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## the wall occupies a space too

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THE WALL OCCUPIES A SPACE TOO

by

Ashley Paul

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors  
(English & Philosophy)

The Honors College

University of Maine

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Advisory Committee:

Jennifer Moxley, Professor of English, Advisor

Laura Cowan, Associate Professor of English

Hao Hong, Preceptor in the Honors College, Assistant Professor of Philosophy

Kirsten Jacobson, Professor of Philosophy

Katie Quirk, Preceptor in the Honors College

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## ABSTRACT

This project, entitled *the wall occupies a space too*, is a creative exploration of the self and the surrounding world. Poetry has been a way for me to explore my thoughts and feelings in order to better understand myself, and to share my perspective and experiences with others. Moreover, it has been a way for me to express my feelings and momentarily free myself from the chains of society by recognizing and cultivating my relationship with the natural world. Much like Anne Sexton's and Sylvia Plath's work, because of this focus on the self and in revealing and admitting personal thoughts and feelings, most of the poetry in this manuscript is confessional.

I conclude this thesis with a brief exploration of how poetry can be used as a therapeutic practice. Writing confessional and lyric poetry has been helpful for me insofar as improving my mood and seeing things from a more positive point of view. Indeed, generally, so long as one focuses their writing on a real event and writes about it in a narrative form, it can help improve their mood or mental state (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999).

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*THE WALL OCCUPIES A SPACE TOO*

## IS THIS WHAT THEY MEANT BY INK POISONING?

You write of hopes and dreams on your skin  
that it should  
make you real.  
You are here.  
Right *here*.

And yet  
you feel your presence  
slipping away. . .

So you write harder.  
'Til ink becomes blood.  
Until you know the life  
that is there

and your skin becomes poetry.

You are a work of art,  
a mess of wanting and of not-wanting,  
bones of a fractured text  
of unknowing.

Not knowing who or what you are  
yet knowing this skin belongs to you,  
this poetry is yours,  
these words the cries of your dead - end soul.

*Is that all that I am?*  
*Is this all that I am?*

\*\*\*

Words are nothing but reflections  
yet you cannot look  
in the mirror for fear  
that you will not be there  
staring back at yourself

*Who am I?*

Your blood must hold the answer,  
but how will you find it  
when the well is out of ink

so you cannot even bleed?  
How then will you know if you are real?  
If any of this  
is real?

*Or is this all just a life of black on white?*

## REFLECTIONS

As I sit here  
there are so many reflections  
of myself  
staring back at me—

just staring

knowing neither what to say nor what to do.

Pressuring me—

wanting—

wanting me to go  
to do  
to rise  
to run—

if only I could breathe

Then I could listen—  
understand—  
know, even—

Be.

## THE GIRL WHO WOULD BE HUMAN

Inside the womb,  
she was given a name and a label  
with no concept of either.  
It's a girl, the doctor had said.  
*It's a girl.*

By the age of 3,  
she played with dolls like  
they were her own children.  
She would pretend she was a mother,  
and her friends would, too.

At age 6,  
she played dress-up,  
wearing a tiara and waving a wand.  
She would pretend she was a magical princess,  
and she'd dress her dolls up, too.

At age 9,  
she no longer knew what to do,  
setting up her toys and staring at them.  
She couldn't pretend anymore,  
and she didn't know who her friends were.

By age 10,  
she was a shell,  
afraid to tell the truth,  
for she knew the expectations,  
and no one would listen to her if she objected.

By age 10,  
she knew she didn't want to be a "woman,"  
a "mother," or even a "girl."  
She wanted to be human—  
no destined role to play.

At age 14,  
she determined she would be alone,  
never to find love; never to have a family.  
She'd lie awake at night,  
terrified for her future.

At age 17,

she'd fallen in love.  
With a girl.  
She didn't know this could happen.  
She was supposed to marry a man.

At age 19,  
She realized it was okay to be alone.  
She didn't want romance; she didn't want kids;  
she didn't want a political party  
or a sexuality or a gender.

At age 19,  
They just wanted a friend.  
They just wanted to be human.  
They just wanted to live life  
as themselves, for themselves, with themselves.

And so, they did.

## PAST LIFE

Would you say  
I am haunted?

Because  
when I am high  
I cry into the  
sky like it is my yesterday  
again.

All the ghosts come back  
so that I may share them  
with my present.

Here you go.

I'll introduce you  
to my daymares  
as my mind  
fractures  
into the sour segments  
of my forgotten life.

This is J.  
This is her father.  
These are my parents.  
This is my brother

and the pills  
he swallowed  
when I wasn't home  
to fear it  
or to feel it.

Here you go.

These are the tears  
from when I learned  
what real life was,

that I had never known it,  
unsure if I  
still wanted  
to live it.

## ODE TO WATER

I have a reservation for water  
for it is always welcome  
in my soul and in my home.  
Water will be my wedding.  
Water will be my grave.  
Water will be my love, my comfort,  
my ride back to life  
when I am gone.  
Water will be the noise in my ears  
drowning out the darkness  
of silence  
Water will be the beginning  
and end of our lives  
for we are water, too.  
Water is my blood, my lullabye,  
and my joy.  
Water is my savior  
and yours.

## TO BE ONE WITH THE FOG

Desire  
Desire to run until the  
street mists envelop me like  
love I couldn't love  
held She held me  
once so lovingly  
to never get lost  
then To only  
get lost Now running  
running through the  
twilight fog fading  
into fog I could breathe  
through Rejuvenating flesh  
mine like her touch  
No one  
No one ever will the fog  
mists breathe me in I  
breathe me out into  
darkness Empty  
streets out of the  
thing called love She gave me  
what I thought was  
home.

## SUSPENDED

Suspended

in  
the  
air,  
wrists  
bound  
by  
rope,  
feet  
shackled  
with  
a  
chain.

She cannot ground herself.  
Reality does not want her  
and neither does Fantasy.

## I AM NOT ALONE

The wind washes over me  
as the sun sets.

He comes backs to me.  
She comes back to me.  
A life I'd trade for nothing  
and everything.

I inhale the smoke  
from the backseat.

I am not alone.

The sun is setting,  
but there is no ending.  
The past and present do not wash away--  
this is how life is.

To live is to lend  
unwillingly.

I lend my warmth to the cold,  
cocooned in my too-thin blanket--  
nothing can help me hide.

I am not alone in my subjectivity.

Though sometimes I wish  
I was.

## SUBJECTIVITY

In my subjectivity, they are all automatons,  
and I the sole being with agency.  
None of them are free.  
Meanwhile, I bask in my freedom.  
I am more real than real  
can possibly be.  
They are all black-on-white.  
I'm all gray, gray, gray.  
I am vibrant. They are dull.  
I am the one who grants them life.  
I welcome them into subjectivity.  
I make them vibrant like the rainbow.

We share in my shades of gray  
until we fade to I,  
and they are all they once again.

COGITO ERGO SUM?

Sometimes  
I cannot help  
but wonder

if I am real—

so utterly aware  
of every  
little  
thing

I think  
and do—

there is no escaping  
this face  
this mind  
this body  
of mine

there is no  
just  
*being*—

perhaps  
there never was

DEAR JANUS

It makes sense that you only have two faces,  
never seeing in the present.

It's easy to see things in black-and-white that way—  
easy to say that

war and peace are not the same—  
that life and death

are different things.  
It's easy to walk through a door

and see that there are clearly  
two sides to this wall—

to forget that the wall occupies a space too.

## WE ARE BUT A LABEL

I once went to an LGBTQ meeting  
not knowing if I belonged there,  
wondering where I fit into the equation that is  
the world.

I was seventeen.

I had just started college  
just left home for the first time  
just committed to my first relationship.

*I should go, for her, right?  
Clearly I'm not straight.*

But LGBTQ does not mean “not straight.”  
It means a community;  
It means people who are proud  
of their gender, of their sexuality.  
Or trying to be.

But I didn't even know what I was.  
How could I be proud of that?

We write our name and pronouns  
on a tag.

But I do not know what a gender is.  
I panic and write “she/her/they/them,”  
a verbalized “Choose for me—  
I don't yet know who I am.”

We introduce ourselves.  
Two are uncertain,  
everyone else knows exactly who they are,  
why they are there,  
what they are doing.

This is a support group.  
We're social, we care,  
we understand one another.

Except, I am not—  
except, I don't.

I wonder if I am a Q.  
I wonder if I am an F.  
I know I am not a Hetero  
or an M.

Yet I wonder, how can we have labels  
if this is a “spectrum”?

I learned in my statistics class  
that categorical variables  
are discrete  
*not* continuous.

How can I say that I am  
a girl  
a lesbian  
a man  
a bisexual  
when you say this is a spectrum?

Or are we merely points  
on this fault line?

\*\*\*

When I met her, she shook me awake.  
I could no longer say  
“I’m pretty sure I’m not gay.”  
I could no longer say  
“I will never love anyone.”

She taught me the identity  
I had built for myself was wrong  
that love was real  
and I was swimming in it.

She taught me that love  
is non-binary.

So how can *we* not be?

I still search for myself now  
that she’s gone.

Chosen the best labels I could

to understand who I am,  
to paint a picture for others.

I tell them “I am demi-pansexual,  
gender non-conforming.”

I don’t even know what sex is, really.  
I prefer to leave it out of the equation,  
but it lingers like her scent  
every time she left the room.

And I still let everyone call me “she” —  
it’s so ingrained in our brains  
even I fuck it up.

So I cringe softly, in silence  
waiting for the world to catch up  
for me to catch up

for you to understand.

## SUBTITLES

There are no words to follow along,  
no face for me to read.

Each sound is an outline,  
a formless shadow of meaning

without meaning.

I get lost in the visuals,  
for no language is there to ground me.

Only to drown me.

Images draw me to the surface,  
to an almost-understanding, an almost-awareness.

I am almost there.

Yet I can never quite get there.  
There is always something I am missing.

Vowels are the oceans I can swim in freely,  
but consonants are the land I need to steady myself.

They are islands I cannot reach.

Without a face, without the lips which give the words  
their form and shape

or without words on the screen,  
I am almost lost.

AS YOU FADE FROM WHOLE TO GRAY

We used to play this lip-reading game.  
I think you knew I needed it.  
I was like six,  
thought it was just for fun.  
I'd get you every time.

But now your mouth is an empty vessel  
and the words are no longer mine.  
Instead they possess *me*,  
creating a barrier through which  
I cannot reach you.

I know they are there,  
but they're background noise faded

I put them in my ears  
but it's so loud here  
your voice gets lost.

Then I am lost—  
stuck smiling and nodding  
like you're speaking a foreign language.  
I do not understand.

This is a one-sided conversation  
in which you are the only one present,

for I am gone.  
No. *You* are gone.  
I am still here, standing,  
straining to select what  
my hearing aids cannot,

to find you again—  
to read you.

## FOOTPRINTS

She left no footprints  
in the sand that night,  
though walked she did,  
and for miles.

Each step was an erasure,  
a deposit, and a withdrawal.  
She kept her hands to her sides,  
touching nothing,  
leaving everything.

She took only herself with her that night,  
and she took all of herself.  
She left no trace by which to be found.  
She left no note or message.

Until she came back, she was gone, gone, gone.  
No one would know her.

When she came back, still  
no one would know her  
until her feet sunk  
into the ground,  
and she'd left her temporary mark

to be washed up along the shore.

## “DEAD” IS JUST A WORD

*I'm sorry. He's gone.*

\* \* \*

Dead. “Dead” is a word  
I do not yet understand,  
having lost no one dear to me.  
Very nearly.

“Dead” is a story,  
a nightmare, a reality.  
But it is not yet *my* reality,  
though it will one day be.

“Dead” is a word which  
carries a shadow  
in the souls  
of those it touches,

and though “Dead”  
may scare me,  
it leaves but a brush of gray in my heart  
for those who have lost.

“Dead” is a word  
I shall one day know.  
Until then, it is just that—a word,  
a cry from the mouths of many,  
a mere whisper from my own.

## DUSK

When I feel I am in danger  
of losing something—or someone,  
I chase the sun.  
I chase it as it is setting,  
knowing I will never reach it.  
I beg for it to stay or go.  
To stay, if it will stay forever;  
To go, if it will go quickly.  
But it drags and drags and drags  
on for hours.

When it is gone,  
I do not wish it back.

Its absence is a sign of mercy,  
for full dark is better than half light.

## ETERNAL GRAY

I haven't seen the sky in days,  
the clouds are too dark and gray.  
The sun never rises or sets,  
it merely fades.  
And the transition is smooth.

Our lights reflecting in the fog,  
it never really gets dark.

When the sky returns it will be  
because the clouds got tired,  
the sun woke up,  
and the moon called for a funeral.

The night is darker without our clouds of protection.  
Our suit of armor can keep out anything—  
radiation, heat, bright, burning light.

Soon we tire and become deficient,  
but not so soon as yet.  
We still have our strength of mind,  
our eye of wonder.

So, why wonder when the sun will rise?

## ON THAT VERY LAST DAY

On that very last day,  
the sun straddled between  
the clouds and the sky,  
reaching towards the earth, suspended.

The trees parted ways  
at the road, the road which  
connected us and nature  
and would have connected nature  
with nature had the road been a crease  
rather than a painted line.  
I walked this line, waiting.

On that very last day  
there was no need for blinds  
because the sun stopped shining  
at the fold.

We said “goodbye”  
as we said “hello”  
and we sat in silence,  
made ourselves stoic  
so it would all be smooth-going.

There will always be a day after night  
day after night day after night day after night day after night day after  
night day  
so long as the sun survives.

Just wait until it can't pull itself out of bed—  
can't get beyond the clouds.  
The sky waits perpetually.

So long as we are on this road  
the trees will never meet,  
will never be one,  
though they blur.

Can't tell one smear of green from the next,  
and where did the sun go?  
I am blinded.

We're all still here, somehow.

Your figures are gone,  
but your voices are in my head,  
your arms resting on my shoulders.

I can't see any of you.  
You're like the sun  
trapped in the clouds.  
I can feel its heat,  
for I do not shiver.

On that very last day,  
the world seemed to break  
but we're all still standing.

How can this be?  
The sun is only in hiding, you tell me.

The sun is only in hiding.

## MONSTER

White noise whispers through the windshield,  
gray static before my eyes.  
I get lost in the rainfall

and *he* appears.  
I'm back at a stranger's house with *him*.  
I'm back waiting by the river for *him*.  
I'm back in *his* car with *him*.

*He's* the monster  
in my closet.  
*He* won't go away, and *he* loves  
creeping around my room at night,  
keeping me awake.

And she'll never know.  
How fragile she is.

Too much to know what I have done.  
Too much to believe what *he* has done, how *he* has felt  
all this time.

It skips and repeats. Skips and repeats.

I'm in the car.  
I'm by the river.  
I'm in the house.

Every story I've read  
made *him* a monster.  
Every show I have seen  
made *him* a monster.  
Yet *I* have made *him* a victim.

*He's* the Creature and *I* am Frankenstein.  
Who is to blame?  
He wanted love but *I* saw a monster,  
and in the quiet times  
he haunts me.

*He's* in every book in every dream on every show  
in every breath I breathe.  
I'm gasping for air that is clean.

The car slows. Stops.  
I open the door.  
My lungs fill with air.  
But still there is that question—

*Who is the real monster?*

## THE GALE

Oh! To be blown away by a gale-force wind—  
to be lost in the storm, brought down, like the trees—  
to be carried through the storm and the streets  
by an invisible hand.

It is a dream that would do me harm.  
Nevertheless, I dream it.

I wish to be the eye of the storm,  
to be whisked away by the gale,  
to be one with the wind as it changes,  
for then it could change me.

\*\*\*

There is a wind blowing now,  
so hard it rattles the door.  
A step outside, and the air would wash over and through me.  
A step outside, and I could be gone.  
With the door closed, I could be.  
With it open, I could be thrust back inside,  
left to continue my life-long sentence.

So here I stand,  
the door wide open,  
the wind and the rain in front of me,  
the light and warmth behind.

I take a breath, imagine, for a moment, that I am flying.  
But I am afraid of heights.

I look at the ground, the darkness around me.  
I step inside, and shut the door

to the world behind me.

## WITHIN THESE DREADED WALLS/AIR

Holes in the wall. My brother made them.  
Holes in the wall. My father made them.  
Holes in the wall. Tacks. Nails. And hammer.

There's a window. Too.  
A window through which to breathe.  
If there is any air.

My mother awakens, gasping.  
She grasps for air, but little comes.  
So out the door she goes.

Within these walls. I'm shaking.  
Within these walls. Lights off. Off. Off. For father.  
Within these walls. No air.

I whimper in my sleep. Sometimes.  
So my mom says.

## WITHIN THESE DREADED WALLS/AIR PART II

We're driving. Heat.  
It's artificial.  
This unreality makes my head throb.  
I open the window. For air.

But it's cold.  
The windows are fogged up.  
Like my head. My airways.

The heat is on for clarity.  
Clarity of sight.  
My body has none.  
Mom is a mystery.  
So are the windows.

Windows. Open I can see.  
Windows. Open I can breathe.  
Windows. Open I am free.

We are still cold.  
I bring back the walls. For warmth.  
Reel my head back in. For safety.  
Seal the holes again. For comfort.  
Sacrifice my air.

For these dreaded walls. My shelter.

## WINDOWS

There were no windows in these walls  
I never opened them  
too much to get in  
too much to let out  
I kept the shades closed

Now, there's a truck outside, revving,  
the cars flow constant  
The breeze blows irregular  
making my skin tingle

I opened the door for this

My skin feels the world as fresh  
my lungs believe it too

There is no cosmetic  
layer to fool me  
wanting fields of gray  
or green

But green is far from me here  
when gray could be everywhere

within these walls  
outside them  
when the sky casts shadows  
across the world  
so that *nothing has a shadow*

I am relieved

At least then,  
gray is more than a metaphor

## MAYBE WE ARE HEALING AFTER ALL

Maybe the mind is a cocoon.  
Maybe when you are trapped in there  
you just need time to grow.  
So, the mind cocoons the caterpillar soul,  
watching over it until  
it embraces the scars and it blooms.  
More lively and more whole than before.  
Or maybe not.  
Maybe it is only different.  
Still, the cocoon of the mind  
is temporary.  
As are we.  
Perhaps life, too, is a cocoon  
within which we metamorph into something new.  
Maybe before life we are but a caterpillar,  
and only in death do we become a butterfly.

## THE ACT OF SIGHING

I've sighed tonight  
more than I've sighed  
in months,  
reminding me,  
grounding me  
in what's real.  
Each breath of a sigh  
brings me back further,  
down lower  
into my own pocket of earth and air,  
I can breathe.  
But I can't breathe steady.  
I sigh to soothe me,  
but this air isn't pure enough—  
tainted  
with exaggerated emotion,  
with sorrow.  
I sigh until  
the earth and air  
become a vacuum  
and I'm stuck  
in stasis,  
at a loss for sensation,  
seeking salvation  
in everything I touch.



## WATER

I wish to be as free  
as this water—  
to ebb and flow  
in my own time.

I  
would never tire.

No heart to nurture,  
no hands with which to claim  
emptiness

I  
would always be whole, filling  
the room around me and

I  
could never drown.

But more,

I  
would never be  
down

without a heart to be heavy,  
a head to be cluttered.

I  
would never fail,

nor would I know  
what failure was.

## THAT BEAUTIFUL LOOK OF CONFUSION

That beautiful look of confusion.  
He's in a reverie, lost to me.  
I know him, but I don't *know* him.  
His face is my own

His face is my own and we are confused  
because we daydream the day away.  
We do not understand this life.

We belong in the mountaintops  
with that mid-grown grass,  
he and I.

He and I.  
We know the world is truly a mystery.  
We don't understand it,  
but it always understands us.

We let ourselves showered by  
the changing rain,  
cover ourselves with clouds  
because we don't want people to know  
that we don't.

That we don't know it all  
That we are sorry  
That we don't  
want to know it all

So we tell them we are sorry  
and move on.

## THE LONG WAY HOME

That day I took the long way home,  
seeing no reason to do otherwise.  
I drove until the end of March  
through gray on gray,  
never seeing the sun rise or set.

That day I took the long way home.  
It wasn't a waste,  
it was open.  
I was open.

No doors, no windows,  
a few extra songs,  
eyes downcast  
on the road.

Those yellow parallels  
were the only color  
keeping me afloat.  
But I wasn't drowning anyway.  
No, I never was.

I was as wispy as the fog,  
moving through and through and through.  
One with everything around me.

We shared everything. Energy.  
I was draining,  
but the gray sustained me,  
never fully fading  
or pulling me into one nothingness or other.

That day I took the long way home  
because black and white are both empty.  
Black so dark all blends into one.  
White so light we're free falling.

But gray, gray sustains me.

IF LOVE WAS A LACK, THEN TO LOVE IS TO LOVE FROM A DISTANCE

You're floating on the water,  
and suddenly I am outer,  
letting it all in  
                  myself, the exception.

I desire to make the outer inner,  
to break down the walls of my own skin.

You're still distant,  
though no further downriver than  
you've always been.

How do I get in

to float on the water  
alongside you?

Can I replace all the outside with me?  
Until I am inside again?

To take a sip and swallow,  
to swallow the life you give  
                  as I give the outer back to you.

## TOGETHER

I'm the type of person  
who gets emotional when  
I hear someone say that  
they're there.

I don't know why.

But I believe them.  
I believe they are there  
for those who need them.  
And perhaps I never did  
because I never reached out.

Except when I did.

I had to drive myself through tears  
to find someone.  
That day I wanted nothing but death.  
I wasn't fading  
but I felt like I was existing so hard  
I was near to bursting,  
a bubble of emotion.

You're truly alone in your feelings.  
You can't pass them on to someone else.  
You cannot share them  
but you can share them.

Tell me how you feel,  
I'll squeeze you so tight  
you're nearly suffocating  
but I won't catch your tears.  
I'm just here.

But I wasn't then  
when that was all we needed.  
Maybe because we needed more.  
I didn't know how to be there  
without being there.  
You wouldn't let me.

And now everyone is here.  
I will never be alone  
in my loneliness.

## DEAR CHEVY

You took care of me  
more than I took care of you,  
there for me through tears of gray  
'til your sky turned gray too.  
'Til no one could fix you

because I wouldn't help you,  
afraid that my love would  
do you more good than it would me.

Money trouble memories,  
sitting in the front seat, singing,  
our voices blending into one another,  
bleeding through.

I drove you through a blizzard,  
through fog, rain, and dimly-lit streets.  
I admit I couldn't see where we were going,  
yet you always took me right back home.

You were shy,  
nervous about leaving every stoplight.  
Green made your engine shake,  
while my voice soothed you,  
until it shook too

at the vision of your death,  
because it was you who had saved me.

## YOU NEVER CAME

Will the day come  
when I have no more questions  
to ask?  
No more care to share  
with my curiosity?

\*\*\*

I hope one day  
to be.

To be more  
than a pen mark  
on someone else's skin

because I  
am some kind of real--  
a real of my own.

I imagine.

So I imagine myself a breath,  
inhaled and released  
with the ebbing and flowing  
of a dying sea

until we are all  
set free--  
until we are less than a breath,  
a harsh whisper  
somewhere  
without a body  
holding us back  
in an inhalation

we cannot escape.

\*\*\*

I called out                    for you once.

## CONVERSATION

This conversation is a poem.  
It is a way of existing.  
It is the way I exist in your eyes  
and the way you exist in mine.  
Which neither of us can see.

## ORIGIN STORY

I know this sounds cliché, but  
you've made me who I am today.  
Of course, it wasn't all you.  
It was me, too.  
And the grass, and the trees,  
the mountains, and the clouds.  
It was my birth and your death.  
Your hands and my head.  
It was your music, your voice.  
Your stories and my narratives.

I am from the leaves and the stand-alone tree in your backyard.  
I am from you, who never trusts the children--  
you, who looks the other way when a storm passes over my face.

I am from the ego, from the hope that I will one day be a superhero,  
the belief that everything will always work out for me.  
I am from the revelations that there are darker days to come and passed.

You have made me who I am today,  
and they have made me what.

They gave me skin to shape and hold myself together.  
They gave me blood to run my soul.  
They gave me eyes to see the world smile, ears to hear it sing, hands to never let it go.  
They gave me emotions to guide my soul through this world,  
a companion so I will never be alone.

They have made me what I am today,  
given us power to mold my being.

It is from the you, I, and them  
that we have come,  
that we have seen that we are many of a one.

## INCENSE

I drive my hand through the  
smoke from the incense he  
lit for me so I could  
hide inside my shell  
    my dreams  
while I daymared about  
change in  
all the ways it was.

My hair is turning gray  
as the smoke in this moment,  
though it doesn't flow the same,  
stiff in its strides  
unlike my fingers riding the swirls  
of smoke  
to calm my nerves

I watch it grow and  
fill the space around me  
before fading into nothing

until he takes my hand,  
halfway to a shadow,  
I am thinking.

I wonder how he stays grounded  
when I can't on the verge of  
sleep,  
    and I stop myself,  
grateful for the steady,  
though now we are wild  
with the music.

And I'm still sober,  
the one without rhythm.

## THE SURFACE

Whiteness enshrouds my eyes  
alert cold quiet  
I still see thoughts—both images and words—drifting through my mind  
but only so—  
blurred, hazy, unreachable.  
They are lost in the whiteness,  
a soft mountain blanketed within the clouds

I could touch

I wish that I could reach up and touch  
these pillowy buckets of water.  
My hand would but freeze,  
my face red with the leaving warmth.

The whiteness would envelop me  
'til I could see no more.  
Why not go there?  
*Go there* to that frozen place  
so high above this ground of imagined security.  
So what if I should fall?

So what if I should fall from the snow-tipped mountain?  
For I would land limberly on my own two feet.  
Or perhaps the surface.  
Neither land nor water—  
simply, *the surface*.

## THE RECEIVER

I keep writing about the  
sky, hoping that,  
eventually, it will  
envelop me--  
that the clouds will roll, raining  
down upon me--  
that the sun will fade into  
the twilight zone.

There's been so much light lately,  
I've forgotten the darkness  
I am longing--  
longing to be one with some  
eternal cloud,  
drifting through the sky  
past midnight.

And all those particles,  
flowing through me, and around me,  
keeping me afloat  
are my company.  
A quiet rain,  
thunder in the distance--  
lightning is the energy in the sky,  
but it is not alone.

This cloud breathes it in, and I  
am its receiver.

## WALK HOME IN WINTER

1. Nothing more than a naturalistic desire to be warm. covered by blankets. wrapped in heat. waiting for summer. dreading the summer. fearing the passage of time.
2. Fearing the passage of time. almost March already. soon to be May. then September. and May again. soon for them to leave and never come back. never come back to me. soon for me to leave and never come back. never come back to them.
3. Soon we all leave and never come back. why are we here, then? first goodbye C. goodbye A. goodbye T. then goodbye me. goodbye J. goodbye T. goodbye C. goodbye C. goodbye A. goodbye B. making myself sad. then sadder. then happy. then no longer.
4. No longer do they haunt me. they take the form of dreams. old dreams of wanting. afterimages of anger. bad aftertaste. forgiveness. or no? forget. not important. anymore. except in storybooks.
5. Storybooks. no. homework? yes. lists checks tasks. ever-ending, ever-beginning.
6. Hope. ever-beginning, ever-ending. ever-coming, ever-going. soon to be here. soon to be gone. inconsistency. a fantasy. always a fantasy. but in fantasies we fly.
7. In fantasies we fly. pretend want is reality. pretend more of me in all things. reflections of not being alone. of non-isolation. company.
8. Will I have company? or alone? friends? New friends or old? Wild or no? company.
9. Will I work a good job? will my future company be good with good company? happy where I am? happy where we are? happy with where I will be?
10. Why be happy? who labeled happy good? who labeled happy real? who labeled happy difficult? dread.
11. I start dreading life now but also keep dreading after the day ends. hope to see hellos later before the goodbyes. angry about the goodbyes. sad they will come. already lost by their future loss. I will be okay. mathematically. philosophically certain happy will come between the sads. so why be so sad now? Return.

## ON MY WAY INTO BEING

We never expected the spring to come,  
never thought the white would turn to gray--  
or that we would ever see green again.

\*\*\*

On my way into being  
I found free air to breathe,  
a gift from  
the surrounding world.

On my way into being  
the rain fell like stars,  
twinkling on the river,  
forming a new galaxy;

the waterfall raged  
in one ear  
and soothed the other  
as I wavered from foot to foot.

On my way into being  
I stumbled onto an island,  
falling against gravity.  
The river would not take me.

Everything was gray on gray  
until I lifted my eyes from the mist  
to the deep green of the surrounding trees.  
Nothing had ever looked so real.

On my way into being,  
soaked through the skin,  
wanting warmth, I smiled  
because I was *alive*.

## THE MOUNTAINS THAT CONSUMED ME

Have you ever stared into the mountains  
and for a moment  
felt the whole world around you—  
knew that the sky was a bubble, encasing you,  
protecting you, imprisoning you—  
felt like all other people  
were the electrons to your nucleus—  
as the trees were buzzing past you in the car  
like sea foam—  
the land, the waves crashing into one another  
in ultra-slow motion?

Have you ever stared into the mountains  
and considered:  
*These mountains are enormous—  
ancient beings born under  
the rising and setting of the sun  
as it was dying,  
but long before its final departure,  
for they have shown me  
that life and death are not quite so different—  
one dies as they live.*  
These mountains, too, are living and dying  
just like us, and just like the sun.

One day I stared into the mountains.  
I stared and the world showed me what was.

## BEAUTIFUL SUNSET

I saw “silver linings” on the sunset clouds  
for the first time  
in my rearview mirror,

and for the first time the golden pink  
left the fear behind  
left me in awe.

If I hadn't known what life  
felt like I'd've  
thought I was dead,  
free-floating down the road,  
heaven hunting me  
in my bright red car  
that was sure to crash

that was sure to crash if I  
kept watching the sky like  
it had already caught me,  
already dead.

The silver linings I saw  
were paths of the lives I've lived,  
the times I've driven up  
and down that road,  
the shape of city and soul, my home.

Heaven didn't catch me just then,  
though I wasn't looking at the road,

for the sky was full of clouds,  
but the ground  
was clear.

## AND THERE I WAS

I wrote on my arm  
in small cursive letters *De*  
I wrote over it until it darkened *De*  
Wanting to see it  
Wanting it to be permanent.

Would action even give me purpose?  
I ask myself.  
I ask because I do  
and often nothing

No feeling of pride overcomes me—  
No feeling of joy courses through this soul.

Perhaps I do have a purpose—  
people depend on me.  
Too much.

So much I lose myself.  
I forget to be.  
There is no meaning  
in doing without being.

And so I learned to be.

I wrote on my arm  
in small cursive letters *De*  
I wrote over it until it darkened *De*  
Until it was permanent—  
etched within me.

## THESIS DISQUISITION

## INTRODUCTION

### Brainstorming Thesis Ideas and Changing My Major

This project began with the realization that I did not want to be a psychology major. Originally, I was thinking about conducting a study or a survey that involved some kind of intersection between art and psychology that would cover both my psychology capstone and my honors thesis. However, this did not seem appealing to me insofar as it meant I would have to go way out of my comfort zone to ask people to be a part of it and then spend endless hours working on a project that I did not really enjoy.

Before I switched my majors to English and Philosophy, I found an interest in creative writing. Over the next two years, I began attending poetry readings, karaoke nights, and the theatre on campus. I enjoyed these moments when people could reveal a part of themselves by being creative and having fun doing what they were passionate about. That is what poetry does for me. Still, I was unsure if a creative thesis was something I should pursue. I felt that I was better at academic writing and that I would not be successful as a poet, so I imagined that I would write some kind of academic paper instead.

### Unleashing Creativity

The First semester of my junior year, while I was taking HON 391, the class on thesis writing, I started reading a book called *Embrace Your Weird: A Guided Journal for Facing Your Fears and Unleashing Creativity* by Felicia Day. I never finished this book, not finding its style much to my taste, but she makes a lot of great points about how being creative does not always mean creating something that we love or something that is

perfect, nor does it have to be something that takes a lot of effort and planning. Being creative merely means creating anything that (hopefully) brings us joy. Moreover, she discussed how allowing ourselves to be creative can improve our overall mood. While I did not find any evidence of this while researching the accuracy of this claim, I did find that mood often affects people's level of creativity. Generally speaking, it seems that creativity is dependent on mood, personality, goal orientation, and context (Davis). At the time I was reading Day's book, I was also taking HON 180, "A Cultural Odyssey," during which we saw UMaine's production of *The Curious Incident of the Dog In The Nighttime* and *Gas Light*. I also rewatched my favorite musical, *Rent*, and fell in love with the soundtrack from *Dear Evan Hansen*. All of these made me fall in love with the arts, which is why I chose to pursue a degree in English instead of Psychology. By studying English, I could focus more on my creative reading and writing. It was around this time that I decided to do a creative thesis. All of these shows, in addition to Day's book, inspired me to pursue something that would stimulate and motivate me rather than something that was going to mentally drain me.

Speaking of being mentally drained, I figured out my freshman year that I did not enjoy writing prose narratives, but the mental state I was in inspired a lot of emotional creativity, from which I began writing poetry. I was so deeply in love and simultaneously anxious and depressed because of my relationship that year that that was nearly all I wrote about. I was so overrun with emotions that poetry became a way for me to get all of that out. Indeed, some people are high in creativity in an emotional domain, meaning that when they experience a new, effective, and useful mixture of emotions, they tend to find ways to explore them further, which is precisely what I did, and still do, in my

writing (Averill & Thomas-Knowles). Though my poetry was not great in the beginning, however, I enjoyed it so much that I kept writing, and, eventually, I started writing less about love and heartbreak and more about other things, like my fears, desires, and feelings more generally. No longer did my thoughts consist solely of this girl who would be completely out of my life within a year. Instead, I began to focus less on her and more on myself.

Why “*the wall occupies a space too*”?

The title of my manuscript comes directly from a line in one of my poems, “Dear Janus.” I wrote this for a prompt in Advanced Poetry Writing with Professor Jennifer Moxley the fall of my junior year. The prompt was to write a poem that involved a myth or religious story of some kind. As is apparent, I chose to write about Janus, the Roman god of doors, transitions, beginnings, and endings. He had two faces so that he could always be watching on both sides of doors, gates, etc., which suited his occupation as a gatekeeper (Wasson). Janus is essentially a god of duality. In my poem, I challenge various ideas of duality, such as war and peace and life and death, claiming that the world is much more complex and unclear than that. What I mean by “the wall occupies a space too” is that there are not just two sides to anything--there are always more than that because things can be looked at from so many different perspectives. There are not simply two sides to a wall, there is space within and beyond the wall, too.

I titled my manuscript *the wall occupies a space too* not necessarily to challenge ideas of duality, although I would love for people to think of it that way, but to indicate that, in writing it, I am breaking certain walls down. First, the words I have typed on each

page broke their way through whatever walls I had in my mind before I began. Second, in working on this project, I am breaking down mental and emotional walls, revealing myself in a very personal way. Third, I am hoping that reading my work will help others break down their walls when it comes to opening up to others, looking at the world in new ways, and exploring things they never thought to explore before. I want to broaden their horizons with my work, which brings me to my intent.

## INTENT

### Poetry as Self-Exploration

This project has been a way for me to explore many different aspects of myself, life, and the world as a whole. I never used to be very much of an introspective person before I came to college. I was shy and reserved, but I just accepted that that was the way I was and that it was never going to change. My freshman year at the University, I became so concerned about my behavior and doing something wrong that I became almost too introspective. I thought a lot about how I felt and what I did, but not in any healthy way. In fact, for a while I thought I was really happy when in reality I was struggling with depression and anxiety. Writing has been a way for me to parse out my feelings and be more conscious of my mental state and why I feel the way I feel. Because of this, my poetry has become a way of journaling that I can look back on to better understand myself in the past as well as in the present. For example, I mentioned a period of time when I believed that I was happy but actually I was not. During that time, I wrote a poem about staying by my girlfriend's side even if it meant I had no more energy to give and that, because of this, we would both be swallowed up in excruciating nothingness. I did not realize until later how unhealthy this way of thinking was. I found this poem again around the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, and it made me realize how much I have grown as a writer and as someone who is self-aware. Writing my manuscript has allowed me to demonstrate that progress as well as share my creative interests and personal experiences with others.

From a more philosophical standpoint, creating this project has been an exploration of my relationship to the world, what it means to be human, and what it

means to be myself in relation to both animate and inanimate “others.” In sharing these explorations, I hope to inspire others to think more deeply about things they might not otherwise think about, to feel more strongly, and to be more aware of the things around them. When I wrote “The mountains that consumed me,” I was thinking about a recent drive I took with my mother through New Hampshire. As a child and teen, I did not find mountains or trees the least bit fascinating. When I went on a ride, I wanted to see buildings--stores, movie theaters, restaurants. I strictly wanted to see the footprint of human life, especially if that footprint was bright and colorful. But, in one moment, riding with my mom my sophomore year of college, I was mesmerized by the mountains ahead of us. I was in awe about how big they were and how they formed from the pushing of two landmasses into one another. They were strong and powerful in my eyes, demanding attention. Yet, at the same time, I felt that this newfound connection I had with these mountains made me special too. I may not be particularly popular or the best at anything, but I was still a part of something wonderful. Since that day, I have never really let go of that feeling, and that is something I want to share with others. I want someone to read this thesis and see the world and themselves a little differently because of it.

### Poetry as a Creative Release and Escape

In addition to being a way for me to introspect as well as share my perspective with others, writing has been a kind of therapeutic tool for me. Reading through my manuscript, you will likely find a theme of freedom versus entrapment. Being a member of a society that highly values success, that is capitalistic, with an expectation of heteronormativity and a binary view of gender, in my personal experience, has been a

recipe for feeling trapped. Up until I moved out of my mom's home my senior year of college, I had to work almost thirty hours a week as a full-time student in order to help her pay bills. Even this past year, my rent has been so expensive that I work about 20 hours a week and still have to dip into my savings to pay it. In order to do that, I have to work a job that I hate, hoping that one day I will find a good paying career that I actually enjoy. Yet, I cannot get over the fact that I can never do what I truly want to with my life because of financial limitations. On top of that, school is often much more stressful than it needs to be, which has not only taken a serious toll on my own mental health, but many others' as well. I often feel as though I live in a constant state of stress, and poetry helps me deal with that. When I sit down to write a poem, I find that thinking about my relationship to the natural world can be very freeing. Sometimes, when I am feeling down, I like to go outside and stand in the cold snow for a few minutes, or feel the chill of the wind washing over my hands and face. These experiences often become poems, as I remember how free, open, and close to the earth they make me feel. These are moments that I want to record so that I will never forget how to escape the feelings of entrapment that school, work, and society bring me. When I am a part of the earth, my worries, anxieties, and responsibilities are no more significant than the river's need to flow, the bird's need to fly, or the leaf's need to fall. I only wish that my work could be so influential that it helps more people think this way so that we may begin to change the structures of society in order to better suit our needs as natural beings, as opposed to the artificial ones we seem to have become.

## LITERATURE REVIEW: MY INSPIRATIONS

### Leaves of Grass by Walt Whitman

Oh me! Oh life! of the questions of these recurring,  
Of the endless trains of the faithless, of cities fill'd with the foolish,  
Of myself forever reproaching myself, (for who more foolish than I, and who  
more

faithless?)

Of eyes that vainly crave the light, of the objects mean, of the struggle ever  
renew'd,  
Of the poor results of all, of the plodding and sordid crowds I see around me,  
Of the empty and useless years of the rest, with the rest me intertwined,  
The question, O me! so sad, recurring—What good amid these, O me, O life?

#### *Answer.*

That you are here—that life exists and identity,  
That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse.

I was first introduced to Walt Whitman in HON 211 my sophomore year. The first line I read out of his book, *Leaves of Grass*, was “I celebrate myself,” the beginning of “Song of Myself.” Around that time, I was recovering from depression. I was struggling with feelings of low self-esteem, and I started thinking more nihilistically, believing that life had no real meaning, so what was the point? When I read this line, however, I started thinking that maybe the meaning of life is simply to exist and to live it, but I also realized that, even though I am not perfect and I have made a lot of mistakes, perhaps I should go easier on myself and celebrate my life, just as Whitman does in his own poetry. I open this literature review not with the beginning of “Song of Myself,” however, but with “Oh me! Oh life!” This poem relates to many of the themes and ideas I had in mind while I was writing my manuscript.

Whitman’s poems often encompass ideas of unity, oneness, and taking the time to observe and enjoy life, but there is also an existential aspect to many of them, which I see

especially in “Oh me! Oh life!” In this poem, Whitman lists off quite a few negative things about the world and about life, questioning the point of existing among it all. I have found that I turn to poetry most when I have similar thoughts and questions. I wonder what the point of life is if we hardly have time or money to enjoy our time and do what we want. Such thoughts make me feel down and stressed out, but this is when I go and find that sense of freedom in nature and poetry that reminds me how incredible it is to be alive. What strikes me is that Whitman does not end his poem with this question of life’s meaning. Instead, he answers it. He claims that it matters that we are here, that we exist, that life continues around us, and that we play a role in it after all. I love this because it is so simple. The meaning and point of life is such a big question that has been grappled with by so many and for so long. Many of the theories we have come up with are complex, but, I think what really matters is not whether we have all the answers, but whether we experience life and keep in mind what is important, while stopping to notice the little things every now and then. In the same section of “Song of Myself” that “I celebrate myself comes from,” Whitman also includes a line that says, “I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.” I love that he actually takes the time to observe a spear of grass, which might be said to be an insignificant, pointless waste of time.

I have heard it said that Whitman was self-focused and even egotistical. Whether this is true or not, I am unsure, but, when I read his poetry, I see a writer who knew how to live life and pay attention to even the small details, knowing that they were just as much a part of him and he of them as he was a part of his family, the companies he

worked for, and of society. I try to show this in my work, especially when I am writing about nature in some way.

*Stupid Fucking Bird* by Aaron Posner

Here we are. Here We Are.  
**Here. We. Are.**  
This is real, this is true.  
This is new, this is now. . .  
A new place.  
A liminal space.  
A place of grace  
And the boundless pursuit  
Of beauty  
A place where truth  
Might be told--  
Where streets  
Are not lined with gold.  
But just maybe with something better--  
Unfettered  
Possibility.  
Lively Maybe's  
And vital Why-The-Fuck-Not's

Nothing in this existential, angsty, emotion-heavy play intrigued me more than this performance in Act I Scene 4, written by the character, Conrad, and performed by his ex, Nina. This scene occurs before the audience learns too much about the tough love that exists between all of the characters. There is a unity in it in that Nina is stating the fact of their existence. They are “here,” which means they are *somewhere*, which means that they exist. Moreover, repeating the phrase, “Here we are” increased my awareness of my own existence, as I started to think more about where I was physically, what was around me, and what I could feel as I was sitting in my seat in the auditorium. But, beyond that, it made me think more about my existence on a metaphysical level. I kept asking myself

questions like, “What does it really mean to be, and what does it really mean to be *here*?” Thus, I began to develop an interest in existentialism and writing existential poetry.

Although this scene especially inspired me to be more aware of my surroundings and my existence in general even after the show was over, the play as a whole was an existential breakthrough--or *breakdown*, as it was a mess of emotional torment for many of the characters. The characters were constantly breaking the fourth wall, knowing full well that they were in a play, further emphasizing that notion of “we are *here*” and complicating the idea that “This is real, this is true.” After this play, I got to thinking about what it means for something to be real or for us to consider something real or true. Eventually, I concluded that there are so many aspects of our lives that are subjective based on how we perceive different things. Each of our experiences is unique because of this. So, who is to say that the yellow pinwheel pen I used to write about at the Wells Dining cash register is truly the shade of yellow I perceived? Who is to say that it existed exactly as I perceived it in my hands, cold, hard, and hollow?

Though no one will ever know my exact perceptions, I can share at least a part of my experiences with them. Poetry came to me as a good way to do that because I enjoyed writing, but prose does not allow me the same level of creative freedom that poetry does. Returning to the phrases “Here we are” and “This is real,” my freshman, sophomore, and junior years at the University, whenever I was really upset, I would go for a walk outside or even just go out and sit or stand for awhile, feeling the breeze, smelling the leaves, trees, or grass, and listening to either the quiet stillness or the rustling of the leaves and wind. I would do whatever I could to focus on my own existence by increasing my awareness of my natural surroundings. Doing this always calms me down and makes me

feel like I am a part of something incredible and amazing. It reminds me that there is something beyond school and the negative aspects of the society I live in.

*Rent* by Jonathan Larson

“La Vie Bohème”

To days of inspiration  
Playing hooky, making  
Something out of nothing (la vie Bohème)  
The need to express  
To communicate (la vie Bohème)  
To going against the grain  
Going insane, going mad (la vie Bohème)  
To loving tension, no pension (la vie Bohème)  
To more than one dimension (la vie Bohème)  
To starving for attention  
Hating convention, hating pretension (la vie Bohème)  
Not to mention of course  
Hating dear old Mom and Dad (la vie Bohème)  
To riding your bike (la vie Bohème)  
Midday past the three-piece suits (la vie Bohème)  
To fruits, to no absolutes  
To Absolute, to choice (la vie Bohème)  
To the Village Voice (la vie Bohème)  
To any passing fad  
To being an us for once, instead of a them

This stanza from the song “La Vie Bohème” encompasses what I see as the primary message of the musical--that life often sucks, but we should celebrate it anyway. To me, *Rent* is about a group of friends, some of whom are artists, who struggle financially and with physical health, yet find strength in their relationships with one another. This is one of the few songs in the musical where everyone is singing together and visibly having fun. They are seeing each and every one of their problems, but choosing to look past them and celebrate what they have. For me, this song is a reminder for me to “celebrate myself” and my life at times when all I want to do is lie in bed, ignoring all the important

things in my life. Like Whitman's and Posner's, Larson's words inspired my celebration of life and nature through poetry. Unlike Whitman's and Posner's, however, Larson's work also inspired me to try to be more in touch with who I am and write poems that are occasionally more personal than others. Some of my work inspired by this idea include "Subtitles," "As you fade from whole to gray," and "We are but a label." These poems are more focused on personal identity as opposed to keeping in touch with my natural surroundings. Not only does "La Vie Bohème" celebrate life in spite of all its flaws, it also celebrates individuals of all backgrounds and orientations. The poems I just mentioned share and explore two significant aspects of my life: my hearing impairment and my sexual orientation and identity. In both of these ways, I diverge from the "norm," and poetry has become a way for me to find and express pride in that. For me, "La Vie Bohème," and *Rent* as a whole, is just as much a celebration of difference as it is of life.

*Embrace Your Weird: Face Your Fears and Unleash Creativity* by Felicia Day

Emotions are the basis of all creativity. And resistance. So if a strong emotion comes up while working through this book, GO FURTHER INTO IT! "Gee, why do I NOT think I'm the greatest thing since swiss cheese? Is it lactose intolerance? Who taught me NOT to be proud of who I am, and how can I punch them?" (Day 11)

Throughout this book, Day makes herself vulnerable by revealing her own awkward personality while trying to get her readers to be brave and set free whatever creative juices they have bottled up inside them. She encourages readers to deface the book however they please, even including writing prompts and other activities to help get them in the creative zone. This quote in particular reminds readers to stay in touch with their emotions and even highlights how they are essential to the creative process. This idea

helped me decide to do a creative thesis as opposed to a critical one. I struggled with this decision at first because I thought it would be a bad idea to do my project on something that was more emotionally driven than a research paper might be. For whatever reason, I had it in my head that a thesis should be something solely academic and objective. Yet, *Embrace Your Weird*, along with other previously mentioned creative works, inspired me to let my emotions free, be who I am, and do this project on something that is important to me and that I really enjoy. Indeed, I agree that the best creative work is driven by emotion because that means there is passion and meaning behind it that is not solely about economic or social power.

## METHODOLOGY

### Choosing a Topic

Writing poetry is not something that I do consistently. Throughout the writing of my manuscript, there were many lapses. Usually, these lapses came at times when I was in a good place mentally and emotionally. During such periods, I did not spend much time self-reflecting or wishing for things I did not have. I am the kind of person who writes in order to relieve stress and to better understand and analyze myself and my emotions. For this reason, I find it is most beneficial for me to write at times when I am feeling down. Writing is really a way for me to get out of my own head and remind myself of all the wonderful things about life that I have forgotten about. As I have mentioned, working on this project has been somewhat of an introspective practice for me. It has been a productive and effective way for me to explore my personal issues and desires. Moreover, it has helped me become more open and aware of what is around me in terms of my physical and social environments.

I wrote, “On my way into being” after a hike I took with my mother and her fiancé last spring. It was pouring rain, we were cold and soaked, yet I felt energized and euphoric. The entire hike was like a dream to me, but the scene I wrote about is of a break we took near a river. The rain was falling on the water, so it looked like stars were twinkling in it. The trees seemed more vibrant than ever, and I felt like I was home in a way that made me feel safe yet not enclosed and cooped up in some rundown building. I felt like I was one with the natural environment. Many of my poems are written about similar experiences, including “The long way home” and “The mountains that consumed me.” Generally speaking, writing has made me more aware of my own emotions and

mental state as well as my goals and desires. It has even helped me better understand how I think about my own identity as well as others’.

### Grounding the Abstract in the Real

A poem, to me, should be something that is not too abstract or obscure. When I read a poem, I like to be grounded by some sort of familiar idea or object that I can always go back to to find some sort of connection or to better understand what the poem is saying. The poems in my manuscript are not excessively abstract, as I do like to write about real thoughts and experiences that I have. Some of my poems, in fact, are more literal than one might expect. Everything in “And there I was,” for example, is completely true. However, I do not shy away from the abstract completely. Most of my poems are abstract in some way so as to capture or reflect my feelings in regards to some concept or idea that I have. The very first poem in my manuscript, “Is this what they meant by ink poisoning?” refers to how I used to frequently write on my skin and how everyone would always tell me doing so would give me ink poisoning. The poem is also kind of a metaphor for writing poetry and writing about my life more specifically. Though the act of writing on my skin is real, many of the images throughout the poem are abstract, including writing of “hopes and dreams,” writing “‘til ink becomes blood,” writing so that “skin becomes poetry.” Each of these abstractions paints an image of the personal, of the self writing and becoming their own story, and, as I have said, these abstractions are grounded in the literal act of writing on skin.

## Choosing a Structure

I often begin writing my poems with one or a few lines inspired by a word, feelings, image, or idea I have in mind. I typically like to keep my lines short, sometimes using an entire stanza to finish a single sentence or thought. When I do this, I like to break my lines in such a way that allows empty space and audible pauses to help set a certain tone. Most of the poems I scrap I do so because they start to sound too much like prose. I try to avoid this because I want my poetry to sound different from a typical novel or short story. I want my writing to be more free and open than that. Many of my poems have end-stopped lines. I used to do that because it seemed like the logical thing to do--it makes sense to end a line where a pause is already being taken. But, over time, I started to move away from that because I wanted pauses in less conventional areas, either to make the line more dramatic or to give the reader space to consider what I have written. "Is this what they meant by ink poisoning?" is one of the first poems I wrote with a freer and more diverse structure. Each stanza has both long and shorter lines, and there are extra spaces between words in the same line. Additionally, only about half of the lines are end-stopped, unlike the second poem, "The girl who would be human," in which most of the lines end in either a period or a comma. I use free verse specifically so I can have this kind of creative freedom, so I have more room to do whatever I want or need to do to get my message across or paint the image I want to paint.

## CRITICAL ANALYSIS

I have talked about various general aspects of my poems, including how they encompass themes of freedom and entrapment, discuss nature, ground the abstract in the real, and are written in free verse. The most important aspect of my poetry, however, is that it is largely personal and confessional. Confessional poetry focuses on the “I,” and is often emotional and revealing, as it tends to involve an admission of a personal psychological experience (Poetry Foundation). Many poets have used and continue to use this form as an artistic way to let out their emotions and talk about their past traumas and personal problems. Slam and spoken word poets often use this genre, and poets originally associated with include Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, and W.D. Snodgrass. These poets wrote abundantly about their own lives and how they were affected by their experiences. Often, their poetry served as an exploration of the self. Take, for example, Anne Sexton’s poem, “The Ambition Bird”:

So it has come to this –  
insomnia at 3:15 A.M.,  
the clock tolling its engine

like a frog following  
a sundial yet having an electric  
seizure at the quarter hour.

The business of words keeps me awake.  
I am drinking cocoa,  
the warm brown mama.

I would like a simple life  
yet all night I am laying  
poems away in a long box.

It is my immortality box,  
my lay-away plan,  
my coffin.

All night dark wings  
flopping in my heart.  
Each an ambition bird.

The bird wants to be dropped  
from a high place like Tallahatchie Bridge.

He wants to light a kitchen match  
and immolate himself.

He wants to fly into the hand of Michelangelo  
and come out painted on a ceiling.

He wants to pierce the hornet's nest  
and come out with a long godhead.

He wants to take bread and wine  
and bring forth a man happily floating in the Caribbean.

He wants to be pressed out like a key  
so he can unlock the Magi.

He wants to take leave among strangers  
passing out bits of his heart like hors d'oeuvres.

He wants to die changing his clothes  
and bolt for the sun like a diamond.

He wants, I want.  
Dear God, wouldn't it be  
good enough just to drink cocoa?

I must get a new bird  
and a new immortality box.  
There is folly enough inside this one.

Sexton reveals so much about herself in this poem, starting in the second line: "Insomnia at 3:15 A.M." Already, we know she is having trouble sleeping. We also know that she wants "a simple life," yet she has certain ambitions keeping her from being satisfied with "simple": "All night dark wings / flopping in my heart. / Each an ambition bird." She begins listing things that this "ambition bird" wants, none of which seem plausible. Then

she says this: “He wants, I want. / Dear God, wouldn’t it be / good enough just to drink cocoa?” This stanza expresses that Sexton is conflicted because she has ambitions, yet she wants a simple life in which doing something as mundane as drinking cocoa would be enough to satisfy her. Even this poem, however, diverges from what many consider to be “confessional” in that there is a pronoun shift from “I” to “he.” In doing this, Sexton diverges attention (and ambition) from herself and onto this bird, yet the focus of the poem, I would argue, remains on her. She uses the bird as a point of comparison for herself—they both want many things, and these things, perhaps, seem impossible, or improbable, to her to achieve, as the last stanza suggests: “I must get a new bird / and a new immortality box. / There is folly enough inside this one.” It becomes clear that the bird represents her own ambitions, and, indeed, they are implausible, or, as she calls them, “folly.” What really makes this poem confessional is that Sexton addresses her own conflicting desires. Yes, she does so using a bird as a metaphor, but in the end she owns that bird, recognizing and revealing it as a metaphor for herself.

Most of my poems center around the “I” as well. Some address serious problems from my past which I still think about every now and then, while others are about my recent experiences as well as current desires, pleasures, and struggles with mental health. These are confessional in that I take ownership of all of these things. In fact, writing poetry has been a helpful way for me to do this as well as accept myself, my faults, and my strengths, which I often fail to see on my own. Some of my most confessional poems in the manuscript include “Monster,” “We are but a label,” and “And there I was.” As the last poem in my manuscript, “And there I was” connects back to the beginning of the manuscript, to “Is this what they meant by ink poisoning?,” as they both refer to the act

of writing on skin. Both encompass themes of losing oneself in some way or other. Let's look specifically at "And there I was":

I wrote on my arm  
in small cursive letters *De*  
I wrote over it until it darkened *De*  
Wanting to see it  
Wanting it to be permanent.

Would action even give me purpose?  
I ask myself.  
I ask because I do  
and often nothing

No feeling of pride overcomes me—  
No feeling of joy courses through this soul.

Perhaps I do have a purpose—  
people depend on me.  
Too much.

So much I lose myself.  
I forget to be.  
There is no meaning  
in doing without being.

And so I learned to be.

I wrote on my arm  
in small cursive letters *De*  
I wrote over it until it darkened *De*  
Until it was permanent—  
etched within me.

I wrote this poem the fall of my junior year at the University, at a time when I was feeling like everything I did was for others more so than it was for myself. To be sure, I had given myself very little time for myself that semester, taking eighteen credits and working three part-time jobs. Needless to say, my lack of "me time" took a toll on my mental health, which I could not find the time to talk to anyone about. Even now, I find "And there I was" to be highly relevant. Since that fall of junior year, I have made more

time for myself, yet I still feel like I exist mainly for the purpose of others because I must work for others, doing a job I dislike in order to survive. I do not wish to be tethered in any such way. I would love to be able to simply exist, but unfortunately living in this kind of society makes that impossible.

In terms of what makes this poem confessional, throughout the course of this poem, I reveal first that I drew on myself and second that I want that drawing of the word *Self* to be permanent. This is all something that I actually did--I did write *Self* on my arm, and I did want it to be permanent, but, on a deeper level, what I wanted was to do something that was meaningful to *me*. This becomes clearer in the following stanzas, when I ask myself, "Would action even give me purpose?" and reveal that I feel it does not because I do so much for others and little for myself, which causes me to "lose myself." In this poem, I confess my distress in feeling like I have neither the means nor the time to do things for myself. Indeed, I conclude with the accomplishment that I learned how to simply be who and what I am without so many obligations sucking the energy and life out of me. This poem is confessional in that I use the personal "I" to reveal my true actions and feelings.

Confessional poetry, being focused on the self, certainly reveals a lot about the writer in how they feel, what they want, and what troubles them. Most, if not all, of my poems touch on some mental or emotional issue I am grappling with in some way. As I have said, the reason so many of my poems involve nature is because I see it as an escape from the stresses of everyday life and a way to connect to something bigger and more meaningful than whatever is stressing me out. In a way, these poems are a confession that I am feeling trapped and need space to breathe and relax, which I often feel I do not have.

For myself, I consider writing poetry as a kind of therapy and introspective practice because of its connection to the personal, mental, and emotional.

Because confessional poetry is all about the personal, it can also be considered somewhat autobiographical. Many of the experiences shared in confessional poetry are either true, represent something of the truth, or have aspects of the truth in them (Byrne). Not everything that I write is literal, but I would consider most of it true in a metaphorical or symbolic sense. For example, I wrote the poem “Monster” about a time when it was raining and I was riding in a car and got sucked into a replaying of memories I had with a man from my past. When I say “*he* appears” and “*He*’s the monster / in my closet. / *He* won’t go away, and *he* loves / creeping around my room at night, / keeping me awake.” I do not mean any of this literally, but, when I did think about him, it used to feel like he was always lingering there in my mind, watching me, and these thoughts made it difficult for me to sleep at times. This poem, just like “And there I was” is confessional in its admission of the psychological effects that a negative experience had on me, but it is more metaphorical in order to better represent and convey these effects.

CONCLUSION: WRITING AS THERAPY AND EMOTIONAL EXPRESSSIONAL IN  
A LARGER CONTEXT

Poetry is something that I have always enjoyed but did not really cultivate any skills or interest in until college. I have always been an emotional person, sensitive and easily upset, but whenever I was feeling really passionate, I would write a journal entry or a letter I never planned to send. When I came to college, I stopped doing that and started channeling my emotions into something more creative that was so much more than a mere collection of angry words on a sheet of lined paper. What I created made me feel real and significant. I was not only expressing my feelings, I was exploring and trying to understand them. Moreover, poetry felt like something I could share with others. Journaling felt much more private and far more simplistic than poetry. For me, it was a release, but certainly not a creative one that I much enjoyed or could be proud of.

I have spoken extensively about how writing poetry has been helpful for me in terms of emotional comfort, expression, and exploration. I also briefly mentioned that poetry has been somewhat of a therapeutic practice for me. I believe this is because I largely write confessional, lyrical, and even narrative work that refers to real thoughts and experiences that I have. Every poem I write has a story attached to it, which makes each significant for its own reasons. While writing poetry may be therapeutic for me, however, this is not the case for every situation. One psychological study on story writing found that it is indeed beneficial to write about one's experiences in an emotional way, however, this is mostly beneficial when writing in a narrative form and using an abundance of positive-emotion words (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999). Likewise, a review

done on the so-called “writing cure” found that, unlike prose writing, poetry often does not come with the same mental and emotional benefits. They inferred that this may be, in part, because poetry is often not written in a narrative form, therefore writers are not focusing on their experiences and how they have been affected by them (Kaufman & Sexton, 2006). Writing poetry, then, could have a lot of potential as a therapeutic practice, so long as writers choose to do so in a way that helps them explore and emotionally connect with their real-world experiences.

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## AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Ashley was born in Biddeford, Maine and graduated from Biddeford High School in 2017. They decided to attend the University of Maine with the idea that they could explore a variety of subject areas before deciding on their major.

During their time at UMaine, they focused their studies on English, Psychology, and Philosophy, developing strong interests in the human mind, human nature, existentialism, and creative writing. They embraced the arts, discovering a love especially for Whitman and writing poetry. As an undergraduate, they were a member of collegiate chorale and French club and was a Levinson Ambassador for the Philosophy Department. Additionally, they are a member of the honors societies of Phi Beta Kappa, Phi Kappa Phi, Sigma Tau Delta, and Phi Sigma Tau.

They were offered the Gilman scholarship to attend the University of East Anglia for creative writing in the summer of 2020, but had to decline the award due to COVID-19. They still hope to travel to Norwich one day to explore it as an UNESCO City of Literature. Following graduation, Ashley will be working towards an MA in English with a concentration in Poetry and Poetics at the University of Maine.