation, letting the white spaces guide the cadence of the poem. Other than that, I did not pressure myself to be unconventional or inventive. As admirable as those endeavors may be, the pressure to achieve them has proven, for me, to be counterproductive. In the end, I was happy with the balance between convention and un-convention in this poem.

The slower pace, thanks to the spaced-out form of “Portrait of a Loaded X Chromosome,” made it easier for me to write about such a vulnerable topic. Giving the phrases room to breathe and settle lifted the pressure to explain, justify, or elaborate too much. This kept rambling and complaining at bay, and cleared space for the narrative I actually wanted to present. Since the poem’s word count itself is relatively small, the spaced out form also helped it from feeling too compact or constrained. Sometimes, these are positive traits for a poem to have. However, since “Portrait of a Loaded X Chromosome” spans a broad timeline—from great grandmothers to mothers to the present-day speaker—it seemed more fitting for the words, however few, to take up plenty of space on the page.

Without the influence of Akbar, Vuong, Barngrover, Capps, and Limón, I would be a very different poet. I would still have a narrow view of what poetry is, and what deserves to be in a poem. Now I know, thanks to Limón and *Bright Dead Things*, that anything, however

unassuming, can be poem material if you dare to recognize its significance. Without Capps, I wouldn't have had the confidence to use dirty, grotesque images in my poems. After feeling how effective they were in *Mistaking the Sea for Green Fields*, however, grotesque imagery seems like an essential part of any poetic toolbox. Barngrover reopened the world of love poems from a new, intellectual, and political perspective. Not only is love affected by politics and society, but writing about love in the current political and societal climate is subversive. Reading *Brazen Creature* made me realize that love is as important a topic as any. Vuong's book, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, taught me to slow down and listen to my thoughts, and by consequence, to slow down the pace of my writing. This led to a more careful, thoughtful writing process, and poems that focus on small details. Finally, Akbar's *Portrait of the Alcoholic* inspired me to broaden my poetic forms, even after many failed attempts. By studying his balance between conventional syntax and unconventional form, I finally arrived at a comfortable place for my own experimentation. After reflection upon all that I have learned from the books I have read over the last few years, it is clear to me that growth as a writer relies heavily on dedication as a reader. Reading poetry has become the most effective way to overcome any lack of inspiration or motivation for writing. It reframes the way I see the world, so that anything might belong in a poem.

I like to imagine how my seven-year-old self would react if I could travel back in time to tell her everything I have learned about poetry since then. I think, first of all, that she would be delighted to know that writing poems wouldn't just be a childhood hobby that she would have to leave behind. Adult life offers so much room for poetry, and it only gets better. I think she'd be even happier to find out that she would not be solely responsible for writing the poems that bring

her comfort. Someday, she would discover a whole team of poets—including Limón, Capps, Barngrover, Vuong, and Akbar—ready to be read, ready to be remembered, and ready to stay with her for good.

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