

A REFLECTION ON FAMILY

by

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## REFLECTION

Embarking on the journey of writing a thesis in poetry was a risk I was terrified to take. Prior to Alex Lemon's Poetry II Workshop, I had no intention of calling myself a writer; I had no concept of what the word "writer" even entailed. As an English major, I only knew which writers I adored for their abilities to provide readers like me comfort in solitude. Through reading, I felt connected. I was transported to other times, to other bodies, to other worlds different and what seemed more magical than my own. I knew in this writing process that my goal was to connect. I wanted to connect to others through writing. At first, it felt like I was pretending, or rather roleplaying as a writer. I felt foolish thinking I had anything to say, but this quickly changed as my process began.

The journey of becoming a writer began in what felt at the time rather underwhelming way – by asking my roommates what I could possibly write about. Their response was "anything." And so it began. I reflected. I sat in my room in my college house and just thought. I remembered, I grieved, I processed, I reflected. I put pen to paper. Now, suddenly this identity as "writer" became less terrifying and more empowering than any version of myself I had met before.

It was not always easy, as I struggled with physical roadblocks that created mental roadblocks in terms of expressing myself creatively. In times of hardship over the last two years, the last thing I wanted to do was process my life. Things are weird in your 20s – leaving the only home and family I knew to create a life for myself was not something I ever felt ready to do, despite knowing it would launch new opportunities and a new sense of self. In these roadblocks, I decided to do what I knew best: read. Though instead of reading novels, I read poetry. I discovered my all-time favorite collection, Maggie Nelson's *Bluets*, and found inspiration in her meditation of love and loss through the focus of the color blue. I marveled at her ability to destabilize my normal reading processes as she wrote an autobiography ingrained with elements of philosophy and daily observations. I turned to this collection in my times of uncertainty to feel connected to my world, appreciating the times where it felt too small to breathe, and times where it felt too big to comprehend.

In terms of technical practice, I played with different forms such as the pantoum in “Hollowed” and blackout in “Just a Woman.” At times, it felt freeing to follow some sort of structure at times because it gave my work new meaning and allowed me to engage with those who create and follow these forms. It allowed for some introspection into the purpose and range of poetry and helped me to understand the importance of this art form throughout the centuries. I also practiced creating worlds of my own in reimagining characters and stories from the plays and books I studied in English, such as *Twelfth Night* in my poem *Antonio*. I was fortunate enough to have professors like Dr. Ariane Balizet who encouraged creativity in processing literature. I also was able to express a creative side in my second major Art History, a very formal discipline in nature. In an Art History class called *Methods*, Dr. Lindsay Dunn encouraged me to step out of just formal elements of art and create strong arguments through research, which built my writing confidence and helped me to find my voice in different forms of writing. I went to the Kimbell Art Museum, taking advantage of Fort Worth’s treasures to sit and marvel at the works in front of me. I took a long break from formal analysis of a piece to examine instead how it made me feel and create at times fictional narratives surrounding the subject matter or artist intentions.

In revision, I was confronted with making tough decisions that seemed so small but had so much impact. For example, I constantly had to work on my punctuation and line breaks as improvement of these technical skills made my writing significantly better. It was difficult to analyze poetry in these terms and challenged my initial perception of poetry. I was able to tap into spoken word to edit and put myself in a reader’s shoes.

Working with Alex Lemon was an experience I will be forever grateful for. He guided me out of my comfort zone to create something I am proud of, he reassured me in times of writer’s block, and he inspired me through constant dedication to his work and mine. Writing *A Reflection on Family* was certainly not easy, but in the process, I learned about myself and my relationships. I even formed a brand new identity as a writer, which I will be forever grateful for.

*A Reflection on Family*

On an iceberg,  
my body stands frozen.  
I am nothing  
new, I am a materialization  
of a worn-out promise.

Snowcapped mountains loom,  
assurances whispered in the twilight.  
And there lies me, twisted in bed sheets,  
room trimmed with empty bottles,  
a product of snapped soul ties.

Below me, black waves surge and rage,  
Willing me to writhe for air.  
But I long for water to fill every crevice, to give me  
an answer, why I gave myself away at eighteen.

My mother always told me to fear the sun,  
fear weathered skin, show no signs of breath.  
Your strength is conditional,  
fragile to light.  
A wise woman cannot afford  
to show too much.

I might dissipate into blackness  
where the waves await me.  
Will thrashing my limbs  
only sink me deeper,  
rid me of the nothing that consumes me?

My father's gloom and bruises  
turned my skin blue.  
I wonder, will my icy frame take his arm  
out of the fire?

My armor bears no weight  
against the sea,  
its glimmer will turn to ash.  
My grandmother's weathered skin showed she knew  
darkness, but she knew the sun, too.

*september*

we lie under starless black skies,  
mourning for the living.

and only for a moment, i wake and think  
a bandit stole my sorrow.

it returned quickly and without question,  
running like water through my fingertips.

i stare into my own eyes,  
two shells where my tears used to fall.

my cheeks once rosy and hot to the touch,  
sag coldly beneath a lifeless gaze.

september has broken my bones,  
nestled in my cracked ribs and made

my body its home to haunt.

### *Hollowed*

Write about me, she said.  
 Dim wavering candlelight & coral glossy lips  
 Curls of apricot coupled with an earthward gaze  
 Midnight hours of vodka

Dim wavering candlelight & coral glossy lips  
 I was stolen from her by a lover  
 Midnight hours of vodka  
 What is it she wanted me to write?

I was stolen from her by a lover  
 I watched her limber legs  
 What is it she wanted me to write?  
 Wither to strings

I watched her limber legs  
 Anxious to be someone's puppet  
 Wither to strings  
 She drove in coils

Anxious to be someone's puppet  
 Kiss of a wasteful glance  
 She drove in coils  
 Someone she only knew in the blackness

Kiss of a wasteful glance  
 Each freezing hour hunger writhes  
 Someone she only knew in the blackness  
 In her hollowed stomach

Each freezing hour hunger writhes  
 She yearned for tendrils of December  
 In her hollowed stomach  
 White coat refuge

She yearned for tendrils of December  
 Stuffed with rocks on weighing day  
 White coat refuge  
 Sanctuaried in the snow

Stuffed with rocks on weighing day  
 She melts into the crystal white  
 Sanctuaried in the snow  
 Write about me, she said.

## *Grief*

is everything,                      everywhere,                      *all at once*  
 it's your hair tie getting stuck in your hair,                      *(your mom isn't there to help)*  
 it's a flat tire,  
 it's grandma caught a cold  
  
 grief is ladybugs landing next to your tears,                      *(orange or red?)*  
 it's side hugs and i'm-here-for-yous,  
 long lines,  
 turbulence on a tiny jet.  
 it's a collapsed lung:  
  
 grief is nestled in the petals of handpicked flowers from fannin st.                      *(red)*  
 it's she's-in-a-better-place-nows,  
 a gold necklace with mary on it,  
  
 grief is running stop signs,  
 red eye flights,  
 that dream where your teeth fall out,  
 screaming in pillows,  
 screaming in open fields,  
 grief is remember-whens.  
  
 grief is some happy pills  
 a view of the ocean from your hotel room in                      the mOtHerLanD  
  
 grief is no dejes que te ganen,  
 quivering veiny hands with gold rings handing you a purple tin cup filled with soda,  
 socks with vick's vapo rub,  
 hermanas fighting over family recipes,  
 handmade tortillas,  
 sopita:  
  
 grief is scrutinizing the mirror to see if you share her features  
 noticing her favorite color on every sidewalk,  
 leaving a night light on in case she wants to visit...  
  
 she must be hiding,  
 "me voy a esconder!"  
  
 grief is seeing her same crinkled smile in your mother's brown eyes,  
 and realizing she and your sister have the same laugh.



*november*

maple leaves darken in the garden,  
and golden hues cast over leaves. a nightingale  
carries our last words to the shadows.

i'll stack twigs and let the light  
kiss the back of my knees,  
while i ache in secret.

i will sit by my frosted window,  
and wait for you to visit  
to turn my blue fingertips rosy.

the birch tree is always  
there but you are not,  
and my brittle bones will shiver  
until the first robin sings.

*idle*

i am going to pierce my ear  
because i can't seem to feel  
anything else.

it's christmas  
and i wonder  
how you're doing at home.

i am tired  
of fighting you  
in my sleep, waking up barefoot  
outside in the snow.

memories feel like thorns  
and that one night  
our final shared breaths  
was the first night i prayed.

i dreamt of stained-glass  
windows,  
rows of candles,  
and vaulted ceilings  
and you at the altar.

there are crimson apples

and gingerbread cookies  
in my kitchen and i think  
i might love you again.

*june*

It's late. I've come to find  
My wrists bleeding and bruised  
The bracelet my mother gave me  
Snapped in two.

I've come to find that the shoes off my feet  
Lie on opposite ends of the room  
Both with broken  
shoelaces, and bite marks  
at the heels.

I can't give you enough land  
With unending pastures of green,  
And a willow tree whose leaves dip  
Hesitantly into the lake below.

I can't give you enough land  
With a cottage to rest your tired celestial eyes,  
Or any sheep to herd.

But I'll let you nip my heels,  
I'll let you fall asleep  
Chewing my tired hands

For what I can give you,  
Is all I have.

*july*

crisp air floods my lungs &  
shoots waves of starry breaths  
that feel like renewal.  
I am free, born again until  
I think of my father  
heaving for air as he slept,  
my mother's hallowed eyes,  
with resentment growing like weeds in her chest  
for now, I am lost  
cool dark mud envelops  
my toes  
so I shower myself in dandelions &  
travel in circles  
arms flayed like winding branches  
leaves nestled in my hair  
crunched gravel and hiccupped laughs  
july skies remind me I can *be*

## After Watching Greta Gerwig's Little Women, I Put on My Glasses

Years and months went by before I realized you're supposed  
 To see the leaves on the trees from the window  
 To see the outlines of bricks on neighbors' small houses  
 To see the eyes, lips, and ears of those not too far away

I never knew        the comfort in the world        was in the details of the leaves  
Or that I was missing        bugs on petals of flowers  
I want to be alone        to look at the stars        to catch Venus without rays of light  
Shooting like blurry fingers at every reflection,        to see the stars next to the moon

Something I never noticed Until I had two frames resting  
On my nose, that the moon never changes her face  
Something static and sad shines on me in the twilight  
She can hold the world and still be lonely, far away, grieving

She can spin and be sad and be light and be hidden  
 Jo can write and be angry and alone and happy  
 Laurie can be hopeless and drunk and in love with Amy  
 Beth can be young and shy and sick and alive

### *Birdwatching*

The fiery bench my legs are planted on will brand me with a pattern  
The sun beats down on my left arm, slap and sting

The shadow of a dragonfly rushes across the sidewalk and reminds me  
To look up, he circles above my head like a halo

Muffled voices, boisterous laughter  
Sometimes I wonder what it would feel like to belong here,  
and if anyone really knows what it is to really belong

Another dragonfly rushes across the sidewalk  
They circle each other, greetings of beating wings  
“Birdwatching?” a passerby questions  
“Something like that.”

Is writing *anything* like that?

Southern magnolias sway slightly, dancers as they celebrate  
The wistful breeze  
Birds hop from tree to tree

Clouds glide quickly, their linings illuminated gold  
A helicopter flashes red lights, and darts across the sky  
Whizzing and whizzing, farther it recedes  
Hurtle me across the sky, what would it feel like  
To be that helicopter

My keyboard turns to fire, I’m gliding my fingertips  
Across a roaring flame

A locust flicks the leaves with its wings  
The people under the leaves scatter  
The power of a little thing with wings

A wind brings us a shiver,  
And the birds a push  
A plane glides in the starless blue  
Hides behind the clouds

Only sometimes, maybe always  
I wish I could too.

## *Mother, Sun Woman*

I dreamt my sister's whisper,  
                                "It's so dark in here.  
                                It's like we are the moon and the stars."  
We wished to be farther away,  
                                Drowned in one-sided screams,

## Hiding under hanging clothes

*They are the fiery and raging sun,  
                        those who did their best, shattered us  
                        I spun across the interstate, though I don't remember it.*

We are Icarus

*Don't* get too close.

with clipped wings.

I imagined the white plastic rosary  
Hanging from my car mirror  
flinging and tearing through my terror.  
and the clouds creating a milky way  
shelter.

A divine force that kept me from straying too far.  
I spun across the interstate, though I don't remember it.

We are the moon and the stars.

But not too much. Jesus saves, the sun woman said.

*Some* doubt is healthy.

Mother is about to combust,  
 Skin sizzling in a sweltering flare, she asks:  
*How could you make a mistake like this?*

I wait for the detonation.  
 The motherly explosion  
 I am always a burning constellation protected by the moon  
 I spun across the interstate, though I don't remember it.



***Gentileschi's Susanna***

*“And we have not yet heard enough, if anything, about the female gaze. About the scorch of it, with the eyes staying in the head” -Maggie Nelson, Bluets*

At the age of seventeen, Artemisia Gentileschi painted  
her own Susanna.

She sits in front of a stone wall with etched foliage,  
ashen shawl shielding her upper thigh,  
Torqued from the bearded creatures who seek to own her body.

Her auburn curls drape her waist as her eyes pierce the floor,  
but she does not wish to shield her anguish from her captors.  
Instead, she shields them from the sear of her eyes.

*Antonio*

Starred nights speckled like jewels  
Reflected in the blackness of the sea,  
And perhaps, a piece of my heart was left in the wreck  
Where I discovered my once beloved  
Sebastian

Bodies intertwined, the tears of his mourning,  
For Viola  
Dampened my sun-weathered cheeks  
Quenching their thirst  
The heat stripped away

I wished these nights would be endless  
How content I could live with my Sebastian  
Coast to coast, fiery days and steel blue nights  
He knew me, every crevice of my skin

Wind rustled his curled coppered hair  
Pieces of seashells speckled at his feet  
Tattered rags on his back, he sang  
A song for his lost sister

A part of me knew when I dragged  
His lifeless frame  
From the sea, surrounded  
With wreckage, a ship broken under nature  
That he was my buried treasure

And treasure him I would,  
Treasure diamond nights  
And interlocked limbs  
Treasured, my Sebastian  
And for him I would live

*Galatea*

They say beauty is in the eye of the beholder

Oh Neptune, why do you behold *me*?

I only wish

a simple life

of plain fields and oak trees

skipping pebbles in shimmering water

water that I watch rise every season

townspeople shake and bow at the pillars of the temple

white marble with rivers gray and brown

Each year I grow in numbers

Knowing my day

where I must give myself to Neptune

Will come,

A sacrifice I have no desire to make

Not for Neptune, no

I travel to the village, my radiance warding off Agar

But it is my blood that he desires

My blood that will save

And even if I am not the one Neptune desires,

What will my life be?

I refuse to resign myself

To anyone but myself, in the hands of my father for too long

I want to be where orange trees blossom

And gold leaves decorate porch steps

And sea breeze air swirls through windows

And I do not belong to anyone,

not to my father

Not to Neptune

not to Agar

not to any man

And amid my despair, that is when my father handed me trousers and boots,

“He will not take you this year, my only daughter, not this year”

*Viola*

My name, unlike Desdemona's, means violet, or flower  
Both of which I am not, not as Cesario  
I am only a flower with Sebastian as my stem  
My counterpart, my stem, my foundation  
Without him, without a father, without a husband, I am nothing  
I am nothing, I am weak, a woman with no one to vouch for me  
I have no time to mourn my dear brother  
Only to fend for myself on this island where I know not a soul  
Not a soul, but mine own  
Whose I am abandoning to ensure a life for myself  
Today, every day until never, I am Cesario  
And yet, how could I not admit, my love for Olivia comes not from Cesario,  
But from Viola?  
My Olivia, my Olivia  
Take my twin brother instead of me  
We could never grow together, not here  
But elsewhere, in another land,  
Olivia and Viola could be twin flames  
Maimed by our desire, not approved by the rest  
For now, I will pretend, as I have been, as many women do  
To love Orsino, until Olivia and I can meet again

*Not*

*Just a Woman*

LAURIE  
Hello Amy!

AMY  
([REDACTED] turning around)  
I [REDACTED] want to see you

LAURIE

oh, [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

AMY

(still [REDACTED] turning)  
[REDACTED] drinking  
/again?

LAURIE

/Only a little, [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

AMY

[REDACTED] do it.

LAURIE

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] Raphaella?

AMY

(finally turning)  
Never.

[REDACTED] ashen worry [REDACTED]

LAURIE

what [REDACTED]

AMY

(grim)  
I'm a failure. Jo is in New York,  
being a writer, [REDACTED]

LAURIE  
That's quite a statement [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

AMY  
Rome took [REDACTED] me.  
[REDACTED] Paris made me [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

LAURIE  
[REDACTED] so much  
[REDACTED] energy.

AMY  
Talent [REDACTED], [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] can make it [REDACTED]. I want to  
[REDACTED] nothing. I won't be [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

Laurie watches her and then says conspiratorially:

LAURIE  
what women are allowed [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] anyway?

AMY  
The Brontes?

LAURIE  
[REDACTED]?

AMY  
I [REDACTED].

LAURIE  
[REDACTED] genius?

AMY  
well, men, I suppose.

LAURIE  
[REDACTED] cutting down [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

AMY  
That's [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] better.

LAURIE  
Do you though? Feel better?

AMY  
I [REDACTED] female, I'm  
a middling talent.

LAURIE  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] be of me?

Amy laughs.

AMY  
All right.

LAURIE  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED], what are  
you going to do [REDACTED]

AMY  
[REDACTED] be  
an ornament to society.



LAURIE  
Here is where Fred Vaughn comes in,  
[REDACTED]

AMY  
Don't [REDACTED]  
LAURIE  
(laughing)  
/I'm not!

LAURIE  
You are not engaged, I hope?

AMY  
No...

LAURIE  
[REDACTED] if he goes down  
properly on one knee?

AMY  
Most likely [REDACTED]

AMY  
[REDACTED] richer than you, even.

LAURIE  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
your mother's girls.

AMY  
I've always known that I would  
marry rich. why should I be ashamed  
of that?

LAURIE  
There is nothing [REDACTED],  
[REDACTED] you love him.

AMY  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] love, [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] just happens to a  
person.

LAURIE  
I think the poets might [REDACTED] agree.

AMY  
well. I'm [REDACTED] a poet, I'm [REDACTED] a  
woman. [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

AMY (CONT'D)  
Even if I had my own money,

property. So don't sit there  
and tell me that marriage  
isn't an economic proposition,  
because it is.

for me.

The sound of a carriage approaching,


AMY  
That will be  
now. (to  
Laurie)

look all right?

Laurie looks at her,

LAURIE  
You look beautiful. You  
are...beautiful.

runs  
off. From the top of the staircase, Laurie

looks ather and Fred embrace,   
*Patroclus*

“The man I loved beyond all other comrades,  
Loved as my own life”  
My own life tormented and blue,  
I sail with the sea breeze wind

Ivory skin spotted with diamonds  
Splattered with dirt  
He carried me out of the cave  
Strung his mother’s harp

I brandish my spear and my body twists with ease  
Eyes tainted cerulean  
He would know me even in madness  
I just want to know, did the love affair maim you, too?

*Frida,*

Did you ever think  
Your notebook doodles would be hung on display? Diego, diego, diego.  
For queues of people to wander and marvel that you were once a teenager, too?

Just like us, just like me.

Two versions of you exist,  
Both hearts  
Exposed and pumping and throbbing and violently wishing you had more to give.

Did you know the moment he became your third eye?  
Did you wake up one day,  
And realize you saw and decided and lived  
With his face planted between your eyes?

Just like us, just like me.

Con amor,  
Nosotros

## Where You Left Me

From James Van Der Zee, *Harlem Store Front*, 1934

did you mean  
what you said in front  
of the luncheonette?

can you tell me the truth? because  
my mind keeps flashing to me standing there,  
in the cold foggy mist of that morning,

and the tree limbs from across the street are blurry in my teary eyes  
and they look like wet fingers  
and they're coming for me, i know it  
and i wish they would grab me  
and bring me into their woolly green hair  
and i'd never have to leave,  
i'd be safe there in the fingers of those trees.

men in caps whistle, glide  
past me  
women and babies laugh and chatter,  
past me  
and i'm still as a statue,  
in my heels and skirt  
i wore just to meet you.

is this how i'll remember us? how i'll remember you?  
fancy shoes walking away from me,  
the sulphur sun  
dropping beads of sweat on my forehead

i think i'll stay here, where you left me,  
and wait for those trees to gather me up  
and swallow me whole.

and maybe i'll hear the clicks of your heels from above  
this city and know it's you,  
coming back for me.

maybe i'll be wild wild wild  
in these trees  
where no one can find me, and maybe that's  
madness  
or maybe  
that's freedom

***On That Celestial Shore***  
From James Van Der Zee, *Untitled*, 1939

It *wasn't* like a flower though,  
Can't you see it in my eyes?

I *didn't* fall over  
or under you  
or on top of you  
or choose to stand over you like this.

I did not *fall* in love  
I *rose* in love

I planted my feet in your humble beginnings  
*Rose*  
From my own ashes  
And tell me,  
Will you always cover me in  
Roses?

I *watched* you crumble,  
And I can't wait to meet you again.

*New.*  
renewed.  
restored.  
*New.*

Because won't we be *free*, then?  
On that celestial shore beyond the sky?

*Security*

From James Van Der Zee, *Couple*, Harlem, 1932

This city, this city  
Spun me and spins me  
I am on no track of my own.  
Trapped.

His-and-hers raccoon coats,  
I want my baby back.  
Trapped.

Take this v-16 and run it in to the water,  
I want my baby back.  
Trapped.

Take this coat and burn it  
I'll live naked in the woods  
Wild.

Spun no longer,  
I don't crave young love.  
Wild.

I'm hungry no longer,  
In the woods.  
Wild.



*An Ode to Driving*

i used to dread  
tedious  
deflated  
West Texas  
lands  
constraining  
my eyes  
locked shut  
praying  
the blackness  
would stifle  
long hours of George Strait  
and the hunger pains  
in my stomach  
unsatisfied  
with salt  
the muffle of my dad's  
hums quieted  
my restless legs  
craving  
the horizontal  
i only wished  
i talked more  
slept less  
listened more  
on these  
lingering  
drives  
one more  
humdrum drive  
i miss the boring  
i miss the deflated  
i drive  
alone  
tumor robbed  
his hums  
tumor robbed  
his eyes  
tumor robbed  
his drives  
our drives  
just me  
i drive alone

no windmills  
i drive alone  
no cotton fields  
i drive alone  
no ostrisch boots  
imagine  
my younger self  
i wish i could tell her  
savor the company  
you will drive alone  
you will force  
floods  
of remembrance  
of regret  
a piece of his old self  
with me  
on these drives  
eyes radiant  
for his west texas  
home  
i drive  
to see his depleted  
self  
joyful knowing  
he is here  
driving  
like we used to  
it's strange  
grieving  
someone  
who still exists  
in this earthly realm  
breathing  
eyes less radiant  
hums less lively  
hole of a bullet  
under his heart  
but still  
i drive  
i do what he  
wishes he still could

*self-portrait as a chewed piece of gum*

sure, i wanted to live  
     forever  
 and maybe i do  
                                     but chewed and dried out

sure, i think there  
     might be a part of me  
 that knew my resting place  
                                     would be on a sidewalk

grasping  
     for change  
 i cling to a sole  
                                     of a boot

or under a desk  
     cold fingertips' light press  
 to be swung back,  
                                     ripped off

i am no longer wanted  
     no longer  
 of use  
                                     no longer

fresh  
     no longer  
 even a last-minute resort  
                                     *no longer*

I think back to when  
     I saw  
 love  
                                     she was little

“mommy I don’t want this anymore”  
     I knew she was talking about me  
 “give it to me sweetie” I left  
                                     my warm home

to a cold  
     hand  
 palm

snapped dark

i think that's what love  
was  
holding me when

i was ugly chewed drying out

so i sit  
and wait  
for fingertips

or a sole