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THE SLAM COMMUNITY: TRAINING GROUNDS OF ORAL POETRY

by

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DEFINITION OF TERMS

Chapbook: A small collection of previously unpublished poems by a single author.

Poetry Slam: A competition of oral poetry with rules set by Poetry Slam Inc.

Slam: The community surrounding poetry slams and the artists who participate.

Slam poem/poetry: Any orally performed poem in competition that adheres to the guidelines set by Poetry Slam Inc.

Spoken Word: Commercialized oral poetry. Any poetry meant for venues outside of competition or for the intent to distribute/sell/produce for profit.

Oral Poet: Poets who use oral or performance aspects in their work and perform their work rather than just publishing.

THE SLAM COMMUNITY: TRAINING GROUNDS OF ORAL POETRY

Thesis Abstract—Idaho State University 2014

This thesis provides an introductory overview of the world of Slam and Spoken Word studied from a rural perspective. It serves as a guide to understanding the Slam Community and what it can do for an aspiring performance poet, especially one who lives outside of large urban hubs. In addition to the guide I created and performed a feature length show consisting of poetry written during my Master's. The poetry performance is meant to be used as an oral chapbook to use in expanding a poetic career to reach new audiences.

Introduction

I discovered Slam as a teenager. I was heavily influenced by punk rock, independent/political hip hop and the ideals they portrayed, or, the ideals I believed they did. I purchased a CD compilation called Punk-O-Rama 8. I had several others in the series and found them to be an effective way to discover new artists while living in a small college town in rural Idaho in the early stages of the internet era prior to YouTube, etc. While listening I found two songs that hit me harder than the rest. Ironically, neither was musically akin to punk, but more spiritually so. They were indie hip-hop at its finest: politically/socially aware with heavy dark beats. The first, and more powerful of the two, was “Makeshift Patriot” by Sage Francis. The second was “Bird Sings Why the Caged I Know” by Atmosphere. The former being a political rant over the perceived mishandling of 9-11, and the latter a play on words of Maya Angelou’s autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

With further research into the artists, I found a compilation between Sage Francis and the spoken word artist Buddy Wakefield. Wakefield was set to release his next spoken word album on Sage Francis’ independent record label Strange Famous Records. Wakefield’s performance was heartfelt and energetic to the point of grabbing me by the eyes and ears and forcing me to engage in his experience. It was game-changing. I found Wakefield and through his work, I found Slam. I ended up on YouTube for hours at a time, eagerly consuming video after video of Slam and Spoken Word.

I had always been a writer, dabbling in poetry and lyrics. I dreamed of forming a punk band and touring. It would have been difficult to enter the world of slam, with its major hubs in large urban areas, while I was living in rural Idaho. Being the son of a college theatre professor, I realized the necessity of steady income to support artistic endeavors. I compromised my desire to slam immediately with the necessity of an education. I entered an English department hoping to build my ability. While in my undergraduate study, it was difficult to mix my love of oral poetry with the touch-all-bases nature of a B.A. in creative writing. My poetry classes were surveys of written work or grounded in page poetry. Some artists' work crosses over from page to stage. I never felt mine did, and the emphasis I put on performance made silent readings fall flat to peers and their analysis.

I began my Master's program in Theatre with hopes of continuing my writing and study of oral poetry. I was able to write and perform with quite a bit of local success. A slam was started in my hometown and I managed to win almost every month. I developed confidence in my ability, and thanks to the donated spare change of the audience, I managed to make a little money with my poetry. I felt comfortable with the slam scene, but the venues I was participating in were not registered with Poetry Slam Inc., the governing body of the National Poetry Slam (poetryslam.com). There was no simple or easy way for me to move forward as a slammer or poet. I had two viable options: either continue my education and improve my craft independently, or move to a large urban area with one or several registered slams where I could find a larger support system.

I chose to continue studying and working independently. The national competitions have not necessarily been my end goal. Many poets find themselves in the slam spotlight and eventually, or quickly, move on to other related mediums in order to use the recognition to make money as an artist. Slamming is mainly a competition, and while there are monetary prizes to win, it won't pay the rent. I saw myself using Slam in this way, as a stepping stone toward a career as a performance poet. Susan B.A. Somers-Willett, author of *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry*, gives us examples of artists who have found success in the slam world and then moved on to other venues and different audiences. Saul Williams and Sage Francis became hip-hop recording artists, while other poets like "Mayda del Valle and Roger Bonair-Agard, go on to perform one-person shows that grow from their slam material." Somers-Willett mentions MFA programs, scholarships in acting and English, teachers, etc. She names Patricia Smith, Tyehimba Jess, Tracie Morris, Derrick Brown, C.R. Avery, and Sin Salach as poets who have published on page and experimented with melding genres (13-14). These poets are reaching audiences outside of Slam. The Slam Community has created a solid base for me to experiment with other tools in performance. I love the competition, and will slam as long and as much as I can, but I feel the need to expand and diversify as an artist, while reaching audiences outside of Slam events.

The artists previously mentioned and other slammers who diversified have brought me to my Thesis project. Slam has helped me develop my physical and poetic voice and shown me the necessity of understanding the connection between poet and poetry in performance. I want to take those characteristics and move on to more commercial opportunity within poetry. Expansion as a poet drives my creative project,

and desire to show others what I've done to improve outside the central hubs of Slam drives the thesis project to which my creative work is attached. In this thesis work my purpose is to provide insight into effective methods poets, professors, and critics have found for judging, writing, and performing poetry. I intend to create a substantial introduction for aspiring poets in situations that make it difficult to regularly attend a registered slam. To do this I have written and performed a show similar to a poetry or book reading, with poems completed during my Masters. It is my belief this portfolio and performance experience will give me the ability and tools I need to further a poetic career built on my slam foundation.

In the following chapters I will discuss Slam, Spoken Word, and Oral Poetry. I will first introduce the idea of Slam as a community and discuss the elements of the community that will improve a poet. I will then discuss the importance of the perceived connection of the poet to the poem in performance and the difficulty for the audience of separating the poet from the persona. Secondly I will define Slam and elucidate the difference between it and Spoken Word, I will describe the difficulty and necessity of separating oral poetry from page poetry during analysis and the importance of judging from a performance rather than a text. I will then discuss the poetic and physical voices involved in oral poetry and the necessity of developing both. Lastly I will explain the idea of an oral chapbook, discuss the tactics I use in Slam and Spoken Word, and describe the performance I created with poetry written during my study.

Chapter One: The Slam Community

I have defined Slam as community for poets, and in order to understand how it can teach and improve the poets within, we have to understand the community itself. Slam was my first experience in oral poetry, and with it I was able to grow as a poet. In this chapter I will discuss the characteristics that make slam its own communal entity, why it is an effective way to improve as an oral poet, and the importance of understanding Slam and oral work apart from page or written poetry.

Oral poetry and page poetry are siblings, they look alike, they can act alike at times, they might even sound alike, but they are undoubtedly separate entities and must be treated as such. In his work *How to Read an Oral Poem*, John Miles Foley, a scholar of comparative oral tradition, explains the unfortunate necessity to verbally differentiate between oral poetry and written poetry, a necessity created by living in a text-based world. Foley states, “At every turn contemporary Western society asks us to conduct a healthy percentage of our daily cultural business by manipulating visual signs, by exchanging voice and face-to-face communication for the silence and distance of paper-based or electronic print” (27). In the era of print it became much easier to share writing on paper, creating an understandable focus on page work. With the advent of the internet and social media, it has become much easier to facilitate study and appreciation of performed oral work. Foley assures us that oral poetry is literature, as much as page poetry; they differ in delivery, but the intent towards aesthetic appreciation and the creation of art are the same. They belong to the same family, but there are countless

different siblings in the family, each of which needs to be treated as its own genre of content (27).

When I say “poem,” I assume the idea of a written work, a stance learned by studying all page based poetry in my early education. I personally picture a block of text on a piece of paper roughly the length of a sonnet, or something relating to an Epic like *The Odyssey*, or any number of other forms. But if I say “oral poem,” or “slam poem,” or “spoken word poem,” the picture changes first to a person performing solo on a stage. Now, I actually see an audience behind a microphone, my experience in performing has shifted my perception to something I write and perform. Someone else might see a person rapping or saying a prayer. Varied personal perception is the inherent problem when judging or analyzing oral and literary poetry as one concept. Foley argues we cannot look at oral poetry through a literary analysis: it is “like peering through the wrong end of a telescope” (28).

Not only are oral work and page work separated, but different genres of content separate themselves within each. Comparing a Native American story poem to an oral epic from the Caucasus can be difficult, it may work at times, but it wouldn’t be the most logical option. Similarly one wouldn’t compare a sestina to a haiku immediately, it may be fruitful, but comparing it to a villanelle would make more sense. Foley continues explaining the “cornucopia” of genres within oral poetry. We cannot simply lump it all together. Each genre has characteristics that make it work. The characteristics change from genre to genre, and “care must be exercised to ‘read’ each oral genre on its own terms first” (36). Foley notes the large following and easy accessibility of slam allows many people to use it as a first experience in the world of oral poetry (43). I agree with

this. Slam was my first hands-on experience, and helped develop my work in oral poetry. This is one reason I contend slam is an excellent starting point for poets breaking into the oral poetry scene. It is easily accessible, encourages involvement, and allows for a multitude of different poetic styles and genres to have a place in performance, judging them by effectiveness rather than form.

What is it about slam that would train its participants for a life as working oral poets? The first and foremost thing is audience. To have a performance of any kind you need two things: a performer and an audience. These are two essentials defined by most introductions to Theatre, Theatre History, and Performance studies textbooks. Everything else is secondary. Slam events have an audience built in, and not only that, it's an audience that poets need to convince of their worthiness in the competition. These audiences are random. They could be filled with other poets, people who wandered into the event, drunks, or a mix and match of anyone. These random people will judge the performance based on what is immediately apparent to them. The good part is: slammers can get immediate audience attention and analysis. The bad part: It's terrifying. Popular registered slams in large cities will have monthly, and sometimes weekly, slam events. A poet doesn't need to look for a venue, advertise, or do most of the legwork to get an audience. Slam masters, the person(s) in charge of a slam on a consistent basis, have done all that work. Marc Kelley Smith, the creator of Slam, discusses the generalized audience of the slam community: "The poetry slam was founded on the tenets that the audience is not obligated to listen to the poet, that the poet should compel the audience to listen to him or her"(5). To succeed in Slam a poet has to be able to quickly grab a localized sample of the slam audience's attention, and hold it. This can be scary. Imagine

performing your own work for a group of people, who may or may not be sampling the wares of the local bar where they hold the slam, and having that audience verbally express disgust with hisses, grunts, or by guessing the words in your rhyme scheme. A poet's worst nightmare can, and sometimes does, come true. Next, imagine perfectly delivering a tight piece and having an audience scream in applause as you leave the stage. Part of the beauty of a random audience is experiencing the exhilarating joy of winning their approval. There *are* tactics and strategies to improve your chances of success. The creator's success depends upon the consumer—the consumer of Slam poetry is completely random—and winning random approval requires universality. Poets must deliver a product the consumer wants, without being a stereotypical used car salesman.

The basic tactics of performance in poetry are the same as any kind of performance: confidence, clarity, articulation, being comfortable on stage, etc. Another concept of the Slam community is the idea of “Realness.” Slam audiences have very little time to decide what they think about a performer before judging the work. They quickly develop a judgment criteria based on the visual appearance of a slammer. Sounds unfair? It is. Audiences will do this with any kind of performance art, but with Slam it happens 10 to 15 times in an hour of performances. Quick perception of slammers is part of what has created the idea of becoming “real.” Susan B.A. Somers-Willett, a poet, critic, and coiner of the term “realness,” explains the concept as something an audience can sense. Much of it relates to her ideas on marginalized identity within the slam (7). The prevalence of acceptance for all performers and tendencies towards confessional work have complicated the idea of “realness.” Many confuse realness with confession. It does not take the baring of all your personal secrets in a

“look at me” manner to be considered real. “Realness” is more complicated than that, it takes into account a connection to the poetry which I will discuss next. Slam will force you to connect with your voice, both the physical and poetic. If an audience can sense you are disjointed or disconnected from the work the scores will reflect it. Somers-Willett notes that the audience will undoubtedly begin its interaction with the poet by believing the words being spoken are about the poet, “The ‘I’ of the page translates quite seamlessly to the ‘I’ of the stage” (690). There are intangibles inherent in the understanding of realness as a concept. In the meantime, a good way to start is remembering: whatever you write, it needs to be *yours*. It can resemble or channel any oral genre, but it must harmonize well with your body, performance, and voice, physically and poetically. However, the audience is there to witness a performance, your performance can be anything you want it to be. The audience can see you, this affects their understanding of your work, but they may not know anything about you. If you can sell it, or perform it well enough, they will buy it. I would not do well to present work with characteristics of Gangster Rap or Native American Storytelling. Even though I can appreciate and mimic the genres, I am pale, freckled, and from the suburbs. If I were to perform something akin to those genres it wouldn’t be personal or identifiable as coming from *me*. I wouldn’t feel genuine or real, this would be reflected in my poetic voice, an audience would immediately sense disconnect between me and the work. It would be obvious that my physical voice doesn’t fit, as I generally sound, and look, like a Caucasian from the middle of nowhere Idaho. However, as previously stated, the audience most likely won’t know anything about me outside of my appearance. If I can perform a work with the characteristics of those genres well enough they will accept it. I

wouldn't feel very comfortable doing those things, but I could if I worked enough at the performance of the work.

While the connection of body, voice, and performance must be there, the possibilities are broad. For example Patricia Smith's poem *Skinhead* (Def Poetry Season 2). The beauty of this work is the way Smith portrays a connection between victim and aggressor. She takes on the persona of a white male bigot who convinces himself of his own worth through his interactions with those he is biased against. Someone who has directly experienced this type of abuse is connected and able to interpret and analyze in a unique way. I see very little possibility of a Caucasian male approaching the subject in a similar manner. He would have no connection to it, having never experienced the same kind of abuse, not to mention the probability of an audience misinterpreting his poetic intention. It's not out of the question, but it would be a difficult persona to create and deploy.

At other times realness can be sensed in certain topics' universality. A good example is a performance by poet Shane Hawley at the national slam in 2010 (Hawley). He takes on the persona of Wile E Coyote and the subject of addiction. Who hasn't been exposed in some way to the effects of addiction? How many have never seen these cartoons? The surprising persona works perfectly and connects with an overwhelming majority. The realness is there, and Hawley's intense performance delivers well.

It is difficult for an audience to separate performer from persona. The poet is standing on stage speaking the words directly to the audience, leading audiences to believe the poems are the poet's personal words. Due to the confessional style of a lot of slam poetry, this is not necessarily a problem, however to succeed using a dramatically

different persona, it must be very clear in the poetry and performance that a poet is assuming a character. Good examples are the poems previously mentioned by Patricia Smith and Shane Hawley. Further confusion is created by the “metapoesis” found in Slam. Poets reference the fact they are performing, or that what they are doing is poetry. Wheeler explains this may come from a punk rock type attitude, “One answer might be the DIY aesthetic that slam borrows from punk rock: slam aims to be a meritocracy, with no participant inheriting his publishing contracts or buying the slam equivalent of a prestigious diploma. Slam invites anyone in the audience to wonder if he or she could do that too” (152). The participatory nature reflects Marc Kelly Smith’s definition of slam as interactive (*The Spoken Word Revolution* 5). The audience should believe, if they put in the effort, they too could perform in this social event. Poets should know they have to work hard for an audience. The search for realness can lead to intense personal narrative and deep reflection. Ultimately, the two things that can confidently be labeled as characteristics of good slam poetry are a unique voice-in all its connotations- and “realness” as already discussed (Somers-Willett 7). Poets must make themselves be heard, and when they do, the audience needs to be able to sense the honesty, visual connection, and personal touch in the work. Performance ability helps this tremendously. I have sometimes taken my performance training for granted. I was on my high school debate team, and I have taken acting classes and had extensive experience on stage as an actor. The comfort level I have developed on stage translates almost completely to my work in slam. I say “almost” for two reasons: outside of one person shows and storytelling etc. actors have other actors to rely on in a performance and I have never performed in something I personally wrote. When I slam it is with my own words, and

I'm the only one up there driving the performance. During the national slam teams may perform poems as duos, trios, etc., but I have not yet had this opportunity. Taking an acting class can be a massive boon for poets looking to explore the world of performance poetry, or simply to develop more confidence in reading their work publicly.

Slam will force poets to write. The rules are the rules, do your own work. If it doesn't work for an audience, you need to re-write it. If it doesn't score well, you need to re-think it. If someone wants to succeed in Slam, they must work to get audience approval. A slam poet cannot rest believing they know what an audience wants. The audience won't let them. To succeed we have to keep going. This translates well into the commercial world. It's about the consumer; build a product, refine it, and make it work. If someone wants to be a working poet, he/she will have to work for the audience.

Defining Slam and Spoken Word

Understanding what Slam can do for a poet requires narrowing down what exactly Slam is, and what it is not. Here I will explain the difference between Slam and Spoken Word, and how to work within the boundaries of each.

Defining Slam by its characteristics can be a challenge. When poets or artists define it you get poetic answers. Marc Kelly Smith, the creator of the slam defines slam as “a word circus, a school, a town meeting, a playground, a sports arena, a temple, a burlesque show, a revelation, a mass guffaw, holy ground, and possibly all of these mixed together.” He continues, describing slam as a “marriage of a text to the artful presentation of poetic words onstage to an audience that has permission to talk back...”

(Smith and Kraynak 5). He whittles it down later on to five main ideas. Slam is poetry, performed, competitive, interactive, and community (Smith and Kraynak 5-6).

Slam has been defined loosely as a product of the beat poetry scene. Performance poet Lisa Martinovic describes slam as a movement “reminiscent of its Beat movement predecessor, but one that has more deeply permeated the culture” (101). She goes on to note that the audience and members of the movement are “diverse communities” and “people from all ages, races, and sexual persuasion come together to compete on a level playing field” (101). Acceptance resonates with Marc Kelly Smith’s assertion that slam is part interactive and part community (5). Slam was meant to be inclusive, and it takes that seriously. Anyone can register with Poetry Slam Inc. and become a full member of the association. Varied content and delivery styles are welcome. Slam is a forum, follow the road signs and you can drive any car you want, however fast you want to drive it.

Many disagree with the idea that Slam is a remnant of the Beat movement. Poet and critic Lorenzo Thomas argues against the connection:

The United States has been enjoying a sort of poetry renaissance. Currently the “poetry slam,” an event where drunken audiences hoot down sensitive poems about dying grandmothers or inevitable divorces and bestow twenty dollar prizes on scatological doggerel, is sweeping the nation. It’s an amusement that seems to be a goldmine for saloon keepers too sophisticated for “hot Buns” contests. It has recently been possible to find at least three such events every week in in different venues-even in a city like Houston. Perhaps, for a new generation, the poetry slam is the equivalent of the Beatnik coffeehouse scene. Not!” (qtd. in Wheeler 127)

But, whether or not Slam comes from the Beat movement, both authors have indicated a relationship between poet and audience and a definite give-and-take on both sides of the stage.

A simplified idea comes from Gary Mex Glazner, the producer of the first national poetry slam. Glazner offers, “Slam is a performance competition: Judges are chosen from the audience [...] every poet is given three minutes to read an original poem” (11). The rules of the national slams are set by Poetry Slam Inc. (poetryslam.com), though many slams are known to set “house rules” (Glazner 17). In other words, it is competitive poetry, the audience is present and immediately important to success, you perform your own work, and you have a finite amount of time to impress the judges.

For my purposes, I define Slam as a concept: a competition with poets writing and performing original work for an audience that will judge them quantitatively. Slam’s main defining characteristic is competition. I define a slam poem by the National Slam rules. There is a three minute “arbitrary time limit set to 1) emulate a pop song 2) get the Show over in time” (Glazner 17). No props, costumes, or music are allowed. The poetry must be original (poetryslam.com). Outside of those rules, pretty much anything goes. Some poets will have intricately choreographed body movement and vocal cues while others will feed off the audience and perform more organically. Some might even improvise. Every poet’s performance is unique. If it follows the rules, it goes. If a performance does go over the time limit or has elements perceived as costumes or music, score deductions and disqualifications may occur.

Both inside and outside of Slam, as I have mentioned, there are many forms of oral poetry. To describe or define their work poets have used terms like Spoken Word,

Performance poetry, Live poetry, etc. In order to simplify, I refer to anything outside of Slam as Spoken Word, or spoken word poetry. I take the simple separation between Slam and Spoken Word from Somers-Willett: Slam is competition, and spoken word is commercial (9). If a poet is using his or her work for selling merchandise, signing contracts, booking paying gigs, these are all Spoken Word behaviors. If a poet is using his or her work for competing, it is slam. This is not to say that a poet cannot use a slam poem to commercialize, many do. They take poetry they have used in Slam and transport it to other venues like concerts, tours, performing as features, etc. I'll make the analogy of a professional athlete. A person can play football and compete with others. That makes him a football player. A poet can write poetry and compete in slams, this makes them a slammer or slam poet. A football player can use fame and notoriety to do commercials, gain sponsorships, and endorse products while being paid for his or her work. They can always compete as long as they follow the rules and guidelines of the game. Many poets are competing and making a name for themselves. Slam fame and notoriety can help poets to publish, tour, and capitalize. Many poets are moving back and forth between the two arenas. You can always slam and compete, if you follow the rules. Stepping out of the competition gives poets the freedom to experiment with things like music that are against slam rules. Like athletes, poets can use fame or recognition from one arena to their advantage in another (12).

To simplify, if you are competing while performing, you're in Slam. If your poem follows the guidelines of Poetry Slam Inc., it is a slam poem. If you are performing for financial benefit, you are in Spoken Word-or whatever term you want to use to define

your work. If your poem does not follow the guidelines, it is not a slam poem. Define it as you see fit.

Content and style of poems can be extremely varied. Mark Smith explains the possibility of any number of content-based genres appearing in slams, “Poets performing at the Green Mill have written and presented villanelles, haiku, sestinas, and even concrete poems drawn on canvas hanging onstage as the poet/poem delivered the words. The guiding principle has always been that all forms are welcome on a slam stage and can succeed if the poet learns the art of performance and applies that art to the poems he presents to an audience (65)”. The beauty of the community is that you can write as you wish, in many genres, hybridize, jump content boundaries, etc. Whatever you want to do, you can slam with it. But you have to connect to the poetry, perform it well, and do it all in three minutes without costumes, music, or props. Essentially characteristics of any number of form based genres can be found in Slam poetry, for example the Gangster Rap and Native American Storytelling mentioned earlier. The competition and the rules make Slam stand apart as an idea, rather than how they are delivered or the contents within.

Chapter Two: Analyzing Slam

To give a basic idea of what happens at a slam I will make an analogy. Slams around the country will vary slightly in many aspects, somewhat like “house rules” when playing the board game Monopoly. The board is the same, the pieces are all alike, but the way certain sets of players go about playing the game can vary. Generally at a slam there will be two rounds of poetry. All the contestants will perform in the first round. Randomly selected judges will judge the work numerically, and the top scores will move on to the second round. The top scorers from the first round will perform a second poem, receive a second round of scores and the top poet takes the title. Many slams will have a feature poet, one who is not competing, perform a set of poems or readings for the crowd. Slams may also choose to have a sacrificial poet. A “sac poet” will perform a poem before the first round to get the audience ready to view the poetry without being overly harsh or critical to the first competing poet. This also helps, or tries to help, avoid “score creep,” a phenomenon in slam where later performances will receive higher scores. Essentially the game pieces like judges, competitors, features, rounds, etc. are all there in any slam, but different slams will put them in different orders or select them in different ways that they find work best for their slam. Every slam will have one or more “slam masters” which will make these decisions to guide and facilitate the slam (poetryslam.com).

Judges in the audience will assign arbitrary gut-reaction scores to the poets competing in slams. There must be a way to analyze the poetry artistically or

intellectually in order to improve oneself as a poet and competitor. Here I will discuss judges and the difficulty of creating a rubric.

According to the rules of the slam, there will be 5 judges selected at random from the audience. These judges will score each performance on a numerical scale from 0 to 10 using at least one decimal place to avoid ties. The top and bottom scores will be dropped and the other three used to create a score. The audience can interact at will during the slam, but the deciding factors for the competition are the judges (poetryslam.com). As discussed earlier, these judges will base their judgment on whatever criteria they come up with on the spot. A lot of slam will come down to the unpredictable nature of judging. The long-term goal of a slammer should be to hone performance, so that a judge can appreciate the performance aspect adding to the slammer's well-crafted poetry.

There is no set curriculum or method of analysis for Slam Poetry. Most authors and scholars will describe what occurs at a slam and offer their opinion without dissecting the art. Somers-Willett explains that "What has been missing from the criticism of slam poetry is its consideration on its own terms" (13). It is oral literature as argued by John Miles Foley, considering it otherwise will disappoint you (62). It's not a play, it shares some performance aspects, but is obviously not theatre. It's not music, which is explicitly stated in the rules (poetryslam.com). Somers-Willett describes it best as "its own hybrid genre of verse, one that negotiates the possibilities and problems of text, orality, and politics. Slam poetry is verse that exists most richly in a live dynamic between authors and audiences, and it displays the qualities of popular entertainment, adaptability across media and performance contexts, competitive argumentation, and self-

conscious performances of the author's identity alongside narratives of marginalization.”
(14)

A large difference between the judgment of Slam and Spoken Word is the accessibility of text to accompany the performance. As previously stated, slam judges are picked randomly from the audience and forced to make snap judgments. There's no text available, no clearly defined scale for scoring, and no standard precedent. Spoken word, oral poetry outside of competition, is generally more textually available to the public. Many poets publish chapbooks, a small collection of poems, and larger collections for commercial purposes to accompany their performance. The problem here is that to fully appreciate oral poetry, it must be performed. Reading Shakespeare is a different experience than watching his work performed. Just like a play, putting a poem on stage will alter how we perceive it. Professor Ruth Finnegan offers, “It is easy to concentrate on an analysis of the verbal elements, [...] but one also needs to remember the circumstances of the performance of a piece” (28). Finnegan asserts that an oral poem, is best judged in performance. Like judging a play, reading and seeing will create different perspectives (28). Professor Albert Lord would agree. Lord's describes the tendency and downfalls to focusing primarily on a text, “unlike the oral poet, we are not accustomed to thinking in terms of fluidity. We find it difficult to grasp something that is multiform. It seems to us necessary to construct an ideal text or to seek an original, and we remain dissatisfied with an ever-changing phenomenon. I believe that once we know the facts of oral composition we must cease trying to find an original of any traditional song. From one point of view each performance is an original” (9). He is speaking here about traditional oral poetry, but the point remains. Texts can be helpful, the performance

is always changing, and each time it is different it is a new experience and a new poem. Ultimately it's not a bad idea to work with the text of a piece—we simply must keep in mind that performance can change our understanding.

When using a text to study a performance, we will often hear the poem in our minds the way we have seen it performed. Author Martina Pfeiler notes, “when reading a piece of literary work silently, one has to convert letters to sounds in one’s mind (i.e. graphemes into phonemes), and by doing so, one imagines a voice that seems to have been locked in the text.” She further notes that when you have heard something read by a specific person, your mind will most times replicate the sound of said person’s voice (14-15). Studying text can turn into a mental performance. If a text were accompanied by a video, or an audio recording, it could be studied in the author’s voice with the companion text for backup. Somers Willett notes that modern poets do exactly that, selling CDs and DVDs along with texts, making the performance more accessible (18).

Social media has become a massive aid in the world of Oral poetry offering large amounts of various performances, but even with the advent of social media, I can watch a performance, but I wasn’t there. Like watching the film of a play, it is not really the same. This is why oral poetry is such a social experience, and why Marc Kelly Smith defined it as “Community.” (Smith and Kraynak 5) However, with the massive expansion of content sharing websites like YouTube, Facebook, Reddit, etc. there is no limit to how many recordings of specific poems I can find. It can be compared to seeing a Shakespeare play performed on different stages with different blocking. Pfeiler asserts, “Poets felt that they were publishing their poems when they performed them in front of an audience for the first time” (28). Youtube.com and other social media sharing make it possible to

access a limitless number of performances (Novak 28). Ruth Finnegan would counter with the idea, “Differently performed, or performed at a different time or to a different audience [...] it is a different poem” (28). The versions are separate performances, but they add to the overall meaning of the work. Watching a video will help, but it is best to see a performance live. For me personally, the treasure of Youtube.com was a massive boon to improving style and technique. It is an amazing source for those who can’t get to a slam.

So we shouldn’t judge oral poetry based on a page poetry criteria, but we need to establish a method to distinguish the good qualities in oral work. According to critic Julie Schmid there is no real “overarching slam poetry aesthetic.” End rhyme is mostly avoided, while other poetic devices like alliteration, assonance, consonance, etc. are more popular. The sound of the poet’s voice and the rhythm play larger roles (qtd. In Wheeler 147). To create an aesthetic it may be as simple as changing from “ordinary” to “poetic” language. Sometimes simply assuming an attitude of performance will elevate diction and punctuation to the point where it feels and sounds poetic. Artists like Buddy Wakefield have a boisterous, emotional, excited delivery. Others like Anis Mojgani slow it down, make it softer. And they can all have variations within each poem. Artists like Saul Williams and Beau Sia have achieved success with hip hop influenced work, and work that is literally shouted at the audience (*Slamnation*).

It is much easier to point out flaws. Common problems with theatrical performance are appearing noticeably uncomfortable on stage, forgetting the words, being apologetic, and self-indulgent. These happen in oral poetry as well. Poetic problems can be overly obvious rhyme schemes, poor imagery, excessive coarse

language, etc. It's easy to point out the faults in a work: too long, self-indulgent, insecure, and any number of other things that can put off an audience member.

Content can also make or break a poem. There are definite trends that show up in Slam. Poet and Professor Lesley Wheeler attended the 2005 National Slam Championship in order to flesh out a work on slam characteristics pertaining to voice. The observations include: no mention of title, epigraphs, dedications, etc.; "little space exists for improvisation, banter, or response to a particular audience;" and a necessity for the meaning of the poem to be apparent with one listen. Out of 112 performances 68 contained "personal references to the poet or poets." He later justifies the personal references pointing to slam's dependence on the poet's presence (148-51). Poets perform their own work; it stands to reason that much of their material comes from personal experience.

Page vs. Stage

A common misconception leads some to think that good written page poetry will be good performance poetry, it simply has to be read out loud. Sometimes it works out. Most of the time it doesn't. There are differences in page and stage poetry that are unique to each, that can derail the other. The differences have been troublesome in the past.

Critical study can be a large boon to poetic movements. Unfortunately, in the past, oral and performance poetry were viewed as a lesser alternative to page poetry. Luis J. Rodriquez explains the "pendulum" nature of discussing oral poetics. "It's either the best thing to happen to poetry or the worst" (qtd. In Smith and Eleveld 209). A large difficulty

in studying and enjoying oral poetry is the popular aversion to performance in the poetic world. Julia Novak explains, there is a “neglect of live poetry as a subject worthy of academic study – and the resulting lack of historical documentation and a critical language” (15). She goes on to cite Dana Gioia terming many forms of performance poetry as “popular poetry,” but has to include the fact that these forms – rap, cowboy, slam, etc., “thrived without the support of the university or literary establishment” (qtd. in Novak 21). Slam and these other forms of poetry show that academic support could help, but is not necessary.

Many would like to see forms of Spoken Word and Slam enter critical discussion, or at least see a wider critical acceptance. In attempting to enter this discussion by outlining the genre of live poetry, and thereby create a legitimate critical dialogue, Novak explores the idea of compositional practice as a method of categorization. She mentions Adrian Mitchell, a poet whose process requires reciting the work as it is written. She mentions Anthony Joseph who states, “When I’m writing I’m singing the words back to myself” (20). She mentions other poets and other processes all with creational intent and practice. Almost all involve an oral element along with textual documentation. This includes artists like Patience Agbabi, “(who sometimes calls herself ‘performance poet’ although she does not write specifically for performance)” (32). The exception to the performance based on written creative work would be “freestyle” rap and improvisational work.

Slam poetry’s entrance into the critical dialogue has been hindered by personal judgment from critics such as John Siddique, who uses biased terminology. He terms “performance poetry” as poor quality, and “poetry in performance” denotes quality

poetry that is effective on the page and then performed well (qtd. In Novak 32). This undermines any credibility of authors who use the term “performance poetry” to describe works like Slam and Spoken word. Others like David Groff feel that, “looking to please the madding crowd, poets can unconsciously take aesthetic shortcuts that can damage a poem; the effects that work so well in performance are often the kind of shtick that deadens a written poem” (qtd. in Novak 27). One could argue that a performance poem doesn’t need to bother with a written version, or that when performance is the main goal—the previously described Slam and Spoken Word audience—is paramount to a poet’s success. What works, works. What doesn’t work, doesn’t work. Rather than shtick, a performance poet would much more likely use the term “tactic.” A tactic is thought out, shtick is cliché. However the simple answer is: Not everything translates from the page to the stage. I discuss one such tactic later in describing my own work, the concept of filler words. Words used to help control an audience reaction. These words don’t add much to the meaning of the poem, but they smooth audience transitions from laughter to attention etc. Filler words become important in Slam because of the time limit. This tactic is ineffective in a page poetry discussion. They serve no purpose on the page.

In furthering the separation of page and stage poet Bob Hicok states directly, “What is most commonly said about Slam poetry-- that it’s not as good on the page as it is live-- is true for most...” he goes on to note the opposite, being that most published poetry doesn’t work “on stage” (quoted in Wheeler 127). Experiencing oral or page poetry creates different stimuli. Oral poetry is immediate, emotive, and generally meant to be absorbed in one read, or performance. Published work relies more on nuance,

structure, visual presentation, and multiple readings. The direct sensations of the two mediums are mostly unrelated.

Whether the work is written down, memorized, or made up on the spot, success in slam depends on working to connect with the audience within specific guidelines by developing your physical and poetic voice to portray your reality and identity. I am working under the now infamous definition of poetry given by Jack McCarthy (*Slamnation*). He explains what he meant to say in a Youtube video, the main idea being: If someone is able to and has written something everyone can agree on as being poetry, they have the right, or “poetic license” to label something else as poetry, if they believe it to be such (*On Defining Poetry*). Poetry Slam Inc. has defined what it takes for a poem to be eligible to compete. Beyond that, if you say it’s an oral poem, performance poem, literary poem, etc., then that’s what it is, and your audience will determine your success.

Characteristics of Poetic Voice in Performance

Developing a poetic voice takes on a different meaning when it comes to oral poetry. Poetic voice contributes to the genuine nature that sets apart good slam work. Poetic voice and a poet’s physical voice must both be developed, and the physical can have a great effect on the representation of the poetic. Paying attention to both voices will pay large poetic dividends in Slam and Spoken Word.

Connection to a poets work can be enhanced greatly or completely destroyed with poetic voice. Page poet Alice Notley gives the basic idea behind poetic voice on the page, “vividness, actual presence of the live poet in the dead words on the page” (qtd. in

Wheeler 17). Slam and competition will force those who wish to be successful to develop poetic voice, which I consider part of the “realness” factor (Somers-Willett 7). Oral poetry has a different sense of poetic voice. Diction, vocabulary, spacing, etc. all impact our reading and viewing of poetry, while the ability to portray unique poetic voice is fundamental to success, the actual term should not be confused with physical voice, especially in the area of oral poetry.

“Poet voice” is a problem for many beginning poets. They have a preconceived notion of what a performance is and this affects their delivery. The physical delivery of a poem must match or enhance the characteristics of the poetic voice. Beginning actors learning Shakespeare have a tendency to speak in a stereotypical manner commonly called “Shakespeare Voice.” The voice gets deeper and there is a tinge of a British accent. This happens a lot with poets, seeing a poet reciting in “Shakespeare Voice” or “Poetry Voice” is amusing and distracting enough to forget everything else about their performance. “Poet Voice” is one of the most obvious and quickest ways to distinguish a performance that is not “real.” The poem may be amazing, it could be life-changing, but if someone hears it from a poet trying to channel the ghost of Dylan Thomas, they can immediately be turned off to the work.

The term poetic voice itself can be irritating to some like the poet Peter Campion as quoted in Wheeler, portraying some of the negative attitude towards voice, “Out of all the creative writing patois, the phrase ‘finding your voice’ rankles me the most...” (17). Wheeler further explains the term as an idea of personality, comparing it to a “voiceprint, meaning a graph of the frequency and intensity of a person’s speech plotted against time.” When dealing with oral poetry an observer could analyze both a voiceprint and a

poetic voice. The voiceprint comes with the performance, and the “voice” comes in vocabulary, slang, word choice, etc. Connection can be sensed in vocabulary, and in the characteristics of a poet’s physical voice. If an audience doesn’t believe a poet, or the persona that poet is portraying, would ever say a certain word in everyday life, or if the appearance and delivery don’t match the timber of word choice, they won’t believe the connection in a performance.

Tendencies towards confessional poetry and marginalized identity can complicating the development of poetic voice. It is easy to confuse the idea of developing an opinion, with developing poetic style. Think of an election. If I vote, I have an opinion often referred to as a voice, and I used it to make a simple decision. If I write an article about the pros and cons of a certain issue up for a vote, I have gone into detail and used a more nuanced voice. This is like a poetic voice. Susan B.A. Somers Willett explains that many poets “linger on personal and political themes, the most common of them being the expression of marginalized identity” (7). If analyzing a performance, separating poetic voice from the voiceprint and a poet’s personal identity within his or her poetry would be an impossible task, the necessity of accessibility will force an audience to ignore the subtle differences between these three things, and allow it to enjoy the sum of the parts. This is not to say that a marginalized identity or basing poetry on identity, confession, or personal issues is the only way to succeed. I contend it is simply an effective option, considering Slam audiences’ need to develop a grounding in a poet’s work in three minutes. You may not judge a book by its cover, but it is still part of the book, and if it doesn’t synergize with content, you might change your opinion of the whole book after reading it. A strong poet will understand and be able to declare

his or her identity with a strong poetic, and physical voice displayed in their “real” poetry, and may use marginalized identity, but are not bound to it like a crutch (7).

The sum of the parts is exactly what Slam will develop in a poet. In order to commercialize you need the complete vocal package, and Slam is popular avenue to get it. Voice in physical or poetic form touches everything in oral poetry. Wheeler explains the vocal aspects Slam will specifically help.

Slam poetry engages all the meanings of poetic voice that this book has explored: its emphasis on the poet’s presence, its relation to song and vernacular speech, its connotations of singularity and originality. It both exploits and challenges the association of poetry with voice, and it does so with the explicit agenda of reclaiming poetry from teacher-scholars like me.[...] slam is becoming an institution in its own right, with some of its most well known practitioners pursuing and achieving academic credentials, publication, and employment (129).

Poetry in performance is about voice, strong physical performance voice, unique synergized poetic voice, and merging the two for a unified experience an audience can sense immediately. Slam poets are developing these characteristic in their work and delivering it in the commercial arena of Spoken word. “In short, slam is all about poetic voice in its various senses” (Wheeler 142). Slam develops a poet and their product, and the poet can deliver the product to poetry communities outside of Slam.

Chapter Three: Developing a Marketable Spoken Word Collection

Slamming has helped develop my abilities in oral poetry. I have used it to judge my work, revise poetry that didn't work out, and experiment with performance style. I have done this outside of a large centralized population, the next step is to get to a larger audience. Slams generally last two rounds, but I'll need more than two poems to leap into Spoken Word type venues.

I have the Slam experience, but, prior to this work I lacked a product of significant length. A major tool in page poetry is a chapbook: a small collection of an artist's work. Essentially, a recorded performance of a body of work would be an oral chapbook. As previously stated, I never felt my poetry translated fully on the page. While it is much simpler to print transcriptions of the poetry, visuals for press packets and social media are staples in the oral poetry community. This oral chapbook can be evidence of my ability to perform a substantial show for an audience, something that will help publishers, promoters, managers, etc. in booking and signing. This allows me to effectively take the show on the road.

The most important characteristic I want to portray in this chapbook is a unified voice. While there are 12 poems in the show, it needs to be easily recognizable as my work, physically and textually. In a work titled *Poems on the Page, Poems in the Air* Billy Collins explains the importance of the face to face connection between poet and audience. "...the poetry reading offers a double connection: one with the poet who stands up from the page and delivers, and another within the audience united by a common

interest” (qtd. in Smith and Eleveld 2). A reading allows the listener to see the effect of the poem on its author, hear rhythm and voice the poem was meant to deliver, and create a connection between poet, poem, and audience. One can hear a poem’s “momentary escape from the prison cell of the page,” Collins continues. A reading allows a visual interaction not allowed in the “silent transaction” of reading from the page (qtd. in Smith and Eleveld 3). The silent transaction can easily fall flat when a work is designed to be performed.

I have created this body of work as a means to reach new audiences. There are more than just slam fans listening to Spoken Word. Slam has a solid developed audience that is growing, but as stated before with various examples from Susan B.A. Somers-Willet many of the performers expand in different mediums (13-14). These artists need to be heard to succeed, and like Lesley Wheeler states, “Embodied voices attract audiences” (129). You can build a following on your Slam success, but a body of work that can be shared and experienced outside of competition is essential. Small local venues want something different, musical artists are taking spoken word poets on tours as openers, and some poets are organizing larger tours of just poetry. In a more and more media driven society poetry can reach a much larger audience on Youtube.

The warmth and interaction of a reading, which can many times become the boisterous cheering and applause of a slam audience, pulls the poem from the “chilliness of text.” The audience is not forced to imagine what Collins calls a “ghost-form of the poet” (3). The poet is there. One can see the physical appearance of the author, make connections between specific passages and the poet’s appearance, and find insight into his or her work. Most importantly a reading gives the listener a voice to hear. The voice

of the poet can “repossess” the poem from our own inner voice (Smith and Eleveld 3-5). Poet Anthony Joseph would agree. An audience member was disappointed at the prospect of a silent reading after having heard Joseph’s performance, “...whereupon Joseph answered, ‘You will hear my voice in your head man’” (qtd. in Novak 20). As Lesley Wheeler notes about the 2005 National Slam, there is a large element of “metapoesis” in Slam, and many poets use it outside the competition as well (149). It is easier for us to see the physical nature of the poet Poetri in his poem “Monsters” performed on *Def Poetry*. We can see a man with a large belly talk about monsters in his stomach telling him to eat. Without the comic performance and the visual, this becomes very lackluster (*Russell Simmons presents: Def Poetry Season 1*).

Local slams often invite guest performers—someone to feature. A feature poet will perform a set of poetry between the first and second round of the slam, the set usually lasting anywhere from 10 to 30 minutes depending upon the needs of the slam. Feature performers are generally well known poets, national competitors, or friends of the local slam. Some examples can be seen on the Seattle Poetry Slam’s webpage. (“Upcoming Shows”) A guest feature will read/perform in a kind of mini-reading and generally promote what they are currently working on, i.e. chapbooks, DVDs, and poetry collections. This oral chapbook allows me a reference. It gives me the ability to promote a tangible product, and creates a foundation on which I can expand. Touring poets will use local slams to fill out a tour schedule. It basically provides infrastructure, and if you have a following and a product, you can benefit from the structure.

When approaching the chapbook I focused my efforts on creating work that would reflect the strengths Slam has taught me. One of the ways I project my personal

poetic voice is with specific—what I call—“filler words.” A lot of poetry is focused on using less, but better words to portray a point. This is good on paper, but changes when a poet gets to performance. A finite amount of time exists to perform, this means an audience’s reaction sometimes needs to be controlled. By putting in throw-away or filler words, a poet like myself, can pull an audience back in from a laugh or audible emotional reaction. After performing enough, a poet will know where the laughs happen. I plan for this with a filler word. Saying the filler while the laugh or other reaction occurs will alert the audience that the poem is going again. The word is not essential to the meaning of the poem, so the audience doesn’t miss anything, and if there isn’t a reaction in the usual spot, I can leave out the word or use it to build the tone of the performance or break tension. Using these in different ways can create or build my “realness” connection to the poem, I use: look, man, hey, yeah, etc. When reading the poetry, they seem very out of place, but during a performance they are extremely useful, and versatile.

Slam taught me the importance of the audience. Getting critical acclaim is great. It helps legitimize the effort of writing and performing, provide ways to market writing, and looks good on the back of a published collection of poetry. Getting audience acclaim is much better in Spoken Word. Social media will do much more for someone in the oral poetry world than critical acclaim on the back of a book. The work I do is tailored towards audience approval. This doesn’t mean that I change what I write, it does mean that I select different pieces when creating a set list. The first time I ever slammed years ago, I used rhyming couplets in a poem about Shakespeare. I somehow got into the second round and slammed a sonnet. A bad sonnet. Things have improved from there.

The chapbook is all audience approved. I am filming the chapbook in order to use social media to market the product.

Slam taught me the importance of community in poetry. I entitled my performance “Walking with my Ghosts.” My process in writing poetry is to describe a ghost. I feel memories are like reflections or ghosts of our former selves that follow us. We can visualize them, and if we are honest with ourselves, we can help others visualize theirs and see the similarities. When approaching a poem, I want to construct it in a way that someone who was not around during the creation of my ghost could picture how it was made and feel the way I did at the time. This is how I create a relationship with the audience. Help them see me creating a ghost. Simply put, I want someone hearing me to experience what I did. I believe this is the seed for most of Slam poetry. We are all just trying to understand each other. We’re building a community, and by expanding beyond Slam into other markets we can support ourselves financially, or at least partly, and we can bring new members into the poetry community.

The performance I created was simple. I wanted it to reflect the way a slam works. A single figure on a stage performing poetry. No props or music. With a bare stage it is easier for the words to take full attention from the audience. My choreography is generally unplanned. In this way I keep a sense of spontaneity in the work for myself. Every time I perform a poem my body movement is different, however there tends to be very similar choreography in each poem after I have recited it multiple times. I don’t plan it out. I let it get there organically. There are exceptions to this, certain punch lines are helped out with physical deliveries. For example when I say the line “apple bottom jeans jeans, boots with the fur” in the poem “Poetry for Dummies,” (Appendix) I make an

exaggerated dance move to punctuate my own perceived irony of Isaac Newton and Henry David Thoreau dying celibate. I make a pose to look like the mascot of Captain Morgan Rum when comparing an ex-girlfriend to an old man in a locker room in the poem “The 5 Stages of Grieving Portrayed in the Voicemails I Left my First College Girlfriend After She Dumped Me.” Generally I speak with my hands, and I allow them to do what they want to in my performance. By not planning most of my movement, I feel more comfortable, and this allows me to feel like it’s the first time I’ve said the words, even though it may be the hundredth.

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Appendix A: Poetry Transcript

Walking with my Ghosts

Poetry for Dummies

You want to be a poet?

Get yourself a shovel and start digging.

You're gonna have to get deep, I'm talking deep as a hail mary in the last 15. That is not an allusion to prayer. I'm talking football, which on Sundays, Mondays, and sometimes Thursdays, is my religion. Go Broncos.

Hold up.

I didn't say stop digging. Get deep like the pizza in Chicago. Deep like Einstein, Joyce, or Henry David Thoreau in the woods for two years.

Careful with that one,

he died a virgin.

So did Isaac Newton, who I'm guessing sometimes wished that apple was less,

Apple – Gravity

and more,

Apple - Bottom jeans jeans, boots with the fur!

Get deep like the difference between Mayo and Miracle Whip. I'm talking deep like,

“Bro, you're like, so deep, I can't even, like, see you anymore, Bro.”

Now,

climb out of the hole, fill it in with your mis-conceptions, pre-conceptions, and delusions of poetic grandeur.

Start saying what you really feel.

Install a tape deck on your temple, so you can simply stop.

Rewind.

And keep yourself from saying the same thing three times.

I hate it when poets repeat themselves.

I hate it when poets repeat themselves.

I hate it when poets repeat themselves.

Somebody lied when they said the third time's the charm. It may not even be the 4th, 5th, 12th, 73rd, 97th, or in my case the 3,464th time. If your words aren't powerful enough the first time, restating them is not going to be the steroids they need.

Throw em out, put em aside, or give em to the dog, because, I mean, they lick their own asses, so they can handle that shit.

Buy a slingshot.

Because most of the time carefully placed shots of moldy cheese are more effective than words.

Put a notebook by your bed,

one of these nights your going to come up with a line that'll blow your mind awake until you close your eyes again,

but,

you won't write it down.

Reciting the poetry I have written in my mind while searching for sleep would make politicians weep for their sins, it would make children know exactly what they wanted from their lives and go after it, but most importantly, reciting the poetry I have written in my mind while searching for sleep would make women spontaneously burst into orgasm.

But,

I didn't write it down.

Now,

ask yourself, Why?

What messed up memory from your childhood made you believe sonnets were a legitimate life goal? It's not too late to get a real job, because poetry ain't paying these days. So unless you're agoraphobic or Emily Dickinson, I'm thinking one day you're gonna want to move out of your parents' basement. You can't pay rent in similes.

You can't trade metaphor for Ramen Noodles.

And unless you want the first house you buy to be a gently used two man tent you can set up in your buddy's yard, with a prime location half a block from the YMCA because they have free showers, get yourself a 9 to 5.

Go back to school,

be an accountant, or an engineer, or whatever.

The only time a poet sees dead presidents is when he sneaks into a historical movie so he can cool off from the mid summer heat on the corner of main street where he's playing a ukulele for spare change in a world of credit or debit.

I don't do this because it's cool, or fun, or economically advantageous.

I don't do this to change the world. I won't.

Some poets have, others might, but,

...who knows.

I don't even do this to pick up chicks. Somewhere between Shakespeare and no child left behind, writing poetry for the ladies became, creepy, along with referring to women as “the ladies.”

But,

if any of you female type people within in the sound of my voice want to know what it's like to be with a guy that can turn a pizza with 8 slices into 11 meals, call me.

I'm not talking at you because I want to be. I just have to.

If you're not bleeding on the page, it ain't worth a good god damn,
and,

I'm not talking about cutting yourself. I tried that once with a blunt hunting knife and realized, while looking at my fully intact forearm, I can't even fail correctly, and I didn't really want to hurt myself, I wanted to hurt my poor decisions, trust me there were plenty to pick from.

You can't always reverse a vasectomy, so think before you snip, or you may be making the best of disconnected balls.

Life is gonna snip and cut you enough to fill your pages, so you,

can spin the little wheel and move the little car with the little pink and blue people
or
you can flip a table and ruin everyone's chance to enjoy the game. Poetry ain't paying
these days, and poets aren't coming in first,
but second place isn't losing as long as you hold your head up, and finish the game.

The 5 Stages of Grieving as Portrayed in Voicemails I Left My First College Girlfriend
After She Dumped Me

Denial, the day after.
Hey, I'm standing outside your window.
I don't have a boombox,
but I'm holding up my ipod playing our song
like that one guy,
in that one movie.
You remember our song, right?
Stop,

collaborate and listen, Ice is back with a brand new edition...
It's Friday night.
Friday night is vintage video game night.
You're my player 2, my Luigi, you double my dragon.
Without you I'm just up up down down left right left right b a start.

With you we're up up down down left right left right b a SELECT start.

I,

select,

you.

Anger 6 days later.

You're a dick.

A lady dick.

You

are the female version of saggy

old man

balls.

Just minding my own business in the metaphorical locker room in the gym,

some old guy goes all Captain Morgan,

puts his leg up on the bench, and there you are.

Balls.

That's the only b-word I'll say,

I, have class,

I only say the b-word when I'm talking to my dog.

She

by definition

is

a b-word.

It's funny, and Ironic. That's right, I'm funny, and ironic, and I gave you the best 43 days of my life. I'm not getting those back.

I was gonna give you
my V-card.

I found someone else, and she's 8 and a half times hotter than you. She's the PS3 to your XBOX, the Abercrombie to your Fitch, the Ben to your Jerry. She reads Manga. I don't know what that is, but it's better,
than you.

Bargaining 10 days later.

Please take me back. I'll do anything.

I miss you like a pinky toe, I can't walk straight without you.

I'll switch majors,

cut my hair, or

grow it out,

shave on a consistent basis

I would...

man-scape.

I'll switch to mac,

get an iphone,

quit World of Warcraft.

I

would wear
skinny jeans
for you.

Please don't make me wear skinny jeans.

Depression 12 days later.

I want you to know you're the split in my lip,
it hurts when I smile,
and I could get rid of you, if I could just quit biting the scabs
trying to keep you here.

I keep smiling without my eyes and I threw my chapstick out,
feels weird when I put it on, like I'm trying to
cover you up.

I remember you
when I eat, when I sing, but mostly when I kiss,
...her.

But,
someday I'll forget, when my maturity is equal to my age, and I'm ready to smile with my
eyes, without my mouth, for the time it takes to forget the bad, AND the good, because
the former blends into the latter, and the latter tries to outshine the former, and most of
the time,

it does.

But.

Once I am ready,

I CAN lose you.

Acceptance 47 days later.

...still not taking my calls.

don't blame you...

Maybe we can talk sometime?

or not.

I've grown in the last 47 days.

I read Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance.

...didn't really get it,

but I'm vegan now,

so... Take care.

Project Mayhem

We play games my friends and I.

Games to see who's got the biggest

Deathwish.

We're all dying in the Sylvia Plath sense of the word,

But we,

are breaking rules to remember our names.

All we had was a name. In death,
members of Project Mayhem have a name.

My naked, hairy, incandescently white ass is first

In a line of five facing a decaying wooden slat fence.

We piss through the fence we jumped, into

Snow surrounding the hot tub where we resurrect our corpses.

I want to leave my mark on the world. But, I forgot how to write in cursive and it burns to
stop once you start, so I left the world a large inverted lemon snow cone.

We don't make jokes about tiny dicks in cold weather,
anymore,

But, we'll laugh our asses off if someone slips on the ice,

And stop if we see blood.

But blood dissipates in warm water and we'll laugh again
when you sigh out your contentment.

One of us is gay.

He knows it.

We know it.

But, there's a lock on his closet made of Mama's Jesusfish and Grampuh's schrapnel.

He tried to rip it off and got stigmata'd for his effort,

When he licked the wound, he learned the blood of Christ tastes the same as the blood he tastes in his teeth when he bites his tongue to keep the secret.

Another one of us vomits blood,
And pizza, cuz beer goes better with pizza,
151 and cheap vodka go better with pizza,
and they're alright on their own.

Another one sleeps around,
Putting himself in blurry girls getting back at daddy with some loser they'll forget as soon as they get back to midterms and biology labs.

Another one cuts himself, or shoots hot forgiveness in his arms, or, in his legs, to hide us from the tracks to momentary heaven.

I sold my body to God for a chance to love christian girls expecting the most high,
but,
now, I'm just getting the most high trying to forget the most low.

If God was here tonight,
Naked in a hot tub with the products of his boredom,
We could talk this shit out.

He loves us like the sons He never wanted,
But, tonight we're forgetting that, and the desperation of small town lives.

Hot water warms the bodies we use to make minimum wage at jobs we hate making ends
meat to buy words of wisdom that chain us to the people we're supposed to impress.

Hot water helps the bleeding,

sometimes,

we just have to control the bleeding, even when it hurts.

And yeah,

it fucking hurts.

Tonight, we're still alive, and nameless.

But someday soon, when we learn,

this was our chance to take up arms against OUR sea of troubles and by opposing end
them,

And we DIDN'T.

We'll get our names back.

Let's get ready to rumble!

In this corner, sporting the camouflage trunks he wears to hide his feelings, slamming out
of a small town in a long forgotten state by way of Middle Earth, weighing in at too much
to like what he sees in the mirror,
the poet.

In this corner, refusing to wear trunks, because he does whatever the hell he wants.

Slamming out of reality, by way of a wakeup call, weighing in on every decision you've ever made, with more than you can take sometimes.

Life.

This,

will be the 27th meeting between the man and his mortal enemy. The first eight fights were slightly more than mandatory, the next four proved painfully uneventful.

Until No Trunks hit Camo with a rabbit punch in the puberty, his motivation, popped,

like a zit on prom night.

No trunks followed it up with a double low blow of ADHD and social anxiety, Camo hit ground with the chances of losing his virginity at any point in his foreseeable future, He became a no show in the next seven fights, phoning it in, with his face in a fantasy novel escaping the physical reality of a world of,

“It'll get better, someday.”

He started throwing towels instead of punches.

That,

wasn't good enough for no trunks, he's in it for the fight, and the frustration. He feeds on them like a leech on your heart, if it ain't pumping, he's choking on fumes. No trunks got tired of the pointless paper tiger show and ripped apart the homecoming banner at the dance Camo never came to. He found him at home playing video games, and hit him with a falcon punch in the will to win.

Scar tissue is just as good as confidence,
build up enough and you KNOW
nothing's ever, gonna hurt you, like it used to.

Camo threw in the towel on throwing in the towel,
Put pictures of his possible future in his corner,
and told Mick to cut him,
not because he couldn't see,
he needed to know there were dreams,
beyond the ring.

No trunks licked his lips and let loose with everything he had.
Sparks, flew from his eyes with the hopes of finally, getting, a fight.
Camo started to live.

He pulled the tears out of his pockets,
and threw em in the spit bucket.

Tears are only useful in acceptance speeches and pep talks.

And Camo, ain't looking for awards,or anymore, coaching. He knows, someday,
he'll find more tears in the bottom of his backpack when he's finally got time to breathe.
But right now he's sitting in his corner on a folding metal chair thinking of going stone
cold.

He's finally gonna do what it takes to reach, BEYOND the ring, and find where the
sidewalk ends.

He's got a crowd in his corner, with a few new faces and some returning smiles, and they,
are what he fights for.

No trunks is still waiting for the bell, he ain't going anywhere.

He's gonna bring it, like an ice cream truck in the summer.

Every, single, time.

And now, there is finally a fight in the ring,

AND the poet.

What I Should Have Said

I don't know if you can hear me,

but,

it's been

3 years

7 months

2 weeks and

4 days

since you gave me a chance.

My eyes were covered in your scent, and my feet were tripping over my self
consciousness.

I couldn't hear anything but the beating of the nerve I'd been working up,
with my history of romantic failures.

We walked the length of a football field in under 12 parsecs.

I know.

That's a measurement of length, it's equal the miles my mind raced against my pulse walking next to you.

Your words are stuck in my mind, I hammered em in there with the memory of your frown after the answer I gave when you asked me what I would do with my new found free time.

The best I could come up with was, "Sleep. Maybe some T.V."

You laughed your patience into the night air, and built the bridge for me to go from stalker with a tendency to stare to some guy you might go out with.

I couldn't see the bridge from behind the curtain of my lowered expectations patched with cameos from love interests gone awry. You said,

"I just want to do something fun."

and threw your head to the side motioning toward the bridge with your eyebrows.

This,

is what I said,

"Yeah, well, see ya."

You smiled

over whatever you felt, waved, and walked away.

I walked 10 steps

before I got around the curtain and saw the bridge.

Shit.

I turned and looked for you,

not knowing at the time what I wanted to say,

wanting to say something,
anything,
to make you understand,
but, knowing you were more than just physically out of my reach.

This,

is what I should have said:

I'm a mirage, I'm not what you're looking for and if you come towards me you'll miss the
oasis I wish I was. I'm a wasp in a world of bees. We all sting, but I don't even make
honey. And I can sting you twice, or more. I'm a scratcher worth another lotto ticket,
good enough to trade in for another chance at your jackpot.

In 3 years

7 months

2 weeks and

4 days,

I'll be worth your time, because at that point

I'll be worth my time.

I'll be in control of the pen writing my story.

I'll write you in as a flashback that gave me a match for the fire I'd light with pages of my
past written without my input.

But, that's probably all it's gonna be.

A regret can become a memory,

if, we learn from it.

This is what I want to say now:

I'm sorry I regretted you.

It took a long time,

but,

I painted you in words on a page in the book of my past.

That,

is where you'll stay, as a memory,

unless,

we have a chance to write the future.

Virgin Poet Dirty Talk

Watch out gurrll, cuz I'mma slant rhyme you into a

capitol A,

capitol B,

capitol A,

lower case b,

post poem daze.

Yeah, I've got the blank verse for your old school epic. I'm gonna make your lyrics sing

and your couplets b-b-b-bounce. When I'm done, you'll be slamming in tongues, You

won't believe what I can do to your assonance with allusions to my alliteration.

And, yeah...

ummmm,

yeah...

I'mma do... stuff,

to your...

boobies.

This... isn't me.

I want to show you my thought process, why I do the things I do, and the inner workings of the sometimes fragile, rarely focused mind I call my own. I want to convince you to be the first person to believe in the motivation of my stride. My parents don't count.

They're contractually obligated.

I want to show you the pure awesome I behold when you walk into view, and lead you to the pedestal I made to worship you,

worship is a funny word,

I don't know if there's a God,

but I know there's a you,

and that could make me a religious man.

You walked into my life through the monolithic doubts I spent so many years and missed opportunities building for myself, you proved I was in fact, visible, to the opposite sex, I was getting worried, but then you made sure I knew what it meant to sleep next to a chance at understanding what all those cheesy love songs are about.

I want to paint you the pictures I see in my dreams, I used to think dreaming was meant for braver men than I could be, and all I knew to do, was write dark poems behind my eyelids until my mind gave up the daily race it ran to escape hell hounds named for my greatest mistakes. My mind was a blank white page where I scribbled black and blue skeletons. You opened Pandora's box of crayons, poured em through my ears, and melted it all into color swirls with soft breath and warm skin. Now I can mold, color, and dream my conscience into a convincing parody with my fingers, and the brushes I paid for with hard earned scars.

I want to wrap myself up in your intellect and fend off cold shadowed possibilities of failed epics. I want to breathe in the way you won't stop until you find the perfection in a world of good enough. I want to push the hair out of your eyes and watch the flicking of the dreams in your eyelids. I want to believe those dreams include me.

When I was a boy someone told me to shoot for the stars,
if I didn't make it, I'd still hit the moon,
somewhere between Atari and touch screens I stopped trusting my aim, so I'm putting away the guns, the joysticks, and the paddles, and starting a fire.
I'm gonna light my dreams with my own two hands. The fingers are prone to paper cuts, and a little bit crooked, but they can pull a flame out of a match and my less than Ivy League report cards,

and they're pretty good at holding you. I can see a smile in your eyes better in firelight
than the moon and stars ever let me do, and that is
all I ever wanted.

It's every man's dream to give up those dreams for the right woman.

Or man. Whatever works. Not the point.

My dreams are simple, me and you, sitting next to a fire somewhere in a valley between
snow capped mountains, waiting for a chance at another sunrise.

And maybe a big screen.

Or a hot tub.

And it would be really cool, if sometimes,
you let me play with your boobies.

Rundown

I am not the man I was raised to be.

I don't know him anymore. He left
in the fury of a sucked down breathe through a coffin nail.

Dissipated with my hopes of ever finding your God.

They told me he had a plan.

He left a map in a maze on the place mat of a rundown pizza chain.

I tried coloring it in with red crayon hoping

I could find the answers

to myself. But I keep messing up the lines and making frustrated waxy splotches
hammering crayons on the pizza greased table.

The place mats are for the kids, and
the rundown waitress of the rundown pizza chain is
cutting me off.

I'm a second chance kind of guy.

She's taking my second chance at finding the answers and snorting it through a rolled up
receipt with a twenty cent tip on a ten dollar ticket.

She snorted her second chance through a crinkled single in the 80's.

She made it through the 70's in a thong and nipple tape,
but,

her existence sagged with her breasts and
men with truck seat hemorrhoids and diesel beards just
want innocence sitting on their laps.

I put my hand on hers.

"I could have loved you."

The lie comes easily to my lips before
she takes my second chance at loving myself.

I smell the only glimpse she has at acceptance

on her fingers.

She's working her way towards a

Do Not Resuscitate clause with the coffin nails we share.

I leave without eating,

still not knowing how to face my demons.

I paint them on my skin with a needle and the paycheck I receive for peddling false hope
to freshmen in need of father figures.

The demons,

will cover me when I'm done.

I'll look at 'em through a broken mirror with bloodshot eyes.

A mirror I broke because I wanted to hurt me.

The only way I'm gonna find the answers is by crossing a mountain in my mind that's
covered in childhood smoke,

and,

Even though I didn't start the fire,

I'm gonna take my third and final chance.

I'm gonna do whatever it takes to cross that mountain.

I'm gonna take the rundown waitress from the rundown pizza chain.

If we make it through the smoke, we'll show each other our demons.

Then,

We'll find a valley with a glacier-fed lake full of fresh water rainbow trout, drink the cool water, and dip our weary feet.

Even if we make it through, we're still gonna smell the smoke, but once it's behind us,

We'll play, as free as children, in the embrace of the gods,

We always knew,

we,

would become.

Burned Bridges

I was foreshadowed to become an afterthought,

a shoulda, woulda, coulda,

on your bucket list.

You dreamed of me as a face you never met

in a dream soon forgotten with a cup

of caffeinated 9 to 5.

There are a lot of ways to find me,

I'm in the white hot flecks of ash

that pop out of a fire by the ocean,

I drift up and up, and I'll come down

when you can't see me anymore.

I'm in the rock and the roll of your grandma's wooden chair.

She sits on the porch and tells you she was a beautiful girl.

She was.

I am in the embrace of a loved one
while they still have the courage and the decency to love you.
Someone has to keep loving you, we thought
you would have learned to by now.

We were a planned mistake,
acted out in the momentary pause before the second chorus of a Sinatra song.
Ol' blue eyes is rolling in his grave.
He, did it his way, so
You, could do it your way.
But, you threw a drink in his face,
grabbed onto his coat tails,
and dragged his memory in to the malaise
of your small-fish-small-pond-self-inflicted lifestyle.

The relationship you have entered cannot be completed as dialed. Please try again.
I would have given you another chance.
Every song has a chorus,
it helps the karaoke enthusiasts get back on track,
makes the verse less harsh,
and gives us all a second chance at getting the lyrics right.

You took my chorus and ran with it.

I wanted you to.

I wanted you to run to the bridge you built and

burned. You could have rebuilt with my chorus, but you smashed it on a rock and carved your name in the rubble.

Wood burns once, but your mother's heart

feels the flame every time you knowingly fail.

The only safe form of self-medication is the uncontrollable laugh of a baby on youtube.

When I'm brave enough to have a child of my own I'll put away the dreams of drugging myself into nirvana. But, it still feels like we're just waiting for the last call after the final act of the play.

I know you're gonna leave and you're gonna do it big.

There will be days without sun in an air conditioned room surrounded by three walls of concrete and a 1 foot by 3 foot window painted shut with tomato soup and grilled government cheese.

I want you to leave now. Don't waste time picking out the plot or debating cremation.

Those were questions for our children to answer.

A Horse Named Jerry

"I didn't have time to paint you on the horse."

He says this to me as he wipes away a tear

with the back of his

small-for-his-age fore-arm.

He walks with the stature of a 6 year old

and the heart of an old man.

I drop into a catcher's stance with my elbows on my knees and wait,

for my eyelids to clear the "rain."

I whisper,

something I can't remember, and

he graciously nods, he senses

the weakness in my voice and puts on a brave face,

so I don't have to.

A nine year old with a pacemaker, and

three surgical notches

on his

race car bedpost

shouldn't have to believe in God.

That nine year old should believe

with all of his half-grown pace-made heart

that the picture he finger-paints on the stomach of a horse named Jerry will fly into the

night sky and

become a constellation for the world to see and remember the week we conquered our past.

We'd call it happiness, or hope, or something dopy like that,

only because I can drop a cynical halfway smile if I remember it that way.

If I tell it like It really was, you'd see my weakness. And I try not to let that, or my feelings, out in front of people. I still haven't learned it's safe to feel, when others are around.

I spent the better part of six days with the boy.

I taught him to bait a hook, and dance like a robot.

He taught me the innumerable differences between Pokemon and the fact that I will never have a reason to complain.

I still do.

One of the two of us hasn't grown up.

A 27 year old with a tendency to self-loathe and a penchant for doing things

the hard way

shouldn't believe a 9 year old with a stuffed Pokemon

gave him back a reason to try.

He shouldn't believe

when he looks into the night sky

he can say anything to anyone

and they will hear it.

He tried it with God, but

got tired of the one way conversation.

He tried it with the boy and

simply felt loved.

I may never grow up, and

I may never see the boy again,

but,

I still talk to the stars.

Breaking Worlds

I cringe every time a child reaches for my glasses.

I don't want them to see

the world through my eyes.

It's a dirty, water-spotted place that only lets me rest when I can't see in the mirror.

I was sent to a prophet in the 8th grade, he told me my existence was near-sighted,

but, I just need to see the future,

where my dreams still have a chance not to

disappoint me.

He told me to live, and stuck his fingers in my eyes.

I left him like a hangover and saw the world in red. Contacts kept me dreaming till I
flicked those fuckers in the sink and drowned em in the porcelain ocean my G.I. Joes had
to cross to defeat Cobra. After that I decided I was too old to play with dolls and the joke
about
“action figures” wasn't funny
the first time.

By high school graduation I was seeing the world through a
progressive pair of over priced
name brands.

They didn't get me laid by the girl in the poster, and the gift of Dr. Suess didn't tell me the
places I'd go would still remind me of years gone bad and scars that will just take time to
fade.

I broke my first world trying to
sell Jesus to the third world.

No one told me you see daily bread the same as Jesus on day 40 of a spiritual fast when
you don't know where that bread is coming from.

I saw children with distended bellies starve in the miles long line from the welfare office
to the bank.

I stopped pimping Jesus and took my dreams back
to the safety of McDonald's.

I broke my second world in an eastern religions class

trying to meditate in a christian bordello.

I never knew it was okay to learn about “incorrect religions” made by
pagans and false idols.

I would have made a great Catholic, or Jew, or Buddhist, or anything other than

I AM. I cannot be the god of my own world until I forgive the devils running the place.

I broke my latest world when a 7 year old with the odds against him grabbed my glasses
and placed them on his chemo-bald head.

He said, “You should clean these. I can't see you.”

The prophet told me I was a good

candidate for surgery. I told him I like that my world can break.

I clean my glasses now. I just want to see the future, where my dreams
still have a chance to make me
whole.

When Poetry Rules the World

I re-occuringly daydream

at the end of a paycheck, of a world

run on poetry. In this world I would be late for work

because my car ran out of haiku. God,

I love the smell of 5, 7, 5.

This work would consist of row upon row of liberal arts students just out of college paying off student loans by writing academic paper after academic paper in MLA Format, because in this world we really were trained for the job market.

You'll never hear the phrase: "Well, I can always be a teacher if it doesn't work out." or any derivative thereof.

No my friends, in this world

Teachers are worshiped

like professional athletes, they hold a 50 state draft at the end of the academic year, slightly preceded by free agency and a trade deadline, and the top ten picks are given to the states with the least imagination in education.

Those who can, do,

Those who can't, don't,

Those who teach,

were just trying to help all of us to become capable of doing, anything we want.

Politicians will still lie

to us, it'll just sound better in iambic pentameter. People will laugh

at your entrepreneurial aspirations while pulling out their

faux-leather pocket journals to describe the walk to their part time barista jobs where they serve coffee with really long names in Italian in cafes made of nothing but corners to aspiring brooders working on the next great American business plan.

Truck stop bathroom stalls will be monuments of knowledge and culture:

Here I sit,

brokenhearted,

Came to onomatopoeia,

but only farted.

The definition of hero will change

from football players with an extra effort in the fourth to the men and women alone with their thoughts, taking peeks behind society's curtain trying to get an understanding of the dark secrets it holds behind it's back.

They're slowly putting what they see on paper, word by word, story by story, fear by fear.

They're drinking themselves to death self-medicating their minds into forgetting the things they've seen simultaneously trying to put the words together that will show you the good things, and maybe, possibly, convince you the world is still worth saving.

Shakespeare festival attendance will be mandatory.

Sticky icky inspiration will not only be legal, but encouraged, along with other artistic experimentation.

Traffic and trade will slow with arguments over the right allusion to describe the correlation between red lights and North Korean trade restrictions.

Insecurities and self-doubt will be nothing but restrictions on our government issued poetic licenses.

Accidental deaths in hospitals will increase with an acceleration equal and opposite to the demise of rom coms and action adventure explosion reels in favor of foreign art films.

But,

you won't worry.

Bedside manner and condolences will be delivered in epic verse with a heroic build pulling you from the daze of loss into an emotionally manipulated sense of security.

Young writers in school will be pushed through

without performing in P.E. Simply because they have skills

with a pen. They won't know how to work on a team, or with people, but,

hey, they pulled our heartstrings with a lyric, and that's good enough to go pro, but, even

in a world run by poetry there can only be so many publishing professors, and some of us are going to fall into the space between success and self reliance,

the pope may have gotten rid of purgatory, but,

that doesn't mean we won't know the way it feels to be going no where,

fast.

I sometimes have a re-occurring day mare of a world run on poetry. Then I

slap myself. I put the weight of words back on my shoulders, knowing

that I still live in a world run on 9to5s and the stock game, knowing

that I only go to work to support my rent and student loan payments, knowing

I'm always waiting for the weekend, when I can be alone with my pen, hoping

one day my name will be in stylized letters on the cover of a book, put in my hands and

maybe yours by a reputable publishing house printing my day mares and dawn to dusk

dreams where my words can save a world run on... whatever it is we're running on now.

Bringing a Knife to a Pen Fight

A knife.

A knife?

THIS

is a pen. And

It can set you free like Hephaestus smashing chains or
or it can cut you deeper than daddy's disappointment in
a basket of pre-counted chickens.

Those soon to be scrambled dreams are gonna still-hatch with
the latest incarnation of your get rich quick life.

That knife ain't gonna cut away the
pre-traumatic stress disorder of
un-lived potential.

I have got potential for days.
Days and days of
waiting for the lights to brighten
on my small town hash pipe dreams.

Yeah.

It was a one horse town with a stop light

on the corner of Protestant and Cow Shit.

They broke the horse to saddle

in the summer of their discontent,

but the horse broke 'em back in a grass roots revelation of greener other sides.

Man.

Can that horse ride...

It grew dactyl wings in a fit of ptera.

I named it Pegas-me and we flew through a watercolor poem

about Icarus' ill-fated falling action at the end of a high school production

of Romeo and Juliet,

on ice.

Sorry Icky,

You aren't gonna bounce back from that,

You should have let it slide.

This time,

Juliet is gonna drop

that deadbeat and fly. She's gonna take those wings and

wax on

to the next town over.

Because, getting out of Verona is half the battle,

But, she doesn't know the battle's already lost
and one day, she's gonna be a constellation prize for the
third runner up in a crow-eating contest.

You gotta ask yourself
Romeo,
Is that knife in my face
the answer
to your half-cocked prayers pleading for
a way out
of your aggressive mediocrity?

Or are you gonna use it to cut
scar tissue in the shape of a cross into your wrist?

I have felt what it is to fail.

But, here are some things I learned:

The sun is always up, we just can't see it sometimes.

The only thing higher than the population of non-indigenous wild pigs and killer bees is
the suicide rate in Japan.

And life is like a pack of menthol phallic symbols.

-It's kind of a dick, and one day, it's gonna kill ya.

Take my pen, it's got a few words left in the back.

Use it to write your will

to live. Ink that shit on your chest

so when they lay you down, they know:

“Hey, it took him a while, but

this guy...

This guy got it right.”