ALONE TOGETHER

by

JAYDN DEWALD

(Under the Direction of Magdalena Zurawaski)

ABSTRACT

A cross-genre manuscript, *Alone Together* explores the relationship between individuality and community, genre expectations and a postmodern awareness, even distrust, of literary production. The poems and prose texts invoke a wide variety of distinct personae, both historical and imaginary, charting a course through love, grief, music, storytelling, and desire. In three obsessive poetic sequences, *Alone Together* reveals its own artifice—it "shows its work"—only to return to art again as a social construction, private explorations redesigned as a collective.

"One Take After Another: 50 Notes on *Alone Together"* examines the phenomenology of writing and bestows prominence to the experiential impact and life appeal of this dissertation's composition—the many series of events in and outside of language that so often lie hidden, for the general reader, in plain sight.

INDEX WORDS: Poetry, Fiction, Essay, Cross-Genre, Love, Grief, Music, Storytelling, Desire, Individuality, Collectivity, Postmodernism, Creative Process

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

One Take After Another: 50 Notes on Alone Together

> *. . . the act and the potential in the space of the event, in the event-ness of the event.*
> —Jacques Derrida (79)

1. I was twelve or thirteen years old when I became—quite without my knowing it—a musician. My age and education being what it was, I would not for many years have access to (or possess the intellectual faculties necessary to access) conventional semantic content: my ideas were musical ideas; my vocabulary was a harmonic vocabulary. In ninth grade, after I performed an original solo bass composition, a woman asked me, "What was that about?" Such a question—about my own or any other non-vocal music—had never occurred to me. It was like being asked, "What was your lunch about?" To say my composition was about an emotion(s) struck me as pompous: I knew even then that artists don't feel more or less deeply than anybody else. And, anyway, the words for emotions ("happiness," "sadness," etc) felt—*still* feel—embarrassingly inadequate. So. I blinked at the woman. "I dunno," I shrugged.

2. The art that matters most to me (and probably to you, too) deepens and enlarges us, teaches us something about the world, and therefore can easily answer the question above. Easily can I produce thumbnail descriptions of favorite works: *Steve Reich's* Different Trains (1988) *powerfully enacts the experience of traveling in Holocaust trains*; *Do Ho Suh's* Seoul Home/L.A. Home (1999) *is about homesickness*

and displacement; *Samuel R. Delany's* Times Square Red, Times Square Blue (1999) *is an intelligent and fiercely lived denunciation of gentrification*—and so on and so forth. Nevertheless, the texture and affectivity of living intimately with a given artwork is also part of what it communicates and what it means. I realize now that my twelve- or thirteen-year-old composition was about just this—the sensuous particularity of existing with a few dense minor changes, in a certain region of the fretboard, which is a certain region of the mind, almost imperceptible vibrations spreading from the fingertips outward like rills of warmth . . .

3. I aim to explore in this critical introduction the phenomenology of my writing—"you think," writes William Matthews, "with your body" (166)—and to bestow prominence to the experiential impact and life appeal of my dissertation's composition, the many series of events in and outside of language that so often lie hidden, for the general reader, in plain sight.

4. Last week, over the phone, I asked my father about his erstwhile obsession with rock climbing. (When I was a kid, he climbed nearly every weekend. One of my earliest memories is of him on the toilet, very upright, very focused, practicing knots with a length of neon-green or -yellow rope.) "Sometimes," he told me, his voice dreamy and faintly staticky on the other end of the line, "I felt an insatiable desire to touch rock, to smell sunlight on rock and lichen."

For a few moments the only sound was the squeak of the porchswing on which I slowly swung—phone pressed to my ear.

Which reminded me: In high school, my friends and I loved a skate video called *Listen* (1998) that was soundtrack-less, that featured the raw, unadulterated, unbelievably satisfying sounds of skateboarding. I would sometimes just close my eyes and listen.

Which reminded me, too: In college, truong tran told me that I possessed an erotic relationship to poetry. He conjectured—correctly—that I would like to nuzzle certain words.

5. It is an obvious but much-ignored fact that characters, plots, settings, and speakers are mere illusions, are only as "alive" as their author-creators can convincingly depict them in language. The production and/or consumption of said language, however, constitutes a genuine experience—very much alive (no scare quotes) as it happens. When one of my students asks, as they invariably do, what a particular text is about, I tell them: "For the reader, the text is about the experience of reading the text; for the writer, the text is about the experience of writing it."

6. In Tomoka Shibasaki's *Spring Garden* (2014), an illustrator and comic-strip artist named Nishi is obsessed with a "sky-blue house" documented (along with its long-ago residents, a well-known artist couple) in an out-of-print photobook—*Spring Garden*. Taking up residence in a nearby apartment, Nishi stalks the house, later befriending its current residents, in an urgent attempt to behold in person and then to recreate in her art the house's many rooms. As the surrounding Tokyo neighborhood is systematically demolished and rebuilt, Nishi undertakes her updated version of *Spring Garden* and also transmits her obsession to her neighbor, Taro, the novella's protagonist.

Though the book mostly emanates loneliness and loss, I find the iterations of the sky-blue house enlivening. Rather than occupy Shibasaki's characters, the house occupies them, and so survives—a "garden" amidst aggressive urban renewal, a blossoming amidst contemporary urban alienation. Their obsession with the sky-blue house may reveal their lack of satisfactory human engagement, but accumulating versions of it partially eclipse our investment in traditional notions of plot and character, so that readers (or this reader, anyway) partially experience *Spring Garden* as variations on a

theme—an unexpectedly warm-blooded exercise/experiment that blurs the divide between art and artifice, between the work (the novella itself) and what philosopher Kendall Walton calls the "work world" (the relevant artwork's imagined world: the dollhouse for the dolls). Variations on the sky-blue house reach beyond the book's fictional domain, creating a palpable interdependency between reader, author, and characters, because they—the variations—are plainly discernible not only as obsessional output arising "naturally" from character and plot, but as compositional input, as one of Shibasaki's central compositional engines, too.

7. In my mid-twenties, when I began to reallocate my artistic energies from music to literature, I found myself drawn to work that reveals or gestures toward its compositional process(es), that makes the texture and affectivity of the writing experience a discernible ingredient of the reading experience. In my own writing, this was and still is an attempt to reignite some of the sensorial mystery and wonder I felt as a kid learning to play electric bass in his bedroom or listening to Coltrane on his father's record player. "I became content to *feel*," writes Baudelaire in "The Exposition Universelle" (1855), "I returned to seek refuge in impeccable *naïveté*" (196).

8. The poems written "after" Marvin Bell, Ronald Perry, C.D. Wright, Jack Gilbert, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe are especially sensuous. Not only do they evoke the gazillion hours I have spent on the floor of a dimly lighted room, practicing scales, patterns, exercises, and études; not only is my love for these poets discernible as ghosted materiality, as language haunting formal systems—they also very nearly abandon meaning for sound. I thought often, in fact, of a dream (an *actual* dream: I keep a notebook beside my bed) in which my laptop keyboard was a piano keyboard, and words were chords, and each letter could be sharped or flatted at will.

Writing my dissertation, *Alone Together*, I was reminded again and again that what distinguishes my current poetic practice from the musical practice of my youth is that, today, I no longer regard practice as a means to an end (i.e. a way of perfecting or maintaining skills) but rather as an end in itself. The abovementioned poems in particular are not unlike improvisational exercises recorded late at night, over a demitasse of espresso or a snifter of cognac, one take after another, imperfections and all . . .

9. Mark Strand: "It is the oddity of our poems, their idiosyncrasy, their lapses into a necessary awkwardness, their ultimate frailty, that charms and satisfies" (12).

10. In Chapter 17 of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (1885), Huck examines an unfinished crayon drawing by recently deceased Emmeline Grangerford. It features "a young woman in a long white gown, standing on the rail of a bridge all ready to jump . . . looking up at the moon, with tears running down her face" (138). However, because Emmeline died before she could finish "her greatest picture," this young woman has "two arms folded across her breast, and two arms stretched out in front, and two more reaching up towards the moon": Emmeline planned "to see which pair would look best and then scratch out all the other arms." Though Twain was clearly satirizing the comic seriousness of popular 19th-century tragic romances, E.W. Kemble and John Harley's original illustration (see below) of this young woman is neither tragic nor comic. Instead, it's metamorphic: a woman with six semi-transparent arms—"so many arms it made her look too spidery" (139). Emmeline's failure to settle on one pair of arms inadvertently produced a new and decidedly unromantic heroine. She is a spider woman *and* a plural subject reaching simultaneously in different directions.

"IT MADE HER LOOK SPIDERY."

[1]

11. "I learned to listen to variations" (Maya Catherine Popa 29).

12. "Art is the manifestation of choices in a charged field," contends Dean Young (33), and I relish writing that pluralizes those choices, that "fails" to construct the illusion of a literary world in which only one pair of arms ever existed or could exist. "[I]n our time," writes Sharon Spencer, "to perceive, comprehend, or apprehend any object, the preceptor must accumulate a variety of perspectives upon that object. He must 'see' it from as many points of view as possible" (186). When Marvin Bell told me that he'd once borrowed Donald Justice's office and there, in a desk drawer, found numerous sheets of paper on which a couplet had been obsessively written and rewritten and then rewritten again, I knew I was supposed to be impressed by the older poet's patience, care, precision: the time-honored "struggle" for perfection. Instead, I found the (imagined)

[1] <http://bancroft.berkeley.edu>

record of the couplet's composition—its accumulation of perspectives—far more captivating than any single "final" couplet could be. "The house of fiction has . . . not one window, but millions" (Henry James).

13. For the four Gilbert poems, or "sketches," as I prefer to call them, I simply pluck words from his *Collected Poems* and insert them quite at random into a form I developed, a form built upon the repetition of words/phrases separated by a single preposition (e.g. "breathless *through* windstorms"; "blood *through* ripped sheets"; "drift-leaves *through* keyholes"; etc). The product of this procedure becomes the raw material out of which the sketch is made.

Gilbert, I suspect, would roll his eyes at such a process. And yet it's a process whereby I consistently access—even if the sketches are not consistently successful—that which I love most about his own poetry: his embrace of both the insufficiency of language ("How astonishing it is that language can almost mean, / and frightening that it does not quite" [5]) and the inescapable fact that language fairly hums—*always* hums?—with resonant meanings ("What we feel most has / no name but amber, archers, cinnamon, horses and birds").

14. An editor once remarked upon my own repetition of words: *dark, body, hair, shadow*, *night*. I had to admit I *do* love these words, even if—or maybe precisely *because*—it makes me feel like a brooding teenager plunking minor chords on a piano, sustain pedal to the metal.

15. When writing my dissertation's closing series, "Lineage: 7 Variations," John Coltrane was often on my mind (and stereo). Specifically, I thought of his talent for extending phrases beyond their expected conclusions, for broadening and/or artfully complicating the improvisational units of

which his solos were composed. In one well-known anecdote, Coltrane, defending the length of his solos, tells Miles, "I can't find a way to stop," to which Miles replies, "You might start by taking the horn out of your fucking mouth." Channeling the spirit of Coltrane, each "Lineage" variation is a single-paragraph story (with the exception of "6.") comprised of extended, hypotactic sentences, which I rather fancifully regard as "sheets of sound."[2] Each "Lineage" variation is loath to place periods or close paragraphs, is loath to take the horn out of its mouth.

16. Some fifteen years ago, I recorded a duet with my longtime childhood bass instructor, Mike Kelly, entitled "Audio Wallpaper." It featured a technique known as "tapping" in which both hands engage the fretboard—imagine each of us playing his bass as though it were a piano—and repeated subtle melodic variations ad infinitum. In truth, the composition reflected our predominant practice method: we would repeat a riff in unison until we entered a trance-like state in which we (I'll speak for both of us here) felt the mental "stress" of the activity slowly dissolve and our minds awaken inside the music—two figures floating perfectly still inside a storm cloud. In this way, too, the sheet-of-sound/audio-wallpaper impulse (not to mention the degree-of-difficulty calculation that contributes to my pursuit of it) is quite deeply engrained in me.

17. Can my readers discern the spirit of Coltrane specifically? I doubt it—and I don't care. Art is chockfull of present absences. Yet readers can indeed discern that the sentential maneuvering of "Lineage: 7 Variations" is rooted in the practice of jazz improvisation. The basic sentence structures of each variation are almost identical; together, they form the chord progression over which I can solo, the skeleton over which I can drape sundry clothes.

[2] The now-famous term Ira Gitler used to describe Coltrane's solos.

18. Once, over coffee, M. asked me why didn't I write more poems about jazz? Though jazz and jazz musicians receive occasional spotlight (as Freddie Hubbard does in "Landscape with Sashimi"), classical music unequivocally dominates my dissertation. I proceeded to tell M. that I loved classical music, too, and that I grew up on the Russians: Rachmaninoff, Stravinsky, Shostakovich. Which is just to say I didn't answer her question. I didn't tell her that Miles listened almost exclusively to classical music, as his records with Bill *and* Gil Evans attest—"He played Khachaturian, Debussy, Chopin," says Frances Taylor Davis, Miles' first wife[3]—or that my go-to process of composition is essentially bop-derived:

Owing to my background as a workaday jazz musician (I played out of a fakebook in the DeWald-Taylor Quintet for over a decade), it feels perfectly ordinary for me to open a "finished" text and improvise, so to speak, over its changes. Our charge as musicians was to—in accordance with Pound—"make new" tunes we'd played, let alone heard in recordings, ten thousand times. "[I]nstant variety and instant repetition," wrote Italo Calvino (xviii). Every instantiation of a tune must be a new tune and the same old tune, both.

19. If a traditional lyric poem ("the spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions recollected in tranquility," as Wordsworth so famously put it) is a memorial to a single human's experience of a discrete moment on earth, then I'm interested in a hall-of-mirrors lyric, in a lyric for collectivists, in the lyric as a site in which one can repeatedly access, tranquilly or no, discrete moments on earth, understanding full well that one has been here (or somewhere all too like it) at least once before.

[3] Interview from the 2001 documentary *The Miles Davis Story*.

20. Vladimir Propp: "The names of the dramatic personae change (as well as the attributes of each), but neither their actions nor functions change. From this we can draw the inference that a tale often attributes identical actions to various personages" (20).

21. When I first read Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928)—a study in which Russian fairy tales are broken into and analyzed as thematic and narratological chunks, which tend to be, Propp discovers, sequenced in particular ways—I thought of the gazillion hand-me-down phrases/patterns that jazz musicians lean on (mostly for practical reasons, as when a player needs a brief mental or physical break from intensity, a gulp of air before diving back down into the depths) during solos. I glimpsed in Propp's *Morphology* a way to produce narratives that excused stock phrases/patterns as part and parcel of a general practice. Rather than attribute "identical actions to various personages," however, "Lineage: 7 Variations" attributes various actions in identical or almost identical sentence structures: "My grandmother's alone, more alone than I, though less alone than my grandfather . . ."; "I'm handsome—a bit handsomer, I think, than my brother—but perhaps not quite as handsome as our father . . ."; "My father's a very fine musician—a better musician, at least, than my uncle, who will strum his guitar and croon to old wide-hipped ladies in the subway, like a troubadour—though he's not nearly as fine a musician as my wife . . ." And so on and so forth.

22. Repeated, the technical elements acquire an uncanniness: one senses the present absence of an urtext—"something," to quote Freud, "which is secretly familiar." And indeed there *is* an urtext. In 2012, I published a very short story called "Lineage" that contained the "original" sentential skeleton of the series. Though the story itself was forgettable, the movement of its sentences gnawed at me, haunted me, as though the form was always already uncanny. *Here*, I intuited, *is a template for producing*

plot and conflict—two essential narrative elements for which I have little to no natural ability or interest. Still, for reasons unclear to me, a number of years would pass before I, bored and alone in a fluorescent-lighted UGA computer lab ("boredom," claims Carmine Starnino, "is the highest state of creativity"), wrote the first "Lineage" variation.

23. I disclose the mechanics of "Lineage: 7 Variations" in hopes that readers will reflect on the act of writing even as they engage with character and plot; that they will regard the disclosure as indiscreet and in conflict with the supremacy of autonomous finished texts; and that they will seek narrative connections (*Are these characters members of a single family, each variation a branch of one big family's tree?*) as well as morphological connections (*Do particular words, phrases, and sentence structures appear and reappear like strands of linguistic DNA across the series? Are these variations quite literally blood-related?*)

24. In *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods of Jazz* (1961), Langston Hughes includes an afterword, "Liner Notes," which consists of an "informative" prose paragraph for each poem in the collection. Addressed to "*the poetically unhep*," these paragraphs read like prose poems, so rich are they in Hughes' rhymes and rhythms: "Because grandma lost her apron with all the answers in her pocket (perhaps consumed by fire) certain grand- and- great-grandsons play music burning like dry ice against the ear. Forcing cries of succor from its own unheard completion—not resolved by Charlie Parker—can we look to monk or Monk? Or let it rest with Eric Dolphy? (92)" Instead of over-explaining or speaking down to "*the poetically unhep*"—a white audience ignorant of his many black cultural references—Hughes refuses to "speak" inauthentically. Because the tinge of anger and frustration is arguably more apparent in the afterword than in the lineated poems, "Liner Notes" extends the book's genre *and* emotion, a series of corresponding prose poems in a darker mood: a

shadow of the book as a whole. In Hughes I rediscovered that structure and form can facilitate, in the rep-and-rev tradition,[4] not only a more expansive range of emotional and tonal registers, but a more intricate blurring of poetry and prose.

25. *There is an opening from one room to the next . . .*

Barbara Tomash's "Home Stead," from *The Secret of White* (2009), contains a final, coda-like stanza. Separated from the poem proper by an asterisk, this "coda" is also tonally distinct: observational, existential, and slightly formal in its use of the first-person plural: *we walk between the two without thinking, we cross the boundary between living and dying . . .* (57).

"Like commentary on the poem itself," I told her one afternoon in her office.

Barbara looked at me and nodded. She said many rabbis believe a text does not exist unless it's been commented on.

26. Tuscan proverb: "The tale is not beautiful if nothing is added to it" (Calvino xxi).

27. Composing from scratch—*creatio ex nihilo*—is neither the greater method nor the greater skill; it's instead a different method and skill, one in which each decision is guided by (1) a large-scale conception of the urtext, (2) an intuitive inkling of what the in-progress text will be, and (3) the real-time communion of risk and grace (i.e. the ability to gracefully maneuver formal attributes as well as surprise, break expectations, reach "beyond your formulas" [Charles Mingus]). Though my writing is not, strictly speaking, improvised—language doesn't pour spontaneously out of me, à la David

[4] Suzan-Lori Parks: "'Repetition and Revision' is a concept integral to the Jazz esthetic in which the composer or performer will write or play a musical phrase once and again and again; etc.—with each revisit the phrase is slightly revised. 'Rep & Rev' as I call it . . ." (9).

Antin's "talk poems"—my baseline compositional process foregrounds skills and tenets particularly revered by the jazz improviser. I often pursue highly formal/structured poems (and prose texts) solely for the fun of "playing" against their rules.[5]

28. Because language occurs, unlike music, non-simultaneously—"The story is what happens in the reader's mind as his eyes move from the first word to the second, the second to the third, and so on to the end of the tale," writes Samuel R. Delany (4)—the kind of risk-taking mentioned above is only discernible via juxtaposition: the juxtaposition between the poems in Hughes' *Ask Your Mama* and their corresponding liner notes, for example. To discern the riskiness, to register the extent to which this or that decision challenges/strays from the predictable, the reader has to approximate simultaneity by reading the urtext (or any previous instantiation of a text) *behind* or *alongside* its variant. Each compositional decision bears a history. Thus, alternative versions of the text are discernible palimpsestically—a palpable present-absence, or extra-textual energy, affecting our reading experience. Alone together, indeed.

29. "The memory is a beautiful ghost" (Cassie Donish 14).

30. At the center of truong tran's *four letter words* (2008) are four barely visible poems—ghost poems—printed on both sides of two sheets of transparent vellum. *Are these dead poems? Poems "abandoned," as Valéry might put it, too early? Were they once (or once intended to be) something else?* And perhaps most importantly: *What are they now, together, layered almost illegibly one upon the other?*

[5] In the third Gilbert sketch, for example, syncopated silences (created by caesuras, virgules, mid-word hyphenation, and the removal of terminal punctuation) push back against the poem's otherwise simplistic form.

 [6]

31. I first encountered the cinematographic photography of Jeff Wall at his SFMOMA retrospective exhibition in 2007. Even more than his imaginative ideas (*The Flooded Grave*, 1998-2000) or technical prowess (*A Sudden Gust of Wind* [After Hokusai], 1993), the uncanniness of his pictures utterly overwhelmed me. Approximately life-sized but mounted in brighter-than-life lightboxes, Wall's photographs are almost exclusively set-constructed. Chancing upon an event or location of pictorial interest, he does not photograph it, but rather stages it and hires actors to inhabit the space. Hence, his well-known mantra: "I begin by *not* photographing." Which is just to say that Wall doesn't march lockstep within a documentary-based tradition of photography, shooting the world as it exists. Instead, he behaves as a documentary photographer of collaborative semi-controlled environments, merely observing, merely waiting to "capture"—well, *something*.

In photography as in poetry: "What the poem is," as John Ciardi writes in *How Does a Poem Mean?* (1959), "is inseparable from its own performance of itself."

[6] Jeff Wall. *The Storyteller,* 1986. Silver dye bleach transparency in lightbox. 229 x 437 cm. <https://www.metmuseum.org>.

32. With the exception of several centerpieces (a koi pond, a brick patio, a few well-placed canopy trees), my father's backyard has been continually reimagined. At present, it's a veritable rainforest featuring two ponds, three waterfalls, a stream, three patios, one sunken patio, cushioned benches, hanging lanterns, windchimes, a labyrinth of stone paths, a quivering overlay of shadow—in short, not what one expects of a modestly-sized, tract home backyard in the middle of suburbia. And yet, despite its many relaxing, transportive properties, I'm most intrigued by the yard's history and perpetual as-yet-unfinishedness, the way in which family and friends cannot *not* experience the yard as process rather than as product. Because earlier versions of the yard are visible palimpsestically—I can still see the gazeboed hot tub over here, the chain-linked dog den over there, and over there the wooden footbridge—the (re)experience is one of fullness and of absence, both. Variability contributes as much to my father's backyard as water, light, or air.

33. To reimagine a text is to challenge traditional notions of *closure*, *totalization*, *finality*, *perfection*—aesthetic tenets in which I put zero stock. (If I *did* believe in them, then perhaps I would relinquish art altogether and be satisfied replacing batteries in my children's toys.) As Marvin Bell likes to tell his students (I was one of them): "It's not work, and it's never finished." Hence, each text in *Alone Together* is part of a series, and each series engenders a sense of never-endingness:

The component parts of "To an Imagined Us," for example, are neither numbered (which suggests linearity[7]) nor titled (which suggests independence), but rather separated by glyphs (which

[7] Numbers, of course, don't always suggest linearity. As in this very introduction, in both "Fugue: 7 Paragraphs" and "Lineage: 7 Variations"—partly because I call them "paragraphs" and "variations," rather than "stories" or "prose poems"—the numbers merely indicate instantiations of a form (the ur- "Lineage") or a gathering of conventional prose delineations (paragraphs). Readers understand that the quantity of paragraphs/variations is arbitrary. In each case there's seven, but there could just as well as be twelve or fifty or ten thousand. (I wrote many more than are represented in my dissertation.)

suggests assemblage—a series of parts, or [re]movable pieces, quite various in my case, gathered under a single banner). My hope is that "To an Imagined Us," and the "Landscape" series, will be read kaleidoscopically—the second part echoes the fifth part, the eighth part echoes the fourteenth part, the sixth part echoes the eighteenth part, and so on—with the understanding that neither the order nor the quantity of parts/pieces matters. "There's no truth," writes Deborah A. Miranda, "in the old formula of beginning, middle, end" (25).

In fact, the component sections of my dissertation are interchangeable,[8] are what Sharon Spencer in *Space, Time, and Structure in the Modern Novel* (1971) would call a "mobile construct"—its structure "constitutes a denial of linear chronology" and is "dependent upon juxtaposition [as] the chief means by which the impression of 'mobility' is attained" (189).

34. Joshua Jennifer Espinoza: "Nothing is unrelated" (56).

35. In March, Mike Kelly, my bass instructor, died of pancreatic cancer at the age of fifty-seven. After I heard the news, I lay on the floor of our darkened bedroom with my bass flat across my chest—not performing for him, but practicing. (It turns out grief, too, is a sheet of sound.) Trying to make him proud. As though I would arrive, once more, at his house after school on Monday.

36. When I was an undergraduate at San Francisco State University, Camille Dungy took a prose poem of mine and reordered all of its sentences—an experiment that taught me so much about part-whole relations and the importance of angular "turns." It was like listening to Thelonious Monk play

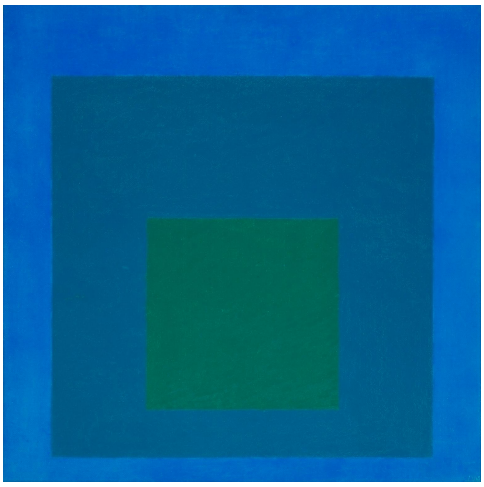
[8] Despite leaping about in time and space, "Variation on a Myth" is the only text whose (four) discrete parts must be read in a particular sequence, the only text that is, to continue Spencer's terminology, a "stable construct."

stride for the first time: the experiment revealed to me that Dungy dug my poems (very heartening at the time), but also poked fun at a certain quaintness or tidiness they possessed.

I thought of this event the other afternoon, at the playground sandbox, when my son sang the Alphabet Song at the top of his lungs—"A, B, C, D, F, I, G . . ."—and two older girls stared up at their mom, wide-eyed, then pointed at my son and shouted: "That's wrong! That's wrong! He's singing it wrong!" Wrong? Protectively, I wanted to inform them that the order of the letters scarcely matters. More importantly, anyway, he sang the song correctly—in rhythm and right on key.

37. Of the lineated poems in my dissertation, most are what my friend d. has termed "rectangles"—poems with lines of uniform length, thus resembling near-perfect rectangles: tidiness of another sort. Though the constraint initially arose as a poetic manifestation of obsessive-compulsive disorder—rectangles are written on a word processor, in Times New Roman, with a margin ruler (no justified margins[9])—I loved the contrast between the subjectivity of a poem and its objective appearance on the page. In content, the poems were radically different. In appearance, they seemed to emerge as from a factory, a succession of rectangular text-objects. Variations on a visual theme. *Maybe*, I thought, *I would print them on cardstock, cut them out, and collect them as I used to collect baseball cards as a kid.*

[9] I have, however, justified the margins of my dissertation's prose. A jagged right margin will evoke (for visually sensitive readers such as myself) a lineated poem, and I didn't want to create unnecessary confusion: *Are these prose texts, or are they lineated poems with very long lines?*



[10]

38. Working so meticulously with the margin ruler, I made-believe these rectangles had one foot in a minimalist tradition. Geometric "studies" such as Josef Albers' *Homage to the Square* series (1950-1976) induced me, in fact, to write poems with different sets of lines of uniform length and/or with unconventional layouts.[11] In time, however, even though I've grown far less interested in line-length uniformity than in the unexpected results the constraint incites (writing lines of uniform length does indeed ignite the imagination and invite the proverbial muse), one of the chief reasons why I've written so many rectangles—many more than the fourteen that appear in my dissertation—is because I simply relish the tactility of measuring, the treatment of language as physical material, and texts that are as much (set-)constructed as they are composed.

39. "White key. Black key. No, / that's wrong. It's all tactile" (William Matthews 149).

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[10] Josef Albers. *Study for Homage for the Square: Beaming*, 1963. 762 x 762 mm. Oil paint on fiberboard. <https://www.tate.org.uk>.

[11] In "2 Landscapes: An Opera," for example, the first section consists of lines of a single uniform length, but with the even-numbered lines "dropped," so that one reads across what appears to be two identical poems, or across the facing pages of a book. The second section consists of two different sets of lines of uniform length: a very short line-length (lines 1, 4, 7, 10, 13, etc) followed by a pair of lines of quite average length (lines 2-3, 5-6, 8-9, 11-12, etc).

40. Somebody once told me that Allen Ginsberg frequently and experimentally altered the size of his notebooks. The size, he claimed, would often determine the length of his poetic line.

Because improvisation often grows out of random gambits—the indelible five-note opening phrase to Keith Jarret's *Köln Concert* (1975) was an imitation of the opera-house bell informing his audience to please find their seats—it feels quite natural for me to follow an arbitrary line-length, whether it be predetermined (à la Ginsberg's notebooks), established by an opening line, or both.[12]

41. Fourteen rectangles. But can you, dear reader, detect them?

When I received the galleys for my first published rectangle, I frowned, I sulked. It was not a near-perfect rectangle. Improvidently, I hadn't realized that the uniform line-length of these poems, when set in almost any font other than Times New Roman, would be entirely lost: they would no longer resemble rectangles, they would no longer exhibit any discernible constraint at all.

Now, however, I love that my poems possess a "secret" methodology. I look forward to the moment when I, as opposed to an editor, set a new poem in a different font, suddenly creating—like the erosion of a vertical rockface—the jagged right margin.[13] I feel like my son, who builds

[12] In "Dissolution (or, Landscape with Martyr)"—a poem with two alternating line-lengths—the length of the odd-numbered lines was established by the opening line ("Afterward, he watched her lumber out of the coliseum," which is approximately 3.625 inches) and the length of the even-numbered lines was predetermined (I chose at random 2.75 inches).

[13] There are also two prose poems—the eleventh part of "To an Imagined Us" and "Fantasia: A Landscape"—in a hybrid form: a chain of unpunctuated, non-lineated haiku (sheet-of-sound compositions, to be sure) whose "lines"—five- and seven-syllable phrases—repeat in the pattern of a pantoum, thus: "inside him for years a river of her brown hair floating round organs as he walks silent a river of her brown hair under sulfur lamps as he walks silent his shadow reaches backward under sulfur lamps clutching a moment his shadow reaches backward . . ." and so on. If written in tercets, the two forms (haiku and pantoum) would be fairly easy to discern, but because I *de*-lineate them, the combination of forms is effectively hidden in plain sight.

humungous multicolored block towers ("Sooooo tall," he exclaims, standing on tiptoe, stretching up his arms) solely for the fun of knocking them down.

Which reminds me: Bookending truong tran's *four letter words* are "paragraphs" of some dingbat font (numbers, images, unintelligible glyphs) with short phrases appearing—erasure-style—throughout. Asked about it, truong said these pages were not-so-successful poems that nevertheless contributed greatly to his understanding of the book. Rather than cut them altogether, he performed an erasure on them and disguised them as idiosyncratic (and mostly visual) front and back matter.

42. If one denies, as I do, totalization and closure, if one "resist[s] a notion of art as capable of seeing beyond" (106), as J. Jack Halberstam writes in *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), then one ought to reframe one's relationship to one's art—one ought to empower art's confined space (a backyard, a "rectangle," a reconstruction of an event *not* photographed) by equating movement within it as emancipatory. Like a jazz musician, one ought to treat the limitations or boundaries of one's art less as confinement than as an opportunity to challenge, transform, expand, resist, reinvent.[14]

43. A few semesters ago, in a literature-based composition course, my students and I discussed the queer, uncanny space of Jim and Harriet Stone's apartment in Raymond Carver's "Neighbors" (1970). More *Twilight Zone* than Dirty Realism, "Neighbors" is the story of Bill and Arlene Miller, "a happy couple" who agree to "look after the Stones' apartment, feed Kitty, and water the plants" (86), only to discover, separately, that the apartment changes them: they re-costume themselves ("He stepped into the panties and fastened the brassier" [91]); become distracted, removed from ordinary

[14] For me, this "confinement" is also a mindfulness technique whereby the lack of physical space has forced (or tricked) me into an embodied awareness of the present moment. As one might expect, the sensuousness of writing becomes dramatically heightened.

time ("'I didn't feed Kitty or do any watering.' She looked at him. 'Isn't that stupid?'" [92]); and carry the trace-marks—the psychosexual aftereffects—of it back to their own apartment/lives:

She let him use her key to open the door. He looked at the door across the hall before following her inside.

"Let's go to bed," he said.

"Now?" She laughed. "What's gotten into you?"

"Nothing. Take your dress off." He grabbed for her awkwardly, and she said, "Good God, Bill."

He unfastened his belt. (88)

I regard the story as a metaphor for the excitement and artistic possibility (and felt potentiality) of entering extant narratives. In the uncanny alternate reality of the Stones' apartment, Bill and Arlene's allegiance to their own narrative promptly malfunctions, and Carver commences a close study—a Jeff Wall-like observation—of characters over whom he holds (or pretends he holds[15]) no dominion: "[Bill] moved slowly through each room considering everything that fell under his gaze, carefully, one object at a time" (90). Rather than escape his aesthetic proclivities by looking *out*, Carver queers the fictive space of the Stones' apartment: he "resist[s] a notion of art as capable of seeing beyond." Though the Millers, at story's end, accidentally lock themselves out of the Stones' apartment, Carver has nevertheless made contact with his (non-realist) literary "neighbors," has already freed himself, however briefly, from the limitations of realism's prevailing aesthetic conventions.

44. In high school, my friends and I skateboarded from the instant the last bell rang until it grew dark outside, moving from one "spot" to another only when we bored of it or when (more

[15] Carver's "presence," as Vasiliki Fachard observes, "can often be felt behind the character's actions" (178).

commonly) we got kicked out. Twenty years later I still maintain a skater's view of the world: stairs, rails, ledges, gaps, well-lit empty lots—indeed the entire urban landscape—is a skate park, a series of spots. For street skaters, concrete jungles are charged not only with possibility (what has been or can be done) but with potentiality (what can be imagined or may be done in the future).[16]

45. My rock-climbing father would understand. Once, in midtown Sacramento—I must have been seven or eight years old—I watched, enthralled, as he began to scale the rock façade of what was, if memory serves, a frozen yogurt shop.

46. I view a page of text, too, as a series of spots—a site in which to attempt possibilities and to evoke, in readers' and writers' minds alike, potentialities: "the warm illumination of a horizon" (Muñoz 1), the ghostly presence of what is not written. "For each work of art that becomes physical," said Sol Lewitt, "there are many variations that do not."

47. In David Huddle's novella *Tenorman* (1995), there's an "historical consultant" named Whitney Ballstom (a not-so-subtle evocation of jazz critic Whitney Balliet) who comments upon the titular tenorman's sudden blossoming: "There's even a new way he's using silence, letting half or three quarters of a phrase stand and then picking it up out of nowhere as if he'd playing a whole sequence of notes in his mind without putting them through the horn" (37).

[16] Or, as José Esteban Muñoz puts it in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009): "Possibilities exist, or more nearly, they exist within a logical real, the possible, which is within the present and is linked to presence. Potentialities are different in that although they are present, they do not exist in present things. Thus, potentialities have a temporality that is not in the present but, more nearly, in the horizon, which we can understand as futurity. Potentiality is and is not presence . . ." (99).

48. Excised from my dissertation is a twenty-page short story called "The Rosebud Variations." In what might have been a climactic scene, the narrator's invented fairy-tale heroine discovers what she believes to be a note left to her by her late mother, though it turns out to be an unfinished pencil drawing—*a self-portrait in which the left eye, the right half of the nose, the upper lip, and the very tip of her Woolfian chin had all been so often sketched and erased, then sketched again and erased, and again sketched and then erased again, that the face was nothing but a tornadic lead-gray blur littered with eraser dust—a face disappearing behind a mask of smoke.*

49. "[S]ome space in which mystery might still exist," said David St. John (150). Or as my partner, Kali, told me last Sunday on an afternoon drive (we were trying to get our kids to nap and have, for once, an uninterrupted conversation): "You are interested in voids."

Which reminded me: I once had my creative writing students write a text to which no one could relate.[17] *Is it even possible*, I wondered, *for a text to be void of relatable experience, emotions, or language?* As expected, we all failed—fascinatingly. My own attempt grew into "Nachträglichkeit (or, Landscape with Adventurers)," a poem in which a community awaits an unknown sound that they believe will signal a journey of transcendence into their town's surrounding ash trees. Quite relatable—even to those for whom transcendence is a chimera, a fool's errand—because most of us have felt a desire either for the impossible or for what Ernst Bloch termed the *not-yet-conscious*, the *not-yet-become*.

[17] I've long bristled at "relatability" as a rationale for an artwork's success. In the classroom, students will all too often describe a text as "relatable" because it's valid, true, and tends to foreclose further questioning from educators hesitant to pry into their personal lives. More importantly, however, I feel it rationalizes people's desire, consciously or un-, to remain safely within their own domains of experience; it rationalizes people's desire to read (and write) only "what they know" or what their sociocultural milieu tells them they should know.

50. “Cries of succor from its own unheard completion.” Hidden in plain sight.

I hope readers of my dissertation can feel not only the provisionality of each compositional decision, but also the (absent) presence of even prospective, untaken decisions—the not-yet-decisions. Ghost arms. Anticipation of the sensuous: words in the mouth or notes under fingertips. “Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is” (Wallace Stevens 10).

A new way he’s using silence.

An invitation for you, too, to invent . . .

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