

Audrey Bernstein
Poetry Portfolio

Ghazal

one month and eight days after your school heard the beat
of seventeen shots seventeen stops of students' heart-beats

i didn't want to tell you i still needed to hear you breathe
cheek on pillow timing inhale with your steady facetime beat

for weeks i opened spotify to that green live feed, you know
the one where you can spy on your friends' curated beats

i stayed up watching you play lorde the killers & black keys
made those nights a playlist called it "signs of life" or "beat"

you don't listen to that stuff anymore, more of a faye webster
girl, but i still do—guess there are habits (or fears) i won't beat

now, six years since, you post a photo burn a candle blow
it out, dream of girls of tiled hallways and blood red as beet

i send a text it's empty blue i can feel you try to scream, don't
type just press your little finger to the screen and let me feel you beat

True Insights from Yale Professors

Words spoken in class or office hours

How does one build poems that extend into eternity?

Rhyme contains an appeal to hope and memory.

Are we allowed to ask how poems make us feel?

I prefer typing to handwriting. The power to wipe words out of existence.

If you think this poem is “cool,” then what is the cooling system here?

Being intelligible is not what it seems.

There’s a lot of nothing in that book.

Most people don’t walk around praying to nothing.

His poetry develops through sympathies—metonymies of attention.

That’s enough of Tennyson.

Why do we hate the middle school girl?

No one with a perfect family would want to change the world.

There’s a popular conception that activists are asking for outlandish things. In most cases, they’re asking to be treated as human.

My friend was at a reproductive justice protest three or four years ago. This guy hit her with his truck.

I spent last night poring through “Celebrities: What they looked like then versus now” in Variety Magazine.

The devaluation of bodies known as hetero-patriarchy had its inspiration, its grammar, in colonialism and enslavement.

I just got sent Miranda July’s new manuscript.

How do I pull my ego back, help myself, and help other people?

I want to decide who I love, that's all. I want to be able to decide when and if I have a child, that's all.

I keep the drag competition prize next to the Pulitzer.

If violence is atmospheric, progressive struggle must be atmospheric.

I'm going upstate this weekend for my friend Orna's birthday. You might know her. She was the therapist on that TV show, Couples Therapy.

There used to be this website where you could rate your professors, and give them a chili pepper if you thought they were hot. I should've had way more chili peppers.

It's supposed to be a form of seduction that's not a creepy one.

It's a poem about probably having a lot of sex and whatnot.

This is what gets tricky for me when I'm on weed.

Entrapment is part of the art of deceit.

Can you all make me a playlist?

The jail formalizes sadism.

I've been worried about you. I was like, should I reach out to the Dean?

Why is poetry a place for activist speech?

You must bear down and, with great honesty, write your life.

I've learned to be intellectually seditious.

I lived on a farm in Nebraska.

Some of you have been worried that you will be penalized for turning work in late. You will not be penalized.

There's this strange alloy, this strange compound, of sincerity and irreverence.

You can do better than this, Audrey.

I have the temerity to be proud of you.

I hope you have a very melancholy day.

It's all provisional and then we die.

Centó on Keeping Company

We were anxious to begin our life as people
who had no people. Our meeting had that quality
of sweetness that lingers, that lasts for a lifetime,
passing through you like wind through a wind chime.
Always more, always hungrily scratching for more.

So sad, so fresh, the days that are no more.
July's shadow is almost rot and we haven't spoken.
I watch you like a faraway tree, gabbing at the root.
I hear only the melting snow drop from the twigs.
Saudade: a yearning for happiness that has passed.

In Vietnamese, the word for missing someone
and remembering them is the same: nhớ.
This is how you walk to the end of the world.
Yes, here's a room so warm and blood-close
you will learn to make dinner for just one mouth.

Ghazal: Need

You love to talk about our future place on the water, a golden oven,
banquet stairs, grapevines, green window-frames—everything we'd need.

I see you see it, and it's honest, the way the vision pours the sky
into your eyes—you smile like a child, like you've never known need.

I pick at grilled-cheese crust, press warmth to my tongue, say "I've just
gotten out of the habit of feeling like a house is something I need."

"What do you mean?" "Like, I could live in a van, nest in a tree, dig
tunnels underneath the beach—" You look at me like you've been kneed.

"Matter of fact," I say, pinching the ceramic buttons on my cardigan,
"I've gotten out of the habit of feeling like skin is something I need,

you know?" I peel my fingertips, "like, I could just prick my toe with
a need-le, let my-self spill out slow, a liquid girl, wouldn't that be neat?"

I smile to my jel-lo-self, catch my sapphire eye in the mirror. When I roll
my body out I'll pin that eye up like a sticker, watch my ghost-self knead

its old-skin blanket-thin. "Well," you squeak, "that would make a lovely
quilt for the couch, don't you think? That orange-peel from your knees?"

"Oh, yes," I say, try to nod but I have no chin, I've slipped out my mouth,
my insides all laid-out, my sticker-eye blinks and sees you beside my need.

Audrey Bernstein

Eggshells and Waiting Rooms:

Brian Teare's Thresholds in *Poem Bitten by a Man*

In 2021, Brian Teare was commissioned to write a poem about artist Jasper Johns. His response, *Poem Bitten by a Man*, is a luminous, fragmented collage; a “waxy mouthful”; a rich portrait at the nexus of illness, heartbreak, and art (Sabatini Sloan). In writing about Johns, Teare felt moved, intuitively, to write about artist Agnes Martin—to follow the heartbeat of association toward scenes tender, particular, and confessional. Teare obliquely defines his poetic style in a poem about a therapy session, in which he drifts between “wordlessness” and expression (Teare 28). Teare describes this quiet, pulsing edge between the said and unsaid: it is “intimate like washing an egg fallen from a nest. To speak would break a thread of red into a bone cup.” Teare’s poetry lives on this very threshold between breaking and nurturing, meaning and emptiness. His lyrics are both loving and aggressive, self-conscious of their own precarious balance. For Teare, everything lives on this shell-thin threshold between breaking and loving—even love itself.

On page 79 of *Poem Bitten by a Man*, Teare writes of the end of his relationship with “R”: “we say / we make love but we say a lot less about how we unmake it.” The space after “say” prefigures the void in which all things start and end, collapse and expand, are made and unmade. The inevitability of destruction looms over, and beckons to, all objects in Teare’s world. Teare poignantly confronts this inevitability later on the same page: “only when I go to hold his hand & R pulls it away do I understand, suddenly & completely; I

will lose everything when I leave & I will never get it back.” Love is a fragile, fallen eggshell, straddling the divide between birth and the void.

Teare’s poetry in *Poem Bitten by a Man* is born of this systematic breakage and creation. The collection’s title nods to one of Johns’ paintings, *Painting Bitten by a Man*, which Johns produced during a breakup with his own “R.” *Painting Bitten by a Man* is solid gray, apart from one illuminated hole near its center, torn with violent streaks resembling bite-marks. Teare describes the painting, writing, “After his breakup with R, [Johns] makes a painting to bite it. To say, *Hello, object. I destroyed you. I love you*” (77). Teare yokes destruction and love as though their linkage is obvious, natural. Indeed, the simultaneity of rupture and repair is the law Teare’s poetry abides by.

Poem Bitten by a Man is a collage of journal entries, quotes, and observations. As such, its form depends upon displacement. In an interview, Teare says, “I think of *Poem* as my own experiment in testing how much of my aggression a poem can tolerate [...] Each snip of the scissors or the cursor is a bite [...] The cut allows for destruction before the paste allows for a form of repair” (Silva). When Teare peels a quote from its context and sticks it onto his page, it’s as though he says: *Hello, words. I destroyed you. I love you*. Teare meditates on his poetic practice throughout *Poem Bitten by a Man*. On page 37, he writes, “Language feels social but the green is wrong & the white is wrong.” Although Teare occasionally questions and rejects language, calling it “wrong,” he continues to employ it—cutting away the edges, pasting collected bits together. Teare’s poetry enacts what he describes as “the superimposition of 2 not quite identical images / 2 things occupying the same space” (48). This is the nature of collage: selecting images or moments that are not-quite mirrors and putting them together, so they reflect each other in a new way.

Poetry is especially suited to this displacement and repositioning. Teare posits, poetry might not exist without it. “‘Pure’ writing’s impossible,” Teare says. “Why not incorporate scratches & fragments left by the contexts in which we suffer from having been being / our unhandsome condition an index of injury” (35). There is no such thing as words that are not informed by other words, Teare reveals, or poetry exempt from context. Living in a context is unavoidable and universal. It also necessitates violence: the “scratches” and “unhandsome condition” he describes. Alliteration draws attention to the “index of injury,” a phrase difficult to say in one breath. Teare forces readers to break the phrase into syllables—in/dex of in/ju/ry—as though performing indexing itself, fragmenting the words into tiny tiles of pain. But breaking apart and merging together is not merely violent; it can be joyous and liberatory.

For example, Teare writes, energetically,

“What’s the word for this queer technology of association, this intimate contact site charged with sensuality? The poem! It floods with unfettered gratitude for everyone, every book, all the art I’ve ever loved, the sweet weave of what remains of me each time I fall into loss.” (80)

The poetic collage is an expression of gratitude: an opportunity to pay homage, to showcase, in kaleidoscopic light, the infinite inspirations composing the self. Teare’s use of the adjective “queer” is no accident: the collage is a queer project, a movement heralded by the LGBTQ+ folks who confront institutions of rugged individualism, question dominant narratives of power, and queer the praxis of art itself.

Teare further reflects on his poetic process through a poem on page 47. He writes, “Quoting is biting & I am so hungry, the notebook → mouth mouth mouth full of phrases I’ve taken between my teeth.” When Teare grabs words from Martin and Johns, he longs to satiate a deep hunger. His repetition of “mouth” alludes to the

collective feeding, from Martin's mouth to Johns' to his own. Teare clings to Martin's words, "It's always better to be a little bit hungry," which highlight the thin rope between yearning and satisfaction. In the same poem, Teare takes a "bite" out of Martin's words—a description of her childhood—and pastes them on the page: "I can remember the minute I was born' [...] 'I thought I was quite a small figure with a little sword.'" By placing the capacity for violence in the hands of a newborn, Teare showcases, again, the simultaneity of birth and destruction. Perhaps Teare, too, is nothing more than a small child, freshly birthed, newly armed with a pair of scissors or a pen. Through this narrative, Teare tells us that love and violence are interwoven.

This theme grows more devastating as Teare details his mother's abuse. He confesses, "I'm an accident, object of antagonism from the start: my mother restricts calories so effectively [...] she gains just nine pounds more than my birth weight" (57). This image is horrifying: a mother so hostile to her child that she refuses to nourish him. When Teare tells his therapist this story, she asks, "Who taught your mother / to love like that?" Perhaps, then, Teare was taught—by his mother, by his therapist, by society—that violence and love were linked.

But Teare seems to long for a purer love—or, at the very least, an unadulterated connection. Just as boundaries have been created between words, images, and people, Teare asks: can they be dissolved? Despite the forces isolating him, like illness and pain, Teare reminds himself that he is surrounded by people. For example, he writes, "What I too often leave out: I'm sick in a city, a neighborhood busy with buses guided by wires like this sentence between printed lines" (33). Though illness feels insular, Teare remains attuned to the collective. Similarly, sitting in a health clinic's waiting room, Teare feels especially connected to the masses. He collects details: "Advice about child care, unzipped fly, cute bag beyond gender, ashy elbows, flirty banter, purple walker decorated with rhinestones" (44). Teare is enchanted by these signs of

shut, withdrawn into themselves,” Teare offers, perhaps, the only authentic wisdom: “I’m trying, I think.”

Works Cited

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