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## The Role of Light in Creating Space

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# The Role of Light in Creating Space

Tor Strand

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Bachelor of Arts in Creative Writing

Linfield College

24 May 2018

Approved by: *Signature redacted*

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Approved by Faculty Advisor *Signature redacted*

Date July 6 2018

*For my mother*

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*all the flowers are forms of water . . .*

*the washed colors of the afterlife*

*W.S. Merwin*

# I. Light

pouring out,  
dancing—



## The Role of Light in Creating Space

We come from Birdridge,  
running Earth's sharp edges,  
jamming our toes, obeying  
an unmapped wanting.

The bore tide fills Turn-Again with a wave  
of outer ocean, a long white cap from up here.  
We surf it with our eyes.  
Far above the snow on South Suicide  
goes blue.

We start climbing after dinner  
but it's Alaska in July—so what matters—

we run loose scree  
above the treeline,  
ankles an afterthought.

Down lower, my friend soars through  
the space inside a split-trunk spruce  
where time is made of rough bark,

ours is to play and forget, snap twigs under boot,  
hands sap sticky,  
we breathe against a hanging sun, building sorrow.

The truck rumbles,  
our veins frothing

toward dusk along the Arm,  
a lane of light

from ridge to ridge. There is no God to speak of.

Why the eye goes to the brightest place,  
I do not know.

## A Light

*for Julia*

Who went by herself,  
a loose feather,  
who didn't care where rain fell—

she didn't even know  
where to shine  
but that doesn't matter

when you're tumbling,  
falling through pockets  
of color and constellation.

When the shivers caught up,  
she spun them  
into numbness,

then stillness, and  
finally, as if guided  
flight

99 and Brumback Street

Say afterlife's blank & open      a room void of chairs & air  
within darkness & outside it      nothing of construction,  
  
away with traintracks & steal      bullets & warnings  
insignias, red flashes, blinking      burning.  
  
I'm motionless on a sidewalk      & a truck full of chained up logs  
roars across the grayness      watercolor & rainsound  
  
opaque pools taut like bow      strings jump to life, scatter like sperm  
with or without purpose      sex & the space inside space.  
  
Is it chaos out beyond      what's in our eyes, full of mirrors  
and trees, divorced from      light—colorless hydrogen—  
  
Maybe it's just one long lane      parallel to perception  
Maybe we go straight to seed      and begin

## Tell Me The Precise Size Of That World

Jelly-eyes, scatter-clouds,  
figs and plums all over  
my backyard like rot, like love.  
They aren't enough.  
Sometimes my bike chain slips  
out of gear, and the peddles sing.  
Tire grip of gravel and light.  
We are cursed by what we see.  
Cured by how it looks.  
We gaze again and again.  
The world, so far before us, brings us,  
carries us, blues us, with what?  
The leaves are drifting to shreds.  
I am a feather, a bread crumb,  
buzzing bee wings. Look at all the plums.  
Can I come along with the sky,  
go inside the fig, inspect your pain,  
bite with ancient bone  
on deepsea floors flooded  
with silica shells?  
We're drifting, drifting,  
dead shreds, scatter  
clouds our breath.

## Sunday Creation, Lutheran Church

After coffee in the narthex,  
during the second reading, God empties  
himself, becomes human,

and during the eucharistic prayer  
our hearts are broke to lift,  
lift to the Lord—

and what does an empty self  
becomes? God of blood and bone  
are we breaking? What is human humbling? Coral reefs

are bleaching. In Golgotha,  
the place of skull, where Christ  
breathed his last, Mary wept

from afar, her hands slippery in the folds  
of linen, in the folds of souls, she soon  
after wrapped word and world. Can't you see

the wormwood and gall tucked in the cranberry hymnal?  
During the eucharistic prayer God's body won't  
crumble for me, my pastor unable to dismember

the bread. We read the Nicene Creed, and praise  
the Almighty, the Incarnate, the Creator of  
all that is, seen and unseen. And I can't

see or unsee, but light in the narthex  
diagonal from above, a narrow window,  
rectangular blue—

## Wood Chips

Standing on a pile of wood chips,  
silence and bird song weaving  
through the level rays of late afternoon.

Rain the past days make the trail wild.  
Today, sunlight and still pools,  
the stream running fast

with us. A few feet ahead  
my friend says  
we should do this more often.

I am as wordless  
as the mote-filled light spelled on his back.  
What whispered him that thought?

What lies inside these trees?  
The afternoon sun dips lower still,  
above, stars like salt.

We found a toad.  
His chin rose and fell  
with something like purpose.

## What Remains

Let's unthread the grammar of birdcalls.

Let's pass through that membrane,

turn over the cones and rods of retinas

turn over ions and the intact of each kiss—

but only if we've seen enough sky.

Answer me,

why do we say a river *runs*?

Granted, we only race toward permanence.

Granted, the squirrel keeps playing

in the far-away tree, see it run along the black and ash edges.

## Audenhaus

It's easy to imagine a poet in a town like this.  
Crows of the far corner in the graveyard,  
ancestral shadows, venturing black curves of icy air—  
seeds of deep maroon.

Churchyard, dirt and sleeped stones,  
why have I found you?

Music music music — *Poet : And : Man of Letters* —

Who wouldn't see it here?  
Crow by the redglass candle  
you know the dead better than any of us.

Beyond the train-tracks,  
field finds horizon.

They play jokes on each other,  
poking their beaks, like belief.

Auden's stairwell is paint-chipped and green  
as the ivy on his stone.

Words can rupture will.  
Yet how far are they from  
the lifelessness of mornings like this one?

How children listen.



## Ex Nihilo, Celebration

Outside Lincoln City flat spells of light red the sunset woods. They look dangerous. The rise of small driftwood fires, little glows up and down the wet beach on the 4th of July. A full moon a followspot for blue puffs, the firework hours and children splashing and lapping, little waves, sandy toes, whistling sparklers, only pausing when the next fuse catches. They're conditioned to the sky dazzling their vivid lusts, a struck match, a cracked sphere, if you find them, they are everything. *It looks like people barfing into the air!* one shouts as they hike toward God's thumb. After, driving Oregon backroads, through distant hills, each one a brushstroke bluer than the last, their edges brimming with the lengths of trees. Road of spit and dusk — fade, fade — ride of semblance and blood.

## II. Blood

instinct: as instant  
as warm leaking wounds. oh wind.  
hear the wolf—howling—

## Burnt Rubber

The sky drips like penicillin.  
And the bike tire slips off the sidewalk,  
slips out of gear  
                                and makes a world  
out of seconds and six inches. The man falls  
on the black tar highway. Gravel screams—  
head, then body.  
    He lies there,  
  like the deer do.

“Piece of shit,”  
he says when he comes to.  
                                “Knocked myself out a second.”

Man of sharp bone,  
    ribbons of muscle and tattoos,

“Finally found someone who can knock  
me out. Me!”

He doesn't want us, 9-1-1, our milky words  
and forced gestures, our faces  
fogged mirrors unable to find his,  
unable to feel the gravel dyed red across  
his forehead.

“Are you okay?” I'm a false note,  
I smell like shining seas and purchases.

He picks up his bag of cans  
and goes, everyone goes, away.

“I have friends,” he says, “my friends  
will take a look. My friends are this way.”

little spell with jaw and colosseum

little jaw of blood

they make you bleed

to bind the foreign bone

they make you more

by spearing you with holes

like whale bone turned art

you heal quicker that way

you link like those

flocks of starlings

dancing over Rome

bleed and build

anew you

resilient stranger

you marrow maker

## Portage Lake, Late March

All that time passing  
without us.

The snowfall,  
the cloud,

the landing place.  
A cherry must have a pit.

A rainbow becomes  
a spot above us.

I cannot speak to it,  
neither can you,

but there it is.  
Sky, do you know it?

Snowshoe prints press  
the lake ice.

Mountain blue shadows  
our only compass.

When I remember we're walking  
on six hundred feet of water,

my toes feel the knives  
carried in nerves.

Farther, the glacier.  
Today, we're snow-blind.

Today, and every day, the sheer  
rockface, void of snow, full of dark.

## The Contents of Fire

Sitting with you outside, late Autumn,  
the gray arching northern world,  
a small fire we built from a wind-claimed spruce

downed by a winter storm behind our home. A rogue gust  
cracked rough bark and thick sap, ruptured  
the wooden wall, revealed rings of time  
orbiting the core—resembling purpose.

After silence, you say, remember  
when I asked if you judge others  
by how smart they are?

When that spruce fell I was home alone,  
thought it an earthquake. We live on the ring of fire,  
active earth, plates that breathe hot and break.

You asked so long ago, and I think now,  
what of the life breathed into lungs?  
Sweet nectar of eyes, rose-tuned  
words, the ceramic exactness  
of ridges across a forehead—

lives—like wet clay—fired  
by existence—by wind. The logs pop and sing.  
That tree gave us fire for three summers.

Now, the last few logs rise up  
in red radiance, your hands over the glow,  
fingers spread, as if catching, reasoning, as if naming.

## Name Me

This time I see a squirrel leap out the oak grove  
with a baby squirrel in her mouth, no shit, her mouth full of  
arms and legs spinning pink and pale white—

blur of raw cells, a face unformed.  
Mother, rigid with fear, unsatisfied with me—  
the too-close-shocked-human on a bicycle.

She scurries across the street, body in mouth,  
swivels up a tree, pops out an open knot.  
As if to teach me space, as if

I don't know blood. I swear,  
from afar she looked  
like a cherry blossom.

little spell with backbone

Her back's in her window shining—  
each morning

x-ray, sun-ray, metallic blue.  
She's a boxer, a badass

all the way up her skull.  
She kept it because it looks cool—

put it in the window like a storefront  
special. I'm not surprised how I love it.



## Wash Bay

Men jive over beauties and the tonnage of dozers,  
spit Grizzly snuff through yellow smiles and radio's best  
country rock, kick rocks between drags of camels—  
all steel-toed boots in the work yard.

All muddy cuffs and *fuck you's* over games of gin rummy.  
It's football, navy jumpsuits hiding tattoos and grease  
that doesn't shower off. Someone asks when weight restrictions  
will be lifted so *this shit can start moving again*.

Dandelions and volunteer pansies twist up  
through the bottom of barb-wire fence  
around the yard, yard of metal and things  
dug-in, rubber tires, big as cars

filled with summer rain and spiders and us  
lying there out back near the train-tracks  
with Pepsi and lunch—the rubber warm in noon light—  
the beards here go gray not with age or God's verity, but dust

and diesel up the nose and wrapped around the heart.  
Someone chains a skidsteer to a truck and takes off  
on eighteen wheels with one perfect turn,  
the backend just missing the ditch.

## My Attic

Full of dust  
posters Led Zeppelin Purple Rain—  
an antique cane chair  
light bulbs broken  
fluorescent  
with watts and lumens  
there's a flag up there I think  
gold trimmed even  
salt and pepper shakers from New York City  
a box marked *Allen's Shoes*  
a giant faded phosphorescent sign  
angels of ladies pink on either side  
in the middle —*girls*—  
Christmas ornaments  
red and blown to brilliance  
winter hats  
black  
my father's laugh  
and finally  
one skull box of soul and  
silly putty the floors creak  
with DNA finger nails, and  
you might find something scuttling  
the gnaw marks on the chairs

## Still Life: Grandfather and Saint

I never saw your real face.  
Only a photograph, black-and-white,  
stout man on a stairwell, hat over his eyes, arm linked

with a woman. I can't find one way to see you. I don't  
even know your name. Too scared or drowned with childhood-treasure  
to find you, grandfather. My father never mentions you.

I don't even know your name.

Joel and I exchange letters sometimes. He's Guatemalan, full of mischief,  
love. I don't know why the police picked him up that night in Montana,  
put him in jail—except, I do. I feel his silence, the police blinkers

flashing: *why why why—fuck fuck fuck*

Couldn't you have lived in the static? Electricity licks at every atom.  
Couldn't you flicker in the candle flame or notes of *comptine d'un autre été*  
when I play on the piano? Why not ripen like the raspberries behind your home?

Couldn't you go on, in shades of red, nameless?

We read Pablo Neruda together. I try and sound out the Spanish. Joel laughs  
and laughs. *You have to come home with me, we'll climb the volcano, you and I, blanquito.*  
And eat the fruits that grow on the mountainside?

*Fruits you've never heard of.*

Dead fathers fill up the sky, we walk on words that feel like wasted space.  
I see Joel and birds migrating south. I see laughter and air trapped in my chest.  
Cough it up, keep coughing. Find the eyes, fissures of blood.

### III. Body

Billiard ball sky / recreate me / in the ocean  
revise me / like you do / yourself / and every movement /  
trickle honey / down the alder  
tree / into the street / trickle / into the street

My heart is a fossil / desperate / to be a fawn  
trickle up my feet / drink me / milk of morning  
milk of dusktime / drink me up / your goldenes Haar Margareta  
waves above / you've done it with grace / with grace /

But here / the road and me / only the road  
and me / and sky / breaking / a solid blue / drops  
in the ocean pocket / drops a note of ever-constant  
a letter to read / to breathe / it's written with ash

Two Years of Collected Light

“The sun doesn’t float,  
it sinks,” says my two year old nephew,  
hovering  
over the pool’s edge. He wants  
the water’s surface,  
then me. We whisper, without  
words, the worst  
form of collected honesty, our smiles  
and eyes are enough  
drawn with colors of common beginnings.  
“It sinks?” I ask.  
“Maybe,” he says, “or maybe it floats?”  
Maybe it floats like  
reflection, or the water lily, maybe  
it’s floating like me  
made of so many urgencies.  
“These flowers smell  
like sugar,” his sister says  
of the pride of madeira,  
a purple cone of blossoms,  
bee-covered blossoms,  
pollen and sugar.  
Her eyes are umber,  
her whole voice  
a trace of beautiful  
sadness, she  
ripples with light—  
we float and float and  
sink and sink and she

dips her dark hair in the pool  
and the water runs  
back all over her face.  
We run  
with muddy regard  
—we slip  
on a slug—sink,  
float. Remember  
if you lick  
the yellow ones  
your tongue goes numb.

and so we were

*Hast du einen Vogel?  
Do you have a bird in your head?*

In Vienna, we followed a 24-hour clock  
like two charmed birds—  
we fell into formation  
following each other's voices  
through foreign hallways  
of flats and castles,  
crypts.

You thought I glimmered  
even in the glum—

Even when the U-Bahn  
was done  
shaking the city  
for the evening,  
shaking the bones  
of Ancient Rome,

and the night-line buses  
were only going the wrong way,

and the tram drivers wouldn't  
be waving to one another  
for four or five more hours.

We laughed. Walked along the Wien Fluss.  
Followed the Donau  
like thousands of years,  
trading Viennese sleep  
for Turkish coffee.

Skipping stones at fortune.

I was happy for it—  
you were too—  
and so we were.

Back home, we follow a 12-hour  
dichotomized clock,  
like two parallel lines,  
one begins as

the other ends,  
never tangling,

as season chases season  
your sweet song sails  
through me no longer  
but I imagine it.  
Our lips spill

words into each other  
and everything tremors.

A hemisphere away,  
Me and an oily  
Prince William Sound—  
wishing,

twenty seven years later,  
that the herring  
would return.



## Cornucopia

I long like an ancient ice fisher  
who waits for his pole to bend as a rib,  
his parka proofed with salty intestines.  
Drift, drift, on the icy expanse.

An abalone you found on a deep dive  
clutching a cave wall. I remember,  
I heard you coming, in the pores of my  
ear-shaped shell—I released with ease.

I hear you now, as you press my pearly  
world against yours. Like a sea otter  
with a meal you float on your back—careless—  
as I slide between your breasts you split me open—

a swirling current—whoosh of ocean color.  
The wind spills across the blueness,

releasing us: your fur the finest,  
a million pins in every inch.

little spell, little ray

And there I go, off the back  
of the island countertop  
in my mother's kitchen.

I'm four years old and spellbound  
by grasshoppers, always trying  
to capture them.

I black out and come to in navy waves.  
I don't know my mother.  
I'm sure she's crying.

I vomit almost immediately.  
But remember, I'm four, so nothing  
is thought of, like when I'm

so fast on the gravel I scratch my soles.  
Like when I hear the owls hoo hooing.  
At the hospital, they feed me chocolate chalk

and stamp buzz lightyear and thomas-the-tank-engine  
on my chest. I go through doughnut shaped  
alienware and catch the glare of doctor specs.

All this, when I went upside down  
eating peanut butter and jelly.  
I can still taste the barium.

That night I dreamt of a lion,  
again and again I dream of her,  
patrolling the rooms, yawning in the kitchen.

## Distance

Heading up the northwest coast,  
unclear, like your eyes—  
an evening eating blackberries

when purple clings to everything.  
You following the green and gray  
blurred streaks of late-

early hours between us  
and each day. You and the rails skipping  
against the sharp curves of ever

onward—dreams of your lower lip,  
my hand in your hair—  
sway gently now, you must have

fallen asleep in the cool-aired cabin—  
headed north, the Pacific, falling across  
the faint curve.

## Don't Touch the Twirling Ballerina

Breaking like woodwind  
reed, like metaphor, like memory  
carrying thin music in time  
gone back

dancing  
on pointe  
on wood-floors and  
fluorescence—

but shoes & reeds  
play to wear and  
break and  
when will you break,

mother? You,  
unwilling to miss one,  
two, three melodies,  
you, humming

though backgrounds  
mending wave to song,  
how much more,  
you hug each chord so close

how much more,  
that slick darkness that jumps out the rest.

## In Memory of Marit Josten Highland

### I.

She lived for a century.  
Through the fickle decades of America,  
fun and woe ebbing and flowing  
like the pink sea shells  
on her Camano Island  
beach home.

She would ask me to go find them,  
those blushing shells  
no larger or redder than a pinky nail  
and I would. And she would say,  
“Well, how ‘bout that.”

And she would say,  
“Those shells used to fill the sand.  
Not anymore.”

### II.

She was a snappy woman.  
Not in an ill way,  
rather like the gingersnaps  
that always filled the glass jar  
on her countertop.  
She would send me with lengthy directions—  
to the left, to the right, down steep-set stairs  
to the right, to the left—  
“There you’ll find the icebox with the soda-pop.”

In later years she rocked  
in a living room chair.  
A telephone with extra-large numbers  
on her left, a window on her right,  
where the Sound rippled  
with orcas deep beneath its waves.  
Her eyes tired, days dimmed,  
but her mind went on,  
aware of every drawer,  
shelf, and box under her roof.  
“The bright days used to be grey,  
now even the Sound’s gone.”

She ate meals with slow gratitude.  
"Kinda tasty," she'd say  
When it was time to part,  
to my parents,  
"Now you kids behave yourself."  
And, "You be a good boy now,"  
in my own ear.

### III.

Once I asked her where college was.  
She laughed, "Work was college."  
Eyebrows raised, "Anywhere you could find it."  
They placed her in the kitchen  
when the world was at war.  
She was never one for the apron,  
so she became a typist.  
"I was a whiz on those keys."

The 4th of July parade  
runs right in front of her hand-bricked home  
on Utsalady road.  
When I was a boy,  
she'd ask me to guide her down the front steps,  
hand in hand—  
"I need to keep an eye on all the commotion."

## Like Whales and Infants

Beluga Point with you, Spring warmth,  
the smell of melt, Arm in break-up,  
and quiet the quiet glacial flow.  
You call it a desert, and I wonder what  
the dall sheep think, their view on the cliff  
higher than ours, two of them, two of us.

Light and Penguin Peak carry us  
four thousand feet out the sea, an avalanche chute.

We talk that afternoon of afterness,  
how short it all really is. How love  
adds up as ice as spruce as instability,  
you talk about what death might be  
but I cannot even approach the idea.  
Look at you, your laughter, humming up your neck.

To A Body That Cannot Contain Itself

Northern California,  
in redwood glyphs,

a young black bear,  
brown-furred, eats

highrise berries. I know,  
I saw her. She saw me

far before—breathing heavy  
and going away as if he knew so much

I didn't.  
The deer were there too—

spotted and light.  
And there was water

pooled in an eddy  
deep enough for swimmers,

salamanders, a snake  
on a dead red stump.

A yellow streak singing  
with heat—

I am amazed  
how he disappears.

And when I disappear

—land of bear's breath, spotted  
with blood so like deer, swimming

with webbed feet and slithering shadows—  
I hope it is in these trees,

in that red that will never miss touch,  
as desperately, I do.



## Crying Out of Nowhere on a Plane Heading South

*For Brian Doyle*

Pink mist—never left me      never      *leaping*  
the magnets      of pain  
alive and well      my weeping corners—  
*wistful* lost its wind      as *mist*  
as *pink*      —even on the northern      horizon—  
even Denali's twenty thousand feet even      the light  
beads up      shimmering      shaking—  
on a plane heading south  
the water      on the window      squirms.  
Everything      gone orange      ponder  
music      warmth—  
Why don't I      burn      life  
out of weeping  
my honeycomb glows      never  
*leaping*      a soft skull      crafted in  
rare enduring      all affinity and likeness—  
I tell you      even stones cry  
the birds on fire      even God weeps      to believe  
hand in hand  
to leap, live in love      remember clouds—  
see the inside      falling out

You See

You wouldn't have wanted  
the boy chasing the wind  
to trip over his shoelaces,

You wouldn't have wanted that girl  
to say *i* instead of *y* in *gypsy*  
at the spelling bee,

You wouldn't have wanted  
that tetherball to swoop around and  
pound my face dizzy and red,

You wouldn't have wanted lava tag to end.

No, you wouldn't have wanted that at all.

You did want that stray rottweiler  
at Tulalip Shores, you'd call him *Brindle*,  
growling and drooling pools all day  
as his eyes watched the waves  
as his paws sunk in sand.

You'd bake him birthday cake  
and he'd smile—twice a year—  
to makeup for all the missed ones.

A worn hat  
covered the chemo.  
I never noticed.

We played putt-putt at Kayak Point  
every Saturday.  
You liked the colored balls,  
pinks and purples.  
I rolled the white ones.

I went back there.  
Walked the course.  
The greens were grown over  
long enough to bend in the wind  
the balls in the ponds were scummy—  
even the pinks and purples.

I rubbed the weary wooden posts,

one read *par 3 feet: 73*  
and the final one—  
do you remember that one?  
A full 100 feet.

What is salt if not the ocean's precursor?  
What is love if not grief's?

Your eyes ceased mourning,  
but your eyes are in mine,  
and mine do, mine do.

*Mary Carol Gardner, 1928-2001*

Afterward:

All writing is observing. This collection takes moments of observation from recent occurrence alongside observation of distant memory. Through encouragement primarily from Professor Wilkins and Dr. Araguz, I experimented more than ever with these poems, particularly in form. Trying new forms is a scary thing for a writer, as at first it can feel silly to be playing with words, tabbing them across the page. Yet now, after I write the initial draft of a poem, I come back to it and tinker with the form. What I am most amazed by is in a relatively short period of time, I can at least eliminate several options of form almost immediately based on the content of the draft. I definitely still have trouble finding the best form to reflect the piece, but I can at least eliminate certain options.

I hope my poems move in the most authentic way that reflects their words. That is ultimately the goal, for the movement, form and content to all coincide to reflect the clearest and most vivid picture. This does not necessarily mean the poems have to follow some strict formula, or rigid rhyme scheme. This process can also be applied to a say, a deconstructed erasure, or an elegy broken up by visual caesura to represent absence or waywardness. It is useful to question the form, though only after the first few drafts are down. For me, it is better to follow the language till it dries up, then perhaps look to form, as it is in fact, always available to interrogate. Trying new modes and techniques is essential to growing a repertoire of styles. It is also just a beneficial exercise for the mind, and helps begin the creative flow of a writing session.

I continue to discover more about poetry each day. I am amazed by how much that can be done within one page of words. It truly astounds me. When I read poets I admire and experience that deep movement inside my being, I cannot think of any place better to be. The only other feeling that may surpass that one is finishing a draft I am proud of.

I write for the pleasure of language, to create pictures with words. I wish I was a better artist, I think I would prefer painting to writing, but perhaps I would miss writing if I went to another creative medium. I am quite convinced at this point that all artistic mediums are children of the same mother. I write and study art because it is the lens I wish to see the world through. I explore subjects that I feel passionate about, that affect my mind deeply.

Often this distills to family narratives and personal experience with close friends, but I believe I am on the verge of approaching poetic fields beyond these immediate connections. I

would never abandoned writing about family and myself, I am not sure it is possible, but I do plan to explore the places outside of myself and immediacy, there are gold mines to find out there.

Finally, this project taught me that to create a very small thing, a very large amount of effort is required. This is humbling as I move forward to further creative endeavors. I will not forget the indebtedness I have to so many that made this project, and all the smaller ones before take place. My wish is that these poems caused pondering through their message and through the simple enjoyment of language.

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