Poetry and Form: Imitation and Innovation

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Language comes from poetry. We speak in symbols and rhythm, lacing the air with songs of praise and malediction, glory and defeat, or chants to the surrounding lands and people. We whisper and scream to the beats of our ancestors, molded through these thousands of years, even before civilization stacked its towers and walls along the great rivers of the world. The rivers, the sun, the moon: all have come to represent some other entity through our tongues. People toss around vocalized images strung together to the rhythm of the past, and that is language.

And what of higher language, of this thing we call poetry? The primary function of normal language is to exchange information. The poem shares this function, but it is not paramount. While normal language and vernacular are tinged with song, poetry capitalizes on it and becomes it. The symbols and the rhythm come to the forefront, while the transmission of information and ideas lies quietly underneath, submitting to the pillars of beauty and acting as their foundation. But what these pillars support is the topic of much discussion in poetics. What form should a poem take? Should it be meticulously constructed or amorphous? Can beauty support a poem if it has no structure?

The answer to these questions was very plain before the advent of free verse: poems should adhere to a strict structure. Through this frame of mind, the sonnet gained its popularity. The sonnet offers a poet fourteen lines of iambic pentameter to express their ideas and images. The rhyme scheme of these lines has seen much variation throughout the sonnets existence, with two of the most popular being Spenser’s (abab bcbc cdec ee) and Shakespeare’s (abab cdcd efef gg). Nonetheless, all are rhymed and many make use of an ending couplet, which often provides a turn in the poem in the form of summary, some answer, or a shift in perspective, and serves as the defining feature of the sonnet. While these rules may seem very constricting, Wordsworth explains the freedom he feels within the form in his poem “Nuns Fret Not at Their Convent’s Narrow Room”:

Nuns fret not at their convent’s narrow room;
And hermits are contented with their cells;
And students with their pensive citadels;
Maids at the wheel, the weaver at his loom,
Sit blithe and happy; bees that soar for bloom,
High as the highest Peak of Furness-fells,
Will murmur by the hour in foxglove bells:
In truth the prison, into which we doom
Ourselves, no prison is: and hence for me,
In sundry moods, ’twas pastime to be bound
Within the Sonnet’s scanty plot of ground;
Pleased if some Souls (for such there needs must be)
Who have felt the weight of too much liberty,
Should find brief solace there, as I have found’.

Here, Wordsworth contradicts what many think of form, suggesting that freedom from it may be more of a weight to bear. He seems to see form as more of a tool than a restriction,

allowing him to create finer art. Through this lens, ideas can be seen as ore, rough and unrefined. Language then extracts the metal from the ore, and form gives it an edge. Without form, the metal would have brilliant color and shine, but it would serve no function. With form, the poet can more easily penetrate the reader with image and artistic truth. However, even within the sonnet form there is room for innovation.

The sonnet itself was born from variation and remained popular for so long due to subtle manipulations in the form. The first sonnets were written in Italian by a boy named Giacomo de Lentini, who adapted the traditional eight line Sicilian strambatto by appending six more lines, perhaps inspired by the Arab zahal. While there is much ceremony surrounding the sonnet form, it started off as a patchwork: a quilt rather than a seamless tapestry. The sonnet was further adapted when it became popular in other countries like France and England. For example, while the Italian form featured hendecasyllabic lines, in England these were substituted for lines of iambic pentameter. But even the lines of iambic pentameter were varied in order to avoid a monotonous rhythm. Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 62” begins with a variation with the opening line, “Sin of self-love possesseth all mine eye,” revealing that those most gifted in the sonnet form were not as rigid with it as the rules suggest. Here, Shakespeare begins the poem with a trochee, with the word “sin” being stressed and the following “of” being unstressed. In order to create emphasis and to change the rhythm, he chooses a bold word to start the poem, giving it a more organic feel given its subject matter of sin with no cure. Rhyme scheme was also subject to manipulation, with many of the popular sonneteers inventing their own rhyme schemes, often featuring six or seven rhymed words rather than the five in the Italian sonnet (ababab cdecde). Changing the rhyme scheme also incited the use of the ending couplet found in English sonnets. While writing a sonnet does entail following certain rules, within those rules there is room for variation.

With the popularization of blank verse in England, which abandoned structured rhyme scheme and maintained meter, form began to loosen. Milton loosened it even further by introducing frequent enjambment in his blank verse. Enjambment does occur in poems before Milton’s time, and can even be seen in “Sonnet 62” with the lines, “But when my glass shows me myself indeed / Beated and chopp’s with tanned antiquity...” In these lines, enjambment is only a slight variation in the form and it is used to create suspense. After reading the word “beated,” it takes some time before coming down to the next line and discovering the source of the violence suggested by the word. However, Milton capitalizes on this sort of suspense and turns a variation into an art. Consider these lines from Paradise Lost:

> They heard, and were abasht, and up they sprung
> Upon the wing, as when men wont to watch
> On duty, sleeping found by whom they dread,
> Rouse and bestir themselves ere well awake.

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4 Ibid.

While these lines are in iambic pentameter, line breaks at the words “sprung” and “watch” provide examples of the enjambment popularized by Milton. By causing the reader to move to the next line, Milton creates anticipation in the reader, who would like to discover what follows from these highly emotive verbs. Movement towards looser form is seen slightly in the sonnet, and more apparently in Milton’s blank verse and subsequent forms.

With free verse, the strictness of the sonnet form was abandoned in favor of poetic devices strategically placed to create a form that molds to fit each poem uniquely. By still using some meter along with repetition, anaphora, parallel syntax, alliteration, and other poetic devices, free verse poets further expanded the possibilities of form, while maintaining the ceremony and care put into each piece. One of the most popular free verse poets, Walt Whitman, demonstrates this calculated fluidity. In the first two stanzas of Whitman’s poem “Song of the Open Road,” he writes:

Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road,  
Healthy, free, the world before me,  
The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose.

Henceforth I ask not good-fortune, I myself am good-fortune,  
Henceforth I whimper no more, postpone no more, need nothing,  
Done with indoor complaints, libraries, querulous criticisms,  
Strong and content I travel the open road.\(^6\)

In these lines, Whitman exercises his freedom from form and celebrates the liberty of an open path, and seems to be speaking to the discussion of form. His work is certainly poetry, but it relies on a different set of aesthetics than those of classical poets. There is iambic meter throughout the poem but it is looser, and the rigid rhyme scheme is substituted for by parallel syntax, giving it an overall lighter feeling. For example the first two lines follow a similar pattern, first listing two properties of the speaker and followed by a comment on the speaker’s surroundings. This type of poetic device is not as overt as rhyming, but it creates a similar musical rhythm in the work. Free verse may seem like it is haphazard, but it requires just as much finesse as more classical forms.

After free verse entered the canon, the question of form or lack thereof caused poets to branch off in several directions, with some abandoning convention even more than Whitman and others creating hybrids between free verse and form. In the former category lies the work of Gertrude Stein, a poet of the Modernist era who wished to abandon not only the conventions of poetry, but also the conventions of language itself. Consider her poem “Nothing Elegant” from the collection *Tender Buttons*:

A charm a single charm is doubtful. If the red is rose and there is a gate surrounding it, if inside is let in and there places change then certainly something is upright. It is earnest\(^7\).

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In this poem, Stein leaves behind lines, rhymes, and common syntax. But this seems to also comment on the question of form. She begins by presenting contradictions like red being a rose, a gate surrounding a rose, and inside being let in. She then suggests that if all these things happen and something changes, then something is proper. Despite the fact that she speaks in nonsense, she tells the reader that there is still change and this is still art. Through this piece, Stein illuminates another feature of poetry: the turn. In sonnets, the turn is often very clear and signaled by the change in rhyme scheme from alternating rhyming lines to a rhymed couplet. By stripping poetry of everything, Stein lays bare the core of all poems. Although she does not take the time to fit her ideas into a form, she writes, “It is earnest.” Her poetry is serious even though it lacks convention. Here, the stark turn could warrant her poem being called a sonnet.

Other poets have chosen to walk the middle ground between Stein and Wordsworth by writing free verse inspired by form. In his collection *The Dream Songs*, John Berryman writes poems that he calls sonnets, but they share none of the surface characteristics of sonnets. Take for example “Dream Song 14”:

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Life, friends, is boring. We must not say so.
After all, the sky flashes, the great sea yearns,
we ourselves flash and yearn,
and moreover my mother told me as a boy
(repeatingly) ‘Ever to confess you’re bored
means you have no

Inner Resources.’ I conclude now I have no
inner resources, because I am heavy bored.
Peoples bore me,
literature bores me, especially great literature,
Henry bores me, with his plights & gripes
as bad as achilles,

who loves people and valiant art, which bores me.
And the tranquil hills, & gin, look like a drag
and somehow a dog
has taken itself & its tail considerably away
into mountains or sea or sky, leaving
behind: me, wag.
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Here, Berryman writes in predominately iambic meter and has some end rhymes, with many of those being slant rhymes, but his form is looser than that of the sonnet. He blends the conventions of free verse with the conventions of the sonnet to create his own hybrid, complete with the classic turn that comes at the line, “and somehow a dog.” Here he uses the turn to change the frame from intense focus on himself to focus on this dog that he empathizes with. Both Stein and Berryman demonstrate that the turn is what makes the sonnet such an effective form, while the strict rhyme and syllable count may just be

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formalities. The core characteristic of a sonnet is a balanced asymmetry: a large chunk of image, questions, or both; a smaller chunk of explanation, summary, or answers; and a turn to signal the transition from one section to the next. The transition from form to free verse is comparable to the phenomenon of evolution. Just as the rook has come from the raptor, free verse has come from the sonnet. Both are admirable, but they are suited for different environments. Both have a brain and a heart, technique and a turn.

This brings me to my own project. In order to explore form, I have written several poems in the strict styles of the great classic poets. I have also performed inspired deviations. The beginning of my collection, from “What Death Has to Say” to “The Rook,” adhere to the classical sonnet forms of de Lentini, Wordsworth, and Spenser. By writing sonnets, I became intimate with their workings, their functionality, and their benefits. I was able to deviate, but only after mastering the hallowed forms practiced by the greatest poets.

My deviations begin with “Divine Gore,” a series of four interwoven Shakespearian sonnets. This poem is more of an extension than a true deviation. Contrarily, “The Snail” is a truncation of the traditional sonnet: a curtail sonnet. These poems maintain many of the conventions of the sonnet, including iambic pentameter and strict rhyme schemes derived from traditional sonnets. With “Dialogues,” I became more experimental, scrapping most poetic conventions, but capitalizing on the idea of the turn. Each section I-IV includes narration in iambic meter with some rhyme in no strict scheme. The turn comes with the dialogue on the right hand corner, where I use pure vernacular free of poetic devices. My play “Circumstance” follows a similar pattern, with narration in iambic pentameter and the turn announced by the introduction of normal dialogue. A grander turn is seen in the change from narration in iambic pentameter to trochaic pentameter in the last act. Finally, “Infinite” is a free verse poem with a turn in the form of an unenthusiastic answer to the narrator’s questions.
What Death Has to Say

I’m death. I’m pleased to meet you, but your eyes are telling me that you don’t want to see my face. Oh well. You’re lying prone for me. I thought that I’d be nice and end the lies that life’s been slipping in your drinks, your ties to bland corporeality, and all the days of getting up to simply crawl beneath a sun that only wants the prize of bleaching clean your sorry bones. Alone, I wander through the desert that is Earth. Alone, the human cactus stands, just grown to point its spines at empty skies from birth. But that’s not you. No, you’re the flower there. You ask, “Where’s God?”

But I’m the one who cares.
The Whole Time He Shifted His Eyes

“I’ve decided I don’t like lying. The leaves on the ground were covered in blood when I got here. Don’t blame that corpse on the ground on me, not me. Don’t think about me or shallow graves. Grieve her. Don’t think that me and the hollow bereaved fought.

I didn’t bruise that skin.

We never fought.
We were magnolia branches, never this rot.
We were waxy leaves and candid breeze. Perceive that, not me, not this. The way my truth caressed the milky petals of her brain and made her go insane. She’s not even dead, but inside she’s all gone. She’s just rough, dry bark.”

He obsessed over that tree metaphor for hours, I’m sure.
I can tell when someone has something to hide.
The Girl at the Party Last Night

Scarlet, she fell into the room like petals fall into a perfect wave around their stems. She talked like wine, she blurred our minds.

The room was pretty small, and words like bees kept whirring past my ears: “She walked in like she dropped the cash, this bitch won’t last.” They stalked around with faux dispassion in their eyes. What lies.

At times I felt her words were tide—many men gawked and listened in. Her lilting voice’s fall and rise caressed our ears and smoothed the other women’s sighs to sea and sand.

Another slur from other girls:
“You try to take away that bitch’s talk, her walk: she dies. She’s blind and fake, she’s tryina take these dudes with curls she bought and pearls she stole, bitch roll out—go.”

Like wine.
She walked around and talked like wine while I drank mine.
You Mistakenly in Love With Me

You see me as gregarious: the pink
that flirts with blued horizons. There it rules
the sky and you and I.

I rule like jewels
might rule the greedy. Rise, you: greedy. Sink,
the setting sun.

Sunset. That’s me, I think
you think I might be dawn. I'm not. Pink cools
to black. That’s me, I’m night, my presence pulls
away the day.

Night. And my wit’s the brink
of light. It draws you in: my words’ perfume,
my jokes’ malicious sweet and tart.

Just stay
around, Just wait, Just let my kiss consume
your skin and try to keep your blood at bay.

“I wanna kiss you.”

“No. You don’t.”

“Why not?”

“My tendencies, my life, the Hell I've wrought.”
He Takes Home Persephone

At first it was absent. The leather couches gleamed and sat warm with day’s curiosity, while dust and feathers filling vacant pillows really seemed to beg for breath and breeze.

The two walked in with Lust. The three of them with red embellished breathe brought gusts and filled the room with foxy grins, wolf eyes, and skin, making the air bloody tangerine like dawns, when dusk had just now passed.

He said, “I love your eyes, your thin waist, and I wanna taste the pomegranate sin your lips are dripping with, and I love your face, it’s great.”

“Um, that’s the best you got? You know you men cost me a lot, pomegranate or not. Come taste my lips and know the fruit I fell down for,” she spat.

They changed their eyes and neither cared where Lust was at.
The Rook

It seems like you don’t notice, but I look at you from over here: right here where light and morning dew combine into the fight between the shadows that the new sun took and hails to new beginnings, at the crook between the sorely knotted branches shook by time and spiteful winds.

And still, despite the fact that you don’t notice me, the rook that solved the riddle of the fallen town, I notice you. I see the way you try to blend between the truth and knowing how to fool the twinkle-eyed...some loveless guy like me. Well that’s alright, I’ll raise my beak to cry for worms and city walls so weak.
Divine Gore

I'm time.

My hand is tight, and from my hand
The cube of truth, cold class perfection, breaks
Free. Four dimensions show themselves. A band
Of moments, heres and nows, first bends, then takes
The form of pierce, elucidate, and see.
Because of me. Because I'm time and this
Is what I do, and truth’s the same: all be
And do becomes the truth in time.

And bliss?
Just what becomes of bliss and its golden
Promise? Nothing. Because the bliss you know
 Doesn’t exist. Those stories embolden
The glorified talkers: those gem-eyed crows
That still cry to the vacant sky.

The gods
Who live in page and hope and rule with rods
Of marble, white and human shaped, and slabs
Of wood, all smoothed by daily prayer and dark
With knee sweat, die.

Just look as this one grabs
At his missing jaw. Who is this whose bark
Resounds from Ancient Rome to Deep South bogs?
I think it’s Jupiter, or Christ, or king,
To think his voice would rally hordes of hogs
Along the years, and after everything,
They’d stare at him desperately grasping
For articulation.

The hogs go back,
Unmoved, to the warm mud.

The king, gasping
For air, just can’t believe he saw them learn.
His lungs are filled with blood and slackened tongue.
His eyes blink once in the rising sun, hung
On blue by nothing more than chance. He blinks
Again and sees the end.
And look at that:
Red Mars has fallen too. He lies and thinks
For once about his past and fails to bat
His eyes at truth or time or sun. Instead
He holds his steaming entrails, admires
His empty gut, and fills his rotting head
With smut, with bloody sands, and old pyres
Whose fires try to lick the sky, but die
Unceremoniously. Just like him.

They’re gone. There’s no more need to watch and sigh
As humans try to scale the sharp and dim.
No need to see them climb the onyx face
Of mystery. A pyramid, it stands
To face the day and everyone. It’s base
Obeys the land, across the moment bands.
There, the fall of the hominid, the smear
Of gunk, cerebral opal wiped across
The front of mystery, is gone.

Now hear
The humans at the base:

“I didn’t see a loss.”

“Yeah really, what happened?”

“This is great.”

Just watch as we pass: so clear. And wait.
The Snail

The snail decides to lose its shell between my fingers, tide decides that it will take my path. Now I’m the one become exposed. But I enjoy the salty breeze, the green of open sea, the massive barge’s wake: to day’s old ways my door was never closed.

The snail is you. And look at you just hang there on the branch I tried to pluck you from. Oh well, enjoy your spot. The anchor’s clang against the sand may prick the ears of some, but I sail on.
Dialogues

I
We walked across some sandy plain awash with ghosts of this and that shelled creature.

String them up on necklaces.

Mindless, they remain along the shores that crush for days and wash for days the shells and snails still waiting.

Snails. You see them crawl, no wherewithal to run and hide, no mind, just eyes.

Just string them up, why not? Why not string them right around your throats?

On days like that, I'd think a lot about ghosts and sand while holding hands with you.

II
Your hands mistook my hands for perches like that clumsy gull mistook a slimy rock for home. Some algae on a rock, your hand in mine, and waves still keeping time as if my brain wasn’t.

Time had passed and waves still crashed along the glassy plain and water stretched in front of us like days and days.

A year until the sun would die, but months before her heart would pass.

“I really like this,” you said.
“Yeah, the sky’s nice,” I said.
“I mean, I like being here with you.”
“Yeah, me too.”
“What’s wrong with you?”
“Life.”
“That’s not an answer.”

“I’m not in love with you,” I said.
“What?”
“I’m not...”
III

I'd rather walk into the sawgrass and feel its scratch as I lie across it, down my back.

I'd rather let the sun have its way and the tides have their say and end this.

“That’s not true,” you said.
“Yes it is, I’m sorry, this just isn’t it. It’s not.”
“But—”
“It’s just not, can’t you feel it?”
“I thought you felt it, I thought that’s why we were here. Because you felt this.”
“I feel the end of this.”
“Well I’m feeling the end of you.”
“Don’t say that.”
“Why not?”
“It made me feel something.”

IV

I saw the ocean next to us and no one saw us here. The things that sun and ocean and I could do. And what would you have done? I know the cactus would stand under sun. The cactus wipes the salt off of its spines with predators’ blood. Are you the cactus? Or are you the prickly fruit? Or are you the blooming red flower, thriving in thirst from its first day as a bud? No, you’re the fruit. You’re the one that people come and pick the spines off to find out that you’re bitter on the inside. Red and bitter.

The sun began to set and hummed across the blue, now red, and cast its red up to the sky and clouds. And seagulls took their beaks to pools, and snails became the rocks, their eyes relaxed.

I think I was a snail that day, ready to get plucked by children passing by and tossed into the ocean, where I’d drift down to sand and crawl away. Or maybe that the sun would pluck me off because the days of ocean left me back when tide had passed. And there I’d stay.

“So you do love me?”
“I never said that.”
“You have before.”
“My mind has changed.”
“A lot in you has changed.”
Circumstance

How much she hath glorified herself, and lived deliciously, so much torment and sorrow give her: for she saith in her heart, I sit a queen, and am no widow, and shall see no sorrow.  
—Revelation 18:7

A city. A glass wall cuts the stage in half from upstage right to downstage left. The portion on stage right is outside: a small tree, garbage can, and bench are found there. The portion on stage right is inside: potted plants and two black leather armchairs are found there.

I

Today

[Enter NARRATOR stage right, approaching the glass. Enter CRIMSON and MAN stage left, talking silently.]

NARRATOR: I walk into the city where towers are made of telling glass and am captured.
I pass a steely building’s window there and see it all: me splashed across the prints of children and the old: reflections on the touch of past—but what is that inside? What is there here for me to see today? Some woman’s face, her proud red lips, and gold dust falling off her breath. Her waist is pinched by some designer: man obsessed with form, imagined silhouettes, and Hogarth’s dreams. I see her dust rest on the lashes of another man, causing light to spread out, creating tendrils where her face would be, curling and white: renegade enchantments all unbeknownst to her. If that they are. Oh, but this is my dream now and rumbling sewers, streets, and cars are my snores. My dream of her seducing man and that poor man becoming nothing more than closed petals for bees or moonlight on waves for humans, always starving for some image worthy of their eyes and beauty’s throne. A woman that’s seducing man just because she can.

CRIMSON: Wait, how long have you worked here?
MAN: Too long.
CRIMSON: But seriously.
MAN: Six years.
CRIMSON: And how long have you been single?
MAN: Five.
CRIMSON: Nice. Well I’m new, so...
MAN: So what?
CRIMSON: So I’m the sexy new secretary.
MAN: Are you a secretary?
CRIMSON: No, I’m an intern, but secretary sounds more scandalous.
MAN: Are you scandalous?
CRIMSON: Do you see the color of this dress?
MAN: What if I said no?
CRIMSON: I’d call you colorblind.
MAN: That’s probably true, but I’m gonna need more than a dress to tell me about you.
CRIMSON: What are you doing Wednesday?
II

The Past

[NARRATOR sits on the bench looking at a compact. CRIMSON and MAN sit in the armchairs. Lights are down stage left.]

NARRATOR: And then I see myself again and see the paint on my face: smoky breath around my eyes, those rebels’ kisses on my lips, embellished claws on my pale fingertips. That girl inside—oh, I’ve been her before. That one that’s softly harping on the man’s heartstrings, that’s got him humming tunes so sweet that he can’t see the lacy veil about to fall over his eyes. That lace is old. It’s her mother’s, her grandmother’s. And mine. [Enter GHOST.]

They must have picked it right up from the road, the gutter where I left it stewing…gross.

[NARRATOR closes her compact. GHOST stands behind her and lights a cigarette as she stares ahead.]

GHOST: You’re perfect.
NARRATOR: I really like you.
GHOST: Let’s do this again.
NARRATOR: (Pause) My past. What a joke. Men are all the same, that one inside is no exception. Musk and cotton, stale tobacco: all the same old promises. They’ve all become this man in there condensed, those young days manifest in front of me. And now I see their eyes beyond the glass in my own eyes. Just like (Looks to her right.) that day when I saw our relationship just drip away like smoke from a loner’s last cigarette. So bleak. But that’s the way the world goes and we’re all a part of it.
My makeup, this face paint: my rouse beyond the border. I’m stained glass to them. To me they’re television, Just histrionics. I’m glass inspired by reality performing ritual and reverence. Yeah, let’s do this again.
GHOST: Do you want a drag of this?
NARRATOR: A little too much.

[Exit GHOST.]
III

His Mind

[NARRATOR fiddles in her purse.]

NARRATOR: And what a dream to watch. To see it hatch from seeds of possibility. (Looks up then back down.) One gold and pleasant, one all scratched with hairline cracks. Her hair will fill those cracks and fill the white with lapping black like the darkened city’s cold waters compliment the fissures in its barnacled and brittle concrete seawalls. Just look at what the river gained for them, for cities in the past, for him in there. And whether it was running blue beneath the staunch pagodas, or it was strolling brown between the fields of sugar, he gained, they gained every day: lengths of gleaming hair and rivers. Her: now dark…and I just watch.

[Lights go down on NARRATOR. Spotlight on MAN, still sitting in the chair.]

MAN: Wow, she’s pretty hot, but what about Clover, oh whatever. But what about—look at her (Looks at CRIMSON.) Hair, lips, eyes, lips, tits. Tits. Hmm, Clover has tits and lips and long blonde hair. (Looks away.) This chick has long black hair...long black hair...panther, jungle, jungle girl. Her voice is smooth. (Sighs.) Clover’s voice: dirty dishes, cupboards, “That’s so annoying,” “Stop,” I just got off the phone with my mom,” garage door. This voice: warm bath, steam, lips, words, words, silk, “I wanna see you again,” You’re hot,” “What color are your eyes,” warm dinner, sitting on a dark bench—this is my new Clover. Clover, chardonnay, pearl, Jill, Eve, Eden.

[Lights go down on MAN.]
[Lights come up stage right, NARRATOR has put down her purse and taken out a brush. She begins to comb her hair.]

NARRATOR: I've come across this place. I've seen it peak and seen it fold across some plane of time and sand. I saw aluminum all crushed and thrown. (Sighs.) This place. It's like I went and saw a cactus tell about the trials of it's sad life and rain. No rain. Come again you, you cactus, whose thick skin was made for this. My glass thrones of thin bones and thinning skin all covered with some compote, salve of time, distaste and lessons preached from those on high. The city. This was it. This was gleaming metal. Forgotten stars will polish it every night with their tears. Perfumed with smog, these waves of artifice astound me. Why? Why did I walk in? Why did I step in for this and see that girl and him and me? Who knows. But here I see their eyes collapse in widened pupils, their ears become bays for waves of lust and honeyed words. His nose tells him to taste what French enchantment mists her wrists and neck. And what about their skin? (Looks at the glass.) Look, hers is tempered, silver, see it gleam? But what is his, I wonder. His is weak.

[Lights go down on NARRATOR. Spotlight on CRIMSON, now standing.]

CRIMSON: Eden, Adam, Jack, Onyx, Merlot, Him—what’s his name, name, my name, what’s, me. Crimson. Me, that’s me. Him, I like him. (Looks at MAN.) When I met you, I liked you, you boy, you man, you suit and tie. Who do I have? Who’s at my house, no one. Do you have someone? (Looks away.) I can see us, living room, patio, living room, bedroom, kitchen, bedroom, bye. I can see me saying bye. And what will you say? What? “I love you,” “I hate you,” “Who are you,” “That was fun,” “See you tomorrow,” “See that sky,” “You don’t like the menu,” “Do you like this song,” “Do you like me,” “Where are we,” “Where are you going?” What? (Sits.) What will you say to me when I say goodbye? Bye, goodbye.

[CRIMSON sits and lights go down on her.]
What Happened

[Lights come up stage right. NARRATOR is standing next to the tree, holding it with one hand. She looks up.]

NARRATOR: I wanted to enjoy the day and see it fold away like eyelids splayed to stars' soft light and moon, revealing night and truth. I wanted man and wanted man to see the way that people were at night. They flash right by, red as seductive beats that leak from out of cracks in bricks of dingy bars, their cold cemented basements, tinted glass, and optimistic hearts. And there they dance, and thrust their hips to greet the streets and friends. Just watch them gallivant through parks and swans, and see them pop their chests to sweaty men in chains. To tight pants and pink fizz. Those kids. But who am I today? I'm not those nights, I'm not those streets No, here I am with day's return in gray and glass and weakened trees. But I was there the night before, so long ago. So many years of faces still around...so many others mind's quick wit erased. Some faces that I barely saw back then, all blurred with revelry's quick-lived affections: the renegade rejections of memory gone up in misty skies. [DOCTOR enters.]

[DOCTOR stands beside NARRATOR, she does not look at him.]

DOCTOR: So, how come you're here today? NARRATOR: I think I'm having a problem. DOCTOR: What is it?

[DOCTOR enters.]

NARRATOR: Some will see their petals spread as early as the morning, others at night. Some will die with spring, but all will die by winter. DOCTOR: Well... NARRATOR: What is it? DOCTOR: I'm glad you came today. I'm sorry—
[GHOST enters upstage and goes to stand behind NARRATOR. Exit DOCTOR.]

NARRATOR: Where am I and when and who are they there? (Looks to glass.)
Does this city end? I want the cliffs, I
go to them. I go to edges where the
mighty sea perpetually slams its
back against the land, always protesting
cities piled high across its mothers
spines: the rivers.
GHOST: What did you wanna talk about?
NARRATOR: I went to the doctor’s today. (Looks forward.)
GHOST: For what—
NARRATOR: You need to get checked.
GHOST: Seriously?
NARRATOR: See the rot, the alleys: mouths of filthy
buildings? See the gutters, grimy bricks, and
vagrants? Brown canals run through the heart of
what was once a fecund jungle. Now the
wind’s the only thing alive. It blows through
all the air it never touched before, where
trees protected the white petals of the
baby’s breath inside. And now it keeps on
kicking back and forth between the buildings,
chilling every bone within and tossing
up the stench of vain urbanity to
skies that didn’t ask for this and all the
clouds that spend their days in toil in this
place. (Looks to glass.) But should I tell them, should I wait for
them to tell themselves like I had to, or
should we all enjoy this fleeting moment
now when answers and decisions matter?

[Lights go down on NARRATOR.]
VI
The End

[Lights come up stage left on CRIMSON and MAN sitting.]

CRIMSON: I know I don’t have any plans.
MAN: You don’t sound so sure of that
CRIMSON: Why’s that?
MAN: I think you know what’s about to happen.
CRIMSON: What’s that?
MAN: I’m gonna ask you to go to the movies with me.
CRIMSON: That’s not what I thought was about to happen. How about a restaurant instead?
MAN: How about I cook you dinner?
CRIMSON: I’m vegetarian.
MAN: That’s fine.
CRIMSON: I’m vegan.
MAN: Me too.
CRIMSON: You’re full of it.
MAN: Says you.
CRIMSON: How about we go to a nice bar?
MAN: I like that.
CRIMSON: I like you.
MAN: I like whiskey and girls.
CRIMSON: What about me?
MAN: What’s the difference?
CRIMSON: This’ll be fun. (Fixes MAN’s hair.)

[From the darkness stage right, NARRATOR runs up to the glass and begins beating on it frantically. CRIMSON and MAN are both startled, then get up and walk away with concerned looks. Curtain falls.]
Infinite

I see some buildings and a road.
Along my path a long dead tree
curls its fingers to a cloudless sky
still begging for the rain it never got.

I take a sip from my plump gourd.
Where am I going again? Over there?
Who cares? I walk ahead toward
the town. Toward warped wood

and rot. Why not? The sun watches
my back as my feet tread east.
In my finger is a splinter, some
scrap of entertainment for my trip.

I pull out my knife and begin to dig,
but to no avail. It’s in too deep.
I bleed a little onto a strip I rip off
from the bottom of my shirt. I wrap it.

Above me all the buzzards circle,
suspended by a thermal exhaled
by the townsfolk inside. With pride.
I can’t be one of them, but I’ll pass by.

I need more food anyways. Running low.
The dirt from the path gets between
my toes and all over my sandals.
I pour some water on my feet. Relief.

I hear something from far away.
What is it? I hear the breathy wail
of the wind, but that’s not it. I hear
some birds. Mindless chatter. Not it.

What is it? Could it be the people
over there? Maybe. Probably.
Consulted Works


