Asserting and Locating Value in Contemporary Elliptical-Style Poetry

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Abstract

This thesis has both critical and creative components. The critical study examines the strategies that contemporary poets—which I am characterising as elliptical-style for their interests in postmodernist gestures and traditional affective responses—use to write about subjects that are difficult due to individual or collective trauma. It is based on close readings of the poetry of U.S. writers Terrance Hayes, Solmaz Sharif, and Dora Malech. The study analyses how the poets use found terms, erasure, anagram, and persona speakers, including alter egos, to assert and locate value in poetry that can at times be elusive or elliptical. Such poetry is characterised by evasive speakers, associative logic, and gamesmanship. Found poetry uses pre-existing material in poems, erasure selectively deletes text, while anagram remixes existing words to make new lines. Persona speakers are narrators of poems who are identified as distinct from the implied poet.

This study examines Hayes' use of alter egos in his 2010 volume of poetry *Lighthead* to examine issues of race, Sharif's use of persona speakers and found poetry techniques to critique American imperialism in her 2016 collection *Look*, and Malech's application of anagram in her 2018 volume *Stet* to write on confessional topics. I argue that these poets assert value by using persona speakers, found techniques, associative strategies, and juxtaposition of unlikely discourses, to thematic effect, while simultaneously distancing the reader from the poem by creating narrative, thematic, or grammatical gaps in the poems. The relationship between reader and poet in these elliptical-style poems is that of co-creators of meaning, as the reader must import outside information to fill in the spaces. I argue that elliptical-style poets assert and locate value in their poems by providing a co-creative experience for the reader, using techniques that are carefully chosen to both contribute to the themes of each poem, while also resisting closure and fixity, thus requiring an active reader-poem relationship that is experiential rather than linear.

The creative portion of this thesis is a manuscript of original poetry. It uses found terms, erasure, and persona speakers to engage with material concerning Covid-19, the Christchurch massacre, travels in the U.S, and reflections on writing and depression. The pandemic section reimagines and reframes the civil emergency discourse of the lockdown to suggest an alternative, imaginative response for the poem's speakers. Other sections use techniques to create elusive, dynamic lyric wholes, in which the reader is asked to contribute to the poems' themes and narrative.

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Introduction

Lyric & the Elliptical-Style Poem

Over the past 30 years, a number of critics and scholars have written about a significant movement amongst U.S. poets towards what poet and critic Tony Hoagland[1] describes as "associative and 'experimental' poetries" (173). This shift sees poets increasingly incorporating experimental techniques into lyric poems. Greenberg and others write in the introduction to their chapter, "Hybrid Aesthetics and Its Discontents," that this has grown out of "the American poetry wars," which Greenburg et al. state "pitted Language poets against Official Verse Culture" (117), and which is also described by critic and poet Ron Silliman as "a divide between Post-Avant poetry and the School of Quietude" (Silliman qtd. in Greenburg et al. 117). As stated by Greenburg et al., the poetry that results from these efforts "goes by many names, including 'Third Way,' 'Elliptical,' and, most recently, now, 'Hybrid'" (117). Regardless of the labels of these trends, the discussion by scholars and critics of such poetry tends to coalesce around key themes, which will be discussed in this section of the Introduction.

A central characteristic of this aesthetic is to produce poetry that is identifiable for what Hoagland called its "skittishness" (173). While "skittishness" is not necessarily a pejorative word, Hoagland tends to refer to such poems in negative terms. In a 2006 essay, "Fear of Narrative and the Skittery Poem of Our Moment," Hoagland notes the "great invention and playfulness" of this poetry, but also its tendency towards "emotional removal" and "aesthetic self-consciousness" (173-174). While stopping short of outlining a coherent school or movement, Hoagland describes such poetry as favouring "obliquity, fracture, and discontinuity" over development in a systematic manner, and associative modes over narrative forms (174), as well as favouring "multiple perspectives" over "sustained participation" (178). Hoagland describes this movement in postmodern poetry "as a kind of crop rotation," (173) a "surge" that allows the "topsoil of one field . . . to rest" while another is cultivated (173). Hoagland's delineation of this tendency towards skittishness amongst recent innovative poets

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[1] This study relies heavily on Hoagland's critical writing in the area of experimental poetries. None of the sources used in this study include any discussion by Hoagland on race. However, it needs to be acknowledged that Hoagland became embroiled in a race-related controversy centred on his poem, "The Change," (see: https://poets.org/poem/change) and his response to criticism of that poem. Poet and scholar, Claudia Rankine, presented an open letter critiquing Hoagland's treatment of race in "The Change" at the Associated Writing Programs Conference in 2011 (see: https://poets.org/text/open-letter-dialogue-race-and-poetry). Hoagland, in turn, responded to Rankine's letter (the revised can be seen at: https://poets.org/text/dear-claudia-letter-response).

echoes and—to some extent—endorses an earlier trend identified by poet and critic Stephanie Burt by contemporary poets. Burt describes the characteristics of such poets in a 1999 essay in *American Letters & Commentary*:

> Elliptical poets are always hinting, punning, or swerving away from a never-quite-unfolded backstory; they are easier to process in parts than in wholes. They believe provisionally in identities . . . but they suspect the Is they invoke; they admire disjunction and confrontation, but they know how a little can go a long way. Ellipticists seek the authority of the rebellious; they want to challenge their readers, violate decorum, surprise or explode assumptions about what belongs in a poem, or what matters in life, and to do so while meeting traditional lyric goals. (46)

Hoagland quotes Burt in his 2006 essay, noting that, while Burt's definition is "quite general," in Hoagland's view "he gets the mania and the declarativeness right. Also the relentless dodging or obstruction of expectation" (182). Burt coined the term "Elliptical Poets" in her 1998 review of Susan Wheeler's collection of poetry, *Smokes*, in which she states:

> Elliptical poets try to manifest a person—who speaks the poem and reflects the poet—while using all the verbal gizmos developed over the last few decades to undermine the coherence of speaking selves. They are post-avant-gardist, or post-"postmodern": they have read (most of them) Stein's heirs, and the "language writers," and have chosen to do otherwise. Elliptical poems shift drastically between low (or slangy) and high (or naively "poetic") diction. Some are lists of phrases beginning "I am an X, I am a Y." Ellipticism's favorite established poets are Dickinson, Berryman, Ashbery, and/or Auden; Wheeler draws on all four. The poets tell almost-stories, or almost-obscured ones. They are sardonic, angered, defensively difficult, or desperate; they want to entertain as thoroughly as, but not to resemble, television.

The key element that underlies Burt's original conception of Ellipticism is an ellipsis in understanding, elicited by techniques that create gaps in themes, language, and linearity. "Verbal gizmos" undermine the coherence of the speakers of the poems; high "poetic" diction is disrupted by "low" or "slangy" diction; narrative is undermined by "almost-stories;" and these defensive postures make it difficult to discern the position of the speakers of such poems. The reason for such disruptiveness may lie in what Burt describes as the tendency of Ellipticals to channel Post-Structuralist theorists by treating identity, self, and voice as "problems and phenomena" (46) to be explored, rather than as givens.

The naming of the school as "Elliptical" suggests that the essence of the movement is one in which gaps, spaces, and absences are crucial. In his entry in *The Princeton Encyclopedia*, Terry V. F. Brogan states that ellipsis originates from the Greek eclipsis, which means "leaving out" or the Latin detractio or "defect" (400), thus implying that what is omitted from Elliptical poems is an important part of the reading of such poetry. If something is elided, it is left out of consideration, suppressed, altered or struck out (Merriam-Webster), which adds to the critical nature of the spaces in such poetry. Furthermore, ellipsis in the grammatical sense is a series of dots that indicate the omission of superfluous words, which suggests that the move towards Ellipticism is a paring down or a removal of linkages considered superfluous (Oxford English Dictionary). The naming of the movement suggests a disruption of the lyric, in that unnecessary connectors are erased, leaving only the essential utterances.

In addition to Hoagland's identification of a tendency of contemporary poets towards skittish poems, and Burt's conception of Ellipticism, Cole Swensen gives further discussion to such poetics when she highlights the ways in which two formerly opposing schools have merged in surprising ways in the introduction to the anthology *American Hybrid* (2009). Swensen uses the term "hybrid poem" to describe poetry that combines qualities from "third wave poetics" and "post-Avant" poetry (xxi). Swensen draws on the "two camp model," bringing in Paul Auster's observation "that most twentieth century American poets took their cue either from the British poetic tradition or the French" (xvii). Swensen follows this line of influence—tracing the two main overlapping strands—on American poetry of the British Romantics and the French avant-garde through what she describes as "the anthology wars" (xviii) in the U.S. in the 1960s. It is in the 1980s, Swensen points out, that the distinctions started to break down, and the hybridisation became apparent. Key to Swensen's approach to the hybrid poem is the flexibility of her conception. She draws on the biological "roots" of the term, describing it as "The New (Hy) Breed," and also pointing out that the hybridisation is "selective" (xxi). Swensen sees hybrid poets making innovative blends in their poetry:

> Considering the traits associated with "conventional" work, such as coherence, linearity, formal clarity, narrative, firm closure, symbolic resonance, and stable voice, and those generally assumed of "experimental" work, such as non-linearity, juxtaposition, rupture, fragmentation, immanence, multiple perspectives, open form, and resistance to closure, hybrid poets access a wealth of tools, each one of which can change dramatically depending on how it is combined with others and the particular role it plays in the composition (xxi).

What is notable about the hybrid conception is the way in which the "traditional" and "experimental" elements are blended. It is as though the either/or distinction has collapsed, so that these kinds of poetries draw on the traditions stemming from the Romantics, as well as those from the avant-garde. Furthermore, the hybridisation of these two previously disparate camps has entered the mainstream in U.S. poetry.

Another scholar to draw attention to this growing aesthetic is Reginald Shepherd. In the introduction to the anthology *Lyric Postmodernisms: An Anthology of Contemporary Innovative Poetries*, Shepherd outlines postmodern techniques that Burt draws in under the umbrella of Ellipticism, which include a multiplicity of voices, mixing of high and low culture and diction, associative logic, seriality, and juxtaposition instead of a narrative approach. Shepherd points out that these are modernist strategies, used extensively in *The Waste Land*, *Ulysses*, and *The Cantos*, but argues that the intention of postmodern poets using these techniques differs in that they "employ such devices to refute the very possibility of synthesis. There is no whole to which they strive, only holes upon which they stumble, and many find the notion of totality entirely too totalitarian" (xiv). Shepherd does not frame this as a criticism of writers engaged in writing such innovative poetry. However, poets who proceed "by means of breakage . . ." and who "simply point, helplessly, hopelessly, and sometimes gleefully . . . to the pieces" (xiv) raise questions about the role of the contemporary lyric, and the contribution of such poems to the lyric project.

The extensive critical discussion of recent trends in experimental poetry has led to a proliferation of both labels attached to such aesthetic streams and definitions that aspire to provide catch-all characterisations of what is actually an extremely broad and diverse set of poets: Elliptical, skittery, Hybrid, Lyric Postmodern, and Post-Avant. Although the descriptors vary, there is a significant overlap in the definitions espoused by Burt, Hoagland, Swensen, and Shepherd. Of the scholars discussed, Burt is the earliest major figure in the discussions of innovative poetries, with her conception of the Elliptical School. Since then, the conversation has progressed considerably, and the conception of what distinguishes innovative poems in this oeuvre has evolved. However, I argue that the ellipsis—a space, a gap, a rupture—whether in the narrative, the speaking perspectives, or the ways in which unusual combinations of techniques are applied—is a conception that underlies all of the major approaches. For the purposes of this study, I will for convenience adopt Burt's use of elliptical with a small "e" even if the poets I will consider are not among those she described—because elliptical is a useful umbrella term to describe their gestures and effects.

Broadly speaking, then, elliptical-style poetry is characterised by spaces, gaps, or absences in the poem. These spaces are manifested either in a literal sense (on the page), in a lack of links between images, through gaps in the theme, or in the evasiveness of the speaker. The mode of elliptical-style poems is most often associative; the techniques are highly inventive and wide-ranging, drawing on both traditional, lyric forms, such as the sonnet, as well as experimental techniques, such as erasure and anagram. In addition, elliptical-style poems frequently combine disparate elements, which manifest in innovative blends. Finally, the elisions in such poems require a more active role by the reader, as the reader is required—to a greater or lesser extent—to co-create meaning.

Elliptical-style poetry, again a term I am going to use to include the various terms that have come to represent such innovative poetry—including Hybrid, Elliptical, and Lyric Postmodernisms—has its share of detractors, and the disruptive nature of the aesthetic raises a number of productive questions for critics. Shepherd asks: "What does lyric mean in our contemporary post-everything world, one that has been described as depthless, fundamentally inauthentic, and at if not past the end of history? What does it mean to be a poet, to choose this most marginal means of discourse in social and historical circumstances in which all discourse sometimes seems to have been emptied of meaning, content, or value?" (xiii). These questions posed by Shepherd about the role of the lyric poet need to be considered in regard to the issues raised by critics about elliptical-style poetry and its contribution to the lyric project. One serious objection to elliptical-style poetry is raised by Hoagland, who comments at the end of his 2006 essay on "skittery" poems, that such poetry may lose "one of poetry's most fundamental reasons for existing: the individual power to locate and assert value" (187). Furthermore, Hoagland points out that by strenuously avoiding "the potential embarrassment of sincerity" and "the sweaty enclosures of subject matter," some of this type of poetry may be committing itself "inadvertently to triviality" (187). This comment by Hoagland touches on the above questions raised by Shepherd, in that, while such poetry may be an understandable aesthetic response to cultural discourse that is "emptied of meaning, content, value" the net result may be one in which the discourse of the lyric is, similarly, rendered valueless. Building on Hoagland's concerns about the potential insubstantiality of innovative poetries, elliptical-style poetry has also been criticised for its apparently apolitical nature. In a 2009 entry on his *Exoskeleton* blog, "Nonsense/Burt/Hybrid," poet and translator Johannes Göransson comments on both the *American Hybrid* anthology and Burt's *Close Calls with Nonsense: Reading New Poetry*, pointing out that for both books nonsense represents an

illusion:

> . . . of formal purity. The idea that there is poetry that is so "pure" that it's not about anything; it's just pure language. I think that's a very important point. Both books pretty much focuses [sic] entirely on "formal" analyzes [sic]. American Hybrid mentions nothing about politics, except the very retro-New-Critical notion that by purifying the language we resist the contaminating influences of mass culture.

This purist approach to language, and its elision of political concerns, could lead to a lack of significance or value for similar reasons to those advanced by Hoagland, who noted that the lack of sincerity of some innovative poetry was a weakness. In addition to possible concerns about the apolitical nature of elliptical-style poetry, and lack of value, issues have been raised—about the conception of Hybrid poetry, in particular—about the potential homogeneity of a poetry that dwells in the middle ground. In a review of *American Hybrid*, poet and critic, Ron Silliman, comments:

> Rather than representing a revolt from within either literary tradition, it seeks to ameliorate the borders betwixt the two, to operate perhaps as if no chasm in aesthetic & cultural values gave rise to these traditions, as if, in fact, they didn't always already represent something very real.

Silliman's comments suggest a collapsing of borders between traditional and experimental poetry. In a blog entry, he comments further: "Hybridism wants to be new & it wants to be the well-wrought urn. For the most part, it accomplishes neither. Above all else, it is a failure of courage." The implication is that the blending proposed by Swensen, representing an inability to make a choice between competing traditions, is reductive. Furthermore, Mark Wallace has critiqued the homogenising tendency of the Hybrid aesthetic proposed by Swensen:

> This notion of hybrid tries to find similarity across divergent practices. It breaks down the idea of singular schools by looking for things different poetic groups have in common. It tries to find middle ground. It imagines itself, perhaps, as a new center, one from which the most extreme and divisive elements of divergent practices have been tempered or simply removed. In this imagining, it asserts a power relationship between and over various practices, one in which this new center masters the flaws and excesses of divergent schools of thought, in theory taking the best of each and disregarding the rest (Greenburg et al. 125).

Wallace also argues that the effect of breaking down the differences between strands

in traditions is to synthesise what were previously productively divergent poetries. Wallace notes that Swensen's conception draws on "the notion of hybrid as synthesis," which "seeks to undermine older competing unities but does so in the name of creating a new, inclusive (but also exclusive) non-competing unity" (Greenburg et al. 125). According to Wallace, Swensen's conception of the Hybrid has the unintended effect of blunting differences and diversity which saw a productive push-pull between experimental and conventional strands of poetry. However, in an essay in the same anthology, Swensen strenuously denies Wallace's contention that the hybrid has a synthesising effect:

> We are not trying to find similarities, or a middle ground; we have no desire whatsoever to remove divisive and divergent practices—in fact, we present quite a few in the anthology—and the only time I used the term "center" to speak of the work was in the phrase "a center of alterity," specifically to figure any assumed center as itself a collection of differences (149).

In addition to critical push-back against the synthesising effect of Hybrid poetry, concerns with Swensen's formulation tend to focus on elision of poetries that fall outside the "two-camp model." Michael Theune points to the dour nature of Hybrid poetry, stating that what is missing "is the poetry that is more carnivalesque—perhaps funny, but, if so, more clownish, odd, disturbing, shocking, abjectly surreal" (Greenburg et al. 130). Craig Santos Perez comments on the lack of cultural diversity in the anthology and, in particular, the fact that not a single Native American or Chicano writer is included. Perez argues that "Swensen's 'Legacy' is a white poetic legacy, a white reading of twentieth-century American poetry" and "that 'American Hybrid' should have more accurately titled 'White American Hybrid'" (Greenburg et al. 139). Underlying the majority of the critiques of Swensen's Hybrid conception, in sum, is that the combination of experimental and traditional lyric poetry strands has a homogenising effect on the poetry, that it is non-inclusive of those from races and cultures outside of the dominant, white majority; and, finally, that it is unfunny and, quite possibly, dooming itself to triviality by its non-committal nature and allergy to sincerity.

Setting these concerns aside for the moment, it must also be considered how elliptical-style poetry fits within the lyric project. By lyric project, I am drawing on Hoagland's assertion that one of the primary functions of poetry is its ability to locate and assert value and, furthermore, on Shepherd's point that "What gets lost in all this territorialization and fence-building is poetry, and more specifically, actual poems, as readerly experiences and aesthetic artifacts" (5). In Burt's conception of Ellipticism, she describes these kinds of

experimental poems as still wanting to meet "traditional lyric goals" (47).

What that lyric project is has, of course, been a subject of debate. Critics such as Scott Brewster emphasise the "open-door policy" of the contemporary lyric, pointing out that the lyric should be regarded with a degree of flexibility and that "this terminological looseness has constituted lyric's strength, and has underpinned its constant reinvention" (4). Furthermore, Jonathan Culler (2015), appears to endorse both the flexible approach to the lyric, as well as the consideration of historical influences, including the traditional approach to the lyric as a subjective genre. Indeed, despite the many approaches to lyric, subjectivity is considered one of its key features, both historically and in contemporary scholarship. As critic M.L. Abrams points out in his oft-quoted book, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (1953), it was the subjective nature of lyric poems, which were seen as primarily concerned with expressing the author's feelings, which meant that they were held in contempt until 1641, when Cowley's Pindaric "imitations" exploded and led to the popularity of the "greater Ode" in England. Abrams points out that "The lyric form—used here to include elegy, song, sonnet, and ode—had long been particularly connected by critics to the state of mind of its author" (84). This approach is inherent in the classic glossary definition of the lyric as "any fairly short poem uttered by a single speaker, who expresses a state of mind or a process of perception, thought, and feeling" (Abrams and Harpham 202) and affirmed in the entry on lyric in *The Princeton Encyclopedia* (2012) in which Jackson states:

> Since the 18th century, brevity, subjectivity, passion, and sensuality have been the qualities associated with poems called lyric; thus, in modernity, the term is used for a kind of poetry that expresses personal feeling (G.W.F. Hegel) in a concentrated and harmoniously arranged form (E.A. Poe, S.T. Coleridge) and that is addressed to the private reader (William Wordsworth, John Stuart Mill). A modern invention, this idea of lyric has profoundly influenced how we understand the history of all poetic genres (826).

Looking at the history of the lyric as a subjective genre, along with the contemporary thinking of scholars and critics on the role of the lyric, the desire for ellipses and disruption must be balanced against the tradition of the fundamental role of subjectivity—typically a speaker—as well as language that "sings," both in the musical and the emotional sense. To assert and locate value in poetry, the contemporary poet must proceed with caution when applying innovative techniques—either that, or the poetic strategies themselves must play

some part in communicating the meaning of the poem. As Burt states about the work of Hybrid poets: "their bad poems were bad surrealism, random-seeming improvisations, or comic turns hoping only to hold an audience, whether or not they had something to say." In order to avoid this pitfall of elliptical-style poetry, I argue that the meaning or theme of the poem—or, as Burt puts it the "something to say"—must be forwarded by the innovative techniques applied, rather than just being games-for-games'-sake (41).

The most influential scholars—and the main contributors to the critical discussion—in the area of contemporary innovative poetries focus primarily on the aesthetic or theoretical underpinnings or characteristics of these poems (Swensen, Shepherd, Burt, Hoagland). The critique surrounding elliptical-style poetry centres on the contribution that innovative poetry can make "in our contemporary post-everything world" (Shepherd xiii) to the lyric project. In particular, issues raised about innovative poetries concern the aesthetic blandness of the poems due to a middle ground approach (Greenburg et al., Silliman, Göransson) or an absence of humour (Greenburg et al.), or its lack of significance—either because of a dearth of sincerity and commitment (Hoagland), the erasure of political concerns (Göransson), or insufficient inclusiveness, most notably of people of colour (Greenburg et al.). However, aside from some critical commentary by Hoagland, there is less emphasis on how poets might use elliptical-style techniques to produce poetry that is thematically significant and emotionally resonant, or the ways in which elliptical-style aesthetics might contribute to—rather than detracting from—poetry that makes a significant contribution to the lyric oeuvre by engaging with societal issues of a collective nature (connected to race, war) or individual (trauma related to life changes). This study asks: how do elliptical-style poets assert and locate value in poetry that engages with both collective and individual issues?

There is wide debate amongst scholars and critics about how to ascribe value to literary works. While Hoagland does not define value in poetry, it can be inferred from his critique of "skittish" poetry that he does not value poetry that is trivial, does not commit to either sincerity or subject matter, and which elevates gamesmanship over theme. In *Wallace Stevens and the Demands of Modernity: Toward a Phenomenology of Value*, Charles Altieri (113) examines the values celebrated by Stevens' poetry, which celebrate the imaginative capacity to reconfigure and configure our experience of the world. Altieri argues that this produces pleasure through both the experience itself, which yields sudden insights, and through the appreciation of the powers of the imagination, both individual and collective. When ascertaining value of a literary work, feminist scholar, Rita Felski, points out that we consider both our aesthetic experience of the work, as well as our judgement of the "goodness

or badness of particular works" (139). She notes, furthermore, that feminist scholars tend to embrace the messiness of their response to art, and that the aesthetic dimension "includes themes as well as forms, social meanings as well as psychic yearning (142)." Considering the views of these scholars, as well as the questions considered in this study, I will approach value as something that can be ascertained by considering the nature of the aesthetic experience offered by the poem—as Felski puts it, does it "inspire or move, teach or disturb, give pleasure or give solace?" (139) and, secondly, whether the poem, however obliquely, communicates a theme or social meaning.

In this study, I argue that strategic use of elliptical-style techniques facilitates a nuanced engagement with issues relating to collective or individual trauma, by either offsetting the seriousness of subject matter with humour, or by producing a complex and nuanced individuality that allows for multiple speaker perspectives. These speaking perspectives counterbalance a tendency towards either polemic in political-focused poetry or melodrama in confessional poems. I will focus particularly on the ways in which the alter ego, erasure, found poetry, and anagram, can be used to engage with issues of personal or collective trauma, rather than detracting from it. Hayes' use of persona, Sharif's engagement with found poetry techniques, and Malech's anagramming are paradoxical in that they both communicate the themes of their poems' and disrupt the linearity of the poetry—by creating both literal and logical spaces in the poems—which requires the reader to co-create meaning. Though I hope that some of the readings elucidate the poetics of these very interesting poets, the goal of this critical portion is contextual for my own work, which has always tended toward the elliptical, a means of exploring how some recent work in the so-called "hybrid" school works to excellent effect and, at the same time, to answer some of the criticisms of this approach. These questions will be considered in both the critical and the creative portions of this study as it is the latter—my own interests as a poet—that, as I will briefly describe further below, drive these questions and my own exploration of these poets.

Persona Poems

While "persona" is used generally to refer to the speaker or source of a poem (Izenburg 1024), a persona poem is a dramatic monologue or self-contained conversation from the perspective of "a speaker who is distinctly different from the poet-author" (Lynn Brown and de la Paz 2). "Persona" was first used as a name for an actor's mask in a Roman drama, and has also been proposed as a translation of the Greek word "prosopon," which means face (Izenburg 1024).

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Jung used the word to refer to the mask that we present to others (Lynn Brown and de la Paz 2), implying that there is a level of artifice in all of us. Certainly, the addition of a speaker that is signaled as distinct from that which we might infer as a version of the poet complicates the reading of the poem and its relationship to the lyric tradition. Adding to this complexity is the fact that there are different kinds of persona speakers within a poem, with varying degrees of distance from the voice of the implied poet. One such complex relationship between the implied poet and their speaker is when an alter ego narrates the poem.

The term "alter ego" was used for the first time in English in a letter to Thomas Cromwell by Richard Layton, in which he discusses the suppression of the monasteries: "Ye muste have suche as ye may trust evyn as well as your owne self, wiche muste be unto yowe as alter ego" (Phrasefinder). Cicero referred to Atticus as his alter ego in *Letters to Atticus* in the first century B.C. Rome: "You must forgive me here. I am reproaching myself far more than you, and if I do reproach you it is as my alter ego; also I am looking for someone to share the blame" (Cicero 253). The dictionary states that "alter ego" derives from the "other I" in Latin and also means "trusted friend" or "second self" (Oxford English Dictionary).

In psychology, the term is used in association with multiple personality disorder, in which the patient experiences two or more, frequently conflicting, personalities (Weiner and Freedheim 32). Thus, the alter ego denotes a split—and frequently conflicted—self that raises significant complications for the character. Alter egos in literature are often used to convey aspects of the self that are in violent conflict with the respectable, acceptable versions of the self that we present to the public. One of the most well-known examples involves Robert Louis Stevenson's novella *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, which echoes Victorian beliefs that a person must use a strict moral code to defeat the "animal urges" represented by Jekyll's uncontrolled alter ego Hyde.

In what I describe as "alter ego poems," the speaker, while signaled as distinct from the implied poet, through naming or other techniques, bears a resemblance to the poet that invites conflation of the two. In the introduction to the anthology *A Face to Meet the Faces: An Anthology of Contemporary Persona Poetry* (2012), editors Lynn Browne and de la Paz describe this category of poem as "persona as alter ego," giving T.S. Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock as an example:

> Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," from which this anthology takes its title, is an excellent example of persona as alter ego, allowing the poet to voice the unspeakable and think the unthinkable without direct ownership, consequence, or

reproach. In this way, "hiding behind a mask" can be utterly revealing and liberating. (2).

John Berryman is another example, and served as an influence on the type of poetics I address here. Burt, in her initial formulation of "Elliptical poets," notes that Berryman is considered among them to be a "favorite established poet." Berryman made extensive use of alter egos in his Pulitzer Prize-winning collection, *77 Dream Songs*, with his alter egos Henry and Mr. Bones. The splitting of selves in this collection makes for challenging reading, with the speaker's multifarious iterations pulling in many—and frequently conflicting—directions. Although *77 Dream Songs* was published 20 years before critics started discussing the aesthetic variously called Ellipticism, Hybrid or lyric postmodern, this volume epitomises the evasive speakers, the high-low swings, the speediness and wit that is associated with what Burt called the "Elliptical school." The use of alter ego leads to a destabilising of selves that is a hallmark of such poems. As Berryman first wrote in the introduction to the 1969 volume:

> The poem then, whatever its wide cast of characters, is essentially about an imaginary character (not the poet, not me) named Henry, a white American in early middle age sometimes in blackface[2], who has suffered an irreversible loss and talks about himself sometimes in the first person, sometimes in the third, sometimes even in the second; he has a friend, never named, who addresses him as Mr. Bones and variants thereof. Requiescant in pace. (Berryman xxx)

Although Berryman points out that Henry is a character distinct from himself, he is superficially similar in that, at the time of writing the *Dream Songs*, both Henry and Berryman were white, American, middle-aged men who had experienced the "irreversible loss" of their fathers to suicide. Berryman uses the alter ego as a vehicle to go to extremes, as though using the persona mask of Henry gives him permission to act in ways that one would not normally do in polite society. It is as if the mask of Henry, similar to the masks that actors wore in ancient Rome to exaggerate their features, provides the cover, the freedom, and the distance to act out an alternative self that is exaggerated to the point of grotesquerie. In an interview with Al Alvarez in Dublin in 1967, Berryman explains that he "took Henry in various directions, the directions of despair, of lust, of memory, of patriotism, various other things, to take him further than anything in ordinary life really can take us." Berryman uses alter egos to offset

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[2] Berryman's use of blackface and the conventions of minstrelsy in the *Dream Songs* has been subject to extensive criticism and discussion by critics and scholars.

the extremes of his material, to act as a pressure valve for subject matter that ranges from lust to suicide.

In addition to relieving the pressure of his material, Berryman's alter egos allow for a multiplicity of voices, which is also a hallmark of elliptical-style poets, who tend to adopt various postures in speaking voices before throwing them off for other guises. Anthony Caleshu describes how Berryman's poetics stem from dramatic monologue "where not only the poet but the speaker is hidden behind a mask of intentions" (102). However, in Berryman's case, he complicates matters further in that, while Berryman dons the mask of Henry, Henry has his own alter ego, Mr. Bones. Therefore, the series of performed selves is frequently shifting and changing, and elusiveness is the central characteristic of the speakers.

Found Poetry

According to Margorie Perloff, found poems are made "by taking words, phrases, and, even more commonly, entire passages from other sources and reframing them as poetry by altering the context, frame, and format in which the source text appears" (503). The use of found or appropriated material in poetry was popular with modernist poets, such as Pound, who incorporated much appropriated historical material into *The Cantos*, and Eliot, who used extensive collage, including snippets of Shakespeare, Wagnerian opera, and texts from Greek mythology in *The Waste Land* (Golding 38), and the techniques of pastiche and collage have continued and evolved amongst postmodern poets. The main shift in the use of found text by postmodern poets is due to the internet changing the way in which knowledge is disseminated, and an explosion in the volume of information to which we are exposed (Hoagland 174), suggesting that one reason for "the contemporary attraction to dissociation" (175) might be our "deeply ambivalent relation to knowledge itself" (175), which he links to having "more data than we can manage" (175) and having yielded control to outside agencies. One of the outside agencies to which we have surrendered is technology companies, which could explain what Hoagland describes as our "passive-aggressive" relationship to meaning (175).

One way in which contemporary innovative poets have taken advantage of the internet's information overload is "uncreative writing," a term coined by Kenneth Goldsmith for works that use unoriginal material as their source. In a 2013 talk, Goldsmith draws an analogy to the effect of the arrival of photography on painting, arguing that with the "rise of the Web, writing has met its photography." This, Goldsmith claims, "has set the stage for a literary revolution." In the introduction to his 2011 book *Uncreative Writing: Managing*

Language in the Digital Age, Goldsmith argues that what distinguishes a writer is their ability to manage these "thickets" of material. Perloff (504) uses the term "unoriginal genius," to describe the role of the contemporary poet, whom she sees as "more a programmer than a tortured genius, brilliantly conceptualizing, constructing, executing, and maintaining a writing machine." Moreover, Perloff describes both the act of moving information around and of being moved by that information as "moving information" (504).

In addition to examining the ways in which appropriated terms, such as those from the *Department of Defense Dictionary* (2007), are used in elliptical-style poetry, this study focuses on two specific types of found poetry: erasure and anagram. Erasure, or blackout, poetry is described by the Academy of American Poets as "a form of found poetry wherein a poet takes an existing text and erases, blacks out, or otherwise obscures a large portion of the text, creating a wholly new work from what remains." Brian McHale describes erasure as "a recurrent topos of postmodern poetry" (278), pointing out the ways in which erasure poems exemplify the tendency towards the text's "progressive infiltration by ever greater volumes of white space." McHale (278) posits that "[t]he ubiquitous white spaces of postmodernist poetry signify (among other things) that something has been lost or placed sous rature."[3] Furthermore, as Shepherd (xiv) points out, innovative postmodern poetries refute the notion of synthesis, preferring to embrace fractures, and discontinuity. This is something that the erasure technique helps to communicate.

Erasure has its origins in visual art. Travis Macdonald refers in 2009 to the emergence of "a new form of reductive poetics," which he posits originates in the experiments of visual artists, such as the "Erased de Kooning Drawing," which Robert Rauschenberg almost completely rubbed out in 1953. Rachel Stone points to the work of visual artist, Doris Cross, who selectively painted over the pages of a 1913 edition of Webster's Dictionary, and published the results in 1965. Since that time, erasure-type work has become more commonplace, with poets using a variety of sources. Tom Phillip's book, *A Humument,* was made by painting over a forgotten Victorian novel (*A Human Document*) in 1973, while Ronald Johnson used the first four books of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Johnson left only a few dozen words on each page, and published the results as *RADI OS* in 1977 (McHale 277).

Erasure speaks to the elliptical-style aesthetic of which the essence is creating space in poetry—whether literal or in terms of the removal of linkages in the poem. Burt describes the evasive qualities of Elliptical poets who "are always hinting, punning, or swerving away from

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[3] Under erasure (Oxford English Dictionary).

a never-quite-unfolded backstory (46) . . .” This lack of disclosure often involves erasure of the speaker's history. Burt notes furthermore that “gappiness,” “erasure of parts of stories,” and “non-disclosure (46)” are essential elements of what she terms Ellipticism. This lack of context, provided by spaces—literal or figurative—is a feature more broadly of elliptical-style poems and its manifestation in physical erasure of language is one way such poems require a more active role by the reader to co-create meaning.

Among postmodernist poems erasure is frequently linked to politics. McHale (279) argues that postmodern poets associate erasure with its connection to “the fact of the Shoah and the other mass atrocities (actual or threatened) for which ‘the Shoah’ serves as a kind of synecdoche” (279). McHale posits that erasure poetry that is “[w]ritten in the aftermath of the Holocaust and . . . in the shadow of nuclear holocaust” has greater resonance because of our nervousness about threats to our survival. In addition, Macdonald connects the vast quantities of information to which we are exposed with the role of “writers and artists to chart some passage through the newly dug channels of our shifting culture” and the “common intent” of erasure practitioners to “assist in the reclamation of our language and culture one text at a time.” More recently, Stone connects a “boom” in erasure poetry, particularly on Twitter, to the Trump presidency, pointing out that the poetic form has “spiked in popularity since Trump's elections galvanized a culture of resistance online.” In this contemporary iteration of erasure, poets elide or blackout words in texts to uncover alternative narratives, pushing back against what they feel are misleading or coercive originating texts.

Anagram poetry is another found form that operates on the edges of the poetry scene in the United States. Rather than erasing words from an existing text to make a poem, anagrams are made through the rearrangement of pre-existing words, phrases, or names (Oxford English Dictionary). The deep historical contempt for anagrams has been noted as far back as 1711, with Joseph Addison commenting: “The Acrostic was probably invented about the same Time with the Anagram, tho' it is impossible to decide whether the inventor of one or the other were the greater Blockhead” (qtd. in Baran & Rothman 48). In Benjamin Wheatley's 1862 book, *Of Anagrams*, he notes that anagrams are held in low esteem, and are seen only rarely, “grouped under the head of riddles . . . in close proximity to Rebuses, Enigmas, and Charades, sometimes headed by the title of Transpositions” (1). Although anagrams have a long history, they are now associated with the French experimental poetry movement, Oulipo, which embraced the anagram as an officially sanctioned form by including it in the *Oulipo Compendium* in 1998. The entry notes that, while anagram was not a form that was previously embraced by the organisation, “the election of two recent

members, Oskar Pastior and Michelle Grangaud" changed the Oulipo perception of the form by using "the procedure with not only virtuosity but a poetic seriousness that has purged it of its traditional slyness and turned it into a productive literary resource" (48).

Notwithstanding the historical bias against the form, the turn in the anagram's fortunes is noted by Baran and Rothman to coincide with the publication of parts of Ferdinand de Saussure's notebooks in the 1960s, which contained his research on anagrams, in which he examined text structures of authors including Virgil and Lucretius. While Saussure subsequently expressed doubts about his methodology and conclusions, his work has impacted significantly on, and been developed by, literary theorists, linguists, and poets. Another practitioner responsible for changing the perception of anagrams is German poet and visual artist Urnica Zürn, who in 1954 published *Hextentexte (Witches' Writings)*, which consists of "an illustrated manuscript consisting of five drawings and corresponding anagrams" (Haddad). Zürn's anagrams, described in the *Oulipo Compendium* (1998) as establishing "a masterly precedent," (48) is part of the movement of anagrams towards a place within contemporary innovative postmodern lyric poetries. Given that elliptical-style poets are known for blending different strands of literary traditions, and using techniques associated with both (high) literature and (low) popular culture, the anagram, with its complicated relationship with critics and traditional marginalisation, seems ripe for the kinds of anarchic play characteristic of elliptical-style work.

Contemporary Context

All of this sits in the context of my own work as a poet. In the four years that I have been writing this thesis, a series of shocks at the global and local level have pushed me to consider how the lyric can be stretched to accommodate matters broader than the personal, subjective concerns for which the lyric is traditionally used. Covid-19, the Trump presidency, Brexit, and the Christchurch massacre were overlaid on pre-existing anxiety about climate change and privacy issues. New South Wales, California, and The Amazon were on fire, advertisements followed me around the Internet and, on the occasions when I misplaced my Oppo A73 cellphone, I felt as if I had lost a thumb. In addition, the Black Lives Matter and Me Too movements were pushing conversations about racism and sexism to the fore. Although the purpose of this study is not to examine how politics and poetry interact, or how political themes can be expressed in poems, during the period of time in which I have been engaged in this study, I have felt an urgency to write something that reflects the exquisite anxiety of the

contemporary social, political, and physical environment we inhabit. The impulse to include collective matters alongside personal concerns was accompanied by an equally strong impulse to avoid polemic, reductive poetry, to evade categorisation, to surprise myself, to partake in the delights of language, to make the serious entertaining, funny, laced with irony, but also sincere. Like most postmodern poets, I want to have it both ways: to engage lightly—and delightfully—with pressing issues; to approach serious issues in a serious way, but also not to take my own (poetic persona) self too seriously. The elliptical-style aesthetic I identified in Hayes, Sharif, and Malech, and the ways in which they distance themselves from their material, while maintaining an emotional charge, demonstrates how evasiveness can be channeled to increase, rather than detract, from the impact of poetry. Lighthead's uncatchability, for example, is poignant in that, the further the reader gets into the poems, the more they want to know Lighthead, but the further away he gets. The reader is asked to fill in the gaps, to co-create meaning with Hayes by making a series of educated guesses as to Lighthead's character, whether he is being serious or ironic, and what his true position is on the race issues he alternately tackles and avoids. Malech's anagrammatic restrictions and associative strategies strip her poems to their linguistic essence. The reader must piece together clues to guess the occasion of the poem, while experiencing the thrill of lyric shocks, as odd grammar and diction, and the strictures of the procedure enable startlingly raw associations. Sharif's technique of putting military language proximate to intensely confessional material makes the reader question the narrative forwarded by the U.S. Department of Defense, which distances military actions from their results. Each of these poets offers a solution to the problem facing post-modern poets of how to balance sincerity with detachment, commitment with evasion, and the desire to "assert and locate value" (Hoagland 173) with an equally strong need to avoid polemic, melodrama, or a reductive approach.

In Chapter One, I examine how U.S. poet Terrance Hayes encapsulates an elliptical-style approach to issues of race in his 2010 collection, *Lighthead*, by using personae to represent a multiplicity of speaking selves who throw off guises, evade easy categorisation, and call on the "Gods"—both of Greek mythology and of popular music—to create a nuanced or fractured individuality. The "whole" that Hayes presents in his poems is fluid, complex, and shifting, as are his alter egos, demonstrating the complex realities that the speaking selves inhabit. In a similar way that Berryman uses Henry and Mr. Bones to write about terrible material as a joke, Hayes' Lighthead provides light relief when approaching race and the legacy of slavery, themes that are so terrible that a slanted angle, with elliptical-style speakers,

can be one way of—as Berryman puts it—relieving "the tension, the hopeless solitude" of the speakers.

In Chapter 2, I analyse U.S. poet Solmaz Sharif's use of found poetry in her 2016 collection, *Look*. Sharif uses the techniques of "self-erasure," as well as found material from the U.S. *Department of Defense Dictionary*, to create speaking selves whose peace-of-mind, human rights, or lives are under pressure through trauma ensuing through the immigrant experience; or that of the spouse of a Guantánamo prisoner attempting to make contact with her husband. Sharif, engaging with themes regarding the effects of war and state power, maintains a lyric subjectivity, with the speaker's perception at the centre of the poem. The cohesion of Sharif's poems is under constant pressure through the intrusion of erasure or found terms, in the same way that the political and human rights' pressures on the poems' speakers is a threat to their stability.

In Chapter Three, I examine U.S. poet Dora Malech's use of anagrams in her 2018 collection, *Stet*. The collection foregrounds the anagrammatic while focusing on the intensely personal themes of marriage, pregnancy, and divorce. *Stet* channels the Oulipian approach of using restrictions in order to innovate, using form to serve a thematic function. The constraints of the anagram are suggestive of the strictures of the institutions—and bodily processes— featured in the collection. By foregrounding such a restrictive form, Malech puts intense pressure on her speaking selves; at times her speakers or their points-of-view are hard to ascertain. Malech's work offers a basis for responding to the critique that elliptical-style work places such pressure on coherence that it is difficult both for the poet to assert meaning and for the reader to locate it. Her work suggests that such linguistic play is not "just a word game," that the splintered selves of her speakers can be located, and that—to use Shepherd's vocabulary—"wholes," rather than just "holes," can be stumbled on (xiv).

This project will focus on ways in which the ellipses enabled by elliptical-style poetry facilitate a lyric spaciousness in a contemporary context—which is characterised by information overload and political and environmental shocks that lead to overwhelm, exhaustion, and moral numbness. A vigorous engagement with language and self through the post-structural frame of elliptical-style poetry allows poets to push back against a discourse that is enabled by dead and maimed language. Through this heuristic process of engaging with the lyric, poets reinvigorate both the discourse and language that we, as a collective and individuals, inherit.

Chapter 1—Lighthead's Guide to Poetry

Lighthead's Guide to the Galaxy

Ladies and gentlemen, ghosts and children of the state,
I am here because I could never get the hang of Time.
This hour, for example, would be like all the others
were it not for the rain falling through the roof.
I'd better not be too explicit. My night is careless
with itself, troublesome as a woman wearing no bra
in winter. I believe everything is a metaphor for sex.
Lovemaking mimics the act of departure, moonlight
drips from the leaves. You can spend your whole life
doing no more than preparing for life and thinking,
"Is this all there is?" Thus, I am here where poets come
to drink a dark strong poison with tiny shards of ice,
something to loosen my primate tongue and its syllables
of debris. I know all words come from preexisting words
and divide until our pronouncements develop selves.
The small dog barking at the darkness has something to say
about the way we live. I'd rather have what my daddy calls
"skrimp." He says "discrete" and means the street
just out of sight. Not what you see, but what you perceive:
that's poetry. Not the noise, but its rhythm; an arrangement
of derangements; I'll eat you to live: that's poetry.
I wish I glowed like a brown-skinned pregnant woman.
I wish I could weep the way my teacher did as he read us
Molly Bloom's soliloquy of yes. When I kiss my wife,
sometimes I taste her caution. But let's not talk about that.
Maybe Art's only purpose is to preserve the Self.
Sometimes I play a game in which my primitive craft fires
upon an alien ship whose intention is the destruction
of the earth. Other times I fall in love with a word
like somberness. Or moonlight juicing naked branches.

All species have a notion of emptiness, and yet

the flowers don't quit opening. I am carrying the whimper

you can hear when the mouth is collapsed, the wisdom

of monkeys. Ask a glass of water why it pities

the rain. Ask the lunatic yard dog why it tolerates the leash.

Brothers and sisters, when you spend your nights

out on a limb, there's a chance you'll fall in your sleep (1-2).

"Lighthead's Guide to the Galaxy" is the prefatory poem in U.S. poet Terrance Hayes' 2010 collection *Lighthead*, in which he outlines an ars poetica using his alter ego speaker, Lighthead. Lighthead's central characteristic is his astronaut-lightness, which allows him to float above paradoxical and, ultimately, irresolvable issues concerning the role of poetry for both the "Ladies and Gentlemen" of society and fellow "Brothers and sisters" who are, like Lighthead, "out on a limb" writing poetry. Lighthead does not seek to resolve these problems, but rather to nimbly navigate around them in his guise of an outer-space Orpheus. Instead of taking an either/or approach to poetry, Lighthead argues for a "yes, but . . ." mode in which his alter ego picks a technique before swiftly undermining it with a disparate strategy. Lighthead uses an associative—and sometimes dissociative—mode to achieve this, which is a dominant approach for elliptical-style poets. As an elliptical-style poet writing about race this speediness allows him to balance competing demands for, on the one hand, irony and detachment, and, on the other hand, seriousness. While Hayes' method undercuts thematic accessibility and sincerity, which Hoagland sees as a weakness of "skittery" poetry (179), what it proposes is a fluid, shifting coherence—an incoherent coherence, if you will—that dwells in an intersectional zone between modes, styles, and traditions. What is notable about this intersectional zone is its fluidity, rather than its fixity, with the proportions of, for example, slippery to accessible changing with every line. It is in this middle zone that themes can be located, but not without help from the reader as co-creator to help fill the spaces Hayes leaves in his poetry.

Post-Civil Rights' Alter Ego

Hayes uses his quirky, contradictory Lighthead alter ego to "turn up the volume" ("A Conversation with Terrance Hayes" Hayes 76) on issues of race, while giving him a mask behind which to hide. Similar to Berryman's alter ego speaker, Henry, in *The Dream Songs*,

whom Berryman describes as "a white American in early middle age . . . who has suffered an irreversible loss," (xxx) Lighthead bears a superficial resemblance to Hayes-the-poet while, nevertheless, putting on the mask. Performing as a masked speaker adds to the uncatchability of the speaker because, while a reader may be invited to conflate the poet and the persona speaker via their biographical similarities, they are denied that tidy identification because of the distinctions drawn between the implied poet and his mouthpiece.

Hayes' three guides provide a biography of his alter ego speaker, Lighthead. From the allusion in "Lighthead's Guide to Parenting" to the lack of fathers in Lighthead's clan to "slump black and whipped as blackness / on a big couch" (80), it can be inferred that Lighthead is an African-American member of a family blighted by fatherlessness. He has a daughter, most probably a teenager, with whom he argues over the volume of the radio (Hayes "Lighthead's Guide to Parenting" 80). He is married to a woman who is inclined to take a measured approach to life—when he kisses her, he can "sometimes . . . taste her caution" (Hayes "Lighthead's Guide to the Galaxy" 1). Given his marital status and his teenage daughter, Lighthead is most probably in his thirties or forties.

There are, then, similarities between Lighthead and Hayes. Hayes is a Generation X poet born in 1971 in Columbia, South Carolina (Poetry Foundation), to a teenage mother, who dropped out of school to give birth to him when she was 16 years old ("A Conversation with Terrance Hayes" Hayes 59). Hayes was raised by his mother, who worked as a prison guard, and his stepfather, who was in the military ("A Conversation with Terrance Hayes" Hayes 60). Hayes studied painting at a small liberal arts institution, Coker College, on a basketball scholarship, and took his MFA in poetry on a full fellowship at the University of Pittsburgh ("A Conversation with Terrance Hayes" Hayes 59), where according to Robert N. Casper (178), Hayes studied with Toi Derricotte, the co-founder of Cave Canem, which is an influential organisation that supports and mentors African-American poets. It was a turning point for Hayes, in that he both met his future wife, Yona Harvey (now divorced), with whom he had a daughter and a son, and began a lifelong commitment to addressing issues of race in his poetry and mentoring other African-American poets ("About Terrance Hayes" Hayes 178).

As a black poet, in addition to engaging with the experimental, elliptical-style aesthetic of the contemporary U.S. lyric, Hayes is also writing into the complex—and sometimes fraught—African-American poetry tradition. At the centre of this tradition is the Black Arts Movement, which was founded by writer and activist Amiri Baraka in the mid-1960s and included influential writers and artists, such as Gwendolyn Brooks, Nikki Giovanni, and Etheridge Knight (Poetry Foundation). The Poetry Foundation describes

Baraka's poem, "Black Art," which was written in 1965 after the assassination of Martin Luther King, as "a de facto manifesto for the movement" (Baraka and Harris 19). "Black Art" (Baraka and Harris 36) argues for poems with a political stake:

> Poems are bullshit unless they are
> Teeth or trees or lemons piled
> On a step. Or black ladies dying
> Of men leaving nickell hearts
> Beating them down. Fuck poems . . . (36)

"Black Art's" vision of poetry-as-activism is connected to its role as "the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept" (Baraka and Harris 106), and focuses on violent resistance to racial injustice in the United States:

> We want "poems that kill."
> Assassin poems, Poems that shoot
> guns. Poems that wrestle cops into alleys
> and take their weapons leaving them dead
> with tongues pulled out and sent to Ireland (36).

Black Arts Movement's "de facto manifesto" (Poetry Foundation) privileges the political over the personal, focusing on the influence of outside forces on the speaker—particularly those that relate to the structural oppression of African-Americans—rather than on intimate or domestic experiences. BAM's vision of socially and politically-engaged poetry is one that prioritises direct action ("poems that kill") and also demands that poets engaging in this version of Black Art foreground their blackness and the civil rights' struggle of African-Americans.

Hayes' subjectivity is, like Baraka's, heavily influenced by structural forces pertaining to race. But unlike Baraka's, it examines the impact of individual experience and the ways in which these two influences intersect. I argue that Hayes uses persona speakers both as an antidote to polemic and to enable levity when confronting serious themes. It is my contention that alter egos create shifting selves in his poetry, which allows for nuanced, conflicting, and sometimes contradictory positions to be adopted by the speakers, and for fluid, dynamic wholes in his poems. However, I also argue that Hayes' distancing of the reader is deliberate:

he wishes to maintain the privacy and, thus, the irreducibility and uncatchability of Lighthead. Though elliptical-style poetics has been criticized for its apolitical stance (Silliman), humourlessness (Greenburg et al. 129), and lack of gravity (Hoagland 513), Hayes uses experimental techniques to facilitate a complex, nuanced, sometimes hilarious, lyric sensibility that, far from committing itself to triviality, asserts its value as a politically-engaged lyric. The ultimate point that his evasive speaker makes is that he will not be caught, thus maintaining his individuality and integrity.

As a "second-wave" post Black Arts Movement poet (Rowell xl), Hayes has expressed his affinity with—and allegiance to—his forebears, such as Baraka, while, at the same time, cherry-picking from a diverse range of influences. Burt observes that, "Hayes works to escape not the African-American identity but the demand that he (or anyone) express that identity in the same way all the time" (61). In a 2006 interview, Jason Koo asks Hayes whether he is "trying to define a new kind of hipness or 'weirdness' in relation to conceptions of African-American masculinity in his 2002 collection of poems, *Hip Logic.* In his reply, Hayes notes "the absence of . . . weirdness in the canon of African American poets" ("A Conversation with Terrance Hayes" 66) and his desire to present a "viewpoint of the world" ("A Conversation with Terrance Hayes" 67) that is "more peculiar" ("A Conversation with Terrance Hayes" 67). In his *Lighthead* collection, Hayes uses his alter ego to forward this weird worldview, which foregrounds the speaker's individual expression and character and is, thus, an assertion of individuality alongside race.

For example, Lighthead is presented as somewhat unreliable, and frequently distracted from his serious duties as a guide to the "Ladies and gentlemen, ghosts and children of the state" by sex (Hayes "Lighthead's Guide to the Galaxy" 1). In his galactic guide, he likens the troublesome nature of his night to that of "a woman wearing no bra / in winter," and states his belief that "everything is a metaphor for sex." Lighthead is similarly led astray in his guide to addiction, admitting "I often wake up horny" (Hayes "Lighthead's Guide to Addiction 49). Admitting this tendency for his thoughts to wander, while simultaneously professing the seriousness of his mission, troubles the notion that political poems should always be earnest and consistent and that the speakers should present a particular, coherent world view regardless of their individual flaws, which is frequently forwarded by the Black Arts Movement. In addition to his preoccupation with sex, Lighthead also enjoys employing a jokey irony. In "Lighthead's Guide to Addiction" (49) Hayes' alter ego speaker frequently dispenses dangerous advice. He suggests "riding an unsaddled horse until you are thrown into a bed of gravel" to counteract an attachment to contraception, and "guard dogs, traffic, or

infants" to remedy an addiction to silence (49). The weird worldview of Lighthead, who dispenses bad advice and abandons his existential musings in favour of sexual fantasies, is peculiar in a way that Hayes has stated is infrequently seen in the African-American canon. Hayes points to Bob Kaufman as one of the few black poets he can see espousing such poetic quirkiness ("A Conversation with Terrance Hayes" Hayes 66). Prioritising this quirkiness is part of Hayes' commitment to individuality and subjectivity of the speaker, even when addressing political themes.

Out of all the Lighthead poems, Hayes' position in terms of race is most notably evasive in his galactic guide. Hayes refers to Lighthead loosening his "primate tongue and its syllables / of debris" by drinking "a dark strong poison." Hayes could be simply referring to the biological fact that Lighthead is a "primate," as "a mammal of an order that includes the lemurs, bushbabies, tarsiers, marmosets, monkeys, apes, and humans" (Oxford English Dictionary). However, it is possible that Hayes also intends to hint that Lighthead has experienced racism, by alluding to slurs that liken people of colour to animals. Hayes builds on this implication with a later image: "I am carrying the whimper / you can hear when the mouth is collapsed, the wisdom / of monkeys." Hayes could be, on the one hand, implying that he is unable to loosen his "primate tongue" to produce anything other than gibberish or, on the other hand, suggesting that Lighthead has been subject to racialised slurs (that he has been called a monkey) and physical and psychological violence (the mouth is "collapsed"). The enmeshment of the connotative meaning with the ordinary denotation of "primate" and "monkey" is wobbly territory, in which it is impossible to resolve with any certainty Hayes' intentions. Ultimately, I think Hayes wishes to create uncomfortable territory and, by refusing to fully commit to a side, he makes the reader fill in the gaps. By eluding capture, Lighthead throws the reader back on their own resources, arguing for them to make the final judgement as to the theme of the poem and Hayes' intentions. One possibility is that Hayes is playing a joke on the reader, by assuming they will comb his poems looking for clues about themes of race. He uses "primate" to tempt the reader to read that as a reference to racism, and ups the ante with the allusion to "monkeys". Yet with no overt references to race in this poem. I believe that Hayes intention is to leave the reader with a productive doubt, which is created by experiencing an irresolvable ambiguity. By remaining uncatchable, Hayes's speaker will not be reduced to a type.

The wearing of a persona-mask, such as that of Lighthead, allows Hayes to explore stronger perspectives than he may be able to do if using an I-speaker. Hayes has used personae in previous volumes of poetry, such as Blue Baraka and Blue Terrance in *Wind-in-a-*

Box and Bullethead in *Muscular Music*. He was asked in an interview, "Do you think of the persona poem as a chance to wiggle free of any expectations you might feel about producing a certain kind of confessional ethnic speaker in a poem?" ("A Conversation with Terrance Hayes" Hayes 76) Hayes replied that, to the contrary, he thinks of it "as a chance to turn the volume up on certain ideas . . . So the irony is that when I put on the persona it allows me to do the stuff that I can't do without the mask" (76). The wise-cracking, tough-minded, viciously witty version of Lighthead in in "Lighthead's Guide to Addiction," for instance, relieves the tension by using irony and grotesquery to manage appalling material. This poem is at least in part about the United States' violent racist legacy, its inability to learn from history, and its addiction to repeating the mistakes of the past:

Lighthead's Guide to Addiction

And if you are addicted to sleep, a bay of fresh coffee may help.
If you are addicted to coffee, teach yourself to breakdance.
If you are addicted to dancing, polio will cure you.
If you hear that the last black man alive will be burned at sunset,
find an underground railroad.
If you are addicted to railroads, try wearing undersized shoes.
No one knows where your mother has gone with her tax refund.
If you are addicted to shoes, move to a provincial village in Japan.
If you are addicted to Japan, try eating with no teeth.
If you are addicted to teeth, visit the wife beater's widow;
she will be upstairs awaiting your caress.
I often wake up horny. If you are addicted to masturbation, seek company.
If you are addicted to company, try starlight and silence.
If you are addicted to silence, find guard dogs, traffic, or infants.
If you are addicted to infants, try reliable contraception.
Or try asking yourself: What's wrong with me?
If you are addicted to contraception, try recklessness.
Try riding an unsaddled horse until you are thrown into a bed of gravel.
If you are addicted to recklessness, try a spoon-fed disease.
My mother loves imagining the day she'll die.
If you are addicted to disease, visit an Old World doctor.

If you are addicted to doctors, try war.

If you are addicted to sorrow, all my talk about loss is not loss to you.

No one knows why your father built a shed for his weapons.

Probably was some hellified form of addiction.

If you are addicted to weapons, please find the people who plan to burn

the last black man at sunset for me.

Or try learning a little history.

Obviously, I'm addicted to repetition. Which is a form of history.

If you are addicted to history, try a blindfold of razors or buy a Cadillac.

If you are addicted to Cadillacs, try poverty.

No one is addicted to poverty, but if you are, try wealth.

If you are addicted to wealth, you'll need money.

If you are addicted to money, you'll need money. Try that (49-50).

The version of Lighthead in "Lighthead's Guide to Addiction" is extremely funny, cruel, unfiltered, prone to violence and "addicted to repetition" which, as Lighthead explains, "is a form of history". The anaphora at the beginning of most of the lines, with the repetition of "If you are addicted to . . . ," heightens the sense that the cycle is impossible to escape and self-perpetuating. Having said that, the addictions that Lighthead considers are not what one normally classes as addictions: drugs, alcohol, or obsessive indulgence in activities, like gambling. The addictions addressed by Lighthead are often positive activities, such as dancing, sleep, and silence, or seemingly innocuous things like shoes, teeth, doctors, and Japan. Another category of addictions Lighthead considers are negative things, such as poverty and disease, which are unenjoyable and, therefore, non-addictive. Moreover, the advice Lighthead dispenses is mostly ridiculous and funny. He recommends breakdancing to deal with coffee addiction, "starlight and silence" to cure an addiction to company, and "a bay of fresh coffee" to remedy an over-reliance on sleep. However, the jokiness of agony-uncle Lighthead becomes crueler, with his suggestion of polio as a cure for dancing, and a visit to "the wife-beater's widow," who is "upstairs awaiting your caress," to remedy an addiction to teeth. Lighthead's inappropriateness is discomforting, because it is difficult to tell if he is being serious, ironic, or both, and the humour is unsettling, because of its tendency to suddenly escalate from benign to malignant. Lighthead shifts to the violent image of "the last black man alive" being "burned at sunset," which suggests a much more serious addiction to repeating the mistakes of the past.

This version of Lighthead is one that utilises the flammable connotations of the alter ego speaker, suggesting that, while Lighthead burns, he is also capable of setting things alight. In a recent interview, Hayes comments on his *Lighthead* collection: "there's a lot of fire throughout the book, so I'm playing around with the paradox of fire and lighting things up" ("About Terrance Hayes" Hayes 178). This version of the speaker leans closer to Baraka's Black Arts manifesto "poems that kill" (Baraka and Harris 107). If the poem is about repeating mistakes throughout history, it is notable that the only repeated image in the poem is that of a black man burning. Moreover, in one of the few serious suggestions in the poem, Lighthead advises finding "an underground railroad" in the event that "you hear that the last black man alive will be burned at sunset." The horrific nature of this image is highlighted by its contrast to the fake addictions (dancing, silence, shoes) and bad taste jokes (suggesting sex with a toothless woman to cure an addiction to teeth) which surround it. In addition, it makes for a discomforting ambiguity in that it is not clear if Lighthead is serious when he asks those who "are addicted to weapons" to "please find the people who plan to burn / the last black man at sunset for me," suggesting he hopes they will kill the people planning the violence. Hayes uses humour to offset the uncomfortable material he is dealing with, and also to give him a mask behind which to hide. The humour increases the tragedy of the material—these are deeply serious matters, which Lighthead can only face by using another face (mask) to look through. It is a cover, in that it protects him from exposure, but it also exaggerates Lighthead's characteristics—similar to the way the masks used in Roman dramas exaggerated the actors' facial features (Izenburg 1024). The real tragedy for the reader is that they are denied access to the real Lighthead—he becomes more and more unknowable, the further into the poems we venture. If I am asked whether Lighthead is being serious or ironic, my first answer is that I do not know. If I push a little deeper into the question, I wonder if that is the point of the poem: Lighthead is a private character who keeps parts of himself hidden from the reader, even as he tempts the reader into a relationship, the reader is denied closure. Who is Lighthead? I do not know. Do I want to get to know him better? Yes, I do. The real tragedy is that the deeper I go into the poem, the further away Lighthead draws. He becomes more and more unknowable. I think Hayes has created an unknowable character deliberately, because does not want Lighthead to be caught.

Hayes' Lighthead channels the way that elliptical-style speakers adopt guises, before casting them off in favour of new poetic personae which are then, in turn, abandoned for updated—and frequently contradictory—versions of speaking selves. While Lighthead presents himself as a socially-committed poet, he also plays the role of a joker. Thus, we are

left wondering which version—if any—of Lighthead we should trust. Lighthead complicates matters further with digressions and segues. Sandwiched in between his mad-uncle advice-column musings, Lighthead states: "No one knows where your mother has gone with her tax refund" and, further on in the poem, "No one knows why your father built a shed for his weapons," from which it can be inferred that there are mysteries of human nature, foolishness, and inconsistency, that no amount of advice can solve. However, at its core, I argue that Hayes' feinting and play is for a serious purpose, suggesting that the violence, poverty, and white supremacy that blight race relations in the U.S. are a travesty, and that attempts to make significant progress in this area are stymied by our ultimate addiction, which is to repeat our mistakes over and over again. Hayes channels elliptical-style evasiveness and jokes to give him the distance he needs in order to communicate themes of racism. In contrast to poems engaging in the elliptical-style aesthetic, which sometimes are criticised for being apolitical and humourless, Hayes uses the black humour of Lighthead to make his point: that racism is a sick joke. Furthermore, that, although he is willing to address these themes in a serious manner, he wishes to remain elusive, to hide behind his mask and make the reader keep guessing.

The Anti-Polemic Elliptical

While Hayes has stated that he doesn't "trust polemicists" ("The Poet in the Enchanted Shoe Factory" Hayes 1081), this does not mean that his poems lack either political or lyrical force. Rather than using polemic to attack in his poetry, Hayes' heads examine the issues from multiple angles, with a restless interrogation of concerns, and refusal to settle for easy interpretations. Hayes' alter ego's complex individuality can be seen in "Lighthead's Guide to Parenting" (80). Lighthead is a conflicted, unreliable guide, who is at once frustrated by his teenage daughter, traumatised by the intergenerational fatherlessness in his family, and appreciative of transcendent parenting moments:

Lighthead's Guide to Parenting

To say there has not been a daughter born to my clan
for more than four generations is a truth almost as absolute
as the one about the speed at which the rain will fall

on this day a year from now. What's more, none
of the children born to my clan in the last century

had a father to slump black and whipped as blackness
on a big couch and say, *Come darlings, unstring my boots.*
Remember when we believed everything the future told us?

Therefore, I suggest corporal punishment as a way
to establish the boundaries between youth and adulthood;
between you and your daughter. Do not hide or guard

the cheese and crackers or ask if she understands truly
the meaning of understanding. The moon, she notes, is God's

nail clipping. Tell her, "Yes, you know nothing of Jesus
on the cross. Jesus at the crossroads. Jesus of the cross-

over, drive, and dunk: the team wins by one."
"You don't know nothing, the belt aint taught you." Say that.
Remember when we were young enough to remember?

Remember when we believed everything evening told us?
It has been raining and then it wasn't. There was a damp quiet

resting on the lapels of the maples and the daylily's
monkish, which is to say *idle*, upturned face.
When you demand that your child turn down the radio,

the only answer should be silence. If you are disciplined
with your discipline, he or she will love you

as he or she will someday love God, the theory goes.
When the darkness begins to get really dark, it will burn.
That's not to say life is without its degree of jazz.

The rain might scat were it not for the sunlight.

The light might solo were it not for the rain.

And everything in that kind of compromise could be absolute (80-81).

Hayes alludes to the intersection of individual and collective pressures on his persona speaker, with his reference to the 100-year absence of fathers in Lighthead's family. It can be inferred from this that the speaker's family is composed mainly of single mother units, and, thus, likely lacking in financial and emotional resources. Lighthead's absence of male role models will most likely decrease his confidence in his parenting. Furthermore, Lighthead's idealised father figure is a man who is utterly defeated. He is so exhausted he can only "slump black and whipped as blackness / on a big couch" a phrasing that underscores the link between the father's traumatised state and his race—"whipped as blackness" links him both to the physical violence perpetuated against African-Americans and the psychological violence that creates an existential exhaustion. More troubling is the potential implication of a link between past violence against African-Americans and domestic violence in contemporary families: the "whipped" father alongside Lighthead's endorsement of "corporal punishment.". However, while Hayes uses the proximity of the images to imply a possible connection, he does not go so far as to make a definite link, using the evasiveness of his speaker to avoid commitment. While Hoagland has argued that a lack of commitment to sincerity is a weakness in some elliptical-style poems (which he calls "skittery" 173), Hayes uses hints as a way of maintaining balance when dealing with subject matter that is so inflammatory that it is almost impossible to approach without tipping into polemic. Insinuating a connection through the proximity of images leaves an ellipsis that acts as a buffer between the poet and his material.

"Lighthead's Guide to Parenting" selectively hybridises elliptical-style wise-mouth riffs and evasiveness with Baraka-style activism, albeit for the post-Civil Rights' era. The poem exemplifies the poetics of the elliptical-style movement, in that, as Hoagland (513) points out: "Elusiveness is the speaker's central characteristic. Speed, wit, and absurdity are its attractive qualities." However, Hayes avoids the pitfalls of some elliptical-style poetry, about which Hoagland states: "The last thing such poems are going to do is risk their detachment, their distance, their freedom from accountability," in that he embeds issues of race his poems, alongside—or inside—his jokes. Lighthead pokes fun at his efficacy as an advisor, as he starts riffing about "Jesus at the crossroads," before implying that the guide is driven by insecurity to win a point over his daughter, as he continues with: "Jesus of the cross- / over, drive, and

dunk: the team wins by one." The ridiculousness of Lighthead's parenting advice is undermined, though, in the subsequent line: "You don't know nothing, the belt aint taught you.' Say that," which underlines his parental shakiness, hinting that Lighthead may be tempted to beat his daughter. Hayes could well be insinuating that the violent history of African-Americans means his alter ego is vulnerable to continuing this legacy when parenting his children. If it is hard to determine whether, or when, Hayes is serious or ironic, it is that he is trying to be both at the same time. By approaching ghastly things sideways, as a joke, he can distance himself from them and argue for a complex layering of influences on the parent, Lighthead, which are less about either/or and more about both. In this, he offers not a false simple integrity but a complex whole in the sense that the speaker—and the issue raised by the poem—is a complicated one in which multiple contradictory elements are simultaneously true. Furthermore, Lighthead, while demonstrating his lightheadedness and flakiness in his guide to parenting, also meditates on beautiful imagery, such as the "lapels" of the maples and the "idle" face of the "monkish" daylily. In the end, though, the "absolute" compromise that Lighthead sees in parenting is one in which jazz, like beauty, prevails in the darkness, so that "The rain might scat were it not for the sunlight" and "The light might solo were it not for the rain." Hayes implies that there is joy to be found in the sacrifices required in parenting—one cannot have both the scatting rain and the sunlight; or the solo sunlight and the rain—but the intense beauty in the compromise is present, nonetheless. The irony is that, far from using jokes, irony, riffing, and inconsistencies to avoid the "sweaty enclosures of sincerity" (Hoagland 513), what Hayes appears to be doing with this "skittery" poem is using the strengths of politically-engaged poetry (substantiveness) in a way that offsets the weakness of elliptical-style poetry (insubstantiality), while also using its appealing wit, speed, and ambiguity as an antidote to the reductiveness and humourlessness that sometimes occurs in poems that foreground the political.

Conclusion

The distance enabled by alter ego speakers acts as a pressure valve for Hayes when dealing with issues or events that are, as Berryman puts it, "so horrific that you cannot look at them directly". Racialised violence and the legacy of slavery in the U.S. are two themes that Hayes approaches using the mask of Lighthead, and others, as a buffer between him and his material, and which also allow him to "turn up the volume" ("A Conversation with Terrance Hayes" Hayes 76) on issues that may be problematic to approach without the protective effect

of the persona mask. Hayes asserts and locates value by using a range of elliptical-style strategies to offset the seriousness of his subject matter: jokes counterbalance themes of race, and the elusive, free-wheeling nature of the alter ego speaker, Lighthead, evades polemic by asserting a complicated, nuanced individuality—one that sees him laugh, love, joke, rage, collapse, in performances of multifaceted, shifting, postmodern selves. In the three poems that I examine—"Lighthead's Guide to the Galaxy" (1), "Lighthead's Guide to Parenting" (80), and "Lighthead's Guide to Addiction" (49)—Hayes progressively raises the stakes, until the humour degenerates into bad taste (jokes about polio), which is contrasted with personal asides ("No one knows where your mother has gone with her tax refund" [49]), and comedy worthy of a stand-up set: "If you are addicted to silence, find guard dogs, traffic, or infants. / If you are addicted to infants, try reliable contraception" (49). Of course, Lighthead is not only used to approach issues relating to race. He also outlines his persuasive, comprehensive, yet inconsistent manifesto for the contemporary innovative postmodern poet: in "Lighthead's Guide to the Galaxy" (1) his alter ego riffs on the beauty of romantic imagery, and the music of the lyric, while warning the poet against falling out of trees while sleeping (due to being out on a limb), and implying that all that reflection on "Self" (1), "Time" (1) and "Art" (1), can exact a psychic cost—he likens the creative process to drinking poison. Hayes' level of irony, wittiness, and his innovative approach to self as a problem that can be explored through the application of lyric strategies, means that one can never locate a fixed version of the speaking self—or of the theme, for that matter—for, by the time we have pointed to a spot and said, "There, that's it, I think I have it," Hayes has already moved onto his next guise: the wise man, the funny man, the social-and-political activist, the stand-up comedian, the oddball, the heart breaker, the weirdo, the romantic, the music lover, the mask wearer. We cannot keep up with Hayes' throwing off of one mask in favour of the next, and nor should we try: these selves that he is limning behind his Lighthead persona—which exaggerates his features—are provisional, but produce a multifaceted character, who communicates themes in a complex, moving way, while keeping a part of himself to himself and maintaining, in the end, his unknowability.

Chapter 2—Solmaz Sharif's *Look*

LOOK

It matters what you call a thing: *Exquisite* a lover called me.
    Exquisite.

Whereas *Well, if I were from your culture, living in this country*,
    said the man outside the 2004 Republican National
    Convention, *I would put up with that for this country*;

Whereas I felt the need to clarify: You would put up with
    TORTURE*, you mean* and he proclaimed: *Yes*;

Whereas what is your life;

Whereas years after they LOOK down from their jets
    and declare my mother's Abadan block PROBABLY
    DESTROYED, we walked by the villas, the faces
    of buildings torn off into dioramas, and recorded it
    on a hand-held camcorder;

Whereas it could take as long as 16 seconds between
    the trigger pulled in Las Vegas and the Hellfire missile
    landing in Mazar-e-Sharif, after which they will ask
    Did we hit a child? No. A dog. they will answer themselves;

Whereas the federal judge at the sentencing hearing said
    *I want to make sure I pronounce the defendant's name
    correctly;*

Whereas this lover would pronounce my name and call me
    Exquisite and lay the floor lamp across the floor,
    softening even the light;

Whereas the lover made my heat rise, rise so that if heat
      sensors were trained on me, they could read
      my THERMAL SHADOW through the roof and through
      the wardrobe;

Whereas *you know we ran into like groups like mass executions.*
      w/ hands tied behind their backs. and everybody shot
      in the head side by side. its not like seeing a dead body walking
      to the grocery store here. its not like that. its iraq you know
      its iraq. its kinda like acceptable to see that there and not—it
      was kinda like seeing a dead dog or a dead cat lying—;

Whereas I thought if he would LOOK at my exquisite face
      or my father's, he would reconsider;

Whereas *You mean I should be disappeared because of my family*
      name? and he answered *Yes. That's exactly what I mean*,
      adding that his wife helped draft the PATRIOT Act;

Whereas the federal judge wanted to be sure he was
      pronouncing the defendant's name correctly and said he
      had read all the exhibits, which included the letter I
      wrote to cast the defendant in a loving light;

Whereas today we celebrate things like his transfer to a
      detention center closer to home;

Whereas his son has moved across the country;

Whereas I made nothing happen;

Whereas *ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is*
      your life? It is even a THERMAL SHADOW, it appears
      so little, and then vanishes from the screen;

Whereas I cannot control my own heat and it can take

      as long as 16 seconds between the trigger, the Hellfire

      missile, and A dog. they will answer themselves;

Whereas *A dog*. they will say: Now, therefore,

Let it matter what we call a thing.

Let it be the exquisite face for at least 16 seconds.

Let me LOOK at you.

Let me LOOK at you in a light that takes years to get here (Sharif 3).

     As a woman of Iranian descent, who was born in Turkey and raised in the U.S., poet and scholar Solmaz Sharif has, like many of the speakers in her poems, a significantly different perspective from that of many U.S. citizens. Sharif utilises this perspective in her sole published volume of poetry, the National Book Award-finalist *Look*. In an interview with *Paris Review*, Sharif describes her first impulse as an artist: "to go back to the exilic intellectual—to stand outside of and look into, and constantly question and interrogate the collectives that exist." ("The Role of the Poet" Sharif) Sharif's restless interrogation of the lyric—she uses a combination of found poetics, persona speakers, and erasure, alongside startling imagery, which channels the confessional poetry tradition—combine to unsettling effect in her political lyric poems. Like Hayes, Sharif uses elliptical-style techniques to tackle political themes, combining confessional imagery with military discourse, rather than approaching issues from a distant, moralistic perspective. The elliptical-style aesthetic facilitates a productive uncertainty and ambiguity which offsets a tendency towards reductiveness which sometimes features in political poetry. The collection, "LOOK," (3-4) engages in the elliptical-style aesthetic by combining unlikely discourses—that of the military with the confessional—to thematic effect—the individual costs of war and conflict are revealed by the jostling of the lyric I, against generalised Department of Defense language. Sharif is also playing with spaces and gaps in her poetry, which is the central element of elliptical-style poetry. In Sharif's case, though, the spaces she is working with are those between actions (for example, the military) and consequences of those actions (for example on

civilians). However, rather than creating an ellipsis in understanding, Sharif closes that gap through moving things closer together. The surprise is in the recombinant new she creates: the discourse of war gets a lyric makeover, so that the deniability of military actions in exploded. Sharif's innovative blends, such as self-erasure with persona poetry, facilitate a complex, nuanced approach in her poetry which reinvigorates both the issues being described and the elliptical-style aesthetic within which it is working.

The speaker in the book's title poem "Look" interrogates language—of the U.S. military, legal documents, a man attending a Republican National Convention, and a soldier in Iraq—from the perspective of an "exilic outsider" ("The Role of the Poet" Sharif), implicitly asking that the individual costs behind the words be considered. The speaker is an immigrant to the U.S., of Iranian descent, whose mother's family home in Abadan, Iran, was destroyed. The speaker asks a man outside the Republican National Convention if he thinks she "*should be disappeared because of my family / name?*" (3) and writes a letter in support of an inmate in a detention centre. The detainee whom the speaker is supporting may be a relative or a close friend, although the exact relationship cannot be ascertained from the poem. On a more personal level, the speaker has a lover who calls her "Exquisite." The lyric I in "Look" provides the insider-outsider perspective in the collection. While the speaker is resident in the U.S., she originates from the Middle East and, in contrast to most U.S. citizens, is familiar with the impacts of war. The speaker has visited the area in Abadan, Iran, where her mother used to live and recorded the "faces / of buildings torn off into dioramas" (3). Thus, the lived stakes of the speaker are raised and she has a different perspective to those who have the luxury of viewing military actions from a distance.

A Poetry of Proximity

Sharif uses the terms "Look", "torture", "probably destroyed", and "thermal shadow" to communicate the new, highly militarised U.S. culture into which the speaker is struggling to integrate and from which her family has suffered. Furthermore, the speaker's closeness to the negative effects of military action, as a woman of Iranian descent, complicates her relationship with the militarisation in that she is from "the there" ("The Role of the Poet" Sharif) that is often targeted. Sharif plays off the ordinary meaning of "look" against that of the military definition, which refers to that "period during which a mine circuit is receptive of an influence" (Department of Defense Dictionary 318). The double-denotation suggests we are to "look" beyond such abstractions to the cost to the individual. The military

dictionary distances the word from its impact by using "influence" in place of "person" and it takes several steps to locate the human concealed by the abstraction. An "Influence mine" is "A mine actuated by the effect of a target on some physical condition in the vicinity of the mine or on radiations emanating from the mine" (Department of Defense Dictionary 260). The definition of "target" includes a "person against which intelligence operations are directed" (Department of Defense Dictionary 535). At the highest level of abstraction, then, the "person" is merely an "influence" on the "look" (live mine); at the tier below that they are a "target" and, finally, one can locate the "person" who is activating the live mine. Thus, the laying of the live mine is distanced from its consequences (the dead or maimed person) by the definitional process.

While Sharif's inclusion of the military definition of "LOOK" in the prefatory section implies that the Department of Defense Dictionary meaning is an important consideration, the grammatical context suggests that the ordinary meaning of "LOOK" is also intended. The speaker feels that the soldier who fought in Iraq might feel differently about the mass executions he witnesses, which he describes as "*kinda like seeing a dead dog or a dead cat lying*," if he could just "LOOK" at her or her father's faces. In addition, Sharif uses the action of looking in a deeply personal context. The speaker's lover considers her "*Exquisite*" and lays "the floor lamp across the floor, / softening even the light;" in a tender, intimate scene which heightens the vulnerability of the speaker, and shows the lover looking at her in the sense of seeing her: as an individual, a loving and loved and exquisite person, rather than one who can be reduced to a thing.

Furthermore, Sharif uses the speaker's proximity to the consequences of the military actions to individualise the effects of war. The military language implies that politics, state power, and the effects of war are an inextricable part of the conflicted realities that her speakers inhabit. Sharif describes this repurposing of found language as a "poetic rewrite," and explains her motivations in an interview:

> My own experience as an Iranian born in Turkey beneath the long shadow of the Iran-Iraq War has always been an impetus behind this project. As an Iranian abroad, this experience was quintessentially American—the warfare was happening over there. Less American, perhaps, was being from the there ("Solmaz Sharif" Sharif).

The speaker that Sharif uses in "Look" is also "from the there" (the Middle East) and, therefore, has a stake in military actions conducted by U.S. forces in that area. Sharif demonstrates the closeness of the speaker to these actions in the lovers' scene: "Whereas the lover made my heat rise, rise so that if heat / sensors were trained on me, they could read / my

THERMAL SHADOW through the roof and through / the wardrobe; (3)" The "THERMAL SHADOW" aligns with Sharif's intention to throw "into sharp relief" the "deadness, the inaccuracy" and "the deceit of the DoD [Department of Defense] language" ("Solmaz Sharif" Sharif). The abstraction of this language allows the U.S. to keep itself as distant linguistically as it is geographically from the cruelty of war. She notes that she uses the found terms as an act of dissent against the way in which the Department "kills" both "the bodies" and "the speaking itself" ("Solmaz Sharif" Sharif). Specifically, she uses this language to "juxtapose the word with the actual atrocity it is veiling" ("Solmaz Sharif" Sharif). In the *Department of Defense Dictionary,* a "thermal shadow" is "The tone contrast difference of infrared linescan imagery which is caused by a thermal gradient which persists as a result of a shadow of an object which has been moved" (Department of Defense Dictionary 547), which is used by heat-seeking missiles to find their targets. The speaker in "LOOK" is an immigrant to the U.S. from the Middle East and, therefore, is among the category of people at whom such missiles would be targeted. The confessional imagery of the lovers' scene is interrupted by the awareness of the speaker that her rising temperature makes her vulnerable to heat-seeking missiles, which could track her "through the roof" and "the wardrobe" (3). By alienating the military term from its ordinary setting Sharif defamiliarises (Lorman 343) the language to build a critical distance between the reader and the military terms. Sharif addresses these issues in an essay in which she explains the trajectory of both weapons and state language, which "drive greater and greater distance between bodies that can be closed with greater ease and damage" ("Poetry of Proximity" Sharif). Sharif proposes a poetics that, in building a critical distance, counteracts this emotional distancing, by creating a proximity between the body of the drone operator in Nevada and the life ended by drone strike in Afghanistan. Thus, the "maimed", "dead" language is exposed for what it is: the language of killing real people with feelings, lovers and lamps that cast gentle light.

The centrality of giving things their correct names—and its linkage to looking, as in truly seeing—is argued and reiterated throughout the poem, with an allusion to U.S. hellfire missile (drone) airstrikes on the town of Mazir-e-Sharif, in Afghanistan, in which soldiers insist that the small casualty they spot on screen is "a dog," rather than a child. This passage refers to the policy of drone warfare of the U.S., which has reportedly resulted in numerous civilian casualties. As pointed out in an article in *The Baltimore Sun* on "Afghanistan's Innocent Victims" (Meehan) "the Hellfire missiles they send into civilian homes are well-named; they do make each house they strike a hell on earth. Some family members are blown to pieces; others receive severe wounds that may lead to lifetime suffering." The same article

refers to a "U.S. report [which] found that drone operators, working from an Air Force base in Nevada, had 'tracked the convoy for 3 ½ hours, but failed to notice any of the women who were riding along.' U.S. intelligence analysts, watching a video feed from the drone, had sent two warnings "that children were visible." The incident resulted in four drone operators being reprimanded and investigated over their conduct. While Sharif appears to be using a fictionalised account of a child being killed by a drone, the incident echoes the details in "Look," in that civilian casualties, including those of children, are common in these military actions. Sharif's images emphasise the depersonalised nature of drone warfare, which heightens its sense of unreality, and the ability of the soldier to remove themselves from the consequences of their actions. The operator is a combination of extremely close in a temporal sense—there is a 16-second gap "between / the trigger pulled in Vas Vegas and the Hellfire missile / landing in Mazar-e-Sharif"—and extremely distant in a physical sense: Mazar-e-Sharif is about 12,000 km away from Nevada, Las Vegas. Sharif implies that this combination of physical distance and temporal proximity facilitates the ability of the military to avoid accountability for their actions. If the target is demarcated on a blurry screen, then it is possible to insist that a dead child is actually a dead "dog," and to use dehumanising language to enable this denial. Sharif uses repetition to suggest the delusion of the drone operators, who insist, "No. A dog," three times, which is how "they will answer themselves." But Sharif asserts, after the third denial, that we must "Let it matter what we call a thing," arguing that language cannot be used to distance ourselves from the consequences of our actions. As Sharif explains: "Ultimately, I think our ability to name, our desire for language is one of the most terrific (in the old and new sense) powers we have as strange, mortal creatures" ("Poetry of Proximity" Sharif). Sharif personalises language which is couched in denial, and reduces the distance between the actions and the consequences by asserting a concentrated, lyric subjectivity, in which she uses the personal image of love to counterbalance the linguistic numbness evinced by Department of Defense terms. Thus Sharif's approach to space is to collapse it, to remove the ellipsis in understanding facilitated by generalised language. However, the way in which she does this channels another elliptical-style aesthetic—the combination of unlikely factors, which makes for a series of lyric shocks. The lover is softly lit and exquisite—this is the target, Sharif argues, this is your vulnerable person.

Sharif further defamiliarises military discourse by providing alternative definitions of terms that use intimate detail within traumatic contexts to re-define Department of Defense language:

DEAD SPACE   fridges full

                              after the explosion at the hospital

                              places body parts

                              out back where crowds

                              attempt to identify those

                              who do not answer their calls

                              by an eyeball

                              a sleeve of a favourite shirt

                              a stopped wristwatch (12)

While the military definition of "Dead Space" is an area weapons cannot reach due to intervening obstacles (Department of Defense Dictionary 144), here "dead" is literalised: such a space is found inside fridges, which store body parts after an explosion at a hospital. Sharif personalises this dead space by alluding to "crowds" who can only identify the body parts through a shirt sleeve or a "stopped wristwatch." Heightening the horror of the image is the fact that the explosion happened in a hospital, thus off-limits according to international norms—in a sense, meant to be a dead space, in that it is conventionally regarded as inaccessible. In her re-definition of "DESTRUCTION RADIUS" (12) Sharif expands the scope of the radius from one that measures the distance that a blast from a mine can reach (Department of Defense Dictionary 166) to that of the "brother abroad" who collapses in shock and then "punches a cabinet door" on hearing the news of an attack, which has likely resulted in the death of a sibling—in effect suggesting the wide radius of emotional damage, humanizing the victims as well as disputing the limitations suggested by the military definition:

DESTRUCTION RADIUS   limited to blast site

                              and not the brother abroad

                              who answers his phone

                              then falls against the counter

                              or punches a cabinet door (12)

In sum, in her expanded or reframed definitions Sharif utilises multiple denotations and connotations of the definitional terms to challenge a militarised narrative that has the effect of erasing or distancing the terms from their consequences. Sharif pulls focus from the

military actors to the crowds of relatives desperately phoning those who have been killed, and receiving no answer, and to the victims themselves, who have become an eyeball in a fridge, or the sleeve of a "favourite shirt" (12). Thus, Sharif signals an approach in "Look" to looking: she provides these issues from a lyric perspective, which challenges a militarised narrative that erases both consequences via language.

In other poems, Sharif uses military discourse in non-military contexts to illustrate the speaker's struggles with fitting in in a stressful, competitive culture of the middle class variety. The militarised terms have metaphorical effect in "Dear INTELLIGENCE JOURNAL," (18) suggesting that the speaker finds these social situations extremely stressful. The speaker is the host of a dinner party, which requires an extensive "PLANNING PHASE," according to a carefully thought-through "seating chart" designed "to avoid a HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT" (18). The dinner party, ironically described as "Lovely" (18) is a figurative battlefield, strewn with capitalised *Department of Defense Dictionary* terms, which are reframed as metaphors:

Dear INTELLIGENCE JOURNAL,

Lovely dinner party. Darling CASUALTIES and lean
sirloin DAMAGE of the COLLATERAL sort.
Extended my LETTER OF OFFER AND ACCEPTANCE
to the DESIRED INTERNAL AUDIENCE, reaching
DESIRED EFFECT and DESIRED PERCEPTION…
a lengthy and essential PLANNING PHASE,
down to our party's seating chart where I perfectly
placed gentlemen to avoid a HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT…
showed great CONSTRAINT…CIVIL AFFAIRS.
A real CIVIL CENSORSHIP. Even when he dropped that MEGATON
WEAPON on me, coyly I promised:
wait until you taste the COUP DE MAIN!
He stayed! To think, nights ago I wished
DISENGAGEMENT. Following tonight, to the T,
I did as mother suggested: IDENTIFICATION, FRIEND OR FOE.
Turned out FRIEND…
(If you have found this, please stop reading now.)
We were FRIENDLY beneath the gazebo's LATTICE…a LOW VISIBILITY

OPERATION, which is what my OVER-THE-HORIZON

RADAR was telling me. The INTERPRETABILITY of…

well, INITIAL ASSESSMENT, really…just MARGINAL INFORMATION,

I know. I promise more later. But, still

a truly really important POINT OF NO RETURN…

   Stepped out to ASSESS this AREA

OF INFLUENCE, to admire together the ARCHITECTURE,

shared a DESIRED APPRECIATION of our

        HOME

LAND that (fingers crossed!) we will build together… (18)

Sharif emphasises the danger present in the environment by juxtaposing the term of endearment ("Darling") with CASUALTIES, which is, according to the *Department of Defense Dictionary*, "Any person who is lost to the organization by having been declared dead, duty status – whereabouts unknown, missing, ill, or injured" (78). Sharif implies that beneath the surface gloss these occasions are brutal, and result in losses which, while not necessarily involving physical injuries, may lead to social harm. The harsh nature of the occasion is emphasised by Sharif's association of the harms ("DAMAGE" which is "COLLATERAL") with meat—this harm is of the "lean / sirloin" variety, suggesting that the injuries are associated with rarified environments, such as dinner parties at which expensive cuts of steak is served. Furthermore, Sharif implies the social injuries inflicted happen not necessarily as a result of a direct attack, but simply because the environment is so fraught—thus many of the hurts are sustained collaterally. The speaker describes defusing an encounter with a highly aggressive man:

". . . even when he dropped that MEGATON

WEAPON on me, coyly I promised:

wait until your taste the COUP DE MAIN!" (18)

The speaker's coy and flirtatious response to an attack, which is likened to having a giant nuclear weapon dropped on her, shows the sophisticated maneuvering required of a hostess who wishes to maintain her own safety. Yet, while the hostess appears to defer to the dinner party guest, the military definition of COUP DE MAIN implies that her character is equally dangerous to his, although perhaps in a less overt way. COUP DE MAIN is "An offensive operation that capitalizes on surprise and simultaneous execution of supporting operations to achieve

success in one swift stroke" (Department of Defense Dictionary 130). Sharif may be alluding to the fact that the hostesses' "offensive operation" is carried out using culinary means—that the main course will quell any further disturbances by this particular guest. Finally, it is implied that the peaceful co-existence of the speaker with her guests is possible—though it may be difficult to achieve:

> "Stepped out to ASSESS this AREA
>
> OF INFLUENCE, to admire together the ARCHITECTURE
>
> share a DESIRED APPRECIATION of our
>
>   HOME
>
> LAND that (fingers crossed!) we will build together . . ." (18)

At an ordinary level, this scene of guests walking into the gardens of a magnificent home to admire it from a different perspective is imbued with notions of class, in that hosts display their wealth and status on such occasions. The addition of capitalised military terms adds a charged, threatening edge to the proceedings, which implies that the culture that supports this inequality of wealth is much less civilised than appearances would suggest. For example, the military definition of "AREA OF INFLUENCE" gives significant and surprising insights into the power dynamics of this situation: "A geographical area wherein a commander is directly capable of influencing operations by maneuver or fire support systems normally under the commander's command or control. (Department of Defense Dictionary 42)" The "commander" on the property on which the dinner party takes place is the hostess, and it is implied that her resources are considerable and dangerous. While she is in vicinity of the house, she is in control of "fire support systems" (weapons) and able to bring them to bear by issuing an order. Thus, the guests are in territory in which someone else is in command and the dinner party "battlefield" is revealed as an uncertain place, and one in which many dangers lurk. Finally, while the hostess perkily asserts her wish about the "HOME / LAND that (fingers crossed!) we will build together . . ." the splitting of "HOME" and "LAND" implies something of a divided country. The military definition of homeland is "The physical region that includes the continental United States, Alaska, Hawaii, United States possessions and territories, and surrounding territorial waters and airspace" (Department of Defense Dictionary 243). On the one hand, she could be just pointing out that these occasions are, in middle class U.S. society, hostile, complicated, and political, despite their glossy, friendly surfaces. The use of the Department of Defense Dictionary terms in the context of a dinner party in a private home, on

the other hand, could suggest that Sharif intends this party as a case study of a divided, aggressive, complicated, privileged, and dangerous country—one in which politeness is insisted on to hold up a cultural elite that is supported by the violence of the most powerful military in the world—the "HOMELAND" is U.S. territory, and Sharif implies that the military might bleeds into the social and cultural fabric of the country.

Sharif also uses military terms to imply that the lives of the speaker and other characters—most likely the same family as in the poem "LOOK"—are circumscribed by political and military forces, which brutally restrict their possibilities. In "SAFE HOUSE" each line begins with a Department of Defense term, which appears in alphabetical order (13). The title is followed by "SANCTUARY," "SANITIZE," and so on, until the concluding line, beginning with "SHORT FALL". This form suggests that the family's life is controlled by larger forces, and that the container within which their lives unfolds is connected to trauma and struggle of war. While the context in which the military definitions are used suggest that Sharif intends the ordinary meaning of the word to be used, the terms cast a military shadow over the poem, suggesting that the lives of the speaker and other characters are affected more than that of the average U.S. citizen by state actions. The capitalised terms create a connotative echo in the poem, which hint at the ever-present threat of violence and struggle. The intimate details of the family's life blend queasily with definitions designed for a war zone. The hybridisation of these opposing aspects combines to thematic effect: the war that the family is affected by may not be literal war, but it remains traumatic, dangerous, and uneasy. Even though the family have arrived in a safe country, they are not really safe.

"SAFE HOUSE" focuses primarily on the struggles of an immigrant Iranian daughter living in the U.S. to maintain a connection with her father who is, for the most part, absent from the family home. The spaces and ellipsis Sharif is writing into are literal, geographical gaps between the father and daughter, as well as the figurative spaces created by the traumatic struggle of the immigrant. The ordinary definition of "safe" sits in tension with the military definition of "safe house": "An innocent-appearing house or premises established by an organization for the purpose of conducting clandestine or covert activity in relative security" (Department of Defense Dictionary 473), which implies that the activities which are conducted inside it are a threat to the state. However, what Sharif appears to be suggesting is that the clandestine activity that takes place in the residence is covert, but not illegal. To the contrary, the activity Sharif points to is simply that in which an immigrant family can take refuge from discrimination:

SANCTUARY where we don't have to

SANITIZE hands or words or knives, don't have to use a

SCALE each morning, worried we take up too much space . . . (13)

The family can speak openly, without sanitising their "hands or words or knives," implying that, outside of their family home, they are perceived as threatening, perhaps in a physical sense (hands, knives), as well as by speaking out (words). They are also able to shed the watchfulness, which Sharif implies is present in U.S. society, in which they are not supposed to "take up too much space." Perhaps, too, while free of the censorship that they face in the Middle East, they are still required to be watchful in the U.S. The sense of dislocation that is engendered by financial struggles is also shown in the daughter's relationship being conducted mainly through a screen, as the father is in Santa Monica.

. . . I

SCAN my memory of baba talking on

SCREEN answering a question (*how are you?*) I would ask and ask from
behind the camera, his face changing with each repetition as he tried to
watch the football game. He doesn't know this is the beginning of my

SCRIBING life: repetition and change. A human face at the seaport and a
home growing smaller. (13)

The daughter cannot connect properly to the father, who is intent on watching a football game, while she asks him repeatedly how he is. The distance is shown by the poignancy of the images of the father's face at a seaport, which we associate with work that keeps men away from their families, while the home "grows smaller"—perhaps literally so, because it is behind a screen, but also in terms of fading in the memory of the speaker's baba. The sense of missed connections together with the military terms starting each line combine to suggest that the family is part of much larger structures, which roll out despite their best efforts to connect. There is also a sense of entrapment in the terms by re-envisioning them as

metaphors. For example, "SEIZE" refers to the entrapment of a wild pigeon, implying that the father is making something of his life for his family—he is seizing the opportunities—but at the cost of his own freedom:

SEIZE a wild pigeon off a Santa Monica street or watch

SEIZURES unfold in his sister's bedroom—the FBI storming through. He said *use wood sticks to hold up your protest signs then use them in*

SELF-DEFENSE *when their horses come*, his eyes

SENSITIVE when he passes advice to me, like I'm his

SEQUEL, like we're all a

SERIAL caught on Iranian satellite TV. When you tell someone off, he calls it

SERVICING. When I stand on his feet, I call it

SHADOWING (14).

The relationship is tender, with the daughter standing on his feet, something that she would have done as a small child, and which she calls "SHADOWING." This implies that the speaker is "in the shadow" of the negative aspects of the father's struggles. Furthermore, she views herself as her father's "SEQUEL," implying that the speaker's political activism mirrors that which the father is engaged in. Although the family's house is "safe," they attend protests at which there is physical danger: the father advises the daughter to use wooden sticks off protest signs to fight against the police when they attack. The Department of Defense terms add to the sense of embattlement that the speaker and her father feel. The actions of the speaker protesting, and the exhaustion of the double life of the immigrant implies that her existence is traumatic.

Although the context in which the Department of Defense terms are used suggests that Sharif intends them to be read primarily in terms of their ordinary meanings, there are

connotative echoes created by their additional meaning. For example, the shells crunching beneath the father's feet evokes his traumatic past:

> . . . the sound of
>
> SHELLS (SPECIFY)—the sound of mussel shells on the lip of the Bosporus crunching beneath his feet . . .(14)

This image swerves away from the United States to the Bosporus Strait in Turkey, hinting that the fractured relationship of the father and daughter and the geographical barriers pre-exist their immigration to the U.S. In addition, the connotative echo of "SHELLS (SPECIFY)," which means "A command or request indicating the type of projectile to be used" (490), speaks to the draining nature of the struggle of the father and daughter. The shells the father is crunching beneath his feet are in yet another country to which he has travelled to escape shellfire in his home country of Iran. Furthermore, the shells could suggest the hollowing out of individuals through trauma, in that they are shells of their former selves. Sharif's decontextualising of defense force terms brings new insights into both war and its effects and the struggle of immigrant existence within the foreign culture of a highly militarised country that is less civilised than its dinner parties suggest.

Dear Salim—Self-Erasure in the Persona Poems of Solmaz Sharif

In the seven-poem sequence "Reaching Guantánamo," Sharif uses erasure and persona to document the difficulty for families, and spouses in particular, to maintain a connection with their loved ones imprisoned in Guantánamo, given the extensive censorship of communications with prisoners. For example, letters to inmates are often heavily redacted. Sharif manifests this censorship by erasing sections of the letters, which demonstrates the fractured relationships of the incarcerated people with their loved ones, as well as, paradoxically, enabling new and surprising linguistic connections. The relationship between the implied poet and the persona speaker is complicated, given that the Sharif writes as a fictionalised version of a real, living person. Um Fatima is the wife of Salim Hamdan, the man imprisoned in Guantánamo for six years (2002 to 2008) for being the driver of Osama Bin Laden ("Solmaz Sharif" Sharif). In an interview, Sharif addresses the ethical issues that arise from poetry that has a documentary element, stating that she "doesn't have a concise answer"

("Solmaz Sharif" Sharif) when it comes to writing about "the pain of others," and that she has "an imperfect litmus test" for herself:

> would I be willing to read the poem in front of someone directly affected by that atrocity? In other words, if a Guantánamo inmate were at my reading, would I read "Reaching Guantánamo"? If not, is it because it now rings fraudulent? cruel? pointless? Then I don't think I have a right to write the poem. Or is it just because I'm scared and don't want to put my neck out—well, too bad. It's not about me and it's not about making sure I do it right. ("Solmaz Sharif" Sharif)

While Sharif addresses the question of using source material, she does not speak to what it means to use a "mask" of a living person. Although Um Fatima is not identified, a Google search of "Salim" and "Guantánamo" leads fairly quickly to uncovering her identity. Sharif admits, though, that she does not have any easy answers, and, in the end, her approach is to interrogate herself on her intentions in writing the poem, asking if her act of writing is grounded in, and informed by love:

> [f]eeling like I would read it in front of the "other" I am writing does not mean I believe I did full justice or that I succeeded in "speaking for" someone. (I abhor "giving voice to the voiceless." Folks are not voiceless, we are not listening.) Being willing to read that poem despite my discomfort and fear means I know my attempt comes from a place of love. I value this thing: love. The lives of others are not intellectual curiosities or conceptual playthings—they are lives and if I'm not loving them, then I shouldn't write them ("Solmaz Sharif" Sharif).

The poems are made even more complex by the erasure of selected phrases, which leads to an elliptical-style gappiness that interrupts the poem. These redactions are meant to be those of military officials—a fictionalised Joint Task Force—who examine all communications with prisoners and remove any information they deem sensitive (Falkoff 3). There are numerous reports of the Joint Task Force of Guantánamo, which manages the prison, heavily redacting personal letters written to inmates. In "Poems from Guantánamo: The Detainees Speak," this sort of censorship is outlined in the biographical note of inmate and contributor Moazzam Begg, a British citizen, who was arrested in Pakistan and detained in Guantánamo for three years without being charged with a crime:

> while [imprisoned in Guantánamo], Begg received a heavily-censored letter from his seven-year-old daughter; the only legible line was, "I love you, Dad." Upon his release, his daughter told him the censored lines were a poem she had copied for him:

"One, two, three, four, five, / Once I caught a fish alive. / Six, seven, eight, nine, ten, / Then I let it go again" (Falkoff 29).

As noted, elliptical-style poems are characterised by evasive speakers and disrupted narrative. In contrast to many of these, in which elision or evasion is framed as a choice of the speaker—and, in some ways, is seen as a way of retaining control of material—in "Reaching Guantánamo," the spaces represent an exertion of force by the State over the speaker, such that the speaker is characterised as losing control. The erasure ruptures the already fragile connection between the speaker and her husband, and contributes to the theme of abuse of state power against political prisoners, who are unable to maintain basic connections with family members outside the prison. At the same time, the spaces, the things unsaid, assert the value of the lyric to make new connections, connections that facilitate new linguistic combinations even in traumatic situations.

Sharif departs from the usual convention of using found texts as source material and, instead, erases words that she has written herself, a technique sometimes called self-erasure. (Darling and Taylor) Sharif states that she was horrified when she first encountered erasure "as an aesthetic tactic". Sharif's concerns arose, she says, because "[h]istorically, the striking out of text is the root of obliterating peoples." ("The Near Transitive Properties" Sharif) Her concerns echo those of McHale (2005), who argues that the erasure cannot be divorced from its historical origins, and must be used with an awareness of this history. Brian C. Cooney cautions against lumping all erasure poetry together, noting that "a number of disparate techniques" are associated with erasure, which tend to result in "a wide variety of political and aesthetic results" (17). Cooney proposes examining erasure works and their antecedents, and acknowledging the differences in the kinds of poetry that falls under the erasure "umbrella". Stone implies that the self-erasure in "Reaching Guantánamo" (45) resolves the issue Sharif has with the history of the practice, in that she has "created the text she would later erase, so that the only words she would obliterate were her own." Still, there is a tension present in that, while the words are written by Sharif, they are in the persona of Um Fatima, so the complications remain.

Sharif's erasure poems use the gaps in the letters to suggest the severed connection between Um Fatima and her incarcerated husband, Salim Hamdan, as in the first poem:

Dear Salim,

Love, are you well? Do they   you?

I worry so much. Lately, my hair   , even

my skin   . The doctors tell me it's   .

I believe them. It shouldn't

      . Please don't worry.

                        in the yard, and moths

have gotten to your mother's

                    , remember?

I have enclosed some   —made this

batch just for you. Please eat well. Why

did you   me to remarry? I told

            and he couldn't   it,

I would never   .

Love, I'm singing that   you loved,

remember, the line that went

"   "? I'm holding

the   just for you.

Yours, (45)

From the redacted letter, it can be ascertained that the wife is deeply concerned about the husband's welfare (she asks, "Love are you well?"), and worries about his health. However, the letter is disrupted by the censorship, which results in what is likely to be anxiety-producing ambiguity and severed emotional connections, both for husband and wife, as well as for the reader, who is forced to guess what could be in the spaces. Hamdan is informed of problems at home with his wife's health, the yard, and moths, but is denied information that could help him discern the seriousness—or otherwise—of such concerns. In addition, the line from the song that they both love is removed, cutting an emotional link between them. The pointlessness and cruelty of the erasure—like the erasure of a child's poem in the real-life letter to Begg (Falkoff 29)—suggests the extreme difficulty of family to maintain communication with inmates during terms of imprisonment. Sharif uses the white space on the page, the space that would otherwise contain a line from a song, as a visual metaphor: an absence, a blank, a gap, where a lyric should be.

In addition to demonstrating the disruption of the bond between the husband and wife, the heavily censored letters point to both the imbalance of power between the prison

authorities and the detainees and their families, and to human rights' abuses. The wife's initial question, "Do they ⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛ you? " suggests she is concerned about Hamdan being beaten or otherwise physically ill-treated. The gap between "they" and "you" is sinister because it hints that any number of avenues of abuse are possible. In an interview in which she discusses these poems, Sharif comments that the "redactions are silences that come abruptly, unpredictably, illogically" and, furthermore that the "sole purpose of such censorship is the breaking of the spirit" ("Solmaz Sharif" Sharif).

In addition to the "spirit breaking" tactic of redaction of family letters, which are almost the only form of contact for the prisoners with the outside world, reports on the treatment of inmates, including Hamdan, suggest that these prisoners are being tortured. In the prefatory note to the poetry anthology, *Poems from Guantánamo: The Detainees Speak*, Marc Falkoff, one of the volunteer lawyers who first visited the prisoners in 2004, after security clearance from the F.B.I., describes what he and his colleagues learned from their clients on that trip:

> During the three years in which they had been held in total isolation, they had been
> repeatedly abused. They had been subjected to stress positions, sleep deprivation,
> blaring music, and extremes of heat and cold during endless interrogations. They had
> been sexually humiliated, their physical space invaded by female interrogators who
> taunted them, fully aware of the insult they were meting out to devout Muslims. They
> were denied basic medical care. They were broken down and psychologically
> tyrannized, kept in extreme isolation, threatened with rendition, interrogated at
> gunpoint, and told that their families would be harmed if they refused to talk. They
> were also frequently prevented from engaging in their daily prayers (one of the five
> pillars of Islam) and forced to witness American soldiers intentionally mishandling the
> holy Qur'an (2).

This report from a visiting lawyer confirms the extreme abuse suffered by detainees during the period of Hamdan's imprisonment (2002 to 2008). An article in the *New York Times* (Claberson) reports that Hamdan was unable to prepare the defense for his forthcoming trial (as his lawyers state):

> Mr. Hamdan has essentially been driven crazy by solitary confinement in an 8-foot-by-
> 12-foot cell where he spends at least 22 hours a day, goes to the bathroom and eats all
> his meals. His defense team says he is suicidal, hears voices, has flashbacks, talks to
> himself and says the restrictions of Guantánamo "boil his mind."

The treatment of Hamdan is relevant to the interpretation of "Reaching Guantanamo" as the poem has a documentary aspect to it: while the letters are fiction, they are based on the experience of a specific, named prisoner. By re-enacting the censorship of the Joint Task Force of the correspondence, Sharif is engaging in lyric activism: the spaces in the letters call attention to contemporary erasures carried out by the U.S. government through systematic torture and abuse of human rights of prisoners for political purposes. The effect on Hamdan can be seen in his wife's response to his suggestion she remarry, presumably in his previous letter:

> . . .   Why
> did you   me to remarry? I told
>   and he couldn't   it,
> I would never   . (45)

The language implies that Hamdan feels like he has lost all hope, and wishes that his wife would forget about him and move on with someone else. However, the faith of his wife in their marriage is affirmed in the final lines, in which she speaks of a shared love song that she is singing for him. The letters are, after all, love letters, written in the persona of the devoted wife: thus the frame is able to admit small slivers of light, despite the blank spaces on the page and the cruelty of the prison conditions. The combination of enacted erasure with the use of a persona works to locate value in the poem: the violent anxiety produced by inhumane treatment in prisons, and the corrosive mental effects of that, but also opportunities for new connections, and new possibilities in language, which are suggestive of hope, of love, and of renewal. Similarly, emotional metaphors are facilitated by the erasures, suggesting the redactions fail in this sense to stop the communication of feeling. When speaking about the intended effect of the letters she sends, the wife comments:

> . . . I just want the ones
> you open to
>   like a hill of poppies. (48)

The erasure between "to" and "like a hill . . ." connects the poppies to the husband directly, implying that the joyful abundance connoted by the hill of poppies is what the wife wishes for her husband. The new combinations enabled by the erasure imply that traumatic events may offer unexpected opportunities for beauty and growth, such as the intense

appreciation Um Fatima has of her surroundings in Hamdan's absence: her yard, the lightning, the books, the sour plums. This awareness is possibly facilitated by the pain of the spaces, the gaps, the absence, which, while excruciating, also facilitate growth. This can be seen in the second poem of the series:

Dear Salim

Lightning across the sky all night, lighting up my
But no rain. No
When I get home, everything is
                            dust. One pair of
                by the   . One towel,
one   , one
in the morning. Anyway, I couldn't
so I sat by the window watching
it streak   and
thinking I must look like something
lit up and   like this.

Yours, (46)

The central image of the storm, which brings lightning, but not rain, and which illuminates the speakers' face at the window, suggests the devastation of the wife at the husband's absence. By stripping away the connective tissue of the letter—especially through the removal of nouns—the erasure highlights repetition of certain words, such as "one," which is repeated four times over three lines, suggesting the solitary nature of the narrator's struggle—she is only "one" without her husband to support her. Furthermore, the space surrounding the "ones" on the page acts as a visual metaphor for isolation, missed connections, and absences, particularly in line 7, which is composed simply of two "ones" separated from each other by a blank space. The "ones" could represent Salim and Um Fatima, with the distance of incarceration and the erasure of communication between them. The erasures also create new connections. For example, the erasures in lines 4 and 5 enable the metaphor: "everything is   /   dust," from which it can be inferred that the impact of the erasure of the speaker's husband from her life is cataclysmic. The elision of

nouns removes humanity. For example, the redaction in line 11 means that the speaker sees herself as a "something". This shows the dehumanising effect of the process on her, in that she becomes an undefined, unspecified, unknown thing. On the other hand, some remaining words—which otherwise might not be foregrounded—assume a prominence that contributes to possibilities for renewal, for possibilities connoted by the images of light in the letter: there is "lightning," and the speaker is "lit up" by the storm, which hints at hope and renewal. The Joint Task Force may redact lyrics from a favourite love song of the couple, but it cannot obliterate the hope of Um Fatima, which is, in some ways, facilitated by the possibilities inherent in those gaps and absences which have been forced on her by circumstances beyond her control.

Sharif has described her approach to poetry as one in which "aesthetics and politics have a really vital and exciting give-and-take between them" ("The Role of the Poet" Sharif), and expresses her enthusiasm for poets whose politics are "shaped by these aesthetic considerations, and wondering when the poetic will lead you to the kind of political surprise that a dogmatic approach wouldn't allow ("The Role of the Poet" Sharif). This approach has echoes of Perloff's approach to what has been termed "uncreative writing" in that Perloff makes the point that the process of changing the position of words may also change the attitudes of the writer (504). The erasure is of fictionalised rather than found material, which renews the narrative by a poet (Sharif) who has a significant stake in Fatima's material (she is also of Middle Eastern origin and has been impacted by conflicts in the area). Moreover, the erasure reclaims a traumatic process (redaction of inmates' letters by the Joint Task Force,) which severs connections between and dehumanises both the writer and the recipient, by making new linguistic connections that humanise both parties. In the renewal of the language through new connections, the narrative of those involved also has a possibility of new life.

Conclusion

Sharif engages with the ellipsis in elliptical-style poetry by using spaces in her poetry as an essential tool—whether she is collapsing the gaps and making proximate those clashing discourses (military and intimate) to expose the human cost of state actions, or demonstrating the severed connections between a prisoner and his wife on a page of redacted letters, which reenacts the "red action" (Malech "Road Not End" 41) of a fictionalised Joint Task Force. Sharif juxtaposes military terms with both documentary details and a variety of lyric strategies—personal confession, repetition, and metaphor—to challenge the erasure and denial

of civilian deaths and military culpability that is enabled by abstract or misleading language: that an "influence" on a landmine is a "person," (3) that a dead dog is actually a dead child (4). Sharif explains her approach to repurposing Department of Defense terms: "I have zero qualms in reclaiming maimed language. My goal there is to disrupt and instigate. It is my responsibility to do so, in fact" ("Solmaz Sharif" Sharif). Sharif uses the militarised terms in non-military contexts, such as that of dinner parties and family homes, to overlay intimate, lyric poems with an uneasy structure, one that demonstrates the inability of her speakers to escape trauma and danger, even as they settle and struggle in the "safety" of the U.S. For the immigrant, faced with racism and separation from family members, the new life can be a fraught, embattled experience. Sharif uses a combination of techniques to narrow the distance between language and consequences, and to assert and locate value in poetry—in which the word games are not just an end in themselves, but reveal new possibilities in the themes they consider. The game (the found terms, the erasure, the juxtaposition) is played for a point: erasure of the parts of letters of a wife to a Guantánamo inmate is not just about making spaces on a page, it is to re-enact a state action taken against prisoners serving prison terms without trial, who are tortured and held in solitary confinement, who are denied even a poem from their child, or the line of a lyric from a shared favourite love song with a spouse. On the other hand, erasure can also make for new and electric connections, and provide the basis for lyric activism; the technique, used well, offers hope in the face of an imbalance of power. Sharif's techniques and politics are in conversation, and that dialogue is a complicated one, with notes of despair, and sometimes unremitting darkness, but also electric, emotional, lyric charges that invigorate the spirit and the art of poetry itself.

Chapter 3—The Anagram Confessional: Dora Malech's *Stet*

In an interview published in *Johns Hopkins Magazine* in 2018, Brett McCabe comments that while Malech's first two volumes of poetry involve experimentation, including "musical wordplay," her third book, *Stet* (2018), "embrace[s] a more daring degree of difficulty" ("Talking with Dora Malech" Malech). Malech's two previous collections, *Say So* (2011) and *Shore Ordered Ocean* (2009), along with her latest volume, *Flourish* (2020), fall within the innovative elliptical-style stream of contemporary lyric poetry, which channels Dean Young and Susan Wheeler with their wise-cracking, performative speakers and evasive poetics, which defy easy categorisation, blend pop culture with literary allusion, and in which the only constant is the throwing off of guises, before the rapid assumption of another posture. The spaces and elisions in the poetry are elicited by the un-catchability of the speaker, due to the constantly switching attitudes, tones, and references. However, as McCabe points out, Malech's use of anagram in *Stet* moves her innovative strategies into much more extreme territory: "like a skateboarder who isn't content to level up a conventional trick but wants to try doing it while blindfolded and wearing flip-flops" ("Talking with Dora Malech" Malech).

While Malech continues in the elliptical-style vein which she has explored in other collections, in *Stet* she does so with the addition of Oulipian techniques, which impose severe constraints on the coherence of both her speakers and her themes. Oulipo (the Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle or Workshop of Potential Literature) is a Paris-based group of mathematicians and writers which promotes writing according to constraints (Baetens 115). While Malech is not a member of this group, I am considering her work within this frame due to the extreme foregrounding of form and procedure in *Stet*, her speaking about Oulipo in various interviews, as well as her discussion of questions commonly considered by procedural practitioners in her poetry. The intensive, spirited evasiveness facilitated by Malech's splintered forms—anagram, found material, and redaction—embodies the elliptical-style approach of creating spaces or absences in the poetry, which manifest both in gaps in understanding—of the themes, the speaker's position—and, in Malech's case, physical gaps in the poem. Malech is both a visual artist and a poet, a fine arts major at Yale and a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop (Poetry Foundation), and *Stet* uses the spaces on the page to thematic effect: the splintered lines imply the shattering of the speaker's psyche through the personal trauma of divorce, remarriage and pregnancy. In addition, the notion of the anagram, a strategy in which letters are rearranged into new words, alludes to the theme of reinvention

of the speaker through life events, both catastrophic (a separation) or joyful (a pregnancy), but with a common thread of transformation.

While I will be focusing primarily on Malech's use of anagram in this chapter, she also employs erasure or redaction in *Stet*, both in the case of erasing found texts, as well as creating an erasure-type effect through the spaces on the page, which imply an obliteration of the speaking self. As stated in the Introduction, erasure has its roots in visual art of the 1960s. In one of the first acknowledged erasures, Cross selectively painted over parts of the 1913 edition of *Webster's Secondary School Dictionary* and published the results in 1965. Stephen Parks explains Cross's approach in a 1981 interview in *ARTlines*, in which he notes that her "art is inspired by epiphanies, by those bright mysterious bursts of subjective meaning" and, furthermore, that "The epiphany is triggered by the relationship between seemingly unconnected words, words found either at the head of the dictionary columns or words within a column."

Malech brings her own visual art background—Malech has an MFA in painting from Yale University—to bear on *Stet*. She explains that while "musical wordplay has always been a driving force," *Stet* has seen her "push those elements into more extreme territory" ("Talking with Dora Malech" Malech). She points out her desire to use her visual art background to create "a kind of limited palette with [her] language" ("Talking with Dora Malech" Malech). Malech explains that her anagramming began as a private practice in her notebooks, but extended beyond that as she started to see it as an "heuristic process" ("Talking with Dora Malech" Malech) in which she "appl[ied] pressure on the building blocks of [her] written language to yield the unexpected" ("Talking with Dora Malech" Malech).

Malech explains her process of anagramming as connected to changes in her personal life:

These practices became a kind of lifeline for me across changes in my life, my relationships, my location, my body, and my perspectives. I wrote through and into these changes, letting the process that had begun in form become a figure for other kinds of lived making and remaking ("Talking with Dora Malech" Malech).

The "changes" to which she refers are therefore in the recent lyric tradition in their personal contexts. Indeed, they are those which are considered topics of confessional poetry and its inheritors: intensely personal matters that, since the 1950s have been a strong strand within the contemporary lyric. Malech's poems in *Stet* are in conversation with those of confessional poets and, particular, those of Sylvia Plath, whose poem, "Metaphors," (41) she reimagines in *Stet's* final section.

But they are not delivered in a confessionalist manner. Malech is also tapping into a movement identified by critic and poet Swensen in which innovative poets hybridise unusual elements to startling effect. This conception of innovative poetries builds on the elliptical-style poetics identified by Burt, and elaborated on by Hoagland, in that the poets strive to attain traditional lyric goals while incorporating experimental techniques. The hybridisation that Swensen describes is characterised by the way in which it mixes traits of "conventional" poetry, ". . . such as coherence, linearity, formal clarity, narrative, firm closure, symbolic resonance, and stable voice . . ." with those of "experimental" poetry, ". . . such as non-linearity, juxtaposition, rupture, fragmentation, immanence, multiple perspective, open form, and resistance to closure . . ." (xxi). Swensen traces the origins of the split back to the tendency of twentieth century American poets to align themselves either with the traditionalism of British Romanticism, as exemplified by Robinson and Frost, or the experimental aesthetic of the French avant-garde, espoused by Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Apollinaire, and Mallarmé. Swensen argues that, for contemporary innovative poets working in the hybrid stream, the distinction between the two strands has collapsed, with practitioners borrowing freely from techniques that have their origins in both the English and French traditions. Swensen's hybrid conception frames the poet as curator of different trends and techniques, as opposed to subscriber to a particular school. Malech's process-focused approach builds on the avant-garde practices espoused by the Oulipian poets, who use restricted forms, such as the anagram, to unlock creativity. In the introduction to the *Oulipo Compendium*, Roubaud defines an Oulipian author as "a rat who himself builds the maze from which he sets out to escape" (41). However, as pointed out by Harry Matthews, it is not sufficient to simply escape the maze, but to achieve "valid literary results" (Matthews qtd in Elkin and Esposito 4).

Stet is a confessional collection in five parts which channels Oulipian aesthetics. In the first part, the speaker is in a relationship that is falling apart (the marriage vow is "rented" [4]; the man is "damned" [11] and the form (of the marriage) can be described as a "fail" [12]). The last line of "Stet," the final poem in the first section, asks: "Must we fail in one form to find another?" (16), which can be read as both a comment on the anagram form and the broken relationships. It implies that the failure of the marriage (form) is what is leading the speaker to a new relationship ("another"). In the second section, there is a renewal of the speaker, but it is tainted with what one can infer is guilt. She is beginning "a new life," but it is "less" and "lifeless" (20), suggesting that she is drained from the process and that the renewal comes with conditions. The opening poem of the third section, "A Time Balm" (27),

alludes to the aphorism "time heals all wounds," implying that the passing of time has made things easier to deal with. However, the messiness of the process is demonstrated in the imagery of the poems, hinting at the speaker's guilt at causing pain: the "lip" is "split"; the "cut is cleaner"; the speaker is holding a "burden" and "burned." The hopeful note of "Something Wonderful is About to Happen to You" (39) in section four, a nine-line poem composed of anagrams of the fortune cookie message title, provides a strong clue that the speaker's fortunes have changed. There is "blood" and an "omen," but also a flower "happen[ing]" in the last line. Despite the childlike ebullience of the opening poem's title, this section is strewn with blood, pangs, scars, red actions, redactions, spills, splits, and conflagrations. While it hints at a remarriage ("I Do"), even this allusion is profoundly conflicted, referring to a battle to which the couple comes "bulletless." The final section is a series of nine anagram poems made out of Sylvia Plath's poem, "Metaphors," (41) each poem corresponding to a month of the speaker's pregnancy.

The personal subject matter of the collection, which sees the speaker fall apart, followed by her remaking in the subsequent remarriage and pregnancy, is performed by the anagramming process, which requires using existing words to make new combinations. The central thematic question of the collection is posed in the last line of the titular poem: "must we fail in one form to find another?" (12). That is, the collection explores how the destruction of one form (a relationship) is necessary for renewal in a new version (bond with a subsequent lover), and that inherent in recombinant forms is the dismantling of pre-existing constructions (such as the female body in pregnancy). The question also addresses an Oulipian "law" described by Jacques Roubaud in the introduction to the *Oulipo Compendium*: "A text written according to a constraint describes the constraint" (42). That is, "far from remaining outside the work and appearing only at its conception and its underpinning, the constraint permeates it entirely" (42). The spaces between the words as well as the apertures arising from disconnections are suggestive of the disruption inherent in a remaking of a life, of a self, of a new lyric I, which relies on its previous iteration for its material.

The other equally important question posed in *Stet* appears in "Q & A" (50): "Is it just a word game?" This relates to concerns about elliptical-style poetry: that the game is an end in itself (Hoagland), and that there are no "wholes" only "holes" to be found in such poems (Shepherd xiv). The questions that I will explore in my analysis below, then, are how does Malech assert and locate value within these experimental forms? What techniques does she use to maintain cohesiveness in the poems? How does Malech communicate theme? I have chosen to focus on these poems for my third chapter because, unlike the relatively accessible

poetry of Sharif and Hayes, the anagram poems in *Stet* foreground form to such an extent that the thematic coherence is severely disrupted. This means that the reader is required to co-create meaning with the author and, thus, the reading experience is very different from that of poems that adhere to more traditional principles. Malech explains the relationship that she is building with the reader:

> The language of poetry, particularly poetry that disrupts our linguistic norms, invites participation in the making of meaning. Poetry asks a lot of a reader, but so do our most fulfilling and enduring personal relationships. I am asking the reader of *Stet* to have a relationship with language. ("Talking with Dora Malech" Malech)

In this chapter, I will explore how Malech uses anagram to offset the emotionality of the confessional material, and how she communicates her themes despite the gaps the extreme foregrounding of form facilitates. I argue that theme is communicated by a series of clues scattered throughout the poems, and that the occasional disorientation of the reader is mimetic of the confusion of the speaker. However, I will also point out the downsides of such an extreme foregrounding of form, which is that—if there are not enough clues left for the reader—the poem is apt to tip over into being a game for game's sake. Where Malech succeeds in asserting and locating value in such poems is when she offsets the dissociative elements of the poems with enough clues for readers to orient themselves.

Is it Just a Word Game?

The title of the collection, *Stet*, which means "let it stand," is a proof-reading term that is "used as an instruction on a printed proof to indicate that a marked alteration should be ignored" (Oxford English Dictionary). When a proofreader marks "stet" beside a mistake, they acknowledge that what looked like a mistake on a first reading was actually fine as it was on the second look and does not need to be corrected, deleted or otherwise altered. When applied to a past relationship, the concept of "stet" argues for accepting things as they are—or rather, were—not as a mistake, as something that needs to be altered or erased, but rather to be accepted for what it is—or, to be more accurate, for what it *was*. Taking this notion as metaphor, *Stet* acknowledges both the impulse to make amends and the need to accept things as they are—a common trope of relationship breakdowns. To do this, *Stet* enacts the lived stakes of divorce, infidelity, remarriage, and pregnancy—topics that are associated with confessional poems—in anagram and redaction.

The central thesis of the titular poem is contained in the exegetical last line: "Must we fail in one form to find another?" (12). The "form" to which Malech refers plays off the double denotation, which includes poetic form (anagram) and the form one finds in either a human body or a relationship. Malech is asking whether every process we undertake to get to a new situation in our lives depends on the unraveling of a previous iteration, as well as referring to the metapoetic aspects of Oulipian techniques, in that "form is thematized" (Poucel 987). The anagram poem requires a series of abandonments (abandoning the previous line) in order for the speaker to remake themselves in the next line. However, the paradox of the anagram is that it implies that one can never really leave the past behind, as it is in the language of the previous line that we find the material for the next. Thus "Stet" as a concept permeates the collection: while we may agonise over personal mis-steps and try to correct them, in the end it is best to leave them be. According to the anagram laws, however, we are allowed a limited second chance: limited in that the only material we have is that which we have already been given.

The titular poem, "Stet", is about the speaker's guilt over infidelity. The "other" is another person, and the failure of the previous form represents the end of that relationship:

STET

Last meme down: to off our inner faith in
lit ions, amen (*fin*), fume of tore and throw,
stone hid unfelt, from "we" (from an "I" to an "I").
Nil with rot, a minute off deforms an eon
of meat run low, no foment, a tired finish,
mere sunlit affair. Oh, to find moon, went
wet at dim. Afternoon sinner, hum if fool
is true of mow, of annihilated front-men,
stunt-man, of him, an indoor Eiffel Tower,
non-sonata writ mute. For me, no HD life. If
radio, some worn tune. Then, main lift-off:
off-line, not no raft, I swim out here. Damn
if'n I wasted no moment of hurt on a rifle.
Old "No room at the inn," i.e., FU. Warn: stiff me

One time, shame on, off, until worn adrift.

Must we fail in one form to find another? (Malech 12)

"Stet" is composed of sixteen lines, each of which includes the same letter set: each anagram is an anagram of every other line. The source material is Malech's original work but, due to the formal constraints she imposes, the composition is brutally limited. The only way forward is through a tortuous re-arrangement of the letters in preceding lines. If, according to Oulipian laws, form has a thematic effect (Roubaud 42), then applying a procedure that requires poring over each letter of the previous line and then painstakingly reassembling the letters for the line that follows, implies that a forensic examination of past lines (mistakes) followed by a painstaking rearrangement of that material to make the next line (the future) is the only way for the speaker to move through her trauma. The agony of weighing each word in a line to discover possibilities for the next line is an act of bravery, with the speaker lurching forward due to a series of miraculous remixes. Equal parts painful and hopeful, this poetic remaking echoes the recombination of the speaker's shattered self.

"Stet" sprinkles images and key words through the poem like the bright orange flags that a tramper might rely on to orient themselves in misty weather. The "Last meme down" plays off the pun "last man down," which could be read as an admission that a previous relationship is over. I say *could* because anagram poems must be approached with a high tolerance for ambiguity and an acceptance that it is only through an accumulation of connotations that one can divine what the poem is about. Clearer signals can be found in the "sunlit affair," an "afternoon sinner," and "shame" which, in combination with the final line, "Must we fail in one form to find another?" suggest to me that this poem is about an affair. The imagery implies a strong sense of guilt and disgust that the speaker feels at betraying her partner. She hints that she feels worthless ("Nil") and self-disgust ("with rot") and that the infidelity ("a minute off") is all that it took to ruin a long-standing relationship (it "deforms an eon"). Malech also alludes to exhaustion and disillusionment in what would otherwise be an exciting encounter: the "meat" has "run low"; the "finish" is "tired". In addition, there are multiple biblical allusions, which hint that the speaker feels that she will be punished for her betrayal: "From an 'I' to an 'I'" suggests the need to pay in an "eye for an eye" fashion for moving from one person ("I") to the next ("I"). In addition, an "I" for an "I" hints at problems in the future with the relationship, by suggesting that the speaker feels she will have to pay in an "eye-for-an-eye" manner for the manner in which the relationship commenced. The cumulative effect of the imagery implies that she views the affair as having a besmirching

effect: the tune is "worn", the sonata is "mute" and she cannot "find [the] moon". Romantic imagery, such the moon, and song, which traditionally accompany love poems, is inaccessible to the speaker: the moon cannot be located; the song is not able to be heard, pointing to the sullying effect of the circumstances in which the new relationship began. The poem has a lurching feel and the spaces, absences, and gaps are resonant of a shattering of the old self and a fractured recombination that is less that satisfactory.

The pressure that the anagram form puts on language results in thematic uncertainty in part due to the disintegration of the laws of grammar. The "limited palette" ("Talking with Dora Malech" Malech) that Malech uses causes grammatical elisions and disjunctions. Particles and articles are omitted ("Oh, to find moon . . ."), incongruent word forms are blended ("fume of tore and throw"), and ancient biblical allusions ("'No room at the inn'") co-exist with acronymic slang ("FU"). Of course incongruous blends are a central characteristic of the aesthetic elucidated by Burt, who states in her 1998 review of Susan Wheeler's volume of poetry, *Smokes*, that "Elliptical poems shift drastically between low (or slangy) and high (or naively 'poetic') diction." This putting together of things that would not usually belong is the essence of the elliptical-style approach, and apertures created by unusual grammar align with this aesthetic. However, the strictures of the anagram result in a grammatical disintegration that is like that of a new language learner, in that incoherence is blended with moments of lucidity, during which thematic signals pop up to the surface in the poems, and odd combinations, such as the "indoor Eiffel Tower," are enabled. One argument is that the lexical instability in these poems in itself has a thematic effect: the speaker is emotionally rent by the changes in her personal life, and the effect of the trauma is disorientation and instability. This echoes the Oulipian "law" that "a text written according to a restraint describes the restraint" (Roubaud 42), which means, in practice that "Oulipian texts are usually, at some level, about the constraint that generates it – they turn the procedures and rules that underlie their own form into a theme of the work itself" (Epstein 328). If the central issue is how we can rebuild our lives after traumatic change, the answer would be that we must make of it what we can, that the recombinant iteration will be fractured. In essence, the theme of how a self can be remade after traumatic events is evident in the broken results of the anagram, which suggests that the freedom of escape—from one relationship into another; from a single body into the bodies of a pregnant woman—is inextricably linked to our previous forms: that we are ineffably constrained by the past, and our past forms, which echo in our present iterations.

The anagram acts as both constraint and sterile container for the "raw, personal uncertainties" Malech describes, with the strictures aiding a syntax that is stripped of linkages and bridges, so that the poem has the broken rhythm of a highly intelligent second language speaker, with an advanced vocabulary combined with an impoverished grammar. With the central linkages reduced to sound, rhythm, and association, the effect is of reading a series of lyric grunts. These poems operate as visual metaphors, with the spaces on the page demonstrating the speaker moving into terra incognita (emotionally), and signaling an elliptical-style dissociation that hints at the theme of the poem: while gaps can indicate erasure or obliteration, they also represent possibilities for renewal. The effect of the anagram constraints on Malech's poetry is to reduce her lyric to essential, well-spaced utterances that must be navigated via a series of associative leaps.

The visual effects of the disjunctions, as well as the emotional resonances evinced by such an aesthetic, are demonstrated in the poem "THEN   READING

IN   THE   GARDEN" (51). The poem takes the form of a mirror anagram: the left column is the original, initiating line, written by Malech, while a remixed version of that line is reflected in the right—and, occasionally, in the middle—column of the poem. The poem, which is reproduced in full below, has an Horatian Ode-like reflective quality, with the speaker acknowledging the beauty of the garden scene, while considering her mixed feelings—of joy and regret—at the situation in which she finds herself:

THEN READING   IN THE   GARDEN

my	iris,	know			i	risk	my	now
for		you.					for	you,
fuchsia,		intent.			if	us,	then	i	can't
stand		coping,					stop	dancing.
all	this	stupid	heat,		a	stall,	the *up this* i'd	
tend		to					dent.	to
what's	left: it's	this	last	weft,		the	last	swift,
stitches		in				its	chest.	in
thrust,	be	a	sure				suture.	breaths
stake		my					sky,	meat
left		looser,				lost	reel	of

pure monster, no petal   nor stem. rope un-leapt
dares   *show,*   re-shadows.
i drown in the   wind or in the   when. i, rind to
sweet segments,   us,   wet guess, net mess,
loss.   loss
is   spent   in   steps,
into   it   no
answer.   re-swan,
answer   as   wren,
bird   called   bed   rid,   call
outs and inners,   sand in our nest
and   i   grit,   daring   it.
a   line,   lane   i
veered into.   need it over.
no, i wound.   i didn't hit a wall   i hit a window, all not undid,
spot on. in pleasing us,   a song split us open. in
no night's fortune   tunes for nothing
spent, no   not   pens,
not memory,   not my *more.*
we love a   vow   alee
but we vow aweather, and in-   bound. i want whatever awe
can find me sore,   end from *in case.*   if rose can mend
a   swear: *was,*   *are,*
the last poor excuses for   force : aster, phlox, suet, so
a word is my bond, but   my bond's outbid. was
it fate, then and now?   a theft i went on and
up? sad old itch? still.   all this stupid cold (51).

     The occasion of the poem is the speaker sitting and reading in the garden. It is hot weather, and she admires flowers, such as irises, aster, and phlox. She is ruminating about a situation for which she feels regret because she caused injury (she "veered into [a] lane" and "hit a window") and she feels that she acted unethically (there was "a theft"). The situation most likely involves a relationship or relationships, as she refers to a "you" and an "us." At the end of the poem, the speaker notices that it has become cold in the garden.

While "THEN   READING   IN   THE   GARDEN" (51) provides significant challenges for the reader, it is one of the more straightforward poems in Malech's collection because of the clear signal of the setting given in the title. However, the lack of linkages and significant ambiguity in the imagery, which is driven by constraints of the form, means that we must be content to make a series of educated guesses as to what has happened to whom, how, and why. The mirror form of the poem, with its left to right associative leaps, echoes the ruminative, obsessive thinking pattern of the speaker, who is engaged in a push-pull between romance, passion, heat, and abandonment, and that of guilt and regret. She is "risk[ing] [her] now" for the fuchsia iris, and she can't "stop dancing" in the heat. On the other hand, she resents the heat (it's "stupid") and is under stress ("can't / stand coping." Malech undercuts the romantic metaphor of the "sweet segments, us," which suggests a fresh, new relationship, with its remixed mirror image: "wet   guess,   net mess". The anagram remix in the right hand column of the "sweet" couple demonstrates the conflicted attitude of the speaker towards the romance: while it's passionate ("wet"), it's also ill-considered (the result of a "guess") and, when the whole situation is considered, a "mess" and a net loss. The speaker implies that the "us" is corrupted, by using a musical metaphor of the "song [which] split us open," which she then nullifies with subsequent imagery of "tunes for nothing." Malech's strategy of introducing and then undercutting romantic imagery conveys the embattled attitude of the speaker to the new relationship. It can be inferred from this that she is unable to enjoy it because she feels that it is corrupted in some way. The cause of this negative perception is hinted at strongly throughout the poem, with images that imply that the speaker feels she has caused pain. She insists that she is the source of the hurt, because she "veered into" a "lane"—she "need[ed] it over." She insists, furthermore, that the resulting injury (to the unidentified other party) is also her fault, by stating "no, I wound" and insinuating that it was her need to escape that led her to change of lane: she "hit a window," not "a wall." Smashing through glass is suggestive of messy and complicated injuries. Although it is not possible to pinpoint the exact cause of the narrator's guilt and regret, the poem has elements of the elegiac, in that the thing that is left has "stitches in /   its chest." One can infer from this metaphor that a serious injury has been caused, in a figurative sense. The fact that the stitches are in the chest area implies both that the injury is serious and that it concerns the heart. When read alongside the metaphors which convey the speaker's guilt at causing injury, it can be inferred that she feels that she is the cause of the heartbreak. There are also hints that there has been a betrayal of trust, with the references to a "theft" and the breaking of a bond, which was "outbid." The cumulative effect of the

metaphors and allusions is the implication that the speaker feels guilt at causing pain to another, probably within the context of a relationship ending badly, due to dishonesty or actions that she feels are morally dubious. We can guess at an affair, but cannot say for sure. We do not know to whom the injury has been caused, but we know that there has been one, which the speaker insists is her fault. We can also confidently infer that the speaker is in a new relationship, as there is heat, wetness, songs at night (albeit corrupted) and flower imagery. In addition, the poem acts as visual metaphor, suggesting a violent splintering of the speaker's psyche: the words are scattered across the page. Finally, the extreme pressure placed on the grammar by the anagram process disrupts the linguistic coherence in a way that is imitative of the effects of trauma or shock on the speaker's psyche. The voyeurism we might find in a more straightforward confessional lyric of this kind is disrupted by the application of Oulipo constraints. The anagrammatic proceduralism results in gaps in our understanding that cannot be filled because the effect of the constraints is that full disclosure is precluded. The effect is elliptical, both in terms of the spaces it leaves in our understanding, and in the essentialist nature of the anagram, which allows only pre-existing material to be used. However, it can also be argued that, while the adherence to Oulipian proceduralism provides barriers to easy understanding of what is happening in the poem, and in location of a theme, this difficulty is also part of the poem's appeal, and is precisely the way in which meaning and value are asserted. Indeed, this is one of the key elements of the Oulipo tradition. As Epstein points out, this means "seeing it as never fixed, finite or contained in any of its individual manifestations, but as always filled with unrealized and unpredictable possibilities, with an infinite number of combinations and permutations" (329). Requiring the reader to import information to fill the elisions makes for a different reading experience: one in which the reader is a much more active participant in the meaning-making process. Malech describes her use of Oulipian constraints, including anagram, "as a kind of elliptical way of exploring [her] own autobiographical moment of 're-making' when a more straightforwardly linear 'confessional narrative' approach felt frustratingly melodramatic and even paradoxically dishonest" ("Dora Malech's Formal Feelings" Malech). Malech also says she feels that she is "actually revealing *more* of my own embarrassing inner workings and life than any more traditionally confessional poem I might write" ("Dora Malech's Formal Feelings" Malech). While Malech does not explore why she feels that the anagram poems are particularly revealing, one reason could be the anagram's effect of reducing the poem to a series of essential utterances. The "limited palette" ("Talking with Dora Malech" Malech) of language means the writer is denied refuge in the kinds of linguistic tricks that enable them to avoid

committing to what Hoagland describes as the "potential embarrassment of sincerity" (179). While the elliptical-style games risk the evasion of feeling or meaning, the ellipsis in *Stet* enables a raw honesty in the poems, which might not be possible if Malech were able to call on any letter for help. There is a desperation in the poems, and an unguarded emotionality in the rhythms and blurts—sometimes erudite, sometimes ungrammatical, sometimes naïve to the point of recklessness—that has a cumulative effect of conveying the emotional obliteration of the speaker: a breaking up of everything that she previously thought was stable and certain, and an almost unbearable mix of joy and regret. Thus, the anagram is thematised, in that the messy, painful process of remaking a self is laid bare. There is ambiguity in reading such poems, and complete closure or certainty is impossible for the reader, but the emotional effect of these changes wrought on the speaker are communicated clearly.

While poems, such as "STET," and "THEN READING   IN THE   GARDEN" have exegetical elements, in that they demonstrate the ways in which Oulipian proceduralism feeds into the themes of the poems, Malech also directly addresses questions relating to proceduralism in the poems "Q & A" and "ESSAY   AS YES." Malech comments on her conflicted views when working with the anagram, commenting that it "sometimes still feels like I'm tapping into the worst of multiple aesthetic worlds . . . the guilty pleasure of a bad habit (nail biting, scab picking), the frivolousness of a game, the pretentiousness of a private poetics of inaccessibility, the superstition and obscure rites of the occult." ("Unica Zürn: It lies in your hand" Malech) The obsessive rumination which, as she comments, taps into "obscure rites of the occult" is, in some ways, an appropriate match for confessional material, which has deep roots in ancient religious traditions that are known for their ritualistic qualities. As Nelson notes, "Confessional writing is part of a religious tradition that dates back to Augustine and became part of a therapeutic tradition even before the advent of psychotherapy" (34). Hirsch also comments on the connection to an "honorific tradition" of confession, both in religion and literature. He points out that this "more honorific sense of confession" can be traced back to *The Book of the Dead*, other ancient Egyptian texts, as well as the autobiographical writings of Saint Augustine and Rousseau (56-57). Having said that, the argument for the occult element of the anagram, which Zürn describes as "a dangerous fever" (qtd. in Friedland 113), presents itself in the exegetical last lines of "Q & A," (50) where the question: "Is it just a word game?" is answered with, "*Is a god just wartime?*"

Q & A

But haven't others done all this before?
To belief, heaven's both holster and rut.

[innovation's
invasion not

mid-progress as
promised, grass

greener and heart at
earth, a tender range]

Is it just a word game?
Is a god just wartime? (50)

By answering a question with a question in the form of an anagram riddle, Malech is
demonstrating both the slipperiness of elliptical-style poetry and the occult properties of the
anagram—Malech finds a "god" in the original question. Malech's response perhaps asks
whether worshipping the "gods" (of constrained forms) is just about "fighting for dominance"
("wartime"), showing an ambivalent attitude to literary disputes ("wars") that are frequently
fought regarding the purity of experimental poetry. Malech also asks, in the opening line, "But
haven't others done all this before?", which concerns the difficulty innovating when one is
preceded by a long tradition. Malech's answer to: "But haven't others done all this before?" is
that "To belief, heaven's both holster and rut." To paraphrase: when one examines the concept
of "belief" it is also important to consider "heaven". In this context, "heaven" can be
considered "both holster and rut" to "belief." The "heaven" to which Malech is referring is
successful innovation, which is the goal of most poets when engaging in traditional forms.
This desire for "newness" ("heaven") is what drives the poet (the "holster" in which she holds
her weapon) and also what holds her back ("the rut"), when it comes to trusting in the old
forms to deliver the results that she wants. In summary, using old forms to deliver innovative
results is something that both frees and constrains the poet. What Malech is attempting is

extreme and fraught with difficulties, but the rewards are also rich, as she hints in the middle section: her innovations result from an "invasion," but gains are available.

Malech details her reasons for choosing constrained forms, such as the Oulipian anagram, and redaction in her opening poem "ESSAY   AS   YES" (1), drawing on the Oulipo philosophy that constraints are not chosen randomly and, furthermore, that the movement prioritises potential over product, as suggested by the name of the organisation: Ouvroir de littérature potentielle, (Workshop of Potential Literature [Poucel 987]). In the introduction to the *Oulipo Compendium*, Roubaud points out that "truly Oulipian publications (those published in its name) do not necessarily lay claim to the title of literary works" (39), as Oulipians tend to feel that the possibilities inherent in a constraint are more important than its execution (Epstein 329). Moreover, the Oulipian axiom that "a text written according to a constraint describes the constraint" (Roubaud 42) manifests itself in that texts using Oulipian constraints "are usually, at some level, about the constraint that generates it," which means that "the procedures and rules that underlie their own form" become "a theme of the work itself" (Epstein 329). Perec's novel *La Disparition* (1969) is the best known example of this in that the lipogrammatic "guiding constraint" of "the prohibition against ever using the letter 'e' – becomes the mechanism driving the text and its central theme" (Perloff 14). Priya Wadhera describes absence as a central theme of *La Disparition*, claiming that it is used to evoke the loss of the Shoah (576). The main character, Anton Voyd, who is haunted by the lack of the letter e in his life, disappears. When searching for clues to his disappearance, his friends die one by one just as they are about to speak a word that contains an e (Mazzucco-Than 1). *La Disparition* is an exemplary manifestation of the Oulipo philosophy, in that the lipogrammatically prescribed erasure (of the letter e) informs the novel's theme of obliteration of a group of people due to a perceived common defect (they cannot say e).

Malech's use of anagrams and redaction also has a thematic effect, which is explored in many of *Stet's* poems. However, it is in her opening poem "ESSAY   AS   YES" that she outlines her intentions for the collection in a comprehensive—albeit submerged—manner. However, rather than outlining a coherent argument, Malech drops clues throughout the poem, which must then be pieced together to decipher her point. The argument, then, is not just about the philosophy which she is channeling, but of the relationship she is asking the reader to have with the poems: one in which the reader is required to co-create meaning with the poet.

Malech implies that constrained forms must have a thematic effect, so that the speaker's personal failures, and subsequent painful reinventions, are echoed in her choice of form in this poem:

> . . . I needed forms that could flail, fail, lists listing back toward their
>
> not-so-fresh catalysts, sepsis of afterbirth still lodged in the body, that
>
> which once nurtured lingering malignant. (1)

Malech is perhaps arguing that negative emotional states (guilt, obsessive ruminating, self-flagellation) can effect a psychological sepsis. The primary subject matter of "Stet" of broken relationships and affairs are those which involve typically involve obsessive rumination after the fact, some form of atonement, followed by a new personal iteration. Thus, an appropriate technique is one that is "listing back towards" the problem—obsessively working over the past failures (lines) to make new iterations (the next line)—through an obsessive rearrangement of letters. The violent strictures of the anagram process also lead the poet to "flail" grammatically and syntactically in order to make new words when so constrained. The constraints of anagram are also appropriate, Malech implies, for a traumatised and confused speaker:

> begged off bad beginnings, false starts of a star-sat self, her benched head cartoon bird
>
> spun, stunned out a long season. (1)

Her head is "benched," after being "spun" around in the manner of a "cartoon bird." She is "stunned" and seeing stars after a "long season" of "bad beginnings" and "false starts" , and has, thus, decided to sit out the season on the bench. The extreme nature of the anagrammatical strictures are mimetic of the speaker's mental confusion. The forms she needs are those that "flail" for words that will fit in the remixed version, and "fail" due to grammatical compromises—elision of particles, incorrect word forms, abbreviations, and incongruous slang—in order to move the poem to the next line. This failing and flailing technique echoes the difficult process that the speaker must undergo when remaking herself. Malech posits the anagram as a form that fits the confessional mode, with its neurotic rumination on past events ("listing back"), as well as exploring matters too "malignant" for consideration in lyric poetry. Nelson points out the tendency of early confessional poets to write about matters that were then considered off-limits for the lyric, such as surgeries and menstruation (34). Malech's image of the "sepsis of afterbirth" is an example of a personal disclosure of the kind that made confessional poetry controversial when it first emerged in the 1950s. At a figurative level, the malignancy could refer to the unhealthy effects of neurotic obsession with—and self-flagellation over—past mistakes. A form which allows failures (the

anagram), Malech suggests, is an apt poetic strategy for negotiating past mistakes. She implies that the limitations of the anagram contribute to her theme: that within each renewed version of the speaking self, her life, her body, lurks the previous version—the mistakes and missteps—and that, however much we "rearrange . . . the trace remains, asks after, echoes back into and of its origins—" (3). Malech implies that the repetitive re-litigation of past mistakes is well-facilitated by the anagram, which requires an obsessive focus on the past (letters, actions) in order to lurch forward to the next line.

In "ESSAY   AS YES," Malech suggests that Oulipian proceduralism is the best way to manage the shameful, confessional material in *Stet*. She points out that, "The best I could do was an embarrassment, crying for do-overs, blushes reread, reacts in redactions" (2), implying that embarrassing material is well suited to forms that enable the speaker to revisit, re-enact, revise, reconfigure, or redact past iterations. The shame that the speaker feels has her "crying for do-over," implying that she is desperate for a chance to make amends for something at which she at first failed. The need to revisit personal issues is also shown in the "reread[ing]" of "blushes," which implies the speaker is ashamed of her actions, and wishes to reflect on her actions. Furthermore, the speaker wishes to take back (redact) past reactions, both through the process of anagramming and erasure. While not explicitly stated in this poem, it can be inferred that Malech's argument for anagram and—to a lesser extent—erasure to write about confessional material results from the fact that personal trauma is distinguished by both an obsessive focus on past mistakes, and a need to reframe in order to move on from those events. A procedure that enables both rumination on and reinvention through the remixing of letters, satisfies both the neurotic element of the confessional tradition as well as tapping into the more positive aspect of confession as an element of ritualised and restorative religious traditions. Thus, in such a reading, Malech's constraints are thematised, with the process of the autobiographical interactions mirroring that of the forms used to describe those relationships.

No Other Letters Can Be Called for Help

Malech's blend of French avant-garde proceduralism with the confessional tradition is facilitative of surprisingly raw results The hybridisation of anagram with confessional material, while unusual, is not unprecedented, as in German poet and visual artist Urnica Zürn, whom Malech cites as an influence. Malech points out that she "found Unica Zürn as I

tried to feel less aesthetically alone" ("Unica Zürn: It lies in your hand" Malech) in her anagrammatic project. Malech comments on the Oulipo writers:

> I found much of their work more theoretically and formally interesting (a display of structural virtuosity) than emotionally moving. There is a raw darkness in Zürn's work and a seeming urgency (*necessity*, even) to her methods that I hold close. ("Unica Zürn: It lies in your hand" Malech)

The "raw darkness" and "seeming urgency" that Malech identifies in Zürn's poetry is most likely connected to her material which, like Malech's, is emotionally charged— Zürn suffered from depression and psychosis until she took her own life at 57, and her poetry reflects the intense mental pressure she was under. In his accompanying notes on a translation of nine of Urnica Zürn's anagram poems, "Postface to Hexentexte" Hans Bellmer, the surrealist artist and long-time partner of Zürn, comments about the form:

> At close inspection the anagram is seen to arise from a violent and paradoxical dilemma. It demands the highest possible tension of the form-giving will and, simultaneously, the exclusion of premeditated purposeful shaping, because of the latter's sterility. The result acknowledges - in a slightly uncanny manner - that it owes more to the help of some "other" than to one's own consciousness. This sense of an alien responsibility and of one's own technical limitations - only the given letters may be used and no others can be called upon for help - leads toward a heightened flair, an unrestrained and feverish readiness for discoveries, resulting in a kind of automatism. Chance seems to play a major role in the result, as if without it no language reality were true, for only at the end, after the fact, does it - surprisingly - become clear that this result was necessary, that no other was possible.

While Bellmer attributes the unsettling results of anagramming to "automatism," "chance," and "the help of some other"—factors which are outside the control of the author and connote an element of the supernatural—the "raw" element of such poems is, in my opinion, due more to the strangeness or defamiliarisation that results when using constraints. If one is prevented from using the "correct" words, then the effect on language is to reduce it to its more primitive version, one which is less conditioned by all of the language "rules" by which we are bound.

If *Stet* is said to be in conversation with the intense anagrammatical confessionalism of Urnica Zürn, it explores an even deeper connection with Sylvia Plath, who is a key figure in the Confessional school of the 1950s and 60s, by remixing Plath's nine-line poem about pregnancy, "Metaphors," into the nine anagrammatic poems in the fifth and final section of

Malech's collection. Malech comments in a 2018 interview published on the Princeton University Blog that "Unica Zürn and Sylvia Plath (both mothers who took their own lives) echo through the book" ("Dora Malech on *Stet*: Poems" Malech). When we speak of confessional poetry, we often think of the poetry that is raw, in the sense described by Lowell in his acceptance speech for the National Book Award in 1960, of a "poetry of scandal" which dishes up "blood-dripping gobbets" to "midnight listeners." However, as Malech points out, "I think Plath gets unfairly thought of as sort of hysterical and humorless, which is the farthest thing from what she was. She was so funny and witty and clever, and so I wanted to engage with that aspect of her work" ("Must We Fail in One Form to Find Another?" Lewty and Malech). Malech describes Plath's poem, "Metaphors," which provides the material for *Stet's* final section as "incredibly playful":

> Metaphors
>
> I'm a riddle in nine syllables,
> An elephant, a ponderous house,
> A melon strolling on two tendrils.
> O red fruit, ivory, fine timbers!
> This loaf's big with its yeasty rising.
> Money's new-minted in this fat purse.
> I'm a means, a stage, a cow in calf.
> I've eaten a bag of green apples,
> Boarded the train there's no getting off. (41)

The poem has an exuberant, Pindaric tone, with the metaphors ascribed to the pregnant female emphasising her fecundity (she is ripe "red" fruit, "yeasty") and size ("an elephant", house", "fat purse"), with images that emphasise the ridiculousness of the pregnant state, by contrasting the size of the baby ("a melon") with that of the woman's legs ("two tendrils"). The extravagant nature of the metaphors underline the lack of agency the female has over her body, so that she is reduced to "a means, a stage, a cow in calf," rather than being seen as a human in her own right.

Malech extends Plath's idea with poems that represent each month of pregnancy, and in her homage implying that she is remaking and expanding Plath's concept for a 21st century audience. Malech's project highlights the extreme restrictions placed on the female by

childbirth, by limiting her "palette" (for nine poems) to the words of one poem. That is, each "After Plath" poem is an anagram of Plath's entire "Metaphors" poem (Malech 66). The poem below, for example, represents the six-month gestation mark:

AFTER PLATH: METAPHORS VI

[Money's new-minted in this fat purse]

I've been a flag left planted on a distant

planet. Its seed singing in an empty shell,

a file sighing, stone to sand. See if I defy

I, defy firmament, petri's eager agar,

proverbial whore to culture, embrace

what blooms in a windowless room,

in a laboratory rinsed in sun's hot tints,

shining from the inside out.

Malech's opening metaphor draws a parallel between pregnancy and space exploration, with connotations of risk, adventure, and personal transformation. Malech's imagery also evokes the alienating effect of gestation on the woman, who has been "left" on a "distant planet" and is an "empty shell." In addition, Malech could also be hinting that she was planted there by a male—in a similar way that men mark new territories with a flag, the speaker has been marked by the pregnancy—and has now has a much reduced control over her body. These images echo the sentiments in Plath's poem. However, Malech also shows the increased impact of medicalisation on modern childbirth, implying that the estrangement results from both the influence of science (the petri dish, the laboratory tests) and cultural pressures ("whore to culture") surrounding motherhood. Malech's "conception" of pregnancy, like Plath's, relies on contrast. However, the discourse of scientific terms clashes with those that suggest a more romantic, sentimentalised version of gestation. The "bloom" happens in a "windowless room", with the potential implication of IVF or blood testing; the seed "sing[s]", the file "sigh[s]", showing the blend of the scientific/procedural and the romantic in the process. The severe limits imposed on this poem by the process produces combinations that are compelling partly for the insights they reveal, and partly because of their oddness. "Petri's eager agar" is an example of an image that is startling in its strangeness, because the description of the "agar" (culture that is used to grow microorganisms in the laboratory on a petri dish) is "eager" is both funny and accurate—accurate because of its facilitation of

(eagerness for) growth, and funny because of the clash of the sterility of the scientific terms with that which implies an overflow of enthusiasm (eagerness). If Malech is suggesting that the pregnant female is overtaken by scientific discourse, the desire of the petri's agar to grow suggests an eagerness to be viewed under the microscope. Malech channels the Oulipian approach of thematising form, in that the incredible restrictions she places on the poem—requiring a complete anagram of a previous poem which corresponds to that month of the pregnancy—is a task so overwhelming in its limitations that it seems almost impossible. Thus the incredible limitations that the procedure places on Malech reflects the limitations of pregnancy: the female body is overwhelmed by the needs of another form (the baby's body), and must work extremely hard within these limitations to respond creatively. In addition, there is a suggestion of both a poetic legacy being passed down—from Plath to the speaker—which she honours by paying tribute to "Metaphors".

Conclusion

One of the central questions, both of Malech's third collection, *Stet*, and the criticism surrounding elliptical-style/hybrid poetry is this: is it just a word game? Games, while attractive to some experimental poets, would seem insufficient to satisfy the demands of the lyric that it surrender to "the sweaty enclosures of subject matter and the potential embarrassment of sincerity" (Hoagland 179). As Shepherd (2009) asks: "What does the lyric mean in our contemporary post-everything world, one that has been described as depthless, fundamentally inauthentic, and at if not past the end of history? (xiii)" The answer provided by the poems in *Stet* is that, while poetry that foregrounds form presents significant challenges to the reader—themes are more difficult to decipher and the poems cohere in a looser way than in more traditional poetry—the emotional, which is to say lyric, rewards are there for the reader willing to participate in the making of meaning. Malech comments on this in an interview:

> The lived stakes of *Stet* are fragmented and submerged, but they are present nonetheless – relationships, closures, and apertures enacted in language. I hope that the pleasure I take in the materiality of language translates to pleasure for the reader, and I hope that the emotional intensity I channeled into the process of making and remaking translates as well. As *Stet* is a book that foregrounds process, it's also a book that invites the reader to participate in that process and in the act of meaning-making. That engagement can bring its own kind of pleasure, and for someone asking "why poetry?"

This collection foregrounds that very question ("Dora Malech on Stet: Poems" Malech).

For the reader willing to participate in "meaning-making," *Stet* is an innovative blend of "raw" confessional material with the "cooked" constrained forms of anagram and erasure that continue to ask the question implicit in Lowell's National Book Award speech in 1960, which is how to combine two "competing poetries":

The cooked, marvelously expert, often seems laboriously concocted to be tasted and digested by a graduate seminar. The raw, huge blood-dripping gobbets of unseasoned experience are dished up for midnight listeners. There is a poetry that can only be studied, and a poetry that can only be declaimed, a poetry of pedantry, and a poetry of scandal. I exaggerate, of course. (Lowell)

Malech combines the "blood-dripping gobbets" of the confessional with the formal "cooked" element of Oulipian proceduralism, making an innovative blend in which the formal constraints in combination with the personal material leads to paradoxically "raw" results. The limitations placed on the language by the procedures create an emotional grammar that is stripped of artifice, and is very much of the body: meaty, messy, and bloody. As outlined in the Introduction, elliptical-style poets are sometimes criticised for a lack of commitment to theme (Hoagland 179), homogenising previously disparate elements into a bland blend (Greenburg et al 125), an apolitical stance (Greenburg et al 139), and humourlessness (Greenburg et al 130). There is no doubt that *Stet* is an extremely challenging read, which sometimes saw me get lost, and sometimes saw me stumble. However, on the whole, Malech's Oulipian-Confessional blend makes for a bold, funny, bizarre collection in which the demands are high but the rewards are great. The rawness of Malech's results, which are facilitated by the extreme strictures of the anagram, communicate the central theme of the poem: a speaker's ability to remake herself after traumatic events, and to rediscover joy and, perhaps, unexpected delights in the process. Malech's games are not games for games sake but, instead, serious games, designed to both remake the speaker and to show the reader how she does it. The collection is an instruction manual for the broken, for whom procedures and rituals work to reform the speaking self.

Conclusion and Discussion of *57 New Words*

In the critical portion of this thesis, I examine the ways in which Hayes, Sharif, and Malech use elliptical-style techniques to assert and locate value in poetry that deals with collective or individual trauma. My central question—how do elliptical-style poets assert and locate value in their poetry?—draws on a critique by Hoagland of the poetry in this oeuvre, which he describes as "skittery" (173) and criticises on the basis that "the poetic pleasure of elusiveness, inadvertently, commits itself to triviality" (187). Other critics and scholars have noted that elliptical-style poetry (especially in the Hybrid strand) can be apolitical, humourless, and aesthetically uninspiring, due to the homogenising effect of combining two previously dissonant strands (the experimental and the traditional). The creative portion of my thesis, which follows, a manuscript of poetry called *57 New Words*, explores the same question posed by Hoagland and other critics: how can an elliptical-style poetics assert and locate value in verse?

While I admire the technical brilliance, nerve, and linguistic virtuosity demonstrated by elliptical-style poetics, I am at times disappointed at the end of encounters with such poems. It is akin to eating a meal that looks great on the plate, and which combines unusual ingredients in startlingly innovative ways, but leaves one unsatisfied. In the more extreme cases, I felt such poems are designed primarily to show off the cleverness of the poet—while, ultimately, serving only to demonstrate the poet's—and, by extension, the poems'—deep triviality. While I am interested in experimentation and expanding my range as a poet, I do not want to do so at the expense of engaging with issues seriously. I wanted in my own work to explore many of the questions that I have looked at in my critical section, which come from two opposite directions. How can elliptical-style poets foreground word games without committing their poems to triviality? How can poems approach structural issues without tipping over into polemic? The poetry of Hayes, Sharif, and Malech, provided a way forward. The three poets are technically innovative, and fall broadly within the elliptical-style aesthetic, but as I have described at length in the critical section their "games" work in service of their themes, rather than as an end in themselves. For example, Hayes' alter ego creation, Lighthead, is deeply committed to deflection, contradicting himself, jokes, games, and irony, but this deflection is in service of a thematic argument: Lighthead is an embodiment of Hayes' stated aim to write about race, but without having "to choose a side" ("A Conversation with Terrance Hayes" Hayes 66). Hayes does not want a persona speaker who can be reduced to a type, so he uses elliptical-style techniques—wearing a mask, deflection, irony, and combining

unlikely things—to maintain Lighthead's integrity. Sharif also uses gaps and shifts among registers and discourses to engage with issues of substance. For example, Sharif redacts a letter to show the severed emotional connection between a spouse and her political prisoner husband. The reader is invited to experience the anxiety caused by the gaps on the page, as well as the thrill of new linguistic connections enabled by the redaction process. Malech, in turn, employs the challenges of the anagram to show the possibilities for her speaker's renewal as the combinatory new of the rearranged words allows the speaker to move on from her emotional trauma. Hayes, Sharif, and, most especially, Malech, provide an open-ended experience for the reader, who is asked to participate in the meaning-making process.

It is worth noting that the experiments I conducted in my own work using erasure, anagram, and even, on occasion, persona speakers (a technique at which I had years of practice) were at times failures. In some cases, after months of committed and exhausting work that I approached with an evangelical fervour, I had nothing to show for it. However, what I discovered during this failure, while not contributing directly to the creative portion of this thesis, gave me a number of insights into both the difficulty of writing poetry that engages with political issues (Hayes and Sharif) and that which foregrounds procedural issues (as per the Oulipo anagrammatical approach utilised by Malech). While I won't catalogue all of the failures, one example is a series of anagram poem along the lines of Malech's anagrammatical collection, *Stet*. Unlike Malech's poems, which centred around a personal narrative of infidelity, divorce, re-marriage, and pregnancy, the poems were about disparate topics: the end of a relationship, the artist's struggle to make a living, marathon running, and coming of age. While it did not yield any usable results, I discovered that, when you foreground a form, such as the anagram, the concerns of the poem really work best when performed by the chosen restraint. Malech's poems are about taking apart and remaking the speaker's self. This process is echoed by the anagram, which dismantles and remixes the previous line in order to make a subsequent one. According to Oulipo laws, form has a thematic effect (Roubaud 42). In practical terms, this means that a poet cannot randomly assign a foregrounded form to a topic or theme without considering if they match. There was nothing in my disparate topics that spoke to the anagram form in particular, and the lack of connection meant the poems became games that were played for the sake of playing a game, rather than serving a larger purpose. Thus I observed, through my own creative practice, the way in which these processes do and do not work.

My resulting collection, *57 New Words*, is in four parts: "Beside Herself," "Hotel," "O, [Christchurch]," and "Code of Confinement." The speaker appears in third-person alter

ego forms as Miss Dust and Cockroach, as well as I- or you-speakers. The section "Beside Herself" centres primarily on the speakers' struggles as a young person: at high school, as a law graduate, and in Japan; the section "Hotel" examines the speaker's experience on a writer's residency at the University of Iowa in 2015; in "O, [Christchurch]," the speaker responds to the 2019 massacre of 51 Muslim New Zealanders at two mosques in Christchurch; the final section, "Code of Confinement," examines the Covid-19 lockdown in New Zealand in March 2020 from a number of angles. In sum, I explore strategies in sympathy with those I examine in my critical section: alter ego speakers (Miss Dust and Cockroach); found or found-adjacent techniques, including erasure; associative techniques; and more straightforward lyric sequences, using "I" speakers or narrative.

At the centre of the first section, "Beside Herself," is "My Friend from High School," and accompanying poems, "Friend," "School Friend, High," "Miss Dust & the High School Friend," and "Nastassja on the Wall." The poems examine the speaker's unease at the relationship of her friend with the friend's stepfather, which is strongly suggestive of sexual abuse. I use a variety of techniques, including the narrative first person in the central poem ("My Friend from High School"), erasure ("Friend"), a cut-up poem ("School Friend, High"), an alter ego remix ("Miss Dust & the High School Friend"), and a poem zooming in on a detail contained in the original poem—a poster of Nastassja Kinski on the wall ("Nastassja on the Wall"). My intention was to use elliptical-style techniques to circle around the incident and look at it from different angles, to imply the rumination on—and reexamination of—the issue by the speaker, who reimagines herself as the camera, surveying the scene ("Miss Dust & the High School Friend"), and wonders how the stepfather must feel ("School Friend, High"). In addition, I engage in conversation with the poster of Nastassja Kinski, connecting to the broader cultural problem of objectification of women, although Kinski in no sense sees herself as a victim—the Boa Constrictor was, after all, her idea.

The title of the second section, "Hotel," operates as a metaphor for the blend of privilege, intense connection, and dissociation of living in the U.S. on a writer's residency. This section uses a wide variety of techniques, including appropriated forms ("Periplaneta Americana" and "Facebook Permissions"), alter ego speakers, and prose poems. In a central poem, the importance of the name of the speaker's alter ego is explored ("Miss Dust Explains Her Name"). Miss Dust is a restless, speedy character—she likens herself to a dust devil—who is strongly independent: she "goes wherever the fuck she likes" (116), and is a runner. Thus the naming of the persona-masks adds an extra layer to the poem—as additional qualities can be imputed to the speaker based on her moniker. The other mask used in "Hotel"

is "Cockroach." The name Cockroach was chosen for its strong negative connotations: filthy, disease-ridden, and invasive. On the other hand, cockroaches are also incredibly resilient and able to survive almost any hardship. The connotations of Cockroach's name convey the speaker's perception that she is not fully human. She is presented in contrast to the novelist ("Cockroach & the Novelist"), who is childfree, while Cockroach is depressed (she recommends having children as suicide prevention), possibly weighted by family obligations and, despite her reputation as a speedy insect, is outrun by the novelist who "always seems to be almost running" (127).

The section "O, [Christchurch]" mainly focuses on the speaker's response to the Christchurch massacre in 2019. It is worth noting that my interest in Christchurch is another case where initially a number of my elliptical-style experiments in working through these poems failed and are not included in the manuscript. Specifically, I attempted a series of erasure poems I wrote about the Christchurch Massacre, which occurred on 15 March 2019, and resulted in 51 deaths. For forty days (beginning on the day of the massacre) I took a running record consisting of all the words I saw or heard during a 20-minute period during that day (the times varied; sometimes I took two running records). I made a poem using the words on the running record (if there were two, I could choose which one I used). The rules were that, with the exception of the title, the poem was made by erasing existing words from the script in the order that I wrote them down. The intention of the project was that the radical mindfulness involved in paying attention every day for 20-minutes to all the words that surrounded me would translate into moving, original, and distinctive lyric poems that also engaged with the experimental oeuvre. The resulting poems were unusable. However, as failures they provided useful case studies as to why procedural poetry (as per Malech) is so fiendishly difficult to pull off and also, somewhat surprisingly, some insights into what would make procedural poetry work, if one were to make it work. This experiment also highlighted the challenge of writing political poetry of this kind.

One reason these poems did not work is because there is nothing in my personal background, history, or identity that connects me in a meaningful way to the subject matter. First of all, I am a female, Pākehā, middle-aged woman who is not a Muslim. Therefore, I do not have a significant stake in the tragedy. To the contrary, red flags are raised concerning a person from a privileged majority appropriating the pain of those from a minority group. Secondly, the choice of the erasure technique to write about a literal erasure of a group of people based on their religion and ethnicity raised questions of appropriation. The third problem was that the texts I was using (my running records) were composed primarily of

transactional language, such as overhead conversations, building signage, news reports and the like. Thus, the nature of the words I was restricted to was an additional barrier. It was not surprising that the experiment did not yield any usable results. If writing about political matters is to succeed, the poet must have a personal stake in the subject matter. Hayes can write so persuasively about race in the U.S. because he is African-American and has lived in the United States for his whole life. Sharif can write persuasively about the immigrant experience because she is an immigrant to the U.S. from Iran via Turkey. She can write in the persona of Um Fatima Hamdan in the letters to Guantánamo because, although she is not from Yemen, she is of Middle Eastern origin, and, therefore, is proximate to the kinds of issues that her assumed persona faces. I am not meaning to imply that a poet must have lived experience of everything that they write about, but more to say that the poet must have some personal stake in the material in order for the poem to have integrity.

Given my failed experiments and the reasons for those, I needed to distance myself from the material to avoid issues of appropriation. The primary way I distanced myself from the material in the development of the section "O, [Christchurch]" was by using the alter ego speaker, Miss Dust, as she is (like Berryman's Henry), "not the poet, not me" (Berryman xxx). The poems are based around the speaker's trip to the central north island town, Taupo, on the day that the massacre occurred. The shock of the speaker is shown mainly through the animation of environments—the Desert Road, the motel, Lake Taupō, and the red bicycle installation beside the lake. The objects or environments are filtered through the speaker's unease and shock to suggest the violence underlying the environment. Pylons stomp in "steel caps" ("Miss Dust Drives the Desert Road"); bodies are "stitched into the carpet" in the motel room ("Miss Dust in a Motel Room"), and the woman in the lake is wearing a "scream bikini" (Miss Dust & the Monster Lake"). Miss Dust's experience of finding out about the massacre is in the shape of the day on which the tragedy occurred. Her perception of the Desert Road, the motel, the lake, reflects her perception of the violence she perceives embedded in the lived environment and, by implication, the cultural environment in New Zealand.

An experiment which did yield usable results led to the fourth and final section, "Code of Confinement," my response to the lockdown in New Zealand just after the Covid-19 virus arrived here in March 2020. I have employed a wide variety of strategies in this section, but the most significant is the use of found-adjacent techniques in the "Code of Confinement." My intention in this section is to create an alternative lockdown lexicon in which I reimagine public health discourse terms, and, thus, resist the grinding depression of being surrounded— and governed—by transparent, transactional language. Sharif's use of found language from

the Department of Defense Dictionary hugely influenced this final section. Most obviously, I started the lines of the first four poems in the section with "whereas," as a nod to her poem "Look" (3-4). I wanted to convey how we had entered into an environment in which our actions were governed by legislation, thus using legal discourse within a poem. Also, I wished to collapse the spaces between unlikely things, so as to reveal the unlikely connections—and proximate relationships—of the new environment. For example, I used ridiculous terms, such as FUZZY BEASTS to describe the teddy bears left in the windows for the children to look at on their lockdown walks. I wished to imply that this new reality was both hilarious and scary—there are beasts, but we are pretending—to our children, at least—that they are fuzzy. My intention was to refresh and re-envision the transactional language people were surrounded in to offer hope—that lyric musicality could transcend the stale, depressing lockdown language.

Navigating the question of how one can assert and locate value in elliptical-style poetry in dual modes when approaching individual or collective problems—both through analysis of the poetry of Hayes, Sharif, and Malech, and, in my own poetry—has been a dynamic process in which the examination of the poets in the critical section has fed into a series of experiments in the creative section, some of which, as in the "Code of Confinement," have resulted in usable outputs for my thesis. Others, while not yielding poetry that can be included in the thesis, taught me a lot of about the ways in which the relationship between technique and theme works in elliptical-style poetry—it is a dialogue, not a monologue. The technique and the theme must jostle productively with one another, so that the lyric surprises inform the theme, and, just as importantly, the theme talks back to the language.

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Creative Portion of Thesis:
57 NEW WORDS

Table of Contents

Code of Confinement

Code of Confinement

BESIDE HERSELF

Miss Dust Considers Her Composition, Which is a Wonder

Space rocks have been found in her.
        DDT has been found in her.
Lightning scabs have been found in her.
        Moonlight has been found in her.
Cat hair has been found in her.
        Dog saliva has been found in her.
Scars from tinsel sprinkled all over Christmas.
        The needles of the Christmas tree.

Why Miss Dust is not a Pop Star

When she was young, she wanted to
be a pop star. She didn't think about
the logistics of the pop star life: soupy
seats on tour buses, backup singers weeping
mascara rivers, trying to hold onto a boyfriend
for more than two months, when they're
never in their lounge together. She didn't
know about fish mouth or Molly, vocal
nodules or paparazzi on Vespas shooting
Canons. She didn't know about managers
who fly to Portugal with all the dollars
from the last world tour. She didn't think
about the fact she was not very good at singing.

Miss Dust at the Party

The night she loses
her friends, she's wearing
a monkey suit. The suit is
hot, due to the 100%
fake hair.

The mask makes
her glasses fog up. She can
hardly see through the eye-
holes. "Could you take off the
mask?" a man asks.

The girls on the stairs are
drinking Hi-Lo & speaking
Sunglass. "I wish I
could get out of
this poem," says Miss Dust.

"I wish I could lip-
read," says the man. "Lip-
reading is against the
rules," says Miss Dust.
"Afraid is a monkey," say the girls.

My Friend from High School

Lived in a rented house which faced the road
& was identical to the house next door.
Airbrushed lesbians pashed in a poster
in the lounge & I remember thinking,
How do they make their tongues look so wet?
As if I could reach up & touch those tongues,
& the juice would pour down my arms.
A naked Nastassia Kinski lay along the wall
by the stairs, which led to the stepfather
& mother's bedroom, a Boa Constrictor's
forked tongue paused against her exquisite ear.
Her stepfather & mother were always starting
unlikely businesses, which bloomed & twisted,
died out as quickly as they began, her stepfather
snapping photographs for her modelling portfolio.
It was the 80s & spiral perms, bikini shots, you know
what I mean? The back of the house clawed out
at the native bush: raw with Manuka, splattered
with bloody little pink flowers. One day while I
was perched on the couch in front of the enormous
television, my friend showed me a photo in the family album.
She was lying on the couch that we were sitting on.
In the *photo*, I mean, she was lying on her stomach
on the leather couch in a red lace negligee. "It's a teddy,"
she said. That word, *teddy*, so creepy as I type it now,
the voices of the cafe swarming in the background,
harsh coffee grinder cry, half-glass of merlot, swinging
below the legal limit line. I'm trying to imagine
the logistics of the shoot. Her stepfather pausing
in his incessant snapping, lowering that expensive
camera, which his face was always shoved into,
its grotesque black nose, extending & retracting.
He must have run out back to the rabbit perched
behind the chicken wire. He would have held that rabbit
so tenderly in his big hands, with the dense black hairs
sprouted across the backs. He must have felt the hammer
of her little heart thudding, the appalling softness
of her stomach, her tender rabbit nose, twitching,
as he lowered it, carefully, into that spot,
that gap, where the butt crack meets the thighs.

MY FRIEND FROM HIGH SCHOOL

Lived in a rented house which faced the road
& was identical to the house next door.
Airbrushed lesbians pashed in a poster
in the lounge & I remember thinking,
How do they make their tongues look so wet?
As if I could reach up & touch those tongues,
& the juice would pour down my arms.
A naked Nastassia Kinski lay along the wall
by the stairs, which led to the stepfather
& mother's bedroom, a Boa Constrictor's
forked tongue paused against her exquisite ear.
Her stepfather & mother were always starting
unlikely businesses, which bloomed & twisted,
died out as quickly as they began, her stepfather
snapping photographs for her modelling portfolio.
It was the 80s & spiral perms, bikini shots, you know
what I mean? The back of the house clawed out
at the native bush: raw with Manuka, splattered
with bloody little pink flowers. One day while I
was perched on the couch in front of the enormous
television, my friend showed me a photo in the family album.
She was lying on the couch that we were sitting on.
In the *photo*, I mean, she was lying on her stomach
on the leather couch in a red lace negligee. "It's a teddy,"
she said. That word, *teddy*, so creepy as I type it now,
the voices of the cafe swarming in the background,
harsh coffee grinder cry, half-glass of merlot, swinging
below the legal limit line. But there was something else
in that photograph: a rabbit. I'm trying to imagine
the logistics of the shoot. Her stepfather pausing
in his incessant snapping, lowering that expensive
camera, which his face was always shoved into,
its grotesque black nose, extending & retracting.
He must have run out back to the rabbit perched
behind the chicken wire. He would have held that rabbit
so tenderly in his big hands, with the dense black hairs
sprouted across the backs. He must have felt the hammer
of her little heart thudding, the appalling softness
of her stomach, her tender rabbit nose, twitching,
as he lowered it, carefully, into that spot,
that gap, where the butt crack meets the thighs,

School Friend, High

House, airbrushed. How do
they make those tongues?

Snapping spiral. Perms,
you know what I

mean! House perched
on a television. Lying

on the leather in red,
she was something else

inside the wire. Big
hands, dense

black hairs, sprouted.
He must have felt.

Miss Dust & the High School Friend

I'm trying to imagine the feathers,
the fast felt-tap of the claw-next-door.

I'm the camera, looking
at the *show-me* couch.

The mother-red leather
is splattered with juice.

The ashtray is snapping
at the television.

NASTASSJA ON THE WALL

I remember you lived in a boa, Nastassja,
I remember the road, juiced with rain,
I remember you, blue-tacked to the wall,
with a look that said, "Money!"

The history of men watching women.
The history of women watching themselves
being watched, the history of lying
on cold concrete for hours,

while a snake sulks at your feet.
The history of *whose stupid idea was this?*
The history of *oh, it was mine, fuck!*
The history of *do you have any ideas, Nastassja?*

The boa constrictor slides from your feet to
your face. It displays its pale pink gums.
It samples the scent of your exquisite
ear with its forked tongue.

PRINTS CHARMING

What do you say to the Prints you meet on the edge of the leaf?
"Don't leaf me hanging."
What do you say to the woman who's addicted to chitchat on the telephone?
"This is Prints Charming."
And what if love got tired and lay down to rest?

I am writing you this poem because I can't write you a love poem,
because then they might know that it was about you
or it was about me
or it was about you/me.
Yumi is a girl's name in Japan.

The Yumi I knew found a very bad man,
& when Yumi found him, she made him her husband.
Yumi was always breaking up with her husband
or making up with her husband.

Husbands, like weather, can be bad in Japan.
The sea in Japan got worse with the weather.
Sometimes it swept whole people off.
It would not give the people back.

ADMISSION TO THE BAR AS A BARRISTER AND SOLICITOR OF THE HIGH COURT OF NEW ZEALAND

an erasure from the Practice Briefing: Counsel Moving Admission of Barristers and Solicitors to the High Court on the New Zealand Law Society website

To apply for a temporary purpose of being,
you will need to provide
references,

wear
a wig and
a skin,
where possible, tied back.

At the appointed time the Crier
will bring in the Taken.

Please take the right hand—

"Ladies

and gentlemen
do each of you

sincerely and truly declare

that you will be

satisfied?"

Miss Dust Scores a Law Firm Job

"What's your name?" asks Grunt.

Miss Dust thinks, *My name*
is Deep Sea Fish with Red Teeth.

The red teeth glow in the water
& terrify those who swim near me.

But, y'know, the nineties . . .
supposed to be a recession.

Kurt Cobain just can't
seem to snap out of his

cardigan. Miss Dust says,
"My name is whatever

you want it to be."

Miss Dust on Gardening

When I say baby, I mean break it down.
When I say break it down, I mean compost.
When I say compost, I mean worms will

eat it. When I say worms will eat
it, I mean worms will worm through
my eye sockets when I'm gone.

When I was young, I read a story about
a dying Buddhist master. The master yelled
out, "I don't want to die!"

Miss Dust & the Field of Bulls

She steps out of the house into the cool bite of the morning.
A knot of bulls is tearing at the dew-covered grass.
She walks up to the five wire fence & waits.
A lone bull peels away from the herd,
the machines of his shoulders churn underneath
the smooth & shining hair of his boned & muscled body.
He steps in closer & she can see from his yellow tag
that it's her favourite bull: number 522.
He nuzzles her with his wet, black nose,
he lassos her hand with his sandpaper tongue.
His eyes are dark & gleaming,
his neck is as smooth as a silk pillowcase.
Miss Dust could snap into two Miss Dusts.
Miss Dust could stand beside herself.

HOTEL

MISS DUST AT THE SCANNER

At the airport, officers yell "take off your shoes!"
Miss Dust kicks off her leopard print slides.
She lays them on a plastic tray.

Airport officers ask her to remove her belt.
Miss Dust pulls the strap through the loops
& coils the snake beside her slides.

The officers are afraid they'll have to examine
her peepers as well. Miss Dust scrapes out her eyes
& drops them onto the tray.

The airport officers are really sorry, but they'll also need to
scan her teeth. Miss Dust unscrews each
tooth & spits them out.

The molars are mountains extracted from red earth,
snow yellowed at the roots & patches of melt.
The snow is waiting for the eyes to push through.

MISS DUST EXPLAINS HER NAME

Dust devil

'A dust devil is a well formed
and relatively long-lived
whirlwind, ranging from
small to large.'[4]

'My primary vertical motion is upwards,' says Miss Dust.

Sand augers, dancers
in the desert, a willy-
willy, a whirly-whirly.

A good devil spins clockwise,
a bad one goes wherever the fuck she likes.

Sounds like

'It sounds like something else,' says D-Licious.
Miss Trust. Eat mine. Ashes to ashes.
Another one bites the… Miss Dust hates
a long goodbye almost as much as no goodbye.

'What do you call your child, mother?'
And on the seventh time, I answer,
'Miss Dust.'

Singing

Song fades to gone,
because it spends so much
time in the basement
of a house, slammed down
on the edge of a river,
in a different hemisphere
to the one she's used to.

---

[4] Wikipedia

Just before the morning comes,
the trees chomp into oil.

Morning run

"I run so slow because I run so long;
my legs are filled with longing," says Miss Dust.

Before light bleaches the path
She navigates by orange lamp.

You wouldn't know it's autumn
From the hunched shoulders of oaks.

There could be 23 carat gold paint
Splashed all over the trees, but we

Can't be sure: until the day shatters
Suddenly, flooding blades of grass,

The concrete path, Beckwith Boathouse,
The Boston terrier walking her owner,

The lonely wooden pony on the merry-
Go-round, cars crouched half-cold

in City Park, bottle-green heads of
drakes, who bark at ducks, the benches

beside the Iowa River hungry for human
company, other runners, who are crashing

into the light, which drenches their day-
glo singlets, climatec shorts, fluorescent

sneakers, which are churning, churning
into the morning.

I am Living in a Hotel

Outside the window a young man duct-tapes
a blue banner to a pillar: *Courage Ride*. Around
the corner, a blue banner hangs from a balcony:
TRUMP. Next morning, you run into Raed in
his silver tracksuit, with stripes of racing red.
He's carrying a bag of stale, white bread for the
ducks. "Wanna run?" you ask. Raed runs with
you for fifteen steps, with the white bread
slapping against his leg. You hold the hotel
in your sneakers. You toast the hotel at the
Foxhead Tavern. You raise a fork to the hotel
at Bread Garden Market & Bakery. You carry
the hotel in your red bricks, your steel railings,
your reception desk, your concrete steps.
When you walk away from the hotel,
the hotel walks with you.

TRANSLATIONS

In the common room, Raed is translating poetry into Arabic, the coffee machine is translating grounds into hot, brown water, the chairs call out, "Where are my people?" Raed asks, "How are you?" Translation: "Are you trying to write poetry, too?" "I'm gathering material," you say, which Raed translates as: "You're a squirrel with your nuts." "Yes," you say & smile. Translation: "I'm glacial". Translation: we can't really say "glacial" when even the glaciers are not really glacial anymore.

Outside the window the early evening translates the sky onto its red-pink underside. At the end of a long hallway washing machines translate quarters into clean jeans & shirts, which smell like sun & fresh air. Later that night Homeira from Afghanistan knocks on your door. When you open it, she says, "I'm looking for Burma." "Next door," you say & close the door. Translation: although you like to be alone you're lonely too. Translation: you wish the walls would fall in love with you.

Miss Dust at the Iowa University Library

The girl with the coke can in the cubicle
beside the window on the third floor of
the library yells out "fuck!" then "sorry!",
as a sparrow shoots across carpet. "It
happened to me last week," you say
to the girl about the sparrow, which came
like a mouse, so close to the ground
you thought it was running not flying.
It was the brownness plus the speed
which startled you, as if a mouse could
suddenly sprout wings, as if you might
see, on the concourse, mice fluttering
up into the branches of the poplar trees,
as if, instead of busy sparrows, which
turn their heads as if deep in thought,
you might look out the glass to see
the whiskers of a mouse, its soft, brown
fur, wings grafted onto its compact body,
tail curling around a branch, mouthing
the words, *write me!*

AMERICAN GHOST

The Iowa
farmer, who lives on
a hill, gives you & eight
other IWP fellows a ride on a
trailer, pulled by a tractor through
cornfie   lds. Stalks   of maize-
hair shriveled up at the end of summer,
scraggly, blonde, dry strands. The writer
from Nigeria says,   "Shall I jump?" We
say, "Do it!" When   he lands, he lands
with a   thump. That   would hurt, you
think. He runs back   to the trailer   &
hauls himself up onto   the hay bales. The
dusty, dirt-dried cobs,   with   brown & red   kernels,
like teeth punched out, blood spots in gaping mouths,
a ghost following the   trailer. "Fuck,   they have the
same clichéd ghosts in the   States that they have in
New Zealand," you say. If you were   asked to   draw
the ghost, you'd draw a white sheet. If you were asked
to look at the ghost, you'd walk up to the eyeholes &
peer inside. If you were asked to   touch   the   ghost,
you'd start   with   the   human bump of nose
underneath   the   cotton.

ODE TO CICADA

In a car park across from a graveyard in Sewanee,
a cicada falls out of the sky in front of you.
As you kneel before her on the bitumen,
you notice she's dressed in black velvet.
Her abdomen is studded with pearls,
her green wings are pressed against the hot tar,
her legs are lightly licking the sticky air.
You lay the cicada out in a plastic cup to rest
& set her down on your dorm room desk.
In six days' time, a colony of black-
pearl ants swarm her skeleton.
In six days' time, her perfume is the stench
of shoes infused with sweat.
You love this cicada.

Unwanted Gift

Everyone feels the same about Donald Trump,
except for those who don't.

Big pink man in the sauna at the Lido pool
thought Donald "a breath of fresh air."

Changying, who teaches English
with me, looked up from her miso soup

and said, "At least you know
what you're getting with Trump."

Karen Johnson, from Paihia Primary,
posted on Facebook,

"I'm overjoyed that Donald
Trump won the election."

Karen's father once insisted
on blessing my mother's sore wrist,

when she ran into him
at the local Four Square.

"Did it work?" I asked.
"No," she said, "it felt worse the next day."

FACEBOOK PERMISSIONS

a found poem from clause 3, The Permissions You Give Us, of Facebook's Terms and Conditions

Face like you, contented,
Face like you, downloaded,
Face like you, like, sub-face,
Face you like, like, friend face,
Face your, like, uploaded face,
Updated face, like, translatable,
Face like you, like, sponsored face,
Like you, like, sub-licensable face
Like you, like, non-transferable
Face like you, like, *give us your face*
Like,   back-up copies   of a deleted face,
                which may persist   as a face,   like.

Periplaneta Americana

This poem draws on material from "The Structure and Life History of the Cockroach," by L. C. Miall and Alfred Denny, first published in 1886 and reproduced online in 2016 by Project Gutenberg.

I am eating the bodies of other cockroaches.
I am cucarácha, I am schabe, I am Black Clock.
I am carried to the baker's in bread-baskets by soldiers.
I am often found in ships in London docks.

I am cucarácha, I am schabe, I am Black Clock.
I am mostly lurking in woods and thickets.
I am often found in ships in London docks.
I am gobbling dried fish in a Lapland village.

I am mostly lurking in woods and thickets.
I am the torment of Florida housekeepers.
I am gobbling dried fish in a Lapland village.
I am bark, leaves, lemons, oil, blacking, sugar.

I am the torment of Florida housekeepers.
I am imprisoned in a bell glass, loaded with a four-pound book.
I am bark, leaves, lemons, oil, blacking, sugar.
I am side by side with a rival, sharing warm crannies and food.

I am imprisoned in a bell glass, loaded with a four-pound book.
I am carried to the baker's in bread-baskets by soldiers.
I am side by side with my rival, sharing warm crannies and food.
I am eating the body of another cockroach.

COCKROACH

One day, Cockroach lost her head.
Next day, Cockroach was not dead.
"Cockroach, Cockroach, are you dead?"
"No, I only lost my head."

COCKROACH & THE NOVELIST

 "The best thing about breeding is you stop
seriously thinking about suicide," you say
to the novelist on the Chicago coach trip.
"My boyfriend & I don't want kids," she says.
Past the glass, speeding, a red barn in rain,
a JESUS SAVES sign in a field of maize,
a farmhouse crying over bright blue paint,
ROCK FALLS are only a ½ MILE away.
In Ireland, in her other life as a sculptor,
the novelist makes teeny tiny black dogs.
Whenever you run into her around Iowa,
she always seems to be almost-running
while you are dressed in running clothes.
You don't remember exactly when you
became a cockroach.
.

O, [CHRISTCHURCH]

Miss Dust Drives the Desert Road

Miss Dust unzips the black tar with her white car.
The purple heather kicks bruises into the sand hills.
Pylons stomp off through the scrub in their steel caps.
The blue-white snow is bleaching the mountains.

The toi-toi flags are waving in time with the wind,
& that pink couch, lying in the gravel at the roadside,
beside a cyclone wire fence & an ARMY AREA sign.
DANGER: Live firing may occur at any time.

Miss Dust in a Motel Room

 "There's Miss Dust," says the door,
"trailing bitumen." She's stumbling into

finding out. She's walking around
the room on stilts, picking her way

across the bodies stitched into the carpet.
Shrunken people are moving their mouths

inside the television. The enormous fluffy
microphone nods its *yes, yes* head.

Her brain spins like a bird in a cartoon.
Ambulance tunes, ambulance tunes.

Miss Dust & the Monster Lake

Miss Dust walks along the beach teeth,
sits down against the tree beside the DANGER cliff.

There are rocks on yellow signs, stickmen
missing cliffs & flying, finally.

Miss Dust is watching the bark-off boats
stir up the evening.

Miss Dust is watching the couple uncover
their bones & walk into the bruise.

Miss Dust is watching the woman
in a scream bikini.

RED PAINTED BICYCLES

Red painted bicycles zip-tied to the fence along Lake Taupo.
Red painted zip-tied-to-the-fence bicycles along the lake,
& the blue is a cold that calls out to couples to warm up their arms & their legs in an embrace
in the lake, & you say to yourself *get a room* as you bite your kebab, step closer
to the red painted bicycles zip-tied to the chain fence.
Up close, you notice that some are missing pedals, a seat, a chain, one is a child's bike,
a woman's bike, a man's bike, a road bike, a mountain bike, a bike which might be ridden
with a basket, all of these bikes have been ridden by someone, before they lost their pedals,
before they lost their seats, before they lost their chains, they were ridden
                                        by someone you have never met,
                before they were painted red.

Inside an Earthquake

Dolls rush through smoke,
carrying stretchers filled
with damaged dolls.

Shoes tap out beats
to the soprano scream
of the fire sirens.

A doll you recognise
from high school is
nodding seriously

into a microphone.
Someone has carved
frown lines into

her brow. Someone
has stuck lashes onto
her plastic eyelids.

BUFFALO

While you & Noor are waiting outside the Cook Street Dairy
for your dhosa you ask her, "What kind of tea do you drink
in Pakistan? Do you use cow's milk or other kinds of milk?"
"Buffalo milk," says Noor. "They have buffalo in Pakistan?
Buffalo. Buffalo." The more you say it, the funnier it sounds.
"My mother-in-law lives in a village with her buffalo," says Noor,
"Everyone is always giving her sons a hard time & saying, 'why
do you not look after your mother? Why do you leave her to live
with a buffalo?' But she loves that buffalo. Whenever someone
invites her to come visit, she says, 'but I have to feed the buffalo.'
She loves that buffalo more than her children." When your son leaves,
you will get yourself a buffalo. You will watch YouTube videos on how
to care for your buffalo. You will google "music to soothe your buffalo"
& "buffalo grooming hints". You will become president of the Society
For Awareness of Buffalo Welfare. You will invent 57 new words
for the sound of buffalo hooves on bitumen. All of your outfits
will be curated to match her reddish hair. Your buffalo will weep
in the corner of your lawn whenever you leave, but she will do so
quietly. Your nights will ripen into village parties. "These people,"
you cry, as you twirl & twirl, "Where were you all before?"
You can see the gathered backs of the herd tearing up the lawn,
they are sharing out the winds of the savannah. With their milk
you toast the moon: to the sky whose rhythm you thought you'd lost
forever. To the drum, which has taken on new hooves & got to beating.
To the buffaloes: you appoint them Chief Shredders of the torn grass;
you appoint them High Forest Eaters. Let us stand, let us stomp,
let us split open the skull's house & roam again.

BUFFALO

While you & Noor are waiting outside the Cook Street Dairy
for your dhosa you ask her, "What kind of tea do you drink
in Pakistan? Do you use cow's milk or other kinds of milk?"
"Buffalo milk," says Noor. "They have buffalo in Pakistan?
Buffalo. Buffalo." The more you say it, the funnier it sounds.
"My mother-in-law lives in a village with her buffalo," says Noor,
"Everyone is always giving her sons a hard time & saying, 'why
do you not look after your mother? Why do you leave her to live
with a buffalo?' But she loves that buffalo. Whenever someone
invites her to come visit, she says, 'but I have to feed the buffalo.'
She loves that buffalo more than her children." When your son leaves,
you will get yourself a buffalo. You will watch YouTube videos on how
to care for your buffalo. You will google 'music to soothe your buffalo'
& 'buffalo grooming hints'. You will become president of the Society
For Awareness of Buffalo Welfare. You will invent 57 new words
for the sound of buffalo hooves on bitumen. All of your outfits
will be curated to match her reddish hair. Your buffalo will weep
in the corner of your lawn whenever you leave, but she will do so
quietly. Your nights will ripen into village parties. "These people,"
you cry, as you twirl & twirl, "Where were you all before?"
You can see the gathered backs of the herd tearing up the lawn,
they are sharing out the winds of the savannah. With their milk
you toast the moon: to the sky whose rhythm you thought you'd lost
forever. To the drum, which has taken on new hooves & got to beating.
To the buffaloes: you appoint them Chief Shredders of the torn grass;
you appoint them High Forest Eaters. Let us stand, let us stomp,
let us split open the skull's house & roam again.

CODE OF CONFINEMENT

Reprint as at 1 March 2021

Code of Confinement 2020

Public Act   2020 No 13

Date of assent   3 February 2020

Commencement   see section 1(2)

Note

Ministry of Poetry coat of arms sourced from https://icon-library.com/icon/lyre-icon-11.html

This Code is administered by the Ministry of Poetry.

Contents

1   Short Title, Commencement, etc.

(1)   This Code may be cited as the Code of Confinement 2020.
(2)   This Code shall come into force on 19 March 2020.

2   Conditions of Confinement

(1)   Whereas the CENTRAL GOVERNMENT has sent the BODIES to their BOXES.

(2)   Whereas the BODIES must resist CONTACT LONGINGS arising in the presence of other BODIES, excluding the BODIES with whom they share a BOX.

(3)   Whereas the STANDING ALOOF POLICY requires the maintenance of SET SPIT SPACES between BODIES during DAY RELEASE.

(4)   Whereas DAY RELEASE is permitted for specific purposes, including dogs leading owners, prams pulling mothers, daughters walking fathers, bikes riding cyclists, and lawnmowers dragging box holders up and down their close-clipped berms.

(5)   Whereas DAY RELEASE excludes any pursuit that takes place in WILD H2O, BIRD CITIES, or HIGH PLACES.

(6)   Whereas travel out of BOX BOROUGHS is expressly forbidden for the purpose of gaping openly at suns slipping behind lakes, water smashing into stone-jeweled pools, or bleach blonde sand with ocean accents.

3   Wonder Workers

(1)   Whereas the BODIES whose work is deemed WONDERFUL by the CENTRAL
GOVERNMENT must continue to perform their WONDER WORK.

(2)   Whereas the NON-WONDER WORKERS may stand for one minutes' applause while
the WONDER WORKERS leave for their WONDER WORK.

(3)   Whereas the flesh-coloured leaves, flying around the lawn.

(4)   Whereas the yellow arm of the rubbish truck, opening its claws.

(5)   Whereas the bottles, screaming as they smash.

4   Small Humans

(1)   Whereas the SMALL HUMANS scour BOX BOROUGHS for FUZZY BEASTS who live in windows. They pause at the BOX BORDERS and wait for the FUZZY BEASTS to mouth *hello*, and worry that they'll freeze when the daylight leaves their BOXES.

(2)   Whereas the SMALL HUMANS ask:
   (a)   Why is Happy Birthday the official song?
   (b)   When will I see my shadows again? and
   (c)   Can I play on the LIGHT MACHINE as soon as I wake up?

(3)   Whereas a tie-dyed kite attached to the handlebars of a bike.

(4)   Whereas they ride until it almost runs out of string.

(5)   Whereas the harder the wind, the easier it is to fill the wings.

5   Food Gathering

(1)   Whereas the BOX BODIES must nominate one BODY to be the DESIGNATED GATHERER for their BOX.

(2)   Whereas the DESIGNATED GATHERERS must adhere to the STANDING ALOOF POLICY while floating through the fruit and vegetable displays at GIANT FOOD PLACES.

(3)   Whereas the crystal water on the lettuce.

(4)   Whereas the short, white fur of the Golden Queen.

(5)   Whereas the suns of Colby cheese lined up in the dairy section.

(6)   Whereas the tinned tomato sculpture, picked apart by the DESIGNATED GATHERER.

(7)   Whereas the pop songs match the long distance feelings of the DESIGNATED GATHERER.

(8)   Whereas my oxygen.

(9)   Whereas your ventricles.

(10)   Whereas our blues, which want to run away with our BODIES.

(11)   Whereas the lips of the DESIGNATED GATHERERS, mouthing the lyrics underneath their FACE COVERS.

Unexpected Item

"Unexpected item in bagging area, please remove this item before continuing."

More ginger than before,
this red item continues,
a real please, a red ease.

This ease is up for lease,
this lease is up for free,
this free has run up a tree.

Remove this O, remove
this please. Ease has left
this area, this red area.

Long Black: Level 3

Mourning jeans into *please*.
Long man laughs, "Yes, I am"
to joke option, "How are you?"

Bull brain worries the man
with screams, rains all over
his *yes, man* jeans.

Option (a) Short sip, black, hot!
Option (b) Soaked, starts walking.
Option (c) Man walks, raining.

SNOWBODIES

I feel bad about the chairlifts
I don't want the spaces to be empty
Snowmakers spray a fine snow spit

Single bodies at each end of seats
On each chair: two new BODIES
I feel bad about the chairlifts

Spare SPIT SPACES on leather seats
Stuck to sticks & boards: SNOWBODIES
Snowmakers spray a fine snow spit

I feel bad about the spaces for spit
I don't want the lifts to be lonely
I feel bad about the chairlifts

Lifts must miss the spit
Spaces too long for spit to leap
Snowmakers spray a fine snow spit

Seat spaces where BODIES used to sit
Sprayed with snow: my cheeks
I feel bad about the chairlifts
Snowmakers spray a fine snow spit

Memes

1. A BODY in army fatigues & a gas mask. Caption: Teacher of the Week.

2. A BODY & his SMALL HUMAN frowning at a jigsaw. Caption: 999 Piece Puzzle.

3. A BODY holding a whiteboard up to her three SMALL HUMANS. In blue marker across the top: DAILY SPELLING WORDS: ##@*!! %$@#!!! @@##!!!!

4. Two SMALL HUMANS dressed in pajamas, jumping in the air & smiling. Caption: New School Uniform!!!

5. A BODY in a business shirt, tie & tracksuit pants, holding a bottle of Tennessee Fire. Caption: Morning Meeting.

6. Two BODIES in front of their LIGHT MACHINES, wearing headphones, sitting beside each other in a king-sized bed. Caption: DESIRABLE DISTANCING.

Miss Dust's Advice Column

Dear Reader # 1

You're asking me about FULL SIZE HUMANS.
As a "keyboard worrier" I'm not so fond
of FULL SIZE HUMANS. I worry about my
readers only through the tiles. All the letters
I need are at my fingernails. If you have
a standard, lower it. If you have a crumb,
follow it. It's not true to say you won't
find enough crumbs to make a
good meal in this life.

Dear Reader # 2

You dream of women in FACE COVERS
attacking you with salad servers. You dream of
walking into the forest with a shovel & digging
for something someone told you was buried
years ago. Perhaps the clean skull of a goat.
Perhaps a moon's fingernail. Perhaps a diary
sealed in a zip-lock bag. You're pulling it
out of the hole. You're brushing
away the dirt. Un-zip it.

Dear Reader # 3

You're asking me to name a spirit
insect. I suggest a cockroach: swift &
certain, dirty. Can you live without a
head for a week? Are you fast enough to
dodge the stomps on lino? The concrete
trucks are pouring BODIES into the soles.
I recommend a burning kitchen.

Dear Reader # 4

You say your SMALL HUMANS are turning
you into a lunatic. Consider the moon
exfoliating on your lawn under a dark
blue sky. Consider her clean, cold light
on your face. Consider the diamond
peelings she leaves on your window-
sill. Consider the sheet metal shavings
decorating the ocean outside your
lounge window. I recommend fingernails.

Daily Songs

Supermarket mask.
Tomatoes, basil, pesto.
Day waiting in dust.

Run by red station.
A mother, father, pushchair.
Today: a fire hat.

Silk day-pajamas.
Poem about three o'clock.
Night, pajamas, silk!

Day, day, day, day, day.
Day, day, day, day, day, day, day.
Day, day, day, day, day.

Wake up in verse.
Instant coffee, fix a tongue.
Bent neck bedside lamp.

Human tap on Zoom.
Casual rain in afternoon.
Running round a loop.

Tree for Zoom children.
An unmuted microphone.
Student shirt says "BONES."

Morning in sunsquare,
read of swords & skeletons.
State of Saturday.

Netflix: probable.
Alert level: chocolate.
G & T: confirmed.

Ascending the rungs,
stretching for quinces, yellow.
Skin meets mosquitoes.

Stake up Blondies' back.
Panda bound to handlebars.
At back wheel: two bricks.

Bears eating porridge,
a middle-aged Goldilocks.
Leopard-spotted uggs.

Ballet bears, hanging.
Paws secured to feet with string.
Two tutus in tree.

Ode to Toilet Paper

You hang out in packs
Pillow-faced clones
Skin soft as couches

In see-through plastic
Dresses & nearly always
With white skin

Exclusive, flower-embossed
Lightly scented, double-length
With three-ply softness

Bitches fight over you
Bitches wanna hold you
Bitch gonna take you home

Miss Dust & the Online Writing Group

"I share my hostel room with insects," Amira says
at the Zoom-in-and-Write Session.

"What kind of insects?" Miss Dust asks.
Amira holds up a clear plastic container

to the camera, "Black Soldier Flies," she says.
The students watch as the fly legs flutter

across the walls of their see-through cells.
"When the university laboratories closed,

there was no one left to look after my soldiers.
I said, 'Do you wanna room with me?'"

Epilogue: NO BODIES

All over the globe soft, thin slices of ice
coat BODIES who face the chalky sky.
BODIES poke out tongues to catch NO
crystals. NO falls in copses the cities
have forgotten about, adorning trees
with icing sugar. "Sugar," says Copseman
to Copsewoman, "what is this white stuff
that spills upon our BOXES, our lawns,
our SMALL HUMANS? What is this forecast
that has sent these flakes to our copse?"
Flocks of copsepeople fly out of BOXES
& caper, cavort, frolic & skip in the stacks
of NO on the copse piazza. Copsepeople
lie down on the carpet of NO covering
the ground. They scissor their legs from
side to side, they wave their arms up
& down, "NO angels!" they scream.
SMALL HUMANS are building NOMEN
out of the NO. "I require a carrot
forthwith!" cries a SMALL HUMAN.
Another SMALL HUMAN is pressing
pebbles into a NOMAN'S head. "Let
there be sight!" she says.

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Appendix:

Poem by Dora Malech

ESSAY AS YES,

begged off bad beginnings, false starts of a star-sat self, her benched head cartoon bird spun, stunned out a long season. I came to claim I wouldn't burden you with the trailed-off scrap heap of all the times I tried to explain (plain) already, but even without evidence of wadded paper, snowdrift of not that, it is those attempts that act as apologia, sense in absence, itinerant iterations' cairns at the crossroads, hobo code in chalk or coal, worlds not long for these words. In other words: in other words, diary's everyday no entry, inverse relationship between clarity and efficacy. I needed forms that could flail, fail, lists listing back toward their not-so-fresh catalysts, sepsis of afterbirth still lodged in the body, that which once nurtured lingering malignant.

The I, just talk: just like that. Same went for the you(s): free on what messy out. I didn't want to spill it—it meaning guts, etcetera, but mostly guts—because they weren't all mine to spill, those two tin cans strung from the ends of viscera, the what-we-listen-to and where-we-feel-it, so to speak. In my belly, twisted sum [sic] sine in test. It's an old story, sure, and came in waves. I left my name at the front desk. I waved. I left. Abbreviation: sin. The take lodged in to speak that leaves us P.S., postscript as remaindered O, sighed apostrophe to what we turn away (from).

Even some years later, when the nurse explained the blood test, I felt the familiar flush as something else made sense. Material released: information that circulates in the bloodstream. To point to the center and say there wasn't quite right after all. There were bits of the story flowing through me. In fact, the old imperative, echo of act in the sense of what's done. Is done. What is, in a manner of speaking, riveted to the text? In his anagram notebooks, Saussure said God(s) and named names.
Of this, the scholar writes, "Language's tokens make sense because they cor-respond." Raise your hand if you're who here can't hear the heart.

Under wraps, rapture, sous rature's insistent autocorrect. The trace createth (archaic ache) Zürn's "old, dangerous fever," Mackey's "exegetic sweat": open (source, sesame, letter,

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book). Pen, stain one mouth [and] the mountain opens. Bromine cant: recombinant. The lab in labial, the utter in, well, utter. Late tale: I hold the same old doll as me. Not a simulacrum left that the bad birds haven't pecked up, antipathetic, now violet night, violent insight. Cite anti-path as no road home, lips lit [to] spill it.

It turns out, it doesn't matter what we want to want because the spell still (ill saint) outs us, solves for scar in viscera where viscera is crave, cavity-crammed. Still an I, I was trying to write a beginning and an ending at once, using the only words my tongue could touch. Muddle and middle. The writing on the wall was a tunnel under cell-scratched time. Say law [of] always: simultaneous is nauseous limits. They weren't all mine to spill, and even their spooled length unfurled and measured didn't feel like all at all. Totality of utterance reduced to trance, to tatter.

Note burden's sense, too, as refrain, as what we carry singing down the road. Love me little, love me long's the bindle shouldered by that us that must end anonymous, bound to the stone of a song. With, across, after: referred myself to a different doctor, wielded the old ax in ask, metathetic. Closed eyes and metalept: hung for a moment in the air from where the bridge I burned once was. The best I could do was an embarrassment, crying for do-over, blushes reread, reacts in redactions. Or is it that the space was always there, and necessary, not absence but aperture, artery's foramen, foreman speaking for the jury?

Waved, left: laved weft, crosswise threads of a cloth washed and wrung, hung to dry on an over-under. An old story, spun whole cloth: blue banner shook upstage to make the sea's surge billow back the act. The sine was swell and sag. The sine was pregnant, pause, pregnant, pause. Called hum [sic], hone [sic], a song sharpened in the singing, then ground to gone. Sic transit authority (see [sic] changes in signage): mind the [God of the] gap[s]. I always forgot the second I in liaison, and the screen scratched its red line ragged below our best in trysts [sic] (something in us) as I tried to make a dance of distance, move on. Something thumb sings of tapping into: the smallest screen's green flame, time-stamped out but still smoldering, or, hinge-stung, the rise in bruise as blood's chorus roars out its resistance. It's not exactly the same seam, but remove or rearrange and the trace remains, asks after, echoes back into and of its origins—

Poem by Solmaz Sharif

Safe House

Sanctuary where we don't have to

Sanitize hands or words or knives, don't have to use a

Scale each morning, worried we take up too much space. I

Scan my memory of baba talking—him on

Screen answering a question (*how are you?*) I would ask and ask from behind the camera, his face changing with each repetition as he tried to watch the football game. He doesn't know this is the beginning of my

Scribing life: repetition and change. A human face at the seaport and a home getting smaller. Let's

Search my father's profile: a moustache black and holding back a

Secret he still hasn't told me,

Section of the couch that's fallen a bit from his repeated weight,

Sector of the government designed to keep him from flying. He kept our house

Secure except from the little bugs that come with dried herbs from Iran. He gives

Security officers a reason to get off their chairs. My father is not afraid of

Sedition. He can

Seize a wild pigeon off a Santa Monica street or watch

SEIZURES unfold in his sister's bedroom—the FBI storming through. He said *use wood sticks to hold up your protest signs then use them in*

SELF-DEFENSE *when their horses come*, his eyes

SENSITIVE when he passes advice to me, like I'm his

SEQUEL, like we're all a

SERIAL caught on Iranian satellite TV. When you tell someone off, he calls it

SERVICING. When I stand on his feet, I call it

SHADOWING. He naps in the afternoon and wakes with

SHEETLINES on his face, his hair upright, the sound of

SHELLS (SPECIFY)—the sound of mussel shells on the lip of the Bosphorus crunching beneath his feet. He's given me

SHELTER and

SHIELDING, shown it's better to travel away from the

SHOAL. *Let them follow you* he says from somewhere in Los Angeles waiting for me. If he feels a

SHORT FALL he doesn't tell me about it.