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The University of Southern Mississippi

To My Room's Future Tenant

by

Abbe Garcia

A Thesis
Submitted to the Honors College of
The University of Southern Mississippi
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Abstract

To My Room's Future Tenant is an original collection of poems accompanied by a critical preface.

Keywords: poem, poetry, collection, race, form, voice

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Dr. Angela Ball and Dr. Adam Clay for your praise, guidance, and unwavering belief in me. Thank you to the Honors College faculty for always being ready to push me, encourage me, or smile at me when I need it. Lastly, thank you to my family for being my rock and motivation and for lifting my arms when I grow tired in battle.

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Preface

When I wasn't even old enough to go to school, my parents and I lived with my grandparents, aunt, and two uncles. It was like having seven parents, or seven people whose stuff I could snoop through. My favorite place to be nosy was my aunt's antique metal filing cabinet. It was enormous, with hundreds of drawers. My aunt loved making greeting cards from scratch, so every drawer was full of some new and fascinating stamp, scrapbooking tool, ribbon, or piece of colored cardstock. It was in these drawers that I found my love for craft.

I loved the process of making something new from what I found in my aunt's metal cabinet; and even more than the process, I loved the results. I always felt proud of my originality, and it thrilled me to know that the resulting card or book belonged to me. Even if I made it as a gift for someone else, I was the artist and creator. This love for creating would follow me into high school, where I picked up a love for words. In English class, I was alone in my passion for vocabulary, and I was the only one who didn't dread literary analysis. I was the weird girl who genuinely enjoyed reading Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* or O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find." However, instead of exploring this new passion, I started college chasing prestige. I pursued Forensic Anthropology, a major that always raised eyebrows because of its significance and intrigue. I soon realized that, although I had found a major that was both important and captivating, I was swimming against the current of who I am and what comes naturally to me.

Once I yielded to the pull of language, poetry found me and showed me how to combine my passion for craft and my love for words. To me, poetry not only blends language and craft, but also allows me to stir myself into the mix. It gives me an outlet to piece together who I am by using language to explore my identity. I originally titled this collection "Becoming a Poet," because these poems demonstrate the development of my relationship to poetry and how this

process opened me to learning about myself. The new title, *To My Room's Future Tenant*, makes this collection part of my legacy.

Through trial and error, I have discovered my voice and style. Poetry prompts, in particular, have guided me in becoming a poet, and many of the poems in this collection originated from a prompt. For example, "Command Meant No Options" is an "abecedarian," a type of poem in which the first letter of every line begins, in order, with each letter of the alphabet. In a way, this poem assumed its own identity as I wrote it. I began by coming up with unusual words for each letter of the alphabet, and then I started adding to them, making them lines instead of singular words, and piecing them together. When this poem was nothing more than a list, I could already see a religious theme emerging from words like "fruitless," "misdeeds," and "praise," so I decided to make the title a play on words, with the phrase "Command Meant" mimicking the word "commandment." I continued building on the theme by mentioning the Garden of Eden, "nuns," "priest[s]," "deacons," and "angels." I also quoted the Bible for the first line, "*Ask, and it shall be given you*" (Matthew 7:7).

"Cold Slice" is another prompted poem; here, the assignment was to find a poem that had been translated from another language and translate it again to my own words. I found Lilith Mazikina's poem "Asphalt melts under my sole..." translated from Russian:

Asphalt melts under my soles
Runs hot beneath my feet.
A pack of house-cats calls
For mother in loud clear pleas.
I open up to the breeze
To get drunk with the sun.

I'd learned to give up believing

That summer again would come.

“Cold Slice” mirrors Mazikina’s poem in its eight-line form and its progression of details. While “Asphalt melts” in Mazikina’s poem, “Tile freezes” in mine, and I replace the “calls” of cats with “the hum of kitchen appliance[s].” Mazikina’s speaker “open[s] up to the breeze / To get drunk with the sun,” while my speaker “open[s] up the fridge / to get drunk” from spinning in socks. Mazikina’s poem ends by pulling away from details to focus on the speaker’s thoughts, and my poem ends with the speaker exiting the scene by “glid[ing] away.”

Thus far, my biggest influences have been Dr. Angela Ball and Dr. Adam Clay, my poetry professors. Both their personalized feedback and their own published works have helped me grow as a poet. Dr. Ball taught me how to use line breaks to create enjambment, or breaking lines in the middle of a phrase, which emphasizes the separated words and often creates double meanings. “I’ve Planned for Everything Except This” is a playful example:

you are my sunshine

state of mind

control

peanut butter and jelly fish

sticks and chips

and dip

me gently under the stars

and stripes on your prison orange

The phrases “You are my sunshine,” “sunshine / state,” “state of mind,” and “mind / control” each stand alone with individual meaning. When combined, these phrases create new meaning, giving readers a better understanding of the effects that the “you” in the poem has on the speaker. The phrase “you are my sunshine” implies that the “you” makes the speaker happy, but the word “control” comes as a surprise, suggesting the relationship is unhealthy. The lines “and dip / me gently under the stars” tell the reader that the speaker has some level of physical intimacy with the “you.” The final line reveals another twist, that the “you” is in prison, which further complicates the relationship.

Dr. Ball also showed me how to cut unnecessary words to create more impactful language. “The American Dream Catch” demonstrates the results of this advice. The original draft had several titles that were much longer. For example, the line “Poem About You That I Just Can’t” was cut down from “Poem About You That I Just Can’t Seem to Write.” This edit adds a sense of desperation by ending on “Can’t,” emphasizing the speaker’s inability. I carefully consider line breaks and wording each time I begin writing a new poem, and these details have become integral to my craft.

Dr. Ball’s book *Talking Pillow* has also greatly influenced my writing, and it epitomizes everything I’ve learned from her style. In “Lo Que Hay” she writes, “...but he wanted / Charleston she didn’t now she has boyfriend very tall / Cubano-Spanish and daughters in twenties” (4). Her exclusion of articles, pronouns, and punctuation creates tight and specific language. Everything after “now” is a rapid succession of detail that mirrors the quick and unexpected ways in which a life can change. I create a similar effect in “Barista in Training”:

I’m dark roast
squeezed fresh

from espresso machine

Door rings,

milk-colored man

glistening wrinkles

goofy smile

“I love a woman in an apron.

All you need is a mop in your hand.”

I think I’ll have my coffee black today.

Removing articles leaves readers with only details, such as the sounds of the doorbell and physical descriptions of both the speaker and the man who enters the coffee shop. Details describing the man function as a contrast between him and the speaker. For example, the man’s “milk-colored” skin contrasts with the speaker’s coffee-colored skin, and the man’s wrinkles suggest he is much older than the speaker who is “fresh / from espresso machine.” The exclusion of unnecessary words also emphasizes the shock of the third stanza’s interrupting dialogue, and the terse descriptions of the first two stanzas contrast with the slower pace of the man’s speech in the third stanza. The dialogue, characterized by words with long vowel sounds such as, “apron,” “you,” and “need,” forces the reader to slow down. This change in pace highlights that the barista’s “training” involves more than making espresso.

While Dr. Ball taught me a lot about the middle of a poem, Dr. Clay taught me how to improve the beginning and end. For instance, I learned the importance of having a title that

draws readers in and tells them something the poem doesn't already say. The title of "She's Silent Now" acts as a pre-poem conclusion because it does not fully make sense to the reader until he or she has reached the end. It leaves the reader wondering, "who is she, and why is she silent?" At the end, it becomes clear that "she" is the voice of the speaker, and her silence shows satisfaction with the speaker for successfully writing something. I also learned from Dr. Clay the importance of having a strong ending that does something the reader doesn't expect. In an earlier draft of "Intro to Ethics with Cap'n Crunch," I end with a question: "*How did Hitler eat his cereal?*" However, ending with a question has become a familiar and expected poetic device, so Dr. Clay suggested that I make my last line declarative. The new line reads: "and [I] wonder // *how Hitler ate his cereal.*" This revision also avoids redundancy with "wonder" followed by a question because the last line's statement itself introduces a topic for the reader to ponder.

Dr. Clay's collection, *Stranger*, has taught me how to think beyond myself and consider my life in the scheme of universal experience. The scope of Dr. Clay's perception makes his poetry relevant to his readers, whom he directly addresses in many of his poems. For instance, in "Biographical Patterns" he writes:

Don't write
like this is your *Selected Poems* –
there's enough nonsense
.....
a clouded perception
and a derailed train for each of us,
.....
I'm going to walk around the block

you think ... (127)

The point of view in this passage shifts between first person plural (“each of us”) and second person (the recurring “you”), creating a relationship or conversation between the speaker and the reader. By supplying thoughts to the reader, such as “*I’m going to walk around the block,*” and by issuing the command, “Don’t write,” Dr. Clay invites readers into the world of his poem. Towards the end of “Biographical Patterns,” Dr. Clay continues the conversation, appealing to readers with the command, “Believe / me when I say” (128).

I create a similar exchange in “I’m from the South, Believe Me” by imploring readers, from the beginning, to take me seriously. I also switch from first person plural (“Don’t feel bad, we all have something we just *can’t do*”) to first person singular (“I don’t know how to ride a bike / without feeling like I’m on one wheel ...”). Like Dr. Clay, I give readers something to think about and something to do: “We can’t change the dirt in our wheels, but we still have handlebars.” This line suggests that readers can influence their future (with the “handlebars”), despite their past (“the dirt”), and the finality of this line charges readers with the responsibility of taking action.

Another poet whose work has been influential to me is Tiana Clark. Her book *I Can’t Talk About the Trees Without the Blood* makes powerful statements about race, family, spirituality, sexuality, and the challenges associated with each. For example, in “The Ayes Have It,” she writes about the race conversation:

I think about how people say

It’s not about race, don’t make it about race,

I wish black people would stop talking about race!

When all I've ever known is being defined by my race.

What are you? Where are you from? (35)

The tone of these lines suggests Clark's frustration with those who are unwilling to discuss the issues that must be addressed for a "post-racial America" to truly exist (36). Clark goes on to talk about what it's like to be "*mixed*" in the South. This poem stands out to me because I'm also mixed and living in the South, and I've had people ask me my entire life *what* I am. I identify with Clark's frustration because even fewer people want to discuss the South's Hispanic population or to correct the stereotypical ways in which we have been defined.

I wrote "I'm Hesitation" after filling out a demographics form that began with the question "Are you of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?" After answering "Yes," it asked me to select my race. My first thought was *I just told you I'm Hispanic*, and then I thought *Why does this list have African-American as an option but not Mexican-American?* I found out later (after a Google search) that the U.S. Census Bureau equates Hispanic or Latino origin with ethnicity, not race. Nevertheless, I've known since childhood that my race was more than just "white." I use "I'm Hesitation" to talk about my confusion regarding self-definition, as well as my uncertainty about where I fit in a predominantly black and white South. I write:

I'm Hesitation

in the sharp

breath of the sorter

black white

black white

white

white

...

What are you?

If I could talk back,

I'd say, "Well, if those are

the only options,

I guess I'm spicy

brown smudge on plain white tee.

In this poem, I color myself as "brown" in a place where everyone else is black or white. This simple color distinction truly reflects what it was like for me growing up and wondering how to define myself. Even though the dialogue is supposed to be the sorter's voice, the poem asks me "*What are you?*" Though I conclude by saying, "I guess I'm spicy / brown smudge," I never reach a solid conclusion. My title provides a more concrete statement, saying that rather than black, white, or "spicy / brown smudge, "I'm Hesitation."

Clark also engages in formal experimentation in this collection, using various forms depending on her subject. For example, the lines in her poem "Cross/Bite" alternate between right-justified and left-justified, giving the illusion of two separate poems joined as one. The backslash in the title suggests that each side of the poem is independently titled, with "Cross/Bite" acting as the joint title of the two. In a sense, this division creates three different poems and shows the reader three different angles of the same story. In "Cottonmouth" Clark

fear beneath your skin.

Move slow, use words:

“Hand it over, sweetie.”

side-step side-step

.....

Keep her talking.

“Why are you upset, Jen?”

“I drew green pufferfish,

and he won’t stop calling them

‘cactus balls.’”

The fifth line of the first stanza stands apart not only because it is indented, but also because it shows action with the repetition of the phrase “side-step,” which suggests the adult’s careful handling of the situation. The fifth line of the third stanza provides comic relief from the building tension with the phrase “cactus balls.” The extra line of each quintet provides an emphasis that the same lines would lack if they were limited to quatrains.

Many times, the form I choose for my poems highlights the subject. For instance, “Eating Worms” has a tight form of four tercets, imitating the tight, segmented shape of a worm. The form of “I’m from the South, Believe Me” alternates between a quintet and a single-line stanza, creating an imbalance that reflects the imbalanced racial relations of the South’s past as well as the speaker’s unbalance while riding a bike. I continually seek to make this connection between visualized form and intangible content to intensify my reader’s understanding.

Language, like my aunt’s filing cabinet, is this great big intriguing thing, and its lure makes me want to dig all the way to the bottom and reach to the very back to find new stamps

and punches I can use to make an imprint on others. My final poem, “She’s Silent Now,” epitomizes my experience of becoming a poet and expresses my desire to craft language into something that truly affects readers:

These words and letters, my eyes

looking back at you.

These words form me, and I mold
myself with them.

I’m watching you
from behind every letter,

hoping to snag you
with sharp corners
so the blood on this poem becomes
more than what trickles from my pen.

Here, I illustrate my process of becoming a poet with the lines, “These words form me, and I mold / myself with them.” I also identify my ultimate goal: that my poetry would reach further than the page and leave an unforgettable imprint on readers.

Poems

I'm from the South, Believe Me

we're all aware
the air we breathe condensates
and the wind sweeping Mama's kitchen dirt-pile
stung sores on broken backs
and swung men hung from branches.

Don't feel bad, we all have something we just *can't do*.

I don't know how to ride a bike
without feeling like I'm on one wheel
that *wants* me to fall off
and gift the ground with skin
of my palms and elbows.

We can't change the dirt in our wheels, but we still have handlebars.

Command Meant No Options

Ask, and it shall be given you.

Bleed, and expect a fine.

Call 911 if you get a pay raise,
don't if you're really dying.

Evacuate garden immediately upon sight of
fruitless trees because

God doesn't like those.

Hand over the words of yesterday's mouth
in exchange for

juice and crackers.

Knocked-up nuns will be given
lipstick to identify

misdeeds with a red face.

Never blame the priest.

Only deacons can do that.

Praise others, never yourself.

Quell contradictions and
rage alone in

silence at your grandmother's because

that's where angels never check,

under the edge of a

velvet cross-stitch pillow.

Worry not, for the only

x here is crossed arms over

your chest as you

zip the body bag with your teeth.

First Baptism

My head broke the air,
and I panicked, thinking
something wrong everyone crying

*I was supposed to be the baby
born again*

but I knew I wasn't
a baby anymore because babies need
diapers and I forgot my underwear at home.

I'd find out later nobody cried that day –

when my head went down,
my feet flew up,
and the congregation was laughing at my

breach

Biography as Told by Bookshelf

Breathing Underwater

Eeny Meeny

The Beautiful and Damned

Feed

A Visit from the Goon Squad

Stargirl

Making Your Own Days,

Freak the Mighty, Alone

Yet Not Alone, Eleven, Quiet:

The Power of Introverts

*in a World That Can't Stop Talking, The Perks
of Being a Wallflower*

It's My Life,

The Boys of My Youth,

The Stranger, Pillow

Thoughts, Talking

in the Dark, The Abstinence

Teacher

Hinds' Feet on High Places,

The Scarlet Letter, Heart

of Darkness,

The Lost Choice,

The Trial,

The Confession

An Ordinary Woman, Writing

About Your Life,

*The Metamorphosis, Man's Search
for Meaning, Your Twenty-First Century
Prayer Life,
Pandemonium*

*Whirlwind,
Safe Haven,
The Progress of Love, The Ask
and the Answer,
The Wedding,
The Partner*

*The End is Now
All Day Long
The Perfect Death
Overflow
The Five People You'll Meet in Heaven
Requiem*

The Worst

thing's not to make it
across that stage
without tripping
or dropping the diploma sleeve,

but to step off and know
they put in a lit cannon ball.
Your gown sweeps your leg
hair stands on end.

This feeling, it will
monsoon you,
mountain lion you,
monorail-run-you-over until

you're waking up, hungover,
cancerous skin sweaty and stuck
to the tile floor of a Waffle House bathroom.
These years of your life really are

The Best.

Pyro

Sometimes I strike my middle
finger like a match and hold
the flame beneath my eyes

until they burn and pluck
out my eyelashes to forget
flames remind me of the phoenix,

an over-cooked fowl
that won't rise from ashes
because I ate it, *meat and bones*.

I Keep My Enemies on the Mantel

Each a nesting doll, acrylic
layers of hurt. Judgement
glossed purple in the face
of the girl who swept
dirt under my rug.

Jealousy veils a ballerina
in all white and diamonds. Guilt's
scarred hands crush keys and valves,
my accompaniment. Shame cracked

when I dropped him.
Anger, the core of steel
shaped like the boy who
put my sister in the trunk
and told her she was behind the wheel.

Each fits into the next
until the only enemy left
is me. I split myself open,
tuck them inside.

Barista in Training

I'm dark roast
squeezed fresh
from espresso machine

Door rings,
milk-colored man
glistening wrinkles
goofy smile

"I love a woman in an apron.
All you need is a mop in your hand."

I think I'll have my coffee black today.

Reason Dropped by as a Ghost

Tender specter stashed
among sweaty throngs? Watch me
exert myself on trees and pore
over anyone else's story.

Home's only an ample cardboard box,
and feats become as harbors,
keen on when to blow them off
the caste system, an elemental snare.

Ensnared by that phenomenon,
en masse we declare:
"That's yesterday's estate,"
relevant as lottery odds.

One's been shelved,
another propelled by freeway
on tapestry. Breath – phenomenal –
harmony and cacophony.

Cold Slice

Tile freezes under my fuzzy socks,
sends Olympic chills up my legs.

The hum of kitchen appliance
accompaniment to my triple Lutz.

I open up the fridge
to get drunk for an audience of milk and eggs.

The ice maker releases,
applauding me as I glide away.

Stiff

When my brother was little,
he couldn't say, "rhinoceros."
"Rye-knits-her-knots," he'd say.

There's a wooden rhinoceros on my desk.
He sees all. Right now,
he has his snout hooked over
a bag of Dove chocolates.

Sometimes when I'm alone I wonder
how long it would take them to find me
if I died here and now.

My best guess –
18 hours.
Blame the uncooperative rhino.

Library of Side Effects

I step up to the pill-counter behind the pill counter and
wow, emerald eyes. She smiles and slips me
my bag. Prescription says
meet her here
after hours.

She's waiting for me in a desk chair.
We centrifuge between the shelves and rupture
like capsules. She slides me
yet-to-be-labeled bottles of emerald pills.
I hold a gem to the light, and she says,

“Birthdate?”

Her eyes blink my mind's pills away.
She walks to the shelves where I met
her active ingredients and returns
with the pills that numb me.

How to Disarm a Fourth Grader

Breathe shallow, she can hear
fear beneath your skin.

Move slow, use words:

“Hand it over, sweetie.”

side-step side-step

“You don’t want to hurt him.”

Inch across blue—

purple carpet squares.

“Yes, I do. Shut your *pot hole!*”

Keep her talking.

“Why are you upset, Jen?”

“I drew green pufferfish,
and he won’t stop calling them
‘cactus balls.’”

Grab her wrist,

snatch the lead,

toss it in the bucket labeled,

“Needs Eraser.”

I'm Hesitation

in the sharp
breath of the sorter

black white
black white
 white
 white

...

What are you?

If I could talk back,
I'd say, "Well, if those are
the only options,

I guess I'm spicy
brown smudge on plain white tee."

Eating Worms

My body breathes dirt
on my skin, and in my eyes
it rains, but I don't

drink, I'll drown
in sleep in soil
under my bench.

Must move must
leave must breathe
the greener

grass but gray
stretches scorch
me pink.

Career-Ending Baptist Boot-Sole Maggot

I fed off whatever dead
thing you stepped around
last week. Latched on when I heard
you, honey ringing, sing
hymn #128,

*and Judas marked him
with a kiss to keep
the bargain made.*

Before you, I fed on stagnant/retired rot,
but you taste like success/power/the one in charge
and now I've got a new hunger for the cool
blue center, the thrill
of eating what's still beating
as I slither to the top.

When you blink, I'll bore
through your sole, wriggle
up your leg and plant
my larvae in your lungs.

Hatch –
Choke.

Now I make
your money/sing
your song/walk
your boots.

They Called Him Jonathan

for "America's Unknown Child"

The car swayed silently with the trees
whose vibrant green in the day became onyx
in the dusk. Gravel gave beneath our tread
and the scent of vomit lingered
in the backseat, igniting Mother's disdain
for the boy she bought.

She placed his lame body in a box
beneath an icy willow. I watched
how it swallowed him and saw his nakedness
tumble down the stairs all over again.

On the way home, Mother rolled down her window,
let the bitter wind blot her guilty flame.

Coin Face

You flipped yesterday,
landed tails.

Your face shone like a new penny,
you smiled at me with teeth, pretty
like the columns of the Lincoln Memorial,
and your embrace warmed me,
like a penny in a pocket for a while.

Today you flip and land on your
heads you win and I lose
my shine, oxidize with pride,
become dull to your side profile,
your cold shoulder,
like good ol' Abe on a penny in a gutter.

Tomorrow you'll spin on edge,
with a chink-thud,
into your pig's gut oblivion.

You're Not Thirsty Till You See the "Out of Order" Sign

in a spasm waltz, firm and dazzling blue
the heavens cracked like an egg

she dreams of marble
money and beehives

the guilty woman
daughter of the unforgivable

a subtle prison
in the floral buttonhole

I've Planned for Everything Except This

you are my sunshine

state of mind

control

peanut butter and jelly fish

sticks and chips

and dip

me gently under the stars

and stripes on your prison orange

If Volcanoes Grew from the Sky and Lava Dripped Like Icicles on Awnings
we'd die probably

To My Room's Future Tenant

Your new room is conveniently located next to stairs you can't use unless the building's on fire. The dresser's top shelf is missing a peg, so don't put anything heavy in the back-right corner. The fridge is possessed. There's a delinquent spring in the mattress at rib-depth, so you may want to sleep to the end. The walls are thin. The cabinets over the closet open themselves when your neighbor slams the door. The fluorescents buzz. The showerhead squeals like brakes if you forget to release what Google calls, "the diverter valve." Hairy suitemate = a shower that doesn't drain. You must hold the handle and *will* the toilet to flush. Unless you don't mind a squeaky mattress as background ambiance or mysterious substances on your shampoo, you may want to talk to your suitemate about sex in shared spaces. The walls are *very* thin. I did not draw that penis in the desk drawer, and the nail polish stain is only partly my fault. I did not put that Command hook above the bathroom door, but it's still there because I can't reach it. If you decide to leave the bed where I have it, the smoke detector is on the ceiling right above you, and its tiny red light flashes every four and a half seconds. Ladybugs find themselves dead at the door, and I once saw a lizard crawl into the closet's floor crack.

Who Knew Texas Had Two Parents, Eight Kids, One Fiancée, and Beaches

I remember crying into the ocean and wondering
if my tears tasted different to the sharks.

I remember the smell of burnt
bacon and a sandy bunk bed and the sandcastle we built
with our feet during your aunt's wedding.

I remember your pockets bulging
with the shells your sister and I collected and her smile
when she found one I'd like. I remember
late night chicken quesadillas your brother made
and how good they were with chocolate milk. I remember
the world's worst Chick-fil-A and the shock
of finding out such a thing existed. I remember
my first ferry ride on a boat named John Johnson,
the first time your mom did my laundry, how weird that was,
and how short my jeans looked next to her. I remember
salt in my left eye and
you in my right.

The American Dream Catch

Upon Failing My Spanish Class.

Upon Failing to Pray. On Father-focused Bitterness. After Crying over My Spanish Homework. On Blow-drying My Spanish Homework. Upon Having a Ridiculously Long to Do and Accomplishing Nothing.

Poem After Binging an Entire Netflix Series.

Poem Before Using an App to Fall Asleep.

On Looking Under the Couch for Motivation and Finding Socks and Roaches.

Poem on Feeling Hopeless and the Desire to Quit.

On Planning a Wedding. On Pinterest Board with over 2,000 Pins.

Poem About You That I Just Can't.

On the Crummy Couch at Your Work.

My Vows in Haiku. On Broken Beautiful Plate.

My Vows: 6 Pages Single-Spaced. On Jumping the Broom That Swept Porcelain.

On Sitting in a Booth at O.E.C. and Momentarily Not Knowing Myself: Where or Who. Poem to Remind Me.

Upon Realizing I Keep 18 Pencils in a Cup on My Desk and Only Use Pens.

On Googling "How to Test If Tea Will Burn Your Lips."

Upon Burning. Upon Spilling Beans. Poem in the Act of Spilling Beans.

Poem that Sounds like Spill.

Poem That Sounds Like a Robot in Shut-down.

Poem in Which

I Shut
Down.

Grandmother's Ghost

My family's been killed! All because of
that darn cat. I knew I should've given Pitty
to the humane society years ago, or the neighbor's
impoverished bastard children.

No, surely it wasn't my sweet Pitty Sing. It must've
been the children. Yes, the children are at fault. For all
their bickering must've stirred up a twister
that flipped the car right over into that ditch.

Not my precious grandbabies...
Why, it must've been their mother! I never did like her
with that green head-kerchief and those slacks.
How unladylike she's always been.

Bailey had been driving when we
flipped, but my Bailey Boy couldn't be at fault.
He's the best driver in this country, and his only fault's
marrying that cabbage of a woman.

Why, I know! It was the Misfit!
He's at fault for everything. I'm sure
that he planned for our car to be flipped
right into his hands.

Why, why... I'm innocent as a lamb
in the whole ordeal! Nobody would look at such
monstrosity and think that the lady wearing violets
got them all killed.

Intro to Ethics with Cap'n Crunch

I hate purple,
so I eat all the purple berries first,
seek and destroy them with my metal weapon
until it's a red-blue-green bowl.

Then the same with blue and green;
I torment –
scoop, plop, swirl the throngs.

Until all I see is red.

A purple berry overlooked
annoys me, but I eat it
with the swiftness of a bullet
and wonder

how Hitler ate his cereal.

How Much Deeper Would the Ocean Be Without Sponges?

Rhythm & sister's symbol

crash & painted-over

wallpaper, the smell of it & actually

being friend to enemy. Couldn't stanza.

Free writing & full stumble

& a Charlie horse & the one missing

piece of grandma's Operation game

between your toes. Enjambment.

Lollygagging & lick your lips

& lock the door & brake, pause

at the upside-down, overgrown

stop sign. Caesura.

Buy Mom an Icee

& don't spill the couplet.

WikiHows to Bookmark if You Want to Marry Me

How to:

Be a Beatles Fan

Become a Real-Life Superhero

Make No Bake Cookies

Clean Melted Plastic Out of an Oven

Sing in the Shower

Fill a Dog's Christmas Stocking

Make Balloon Animals

Tell if Chicken is Bad

Make Pancakes

Drink Tea

Draw Disney Princesses

Make Your Bed

Stop Regretting Your Decisions

Care for a Hermit Crab

Tell if Gold is Real

Help Someone with Stress

Make a Refrigerator Cheesecake Dessert

Do the Carlton Dance

Build a Ladybug House

Write a Good Ending to a Story

Delivery

My condolences,
your burrito landed in
the neighbor's ant bed.

She's Silent Now

Every time I sit to write,
the voice in my head
whispers, *bleed me*,
a faint puff on the page
that dries the ink.

When I can't win words,
she starts yelling,
BLEED ME!

These words and letters, my eyes

looking back at you.

These words form me, and I mold
myself with them.

I'm watching you
from behind every letter,

hoping to snag you
with sharp corners
so the blood on this poem becomes
more than what trickles from my pen.

Notes

“I’m from the South, Believe Me” began as a line-by-line response to Curtis Bauer’s “Lines to a Friend in a Less Windy Place.”

The first line of “Command Meant No Options” quotes Matthew 7:7, “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you” (KJV).

“Biography as Told by Bookshelf” gets its lines from book titles. Here are those titles again with their authors:

Breathing Underwater by Alex Flinn, *Eeny Meeny* by M.J. Arlidge, *The Beautiful and Damned* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Feed* by M.T. Anderson, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* by Jennifer Egan, *Stargirl* by Jerry Spinelli, *Making Your Own Days* by Kenneth Koch, *Freak the Mighty* by Rodman Philbrick, *Alone Yet Not Alone* by Tracy M. Leininger, *Eleven* by Patricia Reilly Giff, *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can’t Stop Talking* by Susan Cain, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky, *It’s My Life* by Melody Carlson, *The Boys of My Youth* by Jo Ann Beard, *The Stranger* by Albert Camus, *Pillow Thoughts* by Courtney Peppernell, *Talking in the Dark* by Laura Glen Louis, *The Abstinence Teacher* by Tom Perrotta, *Hinds’ Feet on High Places* by Hannah Hurnard, *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, *The Lost Choice* by Andy Andrews, *The Trial* by Franz Kafka, *The Confession* by John Grisham, *An Ordinary Woman* by Donna Hill, *Writing About Your Life* by William Zinsser, *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka, *Man’s Search for Meaning* by Viktor E. Frankl, *Your Twenty-First Century Prayer Life* by Nathaniel Lee Hansen, *Pandemonium* by Lauren Oliver, *Whirlwind* by Rick Mofina, *Safe Haven* by Nicholas Sparks, *The Progress of Love* by Alice Munro, *The Ask and the Answer* by Patrick Ness, *The Wedding* by Nicholas Sparks, *The Partner* by John Grisham, *The End is Now* by Rob Stennett, *All Day Long* by David McCord, *The Perfect Death* by James Andrus, *Overflow* by Scotty Gibbons, *The Five People You’ll Meet in Heaven* by Mitch Albom, *Requiem* by Lauren Oliver.

“Reason Dropped by as a Ghost” is a lipogram of “Light Turnouts” by John Ashbery, omitting the vowels U and I.

“Cold Slice” owes much to “Asphalt melts under my sole...” by Lilith Mazikina, translated to English from Russian by A.Z. Foreman and found on his blog: poemsintranslation.blogspot.com.

“Career-Ending Baptist Boot-Sole Maggot” borrows its second stanza from the hymn “In Anguish Jesus Prayed” by Barbara Hamm.

“They Called Him Jonathan” was written after listening to the episode “Boy in the Box” from the *Unsolved Murders: True Crime Stories* podcast by Parcast Network. I wrote this with the story of the mysterious “M” in mind.

“You’re Not Thirsty Till You See the ‘Out of Order’ Sign” was written after reading Rebecca Holifield’s “Why Eve Ate It and You Would Have Too.”

“If Volcanoes Grew from the Sky and Lava Dripped Like Icicles on Awnings” is inspired by Graham Foust’s “And the Ghosts” from Lemony Snicket’s “Poetry Not Written for Children that Children Might Nevertheless Enjoy.”

“Who Knew Texas Had Two Parents, Eight Kids, One Fiancée, and Beaches” is the result of Gregory Orr’s “I Remember’ Exercise” in his book *A Primer for Poets and Readers of Poetry*.

“The American Dream Catch” takes inspiration from James Shea’s “Haiku” in his collection *Star in the Eye*.

“Grandmother’s Ghost” takes inspiration from the voice of the grandmother in Flannery O’Connor’s short story “A Good Man is Hard to Find.”

“*How Much Deeper Would the Ocean Be Without Sponges?*” takes its title from a fortune cookie.

“WikiHows to Bookmark if You Want to Marry Me” uses the titles of real WikiHow articles for its lines.

Bibliography

Ball, Angela. *Talking Pillow*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017.

Clark, Tiana. *I Can't Talk About the Trees Without the Blood*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 2018.

Clay, Adam. *Stranger*. Milkweed Editions, 2016.