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Suspension

Michael Beard

University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, wrj791@mocs.utc.edu

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Suspension

Michael Abraham Beard

Departmental Honors Thesis
The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga
English Department

Examination Date: 7 April 2021

Professor Earl S. Braggs
Professor of English
Thesis Director

Dr. Richard Jackson
Professor of English
Department Examiner

Professor Carrie Meadows
Professor of English
Department Examiner

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Michael Beard

Professor Earl Braggs

English Department Thesis

26 April 2021

NARRATIVE

In a letter to his brothers, John Keats mentions his idea of *Negative Capability*, defined by Keats himself as “when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason” (Keats 261). While Keats’s original explanation is undoubtedly the most pure, I found Douglas Bush’s interpretation of negative capability (in the introduction of John Keats’s *Selected Poems and Letters* in which Bush edited) to correlate more with the topic of my thesis: “a refusal to seek for clear-cut answers, a willingness to maintain a state of suspension, to let the mind and imagination be a thoroughfare for all kinds of ideas” (xiv). Bush’s explanation is more appropriate, I think, for the context of *Suspension*, to begin to understand the creative process, and to recognize the several topical angles from which I approach.

While the word “suspension” may have been directly present in Bush’s interpretation, it was a number of months before finding this quote that I had already decided the name for my collection. It derives from the ekphrastic poem “Suspension” that I wrote in one of Dr. Richard Jackson’s poetry workshops, the poem that serves as the foundation of the collection in many ways. It just so happened that I found Bush’s quote, with that specific word, in a book given to me on a whim by Dr. Jackson this past summer (2020). Perhaps this was one of those beautifully rare times where you discover, or perhaps rediscover, for the first time that murky, not-yet-quite-developed idea that has been stowed away in the attic, brought out into the living room, dusted

off. It occurred to me that I have been subconsciously writing about the concept of suspension for the past three years.

Before applying Keats's idea of Negative Capability to other poets I have read in preparation for this collection (and the collection itself), taking a look at the original version of his ballad "La Belle Dame sans Merci" will give us a glimpse at what role negative capability played in Keats's poetry. The last four stanzas specifically are concerned with uncertainty and a suspension between locations, realities:

And there she lulled me asleep,
 And there I dream'd—Ah! woe betide!
 The latest dream I ever dream'd
 On the cold hill side.

I saw pale kings and princes too,
 Pale warriors, death-pale were they all;
 They cried, "La Belle Dame sans Merci
 Hath thee in thrall!"

I saw their starved lips in the gloam,
 With horrid warning gaped wide,
 And I awoke, and found me here,
 On the cold hill's side.

And this is why I sojourn here,
 Alone and palely loitering,
 Though the sedge is wither'd from the lake,
 And no birds sing. (33-48)

After meeting a beautiful lady earlier in the poem, the narrator is "lulled . . . asleep" her, and is suspended in a dream where he sees "pale kings and princes too, / Pale warriors, death-pale were they all." These figures of power and strength—kings, princes, and knights—are all pale, under the "thrall," or power, of La Belle Dame sans Merci, the same lady who put the narrator to sleep moments ago. In this dream, seeing these pale victims and hearing their cries, the narrator is suspended from reality, his reality "on the cold hill side"; however, after an indeterminate

amount of time, the narrator becomes conscious once again on the same cold hill on which he was lulled asleep. He says, “And this is why I sojourn here.” The word “sojourn,” according to the Oxford English Dictionary, means “a temporary stay at a place.” A *temporary* stay, “on the cold hill side,” suggests a suspension between location. Even more so, the line suggests a suspension between reality, since the last lines refer back to the beginning of the poem: “Alone and palely loitering, / Though the sedge is wither’d from the lake, / And no birds sing,” reflecting almost exactly the very first stanza where the narrator first meets these “knight-at-arms / Alone and palely loitering” (1-2). The narrator, then, has become like these kings and princes, “pale” and under the “thrall” of La Bell Dame sans Merci, suspended from his own reality.

The titular poem of my collection I wrote in Dr. Jackson’s workshop features a similar element of suspension to the one in Keats’s ballad, I think—though, not exact. Here is the first stanza of my poem “Suspension,” where the idea of a suspension from reality is explored:

In this little dark age we find ourselves,
a bird feeder hangs from nothing
and is filled with lost memories from
timeless beings once alive. (1-4)

Specifically in lines three and four, “filled with lost memories from / timeless beings once alive,” the aspect of suspension comes not from a living person or people, but instead come from the memories of “timeless beings” already gone from reality, never able to be reconnected—both the dead and their memories. There is also an element of physical suspension—that is, the “bird feeder” that “hangs from nothing” is suspended in the air. This physical suspension comes again later in the poem: “A halved papaya dangles, dropping seeds / above a plant pot that nearly catches them” (12-13). Of course, this poem has a more surrealistic quality to it, and that is in part due to the inspiration it came from, the painting “Revealed – Concealed” by George Fischer. I wanted to stay more attached to the painting—that goes for all my ekphrastic poetry—when

writing. That being said, the painting itself also evokes these qualities of suspension, though more muted in meaning due to the nature of visual art lacking substantive language.

The Background Readings

Since I played with different forms in one poem, I wanted to find other forms of suspension I could write about—perhaps build the collection around an umbrella-topic of suspension and let a number of poems explore different avenues. However, I recognized it to be virtually impossible to write about every form well enough to get into the collection. So, in order to get a firm grasp on different veins of suspension, I looked to the poetry of poets I admired, poets like William Carlos Williams, Allison Joseph, Charles Simic, Elizabeth Bishop, and others. I read their work with the thought of my collection in mind, with a special lens for anything related to the concept of suspension—concrete or abstract, literal or figurative. It became important to me to understand where I could and could not go with suspension, if I could identify semblances of suspension in others’ poems, then I could write it into my own. Here, I will look at five poems from five poets that illustrate the concept of suspension.

Beginning with one of my favorite poets, William Carlos Williams and his poem “Autumn” have both a suspension of location and a suspension of inevitability. Here is the poem in full:

A stand of people
by an open

grave underneath
the heavy leaves

celebrates
the cut and fill

for the new road
where

an old man
on his knees

reaps a basket-
ful of

matted grasses for
his goats. (1-14)

Location in this poem is relative. The “stand of people” are “*by an open grave,*” (the italics my own stressing) within the general vicinity of the open grave, though the grave itself is not within the interest of the people. The “stand of people” instead “celebrates / the cut and fill / for the new road.” The word that can lead us to this conclusion is “celebrates”; the juxtaposition of the people’s celebration and the open grave create an unbalance in the poem. The open grave is just sort of present in the poem, not really the subject; the people are caught between the site of the grave and the site of the new road being constructed, a location in which an “old man . . . reaps a basket- / ful of / matted grasses for his goats.” Here there is a sense of inevitability—the location where the old man is currently in the poem will soon be overtaken. So, in a sense, the old man is suspended by time, inevitability, unable to do anything about the construction, industrialism’s overtaking of nature.

Ralph Angel’s poem “Between Two Tracks” explores suspension in a more isolated, internal way, not wanting leave a certain moment. The last stanza of the poem reads:

Somebody laughs, the blur
of small talk. I think about my nerves,
the strangeness and predictability of not wanting
to die here with a Tuesday-night special: ox tails
and dry rice, dabbled with gravy.
The warm air, of detergent and grease. My favorite table.
My favorite dark corner. (30-36)

The title inherently suggests suspension as well, “Between Two Tracks,” physically suspended between two locations, two sides of the same set of tracks. However, as the narrator moves away

from the two tracks, so too the focus of suspension moves to a more internal suspension—the desire to stay in and enjoy a particular moment. Angel writes, “I think about my nerves, / the strangeness and predictability of not wanting / to die here with a Tuesday-night special,” a moment, though not appealing to everyone for its simplicity, the narrator wants to cherish. I find it fascinating and often true of myself, too, that, as Angel mentions, “the strangeness” of “not wanting to die” during a happy moment, how the mind can instantaneously go from (in my words) “I am enjoying this moment right now. I hope I don’t die and have it end.” The mind can sometimes take this mental leap, which can be considered a kind of suspension in itself—say, a suspension of fear, whether practical or not.

The poem “All I Gotta Do” by Nikki Giovanni is concerned with waiting for something, but not knowing when it will come. Here is the third stanza:

you get yours
and i'll get mine
if i learn
to sit and wait
you got yours
i want mine
and i'm gonna get it
cause i gotta get it
cause i need to get it
if i learn how (17-26)

The form here seems to suggest a suspension from where the narrator wants to be and where the narrator currently is—desire and impatience. The poem is a mental process of learning to be patient: “if i learn / to sit and wait.” As Giovanni continues, it becomes a matter of deserved reward: “you got yours/ i want mine.” The simplicity in language reflects the simplicity in transaction—in theory, since waiting for something to come, something you think you deserve, hinges on nothing. Giovanni then writes, “and i'm gonna get it / cause i gotta get it / cause i need to get it,” then returns to the thought of “if i learn how.” The stanza experiences a shift during

these lines to determination, a sense of motivation. There is a rolling feeling to these lines: “i’m gonna,” then “i gotta,” then “i need to”; the syntactical structure of these lines creates this roll as the poem moves, juggling desire, impatience, and determination.

Stanley Plumly’s poem “Wages” battles the suspension between class, living poor and the inescapable cycle of working tirelessly in order to earn food for survival. Here is the second half of the poem:

All over Ohio the mills are warming up
and the whole grain in Kansas burning.
Nobody’s starving, nobody’s going to die.
We’re sleeping till sunlight this morning.

But who will not work shall not eat.
Even my sleepwalking mother tells
tells this truth, cursing the cost of living. (8-14)

The narrator (presumably Plumly himself) reflects on “the cost of living”—which is not necessarily a monetary cost, but more of a cost of working one’s life away. Living in poverty around the mid-1900s, especially in this case where the narrator is probably talking about a life of agriculture—“All over Ohio the mills are warming up / and the whole grain in Kansas is burning”—the motivation to “get / out of bed” in the morning is to survive (3-4), to earn enough to put food on the table and continue the next day. Plumly writes, “But who will not work shall not eat,” a capitalist sentiment. I think that Plumly considers (even condemns) the effects of the capitalist system—so ingrained into society—in the beginning of the poem: “My Depression mother in a tin house. / My Depression father in a tin box” (1-2). Although I do not think the poem is set in the Great Depression, it is certainly affected by that time period, ten or fifteen years after, still suspended within their low class.

Ending with Elizabeth Bishop’s villanelle titled “One Art,” her poem features the idea of suspension in a more realistic, everyday context. The narrator references small incidents, losing

small things, that would put anyone in an uncomfortable place: “Lose something every day. Accept the fluster / of lost door keys, the hour badly spent. / The art of losing isn’t hard to master” (4-5). The state of suspension comes in with the lines “the fluster / of lost door keys.” Imagine losing house keys and looking everywhere for them, even in places they would never be; the desperation anyone would feel when looking for lost keys is a state of suspension, suspended in desperation. “The hour badly spent,” Bishop writes, is something the narrator will never get back, no matter how much they want it. Bishop continues, the scale of things the narrator loses growing: “I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster, / some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent” (13-14). The larger and larger objects and places the narrator loses convey a sense of inevitability; there is nothing the narrator can do to prevent losing what is dear to them, much like the old man in William’s poem.

The Collection Itself

A major theme that *Suspension* revolves around is the relationship between my grandfather and me, though I initially had not realized it. Early into its conception, I had a tendency to write poems that had nothing to do with my personal life, such as “Hands Still Playing”—one of the oldest poems in the collection. I avoided confessional poetry, perhaps because I am a fairly reserved person, which is one thing my grandfather and I had in common. I suppose in order to better understand the poems, I need to describe the kind of man my grandfather was—though, to be fair, I do not know much about his personal life. He was a very surface-level person in terms of his personality. When I was in elementary school, I would stay at my grandparents’ house during summer afternoons. He was a very pious man (a commonality that I eventually grew out of, though he never knew). Every day at three o’clock, he would go to his room for fifteen minutes and pray the rosary. My grandfather also enjoyed sitting out on the

patio behind the house and work on word search puzzles, an activity very fitting to his personality: surface-level, simple, occupying. We would work on them when we were together, completely silent, trying to find arbitrary words in an alphabet stew. This activity of ours comes up in “If I Remember Correctly,” a poem about my grandfather’s passing in 2016:

Grandpa was quiet, doing word searches
out on the patio. He circled in blue ink,
kept a heap of pens lying around.

They say that writing in blue helps
with memory. Something about the color,
synapses firing— (4-9)

He was diagnosed with dementia a few years before his death. During those last few years of his life, he deteriorated at an alarming rate. After my family was having a rough time taking care of him, we had to admit him to a nursing facility, since he could no longer function on his own. Months passed. He went the way you would have thought he would—quiet, reserved, in his sleep, peacefully unaware. The poem ends with a remembrance of him:

It was late summer when Grandpa fell
into a forgetful descent, an injured mind
you would let down easy like a newborn.

Years later, one dry morning, dropping off meds,
I notice above Grandma’s bookshelf a ribbon—
in blue, Grandpa’s name, written beneath. (13-18)

“If I Remember Correctly” is directly influenced by my grandfather—the poem is about him, in a way *is* him. In an interview with *Poetry Miscellany*, Charles Wright discusses names in poetry: “When I invoke a name, I’m invoking more than the person or more than the name . . . When you mention a name, you try to bring not only the blossom, but the whole root system as well. You use the name to try and recover the whole context.” Though Wright is speaking about the names well-known artists in poetry, I thought to bring my grandfather’s whole root system to the

page—or, at least some of it. I was there for the end of his life, and he was there for the beginning of mine. That small window is where, for a short time, our root systems were connected.

A number of other poems throughout *Suspension* have been indirectly influenced by my grandfather as well, all of them being fictional. Though many of my poems in the collection are fiction, I tried to write realness into them—two specifically are reminiscent of my grandfather. The first poem, “On a Bridge in a Foreign Country,” mentions my grandfather in passing:

Four or five bounces
was my best. I once saw
my grandfather throw one
with nine. He said there’s a certain art
to skipping; you need a soft touch
and a strong wrist for it.
Look for the flat stones, he said,
even better if they are rounded. (24-31)

Although I have no specific memory of my grandfather and I skipping rocks by the river, it creates a desired atmosphere of familiarity. The speaker remembers their grandfather, being on a bridge in the dark in a foreign country, looking at how the light bounces off the water, reminiscent of how they skipped stones together. Maybe while writing this poem, I was searching for familiarity—through memories of family life and childhood—that manifested themselves after my grandfather’s death. The poem is a search for familiarity. It ends with the location of familiarity through a stranger—“the old man . . . tending the garden / out back”—a sort of placeholder for the speaker’s grandfather, a signifier.

“To My Dear Husband: A Monologue” is an alternative to “If I Remember Correctly,” though mostly fictionalized. The premise of the poem is based off of my grandfather as well—how he developed dementia and rapidly declined from it—but is from the wife’s point of view

(analogous to my grandparents' relationship, though not directly based on either of them). The poem begins with the speaker's description of how dementia has affected her husband:

You are stuck on a railway to nowhere,
to everywhere you have never been.
You are the last to know this, of course;
that sweet, fuzzy mind behind your eyes
cannot make much out these days. (1-5)

I wanted to begin the poem with somewhat confusing syntax—a paradox of sorts—to disorient the reader, at least at first, to reflect the disorientation of dementia. One thing that I did not witness during my grandfather's decline (and even beforehand) was a sense of compassion between my grandmother and grandfather. Sure, they had love for each other, a kind of baseline love, a love that has been worn thin by the past half-century. But, for this poem, I wanted to illustrate the feeling that bubbles up from somewhere, someone's own deep-down, when their partner is on their deathbed facing their own mortality. I wanted the phrase "sweet, fuzzy mind" to portray this love, innocent of everything the past half-century threw at the speaker and her husband. The poem ends on a more melancholic note, the speaker remembering her circumstances; I imagine that this kind of love cannot last forever, no matter how much we would want it to. The final lines are the speaker's ruminations of how her husband would play the piano now, falling deeper into the arms of dementia:

I wonder
if you could write a song now,
what it would sound like, hunched over,
draped in my cardigan—what chords
on the piano would tell your story,
disfigured, jagged, cacophonous.
Something tells me that haunting sonata,
at the composition of your perfect hands,
would just about end my life. (13-21)

In essence, my grandfather inspired “If I Remember Correctly,” “On a Bridge in a Foreign Country,” and “To My Dear Husband: A Monologue,” whether they mention him directly or indirectly. He was never a musician, nor did we ever skip rocks together near Old Hickory Lake; however, he did not need to be a musician or need to skip rocks with me in order for these poems to work, to function the way I want them to. I think poetry and fiction, aside from structure, are often a lot more connected than we realize—or, at least, they can be. As long as the poem genuinely makes the audience feel what you want them to feel, it should not matter if the poem is fictionalized. My goal for these fictionalized poems is to have them convey an emotional truth, and I believe that fiction, in some cases, can be more genuine than reality.

The topical influences of ““Skyline To”” consist of a song by Frank Ocean (of the same title) off his album *Blonde*, as the poem features three words taken from the song, “smoke,” “haze,” and “blur,” that show up in the ending:

I like to look at the way
 you and the horizon
 intertwine—foothills becoming
 spines, smoke becoming
 hands, haze
 becoming eyes.

And I, too, blur in obedience. (31-37).

This poem is concerned with being suspended in desire; it ends as a succumbing to a desired person, whether positive or negative in nature, to the inevitable. The extent of inspiration from Ocean’s song is the title, three specific words, and the sound—the last of which, carried most of the inspiration, and the other two followed suit. I wrote this kind-of-love poem for an important person in my life at the time. This is the poem that broke my tendency to avoid writing confessional poems. It was more of an experiment at first; I had no intention of sharing it with anyone apart from the person I wrote it for. At the time I finished it, the poem immediately set

itself apart from anything else I had written. It felt more poetic to me—perhaps because I was still suspended in that desire. Nevertheless, I ended the poem with “blur in obedience” as a way to hide the speaker into “everything” in the first line—unable to stand out, which is at the heart of the poem itself.

“First Draft,” after its completion, immediately became the counterpart for ““Skyline To’,” since they are both written about the same person and continue the skyline/ architecture imagery. “First Draft” has both topical and mechanical influences, those being the sculpture “Palace at 4 a.m.” by Alberto Giacometti (topical) and the poem “Black Zodiac” by Charles Wright (mechanical). Here is the first few lines of “First Draft”:

I remember the night we drank away our words,
 built a palace out of them, lived
before we slept
 as a beautiful architecture.
A sheet of glass hangs,
 suspended in its own kind of melancholy;
 I can see myself in it, alone
like the skeleton
 of a bird flapping its wings at nothing.
 Your pillared spine sinks in the woodwork.
 I recognize it. (1-11)

Lines five through eleven describe “Palace at 4 a.m.,” as what an ekphrasis inherently does: to give the reader a sense of the work of art without initially seeing it. I first came across “Palace at 4 a.m.” when reading William Maxwell’s novel *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, which has a two-page section dedicated to Giacometti’s sculpture. Here is Giacometti’s account of the work, taken from Maxwell’s novel:

“It is related without any doubt to a period in my life that had come to an end a year before, when for a period of six whole months hour after hour passed in the company of a woman who, concentrating all life in herself,

block with semi-uniform line lengths. I cannot account for Wright when he wrote “Black Zodiac,” but what I accidentally found out while writing “First Draft” was that the content would have suffered if I experimented with structure while conceiving the poem. The poem is more effective, since I focused on content first, and once I was moderately happy with the result, I then focused on the structure (which is when I thought of the organization of Wright’s poetry, after-the-fact).

“Going Out Tonight,” like “Suspension,” is inspired by visual art, specifically Charles Ladson’s painting “Conversation,” painted in 2018. It is one of a few ekphrastic poems in the collection. The painting depicts two people: one in bed and one standing, half dressed, looking at something (or someone) off the canvas. I imagined the conversation, as the title of the painting suggests, to be unspoken, instead thought of by the one lying in bed that I imagined as sick. Here is an excerpt of the poem:

I’ll be gone soon, remember;
 feed the dog while I’m away.
 I don’t want you getting lonely.
 Make sure to let
 the light in; make it guess at
 what you plan out for the day. (11-16)

Again, I think there is a suspension of inevitability with this one, specifically brought on by impending death. In the poem, the narrator, knowing their situation and unable to do anything about it, wants to give the other person comfort—reminders of their reasons for living, letting in “the sunlight” to keep seeing what is in front of them, to keep looking ahead. I wanted to capture that feeling in the poem, and constantly referencing the painting allowed me to do that.

“Where Lilacs Lie” has a couple of influences—most notably the death of George Floyd in late May of 2020. The title is influenced by Walt Whitman’s poem “When Lilacs Last in the

Dooryard Bloom'd," written after Abraham Lincoln's death, altered slightly to fit the context of Floyd's untimely death. Here is the poem in its entirety:

Into this night, when the sky darkens
and the only eyes not filled with rage
provide cold tears for the dead,
we dream things we should not need to dream.
The night is on fire—we can see the blooms
in each other's eyes, taste the ash
in our mouths. The moon and sun and stars
cannot hear us now, if they ever could.
It is only us that live in this moment
where the air is thorns and smells of gas.
The streets are wounded, red as they ever were,
gasping for breath in some rhythm
we do not know, yet we understand.
It reminds us of our own turmoil,
settled in vast pools beneath our ribs.
We cannot put any of it to words, and yet
we must break a dawn of our own. (1-17)

The lines that illustrate the topic of suspension the most lines four, seven, and eight: "we dream things we should not need to dream" and "The moon and sun and stars / cannot hear us now, if they ever could." The first suggests a struggle—in this case, a struggle for equality. The second illustrates that we are alone, suspended by ourselves, unable to look elsewhere for answers—it is within us to "break a dawn of our own," as the ending states, to lunge into a better, equal future.

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POEMS

On a Bridge in a Foreign Country

Two columns, these cables;
not much keeping it together.
I walk along thin railings
that separate me from a lighter air,
above ocean water rushing inland.
What must it be like to see
its surface from the underside?
Dark, shimmering from the moon.
I feel bursts of wind rush
into me after the occasional car,
dim red eyes fleeing.
I want to be hidden in the night.
I want to melt into everything.
You couldn't tell it was morning by
looking at the sky, and its stars
wouldn't give you any hints.
The moon shoots an arrow
onto the ocean's surface,
reflecting off the water,
the same way when I skipped rocks,
wading knee-deep
in Old Hickory Lake with a shelter
of flat stones nestled quietly
in my palms. Four or five bounces
was my best. I once saw
my grandfather get a throw
with nine. He said there's a certain art
to skipping; you need a soft touch
and a strong wrist for it.
Look for the flat stones, he said,
even better if they are rounded.
I haven't seen a rock like those
since I moved away—or, maybe
it would be more accurate to say
I wasn't looking. I feel my foot
kick a stone at the end of the bridge
and hear it roll across the path.
After walking for a moment, I pause
and turn back, pull out my phone
for a light, and find it was instead
a monkey ball; at least,
that's what I know them as.

I pick it up off the ground, brush
off the dirt. Such an awkward fruit,
rough and sappy. You would think
I could remember they exist
just from their bright color. I keep it
with me on the way home—its weight
adding to mine. When I walk past
the town's nursing facility,
I toss it into their composting bin.
Soon it will become the very soil
it grew from, decaying into life.
It is early morning. Light begins
to glow above the horizon.
An old man is tending the garden
out back, sees me and waves.

“Skyline To”

Everything obeys the skyline
of you,
 and I don't blame
anything for wanting your
gilded windows
 and that
rooftop cafe with the perfect
dark roast.

I am far from you;
the sun drips into your dress
(glints of light keep
hooking my eyes)
I am close to you;
your voice has a subtle rasp
(it is, after all, almost
late November)

I visit your museum
from time to time,
 the one with
an Egyptian exhibit beside
the rotating displays
 of Impressionist art
(you have an odd museum, but
I suppose that
 all museums have
strange keep, don't they?)

My favorite place
is your library, top floor.
I like to look at the way
you and the horizon
intertwine—foothills becoming
spines, smoke becoming
hands, haze
becoming eyes.
 And I, too, blur in obedience.

City Grown: A Monologue

Mama always said if I got in trouble
it better be good trouble. She didn't want
seeing me steal, the dollar store on Main,
Ed and Frankie and the boys, walking hot
like moon pies in their back pockets.
We were full of empty trouble, young.

We were alone in that old apartment
but we've never seen that sun shine
the way it did there, didn't eat any more
tomato sandwiches after moving out.
Mama got a job in the city, and we ate
like we always belonged in Philly.

Mama knew I fell in love with the boy
tending the newspaper stand on Third.
She found ten issues of the Tribune
under my mattress from the same week.
When I got home from class one day
the papers sat in trash bags, shredded.

All the cigarettes Mama smoked caught
up with her this fall. On a blue morning,
I bought the last pack she would take
from me, the last glowing red cherry
between her lips; she hugged me like
she had trouble sharing the two of us.

The same week Mama passed away,
a man called me a queer. A moment,
clenching my hand, being pulled in
closer to my newspaper boy, I knew
something hot in me wanted to find
myself in the middle of good trouble.

After the Mall Was Torn Down

The stones along the walking trail
behind the mall comfort the worms
during times we will call unlovely.

Birds don't know why they cry.
Their tears fall, straight down
to a ground they think they remember—

waiting for an overgrowth, slow
and significant, overtaking the smooth
gray path that breaks off suddenly.

Pit

Aluminum between my lips,
the taste, as I'm sitting under
our cherry tree letting my nose
bleed into the snow—the blood
seeps down, reminds me of times
my mother would get upset when
I shook all the cherries down
instead of picking them one by one
like she kept on asking me to do.

Father doesn't make me harvest
the cherries anymore. Mother
is gone, and she was the only one
in the house who liked eating cherries—
every summer when in season,
he made me tie together tin cans
and hang them on the limbs
to scare away birds, so they won't
eat the sanctity of Mother.

Looking out the kitchen window,
Father sees me kneeling beside
the cherry tree and walks over.
Red drops come to a stop—
I cover the pattern and wipe
my face before he arrives.
As if we know what we both want to say,
we sit below our bare cherry tree
without saying a word.

A Couple Friends of Mine

It snows around this time of year,
late autumn. You can see it well
under the amber lamplight,
where those two blue jays are sitting.
Magnificent creatures. I often watch
them in the infant morning
while my coffee is cooling.
What an odd-looking tree
they must think. I put up that lamp
years ago, and I haven't given it
much thought since then.
I suppose that lamp has been theirs
more than it was ever mine.

Pre-Diagnosis

The Black Dog
has come for me.

It draws near,
and I made sure
not to whistle this time.

It gnaws my aching bones
and laps my hair
with its greasy tongue.

It dug a hole
in my garden, next
to the aging white tulips.

Midday, now.
I am tired.

Perhaps a Funnel

There is something
cold in me
 that wedges
boiling tar
into my muscles
 for losing
my sense
of what home is.

Going Out Tonight

after "Conversation" by Charles Ladson, 2018

Mannequin gray, bare skin,
even the sun could not witness
the two of us, strange
in the most common ways.
Are you looking around
for the other black sock?
Maybe you'll find it
where the other boot hides;
besides, purple doesn't go with
what you're wearing.
I'll be gone soon, remember;
feed the dog while I'm away.
I don't want you getting lonely.
Make sure to let
the light in; make it guess
at what you have
planned for the day.
And please, don't forget
to water the plants
in the windowsill, the ones
that remind me of the times
we looked forward to
who we would be
when we die.

On the Other Side of Nothing

Walking in the park
after a week of rain
is proof of everything.
Pay no attention
to the dimming stars.
Forget the crying grass
all around you.
Focus on the paper swans
swimming in the puddle
at your feet;
they are all you need.
Kneel down.
Get a closer look.
Wonder who folded life
into them, how long
it must have taken,
the many tries
before getting it right.
And we never
really get it right
the first time, do we—
so step over the puddle.
Leave the paper swans
where they are.
Listen to the sun rise.
Recognize the proof
resting on your shoulders.

Sandbox Orchard

Tell me about the painting of the ocean that rolls on forever.

The one with the pelican,

perched on a rotting post, staring into the wild sky.

I know you're usually not one for the hustle and bustle.

Slow dancing with the curious moonlight is more your speed—dipped
to a dusting of snow on the windowsill.

The smell of coffee in the morning

stitches the winter days together, the squirrels outside
searching for a more comfortable tomorrow.

Peel a bundle of apples over the sink. Toss the cores in the sandbox by the crumbling wall.

Something will want them.

Show me the beginnings of an orchard we don't want, how the seeds
reveal our illusion—

As the days go by,

I find myself more and more in that painting, resting above that ocean,
under those clouds, away from it all—

Let's go back inside.

The cold is in my bones now.

Young Aspen in Autumn

Not yet a bright yellow with something wild
nor quite as tall as it ought to be—
it is the start of sunrise that peeks
over mountaintops, dim and warm.
It breathes cold and unapologetic air,
dry and worriless—it breathes
the air of dead things.
The brook below it, where its flow
collides and eddies, changes directions,
is sent here by somewhere else.
Redberries hide behind thorns.
A deer bites for them, scraping
herself for their sweetness.
She whips her head around
at the sound of sticks broken
beneath my weight, runs deep
into the comfort of the forest.
I have forgotten I am alive.

An Other-Self Portrait

If the loud world had wanted it
I would have been raised country,
shotgun shell pupils shooting at coke cans,
hair like fishing line.
The wind blows and drags
insecticide in my lungs.
Take a drag of that cigarette boy.
Swim with the mallards
until they rot.
Step right in that horse shit.
Spray it off with a rusty hose.
Dig holes for these fenceposts, but
make sure to leave room
for the people we will become.

On the Drive Home

The dogwoods are somewhere between
warm and barren, like a cold fireplace
heating up from a flame.

A fawn rests in the median trench
while the passing breeze
builds rapport with what is,
and with what was.

A few miles back the mother
can be seen surrounded
by glass from a vehicle, a plush
butterfly in the back seat.

Somewhere along the sky
a vulture will circle around the halo
of the sun. His feathers will glow black,
black as the oblivion in his eyes.

The vulture knows the breeze.
He has lived with it
as if it were a second skin,
and he can feel with it
where the fawn sleeps alone.

Smart Folk: A Monologue

Need to clean my soles, my boss tells me.
They's full of small stones
and covered in the damn coal dust.
Same with my pick,
except the bottom half of it.
I have a writer friend
down in Chattanooga,
says he wants to write about me.
You's wasting your time I says to him.
All I do is swing my pick,
do what my boss says to do.
He don't listen though;
he says, "Mike,
that's *why* I want to write about you."
He wants to ask me questions
about my life,
my work in the mines, you know;
wants to plan a whole trip to Pittsburgh,
for a book or something.
So I tells the fucker
if he wants to know so bad,
he can take my shift next week!

Sympathy at a Diner in Chattanooga

And it scares people, you told me,
going on about your life and one day finding
yourself lying in a bed, sipping from a spoon

held by a man who's paid to care for you.
That's what I imagine my sister thinks, you said.
The look on your face—listening, absorbing,

distracted by your own deep down.
You asked if I wanted more coffee, forgetting
that you already filled it and I said no.

It's funny how we distract ourselves,
I said, pointing to my cup of steaming coffee,
and you laughed it off with a kind of brilliance.

Something I've come to know about people
is that they don't like having their thoughts known.
So I let you take my plate and bring me the check

instead of telling you I caught on
to the way you avoided talking about your sister.
And I let you cash me out at the register

instead of telling you I know your mind's
heaviness. I would have wanted the same, I know,
so hand me my change, smile, wave, forget.

If I Remember Correctly

The backyard lived in geraniums,
lemon-scented. Rain had us in those days,
knocking on windows, curious.

Grandpa was quiet doing word searches
out on the patio. He circled in blue ink,
kept a heap of pens lying around.

They say that writing in blue helps
with memory. Something about the color,
synapses firing—

Same with peppermints, the taste
can help with remembering—
Grandma kept them in a tall cabinet.

It was late summer when Grandpa fell
into a forgetful descent, an injured mind
you would let down easy like a newborn.

Years later, stopping by one dry morning,
I notice above Grandma's bookshelf a ribbon—
in blue, Grandpa's name, written beneath.

To My Dear Husband: A Monologue

You are stuck on a railway to nowhere,
to everywhere you have never been.
You are the last to know this, of course;
that sweet, fuzzy mind behind your eyes
cannot make much out these days.
The sound of your records fill the air
back home; I have caught myself wanting
that static to last for an eternity—
the state of you, lost somewhere
in a roaring silence. The nurses tell me
you hum before bed. I remember
that little melody lulling our baby girl
to sleep years ago. I wonder
if you could write a song now,
what it would sound like, hunched over,
draped in my cardigan—what chords
on the piano would tell your story,
disfigured, jagged, cacophonous.
Something tells me that haunting sonata,
at the composition of your perfect hands,
would just about end my life.

Hands Still Playing

If paralysis is struck paralyzed at its own throat
then movement can freely speak.
You walk out of the ocean that was your night-gown
and feel the sheets of wind on your skin,
the warm sand bed that edges the water.
The night sounds soft in your ears.

“Into the city,” you say to the idle moon. “Into the city.”
Skyscrapers bend into view. Street lamps
shine their bulbs. The city is empty.
Roads lace the ground beneath your feet,
leading you places without you
ever really going anywhere.

Out beyond the border a mountain spins
a lyre, handing it to you, expecting you
to compose a string ballad.
What could feel better than the lyre’s sound
moving through your playing hands?

But wait—
Is the lyre’s wooden voice enough to last?
Is it worn out, among the silenced?
Perhaps it is—resting for a time—or
perhaps paralysis has struck its maple throat.

Bending Into a New Fashion

Suppose a half-eaten pear decomposes on a station bench,
buried in a wad of napkins,

left to its eventual undoing.

Twenty minutes, another bus passes. It goes on.

Somewhere, in a cobwebbed corner of the mind,

you wish to deny this process,

how decay has always been easy—

the way Hamlet raises a familiar skull to his own,

searching for an after-life in those hollow eyes.

You look out of the bus window and see stray dogs
running in the tall grass, a pack of them.

They are not lost

in these plains of Costa Rica.

Not like you, fiddling with the mahjong tile in your pocket,
the orchid piece you found at the laundromat.

Perhaps the tile called to you,

noticing the way you walked,

the watch on your arm, like a pendulum

maintaining the times of its swings.

You were nearly late for the bus this morning,

forgetting your pear in a rush. The church

on the way to the station

had you thinking about

heaven—sitting on that bench, a whole pear,

feeling yourself beginning

to deny this procession.

And you heard the driver calling to board.

Upon Reading “A Hymn to the Evening” by Phillis Wheatley Peters

When you saw the sun fold into the clouds
above the eastern main, did you think to yourself,
how long will this thunderstorm last?
Or did that not matter? I suppose you believed
the sun would always rediscover us waiting;
nothing escapes its reach for too long.
I know that same sun, though it's raining now.
This, everything, has changed since the last time
you saw it—the seasons many times over.
The world is a raging thunderstorm, pouring
in the middle of a desolate ocean, how we seem
to love wasting ourselves. The sun is caught
behind us, folded into the back pocket of the sky.
Wet leaves that once blew in the Appalachian air
lather the roadsides now, static clouds telling me
there's more time to spill before it's bright out.
Perhaps there is no sun here anymore.
Oh how I would enjoy being wrong.

Where Lilacs Lie

In memory of George Floyd

Into this night, when the sky darkens
and the only eyes not filled with rage
provide cold tears for the dead,
we dream things we should not need to dream.
The night is on fire—we can see the blooms
in each other's eyes, taste the ash
in our mouths. The moon and sun and stars
cannot hear us now, if they ever could.
It is only us that live in this moment
where the air is thorns and smells of gas.
The streets are wounded, red as they ever were,
gasping for breath in some rhythm
we do not know, yet we understand.
It reminds us of our own turmoil,
settled in vast pools beneath our ribs.
We cannot put any of it to words.
We must break a dawn of our own.

Suspension

after "Revealed – Concealed" by George Fischer, 2000

In this little dark age we find ourselves,
a bird feeder hangs from nothing
and is filled with lost memories
from timeless beings once alive.

Dusk wraps silk around the heads
of hollow men who cannot think.
Dawn entraps their legs in wire mesh
like leaning saplings in winter.

The lighthouse mourns its more useful years,
when times of rain were longer and fog
slept on the ocean's barren skin.
A halved papaya dangles, dropping seeds

above a plant pot that nearly catches them.
I see other empty storages, too—glass vase,
clay cup, porcelain bowl—all in a line, as if to
suggest something about our own vacancies.

THE FUTURE OF *Suspension*

Suspension has surprised me in a multitude of ways, namely how conceiving the collection as a whole sort of naturally fell into place. As I began to understand what *Suspension* was about, I saw that there were poems, many of them in fact, that correlated with the topic despite being written months beforehand, like a kind of magic. Over the approximate year of working on this collection—a majority of it spent in quarantine, which was a necessary suspension from the previous way of living—I realized I wanted to keep this collection breathing after graduation. That being said, I do not want it to be categorized as a “quarantine project,” like many other artistic endeavors to which, over the period of the pandemic, they have been subjected. I want to keep working on it even after finishing the thesis. So, in an effort to have this collection achieve the potential I know it has, I have applied to several MFA programs; though I have been accepted to some, I am waitlisted by my first choice—yet another form of suspension. I plan on adding to *Suspension* until I am proud with the result (or, in the case of graduate school, until a deadline approaches). I will discover—and rediscover—new influences, new topics, and new methods of writing from which the collection will undoubtedly benefit.