


Spring 2017

New Elegies

Sarah McCall
Old Dominion University

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NEW ELEGIES

by

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B.A. May 2000, University of Mary Washington

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Old Dominion University in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

CREATIVE WRITING

OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY

May 2017

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ABSTRACT

NEW ELEGIES

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Old Dominion University, 2017
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This manuscript investigates a poetics of desire—how desire manifests in and around the self, the body, and the world. Bearing witness to desire has afforded me an opportunity to develop and refine my own sensibility in my poems, which are deeply personal and narrative by nature, and craft my work around these related themes: Spirituality, marriage, grief, home, identity, sobriety, love, and even racial and environmental concerns. In my work, desire represents a container for a broad consideration of yearning, and wanting—and how to manage such feelings every day, in the world.

Elegy motivates many of these poems, though like desire, I'm working within a broad understanding of elegy with respect to both form and content. The idea of elegy is rooted in honoring the dead, and that is part of my work, but also just the beginning. In this manuscript, elegy means shedding layers of self, inviting in the new, accepting what is, and what is not, and allowing emotional space for the entirety of the experience. There is grief, but there is joy here, too. I want my poems to contain all of it.

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We find out the heart only by dismantling what the heart knows.

Jack Gilbert

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I bow my head in deepest thanks to Luisa, Remica, and Tim, my bright guides—
and to Tara, for showing me how much it matters.

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The Promise

Say nobody dies
in the end. Say the opossum's
not rabid. Say the upturned
fence gets fixed. Say
the dogs aren't sad
when we're gone. Say climbing
Denali got cancelled. Say *check engine*
isn't hazardous. Say the negative
balance is cleared. Say the backyard
moon still delights you. Say it
doesn't matter if we come: bodies in love
for the sake of loving, with or without
post-script, never revising.
Say we forget happiness, forget
sad. Say the time it took us
to figure that out wasn't wasted.
Say we aren't waiting to fail. Say
the firewood's dry for burning tonight.
Say it's alright if it reminds me of bourbon.
Say *you're the one*. Say *I never believed*
in that stuff. Say the fire's gone down
but it's still not the end. Say let's wait.

Wedding Photograph

They both wear suits. My father's, simple and dark,
tie tucked slightly behind his silver belt buckle.
In his left lapel, a bright carnation. Dark too,

her double-breasted tweed suit; short skirt, turtleneck.
Would they ever look like this again? Tailored lines,
careful finish—the undetected swell of her belly?

Shock of bleached blonde hair falling in loose
waves around my mother's shoulders—her crown,
a bit of tarnish seeping out at the roots.

Why does she smile less than him, worry a shadow
across her lips—how to be a mother,
the right wife, to silence her parents' example?

The camera's gaze, a bright presence—
fleeting hope showering them in black and white.

Coming Into the World

These are the things I carried: the want of relief,
the *never enough* of my father and my mother's
tireless hiding away; the moving
truck full of my grandmother's beautiful clothes
headed to Boston, the end of broken noses
and terrified dinners; the grit of the beach where
my parents flirted, tanned skin shining with promise,
twenty-year-olds stoned on freedom, bodies
in the backseat of a Mustang convertible—
procreation first, always more than making love;
sand that held ash and bone, scattered from his
children's fingers; the year my uncle flew out of a car
and died on my brother's first birthday,
the crank of jalousie windows to breathe life
into a tiled basement, wood stove, roller skates,
cousins deep in hide and seek, the order of things—
she was first, he was third, I was fourth;
the black and white photograph of two-dozen faces
mirroring bloodlines, a red brick porch taller than
I knew existed; the Ziploc bag full of my father's
Vietnam letters, each one pressed with *all of my love*;
the communion song of hard work, weekend jobs
and side hustles, evening exhale from cigarettes
and tobacco pipes, sweet smoke through open windows,
tangled phone cord long enough to leave rooms between us;
mothers with three babies, eleven babies, six babies,
a psalm of forgiveness breathed into each child's ribs,
the grown up forgetting – of white Eucharist dresses
and hands held on sidewalks, the unshouldering of grief,
its weight passed onto boys like a gift; sharper than a wife's
silence, the silence of marriage, empty space for the heart's
big wanting to holler into; the fear of liquor in untempered
mouths, the fear of seeing them in me, and the whole lot
spread out on coarse grass, their vulnerable, darkening skin—
a prayer in all their fingertips to touch something holy.

Last Chance

You shave the yellowish hairs from your husband's neck,
watch the soft threads crawl onto his shoulder blades
and he says *easy, easy*. You think, when was the last time

living felt easy? You practice prayer for the hell of it,
you daydream a drink to cleave your head into two halves,
facing each other like bloodied fists; you are equal parts

desire and despair, pushing against the seams. You palm
the tufts of hair into the sink, run your finger along his nape
to make sure the line is even—a clean cut. Your poems,

shaped like whole weeks of looking, are untended halves
of your head, fantasy-drunk and sorry that you don't
waste less of your time, your unbroken bones. When it's

still black one morning, you open the trashcan and a meaty
raccoon crawls out, yellow eyes staring hard, unblinking.
You run from him like it's your last chance to live.

wherever you go there you are

for maybe three or four nights this summer I read to you
from a meditation book we fell to bed at the same time
which we never do and you said *read to me*
you couldn't have known how much I loved that
your warm naked back curled against my left
arm and leg face turned away after maybe two pages
you tremble little earthquakes I dream you're dreaming
your wolf dream fast like lightning wet fur slicked back
eyes shining you elbow me kick your feet more animal
less man more intimate fearless I loved you more than
ever before wrench of wanting deep in me for occasion to stick

I know my heart needs what it needs once I saw the same couple
walking my street early morning he walked the white dog
she carried the thermoses speed walking every single day
I felt hungry for it the sameness in my gut which is actually
my head crafting practices at the end of this poem
there's a beginning so I'll give away the ending now
what I want is embarrassingly simple it's for this to never end

Revision One

In this version, my father's father still dies
on the day of my eighth-grade graduation—
prostate cancer. He goes home to the blue
room where his children file in—but
this time my father doesn't get hit in the head
one month later at work. Doesn't lose brain
matter on the shipyard floor, comatose

for seven months until his February death.
My parents still fight about money, work
too hard, never build the in-ground pool.
I quit piano, but after a while he lets go
of the music he loves, comes to swim meets,
even reads the poems I write. My dad
holds my sister's baby on our front porch

when she gets married, and she doesn't
get married again. My oldest brother becomes
an engineer then, instead of two decades after;
the rest of us learn the shape of ourselves.
Dad keeps the fire burning inside the concrete
walls of his shop, forging dragons and unicorns
out of discarded metal and imagination.
In this version, I learn how to love, watching
my parents grow old together.

Wonderfully Made

A baby cries out with happiness, three teenagers sit on the curb of the sidewalk eating frozen yogurt out of Styrofoam cups, the policeman pats down a homeless guy who leans against the car but they won't harm each other, not tonight. We fucked in the storeroom under a single fluorescent panel, or did we make love? Because our mouths touched over and over and the sweetness of it makes me close my eyes. I don't know the difference. You drove home to your mom's with your new dog and I walked back to my place alone in the hot waves of evening. Once we left this way in anger but that was a long time ago. Not tonight. Tonight there is Dave Brubeck from the empty patio of an empty restaurant. A couple walks by with the same pair of black dogs that we saw earlier in the park. You wanted to know if the dogs were related, but now you've gone home so I don't ask. And then I catch a breathful of happiness. And then I hold my arms out alongside my body with my fingertips spread wide and I am unharmed. I feel that harm is impossible. I read a Psalm yesterday that said *I am wonderfully made*. I never read Psalms or the Bible at all but it happened by accident and then I was glad.

Ode to the New Year

Quiet as buried bones we wake,
 brace for the cold of winter morning—
 my dog and I creep among barren streets
 lick our teeth, humming, unknown
 to bodies still vibrating
 with champagne and kisses until there's no
 more of one and never enough of another—

I see freedom in his sniffing
 every leaf and corner and pile of shit
 Let me learn from him this year
 I walk quicker and follow
 his nose, his absence of premeditation
 and we are warmer now
 walking into the rising sun as it spills
 on the empty park like syrupy liquor at midnight
 let me be a song that is light this year
 let me be born again as the baby I once was:
 pink-skinned, fat and beautiful
 breathing in deep gulps of freedom
 unburdened by worry
 eyes brimming let me lead by nose
 and not thought,

Oh let me surrender
 just before midnight my sister and I wrote
 down our goodbyes then burned them
 with plastic lighters in the cold wind
 the dog nipping at ash of regret
 and heartbreak and judgment,
 fervent snaps of his jaw at what was already
 gone—and change,

oh let us change
 we burned that too
 on separate sheets of white paper
 burning in gray cindery curls
 may I wake up with thank you
 on my eyelids and lips as I feel
 for the dog's fur, his warm nose
 touching my nose

I've never asked
 for perfection or even greatness
 but let me know radical love this time:
 big as the Atlantic and the Pacific
 and all that lines the land in between—
 wipe the table clean with my arms, my cheek

and feast on the savory cuts of effort,
the gristle of occasional failure—
let me step over this pile of ash,
the fading heat of goodbyes
as neighbors and strangers shout across parking lots
between brick apartment buildings—
Happy New Year
Happy New Year
echoing into the beginning of us—

Bound for Glory: A Dream

You are lost in an airport, all flights cancelled but one.
You have a ticket in your hand for somewhere. The lines

are nonexistent. Blank flight information screens
flash green static. You smell hot dogs, walk past cinnamon

rolls two hands large. You drag your finger across displays
of slick, trashy magazines, bottles of water, boxed cologne.

Packs of Juicy Fruit tumble to the carpeted floor,
thread-bare underneath your sandaled feet.

You keep walking, past a girl with a guitar, and glance back
at her sign: *freedom for sale / how much is it worth to you?*

Coasters and bar stools, but it's a desert in here; a glass
sweats in anticipation of some drunk with time to kill.

Music pipes in from creaking speakers outside the façade
of this terminal. A man pushes piles of nameless luggage tags

and invisible dust with his broom. In a dream, does it count if I eat
a chili dog or down three shots of bourbon? Suddenly there are

a dozen doors, and I've exited to the tarmac. My father stands
waving from the top of those portable steps adjacent to a plane's

door, but there's no plane. He's wearing a flannel shirt and Dickies
work pants, but he's missing his striped shipyard cap, usually perched

cockeyed on his head, little tufts of thin hair sprouting underneath.
A job hazard, hair burnt by welding flames and blacksmithing.

I wore one of his hats for years until I left it in a cab one night,
the faint smell of fire and smoke a stand-in for him, maybe

my pride. I hear music from the speakers now, but louder.
It's Bob Seeger. My father mouths the words, still waving—

someday lady you'll accompany me, and he smiles.

Self-Portrait At 38

Between the books, the phone, and a stack of lists,
 days wither and blur. One day I'll practice
 going slow. I used to love music: Dylan, Ella, Nina Simone,
 Beethoven—they could wreck or fix my heart. Now
 I'm mostly powered by silence. I read poets
 who make me want to quit everything,
 I try to understand meditation and yoga sutras
 but I think I'm too stubborn for acceptance.

I like to take long walks beside the train yard
 and watch my dogs run, quickened by scent
 of food, sex, stress; to trace their invisible rituals,
 how they communicate without words, like air
 or smoke. I want less language, nothing imperfect
 to explain, tossed beyond this barbed wire.

I'm not old, but I often wish I'd live to be an old woman.
 I like ocean swimming when I'm too far out,
 past the oily wake of speed boats where fear seizes my legs
 kicking hard underneath the warm surface.
 Sometimes in coffee shops or gas stations I speak
 to strangers to know I can still feel kind.

I love stroking my dog's ears.
 I meet my mother for a donut.
 I send postcards and thank yous to prove
 my own handwriting still works. Oh, gratitude.
 My body's freed itself from youth and stupidity. I wish
 my headache would loosen its grip. What if
 I already know how to let go?
 I have a picture of Bob Dylan on my wall that says
All I can do is be me, whoever that is.
 Child of salt air, grass, prayer—
 worry dissolves like each exhale
 that, so far, belongs to me.

Dear Frank O'Hara

The first Cedar was downtown, and then later
a little further south on University. That's where you
held court, not at this one, not where I worked more than
50 years later. Still, I looked for his ghost in the basement
when I went to fill buckets of ice on Saturday nights.
I'd look twice in the warped mirror that hung behind the bar,
the stained glass glinting red and blue in the afternoon
light of a quiet midweek shift. I'd sit outside and smoke
on the stoop waiting for firemen to drive by, listening
for the honk of delivery trucks down the block, hauling
and heaving their weight like one of my tired old customers
on and off of his stool. A silent nod, a finger tap to the side
of the glass: *I'll have another, when you can*. Was that you?
in between the bang and creak of the Cedar's double doors?
Men used to step sideways to move in and out of them,
shuffling for a moment before gliding around the long bar.
But I think you could have slipped between those doors
without a sound. Not ever shuffling, just gliding.
A split second of no one knowing you were there,
hidden in the sun's 4:00 glare before you were swallowed
by your lovers and your painters and your never empty glass.
If I ever caught you in between those doors, in between
shifts, or in between my own glass always spilling over,
I would want to know what you really meant when you said
There's nothing metaphysical about it. I wouldn't think
to ask what you drank or who was your favorite lover,
not why *Orange*, or why *Lunch Poems*, or how many postcards
you sold at the Museum of Modern Art. I would forget
to ask about Kerouac pissing in his ashtray and whether or not
you guys always paid your tab. Instead I'd ask you if you ever
hated writing, or if you ever felt like a big fat fraud, like I do.
I'd ask you how to give less of a shit, how to fade into
my own lines and become a bright green couplet on the first
day of spring in New York, the best place on earth.
I wouldn't be able to keep you to myself for very long.
Everybody loved you and you made it seem like the easiest
thing in the world, to sit at the head of the table and be adored.
You'd stub out your French cigarette and exhale for a long time.
Stop acting like this is all so important, you'd finally say. *Shut up
and write, or don't*. So when the Cedar closed its doors for good,
I left New York City—left the bar and the ghosts behind.
They sold the air space and built new condos on top of the tavern,
turned the floor level space into a nail salon, or some kind of office.
When I visit I walk down the east side of the street so I can look

at the old place but it's mostly unrecognizable. I keep my eyes low
as if I would still be noticed after all these years.

There's a plaque in front of your old apartment at 9th street—
Frank O'Hara lived here, famous poet, a modern kind of man.

Marriage Report

When you are still new enough in your marriage,
they want to know with an expectant flourish
what it's like. I want to ask them *well what is it for you?*
I wonder if they still bring each other coffee in bed,
if they make love against the kitchen counter, if
the bank account is shared. Instead I just say
it's good, because it is, honest to god.

I don't say all the other things, stuff that clouds
my head every day. Like how we are still
getting to know each other, tiptoeing in between
flashes of mood—is it misery like he sometimes says?
Unhappiness like little grease stains I can't remove
from the belly of his t-shirt? Because in other moments
I'm certain I've known his heart from the second time
I saw him—coffee shop on a Saturday, me talking
about quitting my job for grad school, him talking
about his ten-year old boy, his dying father—
some bluish, far-off horizon in there.

You can see how this is too much to explain,
more than people really want to know when they shine
their teeth at you. *It is the hardest thing I've ever done*
I say, to me and not them; that's what marriage is like.
Always wanting more, red bloom of ache and desire,
what grows from our wide hearts. More tender,
not less—like the green flesh of plants reaching
for light to flood in, and feed us.

to the pecan tree

in my new backyard
of the house we rent
but do not own
scruff of a yard in need
of seeding this fall
but first perhaps unearthing
a layer of trash mashed
into the soil I've dug out
straws and pens bottle
labels with long gone ink
feeling stupidly surprised
by where stuff ends up
four squares of concrete
make a driveway beside
the back porch onto which
the pecan tree drops
its early wares for weeks now
due in part maybe to lack
of pollination or record heat
or possibly the bevy of squirrels
stunned by their dumb luck
to land in a filthy rich
pecan tree drunk off their asses
and making it rain green
husks of nuts scattered
like little stones which thwack
against the pavement the invisible
squirrels shuffling between fronds
tossing them like confetti
while tittering at me and my pups
this morning which is to say
these squirrels are gleeful
and can't get enough
or maybe it's the satisfaction
of gnawing their way through
to a shred of unripened meat
I wipe slivered bits of nut
and shell from my bicycle
seat my fingertips stained
goldenrod at which point I also
swallow a gulp of the tree's
sweet stench not quite rotten
but penetrating and as I wheel
across the celebratory mess

of shells they toss a couple
more pods at me boastful
as if to say *go ahead*
and sweep it up you fool
we'll make more
I'm still thinking about this tree
on the bike ride home
its abundance tossed
like garbage on the driveway
I push a straw broom
across concrete until a pile
forms mid-September heat
sprouting a little sweat
on my brow and in between
my breasts at which point
I want to fling everything
from my body right here
among this chain link
and these too close houses
instead I sweep and sweep
leaves and husks
shards of shell and nut
the whole time thinking
what can I say about this pile
to make it matter
the heap coalesces brown
and green making it harder
to see what's dead and still
living something so wasted there
I reach for an uncracked green
shell hold it in my palm
and eye its four stiff ridges
which makes me think
are you rented or owned?
the dogs sunbathe and pant
and wait for this chore
to end wait for what remains
which causes me to wipe
my face gulp another pungent
breath count these mundane
pleasures like the silence
of the punch drunk squirrels
knowing tomorrow is more
of the same they are rich
and I feel a little rich now too

Reading Sharon Olds in the Vestibule With Dogs

Mornings, the warmest place in the house is up front, the green door flung open to let the light in. The dogs lie still, sunning. I carry my book up there too, sit on the floor and rest against one wall, hold the book close to my face to block the glare on the pages. The little one, Hank, shines like a black whiskered seal, his eyes contented slits as he shifts his small skull onto my thigh. Laundry turns in the dryer, the only sound in the house after I quiet the morning radio. My coffee sits out of reach, cold now on the dining room table. Page after page about her father's last minutes before death, and sometimes I can't tell if she loves or hates him.

Today is twenty-three years since my father died – a lifetime. And he didn't die in the way she talks about – labored breaths, vulnerable to the marrow. He wasn't sick, or old, and I'm not telling those stories anyway. Instead I want to know what comes after. I want to know if the yogis were right, that the identity at death can send a soul into its next life; I want to know if *chanting god* can shift the identity from a dying body. But what if there's not enough time to decide? Would I remember to chant a sacred thing, over and over? And yet, isn't it here—this warm corner, floorboards holding the dogs and me, our eyes closing for a bit.

II

Dear Love & Co.

Dear Love, I'm like that fictitious heart
that expands and contracts red pulses
of affection, as if it could feel into the brain's matter.
Dear Sex, I don't care if you're the primordial
instinct from a single-celled organism
or a non-verbal chimpanzee with a hard-on
for his girl as long as you assault
my guts with the warm bloom of desire.
I confess, I never took that psychology class
or cared for the smoking cigar of Freud's ideas.
I care his family was house arrested during the war
& that his mouth was bred into a hothouse for cancer.
I care he said the inability to have vaginal orgasm
was due to early conflicts, a failure to launch.
Dear Love, I never had to escape persecution
or defend my family's history to the gods.
True, I avoid wading into a frenzied surf
with shark warnings but have thoughts of getting wet.
Is that why I'm for life preservers
on deck to save, maybe, drowning blow-hards like Freud?
Dear Sex, despite the inflated girl talk about hearts
and red, feels more like I'm motoring
stretches of empty highway without lights, hoping
to crash or get caught, those turned down beams,
the lost cause of their darkness and the darkness
of their lost cause. I confess to more chase
fantasies than a librarian with a tightly wrapped bun,
but this time, don't know how I forgot
reality. Maybe, I've come to change the address
to Dear Good Enough, Dear Solace, & accept the rest
like movie tickets waiting to be torn in half
at the box office, like those occasional ecstasies, flares,
for you to fan the smoke back and forth
after the sparkler's orange heat.

Wait [*verb* \□wāt\]

1) to stay in a place until an expected event happens, until someone arrives, until it is your turn to do something, as in the shuddering body, hers, underneath his tongue, fervent circling—until, until, until—*maybe next time*; 2) to remain in a state in which you expect or hope that something will happen soon, as in her body taut with stillness, playing dead beside his but he does not know; as in one fingertip at her back drawing a line she will come hurtling across; 3) to delay serving, as in *hot and now*, as in *come and get it*, as in her fingertip pads burning against the heat of what needs to be held, she practices the tension and release of kneecaps toes belly and wonders *how long must I wait?* 4) to look forward expectantly, or, to hold back expectantly; when she faked it or avoided the question, turned forgettable, forgot names and lost count of their bodies, ripped the tangled sheets from the bed and leaned her hips against the jerking machine, the spin cycle's steady vibration, the trembling, dependable halt at the end; 5) to remain temporarily neglected or unrealized, as in the time before she knew what it was, this lifetime of without, worse now for knowing what it wasn't; similarly, the grief of losing over and over what she never had; 6) to remain stationary in readiness or expectation, always seeking heat (her cold skin cannot warm itself alone), muscles stitched up with resistance, because *how do they not*—she waits, and hates the stillness of waiting

Dead Bird

By what migration it appeared
on our doorstep—flying blind, alone?—
the lifeless body interrupts a fight
we've not yet learned to avoid.
Uncertain which came first, silence
or anger, I gather the language I consider
sacred and let it burn from the inside
out. Now, the groceries my diversion,
I leave the bird where it lies—
feeble effort to plan dinner instead
of an ending.

The bird's one eye stays fixed
on me as I make several trips from car
to kitchen, stepping over the sleek black
body, not bending to stroke the velvet feathers.
My hand wrapped in a double plastic bag
I scoop the bird, finally, not gripping
its body, not hearing its muted thud
in the empty can beside our house.
I imagine the hardest thing about flight—
not the probability of assault or getting lost,
but the fragile likelihood of soft landing.

Flammable

Perhaps it's the heat bearing down
like it always does in July,
ordinary feat of nature oppressive today.
Nothing is ordinary anymore:
a black man killed by white officers and he already

has a hashtag in front of his name, touted
by hundreds who don't know how to respond.
I am worried about the heat, combustible skin
of our bodies. Only certain bodies *are* the flames.
A friend tells me he's afraid to leave

his house today, blanketed by grief.
Two black men smile and talk in a parking lot,
sun beating on their skin. I wonder how tired
they must be, as they clasp hands and press
their shoulders together. Parting ways,

knowing every time could be an ending.
I am worried about the world,
which does nothing. At the grocery store,
I see the cashier, a boy I taught a few years ago.
When he looks at me,
his open smile is a flash of heat.

Long-Term

My mother spent her whole Sunday furious with both of my grandmothers. One, my dad's mom, surrounds herself with her children instead of entering a nursing home. They make her meals, change her clothes, pay the bills. My grandmother remembers everything, she just can't see. Can't really move without help. They are all my mother knows of family for so long now, but she isn't blood. She scoffs at this. She makes a dinner each Monday and takes it to my grandmother but she resents someone having so much help. The other one, my mom's mom, lives 500 miles away up north. My mother is her only family but my grandmother refuses to come back to Virginia. She's broken her hip twice from falling. She won't drink water and she takes a million pills. For years now my mother drives to visit her and help, but my grandmother says she's fine. She's stubborn in a way that I see in my mother too, but my mom hates her for it. My mother says *next time I visit I'll make her tell me what she wants for a funeral; she says all of you will be there, right?* I say of course. We think about the condominium full of furniture, rugs, knick-knacks. It would take an army. We sit in Starbucks and my mother eats her frozen coffee drink with a spoon. Little bits of syrup and whipped cream drip on the table. I tell her they are just old and it's going to happen to her, too. Anything can happen. She shakes her head, says *I'll kill myself before that happens to me.*

Over Coffee and Eggs My Husband of Three Weeks

asks if I ever think about having sex with other people
and I stumble to answer *only by accident*, which is to say
that when I do it's gross, and he says *so that's a yes*.

The truth is I don't want to touch other bodies but his
and mine and ours at exactly the moment when we do—
but there are so many others that I am still forgetting:

M was married and mostly just my friend, my drinking
buddy, but sometimes there was cocaine and foam cups
of beer in Brooklyn at 7 a.m. Occasionally we'd fall

onto each other naked, his belly too big for my
tiny body, his dick slack from bourbon and guilt.
When he left town I went to the Irish bar in Queens

with my girlfriend L and cried in my beer, seriously.
D & S were my first loves. To say I don't think
about them would be wholly untrue. What's more

true is I don't even recognize the girl I was then.
I was untethered in love with S like rip tide, like boiling
salted water that stains long after its heat dissipates.

I collected his letters and held onto them so long
it felt criminal, tiny pieces of contraband I suspected
would someday betray me to someone else.

I'd be lying if I said I burned them; instead
I think I just tossed them and swallowed a mouthful
of bitter spit. What's funny is that I cheated on S

with D, fresh out of college, cornered and looking
for an easy way out. The first betrayal of many.
An older me went after ones like B, sloppy drunk

and snowed in the first time, his cock too big,
his ego too needy. He forced it on me,
all of it, and didn't I want to say no? I didn't.

I even called him for it again later, asked him to come,
but I was sober that time and none of it was fun.
I was squirming for something to quench my barren

throat, a clearing of space to breathe from, to wet with one
word: Enough. He was second to last before you—my husband,
my safety net, my home. Fertile ground for growing whole

truths, which is to say *yes*: of course there were others,
whole mine fields of what I long to forget,
but with you my memory works hard to stay awake.

Honeymoon, Costa Rica

We hated Santa Teresa
at first glance—too many
bars and backpackers, narrow
strip of dirt road through town.

Our AirBnB a construction site,
a joke. I begged to go back
to beautiful Nosara: past one
roadside café after another,

we'd drive hours over the same
dusty potholes, never stopping
to ask for a bathroom. The moody
GPS assured us, but here

was a river in place of a road.
I took a picture of my husband
to his knees in brown water,
staring at the embankment

yards away. This is a marriage,
I thought, not a honeymoon.
Resistance rose like heat.
He demanded we go across

and I said we wouldn't.
What was the worst that could
happen, get stuck? I couldn't
do it. When I told him to go back,

he threw the car into furious
reverse—I said this is not how
it's supposed to be, he said—
what do you want, divorce?

Then miles and hours of silence.
Why couldn't we laugh and go
over? He wanted the other side
so badly, uncertainty waiting for us

like that river, begging to be crossed—

Caught

In the parking garage this morning a young black woman backs her Acura into a space. When I try to move around her she rolls down her window and screams something at me. I can see her wavy hair skimming her shoulders, her pink lipstick. Is she telling me to *fucking wait*? Am I nervous? It's cold and rainy and the garage is brimming with tension. Everyone's moving in and out of tight spaces. Everyone's late. Everyone hates the weather. My jacket hood is up and I don't know if she sees my face or if she cares. I don't know if my face makes her more or less angry. Maybe she's pissed at herself because she's uncomfortable, and I made it worse. How often I see people not wanting to be seen. I drive past her car when she has almost backed into her space. I wonder if I'll see her outside, in the world, where we are both trying to not be angry and late and caught in between desire and responsibility. There's a video online called *Texas Road Rage Incident* that has over 18 million views. Two men get out of their cars and thrash each other with a bat and a long stick. People use their phones to film it instead of calling for help. Who can imagine something like that happening at a red light? At work a woman on my hall speaks to everyone and laughs constantly. She's a smoker, I can tell from the ragged texture of her voice and her small, persistent cough. I shut my door the other day but I could still hear her, laughing and saying *have a good day* to everybody. Today though, I left my door open and hers was too. After she hung up the phone with someone she said *what a fucking dumbass person*. And I can't believe how much I enjoyed that.

Letter To My Father

What would you tell me about how to be a wife,
one half of a whole, not to be undone?

Would you say pay less attention to the floorboards,
the dust that gathers there, your constant desire

to make things clean? I suspect you would tell me
that marriage and god are the same—

all of it can be undone when you least expect it.
You'd ask if there is music in our house, and if there is,

you would say *Listen—go to church with your whole
body and sing, but only if you want to, because otherwise*

it's no good. Afterward, let there be jelly doughnuts.

Going Across

We were kids. It was the summer after dad died. Mom had a AAA “trip tic” and a pop-up camper hooked to the Ford Explorer. That thing had so many flat tires and mishaps that we named it SB, short for shit box. I learned to drive on long stretches of highway in the pitch-black night during a lightning storm somewhere in the Midwest. Mom slept in the backseat and my younger brother and sister hovered, wide-eyed and excited. I drove down one mountain in Colorado and burned out the brakes. The smell stayed with us for hours. We saw Four Corners and got lost trying to find Canyon De Shelley. There were rock formations everywhere, big swaths of pink and beige, pushpinned by gas stations, low-rent diners, makeshift shops on the side of the road selling blankets and beads. At the top of Pike’s Peak we got locked out of our car. We stood shivering up there in the snow in the middle of summer, our shorts and sneakers so misplaced, pretending to smile for a family photo. She wanted to give us a vacation, a real one, for the first time ever, moving across the burning lines of states we might not see again.

//

San Diego to Virginia in three days. I flew to California to help drive my younger sister home. I-40 east littered with bits of her regret for leaving the *best* coast. Her Civic packed so tight there was nothing to see but what lay ahead, hazy stretches of myopic interstate and a bland homecoming. Arizona and New Mexico and Texas felt like one gigantic state, built on pure heat and no green, no water. Our hair whipped our faces as we leaned out of open windows, avoiding air conditioning to conserve gas, maybe. We ate Subway sandwiches every day, scrounged around at gas stations for the lesser evil of snacks. I slapped down my credit card for a little cheap luxury at Holiday Inn Express after driving in a straight line for hours. Pulling discs from a huge black bible underneath the front seat, we spent one day in Dylan chronology until we got to the religious stuff, the late 70s and early 80s when he was weird. *If you gotta go, go now, or else you got to stay all night.* My sister’s constant disappointment her only map, a red line zigzagging over and down the unwieldy country she couldn’t ever leave.

//

You and I will go. Twice I’ve done it in summer, but you and I will go when it’s mild. If there is a range of hurt or happiness I want to climb over it, take pictures, get lost, and say *we were there*. When we went into the West Virginia wilderness together for three days we called it a test. This time we can take three weeks, maybe four. I don’t know how but we will be able to. What is there to test now? You’ve seen ruins and mountains across the world but I just want to drive this with you. See the corners I have not seen. The Florida Keys, Maine, Montana, the Great Lakes. I want to wipe my finger across the dusty surface of each tiny town. I want to know they still exist. I need them to be there. We will camp, we will stay in the worst hotels, we will turn off the music most of the time. I can quit navigating because you will know the way. You and I will go across.

Does This

Do these lines on my face make me an alcoholic? Silver strands of hair, thin-skinned hands, does sobriety make me an alcoholic? The squeeze of freshly cut lemon over ice, the way I know its taste over vodka, does this make me an alcoholic? The taste for breakfast or at midnight or until it doesn't have a taste at all, the way I want a higher power to be real, the way I want congratulations for quitting, I want *I'm so proud of you! Cold turkey? Unbelievable!*

The revulsion and allure of let go and let god, of cigarettes of escape of oblivion of death of giving up perfection, does this make me an alcoholic? I don't know how many people I've slept with, I don't know whether or not I had a disease, but it's not a hangover anymore. What about the all or nothing tendencies, addictive behaviors, the fear and more fear of myself, of my marriage of love, of not love. Does fear make me an alcoholic? Does hating my sister because she won't quit make me an alcoholic?

Does choosing yoga make me an alcoholic? Does dog walking and humming and talking to myself and meditating to stave off irrational bouts of anger make me an alcoholic? What about cataloguing clouds, appreciating nature like *oh my god did you see the sky tonight*, does that make me an alcoholic? The sharp twinge in my gut when I smell whiskey, when I hear bottle caps or aluminum cans hiss, when I want it to burn, when I want to forget, does this poem make me an alcoholic? What about that book I read about quitting?

Does my headache make me an alcoholic? Ten years, four years, does keeping count make me an alcoholic? Do the words *it's genetic, it skips a generation, fuck it let's go get a drink, let's go have one more, let's find some blow and stay up until the store opens*. Remember that time? Does that make me an alcoholic? The sting of every feeling, incessant rumble of thoughts, engines of doubt and waking up at night fueled by heaps of feelings clobbering my skin, burning my face, my eyes, my throat, does this fire that won't go out make me an alcoholic? I am, I don't, I won't—I'm not sure. Are you? Does this?

What Gleams There

this morning my man woke me in the mood for love
and I thought *hot damn!* because I'm in the mood too

there's so much to thank as the sunlight creeps in through
the blinds and he rocks beneath and I say *hold on to me*

and he does, we head somewhere light, some imagined shore
because it's been so heavy this winter, this year—

I bring a book of poems into the yard but I don't
love them, I only want to read the jaw-dropping stuff,

what gleams there like all of this new grass, which normally appears
ragged the dogs fight and nap and wrestle for a moment I say

quiet now, mind and it does tangle of bird songs and squirrel
songs climbs wildly out of tree-tops squeaking *holy shit*

look at me! look at me! and I do, I move from the plastic
chair to the blue hammock my man has strung from the fence

to the deck I climb in with my blanket and my book because
there's a little chill, it's just Spring yet— a fat black bumblebee,

no two, it's two now—they bump their bodies against
the blue nylon of the hammock, which I think of now

as my rowboat pushing away from shore

Say Yes

On the pier last night we say yes, let's get married, but we are still afraid of ourselves, not forgetting what lies beneath. Nearly done with this winter of grieving, we spring forward. We look for signs of life, overturn cold, flat stones expecting a tangle of worms, a feather; green tuft of moss, a cluster of daffodils—the worst flower, everywhere. I dream of orange tulips,

blue hyacinths to smother the senses, but we take what spring gives. It gets better. The icy snow we thought would never melt has gone. Underneath lies the same mottled asphalt. Our dogs piss on every blade of grass, we smile at their small rib cages heaving with breath. We run to them.

III

Prayer

let me come back as a bird
bones like paper and eggshells
head weightless
free of judgment
and relentless thought
mouth contented by teardrops
of syrup
and salt
each movement an asana
an offering
a prayer

let me be a bird with turquoise-tinted
wings touching down
on nests and animals and tables
feet that are not feet
weightless

let me be warm-blooded and toothless
singing
om namah shivaya

Origin Blues: An Elegy

I come from the mixing truck and the calloused hand,
 the idling engines and the rear view dreams;
 I come from the gravel-paved court, the charcoal cookouts
 and bare chests swimming in cinder block pools.

I come from a long line of bartered time,
 flights of stairs hammered one into the next.
 I come from the borrowing stock, the shaded workshop
 of ant farms, the oil cans, the rusted bike rims.

I come from the coffee and pipe-tobacco porch,
 I come from the wrought-iron handrails and the cawing crows;
 afraid of debts, afraid of broken-down automobiles,
 skies bleeding pink, stacks of wood cut for the stove at night.

And I believe what they say about your skin:
 sun-etched, stitched with scars, 100 proof,
 tiny hairs burned behind the welder's mask;
 the howling dog, the wolf scratching at the moonlight,
 though every night the moon gathers its stars and leaves.

I come from salt-water beaches
 and the stinging nettle's grip. I come from dogwood.
 I come from newspapered tables and watermelon rinds.
 My safe distance and your not leaving—almost the same.

I come from iron and smoke
 though you couldn't anchor down your anvil,
 though the metal-latched doors snaked shut.

Old man, father dead twenty two years,
 I know too well what clings to our screen-door souls.
 Not in the ground ever, your flannel-clad arms;
 not in the ground now the gnarled curve of your fist.

And I will tell you more of my memory of you
 now that you live in the lapping waves of the bay:
 fourth of July fireworks at twilight
 children clamoring around your knee caps
 trying to touch the hard line of your jaw—
 whiskey laughter booms and they cry *more, more*.

If

I could finish this cup and walk right onto the concrete patio, bum a cigarette,
light up and inhale the smoke with my pride and my shame.

I could turn down the music so low that everything is heard – words, pauses,
clearing of throats. Scrape of chair legs, clatter of spoons.

I could tell the old man with the mustache and the glasses that I love him,
throw out this buttery crumb cake and eat grapes instead—

but what I really want to do is tell you I'm sorry your dad died last night.

I want to pick you up and squeeze the sorrow out of your throat and your eyes.

I want us to not be alcoholics so we can have a whiskey, cry, and let one be enough.

I want our mothers to meet, drink coffee and talk about their dead husbands.

I want to break this moment wide open, put on my crown and my courage.

I can tell you all this if you show up. If you let me buy you a coffee. If we scare
ourselves enough to not know any better, to walk head on into our love.

Dear Endings

dear so-called discontinuation
 of being, dear cease & desist,
 redundant in terms & also – you fallacy, lover
 of false finishes, I want to know,
 once and for all, about closure –
 doesn't everyone? You aren't god,
 you're something else. But explain faith
 & lapses of Catholicism, fervent genuflecting
 for years then *bam*, upright for life & -isms
 that don't end in Amen. The faith
 that keeps my grandmothers teetering on edges
 resistant as my dog's jaw on a bone:
Don't take this from me, don't you dare –
 aren't their graying crowns a denouement?
 But no, each morning a wind-up breath
 propels them back for one more day.
 I'm not sure if summer ended or if winter
 won't show up: my memory of seasons
 pummeled by global warming, if that's even
 a thing. You would know, wouldn't you?
 About denial of a proper service, like exes
 that ping my phone years later – *still there?*
 Trains whistle all night though I'm certain
 the train yard is full of rusted cars tagged
 & stagnant since I can remember. At night
 when I can't sleep I play *The White Album*
 in my head, like a dream, but even that
 has a fake-out – *Her Majesty* sneaks in after
The End. You love the heavy pauses,
 don't you? How you keep the wait just so,
 immeasurable like space, like time – the tail
 of a hurtling comet, its sparkling body unresolved,
 directionless. It's your universe, after all,
 with fits & starts like doomsday now,
 forever young tomorrow –
 & merciless, always.

Love Poem

Sometimes I long to be the stone—
steady and cool, flecked with silver;
a baby's kidney palmed
into the crease of a hand.

You say I want a guarantee
and you're right—
I want you to fold me
into your palm
and stroke the skin of my cheek
with your thumb, over and over.

I want to skim the water
with a wish on my back—
not *forever*
not the *sweet ordeal* of promise
but a return to you, every time.

First Day of Forever

In the parking lot of the Provincetown Inn, I watch the landscaper water and prune brilliant flowerbeds. It's the hottest day of the week and you sneak inside to use their bathroom with your son. I walk out to the breakwater alone and start along the massive rock path. It leads all the way to the Cape's tip, and the water recedes so much that sometimes tourists walk the sand and algae. I think about waiting for you and your son but I want to be alone here. I want to be alone, but of course this is a lie. I don't know if I can be a mother or a good wife, but we are here now. You catch up to me and let your son walk down the rocks into the water. He begs us to join him but we don't. Once he returns, we walk toward the shore and laugh at the horseshoe crab that swims the shallow water, following us. There is a small park of memorial stones at the foot of the inn, flat stones engraved with names of the dead. They say things like *Bears Together* and *Grammy & Popsie* and *The First Day of Forever*.

Prayer for Orlando

Yes, love is love is love is love is love is love
and guns are guns are guns are guns are guns

I say my prayer 49 times, 50, 53—hammering
breath against the vacant walls of my chest
the President says thoughts and prayers aren't enough

not enough breath to revive the pulse of 49 dead
Oh it's a motherfucker, isn't it? That the internet

can't explain dying, can't observe a moment of silence—
I climbed 49 stairs to make my pulse bleed harder

ducked under 49 waves so cold I couldn't breathe
yes, love is love is love is love is love is love

but not enough love to revive the pulse of 49 dead—
last night I counted 49 stars hating every single one
for their silence, their knowing glint against nothingness

June 12, 2016

bright, infinite

this evening you drive across the bridge tunnel as you have
your whole life, away from home or toward it, face hanging

out of the window like a dog lapping up air, your nose and cheeks
wet with tears. did you choose this water or did it choose you?

gulls swarm above the waves, dive bomb for bait. they echo
on the windows, on your skin. if it's true this city is sinking

into a meteor's crater formed 35 million years ago in the mouth of the
Chesapeake Bay, why don't people believe it?

instinct or foolishness, the gulls chase desire to the death,
to the point of being swallowed. you're paralyzed in front

of photographs of blown off mountain tops, or people up to
their waists in water—unthinkable, vanishing beauty.

you discover the word *solastalgia*, made of solace and desolation,
deep sadness for a world irreversibly altered – at the same time

you find your city ranks second only to New Orleans in sea level
rise. you eye furious waves staining the legs of the bridge,

licking the concrete carrying you toward thunderstorms.
as a child you walked into the mouth of the ocean, swam far

enough your periphery became bright and infinite—kicking
madly against a giant body that could consume you.

Softening Prayer

My friend the massage therapist tells me *don't take this the wrong way, but you're a hard person, you know?* This, after she kneads the muscles of my back and shoulders like dough—bent at the waist, close to my mashed down face on the table—lays her full weight on me one forearm at a time, sliding toward my tailbone with excruciating intention. I silently begged my breath to do its part, listened for its ocean sound coming in and out, my throat a border crossing for release.

I prayed she would know I was doing my part, until the pressure lifted off my back, until she released handfuls of skin and hair, pulling and twisting the matter of me in her fingers, lengthening my skull away from my neck—until I thought my breath would fail me. This, because I am hard. My body slogs in battle with my heart. Isn't this the origin of any fight? A difference in essence—you are this, I am that—deafening bombs, then fleeing the wreckage.

Still, I am just a body, though I've been taught not to identify with even this body. What's that saying, *be careful, for everyone is fighting a hard battle?* If that's true, I pray for a softer heart. For quiet—breathless pause between resistant pain and a crash of relief, breaking foam and froth down my neck, spilling salty medicine over my skin, so I can be less hard.

On Being Sober Five Years

This morning the world is covered in dust,
thin curtain of yellowish resin settling on everything.
I see it falling to the earth in the shadows
of the hundred-year-old oak across the street,
I see it everywhere as I pedal my bike to work,
dust hanging in between houses and spilling
onto front yards. It looks as if someone applied
one of those filters, the kind that makes photographs
look vintage or a little more worn. How concerned
should we all be with *false spring*? Birds arriving
ready to eat and breed, only the plants are long gone.
Do we not dance anyway, giddy, in spite of ourselves?
I wonder if knowing better matters in the end,
but this isn't the end—here's a cardinal,
here's a man sanding the hood of a rusted out convertible
in front of his storage space. Here's the copper yard
where three dogs used to be chained outside
in a circular fence with one dog shack for shelter.
How I hated their bitter chorus of barking, but today
is silent and I tell myself they aren't dead, only rescued.
Who doesn't feel regret or shame about the past?
Here's spring, here's my birthday, here's to another year
and another in which I wake up and see more
of myself than I sometimes care to. I lock
my bike to a metal handrail and blink back focus—
and when I say the dust disappears, which is exactly
like recognizing forgiveness—I know I am here.

Hummingbirds

When I tell my husband I need to write more
as we're driving interstate 81 to McAfee Knob,

he says *Write about the hummingbirds
we saw in the Monteverde cloud forest –*

dozens of them swarming two feeders,
tourists snapping incessant photos.

I tell him a poem can never just be
about one thing—there must be layers,

implication, metaphor—But he insists,
Why can't it just be about hummingbirds?

So I practice as we hike: the clearing of brush
mere space for dirt to feel midday heat,

our dogs like two children running ahead
to sniff and shit and wait for us to follow.

At the rocky overhang I heave my worries
into Blue Ridge air like fistfuls of coins, like leaves

or bits of bread. We ask a stranger to take
our picture at the tip of the Knob, then

we take hers too. I try not to wonder
why she's alone. In the photos we look as if

we are levitating above the valley, two fools
on the lip of the ledge—tiny, hovering birds.

New Elegy for Old Grief

*He is slipping to dust, my hands inform me,
you'd better remember this.*

Cornelius Eady

As if this, memory, is ever something that sticks.
I touch the plastic photograph sleeves,
each page a small feast, hungrily scanning
for what I can't hear: motorcycle engine
grumbling awake, tin cans hopping on asphalt
after a wedding, a screen door hanging open,
a baby's cry from the Sunday baptism.
He is already dust, don't you remember?
As if that fine powder could stay on my skin,
as if I could remember his mouth, laughing.

Litany

for Tommy

when we are old and our troubled hearts have mended,
when we have stroked the dogs' ears and buried
their bones, let us go back, and when we have slept
under moonlight, under the gravity of not knowing,
when we climb over the last boulder,
and the highest summit, when we are exhausted
by perfection, when we smooth out the calloused palms
and right the rough seas, when we put down our shields,
when our muscles sigh and stretch underneath our skin,
when our bodies fall against each other in need and want
when the porch is swept and the birds stay long enough
to sing, and when our mothers aren't sad to leave
and our fathers know to come back to us,
when the house is too clean for cleaning and all the books
are read, and the dogeared pages read again,
when our brothers let their children grow
and our sisters feel loved, and the houses we grew up in
crumble and we dance around the stones, our lips open
and close in thanks, when forever becomes now
when we empty our pockets of coffee beans
and ashes and picture frames, when we aren't holding
onto this or that path, and failure, and nothing
when earth is stitched up in healing time
and we still have gardens in bloom,
when we believe in prayers and when we have laughed,
and laughed and laughed again,
when we see every last promise broken
and sew ourselves up with a visible line,
when we have tasted so much sweetness that we are sated,
and then we taste again, when we open unto each other
and there's not grief when we cry, when we taste
its salt and lick each other's chins the way the dogs would,
when we bid our ghosts goodbye and farewell,
when we bow to them, and when we bow to the good
mirrored in us, when we forgive everything, great and small,
when a whole constellation of forgiveness
resides in us, and we climb back to the top
once more and blanket ourselves with the gleam
of each star that says return to each other,
return to your animal skin, ride into the woods,
your home and your beginning, and when there's enough
at the table, when we have drunk all its fullness,
when we have let our sons and daughters become us

when we fold down our veils and masks, kiss
our eyelids cheeks and temples, our faults accepted
or rendered invisible, let us go back
in praise of our now open hands, open mouths and veins
full of hope that we are no longer afraid of, let us go and go
when we have forgotten headaches and hunger
and the din of doubt, when we gather one another
into the rich dirt staining our skin, and know, finally,
we are enough, and when we swim blind past scars,
letting salt write the map in our lungs,
let us go back into the current that bears us,
let us go back there, let us go back

NOTES

The Jack Gilbert epigraph comes from his poem “Tear It Down” in *Collected Poems*.

“The Promise” is after Ada Limón’s poem “The Conditional” from *Bright Dead Things*.

“Wedding Photograph” is inspired by Natasha Trethewey’s poem “Photograph: Ice Storm, 1971” from *Native Guard*.

“Coming Into the World” owes its impetus to Remica Bingham-Risher and Tara Shea Burke.

“Revision One” is inspired by Teresa Carson’s collection *Elegy for the Floater*.

“Self-Portrait at 38” is after Adam Zagajewski’s “Self-Portrait” poem.

“to the pecan tree” was inadvertently inspired by Ross Gay’s “To the Fig Tree on 9th and Christian” from his perfect book *Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude*.

“Dear Love & Co.” is after Glenn Morazzini’s poem “Dear Spring & Co.”

“wait” was inspired by A. Van Jordan’s definition poem “From.”

The first line of “Dead Bird” is borrowed from my long-ago teacher, Claudia Emerson, and her beautiful book *The Opposite House*.

“Say Yes” contains a line from the poet Joanne Diaz’s collection *My Favorite Tyrants*.

“Prayer” contains a line from a Sanskrit chant “om namah shivaya” which can be translated many ways, but is often believed to mean, “I honor the divine within me.”

“Origin Blues” is after Eliot Khalil Wilson’s poem of the same name.

“bright and infinite” was originally an ekphrastic piece in response to Eric Corriel’s video installation entitled “Water Will Be Here.”

“New Elegy for Old Grief” contains an epigraph from Cornelius Eady’s “You Don’t Miss Your Water.”

“Litany” is after Aracelis Girmay.

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May 2015-Present

Old Dominion University

Assist the Director of Writing & Faculty Development with campus-wide interdisciplinary quality enhancement programs (QEP); communicate with various Writing Program Administrators to develop a university-wide culture of writing focused on student improvement across disciplines; gather and organize large quantities of student-driven composition data for analysis and assessment; provide hands-on interface and facilitation for intensive instructional workshops; provide ongoing administrative support including proofreading and editing manuscripts, supply orders, inventory, and filing.

CREATIVE WRITING INSTRUCTOR

2015-Present

The Muse Writing Center

Classes at this non-profit writing center are small-scale and intimate, with a focus on the creative writing workshop. Proposed and taught classes specializing in poetry topics such as teen writing, poetry of gratitude, and introduction to poetry. Classes cater to a diverse body of learners in an environment that is non-academic, yet encouraging to the development of all writers. Ongoing volunteer for various community functions such as off-site writing meet-ups and fund raisers; featured reader for multiple poetry readings.

TEACHING ASSISTANT

2014-2015

Old Dominion University

Assisted professor with a large online class of upper level literature students (ENG 336, fiction), managed the online discussion board; graded essays/writing samples and provided individual feedback; observed conferences with students, and assisted the professor with planning/implementation of content.

ENGLISH TEACHER

2008-2014

Lake Taylor High School

Classroom experience ranged from survey courses in 10th and 11th grade English to four continuous years of AP Language & Composition instruction; lessons included explicit reading and writing strategies relating to SOL and AP objectives; outstanding classroom management established through individual and collective relationships; professionalism demonstrated by unparalleled communication capabilities with staff, students, and parents.