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Soft Tornado

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Soft Tornado

Zoe Orcutt

Honors Project in Poetry

6 Credit Hours

Critical Essay

When speaking on artistic influence on my work, it is hard to find something I can specifically point to that does not impact me. This is not dissimilar to the way one picks up dirt on their shoes wherever they walk. Little pieces of art I have encountered get absorbed and incorporated into my work, making appearances in tone, theme, and sometimes in reference. These manifest primarily in the forms of books and chapbooks by poets. However, it would be negligent for me to leave out the influence music has had on my work. In this essay, I will discuss poets Sylvia Plath, Walt Whitman, and Rochel Hurt, and musicians Samuel Beam, and Sufjan Stevens.

When it comes to poets, no one has influenced me more than Sylvia Plath. Plath is a mid-twentieth century poet who is the masthead for the confessional movement, the poetical expression of the “I”. What I find most appealing about her poetry is something I try to display in my own, the confessional nature of her verse. I love how Plath unabashedly spews out all of her emotion on the page. She does not try to hide ugly thoughts, she leaves them grotesque. She has a darkness to the language and diction she uses in her poems, something that has made its way into my own work. I first came into contact with her in the eleventh grade when I bought myself a complete collection of her poems after reading *The Bell Jar*. I had never heard of her before that point, something that I now consider tragic. I wish I had been reading her work in middle school, it would have given me such direction.

One particular poem of hers that has stayed with me over the years has been “I Am Vertical.” The title “I Am Vertical” bleeds into the first line “but I would rather be horizontal”.¹ This poem continues by comparing things that would traditionally appear either vertical or

¹ Plath, Sylvia. *The Collected Poems*. Edited by Ted Hughes, HarperPerennial Modern Classics, 2008.

horizontal, like trees and flower beds. In the final stanza, Plath explains she loves to lie down because, “the sky and I are in open conversation”². I still have yet to experience facing the sky horizontally without thinking about this line. In this poem, Plath speaks about nature, using descriptive language to create a sense of place within the poem. When she describes horizontal and vertical images, you can almost feel yourself reorienting in your mind as the speaker stands up and lies down, figuratively.

Another poem of hers that I return to frequently is “Jilted”, included in many anthologies as part of her juvenilia. In this poem, Plath describes rejection by comparing the speaker’s emotions to the moon. My favorite lines are in the second stanza. Plath writes, “Tonight the caustic wind, love, / Gossips late and soon, / And I wear the wry-faced pucker of / The sour lemon moon.”³ To hear someone describe the moon as sour and lemon is astonishing, but Plath’s lines are seamless. This image is so vivid, and creating a visual experience is so important for the reader. I find that in many workshops I have participated in, people are always asking to see more description. Plath delivers this in all of her poems, every time.

Growing up in an upper middle-class, white demographic, I feel a slight kinship to Plath and the problems she experienced in her personal life. Problems with responsibility, academia, and the stagnation that can sometimes be felt in groups with little diversity. Plath’s novel *The Bell Jar* really highlights the isolation she felt in the middle-class setting, with additional links to her mental health. Her depression, eventually leading to her suicide, is one of the most captivating subjects she discusses as a writer. I remember stumbling upon one of Anne Sexton’s poem “Sylvia’s Death” not knowing the two were friends and that they mutually struggled with some of the same problems. The pain of loss in Sexton’s poem is not one of surprise. Sexton

² Plath, Sylvia. *The Collected Poems*. Edited by Ted Hughes, HarperPerennial Modern Classics, 2008.

³ Ibid

writes, “what is your death / but an old belonging / a mole that fell out / of one of your poems.”⁴ Though suffering an untimely death, Plath’s poems are timeless. They continue to shape how I write, even today.

Another strong influence on me as a poet would have to be Walt Whitman. The late-nineteenth century poet is possibly the most famous American poet in existence. His *Leaves of Grass* is one of the first collections of poetry I ever bought. Maybe it was the preface portrait inside the front cover, Walt standing slightly slouched with a leaf of grass between his teeth, or maybe it was the language, but there was something that drew me into that book. I have a particular fondness for nature, growing up on a small flower farm, so Whitman’s subject matter was very familiar to me. I loved the way he described Americans at the turn of the century. He really broke the mold for contemporary poets at the time, writing about the common man. Poetry then was seen as an academic endeavor, usually reserved for “deserving” subject matter. I think I pull from this in the way that I try to write about ordinary things and make them interesting. I also enjoy his use of free verse, not paying much detail to rhyme or meter. This is not to say his poetry does not have rhythm. It actually reads like everyday speech, almost like he could be speaking it aloud himself, and I admire the accessibility of his work.

A poem of Whitman’s that I continually enjoy reading is one of his most famous, “A Noiseless Patient Spider”. This poem is relatively short compared to some of Whitman’s others, consisting only of two stanzas. I love small concise poems because it really causes the poet to deliberate over diction. Each word depends so heavily on the next. In “A Noiseless Patient Spider”, Whitman focuses in on the insect and its creation of the web. Whitman describes it spinning its thread as launching forth “filament, filament, filament, out of itself / Ever unreeling

⁴ Sexton, Anne. *The Complete Poems Anne Sexton*. Mariner Books, 1999.

them, ever tirelessly speeding them.”⁵ He then goes on to relate the spider to the soul, comparing the spinning of thread to the soul finding connection in the world. The soul, like the spider, launches fourth filaments until it finds somewhere to steady itself. He ends with, “Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my soul.”⁶ This poem is very similar in subject matter with the poems that I write, taking an ordinary subject and writing it into a new light. I have a poem about a spider, and while it does not quite land the same way Whitman’s does, it explores the beauty of the natural world and what humans can learn from it. My poems about toads, chickens, and Japanese beetles take this same approach.

One of my favorite lines in any poem ever written comes from Whitman’s “Song of Myself”. This poem in itself is long, broken down into fifty-two sections. In it, Whitman is again describing the soul by describing himself through sensory detail. My favorite line appears in section three where he first begins to describe the greater world and its state of existence, before focusing back in on himself. He writes, “clear and sweet is my soul, and clear and sweet is all that is not my soul.”⁷ In this line he comments on the universality of nature, the connections between all things. All things in nature are as “clear and sweet” and significant as the soul is treated. Whitman’s exploration of abstract concepts crafted into beautiful lines continually draws me back to his work.

While traditional poets like Plath and Whitman got me into poetry in the first place, contemporary poets heavily influence me today. One such poet whose influence can be seen in my honors project is Rochelle Hurt. As professor at Slippery Rock University in Pittsburgh, Hurt has two published collections of poetry and many awards to go along with them. I read

⁵ Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings*. Edited by Michael Moon, Norton, 2002.

⁶ Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings*. Edited by Michael Moon, Norton, 2002.

⁷ Ibid

Hurt's second collection, *In Which I Play the Runaway*, in an undergraduate poetry class at the University of Akron. The class was studying contemporary poets while exploring the topic of writing. In her book, Hurt has various poems that are self-portraits of herself in a particular place, most of them locations within the Midwest. In addition to these portraits, she also has poems centering in subject around dioramas, and poems "in which she plays" a certain role. I was drawn immediately to the thematic continuity of elements throughout the book, as well as the setting and sense of place Hurt creates in her writing.

One poem that I love in particular is titled "Self-Portrait in Honest, Ohio". I love it, not because it is about my favorite state in the Midwest, because it interweaves simultaneously experiences of agriculture and experiences of life. It centers around apologies that the speaker is issuing with the repetition of the phrase "I'm sorry". My favorite lines of the poem appear when Hurt describes the image of a wheat field. She writes, "sharp with empty stalks, soft with fingers."⁸ The strangeness of this image reminds me of the surprise a poem can generate. Hurt's poem largely inspired my own poem, "Self-Portrait in Sleeper, Missouri", with the motif of fingers and touch appearing in it as well.

Another poem in which Hurt explores the pastoral along with elements of place is in her poem "Self-Portrait in Last Chance, California". The speaker of the poem speaks with urgency about the degradation of a situation. They are aware of a "last chance" scenario to escape a previous way of life, one assumedly juvenile with the mention of parents and childhood in some of the later stanzas. Nature is described again with strangeness. I love the lines, "collect the bees left woozy from holding / their electric breath above the shivering."⁹ The description of bees as woozy is something especially significant to me. I have always fascinated by the

⁸ Hurt, Rochelle. *In Which I Play the Runaway*. Barrow Street Press, 2016.

⁹ Ibid

apparent drunkenness of bees around their flowers. This observation inspired my haiku “Honeywater”. I was delighted to see that Hurt observed this and found it significant enough to include in her poems. The description of the bee’s breath as electric also interestingly ties to my own work in this project. Electric breath puts a mechanical image into my mind, and I see a bee that is almost robotic. Similarly, I write about scarabs in my poem “my Japanese beetles”, describing them as “tiny drones”. My poems share with Hurt, an interest in insects with mechanical qualities. I don’t know what that says about either of us as poets, but it does show we are both intrigued with the natural world in an urban setting.

Moving on to the area of musical and lyrical influence, the subject of this section is Samuel Beam of Iron and Wine. Beam has been releasing music under his stage name for over a decade. The former professor of film and cinematography intimately pairs guitar and lyrics to paint a picture of the different stages of life he finds himself in. My mother introduced me to his music in my adolescence. Many of his songs I grew up listening to. His very pastoral and very personal lyrics create a sense of calm and trust that the listener feels. One of his early albums, *Our Endless Numbered Days*, is one of my favorites.

The songs I love most on the album is called “Naked As We Came”. The speaker in the song is meditating on the concept of mortality and its steady approach within a romantic relationship. I admire Beam’s casual approach to the subject of death. He sings, “One of us will die inside these arms / Eyes wide open, naked as we came.”¹⁰ The familiarity that Beam establishes immediately in this song is almost unparalleled, in my opinion. The listener feels the gravity of the “us” and the “we”. When Beam sings those words, the listener is a part of them. In this way, he invites the listener into a sort of emotional ownership within the song so they can

¹⁰ Iron and Wine. “Naked As We Came.” *Our Endless Numbered Days*.

apply it to their own lives. This universality is something I wish I could incorporate with more ease in my work.

Beam does a similar thing in his song “Passing Afternoon” appearing on the same album. The song is about the passing of time and the changing of seasons. The seasons appear as different people in the poem, Beam personifying each in different images suiting their personalities. He sings, “There are things that drift away like our endless, numbered days / Autumn blew the quilt right off the perfect bed she made.”¹¹ In this verse, the listener uncovers Beam’s source for the title of the album, *Our Endless Numbered Days*. The oxymoronic combination of “endless” and “numbered” allows Beam to explore time in both circular and linear contexts. This calls to attention nature’s perception of time verses the linear progression of human lives. Accompanied with an ever-repeating melody, this song is another meditation on mortality. This thematically matches many of the poems and subject matter I enjoy writing about.

The last musician I will discuss is Sufjan Stevens, and the music he releases under his own name. Stevens sings about the Midwest and Detroit, where he grew up. He sings about mental health and religion in a way that always seems new. He recently received well deserved accolades in 2018 for his writing on the soundtrack of *Call Me By Your Name* with the song “The Mystery of Love”. As a queer musician, his involvement in the project was triumphant and perfectly placed. While his work on that project is amazing, I will be discussing his album *Carrie and Lowell* for its religious themes in relation to life experiences. These themes continually make their way into my own work.

¹¹ Iron and Wine. “Passing Afternoon.” *Our Endless Numbered Days*.

Steven's "John My Beloved" inspired the title and topic one of my poems. I admire the way Sufjan writes so intimately of a biblical figure. He writes, "I am a man with a heart that offends / With its lonely and greedy demands / There's only a shadow of me, in a manner of speaking I'm dead."¹² John the Baptist has always been someone who has intrigued me in both a religious and historical sense. As a prophet born before Jesus, I have always wondered of his thoughts and feelings towards his cousin. Stevens song about the same person is not dissimilar to mine, but lands in a different way. His lyrics reflect a personal meditation on John in regard to himself. His words speak to human desire and the natural greed of the soul. Stevens labels himself as unworthy and "dead" compared to the life of John in service to Jesus. The title of this song completely draws in the listener, which is why I selected it as the title of my poem. It creates a sense of intimacy, something I really wanted to replicate.

Another song of Stevens that both showcases a religious motif and his lyrical ability is "No Shade in the Shadow of the Cross". This may be one of the most significant songs I have ever heard lyrically. The title is thought provoking in itself. The concept of shade in the image of a crucifix is strangely emotional. Shade as a motif can signify solace and comfort, while a crucifixion, the crucifixion of Jesus, emits sacrifice and heavy sadness. Stevens is relating his biblical allusion to his own struggle with addiction. He sings, "I'll drive that stake through the center of my heart / Lonely vampire / Inhaling its fire / I'm chasing the dragon too far."¹³ This image is so visual and so filled with symbolism, it throws the listener straight into the emotion of the song. The image of a vampire coincides with a visual degradation of a body through substance abuse. Stevens, weak from drug usage and habitual drinking, drives the metaphorical

¹² Sufjan Stevens. "John My Beloved." *Carrie and Lowell*.

¹³ Sufjan Stevens. "No Shade in the Shadow of the Cross." *Carrie and Lowell*.

stake through his own heart. Similarly, in the image of the dragon, this self-harm is present. This brilliant use of symbolism is something I can only hope to approach in my own work.

In conclusion, many of these poets and musicians have contributed to who I am as a writer today. In many ways, their influence can be seen in much my work, though I hope not only to emulate or imitate them in my poetry. I hope to convey them as artist. I hope to convey their spirits, their tone, their intimacy, their diction, and their importance in my life, not just as poet, but as a lover of art. My art lives and breathes their art.

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Self-Analysis

Upon study of the collection of poems I have written for this project, there are a few reoccurring themes and motifs that continually find their way into my work. I think it is quite apparent that I glean much of my influence from the lifestyle I was raised in. Growing up on a small suburban flower farm, I have an intense appreciation for life in all forms. This comes out in my writing with reoccurring themes like death and nature appearing in almost all of my poems. The tone I tend to take in my work is one that can be described as dark and pastoral. I believe this comes from a very intimate relationship that I have with the concept of death. Tending many living animals, like goats and chickens, cats and dogs, I have seen my fair share of death. I have seen the beauty in passing, and the cruelty. My personal conviction to write about nature would naturally include my perception of death. I have included thirty-one poems in this project, which is the culmination of my creative undergraduate work. Many of the poems appearing here are products of poetry workshops and appreciation classes I have taken throughout my time here at UA. When I first started this project, my only real goal was to write something that was thematically consistent. I didn't want something that was the same throughout, but something that had a consistent voice, my voice. I have been overjoyed to hear from my sponsor that my poetic voice is unique and strong, and my themes, motifs, and tone attribute to this uniqueness. In this essay, I hope to analyze to the greatest extent, all of these attributing elements.

As mentioned above, one of the most consistent themes throughout my work is the theme of death. This usually appears in some sort of literal death or metaphorical meditation on death. It appears specifically in the title of a prompt poem that I wrote for my Advanced Poetry Writing Class called "Death of a Tamagotchi". I chose a Tamagotchi because of its familiarity to my

own generation. I have killed, by accident, countless electronic creatures, but I believe this was the first. I wanted to recount my own personal experience of leaving/losing one and coming back to it, only to find that it had died. I tried to think about how it would feel to die an electronic death. I wanted to know what the experience would be. This wanting manifested itself into anaphora. I write, “I wish you could tell me how it felt to dissipate. / Attach yourself to particles of air and float. / I wish you could tell me it was like falling / asleep. A tiny death descending like rain.” These lines appear in the second stanza of the poem and are a departure from the tone of the first. The first stanza holds a tone of urgency while this one feels a lot more contemplative. The final line was inspired by Rochelle Hurt’s poem “Diorama of a Tiny Death”. I love the idea of a small death, and I think we as people witness more of them than we realize. Take the expression “my phone died” as something we use in everyday speech. Now, take the expression literally. It is interesting that we as humans impose the verb *to die* on an inanimate object, personifying it. In this poem, I wanted to take that already existing concept, and push it further.

Another poem that appears in this project centering on the concept of death is “my Japanese beetles”. This poem also has a similar motif of tiny death, though in this poem I describe a physical death. Japanese beetles are an invasive species of Asian scarabs that would eat away at my mother’s flower garden every summer. I write, “Tiny drones with robotic / rhythm, skeletonizing the foliage of figs and flowers. / Green leaves turn into biological lace quilts crocheted, / then burned. The delicate work of bugs.” I would sit in the garden and observe this “delicate work” of the beetles and my mother would bribe me with money to collect them. We already had large traps for them, bags that would hang in our apple trees. Being strapped for money as an eleven year old, I did whatever I could to earn enough cash.

Ringpops were a symbol of status at baseball games, and I couldn't be seen without one. My mother would have me smash the beetles after collecting them to make sure they would no longer harm her garden. This eventually turned into a common summer pastime of mine. While it may seem cruel, it may have been more cruel to leave them. It pained me to kill insects, but skeletonized zinnias and sunflowers were even more painful to witness.

Both poems, centering on death, have similar voices and tone that describe my adolescence. In "Death of a Tamagotchi", I explore a metaphorical death and write a very contemplative poem about the physical sensation. In "my Japanese beetles", I write about physical death and approach it as a commonality of life. I think this dichotomy really speaks to a child's perception of loss being sometimes exaggerated and sometimes understated. It also plays to the maturity that develops with the coming of age. I think what I really try to get across in these two poems is the different kinds of losses one can feel with death, and that sometimes metaphorical death can cause more pain than the physical.

Nature is another reoccurring theme that I continually interweave into my poems. My poem "Caisson" is an example of this. It is written in inverse haibun form, which usually includes a prose poem followed by a haiku. Since I wrote it in inverse, my haiku is first followed by the prose. The poem centers in subject around amphibians. My haiku opens with "Silent, round toads sleep / winter beneath silver snow— / iced bodies so cold." The haiku is commenting on the natural occurrence of hibernation. Toads spend the winter buried in the mud, their body temperatures nearing freezing point. My prose portion then goes on to describe their awakening with a shovel. This is something I actually experienced firsthand when out shoveling the garden one morning. I had no prior knowledge that there would be anything other than dirt hitting my shovel that day. I was extremely surprise and intrigued to see a "glob" moving

around like a “morphine addict”. In the prose, I relate this slow movement to Caisson’s disease, or decompression sickness. It is also commonly known as *the bends*. This is the phenomena experienced by deep sea divers when they come up to the surface too quickly, bubble of air forming in the blood and tissues through the dissolving of nitrogen. I had studied marine biology in high school and took a keen interest in it. I wanted to know what the toad was experiencing when I intruded upon its slumber. I wanted to know how it felt to be woken up from near death. I write, “I wonder if they experience *the bends*, decompressing as they arrive too swiftly from their dark world, into mine. Space and deep water and body frozen solid. Re-entering this world can be more painful than leaving.” Upon deeper reflection of the words I use in this description, it becomes apparent to me that maybe this poem is also unintentionally about trauma and mental health. In many ways, a reintegration back into society may be more painful than the action of leaving. I read somewhere that if a toad does not bury itself deep enough in the mud that it is at risk of freezing. I think I was trying to convey that people can be that way too sometimes.

Another poem of mine that is again focusing on nature is “Cathedral Glass.” This poem is about chickens and a henhouse transforming into a congregation and a place of worship. My family raises chickens for eggs so I have extensive knowledge of the delicacy of their life positions. Sometimes, when I would go into the henhouse, it would depress me. This would happen especially in winter, when the chickens would not go outdoors for months at a time. There was a sadness to their existence that I pitied. Though, they never seemed to be aware of their situation. I had the idea to relate that to the concept of faith in religion. I first describe the chickens. I write, “I watch them as they dart about—squawking, / slightly singing their witness of life.” I wanted to try to play up a sense of ugly beauty in these lines. Chicken squawks do actually start to sound like songs if you listen to them as much as I have. I am focused to get

across here a sense of life experience or life witness. In this poem, the chickens have their own perception of life, and the speaker does as well, looking down on them from a higher perspective. The speaker is the metaphorical “God” in comparison to the chickens, but the speaker is also contemplating their own spirituality. Description continues with religious imagery intermingling with the visual appearance of light the speaker is experiencing. The reflective chicken feathers create a refraction on the floor that looks like cathedral glass, hence the title of the poem. The speaker finishes the poem by remarking on the oddity of God existing in a henhouse. I write, “While I am mesmerized by the ability of / blind rays shining into dark henhouses.” I wanted to land this poem in an area of ambiguity because I know not everyone who will read it is religious. Still, I tried to convey one can have a religious experience with religion never entering in a formal way.

Both poems in relating to nature take a dark pastoral tone that can be felt in many of my poems. I think there is a sort of beauty in the undesirable aspects of natures. I prefer writing a poem about toads hibernating, or chickens existing, one that highlights the melancholy just as much as the magnificence. That dichotomy is fundamental to me because it is my personal truth, living and breathing it all of my adolescent life. Nature is not always nice, but sometimes it is. Nature is not always kind, but there is kindness in nature. This is what I try to convey in my poems about the natural world.

Whether my poems be about the natural world, or death, pastoral or dark, about Tamagotchi’s or chickens, they always reflect on the speaker in some way. Much of the time, I am that speaker. If my poems are anything, I hope they are a reflection of myself and are true to my spirit. I hope they reflect my loved ones, my way of life, and my passions. I hope they reflect my experiences, and eventually reflect something within the reader.