**Creative Work**

“In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country” Imitation

SENSATION

An insect wing the size of dandruff on the skin of my phone. Like a plastic scrap, only when I

looked I saw it was soft. How did I know without touching? When things are soft you can tell

just by seeing. Pillows, birds, not every flower, spiderwebs, the lining of a swimsuit after you

pull it from your body, shower towels siphoning away your effervescence, a sea cucumber’s

back, flesh, pinecones when they fall into water, a nose dropped from the sky, old theater

costumes, split branch with meaty white insides, clothes shopped for online, hands formed into

lips. That’s why touch would be the first to go if I had to lose one of my senses. You absorb the

softness with your eyes and let it slide across the stiff parts of your ear.

Science says that one ear is better at phone calls. Western Massachusetts has no sea. As such

calling home should summon floods of saltwater from the East River and Long Island Sound to

pour directly into your ear. Inside, there is no sound but the rattling and sudden rush of warmth

as you shake your second ear at the sky to get your address to spill out the other in a little mass

on your phone.

SETTING

Seven-thirty on a September night I walked half a mile, the span of which covered three different

towns, to get my bike with the flat tires from the summer storage unit I had rented. The key had

been thrown overboard over a hundred miles away and I had come back anchorless. The week

when the sun swallowed my lungs the locksmiths had battered away at the lock, twisting its thick

loop into shreds, which ruined the door into artwork. This time, they had called to say that the

damage was healed. They had tamed the metal and it was as domestic as a cat again. The door

rolled up and down like a green eye. The greenness spread – grass broke surges of water onto my

sneakers. My hair had grown out in sharp edges that cut my neck into peeling bark. I’d told no

one I had headed out that day. Cars burned past me like bombs.

Gripping sticky bike handles I walked back, sweat tracing my back in thin patterns, a blueprint

for a short circuit. Stumbling into ditches and onto the side of the freeway just a couple feet from

the night drivers, I began clawing at my body. There had been no real woods in New York City

and the darkness was settling like a glass tank. One slap. Two. Harder. Insects crawling behind

the bridge of my glasses, up one of my nipples, inside my calves though my pants were tough

khaki and my skin hard and bristly from the new growth on my legs. My hand kneading my body

as if it would rise like bread, the other guiding my bike’s unsteady steel. Rust floated off its

creaking gears like crumbs. I imagined a few cars slowing down out of curiosity. She must be a

barbarian baker. Something was emerging coiled from behind my skull. The animal engulfed all

noise as I walked home.

I found the wing once I’d stopped to wait for the 30 bus. So a few of my slaps had landed which

meant I had not fully become steam. Then I forgot my bike on the 30 bus and called transit

services in a pretend sorority voice.

*Good news, the bus is turning back in ten minutes.* I thanked him too many times to be true

liquid. I thank most people too many times. Time opened its mouth and let out a moist fish.

I remembered why I had forgotten my bike. I had been too busy looking at a guy who had

gotten on the bus. He was frowning and wouldn’t look at my face. He did not notice my passion

for bowling. A woman sat next to him and spoke rarely. By this time every bus had turned off its

lights for fear of windshield reflections. The students sat without sensing the water. I knew the

reason even though I was as temporary as them. A black eye lived on his face as beautifully as a

conch.

SUSTENANCE

I eat and don’t gain weight. The chemical engineering at late night Berkshire dining incorporates

targeted music toward precisely those born in the late 90’s and early 2000’s. This specificity

(specifoxity) gets narrower and narrower, closer to the one pop song that will drag you back and

bury you underground. Also the chefs are true traditionalists. They derive pleasure from

presenting acquired tastes. On the day when the moon ate the sun which ate the grass, the pork

belly in the ramen was entirely comprised of fat and still had pig hairs on the outside. Very

strange that it’s getting harder to tell between places in the world nowadays. Might as well be in

Asia for this authenticity so spot on it seems too perfect and thus fake. Otherwise maybe I’m

looking for any reason to find a difference, so that I can convince myself of geographic value,

that a certain place on Earth is special, that true confusion would be impossible no matter how

similar the details that I as a writer bloat myself on. In this way every accidental soup dribble

down the cliff of my lip and chewy pork fat wrapped in a napkin would be belts of the sun and

not its relative stars.

SUTURE

Drunk girls are shouting at the third floor window of our dorm. They are begging sweetly. *Could*

*you please throw down some water? This is the thirstiest I’ve been my entire life.*

I have been having trouble setting up the weather app on my phone. College towns don’t exist on

it, as if they are as unreliable as iron when it comes to weather.

They shriek. The guys have closed their window. *Pussy shit! Pussy shit!* I cannot see them but I

can feel the dents of their fingers as they clutch each other, yelling at a space above my head.

Then they walk in slapping sandals through the pond, algae rising up to shelter their long hair,

and disappear. It is a legendary unsolved case in the campus archives.

The New York weather stays on my phone, beaming yellow cartoon suns. Some of them peek

out only halfway so that makes it more realistic.

In a way…

In which…

The next day the rain on our skin moved like clouds.

*Bluets* Imitation (Edited)

Yellowing Song

1. One day a color woke up without remembering anything of the night before. The glass was empty and it was raining, though no one heard the rain.
2. I work at an art pop-up that has commercialized color from San Francisco to New York and I cannot name a single shade of yellow.
3. I needed an alibi. I looked for power. Ten years after my parents began hitting me, I joined the Air Force. At the recruitment event I saw a woman with a yellow braided cord on her shoulder and wanted to know what it meant.
4. Well, that is to say I’m in the process of joining the Air Force. Nothing is certain in this old country.
5. West Springfield, Massachusetts. At the Big E agricultural fair, heifers and sheep posed for phone photos. The ewes looked at us with their shiny eyes and the cows looked at us with their other ends. A little boy with blonde hair led a brown calf into the ring right before a woman who looked to be his sister walked in with a cow right behind him.
6. In the English language, yellow has traditionally been associated with jaundice and cowardice. Calling someone *“yellow”* or *“yellow-bellied”* is the same as calling them a coward. Irresponsible reporting is referred to as *“yellow journalism.”* The color also represents betrayal, terror, and illness. Interestingly, the latter of these associations is thought to be due to the fact that yellow pigments are often found in toxic materials.
7. During a creative writing and art program in which I essayed myself in for free, I am served eggs benedict. I am ecstatic because runny eggs have been avoided in my family’s cooking. It’s delectable but I cannot stomach too much, as with anything the first time.
8. There is a friend I have not seen in a year. We met on Tinder messaging about ambition and indie anime that I had never heard of. I watched a few episodes just in case -- they were about a swashbuckling misogynistic space explorer who died in the first episode. In fact we met on a field next to twenty other fields at the first archery meeting. The targets were filled with straw, and after every round we dug arrows out of the earth. If we couldn’t find an arrow the club president got out the metal detector. I found my friend after round one and he shook hands with me. Just from looking I realized that he’d been blonde as a child.
9. I watch the Simpsons with a kind of existential dread.

1. When I look at white people I see overlapping images of light and dark hair, an image of time. Born with a swath of permanently dark hair, all I can say is that I do not have the privilege of others viewing me the way I do some others.
2. The color yellow is a spontaneous and unstable color. It is often associated with food and is frequently used in children’s products and marketing advertisements aimed at children. According to the internet, yellow is not a color that should be used when marketing products to prestigious or wealthy men.
3. A week later I am doing a ropes course with my friend thirty feet above the forest ground. The campus police who organized this share sandwiches down below. However, it is only on the tightrope three feet in the air, without higher support, that we are forced to clutch each other’s bodies.
4. Many Italians think about detective novels when hearing the word “giallo,” yellow -- Arnoldo Mondadori published in 1929, for the first time, these kinds of books with a yellow cover.
5. When we got pizza the sun had already been removed from the Earth. In a nightclub dress on the streets of Amherst, old ladies passing by with their dogs, I made a mistake. I nearly leaned on his shoulder before he ended it and made it clear about the eclipse.
6. Yellow is, in nature, a sign of danger that humans have copied. Due to its luminosity and to the fact that it’s immediately recognizable, school buses, taxis and stop lights are yellow. I have never noticed a yellow elevator help button before now. I realize that I am what the color has forgotten.
7. On the way back to my dorm my friend says that he is halfway when it comes to politics. I immediately say that maybe reverse racism is real. He immediately and eagerly agrees. When we arrive I offer a platonic hug. I call it a platonic hug aloud. He takes it. I have not seen him again since.
8. Few artists in history have been known for their use of yellow, an exception being Joseph Mallord William Turner. He loved the color to the point that contemporary critics mocked his images as being “afflicted with jaundice,” and him as possessing a vision disorder. For his sublime seascapes, Turner used the experimental watercolor Indian Yellow—a fluorescent paint derived from the urine of mango-fed cows (a practice banned less than a century later for animal cruelty). For brighter touches, Turner employed the synthetic Chrome Yellow, a lead-based pigment known to cause delirium.
9. In the tenth century, the French painted the doors of traitors and criminals yellow. In Germany the color is jealous, and in ancient China royal. Today, a “yellow book” in China refers to porn.
10. According to the website of Bourne Creative Studio, if yellow is overused, it can have a disturbing effect. For example, it is a proven fact that babies cry more in rooms painted yellow. Too much yellow causes loss of focus and makes it hard to complete a task. Too much yellow also can cause people to become critical and demanding.
11. We recognize the deceitful Judas very often in ancient artwork from the fact that he is given dingy yellow robes.
12. Also according to the website of Bourne Creative Studio, too little yellow causes feelings of isolation and fear, insecurity, and low self-esteem. A lack of yellow can cause one to become rigid, cunning, possessive, or defensive.
13. Months later the Air Force opens up to me like a drink. As I run over the crest of a hill I realize that sunflowers have been inserted beneath the quick of my muscle. The faces around me are more diverse than any upper-level English course I have experienced. *What Harry Potter house are you in?* A guy asks a second lieutenant behind me. I expect Hufflepuff, to match our current breathing and work ethic. *Gryffindor for sure*, she says. People around us nod in bursts of condensation.
14. In one of the earliest formal explorations of color theory, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe argues that darkness is an active ingredient rather than the passive absence of light. Color itself is a degree of darkness, he tells us. Then how, in the same work, is yellow the “color nearest the light?” Perhaps because despite its serene cheer, it is “extremely liable to contamination, and produces a very disagreeable effect if sullied.”
15. My face is losing and gaining this yellow at the same time. I have a blinded view and can only see either the translucent pale skin of fresh-off-the-boaters, or the rich tan that shows someone is a true American. Yellow patches on my skin fade away in certain lights. No wonder a few old white people look at me as if I were trying to deceive them.
16. Over the course of the 2013 music video I am watching, the yellow streetlights transform into epileptic fluorescent lights. If Selena Gomez tells us to slow down the sun, how can we refuse? If we all are yellow under those lights, is the solution to do a gravitational twerk to ourselves in the mirror?
17. Jon M. Chu, director of *Crazy Rich Asians,* writes a letter to Coldplay. Dear Chris, Guy, Jonny and Will. I know it's a bit strange, but my whole life I've had a complicated relationship with the color yellow. From being called the word in a derogatory way throughout grade school, to watching movies where they called cowardly people yellow, it's always had a negative connotation in my life. That is, until I heard your song.
18. “We all live in a yellow submarine, yellow submarine, yellow submarine…” sang the Beatles.
19. Jon M. Chu, cont.: For the first time in my life, it described the color in the most beautiful, magical ways I had ever heard: the color of the stars, her skin, the love. It was an incredible image of attraction and aspiration that it made me rethink my own self image. Within an hour, Coldplay emailed Chu back granting him permission to use the song. On the screen Katherine Ho croons “Yellow” in Mandarin, where despite being a near fluent listener joy (幸福, xìng fú) is the only phrase I recognize.
20. According to another online article, which moves like driftwood, gemstones are believed to aid in clarity, boost concentration, increase energy, and offer relief from burnout, panic, nervousness, or exhaustion.
21. This makes sense -- traditionally, yellow ribbons were worn as a sign of hope as women waited for men to come home from war. Today, yellow ribbons are still used to welcome home loved ones.

“At Night the States” Imitation (Edited)

**Friends With Men**

T-minus four minutes I watch

for the crippled winter

tasting like the road

below fruit trees I may have

asked for

too much. Or not at all

these rockets let go

of satellites in full.

I hear Cape Canaveral through

a screen marred in light stringy

earbuds and my hands

fictitious

Well here I use them to wind up

black curtains the

muscles in her arms beautiful and

tape x’s on linoleum

the cosmic rattle is a friend

of a friend of

mine who deceived me

right now perhaps the bright

bombs of my fists act

as propellant

in particular how do I get myself

back into this scattering

of beams down here

saying bye to winds from

southeast the stage clear

in its calamity

T-minus four minutes I watch

by the speaker a sharp

body swerving

having crafted his feet into drums

these once caught my eye ten seats

behind this is one thing

I have gotten myself into

I wore gray and followed

take care our silence take

care some day care

will take itself

into the shadow of an

alternate heart

another one I think of having given

me a sensitive plant

which never happened.

It was in a little box

so that the leaves would flinch

as little as possible

from touch and have less reason

to move which wastes energy.

I took this gift and the first

thing I did was touch. Actually there was a car

named Marsha and a thousand

soft gray seats. The stars do not bear to sing to me

though I heard the singing. The uplift

feeling blew out my eyes

my new bangs fell out which

is why I look up further

between my fingers

T-minus four minutes I watch

you are looking somewhere else

I am looking somewhere else

The truth never appeared but the

careful not to break me

sits by the root tree

meeting downstairs

you took out the trash of

someone else you took

out

The greatest touch I believe is

head against head soft

hair weaving through a

different

light we look at

This is not

a star but

a star is telling me don’t get

hurt and

I believe

in this and

a Chinese writing

book the

rocket Atlas

V and certain

intermediate

miracles along frontiers of

heat

T-minus four minutes I watch

the first in

a brown jacket no

crime apart from

being a vat of

oxygen

a robber took

the atmosphere without

knowing

the certain power.

So I watch the Centaur engine

rise

and leave the emptiness

where the atmosphere

was behind.

The satellite will

inject into low

Earth parking orbit this October

I saw by

the pond a

strange car inside

a blue plaid shirt

was hanging

axis of wind

I forgot to say it was windy.

One night I thought it was

my turn

to hold the stage

revolver drilled so it could

never fire

she stood a solid planet

I made drafts of her orbit

and begged her

to not be dulled into adulthood

because I’d heard

so much talking about dick

and rent plus which

celebrities retired

actually I did

no such thing

only held a stage knife

the knife shone

like the trail of

a rocket

T-minus four minutes I watch

the round mouth

alight and disappear

into black Florida

clouds.

I don’t want the cold blear

behind my

eyes remaining after I close the

screen if the

contact were what it were

the knowing hot landfall

of

steel on the vast stitching above

forgetting each bright

-footed streak

outside the great

station

the time

light-

footed

did these comets find

the borders of

my knees

and run

along them only I know

the names run

through my chest my

house with

no

floor

**Reading Responses**

Response to *Bluets* by Maggie Nelson

*Bluets* instantly compelled me with its evocative diction and short numbered sections,

which creatively express Nelson’s process of dealing with heartache. To me it seemed that the

book lends a legitimacy to emotion, particularly female emotion, which is often overlooked or

denied, by utilizing an almost archival investigation into the philosophy of color through various

eras and situations. The wide span of Nelson’s information about the philosophy of color, love,

and life is particularly striking as she draws inspiration across multiple cultures, frequently using

specialized information as references, which gives the book a sense of universality. This to me

demonstrated how Nelson wanted her experience of a breakup to be taken as seriously as

other intellectual subjects, which introduces the question of why we do not see such emotional

events to be as legitimate as academic and cultural truth in their own right already. For the

individual, personal trauma can be just as truthful and overwhelming as the highest academic and

philosophical musings, and Nelson allows us to truly believe this through her chosen style of

mapping her suffering through neatly listing various academic and cultural ideas, to the point

where we can feel the emotion in the intellectual ideas and the intellectual legitimacy in Nelson’s

own suffering.

The traumas central to the text are her breakup with “the prince of blue,” and her friend’s

accident which caused her to become a quadriplegic. It was eye-opening to witness the depth of

Nelson’s emotion through her sharp, specific imagery in certain sections, such as her account of

a lover who “was always breaking things and coming up with ingenious means of rigging them

back together… [he] placed precious orchids on wobbly stands…had one tattoo, a navy blue

snake, which I liked to watch dance against the white of his wrist when the rest of his hand

disappeared inside me” (83). She also uses multiple registers of diction, ranging from the

sophisticated language of complex philosophy to blunt words about sex. Though the seriousness

and complexity of the philosophy that Nelson often referred to put me off at first, especially once

it became clear that she was relating these ideas to a breakup, which is often seen as a minor and

shallow event to others, their contrast to her deeply emotional experiences allows for empathy

for the breakup’s impact on her. While people often look down on breakups as not suitable to be

taken seriously, especially not in writing, a breakup’s impact on the individual is often intense

and life-changing. I felt myself developing greater empathy for Nelson’s situation due to the

comparison between Nelson’s heartache and the immense cultural and academic ideas she cites.

The second heartbreak she experiences, when her female friend gets seriously injured, is in

contrast an experience that is usually taken more seriously than a breakup, and Nelson writes

about more interactions with her friend than her interactions with the “prince of blue.” The

genuine love in this female relationship, a constant throughout the book, stood out to me as a

contrast against Nelson’s brief descriptions of her experiences with differing male lovers, and I

thought this embraced a certain type of agency that Nelson regains as part of her recovery from

the trauma of her breakup. All of these traumas never became melodramatic and all of them were

respected as experiences of the level of great philosophical experiences as well as scientific and

cultural truths, due to Nelson’s writing choice to illustrate her suffering in an encyclopedic

treatise surrounding the concept of blue.

Personally, this writing touched me, especially through my own experiences with

depression and trauma. I became more empathetic toward both Nelson and my past experiences

through quotes such as “Mostly I have felt myself becoming a servant of sadness. I am still

looking for the beauty in that” (29). As a poet, I appreciated her search for blue throughout time

and space, which I often do through simpler means such as the internet when writing about a

certain subject I have limited knowledge on. The intuitive connections she makes in *Bluets*

between different ideas were especially familiar to me, and as such seemed to legitimize my own

methods of creative writing. Toward the end, I was inspired by her reflections on recovery after

many pages of acknowledging her suffering, especially moments such as “Imagine someone

saying, “Our fundamental situation is joyful.” Now imagine *believing* it… 221. Or forget belief:

imagine *feeling*, even for a moment, that it were true” (89). I also admired how Nelson used her

truthfulness to take back sexual power by the end of the text, which adds another layer to the

self-empowerment present in including her breakup as something that has a rightful place among

intellectual ideas. By the end I was questioning my initial thoughts about how inserting her

breakup alongside these ideas was cloying – who can say that emotional trauma and events are

not just as truthful and worthy of intellectual respect, to the individual? Ultimately, I found

inspiration for my own writing as well as more respect for my own emotional experiences. I

believe that now I’ll even aim to be a student of my experiences, as Nelson’s subtle analysis of

the difference between desire and yearning as well as the relationship between love and light

leads to the final conclusion, “When I was alive, I aimed to be a student not of longing but of

light” (95).

Response to *The Great Fires* by Jack Gilbert

I found *The Great Fires* to be a moving collection that shows how more traditional

writing and form, as compared to other poetry we’ve encountered in this class, can also evoke

a lot of emotion. The broad array of poem topics in this collection, and how they each connected

to one experience of grief, was the most compelling to me, and I had fun thinking about how

each poem might appear to be a world of its own, yet related in some way to the trauma of

Michiko’s death. Certain poignant lines really resonated with me, though I have never

experience a great grief like Jack Gilbert, and this intrigued me because I was curious about how

he created a space for empathy within his poetry for people without the same trauma. I realized

that my favorite quote, from “The Great Fires,” the poem that lends its name to the collection,

“Love allows us to walk / in the sweet music of our particular heart,” reflected how Gilbert

evoked empathy in me. Through writing about universal themes such as love and longing, he

manages to give readers an opening into his trauma. By emphasizing with how Gilbert thinks

about love, I could relate the loss of his wife to my own life by imagining how it would be if I

lost someone close to me.

Another hallmark of this collection was the vivid imagery – lines such as “repotting

Michiko’s avocado, I find / a long black hair tangled in the dirt,” and “one of those deer…reach

up inside its ass and maybe / find us a little gland or something / that might make a hell of a

perfume” struck me as memorable and unique representations of how life goes on after grief.

Other images I enjoyed were in the poems “Peaches”: “remembering peaches. A strange, almost

gray kind…there had to be a reason / why people bought them…still not sure whether he liked /

it or not. And never able to find any of them since” and “Playing House:”: “I found another baby

scorpion…Did they sleep afraid? Merely alert? / Not needing to touch the other first?” These

will be the images I remember when I think about this collection in the future and I think I will

spend a long time thinking about how they clarify the experience of grief. In fact, my favorite

poem, “Hard Wired,” is largely based on imagery as a metaphor for how Gilbert deals with his

grief. “The raccoon gets behind a tree. Comes again, / cautious and fierce. It stops halfway. /

They stand glaring in the faint starlight.” This poem became a moment of self-discovery for me,

as I had never thought moments of tension as being relevant to the experience of grief – as such I

can say that this taught me, who has never experienced extreme grief, about the experience.

Maybe I will be better prepared or more perceptive if grief does eventually come my way. I also

especially enjoyed “Michiko Dead” for its poignant everyday moment of shifting the weight of a

heavy object one is carrying as a representation of coping with grief.

When I looked at the poems as a collection, the first thing I realized that I was likely

learning quirks about Gilbert himself – I thought that I could conclude that he enjoys singing and

isn’t good at cooking. Additionally, unlike other poetry such as *Bluets* and “At Night the States,”

this collection stays within a traditional poetic free verse form, relying on individual phrases to

convey a sense of mystery. I personally enjoyed how the titles conveyed so much information

because I tend to do the same thing with my own poetry, and it was refreshing to see that I

wasn’t the only person tempted to do this. At the same time, this collection made me fearful at

points about its perspective on women. While I wanted to know what Michiko was like as an

individual, I never got anything more than a delicate, ill body throughout the collection. For a

collection dedicated to Michiko, I realized by the end that I didn’t know what Michiko’s

ambitions were, or her desires apart from her impact on Gilbert. I thought it would have been

more respectful to her memory to delve into Michiko as an individual person, but can relate as a

writer to the temptation to include other people as props in one’s writing, as it’s unavoidable that

the person one is closest to is oneself and it’s natural to want to write about your own perspective

more than others’. However, I became unsettled by certain roles that women play in the

collection, from quotes such as “We must / eat through the wildness of her sweet body already /

in our bed to reach the body within that body,” “The sadness makes her fine, / makes me happy,”

and “At the last instant could not resist darting a look / down at her new breasts.” The attitude

that female sadness and youth can be fetishized and consumed seemed dangerous to me, and as

an Asian-American woman I especially look out for moments where Asian women appear

docile, one-dimensional, and without agency in literature. I realized that I really wanted to learn

more about who Michiko was but was never satisfied, which confused me because I thought that

if I were to write about grief, I would try to recapture the character of whoever I lost during their

best times as diligently I could. Michiko is only portrayed in her weakest times in this collection,

as an ill, dying, and easily pleased woman. Even though I loved certain poems in *The Great*

*Fires*, during other moments I felt anxious and had the urge to ask all my male friends to make

sure to remember my ambitions and dreams if I died, because a poem had made me afraid that I

wouldn’t be remembered as I wanted myself to be. Overall, *The Great Fires* made me think more

about the nature of grief and how an individual coped with the trauma, which may help my own

writing if I choose to include elements of grief in my poetry or fiction because of my lack of

experience with grief otherwise. This collection immersed me in a multilayered experience of

trauma spanning many different aspects of life, but it may not be a collection I’ll revisit as much

as the ones by female writers that were introduced in class.

“At Night the States” Response

“At Night the States” by Alice Notley made me feel both unsettled and soothed, as if it

were revealing to me bits and pieces of my own thoughts. The diction especially stood out as a

unique aspect, breathless and almost nonsensical as if the narrator were having a panic attack and

could hardly get the words out. As I continued reading, I became lost in the narrator’s thoughts

from the stream of consciousness diction, where clarity of speech seemed to be corrupted by

trauma, so that the lineation seemed to give the poem the sound of a distorted radio message. The

repetition of the phrase “At night the states” helped keep me focused throughout the poem,

which was somewhat confusing at times. At times, it seemed like the only moment of connection

between a scattering of ideas and brief perception. As such, this focus seemed obsessive, only

ringing with a more potent vulnerability than the obsession with the color blue in *Bluets* by

Maggie Nelson because of the abrupt lineation and complete immersion within the stream-of-

consciousness voice. Somehow, I expected that if one were to get even closer to a narrator’s

mind, as “At Night the States” seems to do in comparison with the clearer diction of *Bluets*, I

would understand more about the narrator – this poem made me recognize that even when one

gets as close to a narrator’s mind as stream-of-consciousness does, the narrator can be a barrier

herself, trapped from sharing clear visions to readers by the piecemeal thinking trauma may

cause. This made the narrator of “At Night the States” more mysterious, yet more real as I

recognized pieces of my own thoughts in the poem, though they were likely from completely

different circumstances from what inspired this poem. I think this poem demonstrates the

importance of intuition and feeling in a poem, to the point where they can be prioritized over

straightforward diction in order to express an emotional state.

My mysterious emotional connection to the phrases in “At Night the States,” despite

living within different circumstances from the narrator, also inspired me to investigate questions

of how we interpret writing as empathy. I recognized the smaller pieces of diction as reminiscent

of my thinking when I had experienced trauma or shock, and I especially enjoyed the constant

questioning within the poem, as if the narrator were trying to work through elements of her

trauma, with questions such as “Who are you to dare sing to me?” and “What takes you so

long?” As I progressed through the piece, which I had purposely read first without any

knowledge of the writer’s background or inspiration, I realized I was freely taking phrases and

applying them to my own life. For example, the phrase “the states are not good to me as / I am to

them” struck an emotional chord with me, as I associated this with my decision to participate in

U.S. Air Force ROTC. This phrase put my belief that I could help create a better country through

moral leadership in a more uncertain light as I wondered whether I would ever reap the rewards

of my work even if I succeeded, as a woman of color in the United States. I found myself asking

whether my concept of “the states,” or greater American society, would ever be as good to me as

I was working to be to them. I interpreted the lines “I walked fiery and / talked in the / stars of

the automatic weapons / and partly for you / Which you. You know” as relevant to my own

thoughts about gun violence in America. However, I realized I had turned the poem toward my

own purposes as a source of affirmation, and that I continued to do so even after I learned that

“At Night the States” was about Notley’s grief after her husband’s death. Only when I creatively

connected phrases to situations I had experienced, no matter how different, did I feel true

empathy and start enjoying the poem. Do we appropriate phrases from poems to describe our

own circumstances even if that wasn’t the writer’s intention? Is this the only way for writing to

work as empathy, as everyone’s experiences are different? Does one have to see how the words

fit one’s own circumstances in order to empathize with or enjoy the poem, or is there something

of value in trying to understand the poem in the context of what is personal to the writer? These

questions all came up in my mind as I airlifted phrases such as “I couldn’t just walk on by,” “that

shirt is how I feel,” and “Call my name” to bring comfort and affirmation to my personal

ruminations, none of which had anything to do with the narrator’s particular grief. If this is

hijacking, is this unavoidable? After I finished reading the poem, I realized that first adapting

these phrases to my own life, an action that seems almost selfish, let me empathize with the

narrator’s circumstances more on the second read. The vulnerability present in the very rhythm

of the language had tempted me to steal it to enrich my own personal life, which had helped me

become engaged enough with the piece to empathize with the writer’s circumstances on the

second read. The emotional poignancy of ”At Night the States” taught me that there is nothing

wrong with using phrases from a poem to support one’s own life, no matter how different your

life is from the subject matter or trauma of the poem. If the diction is broad, creative, and

forgiving as in this poem, one can easily “steal” phrases for personal comfort, forgetting about

the writer’s intended subject, and empathize deeply with the intended subject on the very next

read-through. As Notley says, “I forget them or I wish I was there.”

“Mount Monadnock Transmissions” Response

“Mount Monadnock Transmissions” is a moving collection with a devastating trauma as

its focus, and I found myself drawn in by the ways in which CA Conrad describes and extends

the physicality of Earth, the murdered boyfriend. One of the first physical descriptions of Earth is

“Dear Ghost flickering with / flames that no longer hurt,” which focuses on the traumatic reality

of the boyfriend’s non-existence and murder. This clarity contrasts against other, more

mysterious phrases, and the disorienting structure of the poems themselves. Conrad’s desire for

the boyfriend to physically return is movingly illustrated in the lines, “but I can put every poem /

I ever wrote / in a pile / and burn / them if you / would appear / on the other side,” which

resonated for me as a writer myself, where I could imagine the value of my poems to me, and

doing the same if I were in a similar situation. Later, the boyfriend slowly becomes a more

concrete entity, though never returns to full living status in Conrad’s descriptions. “A beautiful

moving / target is all you / wanted to be,” Conrad writes, emphasizing the transience of the

boyfriend’s presence. As the poems continue, the true violence of the boyfriend’s murder is

emphasized, reducing the boyfriend to a series of near-incorporeal elements – he first becomes

indistinguishable apart from his dental records as “they needed / dental records to prove / you

were once you / beat the force back.” Then, Conrad describes the boyfriend’s presence as

“wilting in the / painting of summer.” There is no flashback or description of how the boyfriend

was in life, which demonstrates the permanence and impact of this loss. The unpredictable

lineation builds on the theme of trauma, where the form is as amorphous as the various elements

the boyfriend takes on. In fact, the boyfriend’s physical presence appears to almost disappear

entirely unless illuminated by Conrad’s love; a poem that begins with “your rapists were the last

/ to taste you in this world” ends with “I miss you / I love you.” Conrad’s love seems to be not

focused on the boyfriend’s physical existence, but stands as an entity on its own even throughout

drastic physical transformations. One particularly vivid image of trauma and love emerges in the

lines “each time I drink water dropped from clouds / water they burned out of your body I cup

my / hands to catch you.” This phrase transformed the way I thought about such a murder,

introducing a brutal yet cyclic nature and as such a hopeful yet ethereal contact with the

murdered boyfriend through water. The murdered boyfriend still only has a physicality

drastically different from the human person he was in life, an element without any agency, which

underscores the tragedy of the trauma.

Conrad begins to want to give the boyfriend more agency, as Conrad tells him to start

writing poems: “I want you to start writing / poems in the land of the dead / I want you to stop

counting / on mine made up like / you want.” Conrad realizes the agency that death has robbed

from the boyfriend, and that his own words can only capture the boyfriend’s transformations into

elements without agency because to do so otherwise would mean potentially writing the

boyfriend’s self wrongly. These bits and pieces of near-physicality seem to show how Conrad

respects and desires the boyfriend’s agency and longs to hear from him without subsuming the

boyfriend’s voice with his writing. However, the boyfriend never manifests as he would have in

life because of his death and Conrad’s decision that he cannot speak for the boyfriend, only show

how he interacts with the boyfriend’s barely-corporeal presence. The boyfriend gains slightly

more physicality as Conrad “dreamed your babies / stretched inside me…the cry of long-distance

babies / holding hands inside my big belly / this is known as the sharking of / the birdcage.” The

boyfriend takes the most physical form he has been in this collection, a part of the babies Conrad

imagines he carries, which are then given animalistic power. This can also be interpreted as more

incorporeal, as the pregnancy described here appears physically impossible for gay men. Despite

this, the power of Conrad’s desire nearly elevates a portion of the boyfriend back to life, even if

as a figment of trapped, wild babies. However, the boyfriend returns to ghost status as in the first

of the poems, and Conrad appears to begin to accept the boyfriend’s physical nature as a ghost,

resolving the multitude of transformations the boyfriend’s form undertakes throughout the

collection: “I’m tired of smelling my dead boyfriend…don’t be / a coward / about love…hurry

back and forth / to kiss me my / ghost.” The boyfriend’s physicality undergoes beautiful and

violent transformations into incorporeal and near-corporeal elements over the course of “Mount

Monadnock Transmissions,” and Conrad finally seems to begin coming to terms with his trauma

by returning the boyfriend to his form as a ghost yet continuing to be able to physically express

his love for him.

**Workshop Response Letters**

Henry Kim Workshop Response

Hey Henry,

I really enjoyed your piece, it’s actually one of my favorites from this class so far! The idea of

embracing being equally clean and dirty is unique as a lot of the time we only hear about

cleansing and there isn’t any appreciation for being dirty, so it made me look at the world in a

whole new way. I think it’s both very philosophical, which comes from the intellectual quotes

and language, and personal because of the first person and curse words. I actually really liked

your use of “high” and “low” registers, or using complicated philosophical words alongside

curse words, which is a really interesting parallel to the main theme of being clean and dirty at

the same time. The language and word structure is very poetic, and it feels like a very

comprehensive appreciation of the power of language because each word has a lot of power

because this piece is so short, but you use different types of “clean” and “dirty” language. Also,

your notes in the online document actually also reminded me of poetry, so a creative idea I have

is for you to keep the following notes as part of the piece as they are:

discuss→ relates to relationships with other people,

different culture’s values→

turn it around→ i am clean freak

This reminds me of more innovative poetry, which uses symbols such as arrows and lowercase

“i’s” to convey a unique emotion. I think you should keep these words and commas/arrows

without ending words as they are because they lend a lot of humanity and depth to this piece. If

you end it like that, this would be a decisive piece of poetry since it creatively removes the

philosophical barrier between the reader and narrator and reveals the thinking process in a meta

way. These simple words are also just as beautiful as the rest of the writing. This is just an idea

but I think if you did this intentionally it could put more excitement and creativity into the piece.

I think you should try submitting this for publication! Overall great job, I think you should keep

writing about more unique ideas that make people think differently, and keep looking into

poetry!

Matt Workshop Response

Hey Matt,

I really enjoyed your piece which was really fun to read! I thought the dialogue and actions were

engaging, which reminded me more of a movie scene than creative writing, especially the

creative writing traditionally read in English classes. I think that this piece’s genre is most

similar to popular fiction, which is something that English majors like me feel discouraged about

writing after studying literature, so I admire how you shared this piece. It was fascinating how

you used moments that seemed like they could be from older pulp fiction, such as the mentions

of Walter being a slave for the upper class, the mysterious plot, and the presence of butlers and

tea, which reminded me of stereotypical British fiction from the 19th century. At the beginning, I

thought that this was period fiction until the moment when Miss Linda says that “vegan bastards

are coming over,” and the sudden reveal that the piece was taking place in the present was

an effect that was really cool and one that I had never thought about before. I think blending this

Victorian-England-ish setting and characters into the present day is unique and the fact that I was

so convinced this was period fiction but the actual dialogue and characters could exist in the

present day is super interesting. Also, I think there was an interesting subthread with a little

humor in how there is a woman collecting tea bags for the homeless, and how the message is

obviously threatening, but Miss Landa is oblivious enough to look past these many opportunities

to avoid being poisoned. I think the first paragraph of the piece really shows her lack of

intelligence and perception in its imagery, and I’m interested in learning more about how her

obsession with tea developed. I’m interested in knowing what happens next since the three

characters, Miss Landa, Katrina, and Walter are interesting and really different from each other,

which makes me look forward to more character interactions. The plot is also engaging – if this

is the first chapter of a longer piece, maybe look into making this chapter longer as ending on

“everything went black” is a little cliché. The main draw is the characters, who have a fun

dynamic, so I want to know more about who they are. I think you should keep writing fiction and

if this is part of a longer piece, look broadly at what you want the character development and the

plot to be!