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AND DROP

By

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B.A. University of Maine, 2018

M.A. University of Maine, 2021

A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

(in English)

The Graduate School

The University of Maine

May 2021

Advisory Committee:

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AND DROP

By Lydia Lucia Balestra

Thesis Advisor: Jennifer Moxley

An Abstract of the Thesis Presented
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts
(in English)
May 2021

The following manuscript is a thesis in poetry and poetics. The goal of the thesis was to develop a sense of my own poetics which could be articulated in a critical introduction and to put these poetics into practice by using them to create a collection of poetry. Through my exploration of past poets's poetics for the critical introduction I was able to gain an understanding of several ways to approach writing poetry and develop my own methods based on the poetics from others that resonated with me. My critical introduction emulates Rosmarie Waldrop's essay "Thinking of Follows" through the use of referential quotes and an explanation of my poetics in light of these quotes.

The poems included in the collection titled *And Drop* explore themes of overwhelm and the notion of swooning, falling, dropping, and other forms of emotional tumbling brought upon the speaker due to overwhelming situations in their life. These situations are occasionally narrativized with expressed locations

but primarily are shared with readers from the internal location of the speaker's thoughts. In creating a collection of poetry which intentionally does not adequately deal with overwhelming uncertainty and in line with my own desire to create poems which escape a sense of linearity, I have attempted to develop a collection with multiple misplaced endings, varying levels of truth to the events being told by the speaker, and often a lack of an understandable narrative in general. The majority of the poems shift back and forth between phrases one would normally use in everyday conversation and more unusual phrasings that appeal to the poetics of sound poetry.

The thesis originates from my own fixation on being overwhelmed and a discussion had during Sarah Harlan-Haughey's Medieval English Literature course at The University of Maine about swooning being not necessarily a romantic act but rather one of overwhelm. In modernizing this experience and translating it into poetry, *And Drop* utilizes the repetition of the word "and" as an indicator of accumulating energy. Through the development of this thesis I was able to practice transforming the familiar content of romantic swooning into a new context informed by but also separate from my own personal experiences. Three poems within the manuscript are emulations and responses to poetry by Robert Duncan, Mina Loy, and Arthur Symons.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my father, Louis Paul Balestra, for his ability to love and support me in all my endeavors – even when he doesn't understand them.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Jennifer Moxley, for her valuable guidance on this project and poetry in general. Thank you to everyone at The University of Maine that influenced me and fostered an environment where I could create this thesis, and thank you to my family and friends for all you do.

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

I. ACKNOWLEDGING INFLUENCES

The format of my critical introduction is indebted to Rosmarie Waldrop. I read her essay “Thinking of Follows” and took interest in the referential nature of the text. In developing my own poetics I found it useful to return to the poets I have read up until this point and as an emulation of Waldrop’s referential writing I make references via quotations to some of these poets and their poetics throughout my introduction. The strongest influences on my thesis have been Robert Duncan and Mina Loy. Reading about Duncan’s approach to poetics as a refiguration of experience resonated with me. As I will elaborate on in the writing process section of this introduction, my process for composing a poem often begins with an experience or lingering image from my life which I feel the need to reconfigure into language. Mina Loy, being the first poet I have studied in depth while at The University of Maine, has influenced me in her attention to sound patterning and the creation of poems which are often referential but not transparent or easily assigned one interpretation, which I also attempt to employ in my poetry.

The inspiration for my this project originates from both my own fixation on being overwhelmed and a discussion had during Sarah Harlan-Haughey’s Medieval

English Literature course at The University of Maine about swooning being not necessarily a romantic act but rather one of overwhelm. To use the term “overwhelm” in the context of that discussion and in the context of this thesis is to refer to a state of being overwhelmed – to feel that one is currently being drowned or overcome both emotionally and physically. In modernizing the experience of overwhelm or swooning and translating it into poetry, *And Drop* utilizes the repetition of the word “and” as an indicator of accumulating stress and replaces the word “swoon” with “drop.”

II. POETIC FRAMEWORK

“Everything is the same except composition and as the composition is different and always going to be different everything is not the same.” –
Gertrude Stein

The framework for my thesis and my poetics in general is not easily articulated because I prefer to keep an open perspective on the purposes for which I write poetry and also acknowledge that much of the poetry that I write is not usually closed to singular interpretations or explicit about the experiences being referred to.

A.) MOTIVE FOR WORDS:

It is not my motive to describe the world in “the very language of men,” avoiding poems that lean on personifications and allusions (Wordsworth). Objects may be present and require some depiction but I am not concerned with basing my poetry on the construction of identifiable objects. In the same setting, I do not avoid description or rely purely on “evocation, *allusion*,” and “*suggestion*.” (Mallarmé). In accordance with the theme(s) of the work (which I elaborate on in the fourth section of this introduction), much of my thesis exists in an internal or mental space that does not have any shapes within it to allude to or evoke.

I am not wholly concerned with manipulating language toward one motive and I will not lean on one purpose nor claim to do so. In writing my thesis the purpose for each poem repeatedly became to make something from the moment or object of experience which will translate it from energy within myself to an energy on the page, keeping in sight a final goal for the project to create something with intentional uncertainty. The poetic framework I have used for my thesis has been built of uncertain beams which will be extended or cut back by a carpenter who knows the house must have multiple rooms which are not all going to be kitchens or bedrooms, and yet this builder does not have the full blueprint to indicate each room’s purpose. The framework for my poems is present but not stable, leaving

room for later alterations. One poem in particular, “Roast Beef Whatever the Special Is” went through several revisions since its conception as a poem titled “Rush” in the summer of 2017, at which time it read as follows:

Rush

Stand at the crosswalk. Now squint
and watch these weapons pass us by.

White light emitting diodes
will beckon us forward, so hurry.
I will not let you stay on this corner.

Signals are invisible to the naked eye,
drowned out by the flame of innovation.

I always wait for their direction
because I am afraid of being run over.
Physically, mentally, and emotionally.

This is the tortured Summer City
waiting to run us out.

The revisions this poem underwent began with lengthening the poem, developing a narrative of movement that went beyond the stagnant location of the crosswalk, and changing the speaker of the poem to no longer be giving directions. These changes reflected a shift in the purposes I wanted for this poem, to move into a more unsure space for the speaker while also having a poem which could contribute a location to a collection of poems which primarily stay within an

interior space of the mind. Once I had revised the poem with these new goals I was able to reconsider the sound patterns of it and adjust the spacing to more closely resemble the way I want readers to move from one word to the next. In the end, “Roast Beef Whatever the Special Is” appears to be a different poem entirely, but it is in fact the same poem that has just been transformed over the course of four years. I am certain that this poem and/or others in this thesis will be further revised in the future for new, frequently shifting purposes.

B.) EXPRESSION OF EXPERIENCE:

“What about expressions like *strong sensations*, *transgression*, *subversion*, and *ludic experience*? Let’s start with “strong sensations” and “ludic experience.” What do these expressions oppose? For me, they oppose boredom and daily routine; in a word: *linearity*.” – Nicole Brossard

In line with my motivations to remain open and ambiguous, I do not strive to capture the world exactly as it is. As I attempt to work against any immediately discernible structures of organization which might be of some comfort to the speaker of the poem or readers of it, I oppose the following of linearity. Several poems, such as the two “End” poems and “I Can’t Keep Reading” reflect this concept of moving beyond linearity, or defying expectations for the collection of poems, by

presenting readers with a sense of finality in each of them. The collection begins with “I Can’t Keep Reading,” and places the reader seemingly into the middle of some end to the speaker’s contemplations which can’t be comprehended yet because there has been no context developed for it by the other poems. “An Iron End” comes only a few poems later and not only has the word “end” and “iron” in the title, signifying a solid, fixed end, but the speaker of the poem openly references credits rolling and the given narrative suggests we are at the end of something we once again could not have fully witnessed. By the time readers get to “An Honest End” it is apparent that these are not endings to the collection, nor are they effective endings to the overwhelm the speaker of the poems is attempting to navigate. When readers get to this “honest” ending they must consider whether the speaker is really being honest, and what purpose(s) these potentially false endings and breaks in linearity, or the pattern narrative is supposed to follow, serves.

At the same time that I am attempting to create a work which captures a tumbling speaker, I recognize my own personal needs as a reader for the lyric to be connected to the world in some recognizable fashion. Although I stay primarily in an interior space, I make a connection to the recognizable world by balancing the use of more readily used words and phrases which might invoke a common internal monologue or conversation between two people with my use of Mina Loy-inspired

sound patterning and unusual phrases. Section XII of “Letters to Pass With” is an example of this concept:

XII

To get lifted and lip-drubbed
by a stranger
they cheer on this time

I tell him to step with me
outside
And tell me why men why

And skittish thrill is the reason
he gets away with this
action that leaves me unwell

In this section of the poem phrases which might be heard in regular conversation such as “a stranger/they cheer on” and “he gets away with this” are complicated by less familiar phrasing as “I tell him to step with me/outside” (a possible rearrangement and dragging out of the command “to step outside with me”) and the term “lip-drubbed” which combines two words not normally used together: “lip” and “drubbed” (which is already an unusual word) to create a new phrase that goes against linearity.

III. The Writing Process

“They memorized as they realized. In turn, now, the surfaces and involvements of the brain were an imprint of the seas above; and the skydome above was the image of another configuration in the skulldome below.” – Robert Duncan

Duncan’s discussion about the refiguration of language resonates with when writing poetry because before I even sit down to write a poem I will become fixated on experiences or lingering images from my life which I want to convert to poetry.

A.) DROPPING ENERGY INTO NEW FORMS:

“A poem rarely comes whole and completely dressed. As a rule, it comes in bits and pieces. You get an impression of something—you feel something, you anticipate something, and you begin, feebly, to put these impressions and feelings and anticipation or rememberings into those things which seem so common and handleable—words.” – Gwendolyn Brooks

I do not approach the poem with a message to insert or reveal. It starts with something else – a line, a sound, an image, a little piece of something surrounded

by a lot of nothing. The piece of something and the lot of nothing both go on the page. Since I do not intend to take an opaque approach to writing about this subject, I will let several experiences or objects blend together and begin to space out phrases and words depending on how they occur to me. I usually begin poems by dumping onto the page any phrases which come to mind when thinking about the subject and refuse to worry about creating a poem with any discernible trajectory or structure. I am open to the words influencing one another and leading me away from the beginning phrase which came into my mind when I sat down to write. My primary concern when drafting a poem is to drag out of the inciting subject all related energy, to capture all the energy within and surrounding the poem's subject, and to drop all these words into a page together where they can then proceed to affect each other further. While writing, I considered the repetition of the word "and" within the manuscript and the placement of the word to be representative of the accumulation of energy within each poem. Throughout most poems in the collection, and in "An Iron End" in particular, the speaker is not only affected but the spacing of other words on the page also appears to be affected or shifted by these "and" moments.

The whole lot of words and space on the page then get shifted around as I decide how much of it gets replaced, how many of these pieces of something should get traded out for a different something. Once I have captured all phrases I can think

of, I set aside any words which do not connect to each other in some way and then I begin to focus more on the sound of the poem and how to create something lyrical out of the writing on the page. Nearly all the poems in my thesis began as more prose-like and referential. It was through revisions that I focused more on sound patterning and was able to take a step toward the formal gestures of Mina Loy's poetry. The determining factor in many of my choices while revising has been to speak these words into existence, and hear how they sound when they are rearranged and put back into the space of the world they came from. As I studied Loy's poetry I noticed how difficult the poetry could be to read at times due to language and the referential nature of it so I did attempt in my thesis to preserve readability by using unusual language sparingly.

B.) WHEN REFERENCES ARE DIRECT:

"You revise, and you revise. And often the finished product is nothing like your first draft. Sometimes it is." – Gwendolyn Brooks

As I take up the pieces of something and nothing, there is on occasion a comprehensible connection which I can follow through to the completion of the poem in one sitting. In my thesis these are usually the poems which began with an absorption and refiguration of another poet's work such as Duncan. I read Duncan's

“A Letter” and was definitively haunted by an understanding or connection to the words. Duncan gives me a nightmare which begins the poem “Absorption of A Letter”:

As I went on to dream it:
they took a bite from my swollen palm,
ripped it open and the black inside
fell into the other,
where I could see it clearly
for the first time.

I made the conscious choice to retain direct reference in the title of this poem to Duncan’s “A Letter” because I wanted to retain the influence of Duncan’s work on this poem which could otherwise not be recognized as related. This is one poem in the collection which also begins as directly referential to the inciting experience (my dream post-reading “A Letter”) but transgresses into an increasingly disconnected space from the inciting experience until the last section which introduces a new character and object which is seemingly unrelated to the rest of the poem. I believe the movement in *Absorption of a Letter* is also representative of the larger process I undergo while writing poetry as I begin with a recognizable moment and then it gets dragged out of its original context and dropped into a new space. Everything starts in a space I recognize and then it gets transformed into something else entirely.

I CAN'T KEEP READING

It started like a riddle
I read with no response:
*"I could say I don't know
why I write to you
but that isn't true."*

It lightened for a while
"in a strange way"
as you hoped
we would be friends,
that I would
"wonder about me"
and write back maybe.

You wrote and wrote such
happy, flustered hope.
I wondered what would happen
in a year, when silence kept on and
*"it feels like all the letters
in the world couldn't help me."*

And months, when
"others say it gets better"
but you know it doesn't
happen on its own.
*"I don't know how I can
make it better,"* You wrote.

And another year
and a half until
"What I feel is maybe lonely."

Unsure of emotion but

"I need you again."

And I wondered how it hurt
to not leave your name.

I stared at that end
and thought and thought

"This is how my mother felt."

EVERYTHING I COULD HAVE

I was thinking
of my birthday soulmate,
and how much I loved
that farm boy.

I was thinking
of the night I dreamt,
young worry for a loss
I couldn't put in words.

His father was gone
and then he was gone
and then you were gone
and then he was gone too.

I didn't tell you.
You didn't know him
but I worried
if I told you at your lowest
you'd go too.

My mother used to say
we would get married,
even without seeing
the way we grinned
and argued over who
was older and denied
that we knew each other -
even without the way
we saw everything.

I couldn't tell you.

I couldn't add to the induction
of an ending I was afraid of.

DON'T YOU?

I've been thinking a lot, lately
about you telling me to ignore
the thing that scares me most.

I don't think you understand.

There was a balanced act,
and if I forget any more
I won't have any left.
Nothing left – empty
and left to repeat nothing.

I didn't ask to start dropping.

I wish I could remember,
but I know if I did
I'd do something
that makes me more empty.

LAY

It was agreed upon, last night,
by straw-sipped open mouths
who don't sit in silence,
that we were alike, after all,

because we both take up space
in such an uncomfortable way.

One says she likes my innocence,
and an other who pretends to know me
says it's not innocence;
it's extreme discomfort.

And one says she tried, last time
I spoke, to look at you and see
if you noticed how cute I am.

And she says you looked away;
didn't want to meet her gaze.

And they talk about fantasies they have
and laugh at my facial expressions
while I am thinking
and keeping to myself
about every night when I lay down
and count all the ways to stay still.

And they say it's not about sex;
it's about intimacy, the sex is.

I listen and I wish they spoke more
like the feelings in their words.

And I wish I could have my somnium—

I wish I could have the enigmatic dream
in my arms.

I DON'T KNOW MUCH

But we sit together
 in the drive-thru
 and he tells me
selling blood plasma
is painful, is the most
painful way to make money
 when you have no home.

And he tells the woman at the window
to give him the rest of his change.

But he used to be a cook
 and a farmer,
 and mail out credit card offers
before he came to the city.

Now he pays money
 and gets money back
 and sells business
 and my mid-valley-girlfriend is disgusted
 when I tell her how his nose is plugged
 with bloody tissues right now.

ROAST BEEF WHATEVER THE SPECIAL IS

I drag boots, short
of breath on
Dublin – Grandview
because I don't want to
 cross the street,
to share sandwiches
 from across the street.

And I don't want to cross,
and you ask if I'm alright
and I have to walk
and take your cell phone
for the free Chex mix coupon,
and ask the cashier
if you get a free drink today
and get you a sandwich.

And I cross the street
and stand ahead of a man
who can't believe I work
at a car store too.

And I tell him

I don't.

I just help you get by.

And he says he works at one too
and I can see that – the shirt –
and he smiles and wiggles
his full arm, full of sandwich,
and I hate when people bump my arm
like they're so clever I should just

tip over

and my chest is a crumpled
wax sandwich wrapper
and he wants me to
bump him already
and I look at the
too dragged deli boy
who gives me free tenders
and I realize I've cried twice today
but I will get through this
if I just call you
at work
across the street
and ask again
if I've got the right sandwich.

I CAN BE BETTER

If I drink the lesser juice
of rue, of tell me not to,
bitter common gold,
that starts in the garden
and lands with sorrow--

Soft and feathered when I start
to feel heart, in heart
I decline the clause of kings;
put them to disuse
before dissent.

If I look back and wish
what had never happened
ought not occur, oh flower,
I give word to rust
and I possess regret.

That aught can rue me.
That voice can knock me
with a stone, my breast
the box that holds grief.

I tell myself not to taste
the object, not to feel
the better juice of rue.

ABSORPTION OF A LETTER

(After Robert Duncan's "A Letter")

I

As I went on to dream it:
they took a bite from my swollen palm,
ripped it open and the black inside
fell into the other,
where I could see it clearly
for the first time.

What I had felt inside turned now
into a synthetic poly pillow,
a soft magnet, a soft conductor
only I must have spied;
and felt my heaviness again
with the sight.

I now had a fear of being seen and given
a meaning it and I should not have,
a meaning I had yet to unwind
from pure experience.

I dropped it as they bit the other palm,
opened it up with no pain.
And again the cushion fell
where only I would see it.

II

This material is my call and creation;
this static that hangs over and follows,

bright when it is dark and raining.

I cannot run from it;
I hold the kite string, even now
with open palms.

I continue to rock foundations when I sit
and skew level boards when I lean
and there is this dizziness that lingers
when we're all in the path of transmission.

III

I met my carrier of sleep
when I was young, looking at me
from the tops of trees
and holding me, and learning
how to be invasive black and polished glass
and when to come out from me again.

He spoke to me without words or play
and told me when to close my eyes,
with a weight that lingered.
And he put the black in my palms
and woke me up to the wrenching
of two worlds sharing a bodytool
that aches so silent
with everything inside at once.

ALL I WANT TO KNOW IS

I don't know how to stop this feeling
of saying the wrong thing.

It fills my arms with pins, now
wondering if I could have
been more of something else.

If I reach out too far,
try to touch too soon
I undo the attraction.

But you spoke to me first
and though it feels unusual,
the words are familiar.

Please undo my wondering
of what it feels like for you,
and my empathy, my curiosity,
and tell me why I was the stranger
you would admit loneliness to.

THE PIT OF MESSAGES

I don't want to dwell
on dispensing dual advice
you don't listen to –

You said, he says, you say
you are not beautiful, no –
you are handsome.

There is not only the sea
in your eyes, in your name;
not only the sky.

And when you said
you are not beautiful, no –
you are handsome –

I will say you are either both
or neither.

YOU NEVER WEAR YOUR GLASSES

You'll never see this
but I saw a guy
 who looked like you
sitting in his car
outside the fast-food place
where you used to work.

I was getting a sandwich
with my family.

 The one I told you was a mom
 and a dad and siblings and me.
 And you asked if she was
a stay-at-home mom
 and I told you
(as a joke for me) that
 she was a social worker
and then I changed the subject
and I changed it again
when you wanted
to meet at the mall
 and hang out sometime
 because there is no mom
staying at home.

And I don't have one anymore
 and that's my fault.

Seeing you made me wonder
where you were,
 and where you've been.

But I kept walking
and hoped you didn't see me
in my matching red pants.

SPAT

You said *“it’s not fair
that everyone else
gets to change and I don’t.”*

And I don’t know
where to start with that.

But you wore me down
to my lowest, then dared
to tell her what was
just between us.

And I’m sure
you don’t know
what she burned in me
and that’s why
I won’t negotiate.

I’m not your mother
and I’m not your friend.
Not because it’s impossible,
but because the change falls
in the parking lot
unless I’m there to stop it.

And that kind of liability,
always passed from you to me
is what I find unfair.

PINK

Athena,
stumbling
in the rose garden.
 Blur on blur on strum
I dream awake words
 on the blurs of a song,
green on green,
you shout with
 Caroline.

Black iron spinning,
 poetry, you and I
 drink lonely cheer
re-writing and
 climbing stairs
 while you strum
and cut your hair.

Athena,
slamming
 rough on rough
 on roses soft
that makes me jump.
 You slam your drink
 down on the counter,
shatter my design
as I imagine you
 stepping on roses.

AN HONEST END

I am afraid to take
the sweet that laughs
in loud and full.

To say I give up –
that's not true.

I learned I knew the sound
and look away when you step.

I tried to walk behind you
and you turned around
to ask where we were going.

To say I give up –
on what?

I think I'm leveling.

I think your face would fit
in my hand
looking down on me
nearly neutral.

It ends at the thought
and I give up.

UNTIL I FALL AGAIN

I used to wish I could go back
for the long game
of making you like me
as much as I liked you –
back beyond the day we met.

Was my last rout enough
to make you grieve?

I wish I could have seen it.

But I am not from the right time
to be more than a path for you
to go back to when you felt
submerged too.

I will not hear from you

FAMILY VACATION

I worry about intention.

In the man with necklaces,
rosaries, jewelry in a bag
he sets on the counter.

“*Are you a child?*” another asks,
letting himself in the room.

“No,” I say, “*I am something bigger*”
and I see in that moment
disappointment.

I wonder if –

He’ll stop the bloody noses
and when I put the pencil down
 we’ll breathe for once,
my father and me.

There is a car that runs
under trees,
behind the Italian
where I walk his white dog
 and look at all the trucks
for ones with men in them.

He told me on what feels
like yesterday,
that I should be a child longer.

Now he asks when I will hurry
and spend my holiday

with someone else.

He says I won't have children,
he's fairly sure, but if I did
he'd wait to visit them
until they were older.

"You don't have to,"
he adjusts the words,
"but if you do, I'll wait."

And when we stop worrying
about each other
he'll sell all the money
and stay with me, together.

LITTLE CONQUEST

I'm back,
at the corner of the sidewalk
waiting for that white light,
little man crossing,
sandwich in hand.

A car rolls up beside me,
rolls the window down
and turns up the music.

I turn
and stare at a man
like I've always wanted to stare
at the old women
and the man at the gas station
who tell me I might be pretty
if I gave them a smile.

And he rolls the window back up
and he turns the music down
and drives away.

FROM THE SPHERE

*“You’ve ruined it,” he says,
“I can’t see sweet anymore
on the glass, on the screen.
You’ve ruined it for me.”*

His reflection
from my perspective:
Get down, cry get down
or else you’re not sorry.

He is staring at me
not through me yet,
a new kind of glass
not translucent yet,
and saying I am stuck.

My reflection
from his perspective:
I have gotten myself stuck.

I must be happy
to be stuck.

Hit the glass and again.
Fade out collapse go under.
Hit it but it won’t shatter
while it’s thick inside.

HE'D SMOTHER IT

I think I am finally alone,
falling through the night
with a letter that shows
I have no attachments.

Aren't you tired of being nice?

The screen says it,
and says it over again
to no one in particular.

I read into it. I get anxious.
I get this feeling,
like a girl's hand
brushing my skin
when I think too much.

I have a list of messages
I sent when searching
for someone more in the dark
than me.

I want to change the way
I breathe, black smoke.
I want the heat to invade me,
to show I ate the flame
that won't be put out.

WHEN THE RAIN FALLS

And I have time to cool off,
words come back again.

Why are you afraid of weather?
Afraid to be caught
in a downpour or downfall
of hail and sleet.

Why do you need me
to put away the clouds?
Looking at the sun burns
hotter, more lasting
than minding puddle reflections.

My eyes, my skin could recover
from one of those things.

So I keep glancing through this
gossamer umbrella
and wonder what life will be like
when it never stops raining.

SURE (ERRONEOUS)

You should be afraid,
he says, to be alone
with this man.

But I keep saying
we are not similar.
We are not afraid
of the same things.

You and I are not strange
in the same ways.

The movie women
are kissing, naked,
and we are sitting
as far apart as possible.

And my chosen lady-effigy
lives in café cities
and sings her love
to indefinite women.

He says I like women
who are in love with men.
He says I am jealous
of claimed women.

I want the evidence.
I say I want to know
how he figures me,
how he figures we

are using the same sense.

He says he isn't sure –
but it's there. It must be,
still, a romance thing.

He is frozen forward
and acting surprised
that the women are lesbians.
“Huh,” he says.

TO YOU

You told me I seemed a little
aggressive.

And I slurred some half-ass response
about how you should pretend

I was not mean
because I would never be mean

When I stare at a wall now
I am staring in shame
at night, outside your car
while you look down on me.

And I know all the sorry explaining
and rephrasing
won't erase the feeling I created

But I wanted to be mean that night.
I really wanted to be mean

for being so perfect they all fall
on me
and I have to pull you off tongues
that mean nothing

I don't know if you want me
attached

Sometimes I think you do,
but it's hard to tell.
And it's unfortunate I want to do well

so I am already, at this point affixed

And now I don't know
what to do

WHAT DO I FEEL ABOUT THIS?

Do you ever stare
into the mirror of buckles
on boots unclasped,
unbuttoned and unfastened,
and telling you this isn't strange,
sitting on the floor together
while the girl he followed here
is in the bathroom undressed.

They sleep in the living room
and you're not sure where
you're supposed to be,
sitting on the floor, waiting
until the better of her senses
finds you and asks you
if you'd like to be somewhere else.

He gets up close, in the afternoon,
and asks if the kid always sits alone.

And the next day he yawps that
he is going to throw you,
and grabs and tries, silent spiral,
and the lesser of the senses
must take him away
because
 all the *shouting*
 is *embarrassing.*

METERING FEAR

I am afraid
my purpose
for being tied to you
is fraying;
that you will not see it
before the rope breaks.

I close my eyes
and beg you
to take hold of me,
and hear no response.

A FEELING, UNNAMED

There is a certain
thoughtless cerebation
 that hurts my nerves.
I feel in my body
 like I'm looking
out a window that isn't there

And I must do this to myself.
But it still hurts and it hurts
 in my fingertips and it hurts
up to my elbow and and
 and I am crying without tears
and so sore and swollen inside.

AN UNCOMMONALITY

I used to wonder
if they felt that weight –
if they set it on their chest
and let it choke them.

And you wondered
if their burdens were silent
or if they held the weight up
and screamed under it.

SLEEP WELL

I get inside your mind
while you sleep
and I tell you, Bear
to dream of me.

I close my eyes
and talk to you
until my body is heavy
with contact lines.

Last night I dreamed
that you were standing
in the water past your waist,
but still, I laughed
and poured more on you.

I know you feel me
when I speak too softly
to be heard out loud;
and you tell me,
in a state of hesitation,
to dream of you too.

WHEN DID I BECOME A ROCK?

Unmoved from the property.
I stayed in my place.
I did not want to be picked up.

I've started thinking about
how to put a house together.
How we put the beams up
and fill the frames.
I wonder what you would think
if you could see
the house
where I grew up,
if you could see
the lake.
I wanted to see
the house
where I grew up –
not where I grew in size,
but the place
where my mind gets stuck.

BLACK MARBLE

I am in love with a man
inside me.

I am in love with a version
of me I can't be
this time around.

But he's there, and I know
someday he will arrive
in skin and more than dreams.

AND THE LUCID ROSE

Last time I was terrified –
I can now admit
but think of the circumstance
in which we met.

So who knows, next time?

I said that exact same thing
in deja vu. And I'll say it again
next time you come to mind.

So who knows, next time?

After the terror tears away,
I do love us after all.

I SAW IT

Another you laughed
the other night,
a snorty sort of laugh.
And I felt like a visitor
in a foreign land
because I had never heard
a laugh like that –
so surreal
and endearing,
so not you.

I leaned in, about
to say it was slippery
when I realized
keeping balance
was now, also
laughable.

I looked up, spotted
by only you of course.
And I tried to cover my mouth
but saw us both smiling.

I wanted to tell you
something funny.
I could have never
said it loud enough
but you leaned down
and I put my hands
on your shoulder.

“H- l- l- h- r- t-” I said.

And I saw it then,
it didn't matter what I said -
because the level was the same.

ALRIGHT

In the future, in the current
we don't see each other.

Be less like stone, be soft
 and showing sorrow.
I could have told you,
notice again
the way you press me on.

I could go months not speaking
and I'm sorry I don't know
how to tell you
I need to be set down
for words to come out.

I called on the way home,
the one you didn't see anymore.
And I told you what he told me:

*"Sometimes you have a plan,
and you really want it to work out,
but it just doesn't."*

Tell me to continue, tell yourself
the end isn't to be better,
but to be.

BUT I DON'T THINK YOU WILL

I dream you leave in silence.
You stand and feel opaque,
and maybe you are,
to the fitter,
to everyone else,
but I know you're going.

I'm always a dream ahead
of the esse you act on – I know
those days from which we cannot mine
a memory for you yet,
those days I won't look forward to.

I wake and think about the fault you leave
on her figure when you go.
And I wait for you to tell it as it is;
make the nuncio dream untrue,
and stop staring down your forerunner
in a silence that undoes you.

LETTERS TO PASS WITH
(After Songs to Joannes)

I

We might have been pets
in the East to West
or seats where the wheel falls off
the ship
Conversing in love and absence
And anxious taps

And talked till there were no more tongues
To talk with
And never have known any better

II

Today seems easy
for unraveling a different stress
when weakness speaks to body before mind

Sitting in a tree of a chair
and watching her try
Green forest of sage
all sprouts with finger space
a go go

I pluck and smell sharp
the hives on my sister's rind
pressing vexation
of seeing her in a hospital bed
gasping "idiot pine"

III

Frozen mid day
the procession walks
behind us two
the procession stands
and watches us two
I look to my right
 and see a girl
 who stopped me
that morning to say hello

Voices around
 say their condolences
when you look the wrong way
 but I am looking at her

And I am wondering

IV

From the mirrored slice
I too know intimately

You keep one eye on

V

I was once at the mercy
 of being unable to sleep
 until I wished him well

Only able
 to be undone
by the same request

in a new voice

That mercy was
reluctant to appear
for the moment at most

VI

*“Sharing the bed
is not allowed
unless you want to be crushed,”
mother says*

The time is too considerable
between us

So much that it becomes a threat

VII

I know
if you plan
the way the mark will land
it will not fall

VIII

I dream about you
so often, echo ditto
because
I cannot let the world stop
when I am asleep

And I much prefer
you in control
over her

And feel sorry for making me walk

And I wonder

if I protest enough

you might carry me

like all the pretty girls do

WANTING APRIL MIDNIGHT

(After Arthur Symons's April Midnight)

At noon in the city,
no streetlights needed.
Roaming alone, with
the misplaced night feeling
in the middle of day.

In the place in mind,
in the starting chill of October
I am roaming from the fall.

It would be good, roaming
together after a dance or dream.
But perfection is available
already, in dreaming
of roaming at midnight
without the sun truly down.

I WAS ALIVE

Relief comes, unexpected.

I am sitting at a desk
ten years later
when it's finally admitted
you are not lying anymore.

You are now, today,
and forever on out,
turning to forgiveness
requests in the form of prayer.

I think you are being clever
asking for acceptance,
asking to be spoken to
by anyone
(pretending
you want words from God).

But still comes the relief.

This is the first and only time
you will admit to attempting,
to trying to attempt
to "make me afraid," you say,
(always
minding specifics)
not to attempting.

But still the act is there
and I can feel the way it goes

over my head,
drowning me
in tears at the wall.

I am frantic to stop it.
I step back against it.

Staring at you at your hand
at me telling me to say sorry,
I am not allowed to cry
and I am sorry for it all
I am sorry but I have to cry.
I have to cry and be sorry.

When I was tired I'd wonder
what attempt
could be done with love,
if there's a way it
could be done with love.

I said I was sorry
but I was trying to stay
against the strongest fear
that I had cried too many times,
that I had overstayed my time
and now I had to leave.

And then it had not happened.
Ten years ago, I was a liar.

THE TRUTH

Last night
I was scaling the shelves
of your chimera kitchen
when I got stuck,
 like a cat
who has flown up a tree
and then is disenchanted
to find it has no wings.

But my Bear,
received by me in other worlds
to practice disappointment,
was there outstretched
 to let me down.

And when I tried to tell my Bear
what he had done,
 he already knew.

THE LIE

A chapter must be closed

And so we are going,
my Bear and me,
straight to hell
and a funeral

where we say goodbye
to a letter and a chapter,
ring-willing,
walls waiting
to be let go.

He will come with me,
prove I am safe –
the buffer to ensure
I will not be thrown again.

And we will sit by the water
and read the eulogy
together.

And he will know
what created this drear for worlds
of salted space
of eyes that practice looking
kindly
on his un-pretended love
but fail again
and drop.

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Lydia Lucia Balestra was born in Rutland, Vermont on November 10th, 1997. She was raised in New Hampshire, Maine, and Ohio, and graduated from Penquis Valley High School in 2016. She attended The University of Maine and graduated in 2018 with a Bachelor's degree in English. She stayed in Maine and entered the English graduate program at The University of Maine in the fall of 2019. After receiving her degree, Lydia will be pursuing an MFA and continuing to write both poetry and fiction. Lydia is a candidate for the Master of Arts Degree in English from The University of Maine in May 2021.