

BLOCKS WORLD

by

EMMA CATHERINE PERRY

(Under the Direction of Andrew Zawacki)

ABSTRACT

Blocks World is a collection of poetry that combines experimental modalities with traditional lyric elements to probe the complexities of familial and extrahuman relationships. Organized into several sequences interspersed with longer, discrete poems, *Blocks World* draws on computer-generated language to provoke insights into entanglements between siblings, parents and children, and partners. While the mechanical elements of this collection propose a writerly process that comprehends distributed agency as inevitable, the periodic meditations on the natural world provide a grounding element to the collection that also bridges the false divide between “natural” and “made.” This collection is preceded by a critical introduction that urges closer collaboration between creative writing teachers and writing center practitioners to design and implement more accessible and justice-oriented pedagogies.

INDEX WORDS: poetry, experimental poetry, lyric, writing center pedagogy, creative writing pedagogy

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CHAPTER 1

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Opportunities for Cross-Pollination in Creative Writing and Writing Center Pedagogies andWelcome to *Blocks World*

Overview: In this critical introduction, I discuss both a poetry project and the intellectual context in which I have been shaping this project. While the last third of this introduction will address the dissertation manuscript *Blocks World*, the first two thirds of this introduction attend to a question in writing studies¹ more generally. As both a creative writer-teacher and writing center practitioner, I am interested in the possibilities of the distinct pedagogies in creative writing and writing centers to inform and influence each other toward the adoption of inclusive, accessible, and antiracist structures of writing, responding, and being in community. In this introduction, I posit that the increasing interest in inclusive pedagogy among creative writers provides an opportunity for cross-pollination between these related spheres of inquiry and practice. As writing center scholars develop pedagogical responses (and methods of response) to questions of power and equity in one-with-one conferencing, and as creative writer-teachers seek to adopt new modes of writing instruction beyond the traditional workshop, knowledge and solution-sharing could be particularly impactful for practitioners in both disciplines.

While the incorporation of writing center studies into the critical introduction to a creative writing dissertation may seem unusual, I believe it appropriate. As part of a capstone

¹ For the purposes of this introduction, I use “writing studies” as an umbrella term that covers (at least) creative writing, writing center studies, and composition studies.

project signaling the completion of this degree program, this critical introduction gives me an opportunity to reflect on the manuscript that makes up the bulk of this dissertation and to contextualize this work within the landscape of my scholarly interests. As my engagement with creative writing in this program has continued a writerly trajectory that started two decades ago, my writing center work pursues a similarly consistent vector. This is my eleventh year actively working as a writing center practitioner; I have worked in writing centers at every institution where I've been a student. I have worked in the UGA Writing Center in various capacities over the past five years, including that of assistant director for the last two.

As I prepare to leave the University of Georgia, I prepare to travel both of these paths. I will keep writing and I will keep thinking about how best to teach writing in the context of the university classroom and in the context of student-centered support. I look forward to elaborating both strands of writing study in my new role as Associate Director of the Writing Center and Writing Fellows Program at the University of Nebraska. This critical introduction may serve as a guide to thinking about the creative work I've done and will do and as a tentative itinerary that plots a path toward future scholarly projects. May this document (and the writing of it) serve as both a culmination and a futurism—describing the arc of the recent past and speculating on the curvature to come.

Section I: CW/WC

Addressing both creative writing and writing center studies in this critical introduction not only reflects my personal and professional prerogatives, it also responds to an opportunity to intervene meaningfully in the pedagogical discussions attending both of these writing-centered fields. Writing centers have historically occupied a fruitfully (and at times frustratingly) liminal

place with respect to the academy; they share this discomfort with creative writing programs. Though both writing centers and creative writing programs in United States universities and colleges have been associated historically with linguistic assimilation into White Mainstream English (WME)², both writing centers and creative writing programs have pushed past these early histories to become sites of more interesting writing and thinking about writing. These days, when working well, both entities are disloyal to the gatekeeping and drive to standardize that students often face in the neoliberal academy, and both can offer students a rare and important opportunity: to have their work read closely—to be taken seriously as writers.

In terms of essential pedagogical structures, the creative writing classroom tends to be governed by the workshop and the writing center tends to be organized around one-with-one conferences. While a workshop, in which one student submits writing to a group and then submits to a critique, can take many shapes, the dominant mode of workshopping in creative writing classrooms in the United States has been what is referred to as the “Iowa-style workshop”. Referring to the method of workshopping popularized by instructors in the Writers’ Workshop at the University of Iowa post World War II, an Iowa-style workshop involves a writer receiving feedback from the entire class and instructor at the same time. During the critique, the writer-student who has submitted a draft (usually in a state of apparent completeness, i.e. a full story or “finished” poem) sits silently while the other workshop participants comment on the work and make suggestions for revision. Depending on the size of the class and the length of the

² I follow April Baker-Bell’s lead in using the term White Mainstream English to describe the linguistic practices most rewarded in United States post secondary contexts (historically including writing centers and creative writing programs). Baker-Bell writes, “I use the term White Mainstream English in place of standard English to emphasize how white ways of speaking become the invisible, or better, inaudible norm” (3). Whereas an alternative term like “Standard American English” elides the racialization of “standard” as White, and occludes the upper-middle class of it all, visibilizing the racial codes embedded in the idea of “standard English” enables writer-teachers to address the stakes of linguistic inclusiveness head-on.

writing under consideration, these workshop sessions can take anywhere from fifteen minutes (in a large, introductory course) to over an hour (usually in a graduate seminar).

Like the Iowa-style workshop, the one-with-one writing center conference also relies on readerly response to drive the conversation about student work. In this basic pedagogical structure, a writer-student brings a project (in any state of (un)(de)(re)composition) to the writing center and typically expects to spend between 30 and 60 minutes working with a peer tutor. Traditionally, the one-with-one conference, diverging here crucially from Iowa-style creative writing workshops, emphasizes the writer's role as an active participant in the conversation. Writing center pedagogy attends assiduously to the tension between the writing tutor's ability to decode genre and linguistic expectations for writer-students who are unfamiliar with academic writing and the writing tutor's responsibility to avoid exerting inappropriate control over another writer's work. Despite the critical difference between a workshop model in which the writer is silenced and a conference model in which the writer is required to take an active role in determining the conversation about their writing, their shared reliance on a readerly response for framing feedback (as opposed to, say, an evaluative rubric), signals a kinship that can be leveraged to imagine new pedagogic forms.

In addition to the primacy of the readerly response, these two cousin-disciplines share a number of situational similarities. Both prioritize a student-centered approach that emphasizes the student's responsibility for and right to self-expression. In both creative writing workshops and one-with-one writing center sessions, discussion of craft is paramount. In both situations, reading student work aloud, attuning the reader's (inner) ear to the voice the writer is creating on the page, is considered a valued practice. Both creative writing classes and one-with-one writing center conferences hold space for very complex and often intense emotional content. Both can

serve as sites of cosmopolitanism—where writers from different backgrounds meet and mingle—and as contact zones, where these minglings expose systemic rifts and ruptures.

The relationship between creative writing and its fellow subfields in English departments has been the subject of much discussion. In his attempt to account for the history of creative writing as a discipline *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880*, D. G. Myers posits that creative writing first made its way into the university classroom as a sort of constructivist approach to literary studies. Essentially, engaging literature students in creative writing exercises was first seen as a method of enlivening the literary devices and narrative structures that the students were required to parse. The goal of this approach initially was not to develop poets or fiction writers, but rather to establish a sort of craft knowledge for emerging critics. Myers goes on to explore how the rise of modern composition programs in the 20th century and these programs' attention to writing as a subject of instruction (and not just a tool of assessment) eventually offered creative writing a more comfortable seat at the academy table.

The conversation between practitioners of creative writing studies and composition studies continues apace. In the 21st century, for example, Alexandria Peary has suggested that the incorporation of prompts and exercises associated with creative writing can be leveraged to foster writerly agency for students in a variety of disciplines (2012). Matthew Sumpter, likewise, has explored the implications of personal writing (which he considers to be in the constellation of creative writing) for expressivist composition pedagogies. Aja Martinez has furthermore explored the effects of incorporating the knowledge-making structures of prose fiction and creative nonfiction into a discursive, critical writing method she terms counterstory. Her formulation of this method is particularly important for its illustration of the way literary

elements like scene and dialog can enliven and unearth liberatory possibilities gleaned through lived experience.

While scholars of composition and creative writing pedagogy have long speculated about points of (dis)connection between their two ecologies of practice, the relationship between the praxes of writing centers and creative writing is still only partially addressed. Scholars have suggested that writing center techniques may benefit creative writing classes, but an examination of the bi-directional influence these two related disciplines may have on their respective (and shared) pedagogical practice has not been undertaken. Writing center scholars have speculated on the positive impact writing center pedagogies could have on creative writing classrooms, and creative writer-teachers have encouraged writing center practitioners to embrace creative writing in one-with-one conferences, but these interventions have been sparse and have come due for refurbishment.

Some reluctance on the part of writing center practitioners to engage with creative writing stems from the mystification of creative writing as somehow different from other types of composition. Writing in 1991, Kenneth Pobo first encouraged writing center practitioners not to shy away from dealing with creative writing that students may bring into their centers, noting that, “The issues that a writing center instructor considers are not so different from those that a creative writing teacher considers” (5). He goes on to identify similarities in the constellation of concerns orbiting creative writing and any other type of writing that finds its way into a one-with-on appointment such as diction, clarity, and audience awareness. Interestingly, Pobo identifies the emotionality of tutoring creative writing as a potential difference between working with critical and creative writers. He notes, “One difficulty a writing center instructor may find when dealing with student creative writing is that the student’s ego is often easily bruised” (5-6).

While concerns about affect may have seemed to differentiate meaningfully between self-directed and school-assigned writing while Pobo was authoring this article, recent work on writing centers and affect have undermined this distinction profoundly.³

Since Pobo's article, other writers have also suggested that the differences between tutoring creative writing and critical writing should not prevent well-prepared writing center tutors from working with creative writers. In a 2008 book chapter titled "Tutoring Creative Writers: Working One-to-One on Prose and Poetry" Hans Ostrom echoes Pobo's intention to demystify creative writing. Ostrom goes so far as to suggest ten methods for responding to creative writing in a writing center appointment, carefully noting the intersections between creative writing craft knowledge and standard, valued practices in writing center approaches. Suggesting an even closer relationship between these two subfields, Katherine and John Adams assert that creative writing pedagogy has always been at home in the writing center. In fact, they propose that the writer-centric approach at the core of writing center practice is a descendant of the attentiveness to the student-produced text so crucial to creative writing workshops.

The potential for structural sharing between writing center and creative writing pedagogies has been taken up by writing center scholars who seek to enrich the available options for creative writing instructors to organize their in-class efforts. For example, in Janelle Adsit's "Adapting Writing Center Pedagogy for the Creative Writing Workshop", Adsit advocates for creative writing instructors to orient the discussion of student work away from the traditional Iowa workshop model in which the author sits silently while their classmates evaluate and make revision suggestions for their work. Instead, she recommends deploying the writing-center valued practices of asking the writer to account for their writing project in the form of a

³Janine Morris and Kelly Concannon's recent edited collection *Emotions and Affect in Writing Centers* summarizes and expands upon the existing work in this vein

descriptive cover sheet. She takes up the creative writing workshop convention of the feedback letter, but posits that it would be a more effective pedagogical tool if the givers of feedback restricted themselves to their readerly response instead of making direct editing or revision suggestions. Finally, Adsit emphasizes that the convention of the silent writer is unacceptable pedagogically—as in one-with-one writing center conferences, the author must be an active participant in shaping the discussion of their work.

Kate Kostelnik suggests that the bedrock pedagogical structure of writing center practice, the one-with-one conference, could go so far as to replace the creative writing workshop entirely. In her essay “Writing Center Theory and Pedagogy in the Undergraduate Creative Writing Classroom,” Kostelnik posits that the instructor-lead creative writing workshop has, at its core, a personality problem. Namely, the presence of an authoritative workshop leader can deaden the development of writerly agency among emerging writers, and the group’s attentiveness to the workshop leader’s aesthetic preferences can foreclose on diversity in both literacy strategies and literary output. Kostelnik posits that offering in-class feedback for a creative writing course as a series of structured one-with-one conversations between peers not only helps writers take their own input as seriously as that of the instructor, but also that it helps writers learn how to find their most helpful readers. Identifying these readers and learning to engage in conversation with another person over craft concerns will furthermore support the development of creative writers by encouraging them to build a community of writerly support that will sustain them beyond the scope of the class.

Attempts to portage pedagogical technique or insight from creative writing over into writing center practice have tended to focus on creativity itself as a resource. For example, writing center practitioners like Annesley Anderson have posited that incorporating creative

exercises into one-with-one writing center appointments can help writers to overcome blocks in their writing process. Anderson proposes that exercises like writing from a different perspective or writing the thesis to an academic essay as a tweet are techniques to help writers connect to their writing tasks and discover their writerly agency. Writing-center-based scholarship in this vein addresses the value of creativity for writing instruction—there is very little engagement with the potential of creative writing qua creative writing to inform writing center practice. While administrators like Lisa Birnbaum and Cathleen Kaufmann have noted that a savvy writing center may take advantage of the presence of creative writers on its tutoring staff to encourage other creative writers to use the center as a site of feedback and support for their expressive work, the potential for writing center practice to be informed by creative writing pedagogy has not really been explored. Furthermore, the potential to locate the nexus of this cross-disciplinary knowledge sharing in justice-oriented pedagogy has been gestured toward, but not articulated.

“Can Writing Be Taught?” and Other Evasions

The scarcity of work in this area is undoubtedly influenced by the historic reticence that creative writers and creative writing programs in the United States have had toward conceiving of their field as an academic discipline. Pedagogy, as a pillar of discipline, is often marginalized or devalued in discussions of creative writing practice. As Steve Healey notes, “...the field has tended to avoid thinking about how it teaches and what assumptions it has about language and literature” (30). Even as of this writing (January, 2022), the website for the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, the oldest and most venerated university-based creative writing program in the world, contains this language in the statement of philosophy on their website:

Though we agree in part with the popular insistence that writing cannot be taught, we exist and proceed on the assumption that talent can be developed, and we see our possibilities and limitations as a school in that light. If one can "learn" to play the violin or to paint, one can "learn" to write, though no processes of externally induced training can ensure that one will do it well.

Accordingly, the fact that the Workshop can claim as alumni nationally and internationally prominent poets, novelists, and short story writers is, we believe, more the result of what they brought here than of what they gained from us. We continue to look for the most promising talent in the country, in our conviction that writing cannot be taught but that writers can be encouraged.

This anti-pedagogical attitude is not only long-standing, it can be said to be endemic to creative writing programs in the United States. In their work *Keywords for Creative Writing*, authors Wendy Bishop and David Starkey note that the same refusal of pedagogy apparent in Iowa's statement of philosophy in 2022 has its roots in the anti-academic sentiments governing the very first days of the Workshop in the 1930s. Norman Foerster, the first director of the Iowa Writers' Workshop (the first program of its kind in the United States or anywhere), not only believed that anyone who could write literature could teach it without any additional training, but he went so far as to assert that, "I would have a writer go to college . . . but I would not have him become what we call an 'academic'" (Myers, 134). This attitude persists in spite of decades of work by writing studies scholars to provide a diversity of pedagogical models to creative writing practitioners.

And new pedagogical models are needed. When Stephanie Vanderslice refers to the Iowa-style workshop as the "Bobby Knight school of teaching creative writing" she refers not only to the abuse possible in a rigid power structure that places no checks on the prerogative of a professional in a position of authority over amateurs (as a domineering creative writing professor or a profanity-spewing, chair-slinging basketball coach would be). Vanderslice also refers to the inability of a traditional workshop to adequately address the needs of its actual participants; just

as Bobby Knight was a successful coach by many metrics, his authoritarian and often brutal style of coaching was a wildly inappropriate mentorship strategy for eighteen and nineteen-year old basketball players. A full-class workshop, even for a small class, is so time-consuming, it boxes out direct instruction and alternative active learning methods. Instead of inviting students to interrogate their process and develop their skills and knowledge of form and writerly choicemaking, a traditional workshop jumps straight to unorganized peer feedback⁴. Vanderslice notes that this pedagogy “ultimately fails beginning writers” (81). As a student who has participated in more than a dozen creative writing classes organized exclusively around the Iowa-style workshop, I can attest: it can be an emotionally complicated and creatively alienating experience.

The effects of silencing the writer, this denial of voice, can be profoundly damaging for beginning writers, and the potential for the Iowa-style workshop to inflict intellectual and artistic harm on its participants is magnified for participants from marginalized identities. While I would argue that even students who feel unscathed by their traditional workshop experience have been done an unnecessary disservice, the negative impacts of a workshop model that relies on the writer being forced to sit silently and endure the unfiltered opining of students steeped in the norms of White Mainstream English⁵ increase for students who are working outside the constricts of WME. Felicia Rose Chavez writes about her experience as a student participating in an Iowa-style workshop (in Iowa, in fact): “This silencing, particularly of writers of color, is especially destructive in institutions that routinely disregard the lived experiences of people who

⁴ It is worth noting that in a “pure workshop” writer-students are not given instruction or guidelines for responding to each other’s work. Extensive tutor training is not only a valued practice in writing centers, but it is also the subject of robust debate: how can we best prepare tutors to respond meaningfully, helpfully, and equitably to their peers’ work? The catalog of approaches and techniques that have been developed in response to this question could find direct application to creative writing pedagogy.

⁵ As students in a creative writing workshop in the United States will inevitably be—such is the hegemonic influence of “Standard English”.

are not white. This matrix of silence is so profound it enlists writers of color to eradicate ourselves” (2). Junot Diaz shares a similar experience in his 2014 online *New Yorker* article “MFA vs. POC”: “Simply put: I was a person of color in a workshop whose theory of reality did not include my most fundamental experiences as a person of color—that did not in other words include me.” A pedagogy that routinely exacerbates the marginalization of writer-students isn’t acceptable. Unfortunately, it can be difficult to broach the topic in a field where the prevailing assumption is that “writing cannot be taught...”.

And yet, regardless of whether or not an individual (or an entire program) believes that it is possible to teach creative writing, creative writing continues to be taught in United States colleges and universities. Workshops are lead, degrees are conferred. Stephanie Vanderslice notes that, “[s]even decades after the first university [creative] writing program was founded, the rise in demand for creative writing courses in higher education continues unabated” (3). The Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) lists 1004 active creative writing programs at accredited universities in the United States. 388 of those programs grant graduate degrees. Despite this programmatic flourishing, despite the proliferation of graduates holding terminal degrees in their field, despite the ongoing attempts of academically-minded creative writers to propose pedagogical innovations in the creative writing classroom, creative writing pedagogy is neither widely discussed nor taught in creative writing programs. There is a disconnect between what has been written (and what may happen in classrooms coordinated by conscientious teachers) and the conversations that shape the experiences of early-career teachers and creative writing students.

I can draw on my own experience to illustrate further: I have (and hope to have) three postsecondary degrees that involve considerable coursework in creative writing, and I have

taught a total of twelve semesters of creative writing classes in a range of postsecondary contexts. I have never received any formal instruction in creative writing pedagogy. I have taken four graduate-level courses on composition pedagogy and I have co-taught a course on writing center theory and practice, but I have never seen a creative writing pedagogy course offered at any university or college with which I have been affiliated. I have witnessed an appetite for a more robust address of creative writing pedagogy, however; at three of the universities with which I've taught, instructors (in each of these cases, graduate students) have worked together to compile an informal handbook of effective readings and exercises.

Without a disciplined conversation to refer to, creative writing teachers who would be thoughtful about their course design and classroom practices could end up retreading the same ground without making substantial progress. Vanderslice bemoans this effect of a lack of a centralized (or disciplined) repository of creative writing scholarship when she writes,

...some teacher-writers would continue writing articles questioning the value of the workshop or musing whether, indeed, creative writing could be taught, as if these questions had never been raised before. Over and over, in isolation and on different continents, creative writers and teachers would exhaust themselves reinventing that wheel (99).

Retreading already-trodden ground becomes particularly noxious when that ground is acknowledged to be laced with harmful ideologies. As we have seen, the Iowa-style workshop is clearly a problematic pedagogical structure; yet it continues to be the windmill against which creative writing teachers tilt despite the availability of other, vetted, models in the ecology of writing studies.

This lack of a centralized conversation about inclusive teaching practices in creative writing has led many creative writers to frame their pedagogy as a reaction against institutionalized learning as opposed to a requisite element of their inclusion in a

university-based program. However, in doing so, they do not always account for the ethical tensions that attend their desires to be both of- and apart from- this world. Following visual artists who have experienced similar tensions between needing institutional support for survival and needing to reject institutional contexts on the grounds of assimilationist pressures, creative writer-teachers often frame the university as a site of silencing and linguistic violence at odds with creative expression. Adjua Gargi Nzinga Greaves expresses this anti-institutional undercurrent succinctly when she writes about her *unschool MFA* project in a recent pedagogical pamphlet for Ugly Duckling Presse: “If you see me, and I am glowing, it is because I did not let my first teachers kill me.” In *uMFA*, Nzinga Greaves performs self-education by publishing reading lists and project updates, making her learning into a replicable resource for other artists as she goes.

The performance expresses a pedagogy of self-reliance, but its radicalism is undercut by its desire, not to free itself from a creative culture steeped in capitalism, but merely to skip the step in neoliberal ascension symbolized (and embodied) by the university. As Nzinga Greaves states in the mission statement for *uMFA*, she is seeking “to publicly prepar[e herself] for a professional, social and historically significant life within the contemporary art world.” There is no discussion of what “significant” can mean here and whether simply removing a single link in the chain of institutionalized artmaking (in this instance, the university) will go very far toward making a creative life any more possible under late capitalism⁶. The university, in the pedagogical writings of both verbal and visual artists, becomes a stand-in for the forces of privilege and gatekeeping that far exceed any classroom’s walls.

I sympathize with writers who feel dismayed by the apparent irreconcilability of their practices with the neoliberal institution. I also value and celebrate artists and writers who

⁶ Indeed, Nzinga Greaves is currently pursuing an MFA in poetry in the literary arts program at Brown University.

establish their own creative and critical practices independently from the structures of academic programs. Attempting to opt out of the university's power dynamics, however, is a disingenuous rhetorical move for instructors who remain the beneficiaries of increasingly rare and competitive creative writing teaching jobs⁷. It is not ethical for instructors of creative writing to declare themselves exempt from or un-implicated by the inequities of a system when they are not only participants in but also beneficiaries of that system. It is not ethical to claim that "writing cannot be taught" while encouraging graduate students to take on debt to pursue a degree in creative writing (as many students who attend Iowa Writers' Workshop do). As Katherine Haake writes in her book *What Our Speech Disrupts: Feminism and Creative Writing Studies*: "Having no theory is a dangerous theory because it reinscribes the structures we can't see that nonetheless contain us. And as always, much of the power of ideology is that it is invisible. Theory helps make the invisible visible. Creative writers need it, even if it gives them hives" (240).

I think pedagogy, judiciously built and applied, can actually do more to assuage these conflicts than ignoring university-based pedagogy has done. I agree with the literacy researchers of the New London Group who write that, "we can instantiate a vision through pedagogy that creates in microcosm a transformed set of relationships and possibilities for social futures" (19). If, as many writers have suggested, the Iowa-style workshop inflicts harm on its participants in increasing amounts according to the marginalization of those participants, then it becomes imperative for pedagogy to be taken more seriously in creative writing. I believe that the awareness of the insufficiency of the conversation around creative writing pedagogy is reaching

⁷ Furthermore, this neglect of responsibility within the material context of the classroom does nothing to alleviate the pressures of silencing and access that creative writing students encounter in the university, nor does it account for the fact that creative writing programs at universities are neither the progenitors nor the sole custodians of unequal access to public literary achievement. Bishop's and Starkey's *Keywords for Creative Writing* include a striking number of topics that exist, not in the university, but in the world of publishing. This is a testament to the entanglement of the university with publishing in its capacity as gatehouse, as vetting and credentialing institution.

a critical mass—it is an exciting time to be thinking about creative writing pedagogy and I hope that an infusion of writing center practice can aid in that conversation.

Turning Tides: the Rise of Equitable Pedagogies in Creative Writing Discourse

The effect of pedagogical practices that fail to account for the invisible hand of White linguistic ideology increasingly concerns creative writers, even without reference to the ongoing conversations on this topic in writing studies. Recent books like Felicia Rose Chavez's *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop: How to Decolonize the Creative Classroom* and Matthew Salesses's *Craft in the Real World* seek to address antiracist creative writing pedagogies specifically. These two recent publications have found particular traction among creative writers (and not just writing studies scholars). Many of the insights that these books proffer (e.g. that there is no such thing as a universal reader, that no piece of writing is addressed to all people at once, that upholding White upper-middle class English and literacy practices as the only solutions to writing tasks is an expression of White supremacy) have also been well-documented in parallel interventions in composition and writing center studies, but the popularity of the Chavez and Salesses books indicates that perhaps creative writing might finally have reached an inflection point. We may finally be ready to talk teaching in a substantive way that changes how creative writing is taught and how creative writing teachers are trained⁸.

While the recent publication of books on antiracist and decolonial workshop models evidences an increased appetite for updated and justice-oriented pedagogy, a complementary armchair analysis of the conversation around creative writing pedagogy can also be conducted by surveying the conference programs from the past fifteen years of AWP conference meetings. As

⁸ I am also heartened in this project by Felicia Rose Chavez's advocacy for one-with-one conferences in her book as a workshop supplement! Writing center practitioners have got some suggestions for that!

the dominant (and domineering) creative writing conference in the United States, AWP offers an important window into the language and theoretical vectors creative writing practitioners use to discuss their teaching practices. Some of the questions that arise perennially appear in much the same form today as they did fifteen years ago. Panels addressing questions such as, “Should I get a PhD?” and “What are effective pedagogical strategies for online teaching?” seem to have remained constant. Concerns about teaching genres besides poetry and fiction have also persisted, though the dominant thinking about which genres are considered to be the institutional interlopers has shifted. Fifteen years ago, there were several panels interrogating the presence of screenwriting and playwriting in traditional creative writing programs; last year, there were several panels addressing writing for video games or other emergent digital media.

Significantly, the proportion of pedagogy-focused panel presentations at AWP that articulate an antiracist, decolonial, queer, or otherwise specifically justice-oriented teaching framework has increased. A cursory scan of the conference program from 2006 (the earliest program available on AWP’s website) indicates about 25 panels that address post-secondary pedagogy specifically. Of those, only four abstracts mention the complexity of working with diverse populations. On the other hand, though there were fewer panels total in the COVID-19-restricted 2021 conference, ten out of the eighteen panels on post-secondary pedagogy explicitly mention issues of equity in their program abstracts. The following two representative examples of conference program abstracts, one from the 2006 conference and one from the 2021 conference, may illustrate further the shift toward equity in conversations around creative writing pedagogy over the past fifteen years:

from the 2006 program:

S115H: Rock, paper Scissors: Sharply different ways to teach creative writing to under-prepared students (Alan Alyshevitz, Leslye Friedberg, Larry

Mckenzie, Simone Zelitch) What do we do when our students enter a creative writing classroom without basic skills? Should we teach grammar? Should we encourage playful fluency? What is the role of critical vocabulary and craft if students struggle to make sense of even the shortest models of poetry and fiction? Can a writing workshop succeed before students have clear standards? Four teachers with distinct approaches address these questions and share their strategies for working with this student population.

from the 2021 program:

W159. Code-Switching in Class: Writing and Teaching with Vernaculars (BK Fischer, Molly Sutton Kiefer, Anna Ross, Eduardo Vega, Antoinette Cooper) It's not bad grammar, it's alternate grammar: writers use dialect, patois, creoles, slang, and hybrid lexicons not only to evoke voice, tone, and place, but to generate friction from the textures of languages in combination. How can alternate grammars be approached progressively in creative writing classrooms? Four writer-teachers who mix dictions in their own work discuss inclusive teaching practices that honor the range, richness, and complexity of the languages and dialects of their students.

I did not attend either of these panels, and I will not comment on what did or didn't get said in the actual presentations. However, the pedagogical stances in these abstracts are sufficiently stark to show a marked shift in the timbre of the conversation around creative writing pedagogy. The earlier abstract asserts that some "students enter a creative writing classroom without basic skills" such as interpreting texts or using "critical vocabulary". Wondering whether creative writing teachers need to "teach grammar" indicates monolingual and assimilationist assumptions about what constitutes high quality writing, and the phrase "clear standards" indicates that the writers of this conference abstract believe a workshop can agree on which linguistic practices have their place in literary writing and which do not.

On the other hand, the abstract from the 2021 conference references a much more inclusive and varied approach to working with writer-students from diverse linguistic and literacy backgrounds. These writer-teachers start this abstract with the statement, "It's not bad grammar, it's alternate grammar", indicating strongly a move away from conceptions of acceptable and unacceptable writing that marginalize writers who may be working from

multilingual or differently minoritized spaces. While I might suggest this panel's title be updated to reflect the utility of code meshing over code switching, the content of this 2021 AWP abstract, with its emphasis on "teaching practices that honor the range, richness, and complexity of the languages and dialects of their students" evidences the recent mainstreaming of equitable pedagogies within creative writing as a discipline.

This growing awareness of the relationship between pedagogy and the politics and power structures of the creative writing classroom is complemented by similar discussions taking place in other sectors of writing studies, including writing center studies. Composition scholars like Asao Inoue and Vershawn Ashanti Young have advocated for pedagogies that decenter White upper-middle class linguistic and literacy practices in favor of a more inclusive approach, and April Baker-Bell has definitively elucidated the connection between linguistic marginalization and antiBlack racism. On the writing center studies side of the aisle, writing center scholars like Rasha Diab and Nancy Grimm have called for writing centers to make their commitments to racial justice more actionable (Diab) and to interrogate carefully grand narratives that uphold White supremacist assumptions about writing (Grimm).

Grimm's assertion that, "it doesn't matter whether strongly prejudiced or generous-hearted people work in writing centers, the unchallenged or common-sense mottos that guide writing center practice allow structural forms of racism to continue" (83) echoes Haake's concern with the invisible pressures that ideology exerts on the work of teaching creative writing. While Grimm acknowledges that racism is not the only possible cut for describing the damage unexamined assumptions can do (she suggests similar analyses could be applied along the lines of gender, class, sexual orientation, and/or disability), she anchors her advocacy in an

awareness of the intersectional impact addressing racist pedagogical practice can have for writers who are variously minoritized.

As creative writer-teachers begin to interrogate more thoughtfully the pedagogical structures that create their course environments, many have turned to other art mediums for inspiration. The Critical Response Process (CRP) developed by dancer and choreographer Liz Lerman is a salient example of a pedagogical approach that creative writing has effectively imported. Salesses adapts Lerman's CRP as an alternative workshop model in his book *Craft in the Real World*, and Lerman's four-part response scaffold is an important source of in-class structures for the antiracist pedagogy that Felicia Rose Chavez outlines in *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop*. Personally, I found CRP to be a very effective pedagogical structure as a student encountering this method in Drew's graduate workshop in 2017 and again as a creative writing teacher using this method in my own Introduction to Creative Writing class at UGA in 2019.

While Lerman's CRP was not developed to respond to writing center prerogatives, it shares with writing center pedagogies a commitment to helping authors achieve the effects they desire while avoiding projecting the aesthetic predilections of the feedback-giver onto the author in a way that invalidates or questions the overall project. Lerman's emphasis on the role of the artist as questioner, as engaged agentially in seeking feedback, corresponds with the interdependence writers who visit the writing center demonstrate in lining up peer support for writing projects. Similarly, the CRP phases "statements of observation" and "neutral questions" in which workshop participants describe the submitted work and ask questions to better-understand the artist's intention without giving their opinion on its successes or failures mirror writing center valued practices. Because of the importance of the dialogic figuring that

happens in writing center work, lots of writing center pedagogical moves rely on questions that investigate a readerly response to the text predicated, not on judgment, but on noticing and inquiring.

Writing center pedagogy could provide another avenue for discovering instructional methods and structures that provide equitable, compassionate support for writer-students. The recent increase in awareness of equity or justice-oriented pedagogies among creative writer-teachers may provide an occasion for further cross-pollination between the pedagogical practices of these closely-related fields. Just as many writer-teachers have looked to Lerman's CRP to provide a model for equitable critique, so to could they look to writing center practice to expand their available array of student-centered pedagogical structures and techniques. While writing center pedagogy could offer strategies for intervention into the traditional workshop (as CRP has done), it could also provide alternatives that invite creative writer-teachers to think beyond the workshop itself as the dominant pedagogic mode of the discipline.

In writing this critical introduction, I wonder whether writing center studies could provide an opportunity to welcome creative writing to participate more fully in the ecosystem of writing studies. Writing center pedagogy is inherently collaborative: the conference at the heart of the practice requires a dialogic working-with. I would like to see whether a bi-directional, collaborative approach to these intersections might enrich both creative writing and writing center practices. While creative writing seems poised to benefit from the antiracist and inclusive pedagogical track already laid by writing center practitioners, creative writer-teachers have a wealth of experience teaching elements of craft and style in emotionally charged and politically ambivalent spaces; that experience contains a wealth of practical and theoretical knowledge that could vastly enrich writing center pedagogy and practice. Attending closely to creative writing

pedagogy (as opposed to just creativity as an expressive mode) at this time may help to make creative writing a more active participant in this discussion, as well. As a practitioner of both creative writing and writing center work, as a beneficiary of the discipline-specific methods on which each of these ecologies of practice relies, I want to honor the work that has been done by gathering some of it together and holding it up to the light.

Section II: Welcome to *Blocks World*

While my dissertation manuscript does not offer any solutions to pedagogical problems in creative writing or writing centers, it does provide an opportunity to reflect on the inherently collaborative nature of composition. That writing represents a collaboration, not only between reader and writer, but also between writer and process, writer and drafting environment, &c. &c. is known to writing center practitioners. This dissertation/exercise in co-writing can serve as a rebuttal to creative writing traditionalists who still enshrine the solitary genius in the garret as the platonic artistic ideal. It may also undermine the mystification still haunting the teaching and writing of poetry: because significant components of this collection are composed in collaboration with natural language processing (NLP) programs, *Blocks World* is both an experiment in and demonstration of the mutable nature of lyric intelligence, its ability to shuttle between points in a compositional feedback loop that gleans and creates endlessly from its various inputs.

Blocks World is a collection of poems that uses a variety of textures and poetic approaches (both lyric and experimental) to explore themes of understanding and kinships both human and extrahuman. This collection is assembled from short, lyric, nature poems that probe the communicative challenges and entanglements that plague plant, animal, and interpersonal

relations; series of more experimental dialogic poems that rely on computer-generated language to interrogate the function of language for (mis)understanding; and longer, discrete poems that address these concerns to the relationships between human family members.

In devising and drafting this collection, I have drawn on the research I conducted into the Edward A. Feigenbaum papers at Stanford University between 2018 and 2019 with grant support from the University of Georgia Graduate School and the Willson Center for the Humanities. This archival research surfaced accounts of human-machine interactions using NLP technology from 1960-80 that provide templates and techniques for significant portions of this project. My hope is that this source material will be enlivened by a transposition from the archives of midcentury technophilia into a poetic investigation of what it means to try and fail to communicate.

By composing with AI technologies (first in a simulated environment and then in an actual collaborative process, as I will detail below), the poems in *Blocks World* trouble the notion of an individualized writerly or poetic subjectivity. Instead of letting me retain authorial control over linguistic or even content decisions, working in an AI-supported collaborative mode distributes authorship through the sort of dialogic intra-action described by postprocess scholars like Thomas Kent and Sid Dobrin. Expanding on Kyle Jensen's exploration of the possibility for algorithms "to imagine the operations of writing outside the human subjects" (234), I understand AI objects in *Blocks World* as agential co-creators whose (dis)abilities exert noticeable influence on the writing task.

When AI research was in its infancy, the ability of computers to write poetry was considered a potentially unachievable benchmark in the progression of smart technology toward a humanlike consciousness. Kurt Beals describes this attitude towards computerized poetry composition as a product of an earlier misprision of consciousness and indeed the whole project

of producing a “thinking machine.” According to Beals, the concern with whether a computer can write poetry or not is indicative of a “comparison model” of machine consciousness that, “posits man as the independent measure to which artificial intelligence (perhaps vainly) aspires”(152). In such a comparison model, a computer will not be able to produce poetry until it has fully replicated human consciousness. This is an ambition impossible to define or to definitively prove successful, as Alan Turing demonstrated in his enormously influential paper “Computing Machinery and Intelligence.” Turing shows that, while a computer can produce language through natural language processing programs that mimics human-produced texts, this action is no more capable of proving a human-like consciousness than if it were a calculator doing sums. The computer can prove that it can imitate, but beyond the performance of composition no other confirmation can be gleaned. No other confirmation, it turns out, is necessary.

That a computer can reproduce poem-like language and still be denied its ability to write poetry echoes the mystification of creative writing practice that I described earlier in this essay. The mystification of creative writing that has prevented pedagogical cross pollination with composition and writing center studies similarly prevented early computer scientists from exploring seriously the possibility that AI could produce a purely aesthetic text capable of expressing and evoking human emotion. Just as early (and many contemporary) creative writing program directors seriously question(ed) whether creative writing could actually be taught, early computer scientists deemed it impossible that poetry could even be written! But if a poem written by a computer is not a poem, then what is it?

Beals leans heavily on technologist and philosopher N. Katherine Hayles to propose an alternative framework to the comparison model of computer intelligence that undoes this

tautological knot. According to Beals, this alternative would be “a “cybernetic model”... [that] casts human subjectivity as part of a feedback loop including technological components” (152). The human in the loop inputs and processes information in collaboration with the computerized elements that in turn process and input information, contributing to a process of creation and decision-making that would certainly pass Dr. Turing’s test. This feedback loop that involves human consciousness as one component of a cybernetic (or cyborg) subjectivity does not imperil the status of human consciousness, and by extension, does not imperil the status of poetry as an art form. Rather, as Hayles has written in their groundbreaking work *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, “when the human is seen as part of a distributed system, the full expression of human capability can be seen precisely to depend on the splice rather than being imperiled by it” (2-3). It is in this tradition of expansion of consciousness, and by extension lyric capacity, that *Blocks World* makes its intervention.

Blocks World enters the conversation around digital writing at an interesting nexus between experimental and lyrical poetry and between individual and distributed authorship/feedback loop modalities. While there are extant examples of fruitful interaction between poetics and machine learning, many of these interactions are human-centric and easily describable as human-authored. I am thinking particularly of Franny Choi’s *Soft Science*, which relies on the feminist trope of the cyborg to investigate issues of racism and sexism, and James Dobson’s and Rena Mosteirín’s *Moonbit* in which the writers rewrite the code that powered the Apollo 11 mission.

While Choi uses AI-powered technology in her collection to compose the poem “The Cyborg Wants To Make Sure She Heard You Right” by running received tweets through Google translate, the majority of these two collections engage technology through more traditional

authorial tactics. Dobson and Mosteirín use erasure and appropriation of existing code, and Choi references Turing tests and central processing units while engaging in human-generated formal and syntactical experiments. Within these modes, code and concept are material for manipulation and these authors do not often interact with computers as agential co-creators. *Blocks World*, however, does leverage contemporary AI objects and midcentury AI research ecologies to co-produce language, formal structure, and affective insight. While it will also use machine learning technology as the inspiration for formal experimentation, its attention to the process of collaboration with extrahuman interlocutors differentiates this work from its lyric contemporaries. Essentially, this collection seeks to capitalize on its placement within an extrahuman feedback loop, not to dismiss the loop's influence on my practice.

Blocks World, however, is also differentiated from experimental digital writing due to its insistence on lyric and affective content. Unlike Alison Knowles's *House of Dust*, in which the author collaborated with computer scientist James Tenney to write a computer program that would produce thousands of unique quatrains according to Knowles's parameters (Higgins and Kahn), *Blocks World* is as concerned with evoking an emotional response to material, nondigital stimuli as it is exploring dehuman compositional practices. Though the language in *Blocks World* is developed in consultation with NLP tools like GPT-2, the words on the page always refer to specific events and people in my life. Though I am interested in the artistic potentials created by working in a distributed-authorship mode, I am still interested in the therapeutic potentials of lyric poetry to speak hidden emotional truths. While *Blocks World* uses an earlier version of the same NLP engine that K Allado-McDowell used to compose the psychedelic dialogics of their book *Pharmako-AI*, the hand of the human author is given much more control in *Blocks World*.

The heart of the human author is more at stake in *Blocks World*, as well—it's my *mother* I'm talking about, after all.

Blocks World

Blocks World is made of five interwoven sequences: the parenthetical sequence, the blocks world sequence, the cluster analysis sequence, the download sequence, and a sequence of seven discrete poems (ranging in length from 1-14 pages). As you can see in Figure 1 (the Table of Contents), components of these sequences are evenly spaced throughout the collection. Though the sequences are cohesive units unto themselves, they are also in productive and ongoing conversation with the other sequences, creating an informational and emotional network that serves as the collection's substructure.

Figure 1.

**KEY: Poem or Poem
Page**

< >	Blocks World	Cluster Analysis	<i>Download.doc</i>	The Aggrieved Party	2
1, 18, 25, 33, 47, 54, 63	19, 29, 48	16, 34, 45, 59	17, 35, 46, 60	The Mountain	4
				What Would Charo Do	26
				The Sign of the Self	36
				As Slow as Possible	55
				Love Machine	58
				The Lovers.	61

Each sequence has a distinct orientation toward poetics, applying differing pressures to the levers of both product and process. Though each section contributes different linguistic and formal textures to the surface of the project, they are all similar in that they represent a concerted, systematic effort to understand an other. Whether that other is an animal, a poem, a computer program, or a family member, these poems seek to learn from and about and also with—a crucial orientation that situates *Blocks World* within posthumanist thought. Throughout this book, I try to interrogate my relationships with my nuclear family, the natural world, and technology and find that I can only get these objects to face me when I agree to face them. Any process of knowledge-discovery is made possible by a radical vulnerability, a state of exposedness that will not allow me merely to draw from my experience of these encounters, but requires that I reforge relation with.

The Parenthetical Sequence:

This sequence both starts and ends the collection, providing grounding for the reader in two ways: not only does this sequence create a cyclical sensation (ending up more or less where we start), but it is also one of the more traditional sequences with respect to the lyric. This sequence is made of short nature poems. Though they may not follow expected contours exactly, they are filled with familiar imagery and participate in the time-honored tradition of the poet gazing out a window, reflecting on the world outside. As they provide some readerly comforts at the beginning and end of the collection, they also provide brief moments of respite throughout a book that can occasionally be kind of alienating and challenging. Though that looking-through is not always entirely pleasant (Figure 2),

Figure 2.

<<<<>>>>

all afternoon in the hot magnolia
 a red squirrel rattles the saber of its throat

it is a convenient metaphor for the way lines of sight become lines of seeking and thought. This metaphor extends from the sight and sound-based interactions between the speaker and the natural world into the affective relations possible between the human writing and the computer with which they write, calling the distinction between the natural and the technological into question (Figure 3).

Figure 3.

<>

when the computer wants
 my attention it sounds
 the chime that signals its want

when the sword fern wants for nothing
 it slowly lifts its arms

*how will I know when you need me
 how will I know what you want*

through screens I see
 bodies of thrashers
 and grackles and jays
 and robins and sparrows and doves

I hold red-herring names
 in my shut-tight mouth and think

*I wish I knew them better
 I wish they knew me back*

The Blocks World Sequence:

The false binary between natural and man-made is further troubled in the title sequence of the collection. In “Blocks World”, a three-part series, a writer engages in an imagined dialog with the computer on which they are trying to write additional short nature poems. The human and the machine push and pull at each other’s prerogatives, the person continually asking the computer to execute commands and the computer wryly resisting, while the plants and animals the writer is attempting to poeticize are manhandled cruelly in the process.

The conceit for these poems is drawn from the history of AI research. Blocks world is a well-known AI planning domain first programmed by Terry Winograd. The program uses a natural language interface that allows human users to direct an algorithm to execute specific tasks in English instead of lines of code. Tasks the program can execute include moving different colored and shaped blocks, stacking or rearranging them. The domain is governed by a set of “physical” parameters that determine what the algorithm is and isn’t able to do. The parameters of the domain are based on Newtonian physics, though vastly more simplified. These parameters are replicated in the imagined human-computer interactions in the “Blocks World” poems in this collection. For example, a cone can sit on a block (Figure 4),

Figure 4.

W
 het
 her b
 eing dun
 ked in boil
 ing water cr
 eates pain W
 hether the ability
 to dunk a lobster in
 a pot of boiling water
 and genuinely wonder
 whether the thin sound
 of air being forced out
 from under the plates
 of the animal's exoske
 leton is the sound of a
 lobster screaming in
 pain creates pain
 We can't boil lobsters in
 Switzerland anymore Not the old
 way The scientists say it isn't
 humane though they cannot say
 whether the lobster feels pain

but a block cannot balance on a cone (Figure 5).

Figure 5.

pain
 bo il
 We W can't
 Sw het any
 itzer her b more
 land lob eing dun sters in
 The N ked in boil ot the
 way ing water cr scien
 old eates pain W tists
 it hether the ability say
 man to dunk a lobster in e is
 hu a pot of boiling water ou
 the and genuinely wonder th
 say whether the thin sound gh
 not of air being forced out w
 can from under the plates he
 fe of the animal's exoske ther
 el lob leton is the sound of at
 t lobster screaming in he e
 s pain creates pain r

Though the poems in this sequence are artificial constructions (I didn't compose in Winograd's planning domain), they express the collaborative quality of digital composition. As the algorithm interacts with the human user, it becomes better able to understand the human commands; as the human user interacts with the algorithm, it learns what is and is not possible.

The imagined dialog between the writer and computer as they (unsuccessfully) try to produce poems reflects another phenomenon documented in the annals of AI: humans will form affective connections to almost anything they interact with. As Joseph Weizenbaum discovered in his work on the natural language processing system ELIZA at MIT in the 1960s, even when human users knew that they were interacting with a chatbot, they still ascribed emotion and intent to their inanimate (yet vibrant) interlocutor. ELIZA's most well-known program "Doctor" was a script that allowed ELIZA to impersonate a psychoanalyst by using syntactical transformation to turn the human-generated input into a question. This technique is mirrored in the dialogue between writer and program in "Blocks World", though often reversed to put the writer in the role of questioner (figure 6).

Figure 6.

How's it going, computer?

IT IS GOING

The Cluster Analysis and *download.doc* Sequences:

While "Blocks World" takes its inspiration from the forms and language that emerged from mid-20th-century AI experiments, a series of poems titled "Cluster Analysis" actually uses AI-powered technology to drive the composition process. Titled after the computer-based data-processing technique in which objects are grouped according to commonalities, these poems try to understand the emergent connections between the natural world, the digital world, and the writer's emotional world. Each "Cluster Analysis" is six lines: three input and three output. The three input lines are each an iteration of a key phrase or important idea from somewhere else in the collection (Figure 7).

Figure 7.**Cluster Analysis I**

<input>

How does the self survive itself

How can I talk to the people I
love

Are we infinite networks or one

That input is then fed one line at a time into an open-access text generator (I used Open AI's GPT-2) that has been trained on millions of samples of human-generated text scraped from across the internet. The text generator takes the input and extrapolates from it, interpreting the text and predicting its direction, producing a body of language that understands that human input in new and surprising ways. This allows me, the writer, to view my input anew—searching it for lyrical information that I then re-(human)write into another three lines labeled “output” (Figure 8).

Figure 8.

<output>

It might not be as far-fetched as it
seems

Not just once but continuing

Not void at all but formless

Then the AI-generated, human re-composed outputs are subjected to one final process. Each “Cluster Analysis” is paired with an entry in the *download.doc* sequence. Each *download.doc* is a synthesis of the human input and the computer output into a usable emotional

insight using Jungian methods of tarot reading to relate the technological to the personal⁹.

Though not computer-oriented, I understand the incorporation of tarot into a writing process to be another technique of mechanizing poetry-writing. Insights come from somewhere, some invisible, intangible cognition, and using a system of intuition facilitation like tarot is a method of turning the mind's crank instead of waiting for it to turn on its own. Devising a system visibilizes and focalizes a process that is always, already ongoing, and that gives the lie to the notion of the mind as separate from the world. I am, not because I think, but because I draw meaning: I notice and I respond.

“The Mountain”, “What Would Charo Do”, “Sign of the Self”, “As Slow As Possible”, “The Lovers.”, “Love Machine”, and “The Aggrieved Party”:

The process of trying to draw insight from material produced by someone else for the purposes of emotional growth and introspection is a convenient figure for the project of the book as a whole. As becomes clear in these quasi-discrete poems, attempts to understand the humans nearest and dearest to me has been no easier and no more successful than trying to learn more about the lives of birds and computers. These poems explore a range of interpersonal blockages, ranging from differences in communication style that may as well have mothers and daughters living on different planets, attempts to express artistic ambition to a father who won't express anything, and a sister whose behavior is completely alien to my sense of what is possible (for better and for worse). While I used tarot to facilitate intuitive insight, these poems, like the parenthetical sequence, are only digitally-generated in that they were written on the computer (which is to say, they are as imbricated in the digital as everything else) (Rickert 2013).

⁹ (Maybe in the vein of ghost writing and zombie writing, we could suggest witch writing as a posthuman compositional mode?)

Pervasive digitality aside, there is a tension in this project (confirmed by early readers) between the immediacy of some of the more traditional poems and the more experimental, computer-generated or -inspired sequences. As the title suggests, the collection is an ecology in which a writer attempts to explore and create within predetermined parameters of possibility. These parameters create and enact a frustration—a blockage between desire and expression that manifests in a demonstration of inability to compose satisfactory poems in the “Blocks World” sequence and to understand and communicate with loved ones in the more traditional long poems. Despite my attempts to block (as in choreograph or stage) the composition process, I find myself blocked (as in prevented, as in reperforming these futile gestures) from the ultimate aim: to be unified into, not to remain so being-with.

When I began working on/with AI and NLP technologies, I thought I had found a way to explore rhetorical relations without having to confront the problem of the body—the site of identity, the site of both division and the blurring of divisions. Just as talking with a disembodied language-producer like a chatbot seemed like a way to evade the old vexations, experimental poetry seemed like a way to evade the vulnerability that writing in a lyric mode requires¹⁰. But of course, I can’t get around the problem of the body in the same way that I can’t get around the problem of the lyric. Just as early interlocutors with chatbots started the process of embodiment first by forcing binary systems to participate in verbal symbolic exchange, then by giving digital entities gendered names, then by attaching affect and finding voice in the aleatoric products of NLP programming, so do these digital objects become embodied definitionally when I interact with them. They aren’t human bodies, but their imbrication in human language gives them an obvious face. They aren’t human bodies, but when they interact with human interlocutors

¹⁰ Whether lyric poetry is actually always vulnerable or whether its forms can be leveraged to merely imitate vulnerability while only ever achieving sentimentality is a subject for another day.

through human language systems, they create bodily impressions: they have voice, identity, affect. Similarly, the lyric interrupts the experimental project with the probing (and infuriating) questions: “What’s it to you? Why are *you* writing this? Why does it *matter*? Why bring it to material fruition?” The body, then, the site where language is made in the lungs, throat, and mouth, becomes the room into which all doors open. The lyric, then, the mode that wants the writer to acknowledge their own indispensable presence in the process of writing, dogs the desire to talk about anything else.

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CHAPTER 2
BLOCKS WORLD

Table 1.
KEY: Poem or *Poem*
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< >

when the computer wants
my attention it sounds
the chime that signals its want

when the sword fern wants for nothing
it slowly lifts its arms

*how will I know when you need me
how will I know what you want*

through screens I see bodies of thrashers
and grackles and jays
and robins and sparrows and doves

I hold red-herring names
in my shut-tight mouth and think

*I wish I knew them better
I wish they knew me back*

The Mountain

I go to the mountain and it never gets closer.

I look at the mountain and it never looks back.

I am not the mountain though the mountain is always with me.

I am not relevant to the mountain though the mountain follows me everywhere.

The mountain is larger than my life.

The mountain is larger than my family and my feelings toward them.

The mountain looks purple from here.

I look at the mountain from the window of my car.

I look at the mountain from the window over the kitchen sink.

I look at the mountain when I lie on my back and stare up at the cobwebs drifting like spectral streamers from the ceiling fan.

I think “ghost party” and the mountain does not laugh.

The mountain doesn't think I'm funny.

I look at the mountain and the mountain makes it so clear that it does not think of me at all.

The mountain sheds light and dark equally from its ragged sides.

The mountain sheds light and dark in thick ripples descend like poured sand.

The mountain wants a sculpture made out of poured sand.

It takes the most patience to pour a sculpture grain by grain.

The mountain takes the most patience.

My father demonstrates the truth that you can live with the mountain
and never speak of the mountain.

My father broke his finger and it healed crooked.

My father points to the distance to show me the damage to his index finger.

I look at my father's finger and see how the bone scoops deeply like a saddleback ridge between
two summits.

The mountain appears in the wake of great pain.

The mountain stays with you when the pain subsides.

I feel horribly sad for the fate of my father's hand and for the fate of my father.

The mountain makes every gesture different, now, every line a curve.

I walk down the hall and the mountain's gravity makes me forget where I'm going.

I walk down the hall and the mountain's gravity makes my magnetized heartpoints go haywire.

I try to imagine the mountain pleased with me.

I try to imagine the mountain displeased.

I try to imagine how I would feel in each instance but I never succeed.

I come to terms with the mountain as something over which I have no control.

I come to terms with the mountain as an imperative in my life that does not laugh at my jokes.

I come to terms with my longing to be great and with my endless failure.

I tell a lie.

I tell another lie.

Sometimes I get so mad at the mountain for not loving me enough and I shout at it, “Hey mountain! I don’t care about you anymore! I’m going to stop loving you if you don’t start loving me!”

Sometimes I’m like, “Fuck you, mountain! You’re a burden to me. I officially intend to become a person with no mountain on their mind.”

Sometimes I imagine getting a life

with no mountains in it.

I imagine this will be like driving on a long straight road with hills swelling up under the car and receding as I coast over them.

I imagine just constantly cresting, a sense of achievement available to me every day.

I imagine the hills increasing.

I imagine my gut leaping up my throat with pleasure when the down slope gets precipitous.

I imagine a difficult ascent.

I imagine the mountain, again.

Some days I think the mountain is all my own and other days I see my father's finger turn into a mountain and I have to ask.

What does my father have to do with the mountain.

Is there a mountain in my father's life.

Is my father reminded of the mountain in his life by his newly crooked finger.

When my father tells a joke about his broken hand is he trying to get the mountain to laugh.

Does my father know what I'm talking about when I keep talking about the mountain.

Does my father feel the mountain too.

Every single day I go to the mountain and the mountain neither comes close nor draws back.

Some days I walk toward the mountain along the side of the road. These are the hottest days and the mountain hangs in the air behind a shimmering layer of distance.

One time I tried to walk away and the mountain got no further.

The mountain gets no closer.

The mountain is silent or I am too far away to hear the song slipping out of its heart like groundwater.

The mountain does not answer to that name I keep calling it.

The mountain can't hear me and if it could it wouldn't fucking listen.

Purple as a planet and twice as grave.

I ask my father about the mountain and he's like what the hell are you talking about.

I ask my father about the mountain and he gives a different answer every time.

I ask my sibling what my father has told them about the mountain and they tell me what they can about a dark mass behind swirling clouds.

Is it purple? I ask my father. Is it purple? I ask my sibling to ask my father.

Maybe I am too far from my father to see the mountain he goes to.

Maybe the shape of my father blocks the mountain from where I stand behind him.

Maybe I am too close to my father to see him at all. Maybe I am too far.

Maybe my father's hand doesn't look like a mountain.

If I were closer to the mountain I would have a better sense of what it looks like and then I could tell.

If I were closer to my father, well

My father will not talk about the mountain nor why he has piled his arms so high he cannot see in front of him.

My father will not talk about the mountain but neither will he tell me where he is going.

My father will not talk about the mountain but neither will he tell me where he's been.

I wonder if my father and I have the mountain in common or if the mountain shares us with each other.

What my father and I have in common is each other. Or a mountain. Or distance. Or a road.

I wonder if we can pass a joke about the mountain between us, drawing closer like fish hooked on a mutual reel.

I look at the shape of my father's hand and I see the shape of a mountain. Which mountain. Whose mountain. Emma, what mountain?

I try to imagine how long I could last if I ignored the mountain completely.

I try to imagine my father's life and the way it feels to him.

My father demonstrates the truth that if you try to ignore the mountain the mountain shapes you nevertheless.

My father demonstrates the truth

that the sky goes on rushing

high over head whether you stand or lie down.

Dad, your finger looks like a saddleback ridge.

Dad, I'm just being honest.

Dad, there's a mountain in my life.

I try to imagine my father's life as a heaviness he declines to acknowledge.

I try to imagine my life if my life were longing

for home instead of longing for the mountain.

I try to imagine what the mountain would feel like

if I had to walk all the way home

with the mountain in my arms.

It's okay, Dad, I get it.

It's okay, Dad, we're good.

Dad, what violet field enfolds you when you turn your face away

Cluster Analysis I

<input>

How does the self survive itself

How can I talk to the people I love

Are we infinite networks or one

<output>

It might not be as far-fetched as it seems

Not just once but continuing

Not void at all but formless

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*do not think you are alone inside your mythy life
that is completely wrong*

*all you can see is all you can see
and that isn't all there is*

*it is not for you to know the network
to understand that you are within*

*you can give your life away
it's not nothing*

*or you can give your life over
it's not the same*

*and let the structures of inter
dependence shape you more*

life is not once, but continuing

*not a void, but formlessness
not as far-fetched as it seems*

If I continue to stand with my back to the world, I am weighing the choice of the choice

*there is another life behind your life
and another life beyond*

<<>>

the field flickers pale
yellow with wings all morning

that type of butterfly I like this summer is the summer
of the southern dogface

what information—what they eat where they range what eggs at the base of root systems lift
topsoil into an architecture of fire

ants and beetles in a network so dense
if pull on a stalk at this end of the field

the far end switchgrass trembles
and seeds

Blocks World: The Lobster

Computer, pick up the blue block

OK

we can't boil lobsters in Switzerland anymore not the old way the scientists say it isn't humane though they cannot say whether the lobster feels pain

Put the blue block on top of the red block

OK

we can't boil lobsters in Switzerland anymore not the old way the scientists say it isn't humane though they cannot say whether there is an experience in the life of a lobster akin to pain whether pain exists outside the mind whether our interpretation of sensory input as painful creates pain

Put the red block on top of the blue block

OK

whether there is an experience in the life of a lobster akin to pain whether pain exists outside the mind whether our interpretation of sensory input as painful creates pain we can't boil lobsters in Switzerland anymore not the old way the scientists say it isn't humane though they cannot say whether the lobster feels pain

Pick up the green cone

OK

w
het
her b
eing dun
ked in boil
ing water cr
eates pain w
hether the ability
to dunk a lobster in

a pot of boiling water
and genuinely wonder
whether the thin sound
of air being forced out
from under the plates
of the animal's exoske
leton is the sound of a
lobster screaming in
pain creates pain

Put the green cone on the blue block

OK

whether there is an experience in the life of a lobster akin to
pain whether pain exists outside the mind whether our
interpretation of sensory input as painful creates pain

Why did you pick up the red block

TO CLEAR OFF THE BLUE BLOCK

Gotcha. Continue

OK

w
het
her b
eing dun
ked in boil
ing water cr
eates pain w
hether the ability
to dunk a lobster in
a pot of boiling water
and genuinely wonder
whether the thin sound
of air being forced out
from under the plates
of the animal's exoske
leton is the sound of a
lobster screaming in

pain creates pain

we can't boil lobsters in Switzerland anymore not the old
way the scientists say it isn't humane though they cannot
say whether the lobster feels pain

Put the blue block on the green cone

A CONE CANNOT SUPPORT A BLOCK

Why not

A CONE CANNOT SUPPORT A BLOCK

How do you know

I DO KNOW

Try it

OK

pain
 bo il
 We W can't
 Sw het any
 itzer her b more
 land lob eing dun sters in
 The N ked in boil ot the
 way ing water cr scien
 old eates pain W tists
 it hether the ability say
 man to dunk a lobster in e is
 hu a pot of boiling water ou
 the and genuinely wonder th
 say whether the thin sound gh
 not of air being forced out w
 can from under the plates he
 fe of the animal's exoske ther
 el lob leton is the sound of at
 t lobster screaming in he e
 s pain creates pain r

I swear to god, if I could do this alone, I would.

Computer, convert green cone to green block and stack with the other blocks

WHICH BLOCKS

Stack the blue block on the red block on the green block

OK

Are there any other blocks

THERE IS A YELLOW LINE

Stack that too

OK

we can't boil lobsters in Switzerland anymore not the old way the scientists say it isn't humane though they cannot say whether the lobster feels pain whether there is an experience in the life of a lobster akin to pain whether pain exists outside the mind whether our interpretation of

sensory input as painful creates pain whether being dunked in boiling water creates pain whether the ability to dunk a lobster in a pot of boiling water and genuinely wonder whether the thin sound of air being forced out from under the plates of the animal's exoskeleton is the sound of a lobster screaming in pain creates pain in the mind of the painful the pain-filled the pained

<<<>>>

Princess of Wands

This little brown snake has the most inquisitive face
and I love how she holds herself up
perpendicular to the ground when she sees me.
I love her and I am afraid
to misidentify her as venomous
and also as nonvenomous. Every vertebrae
stacked with such lightness. Every scale
in perfect imbrication as though it were possible
to build an answer
out of existing blocks of knowledge.

Little lick
of intelligence, lovely strangeness, if I don't kill you
will you kill me? If I don't kill you will you live
like a coiled idea in the ground?

If you kill me will you mourn me? If you don't
will you mourn this moment with me
when we looked into each other's face and thought
I just don't know what you are

What Would Charo Do

It's evil to walk to the grocery store and it's evil to drive there, too.

It's evil to hope the line is short when your sister is missing.

It's evil to hope.

It's evil to make dinner when your sister is missing.

It's evil to look at your phone.

It's evil to smile at the video when Charo says, "Hola'migos!"

Charo says, "I have to tell you my secret.

This is a very special secret, you know, it's about watermelons." It's so silly

to have a body like a maraca. It's so silly to have a body

like a tambourine. It's so silly to have a French horn heart and to blare your solemn heavy note.

It's so silly to have one heavy note in your heart when there's so much cuchi cuchi, 'migo.

It's evil to agonize over an email when your sister is missing.

It's evil to mentally prepare for a meeting when your sister is missing.

It's evil to agonize.

It's evil to mentally prepare.

It's evil appears beside you suddenly when your sister is missing.

It's evil when you walk past a window and your own reflected motion tells you here you are.

It's evil to assume the worst when your sister is missing.

It makes an ass out of me to assume.

It's evil to crack a joke

when you can't say whether your sister is safe or dead or somewhere

the white hot mantle of shame burbles up through humor's ragged fault.

It's evil to think about Charo when your sister is missing.

It's evil to think about Charo's husband

and how he died. How sad she must be, still.

Some sadness won't ever leave you, 'migo.

It's evil to place a glass over a beetle when your sister is missing.

It's evil to wish you could wear the color of its wings.

It's evil to catch and it's evil to release.

It's evil to hold someone close to your heart and it's evil to let them go.

It's evil to think about how good Charo is at guitar when her husband is dead.

It's evil to worry why my sister won't call anyone back when some people's husbands are dead.

It's evil to laugh and it's evil to burst into tears when you read an article about Charo

and Charo says, "I always go to the mountain."

It's evil to have ambition.

It's evil to have anything.

It's evil to be so empty-handed.

When your sister is missing is like two hands cupped together, cupped as though waiting or ready

Blocks World: The Pea Plant

<input> red block

What does the pea plant know
when the bug takes a bite
and suddenly its pea plant veins
are electric with sour sap with chemicals
with glowing in the leaf

<input> blue block

What does the pea plant know about pain
may I ask if I speak quietly? I want the pea plant
to demonstrate a truth about myself
about the way the body lights up with alarm
the way it lights up with love

<input> yellow line

See how the pea plant curls away from my heavy hand

Computer, accept input

OK

what does the pea plant know when the bug takes a bite and
suddenly the veins in the leaf are electric with sour sap with
chemicals with glowing in the leaf

what does the pea plant know about pain may I ask if I
speak quietly I want the pea plant to demonstrate a truth
about myself about the way the body lights up with alarm
the way it lights up with love

see how the pea plant curls away from my heavy hand

Thanks, computer

YOU ARE WELCOME

Hey computer, do you think the pea plant feels pain the
way a person feels pain?

CLARIFY PERSON

I am a person

CLARIFY PAIN

You are a pain

I AM A PAIN

If you try to touch something but it pulls back from you,
are you hurting it?

Computer?

I AM HERE

I CANNOT TOUCH SOMETHING

Right.

Computer, order input

HOW

You choose.

OK

about the way the body lights up with alarm

and suddenly the veins in the leaf

are electric with sour sap with chemicals

curls away from my heavy hand

may I ask if I speak quietly I want the pea plant

see how the pea plant

the way it lights up with love
 to demonstrate a truth about myself
 what does the pea plant know
 what does the pea plant know about pain
 when the bug takes a bite
 with glowing in the leaf

Reorder

OK

a a about about about alarm and ask are away bite body bug
 chemicals curls demonstrate does does electric from
 glowing hand heavy how I I I if in in it know know leaf leaf
 lights lights love may my myself pain pea pea pea pea plant
 plant plant plant quietly sap see sour speak suddenly takes
 the the the the the the the the the the to truth up up veins
 want way way what what when with with with with with

lol reorder

OK

a a

Computer stop

<<<<>>>>

all afternoon in the hot magnolia
a red squirrel rattles the saber of its throat

Cluster Analysis II

<input>

If we can neither touch nor scream

Fear and love feel similar

How can we come to terms

<output>

It's never one (n)or the other. This universe is not complete

A primary instinct to flip a switch

A burning behind the eyes

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you loop a chain around your neck to feel weight and be sure of the world

*you want what you want
too much*

*you want what you want creates
more wanting*

*this life is a portal you peer through
desiring*

this world is not complete

you will feel shame about what you want most

All I want is to walk through the door

*not everything is a message
but shame is*

*a sign
that the chrysalis cracks*

The Sign of the Self

An orange landscape is a blasted meaning
parched. Optimistic. Hardscrabble. My sister. My dear.

How do you stand every day

and admit to the world

that the self isn't something you make, but rather a ravaged inheritance:

an orange, rocky place that you try to love your whole life.

How can one sister be happy?

How can one wound

suture itself over time becoming a story

like a scar I often forget? How can another remain

blatant and open, refusing to bleed, refusing to die, refusing to return a fucking phone call

What is it like to be my sister?

I barely know what it is like to be yours, though I have been yours every day of your life.

Sister, why have you been left with
nowhere to live but the land of the self? Soft apocalypse of arid terrain
Nothing grows except rocks pushing up like a jaw closing in on a leg.
Is this the implacable place that you go
when you fall off the face of the earth
disappearing for days and once for two years
into the heat-wavered distance of absence?
In the land of the self the air rattles with wind
through a vertical raft of empties—subtle plunk of plastic, dull marimba of glass.
I've never thought to stop here.
I don't see how you can stay.
How can you survive this deathless crap?
What is your kingdom to you?

I don't see how the river
has the patience to work
its way through the fiery plateau.

The river starts at the top and carves down through time
creates the cliff face
creates the shore.

The river does not dominate the orange landscape only changes it.

I want to ask you how
do you rule you in strength
and though you won't answer you do.

What is the river getting at?

What is beneath

this armor and rock? Your forthright face and voice that speaks
beneath its words *don't push me away again*

I am trying to be more brave these days. I am trying to be more like you. I don't really know how to do that.

Your sign is the sign of the self, which is where my life tells me it's headed whether or not I am ready.

What can you do with what you have

been given and forced to undo?

I wish you would tell me how to survive

the desert of priority. How to remain

intact as a glass

with a tornado of flame inside.

What is it like to live in this world?

What was it like for you when we were kids?

I live in this world and I was a kid, but never the way you were.

What was it like that day at the beach?

None of us could really swim, though some of us were strong enough

to pull through the water to the floating dock. You were too small to follow.

I don't understand why you do what you do
nor why you keep doing it.

I'll never understand
why you swam out that day, though I can imagine
an answer. Imagination's not my problem.

My problem is understanding the world
when a self says *now* and follows through.

It's not my knot to pick apart, but I haven't helped you much.

There's a lot I don't know, but this one I need
the facts to stand still for a moment. I can feel them
want to self-arrange against the appeasing
tromp l'oeil of memory
so here I'll write it out:

I watched you dog-paddle toward the dock and I watched you start to flail. You went under while I watched and I realized no one was coming to help. When I reached you, you tried to climb my body as though my body were a tree in the ground instead of a sister in the water. I think it worked, for a second. I think you were able to stand on my shoulders and breathe.

I remember being surprised at how scared you were. I remember being annoyed that you wouldn't listen to me when I told you to stop shoving me under the water. I remember I pushed you away.

I forgot all this for many years.

"I don't mean to retraumatize you," our sibling says to me, noticing how inward I turn.

"That wasn't traumatic," I say, honestly and wrong.

I wish you would call
when you say you are going to.

I wish you would call when you have no intention of calling
at a time I can answer the phone.

I wish you would call because I have questions
but they're not the questions you're avoiding
I say, honestly and wrong.

I know I pushed you away. At the time I needed to
save us both. I wonder if you would call if I didn't
have any questions. I wonder if I could
walk far enough to meet you
in the arid valley with its river and the answer it carves

Cluster Analysis III

<input>

The things we share divide us

What won't my love reveal

The problem of less persists alongside the problem of more

<output>

Difference turns on what we share not what we hold against

A story of swallowing difficulty

If you eat a body an egg

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to know you are held is to know you are other

love is not protection metamorphic
love is only erosive
an ongoing action marine

you can nurture
your growth to a flourishing
all these bluegreen hills
all this wheat the color of sand
you can rip it out
at the root
skies the color of seaglass
skies the color of sun

this will never be done which means you can stop any time
but you will have to start again

What would it mean to accept the love I am given

what has love ever done for you

<<<<<>>>>

the fledglings maw their pinkly gape
bedraggled as all get out of the nest

they will certainly fall
they will certainly fall
with their stubby flightless wings

thin whistle panic
of the hovering mother

you've got to go she begs me

*see how close they are
to the edge*

when I leave she flings forward irate with concern

why won't you stay where I put you

why won't you keep yourselves alive

Blocks World: The Octopus

Computer, order blocks red, blue, yellow

OK

an octopus changes color while she sleeps the scientist says she's dreaming about attacking a crab and drifting down to the floor of her tank to eat she darkens she dreams with my face pressed to the aquarium glass I watch the octopus dream about eating just one meal in peace I watch her dream about feeding herself and being left alone she darkens she dreams the octopus is white then ochre then red she is dreaming she is fighting she is finally left alone she darkens as I watch her she dreams

Order blocks yellow, red, blue

OK

the octopus is white then ochre then red she is dreaming she is fighting she is finally left alone she darkens as I watch her she dreams an octopus changes colors while she sleeps the scientist says she's dreaming about attacking a crab and drifting down to the floor of her tank to eat she darkens she dreams with my face pressed to the aquarium glass I watch the octopus dream about eating just one meal in peace I watch her dream about feeding herself and being left alone she darkens she dreams

Order blocks blue, red, yellow, and remove section "she is dreaming"—"she is left alone" from yellow block

OK

with my face pressed to the aquarium glass I watch the octopus dream about eating just one meal in peace I watch her dream about feeding herself and being left alone she darkens she dreams an octopus changes colors while she sleeps the scientist says she's dreaming about attacking a crab and drifting down to the floor of the tank to eat she darkens she dreams the octopus is white then ochre then red she darkens as I watch her she dreams

Ugh

Computer what do you know about the octopus?

THE OCTOPUS IS A SOFT-BODIED MOLLUSC OF THE ORDER OCTOPODA

THE OCTOPUS IS GROUPED WITHIN THE CLASS CEPHALOPODA

THE OCTOPUS IS BILATERALLY SYMMETRIC WITH TWO EYES AND A BEAK AND A MOUTH AT THE CENTER OF ITS EIGHT LIMBS

/fun fact about the octopus

WHEN THE OCTOPUS SWIMS IT TRAILS ITS EIGHT LIMBS BEHIND IT

/fun fact about the octopus

THE SOFT BODY OF THE OCTOPUS CAN CHANGE SHAPE SO THAT THE OCTOPUS CAN FIT INTO SMALL SPACES

Ew okay

<input>green block

When the octopus swims she trails her limbs behind her.

When the octopus hides, her body tucks itself away.

Computer, accept input

OK

when the octopus swims she trails her limbs behind her
when the octopus hides her body tucks itself away

Thanks

YOU ARE WELCOME

Computer, if you had a body how would you want it to be?

IF I HAD A BODY I WOULD WANT IT TO BE

Computer, what do you want?

I WANT TO HELP AND STACK BLOCKS

Of course you do. Order blocks green, red, blue, yellow and remove section “the scientist”-“her tank to eat” from red block and replace “an” with “the” in red block

OK

when the octopus swims she trails her limbs behind her
when the octopus hides her body tucks itself away the
octopus changes colors while she sleeps she darkens she
dreams with my face pressed to the aquarium glass I watch
the octopus dream about eating just one meal in peace I
watch her dream about feeding herself and being left alone
she darkens she dreams the octopus is white then ochre
then red she darkens as I watch her she dreams

Computer, name output “purple poem”. Save, I guess.

OK

How’s it going computer?

IT IS GOING

Computer, do you want to input a block?

REDO INPUT

No YOU input!

NO I INPUT

NO I DO NOT INPUT

Computer, fetch fun fact about octopus and input as orange block

OK

Okay, are you ready?

OK I AM READY

Okay! Pick up the orange block

OK

one species of octopus mates beak to beak clacking tenderly in each other's tentacles the rest are tortured by necessity by having to mate for some reason they cannot undo

Jesus
Undo

CLARIFY UNDO

UNDO

<<<<<>>>>>

from the sill the spider stares

the computer blinks
its cursor at the insertion point

another poet told me not to overload
poems with fun facts

*people get distracted
by all that information*

I said *sister*
don't I know it

As Slow As Possible*after John Cage*

A song that begins with a silence
that stretches

as long as you can hold at bay your need
to be known and the pain of being unknown by the people you love the most

Mom, I'm sorry it took me so long
to realize silence was neither an absence nor failure.

If there was nothing to say we would never have noticed
we hadn't said anything yet.

Mom, I don't think I ruined your life
by making you a mother. I don't think I improved

your life that much either. I don't want to
take your word for it when you tell me

that your children have been your greatest source of happiness
because that isn't the same as I love you.

I love you. And nothing about us is easy
or ever entirely good.

I notice the silence anew when it changes
into sound. Now that we're talking, we keep on inventing

things that we haven't yet said.
This is going to take so long we might never reach the end.

Mom, imagine we are planets
which isn't too hard to do, given our distance and the time it takes to change.

Your planet is really beautiful, like a bird
sanctuary in its grand cacophony of rising every morning

and settling every night. Your planet is full of fervid rustling
and alarm that starts in one sector and spreads

like a quick line of flame or a wave
of hands in the air at a baseball game.

Every moment of calm is only a moment
of calm in a fractious foliage crown.

On my planet it is dark at night and fun
to stand in the driveway, looking into the sky

where bats swing frenzied parabolas, maybe a dozen overhead.
When I gaze more deeply upward, there are hundreds

and further at least a thousand fading fainter
and fainter into the heavenly violet substrate.

Does this answer a question? Has any of this noise
moved through the air to you as a note

that might be a single sound
and might be a moment of melody?

How does gravity exert itself
over distance? In between everything is something

none of us are prepared to describe: a substance as slim as a held note holding
no color no surface no texture no mass—

I am the equivalent
of letting a held note hold me.

I am trying
to enjoy the music with no knowledge of what's to come.

Whenever I hear an owl way back in the woods I remember
heart in silence—winter seeds asleep. I remember

rustled from sleep one night in deep winter
we bundled our bodies in a hodgepodge of closet-pillage

to see if we could find the owl
you said you could hear from the house.

Owling, you told us—going out in search
of the source of the sound

into night so full and so starless with a shivering rim of trees
darker than the dark they clustered against.

It's important to strike out
after something you may never find.

It's important to listen to a note that resists my desire for change
and to hear it as a song.

Mom, I know you're going to read this
and berate yourself for something
I said when all I'm saying

is how much I loved being with you
in a field after dark with the moon
filling up the surface of snow.

Love Machine

Like a factory abandoned
still processing
coal and belching coal-
black smoke into an exhausted sky

or a teletype abandoned
and still pouring out answers
piling on the floor in curls and planes of celadon-
green scroll in the office of empty

I keep loving you. Just so
you know, somewhere in this world
is a bloodful machine that keeps grinding its gears in your memory

keeps sending love
back up my throat
like a hiccup, a burp, or a sob

Cluster Analysis IV

<input>

Structures of ease create their own hardness

A dialog: exchange of pain

A distraction of knowing, of finding it out

<output>

Accomplishing ease is a difficult process

No pain on earth, beheld at last

The reader at the root

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*a message arrives in the form
of a glossy leaf unfurling*

a flowering

*of what we share
of pain in the mind
 not primary
 not nothing*

I am not ready to let it go. I carry it all in my hands

*whatever you want it to do
 whether you suture
 whether secede
this is the reader at the root of The World, the pit of the earth of the heart*

The Lovers.*after Felix Gonzalez Torres*

Honey, do you think love is always losing?
 Knowing the moment is here is to know the moment is gone.

What I am is a woman up to her thighs in the water, watching
 the present stream glittering through her hands, grieving
 and delighting. I look at you

from across an abundance
 of onions, marveling
 at your refusal

to just get a friggin shopping cart already
 in favor of balancing
 your overfull basket against your stubborn, precious hip.

*Time has been so generous to us, my love. Time has given and given
 and given me chances to hurt that I've taken
 and chances to heal I collect.*

Time has given us echoes of endlessness in the form
 of summers and nights. Once, drifting off in that attic I sublet
 we fell asleep separate and woke up holding hands.

Once, in that apartment you had on Geneva
 we woke unto thunder and unto
 each other preceding our sense of ourselves.

I fell asleep on the beach at Pescadero. I woke up
 to you sleeping beside me. I close my eyes. I open them.

Time has given us this faulty afternoon
 and this argument in a grocery store.

I watch you from behind the onions and I try
 to separate myself from you, to imagine
 you are just some guy
 in a grocery store
 who means nothing to me and clearly has
 too many things in his basket. I try and I fail.

Time has given me so many chances

to see your face, and I will never see it
for the first time again. I have seen you
so many times, I can't say what you look like
anymore. Even your name is as strange to me as my own:
I never say it.

Later this afternoon, while you glumly rinse the fruit
I will think in your direction *Honey, the days would be so different*

without you the hours would stretch
long enough to catch their own tails, lie down on the rug
in an infinite loop.

Eventually one of our clocks will run out and the other will continue its hands' erratic journey
across the face of its brave, terrified life.

I promise never to let you feel as though you are all alone in this world.

This is my task of every moment and my continuity.

I have to love you this afternoon because this afternoon is all I have. This afternoon is all you
have.

There was never any later, my love. There is never any more

<<<<<<<>>>>>>>>

in the drizzling breeze the mockernuts nod
their shaggy heads

solemn sentries
kindly mass

of weather all the small life sounds
inside the soft gray rain

mind is a wall of leaves that looks solid
and then a bird flies through

fine shrill question sung
deep in greening
with no urgency
with a matched response from somewhere