

WHIPSTITCH

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by
Marta Shaffer 2017
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APPROVED BY THE INTERIM DEAN OF GRADUATE STUDIES:

Sharon Barrios, Ph.D.

APPROVED BY THE GRADUATE ADVISORY COMMITTEE:

Jeanne E. Clark, Ph.D., Chair

Sarah Pape, M.F.A

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DEDICATION

I dedicate my thesis to my dad, David Shaffer, who passed away in May 2017, who taught me to read and write, and to enjoy both.

I thank my two writing mentors, Professors Jeanne Clark and Sarah Pape, for their patience, insight, and friendship.

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ABSTRACT

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Whipstitch is a collection of poems that explores themes of amateurship, grief, mental illness, addiction, and love through the poet's decisions regarding how to use imagery, humor, and form. The poet describes individuals and cultures that make mistakes, that work outside realms of authority and expertise, and that ask questions without finding answers. In *Whipstitch*, the poet invites her readers to acquaint themselves with the people and places she holds most dear.

WHIPSTITCH: A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Portrait of the Artist as a Young, Anxious Girl

Growing up, my mother slept on a futon in the hallway outside the room I shared with my sister. I would stand on the staircase landing that led to that daybed, the nightstand, and the TV on a dresser in the hallway, and look up at my mother. She would sit in her t-shirt and underwear watching TV, hair pinned to one big curler on top of her head. Her five-year AA chip was nestled next to her Valium, Xanax, Vicodin and Klonopin in her nightstand drawer. I would throw my questions and demands up the stairs to my mother, but rather than her catching them they would bounce off of her, hitting the shag carpeting with a thud.

Try to picture that myopic, stressed-out little girl: glasses too big for her head, a nail-biting habit that carries through to adulthood. The little girl pretends to go to sleep when everyone else does, waits and listens for the *click* of her mother turning off her nightstand lamp in the next room, and the light snoring of her sister in the bunk bed above her. She then reaches under the mattress and pulls out a notebook, a pencil slid into the coiled wire on the left-hand side. She is writing a novel. It's about a girl named Abigail. It includes fictionalized versions of her dog, her addict mother, and the bullies at school. She leans her head towards her right shoulder to hold a flashlight in place so she can use two hands. She stays up late. She is always tired in class. Nights are the best part of the day.

I envy my ten-year-old self for being able to write fiction. Even though the novel was undoubtedly terrible, I remember dreaming all day about my character, inventing her backstory,

and the way I couldn't wait until I could write down the next part of the narrative. As is what happens with aging, I have lost that ability I once had.

I started writing poetry in high school. I had loved reading poetry since middle school, but had never thought I could write poetry because nothing I ever tried to write sounded like what we were reading. In eighth grade, we were assigned "Those Winter Sundays" by Robert Hayden. I related to the speaker's guilt over his relationship with his father, and wondered what I knew of "love's austere and lonely offices" (l. 14). My father had been diagnosed with a rare auto-immune disease two years prior and was told he would not make it to old age. My father was the practical and emotionally responsible parent; where Hayden's speaker feared the "chronic angers of that house," I dreaded the taxing role of being the oldest child of my mother, an addict and narcissist (l. 9). My dad was our lifeline, taking on the position most women face of working full-time, and then returning home to housework and parenting duties. Hayden's poem paints a scene very familiar to me, growing up in a cold climate:

Sundays too my father got up early
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,
then with cracked hands that ached
from labor in the weekday weather made
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him. (l. 1 – 5)

At sixteen, I vowed to get Hayden's verse tattooed on me when my dad passed—it's how much the poem meant to me.

I similarly related to e.e. cummings's speakers and characters, when I found a collection of his work at the public library. Angry and rather outcast as an adolescent, I understood the isolation of the eponymous pariah in "anyone lived in a pretty how town," and the "cambridge ladies who live in furnished souls" disgusted me, too. Where my sister and I

grew up in Minnesota, Lutherans and Presbyterians had the final say in differentiating right from wrong, cool from uncool. Our mother-in-and-out-of-rehab and our hand-me-down clothing (and in later years, thrift store purchases) were not acceptable, according to our classmates, despite their insistence on having the proper interpretation of God's word. In poetry, I found other people trying to understand their relationships with their parents, other writers critical of the hypocrisy in their communities.

But I didn't know how to use words like "austere," and I didn't know how to make a semi-colon bounce around like a grasshopper, so I never considered writing poetry. Then I picked up *The Pill Versus the Springhill Mine Disaster* by Richard Brautigan. I remember reading "Xerox Candy Bar" and thinking, *Now no one can write about a candy bar ever again.*

He nailed it. How did he *do* it:

Ah,
you're just a copy
of all the candy bars
I've ever eaten. (l. 1 – 4)

The brilliance of the poem comes from its brevity, its title that does some important heavy lifting, and its accessible tone. Last year, when I switched from studying literature to studying creative writing, I realized the difference between the two is that literature students ask, *How* did he do it? while creative writing students ask, How did he *do* it? I understood I was more interested in the second question.

The glee I felt in discovering Brautigan's work led me to seek out other accessible and humorous poetry. I had a wonderful teacher in high school who introduced me to Frank O'Hara. The poem I latched onto first (titled "Poem" but I think commonly called "Lana Turner Has Collapsed") which famously ends:

LANA TURNER HAS COLLAPSED!

there is no snow in Hollywood
there is no rain in California
I have been to lots of parties
and acted perfectly disgraceful
but I never actually collapsed
oh Lana Turner we love you get up. (l. 11 – 17)

I have realized that, like O'Hara's Lana Turner poem, most of my favorite poems have killer last lines that either provide an unexpected turn, or function as a punchline of sorts, because laughing at a dramatic situation (the tabloids' melodrama over a fainting actor, for example) is the best way to undermine its seriousness. I heard recently on a podcast that studies have found some psychological merit to the expression, "Music will never sound as good as it did when you were a teenager." That many of us get frozen in time by age twenty musically, that the bands we listened to as teenagers will mold our personalities and outlooks more than our favorite musicians of any later age. The poets I read in my late teens had a similar effect on me. Brautigan and O'Hara taught me an unshakable lesson: humor allows writers to blend the serious and the funny. Humor is an important method for processing and navigating large and unconquerable topics (consumerism in "Xerox Candy Bar," media frenzy in "Lana Turner"), and a way to cope with uncomfortable, personal situations.

As a kid, *how* and *doing* were not important words in our house, by which I mean that besides reading, I was not taught any practical skills. My poem, "On Being a Woman Who Does Not Know How to Operate a Sewing Machine" combines my shame of not having the common knowledge that women my age seem to possess, with the self-deprecating sense of humor that I have spent my entire adulthood cultivating in response to the shame: "I used to frame it as an act of defiance, / my own bra-burning in the world of / domestic arts" (l. 1 – 3). As a defense mechanism, the speaker rejects the whole art of sewing, summoning O'Hara and Brautigan's

undermining of the topic by taking the normally serious poetic convention of titling a poem “On [Subject],” and then rambling about her own inabilities.

In contrast, my mother’s response to every fallen hem or split-open hole in my school clothing was to whipstitch it, a sewing technique that involved simply circling the thread in and out of the fabric around the hole or hem, like a tetherball around a pole. When I asked her how to sew a button, she responded in so many words to just stick the thread through the holes. For my mother, whipstitching was not an art to perfect, but a method for survival. I simultaneously admire her for adlibbing with a needle and thread, and deeply wish she had taught me a valuable skill. I didn’t realize until adulthood that there were proper and more effective ways of mending things.

Portrait of the Artist as an
Anxious Woman

“This dog does not seem to be dismayed to be at the edge of such blankness, such unknowns, nor does she seem eager to go out into it, to tip over that edge and explore. No, the dog is merely... at the edge, content to be in the space between the known and the unknown.”

—Brenda Miller, “The Dog at the Edge of the World”

In her essay, “The Dog at the Edge of the World,” Brenda Miller laments a dog from a Franz Marc painting. After finding an image of the work online, the hound looks nothing like her memory of it from years ago. “I want my own white dog back, the one I fabricated,” Miller pines (63). In other words, Miller doesn’t want the reality of the painting, she wants her own constructed narrative of it, very similar to the speaker in Elizabeth Bishop’s “Poem,” who

looking at a painting asks herself, “life and the memory of it so compressed / they’ve turned into each other. Which is which?” (l. 53 – 54). As an angry young adult following an angry adolescence, I tried to work through my feelings using the practical skills I had learned at home: taking substances, and reading. I opened a can of beer and picked up the book *The Lost Art of Being Happy* by Tony Wilkinson. He breaks down the “lost art” into five practicable skills, including the predictable “mindfulness,” “benevolence,” etc. Less predictable to me at age twenty-two was “story-telling,” where Wilkinson explains that reality is what we make it, and by reframing our personal narratives we can start to reform the emotions attached to our memories.

Ten years, an undergraduate degree in literature, and several seasons of the storytelling podcast *The Moth* later, I am now very aware of the power of narrative skills. For Brenda Miller, storytelling is a form of coping mechanism. “Maybe that’s what healing is, a kind of remembering,” she muses in her essay, discussing how she plans to reclaim the narrative of the white dog (64). I understood as a child, working into all hours of the night on a thinly-veiled fictionalization of my real life, how important retelling as healing can be. And as an adult, capturing the narratives of my life’s most important subject matters through poetry has helped me puzzle out the world’s greatest mysteries.

The Bugs in My Yard: Story and Perspective in Poetry

Brenda Miller asserts that for Franz Marc, animals as a subject matter “aroused the discerning part of his brain, nudged new circuits to fire, told him which details matter and which do not” (64). As a literature student, I had planned to write my thesis on bees in twentieth-century American poetry. As a now creative writing student, I find myself with a stack of poems

about not just bees, but spiders, moths, and ants as well. Like Franz Marc, who painted bright blue horses and red deer against pink and yellow skies, I aim to make the insects' narratives my own.

In recent years, my poetic influences have expanded from simply the writers I stumbled upon at the public library in middle school. Prof. Clark asked me one day who my favorite poets were, and when I recited my litany, she responded, "Lots of white men. You need to read more women." Grad school provided me the opportunity to acquaint myself with women writers I had never read, and reacquaint myself with female poets I have admired for years – notably, African-American poets like Audre Lorde. In her poem "The Bees," the speaker tells the story of a group of schoolboys that destroy a beehive, and the schoolgirls in the yard who respond directly:

...One girl cries out
"Hey, the bees weren't making any trouble!"
and she steps across the feebly buzzing ruins
to peer up at the empty, grated nook
"We could have studied honey-making!" (l. 28 – 32)

The bees in the poem are not a force in the conflict, but rather the victims of it—and yet so are the boys creating the destruction, since the poem clearly expresses in its first line that they are the product of "the street outside a school," the institution and the dangerous world that surrounds it (l. 1). "This is Not a Poem About Immigration" is a narrative poem about the carpenter bees in my front porch:

...I would even claim she glares at them,

an observation which I would argue couldn't be
my own projection, because
I *like* our new tenants,

the holes they artfully riddle
in the planks of the porch overhead,

wooden constellations they dip into

and emerge from like slow, clumsy mice. (l. 6 – 13)

Like any story, the poem has a “versus” conflict; in this case, it’s my dog versus the bees. As in Lorde’s poem, an outside observer offers a different perspective on a divisive issue.

George Keithley’s ability to bring together a historical figure from over four-hundred years ago and bugs in a single analogy is particularly inspiring. Keithley’s collection *The Starry Messenger* recounts facts and fictions about Galileo. My favorite poem from the book, “What Monsters,” describes Galileo locked up in prison for heresy, turning from the telescope from which he was deprived, to the microscope which he “has perfected” (l. 12). Unable to look at the skies, he focuses on what is in front of him, and demands that his daughter look “Closer, now— / Consider / What monsters swim in every drop of water!” (l. 13 – 15). Through its discussion of the bugs under his microscope, the poem creates a comparison between Galileo’s captors and cell-sized bacteria, and therefore also the microcosm of Venice and a single drop of water. My own poem “Because Jane Hirschfield Says ‘Words Are Bees’” similarly focuses on “a series / of photos of bees, super zoomed in” (l. 1 – 2). Like Keithley’s discussion of the “monster,” being both the bacteria and the Venetian authorities, my poem makes observations about larger issues like “the dusty gray of alien fertilizer” through the imagery of the bees.

Other Things I Can See from My Porch: Tonal Registers in Poetry

Sarah Pape enlisted me to help represent the Chico State *Watershed Review* at the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) conference in 2017. Among many highlights, I had the privilege to hear Ross Gay read “Spoon,” which includes the dedication, *For*

Don Belton. The poem is about his friend who was murdered, a black and gay friend who knew struggle long before his death. Hearing Ross Gay read the poem out loud, I cried quietly, like many other listeners in the room. Upon revisiting the poem, I realized the imagery of his friend Don is inextricably connected to the speaker's garden:

...the sweet potatoes came from a colony
just beyond my back door, smothering

with their vines the grass and doing their part
to make my yard look ragged and wild

to untrained eyes, the kale and chard so rampant
some stalks unbeknownst drooped into the straw mulch.... (l. 27 – 32)

And he is not even done there: continuing onto the next page, he describes his cherry tomatoes and blackberry vines. Ross Gay is obsessed with his yard, to the point where he cannot write an elegy without also mentioning the crops he is growing, intertwining his grieving process with the overwhelming growth around his home.

Ross Gay can write an incredibly tragic poem and also make his reader laugh throughout it, because like O'Hara's poetry, humor and tragedy are intermixed—much like Gay's grief for his friend Don, and the abundance of kale in his yard. I don't shy away from my sense of humor in my gardening poems either. I take gardening very seriously, like most gardeners—but as an anxious woman, I use poetry as an outlet to make fun of my own errors as a novice. "I Suck at Gardening" recounts some of the many mistakes I have made while trying to grow vegetables and flowers:

I think weeds are often pretty,
And I have no idea what the nitrogen cycle is.
Apparently Chico, California is in Zone 8,
Whatever that means.... (l. 1 – 4)

Similarly, "I Can Tell You Exactly Where Gravity Starts" is my attempt to give a rather serious

claim of a title to a pretty playful poem about my cucumber plants, which ends in a comparison to a childish “kite happy to be stuck in a tree / and pulled back down to earth” (l. 11 – 12). The happy-but-self-deprecating humor, the long titles, and the utter preoccupation with my front yard are all straight from Ross Gay’s playbook.

Gardens can’t grow without the sun, which appears in both of my pieces mentioned in the previous paragraph. In “I Can Tell You Exactly Where Gravity Starts,” the cucumber plants “reached up towards the sun, / a morning stretch” (l. 7 – 8). In “I Suck at Gardening,” the speaker quips that “some plants prefer / “Full Sun”—I didn’t know there was a half sun” (l. 4 – 5). The sun is a player in the gardening poems’ games; it acts as a happy image that lends itself to the poems’ playful tone.

The sun also plays an important role in two rather mythological poems. In “You Know Why They Call It a Poet Laureate?” the final image declares the sun as the great equalizer in gender disputes:

men chasing women,
women cultivating the landscape,
everyone with wings melting,
too close to the sun. (l. 9 – 12)

In contrast, the speaker in “From One of the Men Who Holds a Mirror to Light the Hallways in the Egyptian Pyramids, 2015” begins by mentioning his role immediately, in one complete line that end stops to show its importance: “My job is to harness the power of the sun” (l. 1). The poem is written from the point of view of a person not only preoccupied with the celestial heavens, but whose occupation is to control it; again, the playful tone from the gardening poems has shifted to a more serious voice.

If Ross Gay’s poetry lent itself to how I discuss gardening in poetry, The Beatles’ songs perhaps influenced my tonal shifts in describing the sun. Playful, happy songs like “Here

Comes the Sun” and “Good Day Sunshine” feature quick melodies, and lyrics so simple they are almost laughable:

I need to laugh and when the sun is out
I've got something I can laugh about
I feel good in a special way
I'm in love and it's a sunny day.

In contrast, “I’ll Follow the Sun” is about an unrequited love: “One day you'll look to see I've gone / For tomorrow may rain, so I'll follow the sun.” The lyrics of “The Sun King” are upbeat (“Everybody’s laughing, everybody’s happy”) but the music is much slower and wistful than the other Beatles songs about the sun. I believe that the albums *Revolver* and *Abbey Road* seeped into my subconscious poetry-crafting center, and a slew of solarcentric verse at various tonal registers was the result.

Places Outside of My Yard: Imagery and Point of View in Local Poetry

My poems also chart local history and happenings of Chico, California. “Response to an Abstract Painting” projects onto a work of visual art the speaker’s own assessment of what it represents, “a map of our town” (l. 1). The speaker guides her readers through both the painting and the town, simultaneously trying to create a sense of both: “the inverted avocado plaza, / the blue wash of warm night” (l. 2 – 3). The poem becomes increasingly more political as the speaker makes clear who holds the power in her town, and what is/is not valued in her community. The final line declares that “God is a big, red barn,” an attempt to tie together the agricultural and Christian forces that make up the biggest power-players.

My favorite writers to read are the writers I know personally in Chico, CA, and their work to reveal life in California has been hugely influential on my work. Ken Fries has a few lines of verse about persimmon season that I have framed and hung on my office wall because they perfectly capture not just a food very particular to Northern California, but a season and a feeling as well:

Persimmons in November
orange bells high on branches wait
for the ripening hour
the time to fall
to black earth in prayer. (l. 6 – 10)

Like Fries's poem, "Response to an Abstract Painting" also observes that fruit and vegetable seasons and spiritual seasons often go hand-in-hand.

My own poem "What We Call Order" was written two years ago after the Sacramento Valley was ravaged by wildfires. The speaker is sitting in their car in stopped traffic on a highway, watching the firefighters for any clue as to what was happening.

But we saw no fire,
no airy, indicative smoke;
no water propelled into trees,
no thick rescue hose;
no perspiration, or sense of
urgency
of any kind. (l. 20 – 26)

My poem emulates the curious, bystander point of view that is masterfully written in a poem by local artist Muir Hughes called "Sideshow." Her poem observes construction workers at a job site from the point of view of someone walking by. Her speaker is also confused by their posturing to work, without getting much work done at all:

these men don't even know how to get dirty

I'm just standing on the smoky street corner
and I'm dirtier than these guys
and I know how to get dirtier
and dirtier still. (l. 23 – 27)

My poem “Wild Turkeys are Taking Over the Barber Neighborhood” was similarly influenced by Hughes’s poem, “South on Normal,” which describes a walk through the local almond orchards. Hughes’s poem is full of sensory detail that the poem’s characters are infusing into the scene, including “all the fragrance that stubs big visions,” and the “pleasure” that “spills over our feet” as if it were a liquid (l. 7, 11). “Wild Turkeys” also explores the meaning of human observation of an otherwise natural scene.

...social media is lush
with turkey selfies—
by which I mean of course
full-grown adults semi-drunk on mulled wine
holding smart phones up and out. (l. 7 – 11)

The turkeys themselves are less important than the social media coverage of them, and the bizarre identities created by the websites’ users, using the animals as a prop.

People Outside of My Yard: Thematic Conflict in Poetry

Linda Serrato, a local poet and educator, has an incredible gift for discussing her family in her poems. Her poem, “Daughter of the Boxer,” uses her relationship with her dad and the practical wisdom he taught her to ponder the skills necessary to being a woman in the world, specifically that “he taught me where / to put my hands / to protect my face,” because “Goddamn men are / always worried about / your face” (l. 5 – 7, 16 – 18). My poem, “On Being a Woman

Who Doesn't Know How to Operate a Sewing Machine," also dismisses an assumption typically made of women through feminist themes. My poem emulates Linda's work by discussing women's issues with a one-two punch.

My own father away in May 2017. He survived years longer than his prognosis initially predicted. His death is the first I have ever experienced of a close family member or friend, and writing has helped me navigate the unfamiliar process of grieving a life. My father did not want a funeral; he donated his body to science, and we had a small celebration for him at my uncle's house. I had mentally prepared to write a eulogy for his funeral, and when I found out we weren't holding one, I wrote a eulogy anyway and shared it in Sarah Pape's off-campus nonfiction writing workshop instead. My dad would have approved.

Ironically, my dad didn't like poetry much. As he was passing, he was not conscious, but unsure if he could hear me or not, I decided to read to him anyway. We had discussed in passing years which poems he *did* like, of which there were three. So I rather absurdly sat in the hospital room and read him "Rime of the Ancient Mariner," and "Charge of the Light Brigade." *Pops*, I said, stopping midway through Tennyson, *I had forgotten how long and fucked up these poems are*. Our recitation ended with "Ozymandias." I teared up during the final lines, "Nothing beside remains. Round the decay / Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare / The lone and level sands stretch far away" (l. 12 – 14). My dad would be memorialized.

"All the Weird Shit I Have Purchased Since My Dad Died" is a catalogue poem, and the first poem I wrote in observation of how strange the grieving process can be. Prof. Clark agreed the poem had merit, but explained that the items on the list were "all carrots in a soup." I learned that catalogue poems should include both meaty items that provide outside context and smaller items that add to the poem's overall imagery. Catalogue poems also need to culminate in

a final line/item that brings the reader to a different place in the speaker's narrative, because catalogue poems often tell a story. Prof. Clark suggested I literally cut my poem up with scissors and rearrange the lines on a tabletop until I find the sequence with the most tension and resolution. I ended up changing the final line item from "HBO," to "Endless six-packs of flowers for my garden, with names I can barely pronounce like coreopsis, bractheantha, and calibrachoa, which I will eventually learn to say properly" (l. 19). The difference is monumental – the poem went from ending with a thud to an optimistic and more meaningful sendoff.

The poems regarding my mother are more complicated because my relationship with my mother is more complicated. I make no effort to conceal her alcohol and addiction problems in my poetry, specifically in pieces like "The Good Doctors":

Back from the ER,
third time
this month,
my mother's hand is sweaty
around her full
orange plastic pill bottle.
*I got a **good** doctor today.*
She is cooing the word, cradling
it in her hand, like a lost baby
bird, before tossing it,
abruptly, down
her throat. (l. 12 – 23)

Just as addicts tend to have good days and bad days depending on how proximate they are to their substance of choice, my mother, as the two stanzas in the poem suggests, has divided the many doctors she has seen while drug-seeking at the ER into two categories. Similar to the issues of womanhood, my poetry also thematically addresses addiction and alcoholism.

I still struggle to describe my mom's addiction; "The Good Doctors" has undergone countless revisions, and is not finished yet. I plan to read more addiction and alcoholism

narratives and poetry to see how my favorite writers handle the stories of addicts in their lives. Sarah Pape keenly describes scenes with alcoholics in *Ruin and Atlas*. Her poem “Decades of One Winter” sets up the kind of dichotomy that I create in “The Good Doctors”: the living/the schoolchildren, and the dead/the neighborhood alcoholic, whose spiral downward is symbolized by the frozen puppy on the ground that still retains its “smooth brindle Pit’s fur” (l. 12). Her speaker lives in the middle world between living and dead, geographically “between / the man’s house and the bar / he stumbled from” as well as of course figuratively, as an observer of a person’s downfall: not in immediate danger and not out of harm’s way, either (l. 1 – 3). Like Sarah Pape’s poem, my piece about my mother’s drug problem challenges the black-and-white binaries often found in discussions of addiction.

I also find capturing my mother’s voice challenging. Prof. Clark does it very well in “Quinn Margaret’s Mother Speaks Her Mind,” a selection from her collection of poetry that also discusses abuses of different forms, *Ohio Blue Tips*. The shame that the mother of Quinn Margaret, the book’s main character, rains on her daughter is cringe-worthy. No topic is off-limits to her mother’s guilt trips, including Quinn’s son, or as her mother puts it:

That boy of yours
With his name
Like a wild west show,
A name
That is neither family
Nor Bible.... (l. 12 – 17)

My poem “Coping Mechanisms in Reverse” attempts to isolate pieces of dialogue from my mother that are illustrative of her escapist tendencies: “*So we can imagine what it’s like to be someone else,*” “*I am going to start drinking again if you keep acting like that,*” and “*Let’s get*

out of here” (l. 1, 6, 5). Like Quinn Margaret’s mother, my mother stings with words more than action in the poems.

My poems also complicate romantic ties. A poet in Chico whose love poetry I admire is bob garner. His love poetry is strong because of its smashing final lines. “that day” describes going “to the flume with delilah.” The language is so simple, and does not evoke any unheard of imagery, but the final lines frame the scene so perfectly:

...and she walked
on the water
and I walked beside her
that day. (l. 6 – 9)

“on being told not to use the words ‘love’ or ‘beautiful’” is another bob garner poem in which the final lines refer back to the poem’s title, with the speaker declaring that since he has been restricted from using traditional vocabulary for a romantic poem, his lover “evermore / shall be / enormous” (l. 11 – 13).

I emulate bob’s love poetry in attempting to craft satisfying final lines. “Carcasses” depicts a canoeing trip between two lovers that begins, “We are hibernating, but it’s not winter. / We are in the middle of the lake, / but we are not swimming” (l. 1 – 3). The speaker ponders the mountain lions she imagines prowling around the lake, and her lover corrects her, indicating they are nocturnal and wouldn’t be out during the day. The speaker responds, “And I point out that we’re not swimming, / but we’re still in the middle of the lake” (l. 12 – 13). The end of the poem is in conversation with its beginning, similar to the conversation between the two lovers in the canoe. “Chores” is the sequel to “Carcasses,” referencing the day in the canoe, except now, the speaker is less engaged with the lover, ending the poem with the realization that when she thinks of her past lover, “I’m reminded I have rust that / I need to remove from the bottom / of

my wok” (l. 11 – 13). The poem ends with an image of a boring, inconvenient task regarding a messy and unnecessary item—a metaphor for the past relationship.

“Antidote” is a recent love poem. The speaker describes a sweet scene: the speaker’s lover takes extra steps not to wake her as he leaves for work in the morning. But then the poem becomes a kind of anti-aubade—rather than lamenting the quick passing of the night, the speaker just sleeps in while her lover leaves. The imagery is complicated by a conceit that does not exactly register loving feelings:

...to tourniquet
off the morning,
keep the venom of its bite
away from me,
until the morning turns blue,
then bluer,
until the morning doesn’t
hurt anymore. (l. 8 – 15)

In other words, like Richard Brautigan’s “Love Poem,” which is about not being in love, my poetry that discusses romance is ultimately and decidedly unromantic.

The World is Far Greater than My Yard: Conclusions about Poetry and Art

*And in the end, the love you take is equal to the love you
make.*

—The Beatles, “The End”

Brenda Miller concludes in “The Dog at the Edge of the World” that she is just going to have remake the Franz Marc artwork using her own vision of it. At first she thinks she will paint it, then decides mosaic would better capture the dog’s essence, “placing a broken bit of tile

here, a fragment of blue glass there, her white back a crescent of an ancient teacup” (64). The end product will be undeniably an homage to Franz Marc, but also quintessentially Brenda Miller. Her art piece will be a fixed rendition, adjusted to work for her, and using a different and more appropriate medium entirely.

For a long time, I resented the rough years I had as a young adult, having been taught, among other things, that codependent relationships are normal, healthy food is for yuppies, and credit card debt is unavoidable and American. Hell, I was not even taught how to sew a button before I left home. But I am beginning to see that maybe my mother’s solution—to whipstitch, rather than learn proper sewing techniques—actually overlaps with Brenda Miller’s solution for reclaiming her vision of Franz Marc’s work. Perhaps, for the challenges my mother has faced as an addict and parent, it’s more appropriate to whipstitch clothing items than to properly mend or patch them. Perhaps her rendition of the original works better *for her*, even if the result is not as accepted or beloved. Perhaps trying to recreate a vision in a medium outside what one is comfortable with, or what most would expect, is art in itself.

My father passed away four months ago from the time I am writing this, and I still have not had the Robert Hayden lines tattooed on me. And likely, I won’t – after all, my dad liked neither tattoos nor poetry, so the tribute wouldn’t exactly be fitting. I guess I will have to come up with something else – maybe respond to the poem somehow, or use the Robert Hayden lines but in a different medium besides tattoo. Or maybe improvise something else entirely, something all my own.

WHIPSTITCH

Franz Marc's Horses

Sewn from large fabric,
dyed with indigo,
Franz Marc's horses dreamed of becoming
hot air balloons,
threatening the sky
with stampeding clouds of helium.

The Kind of Stuff You Stumble on in Northern California

It was the largest tooth I had ever seen.
The size of a wine cork, the dead horse tooth
lay on the table on its side, like an
upended rickshaw. The color of
a cream pie in a funeral parlor. The dead
horse tooth seemed to be saying, *I'll show you
just what I am capable of chewing.*

**Looking Outside at a Rain-Soaked Street in
Northern California as the Sun Slices the
Clouds and Everything Turns into a
Tangerine**

Kindness arrives on the scent
of orange blossoms—
a secret of the citrus orchards.

You would imagine a downy meadow,
the powder sky softened into the fawnish
grasses, smudged like eyeshadow.

Desire lines—the term for a faint cross
over a well-traveled trail, a path
in a different, new direction.

You are the survivor of winter's four walls,
the wolves that eat the four o'clock sun.

Response to an Abstract Painting

This is a map of our town.
The inverted avocado plaza,
the blue wash of warm nights.
Orange ball, the city council
arguing about the rights of the homeless,
some red, some yellow, all a circle of fury.
The puke-colored off-center non-circle
is the water tower:
Defunct. And the large red block is God.
God is a big, red barn.

Wild Turkeys are Taking Over the Barber Neighborhood

And more importantly,
the Barber Neighborhood's Facebook page.
This time of year, the feed should be full
of blushing trees, carved pumpkins,
and jack-o-lanternesque children
boarding yellow buses.
Instead, social media is lush
with turkey selfies—
by which I mean of course
full-grown adults semi-drunk on mulled wine
holding smart phones up and out—
the same angle as an amateur, backyard telescope—
the screen, like the astronomical tool,
holding an image similar to themselves,
except smaller, and farther away.

What We Call Order

A highway is reduced to a singular lane
causing car
to line up
after car like
a string of beads,
as they took turns
having a right
of way through the mountains'
rolling curves.

Why the back up?
As we approached a man
holding a traffic sign,
we could only deduce
from what we saw:
half a dozen firetrucks parked
in the other highway lane,
and three dozen fire fighters
positioned in various stances
like mannequins in a window.

But we saw no fire,
no airy, indicative smoke;
no water propelled into trees,
no thick rescue hose;
no perspiration, or sense of
urgency
of any kind.

The man guiding traffic
has a sign that gives us
two options: *SLOW* and *STOP*.

Democracy Dude Ranch

On the stairs leading up to my porch,
someone etched “1972” into the wet cement.
The steps are crumbling now; the whole foundation is,
really—but once,
a few years before I was born, they were new,
and someone was proud to live there.
And I wish I could lasso that feeling,
pull it slowly past the Reagan administration, and
drone fighting, and celebrity presidents, and
reel it safely into my house. But
I don’t know how to tie
that kind of knot.

A Different Kind of Rodeo

The states I've been to in America form a horseshoe around Texas. I forgot the Alamo. A man in Reno told me a couple weeks ago that it's Unamerican not to have duct tape in one's garage. Growing up in Minnesota, we kept duct tape in a drawer in our kitchen. It's where my dad put it. He also taught me to dip French fries in a chocolate milkshake, which I've just been informed, is at the very least disgusting, and at the most, Unamerican. My dad's in the hospital. He's receiving the best medical care in the country. I asked him if he needs anything, and he said onion rings. I hate this Tom Petty song, which is probably Unamerican of me. The man in Reno with the duct tape in his garage would likely agree. I wonder if he's been to Texas. I wonder if he remembered the Alamo.

Solicitors

Sign our petition!

We just want to make things as easy as possible.

We'll give you a sticker—

Put it on your sweater, or the sweater of your best friend.

It is in your best interest.

Think of the children, and the children's children.

Then think about how, somewhere in New Mexico,
an armadillo and its brood watches
the traffic on a two-lane highway
from a shallow, shallow ditch.

Tornado Drill Pantoum

In parts of the U.S.,
children perform tornado drills in school.
It's practice in case of a real disaster.
They duck on the floor, and cover their heads.

Children perform tornado drills in school.
Towns sound sirens monthly, to make sure they're working.
They duck on the floor, and cover their heads.
The sirens had two jobs in the Cold War years.

Towns sound sirens monthly, to make sure they're working.
They pretend there is danger, then pretend it is safe.
The sirens had two jobs in the Cold War years.
After the drill, they go back to their lessons.

They pretend there is danger, then pretend it is safe
in parts of the U.S.
After the drill, they go back to their lessons.
It's practice in case of a real disaster.

In the Good Old Days

*America has only three cities: New York, San Francisco,
and New Orleans. Everywhere else is Cleveland.*

—Tennessee Williams

At 2 AM in Minneapolis,
the bars would close, and at 2:15,
the drag queens would come into
the Denny's on Hennepin to play
Scrabble, and in a cloud
of glitter, would complain about how
they used to be able to smoke
inside. But that was back
in the good old days.

A Dozen Eggs

1. Eggs are a cross-cultural symbol for rebirth, regeneration.
2. My friend Caroline owns four pet chickens. They live in her backyard, and have started to eat their own eggs. Veterinarians are not exactly sure what would provoke a chicken into such behavior, but Caroline believes it is stress-related.
3. My favorite episode of *Pawn Stars* featured a lady from Iowa who brought in what turned out to be a Faberge egg. It was worth over \$20,000. She had been using it in her kitchen to keep a stack of paper napkins from flying away.
4. The egg came first.
5. huevo
بيضة
Яйце
uovo
oeuf
(முட்டை)
trúng
הצוף
hua
qe
jaje
蛋
6. Recipe for egg salad:
5 hard-boiled eggs ½ cup mayo
3 tbsp brown mustard 1 scallion, finely chopped
3 stalks celery, chopped And my secret ingredient—2 tbsp curry powder.

Mix ingredients together and chill one hour before serving, either on toasted rye bread, or by itself.
7. When I was in fifth grade, we were tasked with designing a contraption that would keep an egg intact if dropped from the roof of our school. I made mine from a shoebox and some packing peanuts. Ms. Dahlquist hauled them all up to the roof and let gravity have its way. I don't think any of the eggs made it. We were not talented engineers.
8. [Insert factual information about the American chicken farming industry here]
9. "GREED OFT O'ERREACHES ITSELF." -The moral of Aesop's "The Goose That Laid the Golden Egg."

10. President Rutherford B. Hayes, if known for nothing else, was the first leader of the free world to host the White House Easter Egg Roll. Now a longstanding tradition, the Egg Roll hosts upwards of thirty thousand Americans on the White House lawn every year. Some are specifically invited to attend, while others put their name into a lottery, and win.

11. Q. What animal has the largest eggs?

A. The ostrich lays the largest eggs on land, with an average diameter of six inches. However, whale shark eggs are technically larger (the record whale shark egg was 12 inches long) but the egg remains in the female until it is born. Historically, the elephant bird of Madagascar had the largest eggs of both land and sea, over a foot in length and averaging eight inches in diameter. The elephant bird was extinct by the eighteenth century due to overhunting.

12. I know people who can't stand eggs. My sister claims that nothing so jiggly should be consumed. She does, however, eat Jello. My friend Jeanne says it's the texture and the smell that get to her. I can't help but wonder if there is a Darwinian reason for why eggs are distasteful to some people. If we weren't meant to eat the young of another species. Or, that some humans are more evolved—they have looked around, observed what is happening in their surroundings, and adapted.

**“The Family’s Principal Entertainment Was
for Everyone to Recount Their Dreams”**

From a *Smithsonian* magazine article titled, “For 40 Years,
This Russian Family Was Cut Off from All Human
Contact, Unaware of World War II.”

I imagine them waking all together
in one bed under several elk skins.
Snowy breath meets the cold first,
rising, seeking warmer air
like the smoke from the fire
not yet lit.

I imagine their mattress made from grasses
and reeds, dried over the fire, then stuffed
into a sack. Every night, they sleep
father brother sister mother,
lined up like their boots,
leather warming by the
smoldering logs.

I imagine them shifting in silence
every morning, begging the dreams
to stay longer: *Come in, come in.*
No one like you has ever
visited us before.

**You Know Why They Call It a
*Poet Laureate?***

According to the Greeks,
when Apollo was chasing Daphne,
she transformed herself
into a laurel tree to escape him,
the very same laurels
worn by Olympic winners
and poets chosen to document
such occasions:
men chasing women,
women cultivating the landscape,
everyone with wings melting,
too close to the sun.

**From One of the Men Who Holds a
Mirror to Light the Hallways
in the Egyptian Pyramids, 2015**

My job is to harness the power of the sun.
Using reflective glass, and standing at a specific,
predetermined angle,
I bring light to the corridors of this ancient pyramid.

They are not far outside Cairo,
a city of seven million people,
surrounded by billions of trillions
of pieces of sand.

I learned in school that the pyramids were built
for grieving. I learned in school that glass
is made from sand: particles heated
at extreme temperatures and melted
into the shapes of bottles, and jars,
and objects men use.

The mirror I hold can handle the sun
because it has already known that heat,
has experienced boiling point,
which changed its color, and shape,
forever altered into a different form,
both more fragile and more resilient,
now able to fling the sun into hallways
previously dark and unknowing.

When I start my commute back to Cairo,
I imagine that every haunted, grieving, intricate
and beautiful citizen there too has someone inside
them holding up a mirror,
so that in the dead of night, the city itself
would shine as bright as sky
of seven million stars.

During the Solar Eclipse

I had a dentist appointment,
and was the only one there
with the NASA-prescribed glasses
to view the sun, that
piece of chilled fruit.
The hygienists took turns
boomeranging outside in their scrubs,
glasses in hand,
heads tilted back,
mouths open.

Wishes

I've never seen a real meteor shower.
A good one, I mean.
They always drop in one by one
like a lazy game of golf.
I want to see them come down the way
I salt my dinner, like
rice in old weddings, like
not just one, but a handful of coins
thrown into a fountain:
refracted, copper-colored, and lucky.

**Because Jane Hirshfield Says
'Words are Bees'**

My poetry professor sent me a series
of photos of bees, super zoomed in,
and two details surprised me:

First, bees aren't yellow, really—
they're almost iridescent,
reflective little bobbing mirrors

of every other color—
the pink in the petunias,
the dusty gray of alien fertilizer.

Second, they are so messy—
absolutely covered in pollen,
which I was not expecting because

I guess I'd always assumed
that the architects of honeycomb,
the chefs of molten sugar

would be more precise,
free from all the ambiguity,
all the shades of dishevel.

Which is why we need Jane Hirshfield:
Some just know how to work with messes
better than others.

This is Not a Poem About Immigration

The carpenter bees have moved in one at a time,
weary travelers who are seeking shelter
in the overhang of my front porch.

My dog wants nothing to do with them.
Her gaze is focused on the new intruders.
I would even claim she glares at them,

an observation which I would argue couldn't be
my own projection, because
I *like* our new tenants,

the holes they artfully riddle
in the planks of the porch overhead,
wooden constellations they dip into

and emerge from like slow, clumsy mice.
Once, a low-flying, perhaps elderly, sickly,
or just daydreaming member of the colony

succumbed to the pouncing of my dog,
but not before stinging her,
the carpenter bee's last and final defense.

My dog lifted her paw, mouth foaming in pain.
She gave me a look, watery and low,
which I interpreted to mean, *What other options do we have?*

I Suck at Gardening

I think weeds are often pretty,
and I have no idea what the nitrogen cycle is.
Apparently Chico, California is in Zone 8,
whatever that means—and some plants prefer
“Full Sun”—I didn’t know there was a half sun.

Luckily, carpenter bees have moved in—
new tenants in the rafters
of my porch. I trust they will make
the necessary repairs.

Front Yard Physics

I can tell you exactly where gravity starts—
at the top of the trellis
where some cucumbers are growing
in my front yard.

The vine has exceeded the height
of its stepladder,
and reached up towards the sun,
a morning stretch,

then lassoed the other side of the trellis
with its tendrils,
like a kite happy to be stuck in a tree
and pulled back down to earth.

On a Phone Call with My Sister Who Still Lives in Minnesota

She asks me why I compost. Why
make a small mountain of avocado shells and
coffee grounds in the backyard. Our mother

used to collect pop can tabs
for no observable reason. Gallon-sized ziplock bags
full of them. Composting, to my sister, seems like that.

*I don't know the chemical process, but somehow,
it all decomposes back into dirt. Somehow,
it can be used to grow things again.*

The silence from her end reminds me
of being younger and not believing adults who said
foreign languages were spoken in other countries.

Portuguese, Swedish: like horses with wings—invented for fiction.
I assumed that little girls in Brazil and Sweden call a bug *a bug*,
and Koolaid *Koolaid*, just like everyone else in my world.

To my sister, the magical soil of California
now falls on a list of famous storytime
duos from the Wild West:

Cowboys and Indians, roadrunner and coyote,
older sister and her pile of transformative dirt.

Carcasses

We are hibernating, but it's not winter.
We are in the middle of the lake,
but we are not swimming.
We've made an island of a canoe.
I brought berries, nuts and plums
and you brought beer, and some poems
that I wrote. Staring out into the woods,
I wonder how many mountain lions are prowling,
scraping their huge paws against bird carcasses
on the ground. *They don't eat dead animals,*
you correct me. *And they're nocturnal.*
And I point out that we're not swimming,
but we're still in the middle of the lake.

Chores

When I used to think of him,
I would remember the day he roped
a canoe to the top of my Jeep.
He secured it with three different knots:
a figure eight, a trucker's hitch, a bowline.
I watched every loop, his hands, the ropes—
imagining them around my wrists, my waist,
hoping he would notice the blue luster
of my eager, oyster eyes.

Now, when I think of him,
I'm reminded I have rust that
I need to remove from the bottom
of my wok.

Imbalance

The pills aren't for me:
they're for
the man in my stomach
hoisting up my spine with a stick
trying to balance
the spinning plate
in my head. It wobbles
like a warped record.
His neck hurts
from always looking up
at the bottom of the plate.
The pills are to ensure
he does not lose his
job.

Antidote

I like how, before you tip-toe
out of the house
onto the still-black river of the
too-early morning highway,
you drape a t-shirt
over your bedside lamp,
to keep the incandescence
out of my eyes, to tourniquet
off the morning,
keep the venom of its bite
away from me,
until the morning turns blue,
then bluer,
until the morning doesn't
hurt anymore.

On Being a Woman Who Doesn't Know How to Operate a Sewing Machine

I used to frame it as an act of defiance,
my own bra-burning in the world of
domestic arts.

I would watch the monsters growl,
bobbins jammed, thread clumped in nests,
needles stabbing at the air. *Unintelligible.*

The women would put their own fingers
in harm's way, trying to coax them,
unravel their problems. *What a waste of time.*

I used to not care that I couldn't sew.
Now, I wish I knew how to mend such large things
with something so thin.

The Good Doctors

There is no one in-between:
My mother has Bad Doctors,
the ones who *would not listen*,
who *have forgotten their oath!*
who see her again and send her
away, with well wishes and her
orange plastic pill bottle,
empty,
before turning back to a clipboard,
a cold and convenient prop.

And she has Good Doctors.
Back from the ER,
third time
this month,
my mother's hand is sweaty
around her full
orange plastic pill bottle.
*I got a **good** doctor today.*
She is cooing the word, cradling
it in her hand, like a lost baby
bird, before tossing it,
abruptly, down
her throat.

Coping Mechanisms in Reverse

After e.v. de cleyre

My mother answered me, *So we can imagine what it's like to be someone else.*

Before that, I asked my mother why we drive around these neighborhoods.

Before that, my sister and I loaded into the backseat of the Chevy station wagon. Our mother was going to take us on one of her many rides to gaze at the mansions of the rich.

Before that, I knelt on the linoleum while my sister sat on one of the vinyl-seated kitchen chairs so that I could guide her feet into her winter boots and tie them.

Before that, my mother flung on a sweater and grabbed her keys. *Let's get out of here.*

Before that, it was *I am going to start drinking again if you keep acting like that.*

Before that, my sister had started wailing like a tornado siren, and I pinched her arm to make her stop.

Before that, our mother's own mother had called. My sister and I curled our toes in our socks. We knew it was about money because it was always about money. I remember her slamming down the phone on the receiver like a gavel. *Bitch!*

Before that, my sister and I were playing in our fort, walls of couch cushions propped upward to form a room with no roof. In our stronghold, we could be anything, or anyone else.

Echolocation

The caves at Mt. Shasta
have a space called the
Chandelier Room, named for
the ornate and glinting stalactites
hanging from its ceiling.

The guide instructed our group
not to touch the slick, wet cave walls.
*They're alive – and human contact will stop
the fungi and other biota from
forming further.*

My sister and I repeated these instructions
to my niece, who raised an eyebrow,
but did as she was told. She was not told,
however, not to shout,

and as we left the Chandelier Room, she,
small as a toadstool, stared up into the
high-flying buttresses of the diamondesque mines
and yelled: *CAVE!*

And to her happy surprise,
the cave shouted back.

My Sister's Convinced that My Dad Controls the Weather

My sister's convinced that my dad controls the weather,
that he unfurls blue skies like a picnic blanket,
knocks out clouds with precision like they're billiard balls.

My sister thinks my dad takes form
in the neighborhood animals, and she will smile
at a particularly attentive butterfly.

My sister thanks my dad for any good fortune she receives,
knows he is slipping quarters into meters before she parks,
and sticking sales tags on those last pieces of clothing in her size.

All I know is that my dad
doesn't need his oxygen machine now, that he

doesn't have to worry about how to pay the bills, and he
doesn't have a tube in his side connected to his stomach

feeding him "not apple pie," ("*What are they feeding you, Pops?*") that he
doesn't have to eat the opposite of apple pie anymore.

All the Weird Shit I Have Purchased Since My Dad Died

Set of wooden Russian nesting dolls

Fancy thing to put toilet paper in

Fuzzy coral-colored bathmat

Pencil pouch from China that looks like a carton of milk designed in 1950s-style graphics, complete with a campy, smiling face, and a poorly translated Nutrition Facts that says, “Expiration Date: Forever”

Eco-friendly, reusable bamboo drinking straws

Small wire brush to clean the straws with

Candles with odd scents, like white chocolate and sandalwood/tobacco

Pink plastic swimming pool for my dog to splash in, because the heat in this county during the summer does not abate for the mourning

Coffee table for my sister

Bouquet of sweet peas for a friend with depression

Lip stain, lip crayons, and other lipstick alternatives

Strapless, backless bra with a cinch in front to hoist my breasts up, for those backless dresses that I never wear because I don’t really go out anymore; instead I got an

HBO subscription so that I can watch every back episode of John Oliver on a Saturday night and feel like I am informed

Used copy of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* by James Baldwin

DVD of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* because I can’t find my copy

Frozen pizzas, and boxes of mac and cheese, not stuff I normally buy, but hell at least it’s organic

Black tarp to kill my lawn with, even though they declared the drought in California over

Endless six-packs of flowers for my garden, with names I can barely pronounce like coreopsis, bracteantha, and calibrachoa, which I will eventually learn to say properly.

WORKS CONSULTED

WORKS CONSULTED

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