



THE ART FORM THAT KEEPS OPENING AND OPENING: POETRY AS A WAY OF KNOWING

Carrie Sweeney
Villanova University
HUM 6500 - Dr. Tomko
Spring 2022

“A poem, if it’s a real one, in some fundamental sense means no more and no less than the moment of its singular music and lightning insight; it is its own code to its own absolute and irreducible clarity. A god, if it’s a living one, is not outside of reality but in it, of it, though in ways it takes patience and imagination to perceive.”

- Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss*

Table of Contents

Introduction

Dear Reader	4
About the Author (Invitation)	5

Movement I: Human Person

Welcome	6
Mirror Mist	7
Red Eyes	8
Monday Morning	9
Someone else's obituary	10
Lighthouse	11

Movement II: Society

The Everyman's Apocalypse	13
Running Away	15
Windows, Doors, and Mirrors	16
Flowers in Concrete	17
The Courage to Converse	18
Serenity	19
Ivy Joy	20

Movement III: World

Palimpsest	22
Pesante	22
Pentimento	23
Profile	26
The Vulture	27
Mulberry Jam	29
Takumi dreams of freedom	30

Movement IV: God

Chasm	32
Champagne Toast	33

Everything is of the sun	34
A Sweet Amen	36
Paper Plane	38
The Porch Prayer	39
Radical Light	40
Silver Shovel	41

Movement V: Love

The Story	42
Judy	43
To watch the artist deep in craft	44
Lucy	45
Yellow Flowers	46
Encountering beauty	47
To My Grandmother (Yesterday)	48
To My Younger Sister (Today)	48

Reflections & Poetic Commentary

Reflection on the Human Person	49
Reflection on Society	50
Reflection on the World	54
Reflection on God	57
Reflection on Love	60

Conclusion: The Power of Poesy

63

Works Cited

65

INTRODUCTION

“This is not a journey for the feet...you must close the eyes and call instead upon another vision which is to be waked within you, the birth-right of all, which few turn to use.”

- Plotinus, *Ennead 1.6.8, “On Love”*

Dear Reader,

In a reflection on the process of composing his piece “From a Window,” poet Christian Wiman comments, “I wrote the poem one day out of anguish, emptiness, grief- and it exploded into joy.” Wiman continues, “I sought refuge in the half-conscious play of language and was rescued by a weave of meaning I never meant to make.” (Wiman, *My Bright Abyss* 58). In many ways, I hope I wove together meaning that I never meant to make, too. I hope this collection explodes into joy, digs into grief, leans into strength, and urges you to question your own life in connection to mine, and in conversation with the thinkers, educators, philosophers, and theologians who anchor it. This project holds the atomic precision of my own experiences, and attempts to rationalize the irrationalities of human life. This collection centers little epiphanies that illuminate, and the broader strokes of “lightning insight” that strike when utilizing art to encounter the divine (Wiman 89).

This collection is partitioned into five sections that confront major questions about existence in this cosmos, in terms of the Human Person, Society, World, God, and Love. Each section is inspired by the essential questions of the “Gateway Courses” of the Humanities Department at Villanova University, guiding the individual through active contemplation and questioning of their space within the world. If the poems in this collection are to function well, they will individually call the reader out of themselves and into a deeper understanding of beauty, in conversation with each of these big-picture questions. Each poem has a zoom-in-zoom-out function, identifying the minute details of the things we interact with on a

daily basis, while also addressing some sort of big-picture question about what it means to exist in the universe. There are very few straightforward one-to-one metaphors and similes; most analogies drawn are up to the reader to interpret and fit into the “jigsaws” of their own lives. In the most authentic way that my little voice can muster, these poems confront personal experiences, give life to imagined narratives, and seek to cast the world in new light. Thank you for your participation, and for allowing my heart’s work to be received into another.

CS, 2022

About the Author (Invitation)

What wholes me is not just One thing
but many,
as am I:
Light sensitive sunshine lover,
Silent singer,
Forgetful rememberer,
Stagefright actress,
Sleepless dreamer,
Old-souled child,
Teaching learner.

as I wrote this poem
(or am writing it now)
I am all of these

and who, Dear One, are you?

I. Human Person

“We study human behavior, we must not disregard human bewilderment.”

- Abraham J. Heschel, *Who is Man?*

Welcome

A pinch at the skin
As a hand strokes her chin
A wail and a wait
A bed bursts through the gate

A fear deeply sewn
A sob and a moan
A bleat and a scratch
Begging sweetness to hatch

A tear and a kick
And a “this will be quick!”
A twist and a cry
And another one, high:

A new life to hold
Blinks awake in the cold
A sigh and a song,
New voice wails along

Tired eyes open wide
The room swells, while outside:
Nervous wrecks, bouncing knees
A door swings, and they freeze

Through the thick and the foam:
“She has come. Welcome home.”

Mirror Mist

Wherever you go, you need to know that I love you.
 That's why, at six years old
 I'd grab a mechanical pencil—
 the kind you used for morning newspaper crossword puzzles—
 And etch a note into the tippy-top corner
 of the comics page I pretended to read while you worked.
 "I love you!"

And below,
 I'd sign my name
 As if you didn't know.
 As if you didn't read *The Rainbow Fish* to me every night before bed.
 As if you didn't crochet yellow blankets when I came to your house (my favorite color).
 As if you didn't tuck Mickey Mouse-shaped lollipops into the candy drawer when I arrived.

I'd sit across the kitchen table and drink my orange juice (with pulp!) from the glass that
 squeaked when you ran your fingers against it
 And I'd wait for you to return from the fridge with apricot jam
 So you could look down and smile the smile my friends say I have now
 And say you loved me, too.
 Wherever you go, you need to know, in case you forget from room-to-room.
 Because sometimes I did!

That's why I'd let steam fog up the mirror as I dripped bathwater on the bathroom floor
 And I'd write my name, and then a heart, and then my name for you
 I'd dress and sit in the playroom, waiting
 for you to call me in to clean the lint filter
 So you could walk into the hot mist and smile,
 wrap me up in a fresh-out-of-the-dryer topsheet,
 and remind me that you would— *could*— never forget.

Wherever you are now, you need to know that I love you.
 I don't write it on mirrors or newspaper folds
 but I'm writing it now.

I write it with every canvas I paint
 every student I teach
 every stanza I breathe
 Wherever I go, I love you, for you first loved me.

Red Eyes

A ceiling of stars
A “no smoking” sign
And gray leather seats that pretend to recline

An aerial map
On a seatback TV
In an aircraft that idles above a vast sea

The shades are all drawn,
The passengers sleep,
They’ve got places to go and stories to keep

And baggage to claim,
Connections to miss
So we rest, or stare into the clouded abyss

Lugging hearts that we know
Into lands that we don’t
And we pack books to read, full knowing we won’t

Our spot in the clouds
Is a wrinkle in time
As old clocks strike forward and rhythms align

An unlikely steel bird
Glides silently on
Until worlds we once called our own are forgone

So we napkin-jot thoughts
As we search for new light
And we count down the hours (still three left in this flight)

Monday Morning

Palms facing upwards, I stretch to the skies
My hands meet a cupboard, my ears greet its squeal
My knees on the counter (can't reach otherwise)
And my flesh meets fresh cloth, I know it by feel

The plates caked in crumbs, the bowls stacked in threes
Modulations of muscle know well their small tasks.
Cultivation sets pure contemplation at ease,
And breakfast is served before anyone asks.

With stumbling steps down the carpeted hall
And wrists rubbing eyes and the "pass around" yawn,
The children stretch out and make themselves tall
As the day rushes in, just an hour trailing dawn.

The rimmed plate for Katy, the pink cup for Jess,
Extra butter for Mom, and Dad's margarine,
Thomas' sippy and Caroline's mess,
All soon spill in the kitchen as morning begins.

Guests often jump at the loud pantry door
Screech-swinging open, though we've greased it before
Or might catch a toe on that part of the floor,
But we step around, dance the dance of our chores.

We still snark and offend, we bend and we snap
Our family jigsaw isn't always a fit.
We blame others for the unluck in our lap,
Our fabric of life was a first-timer's knit.

But we lean in to clean up, support when it's hard.
When glasses snag corners and break on the ground,
We freeze as they sprawl out in sparkling shards,
Then all rush to sweep, or whoever's around.

Someone else's obituary

My father's father has been dead
Since just a week before my birth.
I knew him not, but I have read,
His diaries, for what it's worth.

I have his wit, or so I'm told,
His stature, poise, and love of Brahams.
When Dad and I laugh uncontrolled,
That wheezing sound was Grandpa Tom's.

I searched his name up, curious
About the year he chose to marry
(A celebration I had missed)
But instead of his obituary:

I found a someone *else's* Tom,
Died younger, recent, farther, fresh
Another life, a different mom,
The same name stretched on distant flesh.

Another story, far from mine
That bears a name that knows my heart
Two different graves, a stolen shrine,
One ghostly consciousness apart.

A Google search is all it takes
For pens to mark our numbered days.
This life revolves in funny ways,
A moment's foot will slam the breaks.

Digging up forgotten fame
Won't bring about much glory.
You might find someone *else's* name
At best. At worst, *memento mori*.

Lighthouse

I landed too late. She stopped making sense.
Relief and deep envy at war
Though still she was with us, the grief was immense,
Puffy eyes studied lines on the floor.

She was paler and milder, plainer and wilder,
Swollen, ballooning, and weak
Purple veins poked and wounded, fluids pumping inside her
Metal imprints on skin, poison's streaks.

Sitting up, still composed, her eyes open (or closed?)
Her fingers traced hems in her dress
It was time, no one said it, but no one opposed
A betrayal, a rescue, a "yes."

Time froze in our hands, the pain wouldn't budge
We froze too, in uncomfortable seats.
We squinted and blinked, couldn't see through the smudge
Of the clouds that hung over in the suite.

I envisioned her happier, she laughed and we smiled
And wouldn't let tragedy win
Life course now complete, a grandmother and child
Reaching out, grabbing hands, pulled us in.

We collapsed in a clunky and unbalanced hug,
Lanky limbs intertwining and bending
She extended her arms and we answered the tug,
Amist aching: an interim mending.

The hospital atmosphere draped like a veil
Mourning's odd morningtime undulations
She was ready, but numbed to what this would entail
By sweet chemical's stale consolation.

But for the one being called, the course had been set
It wasn't a fear she was facing.
We hold on with strength and try not to forget
That *we* were the only ones bracing

Each pupil consoled, affirmed, and embraced,
Formation and love in each breath,
Her life's metronome, so evenly paced,
Paged an ending that wasn't a death.

The shadows and lightness of life were upon me
I smiled, but flicked off a tear.
She looked at my face, but her gaze was beyond me
And all that she said was, "You're here!"

II. Society

“Tradition is not handed down simply in words. It is handed down in institutions and practices within society (all of which of course involve words). Our critical reception of the tradition is not, then, simply a matter of changing our words and ideas but of changing fundamental structures of human living.”

- Herbert McCabe, *The Good Life*

The Everyman’s Apocalypse

On the block on South Broadway in Baltimore
between the Spanish church and the vegan restaurant
There used to be a concert hall
Where traveling orchestras unloaded cargo vans,
steamed their white button-down shirts and silky blouses,
Ready to tune to the click of the traffic light
and play the world back to itself
Ready to perform for an audience of button-downs and blouses

But a century ago,
they tore it down

They tore it down to build a barber shop
Where men with peach skin
Closed their eyes to the buzz of metal behind their ears
Laughing together, telling stories of toddlers tumbling around on shag rugs
and waving teens goodbye as they sputtered off in Ford Thunderbirds
And the peach skin men walked home,
cleaner than before, if you can imagine it

But the barber pole spun itself out of light
and scattered the last of its dim red, white, and blue
Into the nothingness of a November night

They tore the leather seats out
To build a preschool
For the tumbling toddlers that grew up
and enrolled tiny tumblers of their own

Making fun of the haircuts that used to walk out the double-doors
while watching their children slap crawling hands on the puzzlemat floor,
pressing fleshy palms against the bending walls of the playpen

But a decade ago, they tore the preschool down, too,
Leaving a shamble of gray slabs of rock and the powder dust that the breaking left

The block on South Broadway now crawls with rats
and people scurry by,
as the very same rats
tunnel beneath their apartment buildings.

Running Away

I miss the joyful pull
Of the urge to run away.
Your sack is packed, your heart is full,
Escape an act of play.

You find a mystic world,
Swear Neverland your fate.
You watch your fantasy uncurl
In stories you create.

But then, the stories change,
And life leaves you instead.
Imagination runs away,
Leaves numbers in your head.

Windows, Doors, and Mirrors

A plastic window in a room too still
And shards of glass on the windowsill
Splintered wood and a broken lock
A child's face and a dainty knock:
Please won't you move these plastic boards?
There's an older me I'm living towards
That I can't quite see through the shattered mess
Of the world (I'm told) I can't possess.
She would love to see her face, not yours
In the mirrored hall, free of wooden doors
And windows that look out, not in
And books that tug young hair and skin.

Flowers in Concrete

Where fertilized fields of daffodils sway about
Soaked in sunshine, soil and mineral life
They dance in meadows untouched by storm or drought,
Those carbon copied petals evading strife!

But seeds of truth are harder still to sow
When clouds roll in and poison fields with deceit
We suffocate roots and yet ask flowers to grow
Instead of gifting Earth, we plant concrete.

As vegetation wilts beneath our soles
There is no “neutral” stance to shift the blame;
Every foot that paves the path controls
Which flowers get to sing and which we maim.

We’re slow to sit in silence, and quick to rise to power:
We let our own close-mindedness trample blooming flowers.

The Courage to Converse

Fruitful, youthful, full of awe
We wonder at this world:
Shiny, shimmering, glazed with grace
And kinship, bright and pearled.

Clicking, tapping, deep in thought,
Those humming human lives
Share stories (but to *tell* not *hear*)
That stack in old archives.

We spurn the tales unlike our own,
Ignoring ignorant insolence.
But what if we sat back instead?
Observed without defense?

Irritation, at its best
Can be congealed in ardor.
But at its worst, blockades true trust
And makes conversing harder.

Were we to *hear* instead of *speak*,
Then maybe we'd learn of
Those worlds anew, unknown, and real;
To know in full is love.

We worry when attention's sparse,
Our fleeting fame endangered.
But no such thing as foes exist,
Only friends or strangers.

For once we learn to listen well,
We leave no talk unphased.
Embrace, accept, receive, and grow,
Prepare to be amazed.

Serenity

You purse your lips
Let anger slip
You know it well, you're well equipped

Control your air
Tuck in your chair
Don't meddle in the kids' affairs

You know too well
You can raise hell
But purse your lips when Journi yells

You block the noise,
Protect your toys,
You roll your eyes, prank the boys

You belly-laugh
And hug the staff
And color-code your graphs

You want to play
But no one will
Preoccupied with notes and bills

You're sweet and young and mild and free
But more mature than you should be.

Ivy Joy

Reckless and teeming and overflowing,
You run without a sign of slowing.
The lights are green behind your eyes,
You're full of life, to their surprise-
You don't let sorrow tarry long,
And fill our lives with handshake-song.
Consoling peers, supporting staff,
The gray stone halls broadcast your laugh.
Your head pops in, you say hello
To friends you do and do not know.
You comfort all when anguish bites
But fear fists not, and fight your fights.
You bear your soul, admit mistakes,
You dog-ear books with jewel-eyed snakes.
My only wish: to give you room
To let the rose you planted bloom.
You call me back through how you play,
Remind me why I'm here each day.

When battered walls of stone collapse,
Sweet Ivy grows into the gaps.

Let it begin with me

The peace resounding in the new
is hope like hope we never knew
When hope was all we had.
Today, our hope becomes a choice, and not a moment's fad

So let this strength begin with me,
And stop not where I end
But carry on through shining sea
And hearts that long to mend.

We call for the words that ignite and not ignore
To dig into solutions, not calculations
To embrace the past, but repair its faults before
We learn to grow and guide from devastation

Until each freedom comes without expected expiration
And until "us" fights for "them"
We stand, a state of chaos, not a nation
But justice isn't "how," but "will?" and "when."

III. World

“For God has established these laws in such a marvelous way that even if... [it] sets up no order or proportion within it but composes from it a chaos as confused and muddled as any the poets could describe, the laws of nature are sufficient to cause the parts of this chaos to disentangle themselves and arrange themselves in such good order that they will have the form of a quite perfect world- a world in which we shall be able to see not only light bt also all the other things, general as well as particular, which appear in the real world.”

- Rene Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy*

Palimpsest

Shaking and scrapping, part by part,
It tells of time, this art upon art

Pesante

Paintbrushes, canvases, slop sinks and clay:
The shrapnels and shards of mosaic we lay
Sweet silver hands coil around amber flame
Twisting brass, melting glass, finding shape, giving name
Clutching the violet and rose from the sky
Squeezing blooddrops of sun: dyes the flesh, lets it dry
Smear crimson clouds, sponge stolen stars
Sweep the sticks off the floor, rattle planets in jars
Shifting blush to magenta, golden to coke
Scrambling to know the sunrise, stroke by stroke
“Slow down,” others say, “there comes one each morn.”
“You’ll miss breakfast,” they whine, “Time is wasting,” they warn
But here, time’s on our side, the ticking sticks fall
The mirrors draw nearer, reflections stretch tall
Small returns, novel quests, frozen bells, golden rings
Lowered down by the morning, the brightness it brings
When “daybreak” has “broken,” we let down and sigh
Filled with sorrow we burrowed and joy yet to cry
Restoring the valor that blindness erodes
Each day, the day doesn’t break, but explodes.

Pentimento*Mont Sainte Victoire, March 2019*

I waited for the film to fade
 The plane lurched up, but mountain stayed
 Suspended there, the fount of trial
 Three hundred stories, sixteen miles
 The air was clear, the morning fresh
 But mountain stayed in cramping flesh
 The soreness burrowed deep inside
 Tucked itself in every stride
 Refiring muscle, reminding nerve
 Inflaming aching well-deserved
 My mind forgets, but form re-feels
 In ulcerated, abscessed peels
 In tautened tendons, racing skin
 When we stretch out, the world burns in

We rose at daybreak, eyelids sagged
 Our final dawn, our used clothes bagged
 I stuffed twelve Euro in my shoe,
 We left with one thing left to do

The bus was stale, the air was still
 The engine growled and fussed uphill
 The seats were full, we had to stand
 I held the map, you clutched my hand
 As we approached, the mountain grew,
 The base town soon swelled into view
 We signaled stop, slipped down the aisle
 The driver raised a brow and smiled
 But we pushed le rouge too premature
 Our route was long lost, we were sure.

Victoire fluttered mammoth eyes,
 Our trail beyond the wood's disguise
 We paced throughout the sleepy town
 Found an ambler, waved her down
 You sputtered French, she gave advice
 She reiterated *something* twice,

Eyes wide, she gave my hand a tap
You nodded, pulling out the map
You watched her lips, I watched you nod
You said “merci,” we “au revoir”ed
We twisted back to meet, and laughed
Plan A far gone, Plan C in draft
Avoid the yellow, chase the red?
Or the other way around instead?
Sleepy bistros and quite the stroll
Between the hikers and their goal
Fingers traced the bright red lines
We launched, your guess as good as mine.

Our steps trudged on, the crest got clearer
But crystal loom became no nearer
The apex fought, and fought again
The bluff’s midpoint a sinking glen
An escalator stuck on loop
An ever-swinging hula hoop
My gaze fixed on the crags below
Noontime splintered winter’s glow
And glazing sun spun through the cloud
The dust kicked up, the beargrass bowed
The currents pricked sweat from our pores
The path split into many floors

The zenith of our climb had come,
Our faces wind-whipped, fingers numb
We strolled the final aisle’s track
To find the gleaming silver plaque
Beneath the pebbled, arching frame
That flagged the travelers as they came

Gaping from the overpass,
We peeked through Cezanne’s looking glass
Impressionism tore through its tarp
The hues were bold, the lines were sharp
The pentimento layers peeled
The edelweiss broke through the fields
Distant meadows claimed their stripes

The rotting canvased fruits now ripe
Hues too true for palette-terms,
Stain the art that life confirms
When sky had fallen, time was done
We climbed back down, we raced the sun
Delirious from heaven's daze
And muscles tense - oh how it weighs!

The vision slipped, I stood alone
The floors were tile, the walls were stone
The gallery walls all melted down
And calcified upon the ground
A hand stretched out and grazed my waist
The frames were back, my fields displaced
I'd tell you how, but I cannot:
I left it there, it left me not.

Profile

Wet color melts down the chimney,
momentary stalagmites of light flitting their proper shadows across the wall.
The walls are stone gray, but inside the hearth, they glow blood orange.
I want to frame it in light
So with the flash of a camera it stays in stillness forever, something to have and to hold

You turn your face to the violet night
tracing the veins of raindrop races down the window with your finger
I want to frame you in light
So I can give you back to you,
freer, lighter, knowing your shadows
as part of the stalactites on the wall and nothing more
I give you back, knowing your lightness and how the sunshine finds you, folds you, frames you,
reunites with you

Shadow is only lost light
And “lost” is temporary
Waiting for its moment of
“and found”
I barely have to adjust the lens to the shades you are.
You don’t stand on a mountain
or hang in a gallery
or stripe the sky with the blush of a morning
But this world looks good on you,
because it’s *in* you, too.

The foliage buckled,
The wolf stepped forth
“Go away” seated deep in the glare of *a thousand iron thorns*
Still, I waited.

This is the canopy.
Waiting for dying. Waiting for death. *My patience is a patience she can't understand.*

In time, these silly little squabbles of skin will know, too:
In time, they will tear and snap their own
And I will be summoned, more subtly than before

Because no one will want to clean up the mess.

Mulberry Jam

You might have thought she looked on with a smile,
But all the light was sucked out of the room
Providing spotlight to the blues and purples.
The wicker basket hidden in the darkness,
A jar of jam displaying fruit entombed.
Remembrance calling back a time of peace
Among the rows of dappled mulberry trees.
She'd gathered her mosaic: ruby, mauve;
A mess of color, vibrant, rich with life
The beads of deep magenta speckled leaves
That caught her eye and drew her fingers toward them
Began to fill her basket, stain her palms
Her steady hands content in patient practice.
Each branch had offered forth a gift of essence
That she had stolen, melted, molded, packaged,
And all so she could wrap and give it over.
The berries she so loved as being whole
Now mush against the walls of polished glass.

Takumi dreams of freedom

The light of night drips down,
Down the walls of the sky as the bright of day drinks it up

Up rises the octopus man, and with him, the day.

The orchestra tunes, as
Jiro (meaning second son) dreams of sushi, as
Takumi (meaning artisan, skillful, ocean, truth) shakes the sticky hand of his buyer.

Something slaps the surface of the water
And he watches the protesting tentacle float back down into the knots of crimson
Twisting back into the tangle of suckers and slip and slime
A ray of light slips through the gaps between tendrils, fragmenting as it touches deep-sea-dust,
brushing up against the smudges of marker strokes on pricetags, illuminating them.

The buyer points and Takumi flips through laminated pages,
Flags one.

Finally, the buyer smiles. This one, please.

Takumi plunges fist-first into the chill of the tank, immediately feels spirals winding up his
forearm, sucking and testing and tasting his bloodstream

He wraps his hands around the slick, bulbous middle of a coral-colored octopus,
and an ombre of deep red trickles
through its tentacles as he gingerly lifts it into morning air

The plastic bag hisses as he shakes it out with his free hand, air zipping through static and
forcing it open
He steadies as the spineless investigator coils around his arm
tighter, the chill of the air on textured papillae

And with confident, practiced, patient strokes,
he peels each tentacle off of his skin
Each sucker popping and snapping and wrestling to regrip
And scrapes it into the plastic bag

One by one,
One through eight,

and back to one again.

Sticking and plucking, pulling and sucking,
Patiently starting over and over and fighting the call of the sea

His buyer can't help his impatience
Tapping his watch and stooping to tie his shoe
(and then remembering he doesn't wear laces)

But Takumi smiles and shakes the creature, which forfeits and slides down his forearm,
Rustling the bag and stretching out the plastic where its weight rests.

A clink of change, an exchange of balance,
And the day continues.

A life well-lived, but not yet perfection.

IV. God

“[This is] what poetry has always suggested in hints, whispers, and shouts: that the poetic reality stands as an approach to God for the religious or a replacement for the unbeliever...[the] presentation of reality...ripples with a sense of rightness, a vibration at the proper frequency.”

- Thomas Foster, *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*

Chasm

Maybe you'll catch a glimmer of contour
Peering into the chasm of light
Blinding and stirring, shielding and blurring
it is depth, it is lack, it is height

Praying the prayer that opens all wound,
Launches potential for God,
Discord composed, cacophony tuned
The hymns of those who trod

Shapelessness whirring and namelessness stirring
Chaos within a blank space
Scribbles of gloom in an undefined room
A shadow, a shimmer- a face!

A Champagne Toast

Champagne flutes of crystal
and leaflets of gold
An autumn night's banquet
and grace manifold

Sweet drink overflowing
Like bubbling sap
Spilling down satin jackets
as hands rise to clap

Clammy palms smoothing dresses,
socks slipping down shoes
Ice and dirt melts in buckets,
summer's heat undiffused.

Flowing skirts like bright wings
grill smoke, sweat and bliss,
Each grease stain on silk
is the grandeur of this

The day falls to night,
Through sweat and through frizz
And in everything round,
know that God Is.

Everything is of the sun

And that includes milk thistle
 the same thistle that made you sneeze and sniffle
but freed its seeds to feed the finch
filled the belly of the field mouse
 but suffocated the squirrel
The sun, the sun pours over

Everything is of the sun
And that includes the honeybee
that dusts indigo fields
lifts the chin of the catmint
hello, rise, shine
and crawls across skin, sending shudders and starts
 and then stinging

Everything is of the sun
And that includes the lionfish mane
 voltaic tendrils wrapped around crustacean
the ocean's coloring book
 and the sting of paralysis
cloaked in one.

Everything is of the sun
And that includes your mother's sister
breathing
baffling
beautiful
 broken

Shatterable creatures, all.
Consistent contingency.

Everything is of the sun
And that includes your racing heart
 nagging you to race it
 highway of misgiving laying road
 cement on hands, nails on flesh

Everything shawls itself in golden flare
And drinks the light that burns the skin
Too hot to touch, too bold to bare
The light that tells the world to spin

Everything is of the sun
And that means the air
that my unbelief breathes—

A Sweet Amen

Cobblestone bridges, silver walls
 A space that shelters the splendor that falls
 On lamplit paths for soles to tread
 No stone unturned, no page unread

An arboretum bedrock laid
 Beneath the sprightly promenade
 Of lucky soles avowed admission
 With bookish, thoughtful, inquisition

Purple petals, peppered gray
 On fields where boisterous peepers play
 And insects tunnel underground,
 A hidden symphony of sound
 The stones are smooth, the paths held clean
 The flowers bold, the fields keep green
 The lecture halls and classrooms neat
 Hold lives to share and tales to greet

The heart of Nova's tucked away-
 You'll find it, if you go, someday
 When sun has set and tours all pass
 Where searching souls unite, amass
 Without performance, bow and kneel,
 And know not what, but deeply feel
 And lift their brokenness in song
 And for a moment, We Belong
 In marble halls of gold and white
 With gleaming arches and candlelight
 Our souls are known (but still we hide)
 Though weighty doors swing open wide:
 The secret's here, and meant for all,
 For gatekept love's not love at all.

The ones that speak with hearts on fire
 Find milk and honey they desire
 Imperfectly, we stumble through
 An ageless wonder to pursue
 Incorruptible, we stand

As we await a promised land.

The sparks your spires set in me
Within these walls are now set free
My soul still sings, but louder now,
I find my chain a different plow
And leave your lamplit paths behind
As mountains move, new roads unwind

Someday I will return again
To you, with joy,
A sweet amen.

Paper Plane

For life renewed by mindless thoughts,
She begs her core for some commotion.
A wandering from trivial things
To city sky or rambling ocean.
She now recalls the strength of wings
In combing heartache's thickened knots.

A sheet of printer paper tasked
With causing spirits to ignite:
By folding up and changing form
Brings boundless joy through unmapped flight.
Avoiding waters too lukewarm
For true souls once they've been unmasked.

She holds the paper in her hand
And creases slowly down the center.
Then focusing her breathing, aims
And sets art free from its inventor
To visit things with higher Names
(With life to give but course unplanned).

She finds herself now clinging to
That paper plane she set in flight
Amidst kaleidoscopic flames
That flickered silent through the night.
A life set free from mortal frames
Might glimpse the soul it's singing to.

The Porch Prayer

In the room where bugs die
 Crisping against a yellow rug
 In the room where frosted cream paint cracks when the sunlight strikes it,
 That fake-flowered room with seashell string lights
 and a paling lighthouse watercolor,
 I hushed my hands and steadied my spirit.
 I prayed a prayer,
 An eyes-open prayer
 For the voices bellowing across grayed grass to one another
 As sugar snow melted into milky slush on the pavement.

The wind,
 That same wind that hollows out the belly of the sea
 whorled against dirty windows,
 rattling screens with holes so big you could jab a fist through
 The voices oozed through screen-holes and bled through the cracks under door frames
 I listened to inverted words, unanswered calls,
 though I couldn't hear a single sentence.

I imagined the two of them, the voices embodied,
 the yelling enfleshed and given a home.
 Gifted blisters and hunger, freckles and thirst,
 A mother and son, at their fullest and worst.
 I sat in their sorrow,
 without knowing where it grew from.
 I don't even think I said "Amen."

I prayed for their pain
 (though I'm not sure they had any)
 And I prayed for their love
 (though they might not need more)
 And I prayed for their focus
 but my gaze hitched upon

a ladybug, withering and crimson,
 plucking the cable-knit screen like a harp.
 She paused, remembering the wings she tucked under her shell,
 and flew
 Beckoned back by the light of the living room.

Radical Light

Holding the solar system in your palm
 isn't easy, they say
 Jupiter's too gaudy,
 And Saturn's too sheepish,
 and Mars, of course, has a mind of its own:
 dancing the unbalanced dance of this cosmos,
 the marrow of life taking shape, staking hold.
 Stars, swollen with luxury's laze,
 Audacious comets and blitzful asteroids
 Cratered, fated, and ready to strike
 with radical light and the wonder of things.

But once in an eon,
 at the midnight of mercy,
 The pupils of planets align and alive.
 For a momentary blaze, a line of prismatic color:
 glistening, chromatic,
 spherical ripeness,
 pius and whole
 and gleaming,
 then gone.

And the marbles are back on their well-oiled tracks
 spilling over and swirling through intertwined orbits,
 not touching
 but almost-
 Each moment a moment that taunts cosmic carnage
 but you steady your fingertips, fold in your palms
 and whisper
 the world
 into order.

Silver Shovel

The light is everywhere at once, and yet, I want to *will* the sun. My mild abeyance a
World where light scatters, extinguishing the single flame that
Is in my mind, but *isn't* (right?). The bite of starlight, the quick shudder
Charged, accused, charged, electric. Tips the glass of lemonade we made
With sour lemons sewn and grown in mulched-over gardens. Silver shovels digging up
The stems that catch the light and pucker. This is the
Grandeur we planted.
Of this I am sure:
God, it is.

V. Love

“Love is the prime gift. Whatever else is freely given to us becomes a gift only through love.”

- Josef Pieper, *Faith, Hope, Love*

The Story

I stumbled into a bookstore-coffee shop after a long night with short legs
And found a smooth marble top table
White with gray pox
Everything infested already with the work before me
Even my honey lavender latte rising with the smoky aftertaste of unremembered syllabi.

But up on the bookshelf
Amidst failed illusions and angels walking,
I found *This Singing World*
Red and used-to-be-cream
Yellowed spine, cover torn, ink smeared by sunsoaked time
pouring through a window without curtains.
I pulled it off the shelf and a line of books toppled over,
thumping one on top of another.

I opened *This Singing World*,
the first page flagged by a tag that read “antique,” and “\$30”
in the type of handwriting you know came from an “antique” herself.

But the center of its pages was marked by a apricot slip of paper
Tattered at the edges, grease-stained on the back.
With a child’s handwriting, read:
“Love to my mother”
and nothing else.

So,
Love to my mother,
and love to the rest,
Love,
and nothing else.

Judy

Mild and tender, we've entered your sphere,
Quaint and observant- not weak.
You converse and contribute but don't interfere,
Your story hemmed in by mystique.

The family dogs splay at ease at your feet
And wag as you crouch down to pet them
You treat creatures kindly with sweetness complete
You love others before you've met them.

Time passed in pennies, and Penny emerged,
Unveiling my enchanted Forest.
Our Christmases joined and our families converged,
Begrudgements were briefly then chorused.

You won't read my words, but you'll still hear my heart
A locket of lilac to guide you
By knowing my soul and unwinding each part,
Unhinging the past that I'm tied to.

The time I beheld you at first, I withdrew,
Not yet understanding the aching.
You'll never be her, but I'm *glad* that you're you,
And I thank Him for granting me waking.

Lucy

I found myself a star,
A blessed path to cross.
She meets us just the way we are,
And not for what we've lost.

She'll anchor down and hold,
She's still and brave and vast.
Her melodies are streaked with gold,
She loves in waves that last.

When all you can control
Is that which you create,
She'll help restructure life and soul,
For strangers or soulmates.

She loves with guarantee,
A musical motif.
The lift within a melody,
Her guidance brings relief.

She locates my confusion
And readjusts my sight
To forego those too-fast conclusions
When shadows snatch at light.

With vitality in gait
And enterprise in tow,
Her steps of song sing rancor straight,
Her soles set paths aglow.

She finds what's rich and true:
A life that longs to learn.
And caring, carrying, loving you,
Begs nothing in return.

She changes every *one*,
Reminds *all* to renew.
Springloaded with the morning sun,
She makes me better, too.

To watch the artist deep in craft

Lit aglow by Christmas lights
She sits and paints, just out of sight
A tarp below, the world above,
A palette calls her into love
Casting wellness where she strides
The work stays with her, tears the tides
Streaky brushstrokes, measured breaths
A hundred thousand little deaths
The careful lines that birth anew
To witness means to glimpse into,

To lift the lover out of gloom
To cradle life in canvased womb
To watch the artist well in craft:
To crack the door for Heaven's draft.

Yellow Flowers

You greet me here, with dawn and dew
Where island pink meets Delta blue
You sweetly call, outstretch a hand
The solace shrinks, the world expands

You grant the peace my fears deny
You watch me as I watch the sky
You chase down sunset parking lots
When I can't speak, you hear my thoughts

I've never told, you've never pried
But waited with your hammock tied
To free me from a thorn-laid nest
Prepared to wrap my wings in rest

Infinity now greets us here
The road is paved, though route unclear
But "soon" can't frighten patient love
When two below trust One above

Yellow flowers bloom again,
You hold my "now" despite my "then,"
When darkness falls, your gaze transforms
But rolls in light, not thunderstorms

I'm slow to soften, seeking shore
But the flooring's strong, there's no trap door
My heart to serve will be a gift
And not a boundary line to lift

I thank your dawn and dreams and dew,
The space you made, the shades you drew
With silences yet left to fill,
A love that opened opens still.

Encountering beauty

The snow fell, so I journeyed north,
 But winter summoned trials forth:
 Emotions bottled, presents wrapped.
 A life was lost, a tether snapped,
 As shaky legs met new terrain,
 We didn't talk about the pain.

Silent through the hardest week,
 The wound was fresh, the love antique.
 To cry would end recovery
 You saw the pain, supported me.
 Emotions metered, muscles stiff
 Suspended mourning on a cliff
 Until the levy couldn't hold
 The silence burst, uncontrolled.

Those tears that once brought joy of birth
 Stripped the room and cracked the Earth
 Heaving shoulders, hollow calls
 You heard the cry through distant halls
 And tarried not, to meet me there
 Before collapse, a saving prayer:
 Unhesitating love arrived
 The darkness struck, but light survived
 Guiding sadness, letting blood,
 Heartache's freedom fenced the flood.
 Forbidden tears, the fateful blow
It hurts, I thought. You said, "I know."

You squeezed me tight until it stopped
 Each wound in me you did adopt
 With sorrow shared, the Heavens stirred,
 We broke the hug without a word.
 We picked back up and carried on,
 The aching paused, rose red with dawn.

Through Love lived out in one embrace:
 Unmasking love's eternal Face.

To My Grandmother (Yesterday)

Her love encircles every soul she greets,
You'll see it in her sea blue eyes - just there!
Embracing every course, each heart that beats,
The meek and burdened haloed in her care.
She folds her hands and bows her head to pray,
Though thanking more than asking in return.
She smiles and hugs and blooms despite decay,
And tries to wipe away our deep concern.
My Mummum gives in full and loves in truth,
Her zest for life aflame, my heart in embers.
Reminding me to celebrate my youth,
Her "Velcro Child" grew up, but still remembers
To let her love pour forth through love in me,
Alive in what I am and who I'll be.

To My Young Sister (Today)

To beauty, grace, and truth personified:
Dear Sarah, through your eyes, the world's made lighter.
For every childhood pleasure I've denied
Myself, you give it back to me, yet brighter.
You've yet to greet the sorrows of today,
And colors flood your mind as you unveil
The soul that rises through your simple play.
The parts of you that still speak fairytale
Remind us grown ups all to grow back down.
You fill our arms with toys and lives with wit
And transform every verb into a noun.
Though in my mind, the dunes seem desolate,
It's only through your eyes I understand
Just how to fashion castles out of sand.

Reflections and Poetic Commentary

Reflection on the Human Person

Movement I details the life of a human person, from birth to death, expressed through its minor and personal features. The Human Person Gateway tackles the questions of “what is the human person?” along with Abraham Heschel’s infamous “Who is Man?” and other questions surrounding the political, social, historical, familial, and fundamental personal challenges that come along with human life. This movement of poems transforms the idea of the human being into an active idea of *being* human, and what it means for the individual to encounter bigger questions about birth, life, family, art, and death. First, “Welcome” depicts a birth in a hospital setting through sharp sounds, sights, and objects, described by unlikely or otherwise ambiguous phrases. Detached from specific details of a scene, it is structured as an invitation to the movement, and deeper into this project as a whole. The poem is in loose iambic dimeter (x / x x /), though many of the lines break meter with an anapest proceeding the first foot iamb. There are intentional subversions of meter, such as the in the line “a bed bursts through the gate,” where the phrase “bed bursts” demands two stressed syllables in a row, or a spondee (/ /), that “bursts” through the regular meter of the piece. The final line, however, settles back into the expected anapestic meter with “She has come. Welcome home,” as a resolution to the preceding chaos as life welcomes the newborn child.

“Monday Morning” combines personal details about mornings in my childhood home with an aerial view about what it means to be a member of a family in general. This functions as a junction between a familial and personal reflection and the “Society” movement’s examination of what it means to be a part of a societal or communal commitment. “Monday Morning” also shifts between different rhyme schemes in a series of quatrains in loose iambic tetrameter

“Lighthouse” comes from a personal experience during the time when my grandmother was in hospice care before her death in 2017. She was my most beloved family member and the person on Earth tied closest to my own heart, and watching her pass was devastating, but beautiful. When my sister walked into the hospital room for the first time, well past the point of full lucidity for my grandmother, she suddenly perked up on the hospital cot and exclaimed “You’re here!” My sister recalls that although my grandmother was looking at her, it also felt like she was looking *past* her. I imagine that there was someone else she was greeting in addition to my family members in the room. The end of this poem calls out to the ending of Wendell Berry’s *Hannah Coulter*, as Hannah greets Nathan at “the gate” and says, “I am watching him, but he has not yet seen me. And now he sees me.” (Berry 186) It is a moment of recognition, homecoming, arrival. This final form is written as an anapestic sort of ballad, combining two unlikely metrical forms while also recalling the anapestic scheme of the opening poem for this movement. This linkage of meter and form creates a sort of cycle within this movement as well, tying the loop from birth into death and from death into life.

Reflection on Society

The Society Gateway unpacks the idea that Western tradition values the human person, but also often puts the “common good” of a greater society first, raising questions about what it means to truly be a part of a society or community in general. This movement specifically engages with the issue of educational inequity in the United States, but adopts the lens of how it potentially impacts individual human lives, illuminating personal reflections about my engagement with educational systems as a student and as a tutor for education nonprofits and schools in Philadelphia. Most of these poems stem from lived experiences and encounters with

students. In confronting societal issues, human dignity must necessarily first be focused in order to find meaningful solutions to oppression, inequity, and injustice.

“The Everyman’s Apocalypse” is the intellectual grounding of this movement, as it follows the transformation of a block on South Broadway in Baltimore, inspired by an empty lot on the same block as my older sister’s apartment. This piece is layered with meaning about what it means to be a member of American society, traveling through the various ways that groups of people have been cut out of that narrative. Baltimore is a city of severe gentrification and social and economic stratification; 25.2% of the population lives below the poverty line, but Maryland is *still* the richest state in the U.S. per capita. The rich in Maryland are so rich that they pull the statewide average income up intensely enough to surpass all other states, yet, residents of their central city still encounter homelessness, impoverishment, and one of the highest crime rates of any U.S. city. I titled this piece “The Everyman’s Apocalypse” for two main reasons: first, it calls out the responsibility of *every* reader in playing an active role in perpetuating systems of oppression and injustice (including myself), and also nods to the 14th-Century play, *Everyman*, written by an anonymous playwright. The story of the *Everyman* is a compelling story about the *memento mori* realization of a human being as he encounters the reality that he is mortal, and that most of the things in his life cannot be taken into eternity. The social reaction to the *Everyman* dilemma defines how communities operate, either encouraging humanity to step away from the goods that bind them to self-centeredness, or igniting the possibility of coming to terms with mortality in a way that elevates other aspects of life.

“Serenity” builds off of “The Everyman’s Apocalypse,” telling the tale of a student (Serenity) I worked with in a wellness and resiliency behavioral therapy program. This poem captures her maturity in managing her emotions, while also calling into question *why* she has

been taught these things as well. The students I've worked with have all been marked "trauma" children, and many have severe learning disabilities, mental illnesses, and physical diagnoses that call for extra care. However, many of these students are at the mercy of a broken system, perpetuated by a nation that values wealth over the wellbeing of its individuals. Serenity is kind, curious, witty, and precocious, and much more mature than she should have to be. As an elementary schooler, her only responsibility should be to play.

In a turn from the confines of the confining walls of the "playpen" in "Everyman's Apocalypse," "Ivy Joy" is the centerpiece of this movement, as it captures the joy of a young student close to my own heart, coincidentally named Ivy Joy. Joy is critical to learning in educational spaces, and it is crucial to have a deep-seated belief in the power of creativity and joy in order to center the needs of children in discussions about the politics and economics behind education systems. "Ivy Joy" turns the reader back to the power of the individual, and back to the power of the child's joy as the impetus for social change. Children are much more perceptive, brilliant, and adaptive than we often assume them to be, and they illuminate so much about the world for adults to learn from.

Traditionalist education assumes that students attend school in order to learn what they need to succeed in the world, and that they receive this information only from their teachers, who hold all the knowledge and power in educational settings. Under this conception of the aim of education, knowledge is retained and confined by the professionals in the field, and students are empty vessels into which the facts, rules, and concepts that will turn them into adults are poured. This passive style of teaching, although not explicitly adopted in contemporary schools, appears in how many adults approach education for their students. This movement is to reclaim the

power of the joy, creativity, and brilliance of the child as an important part of educating young people today.

A children's literature scholar named Rudine Sims Bishop constructed the metaphor of Windows, Mirrors, and Doors in 1990, transforming how we consider education and literature for students. Bishop details how children's literature shapes their understanding of the world, and that the type of literature we place in front of our students matters. Books that act as "mirrors" reflect our experiences directly back at us, while "windows" open our eyes to different perspectives and experiences, and "sliding glass doors" allow readers to step into new worlds to strengthen their vision of the world in its entirety. The poem "Windows, Doors, and Mirrors" is a direct reflection on Bishop's analogy, turning it into a visual reality in combination with the narrative voice of a child begging for freedom from these forbidding structures. This poem places Bishop's theory in conversation with a larger discussion about Traditionalist vs. Progressive education, and how adults unknowingly install locked doors in front of our students by assuming what their experiences are and what kind of world we are supposed to prepare them for.

The final poem in this movement is "Let it Begin With Me," which nods to the song "Let There Be Peace on Earth," which is a cry for peace on earth that also centers the individual's responsibility to be an active part in creating (even igniting) such peace. The last line of this movement, "So let it begin today, and let it begin with me" is a grounding as well as a springboard into the "World" section that follows, because it addresses inequity, responsibility, and power as a preface to art and general questions about the world, demonstrating that privilege, society, and larger political structures do impact how we experience the rest of the world, and what type of art we are exposed to. In his collection of essays *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B

DuBois notes that “we often forget that each unit in the mass is a throbbing human soul.” (DuBois 88) Each “throbbing” soul aches for its right orientation, but is confined by what is presented to them through the foundational structures and systems laid before them. However, these structures were all manufactured by human hands, and thus can be rewritten and remolded by the same. Without hope and the joy of the mission of rebuilding the world before us, we cannot move forward. As *The Secret Garden* reminds us, “of course this was the *wrong* magic- to begin by saying ‘too late.’” (Burnett 254)

Reflection on The World

This section tackles questions about what constitutes a “world,” and what holds our world together. This movement confronts ideas about unity, perfection, art, vocation, living, knowing, and being. The composite unity of this section dispels a sort of mechanistic reduction of things as the sum of their parts, tying artistic metaphors and analogies to the greater philosophical, ideological, and social constructs they function in. The goals of this section are to illustrate, contextualize, and deepen the world, using a combination of narrative tales and reflections about art to do so.

Allan Bloom firmly asserts that “Any good novelist can teach us more that is true about the meaning of our desires than can any of these amateurish scientists.” (Bloom 18...sorry to my science friends!) Although we can encounter, dissect, study, and revere the world through discovery, observation, and categorization, it is only when we receive the beauty of the world in full that we are able to understand how it presses on our souls. Leon Kass, however, restores the value of scientific understanding and high regard for the mechanics of a thing by saying that “Biology may do some of its finest work when it is brought to acknowledge and affirm the mysteries of the soul and the mysterious source of life, truth, and goodness.” (Kass 297) The

type of observation that allows the observer deeper into the truth of being demands receptivity, a keen eye, and radical openness. Attentiveness to the world in its entirety *and* to its mechanisms invites the ability to produce art that reflects the world and allows the artist and the receptor to enter more fully into it.

“Palimpsest,” “Pesante,” “Pentimento,” and “Profile” reflect on the connection between beauty and the tangible world, melting a romanticized depictions of the world in art back into the world that inspired them, reclaiming the true beauty of the Earthly scenes. *Palimpsest* is the term for a manuscript written on top of another manuscript, oftentimes still bearing visible traces of the initial writing. The short poem entitled “Palimpsest” frames this movement in its entirety, as the writing of earlier poems layers on top of and below the poems in this section, creating a piece of art that has multiple tiers of meaning and of detail. “Pesante” follows, titled from a descriptive musical term meaning “heavy and ponderous,” slowing the reader down and connecting them to the world. Although the details in this poem are largely visual, its structure of iambic tetrameter featuring repetition, alliteration, and internal rhyme presents the aural dimensions of the piece, tying the idea of art together with the music of life. In “Pesante,” the painting of “Monte Sainte-Victoire” by Paul Cezanne peels through the speaker’s view from atop the actual mountain. This demonstrates not only that art has the ability to transport the human mind out of itself and into a hyper-real or otherworldly scene, but that the world can be so beautiful that it feels like a hand-crafted work of art. *Pentimento*, similar to *palimpsest*, is a term for art layered upon art. “Profile” then turns the reader’s attention to the present world and individual people, as it provides a less romanticized idea of the “shadows” and “light” that art captures. “Profile” is titled to reflect a person’s ideological *profile*, as a sort of personal resume-type reflection of a

human being, while also reflecting their side *profile*, or a tangible vision of the side of someone's face.

“Profile” then moves into “The Vulture,” which connects the human world to a descriptive narrative from the point of view of a vulture, attaching the animal world to the human-centric encounters preceding it. Dissimilar to the majority of other poems in this collection, “The Vulture” also propels the reader away from the world that they know and into a fabled world based on the myth of Romulus and Remus in Roman mythology. “The Vulture” is told from the perspective of the vulture briefly mentioned in Eleanore Wilner’s poem “Being as I was, how could I help...” but still grounds the reader in a vividly detailed tale of predation, protection, and patience. Goethe mentions that “every creature is its own reason to be,” and that all living beings on Earth are interconnected and have a direct effect on one another, “constantly renewing the circle of life.” (Goethe 121) In “The Vulture,” the predatory narrator animates its “reason to be” through its indubitable commitment to the singularity of its goal- the vulture itself demonstrates the animacy of its animalness simply by being.

Following “The Vulture,” “Mulberry Jam” squeezes the vibrancy of the natural world into a glass jar, “entombing” the natural world by changing its form, while also asserting its wonder through the radical amazement that the speaker views her creation with. Trailing this theme of creation, “Takumi dreams of freedom” responds to the documentary *Jiro Dreams of Sushi*, highlighting a narrative of work that holds less of a positive vocational reflection. How an individual reconciles their place in the world largely correlates to how important they understand to be, and whether their job aligns with a personal vocational calling. Takumi is masterful at what he does, yet his life diverges from Jiro because he does not feel the tug of his vocational calling as intensely. The “yet” in the final line of this piece captures the essential dynamism of

worldly encounters, framing the fenceless freedom of human experience and opening Takumi (as well as the reader) up to the possibility of deeper meaning. The descriptions in “The Vulture” and “Takumi dreams of freedom” are meant to testify the complex beauty of the peculiarities of life, encouraging readers to adopt a new perspective and locate the good by agreeing to enter the world in its entirety.

Simone Weil maintains that “the soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth.” (Weil 115) Art allows a window (and often, a mirror or sliding glass door) in which the speaker, the creator, and the reader at once understand, either explicitly or wordlessly, some small sliver of the world. The art in this section is intended to invite an emptying and a sharing, and hopefully a deeper attentiveness to creation. Restorative rupture and radical rapture offer an authentic lens of encounter, but individuals must be open to receiving it.

Reflection on God

The God Gateway serves as the point of entry into conversations about the role modernity plays in shaping our understanding of God, attempting to reclaim the language used to talk about God in shared discourse. The course narrative moves through dominant contemporary narratives in religion and theology that implicitly mold how we respond to questions about God.

This movement begins with “Chasm,” offering an ontologically- and metaphysically-oriented account of God, naming the world as ordered, but also as “Chaos composed, cacophony tuned.” The line “Praying the prayer that opens all wound” addresses the capacity for God within grief and suffering, even within a flawed human nature. The concept of the created world pragmatically assumes the identity of its beings in relation to a Creator,

“Launching the potential for God,” but also categorizing humans as members of the “cacophony,” and individuals “who trod” (phrasing inspired by Gerard Manley Hopkins’ “God’s Grandeur”). This movement journeys through the trudge of human life while locating its access points for the recognition, and in some cases, the intrusion of divine affirmation. “Chasm” opens up a “bright abyss” of sorts. “A Champagne Toast” spirals outwards from Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite’s beautiful analogy of God’s presence in all things as a pyramid of champagne flutes, all overflowing and passing liquid from one glass to the next. This metaphor carries on through the elegance of the piece and the opulence of the champagne party itself, but also braids together with the sweaty, fizzy reality of a hot summer night. *Imago Dei* is present in the expansive, palpable, gristly details of humanness, and reflected in “everything round” (or cyclical, measured, intentional). “God Is” is the culminating statement of this piece, because it stands alone as an ultimate statement of God’s infinitude.

“Radical Light,” “The Porch Prayer,” “A Sweet Amen,” and “Paper Plane” present various potentialities for God’s presence, all framing beauty, light, leisure, goodness, darkness, and attentiveness as aspects of who “God Is.” “Everything is of the sun” holds this movement together by addressing “unbelief” while still demonstrating the interconnected nature of created beings of all sorts, and a sort of intentionality in their individual creation. Doubt is a natural and expected part of the journey of faith, and oftentimes deepens an understanding of God. The concluding stanza, “Everything is of the sun / And that means the air / that my unbelief breathes—” leaves the final statement of the piece as an inaudible gasp at the end of a heavily enjambed sentence, leaving the observation, realization, and potential epiphanies about the connections between God and the world up to the reader.

“Silver Shovel” pays tribute to one of the staple texts within the Humanities Department at Villanova; “God’s Grandeur” by Gerard Manley Hopkins. This poem is called “Silver Shovel” because it plays off of the poetic form of a “Golden Shovel,” first made famous by Terrance Hayes. The Golden Shovel takes a line (or multiple lines) from another poet’s piece and incorporates each word from that line as the final word of a new line. Similarly, in this piece, I used every word from the line “The world is charged with the grandeur of God” from Hopkins’ piece as the first word of each line of “Silver Shovel.” This adds an entirely new reading for the piece, and allows the reader deeper insight into the glory of the temporal world, but only if they are persistent enough to look for it. I also weaved in new metaphors and interpretations, such as the line “Charged, accosted, charged, electric.” To me, the phrase “charged with the grandeur of God,” as in Hopkins’ poem, is both a call to action, an accusation, and a designation of blame, as well as a description and designation of energy (in my mind, electrical “charge”). These two conflicting interpretations open the text up and prove that beauty and danger, energy and responsibility, flow with each other in the created world.

The reference to the idiom about “turning lemons into lemonade” builds a metaphor for how humans seem to pat themselves on the back for righting the wrongs that we were the ones to create in the first place. This poem identifies that we plant sour lemons and then add sugar to them, and commend ourselves for the taste. This combines descriptions from the World Gateway with the idea from the God Gateway that God is only a construct for humans to posit their creations and accomplishments onto (Nietzsche, Schleiermacher), placing multiple courses in conversation with each other just as we would during class discussions.

The idea of “light scattered” came to me in a Christian Wiman poem, “After a Lecture With My Love,” from the line, “Light, when it goes, goes everywhere at once.” (Wiman, *He*

Held..., 86) In the first two lines of “Silver Shovel,” the speaker almost assumes themselves to be a god, in a sense, because they use phrases like “My / World.” However, in the speaker’s world, light isn’t *everywhere*, but is instead described as “scattered,” chaotic. The end of this piece “whispers the world into order” (see “Radical Light”) and restores God to the poem itself.

There are two potential interpretations for the final line, “God, it is.” This culminating moment of the poem either leads the reader to believe that the speaker has made themselves out to *be* God, in a sense, or at least something to be glorified, or it leads them to an actual image of God. God has been present from the opening line of the piece, scattering the light, tilling the soil beneath the mulch, slipping down the side of the physical poem in every first word.

Reflection on Love

The poems in this movement capture what I consider to be the fifth “gateway” into the humanities: Love. This movement follows love in three main categories: *philia*, *eros*, and *agape*. *Philia* captures a sort of love emanating from friendship, and in its truest form, desiring the good in the other. “Lucy” is the poem that most directly speaks to filial love, as there are qualities in the subject that call the reader into goodness (“she makes me better, too”). *Eros* mediates tangible and intangible worlds, and is the type of love that calls the lover out of themselves and allows them to transcend their everyday reality by diving deeper into it. Although in its secularity, the term “erotic” has been stripped of its classical meaning and is attributed to sex alone, Allan Bloom and Josef Pieper seek to reclaim a definition of *Eros*, and reinstate its resonance in all conceptions of love. *Eros* is the love that recognizes goodness or beauty in the world and wants to be drawn closer to it, desiring the bringing to birth of the goodness and the transcendence of beauty in the other, entirely centering and decentering in its *ek-stasis*. Josef

Pieper states that “erotic love is something akin to poetic rapture and, in fact, to artistic enthusiasm in general.” (Pieper, *Divine Madness* 250) As these poems address or reflect on people I’ve loved within my lifetime, each piece also functions as an outpouring of love in and of itself, or love embodied in an art form.

Poetry is a type of infatuation that calls the reader out of themselves. However, this infatuation is *not* the whole of love, or even really a whole *part* of it, but rather a reflection of what true love is for the beloved. Hinging upon transport and rapture, erotic love is kindled by beauty in the creation of verse. The power of the rhetorician and the poet is to utilize written art forms to evoke strong emotions, most powerful through deeply personal experiences.

Coining the term “poesy” as the descriptor for the poetic and creative state, Pieper explains that genuine poesy “originates with divine inspiration; it flows from a condition of the soul closer to a state of being-beside-oneself than possessing-oneself; and this being-beside-oneself... is caused by some higher power. Poesy, if it is true poesy, flows from ‘enthusiasm’ in the strict sense of the word.” (Pieper 30) The “being-beside-oneself” and “enthusiasm” Pieper describes here sound awfully close to the Platonic conception of love as divine mania, or something that leads the lover outside of themselves.

Finally, this section transitions into an Agapic form of love in “Encountering Beauty,” entering the dimensions of divine love that pass through human love, as told through an experience between parent and child. Even in the most harrowing of moments, “love is what carries you,” as *Hannah Coulter* puts it. In its many forms and in its unique singularity, “love is always there, even in the dark, or most in the dark, but shining out at times like gold stitches in a piece of embroidery.” (Berry 51) The final two pieces in this movement, a pair of Shakespearean sonnets that travel from “yesterday” to “tomorrow,” and from adulthood into death and then back

into life of a young child, reminding us grown-ups to “grow back down,” and creating a loop to the new life that the opening poem of this collection brings.

Through *philia*, *eros*, and *agape*, this movement journeys from joy into grief and from grief into fullness, and finds its center in the line “Unmasking Love’s eternal Face.” Josef Pieper writes that human love, “by its nature must inevitably be always an imitation and a kind of repetition of this perfected and, in the exact sense of the word, *creative* love of God.” (Pieper, *Faith, Hope, Love* 171) Love affirms the good in the world as the prime gift of all creation and remains the only true point of entry of the type of active participation that contemplation and soulful artistic creation necessitates. If nothing else, I pray that this creative undertaking unmasks the goodness (and if not goodness, then at least the fullness) my two short decades of life have been witness to. Thomas Foster notes that poets are “candles throwing their light high against the dark wall of experience,” giving occasion to “explore the divinity of experience and the miracle of imagination.” (Foster 187)

CONCLUSION

The Power of Poesy

Christian Wiman states that “People who think poetry has no power have a very limited conception of what power means.” (Wiman, *My Bright Abyss*, 114) The capacities to create art, draw connections, interpret symbols, and represent emotions are the faculties that distinguish humans from other creatures, but are also the faculties that allow us to enter more fully into relationship with these creatures. Poetry is a gift, a power, and a demand wrapped into one; it ensouls, it enables, it ennobles both receiver and gifter in every facet of life, but only if they are willing to offer an open ear. Poesis has the ability to dispel the thoughts and experiences that island us, inviting readers and writers into communion with each other through how they interpret the world, offering new lenses to try on, to question, and to embrace. As Wiman says, “I only know that I did not know what love was until I encountered one that kept opening and opening and opening.” (Wiman 23)

Affirming the good
thanks the impenetrable, and
invites the inbreaking of beauty
CS 2022



*To you, with joy.
A sweet Amen.*

Works Consulted

- Berry, Wendell. *Hannah Coulter*. Shoemaker, 2005.
- Bishop, R. S. Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. *Perspectives*, 6 (3), 1990.
- Bloom, Allan. "The Fall of Eros." CP.
- Burnett, Frances Hodgson, and Tasha Tudor. *The Secret Garden*. Harper Collins, 1985.
- Descartes, René, et al. *Principles of Philosophy*. Kluwer, 1991.
- Dewey, J. *On education and experience*. Simon and Schuster, 1938.
- DuBois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Dover, 1994.
- Dubus, Andre. *Dancing After Hours: Stories*. A.A. Knopf, 1996.
- Foster, Thomas C. *How to Read Poetry like a Professor: A Quippy and Sonorous Guide to Verse*. Harper Collins Publishers, 2018.
- Gilroy, John. *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Selected Poems*. Humanities-Ebooks, 2007.
- Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von, and Douglas Miller. *Scientific Studies*. Suhrkamp, 1987.
- Hayes, Terrance. "The Golden Shovel," *Lighthouse*. Penguin Publishing Co. 2010.
- Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *Who is Man?* Stanford, 1965.
- Kass, Leon. *Life, Liberty and the Defense of Dignity: The Challenge for Bioethics*. Encounter Books, 2004.
- Pieper, Josef. *Divine Madness: Plato's Case Against Secular Humanism*. Ignatius Press, 1995.
- Pieper, Josef. *Faith, Hope, Love*. Ignatius Press, 1997.
- Steele, Timothy. *All the Fun's in How You Say a Thing: An Explanation of Meter and Versification*. Ohio University Press, 1999.
- Weil, Simone. "Reflections on the Love of God."

Wiman, Christian. *He Held Radical Light: The Art of Faith, the Faith of Art*. Picador, 2019.

Wiman, Christian. *My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013.

Wiman, Christian. *Survival Is a Style*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021.