

DEAR SATELLITE

by

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ABSTRACT

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This creative dissertation explores issues of female identity in contemporary American culture in an extended sequence of lyric-narrative poems. In these poems, speakers must try to negotiate female identity through examining the range of available aesthetic positions offered to women by art, social and cultural identities, and familial relationships as we understand them in western culture.

Most often, the book revolves around questions of body, and attempts to think through how modes of aestheticization— and fetishization— of certain qualities of “femaleness” have constructed the ways that women can act and be in the contemporary world. In order to examine the connection between aesthetic constructions of the female body and their impact on rhetorical positioning, the book places its speakers in strange and varying physical locales throughout the manuscript. Thus, the speakers of these poems are often found at the bottom of a river, inside the electrical wiring of a house, or within the human eardrum, in order to consider what shifts must be made in order to accommodate this speech.

Additionally, the poems use multiple approaches to gendered relationships as part of their exploration of aesthetics. For example, one poem in the dissertation might show a young female speaker grappling with her mother’s identity, while another considers how to maintain an identity within the unifying structure of marriage. In this way, many poems use the mother-daughter or husband-wife relationships to help think through how cultural undercurrents have shaped and, sometimes, restricted our sense of archetypal female identities.

Through these poems, the dissertation attempts to encapsulate how many positions female bodies, as aesthetic figures, must sustain in their cultural and social placements in the contemporary world.

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Kara van de Graaf
Critical Introduction
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‘I like a look of agony’:
Uncovering the Female Gothic Lyric

Although the texts that first defined the gothic as a genre were written over two centuries ago, their specter has continued to haunt the imaginations of female writers and critics alike. As Diana Wallace and Andrew Smith claim in their retrospective article “The Female Gothic: Then and Now,” Ellen Moers helped to “place the gothic at the centre of female tradition” when she coined the term ‘female gothic’ in her landmark 1976 work *Literary Women* (Then and Now 2). Other critics, such as Gilbert and Gubar, corroborated this emphasis on the gothic as part of the early critical landscape about female writers, envisioning texts by Radcliffe, Bronte, and Shelley as key sites of ideological critique for women writers who, via the shifting place of the domestic sphere, found themselves newly minted ‘angels of the house.’ Through the ‘low art’ of the gothic novel, critics claimed, women were able to exploit architectural, supernatural, spatial and other generic qualities in order to “articulat[e] women’s dissatisfactions with patriarchal structures and [offer] a coded expression of their fears of entrapment within the domestic and the female body (Female Gothic 2).

While the genre of the 18th and 19th century female gothic provided rich ground for critics to begin important conversations about female tradition, its influence is far from absent in contemporary creative texts by women. Elaine Showalter devoted a brief chapter of her recent book *A Jury of Her Peers*, an historical overview of American women writers, to what she called the “extreme gothic,” a genre that became “a phenomenon of women’s writing in the 1990’s” (497). Similarly, Wallace and Smith note that “One of the most fertile

areas of critical investigation post-1990... has been the exploration of the Gothic in twentieth-century texts by women,” citing such examples as Toni Morrison, Angela Carter, and Margaret Atwood (*Then and Now 2*). And beyond these more ‘literary’ examples, writers like Stephanie Meyers and her *Twilight* series prove that the gothic still sells to a female readership, much like its pulp predecessors.

Given the degree of emphasis the gothic has received in critical scholarship about female writers, and its enduring presence in the literary landscape, it seems strange that there is comparably little work that addresses the gothic in women’s poetry. Much of what does exist in this vein revolves around isolated moments of gothic tropes or images rather than reckoning with the genre’s larger concerns. While it’s true that the gothic as a genre was originally confined to prose and does not exist as a poetic category like the lyric or the epic, many of the gothic’s key qualities, as subsequently delineated by scholars, remain profitable inroads for reading poetry. In this essay, I want to suggest that far from alien to established poetic categories, the gothic genre is an important throughline in poetry by American women and has helped to delineate and establish their participation in the evolving genre of the lyric. Famously defined by Northrop Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism* as “preeminently the utterance that is overheard,” the contemporary lyric is most often concerned with the self created on the page (Frye 249). Lyrics are traditionally ‘personal’ in nature, often enlarging internal moments of emotion such as grief, love, or desire, and troubling the dividing line between internal and external, public and private. By carefully attending to how several key American women poets negotiate the gothic’s similar obsession with boundaries—between death and life, normative and monstrous body, domestic and foreign, and self and other—it’s possible to see how the gothic has provided key ground for staking out female ‘lyric personae’ across multiple literary timeperiods. Through this exploration, I will demonstrate

how the gothic genre has functioned as part of the lyric tradition for women poets in America, and also how I hope to participate in this tradition in my own writing.

In this essay, I will examine the poetry of Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath, and Tracy K. Smith, three representative women writers who can serve as examples of how many American women poets have entwined lyric and gothic traditions. Although male authors have also made use of the gothic's generic hallmarks to express their own anxieties, these expressions are critically significant for different reasons. The gothic period represented a touchstone moment for women writers, when ideological shifts surrounding the domestic made it possible for the genre to become, as Kate Ferguson Ellis in *The Contested Castle* calls it, a "segment of culture directed toward women" (x). In many ways, the gothic is the birthplace of not only a female literary tradition, as established by Moers, but also a creative point of entry for women to begin articulating a sense of their own ideological positioning in writing. As many critics suggest, "it is in the Gothic novel that women writers could first accuse the 'real world' of falsehood and deep disorder" (qtd. in DeLamotte 151). Further, I argue that the use of the gothic has remained an important means of continuing to articulate the self, as well as critique ideologies surrounding female identity, for American women writers. This usage is distinct from gothic writing by male authors because, although they may also use the genre to help launch arguments about ideology, these arguments rarely center specifically on issues of the female 'self,' nor do they directly participate in the same lineage. Thus, we must read the use of the gothic by women writers throughout this essay, who write in the context of this literary history, very differently than male writers.

Before beginning this examination, it is useful to provide a framework for my understanding of the gothic genre and its means and concerns. For a literary genre that boasts so many easily-perceived devices and markers—ghosts and specters, labyrinthine

castles, murder, long-held secrets—it’s remarkably difficult to give a concise and adequate definition. In fact, Diane Long Hoeveler, in her book *Gothic Feminisms*, suggests that it is precisely this “laundry list” approach to cataloguing the gothic that has helped it resist “systematic analysis” in the past (2). Rather than trace only moments when gothic *content* appears in women’s poetry, I want to follow more contemporary critics by examining how the gothic helps poets dramatize their search for lyric identities, just as it helped earlier women writers negotiate their place within shifting social and political climates. As Eugenia C. DeLamotte, in her book *The Perils of Night*, has argued, “Gothic romance offers a symbolic language congenial to the expression of...anxieties that resolve themselves most fundamentally into a concern about the boundaries of the self” (DeLamotte 14). Thus, it is not enough to merely notice that hallmark tropes and figures of the gothic are present in a poem; their significance depends upon the ways they engage with what DeLamotte and other critics agree is the central preoccupation of the genre—anxieties caused by the suddenly “unstable, elusive, ineffective, nonexistent” limits between the self and the world (22).

Although there are many available examples of gothic means that might be useful in reading poetry by American women, several key tropes and images are particularly important to my analysis in this essay. One of the hallmarks of the gothic is its foreboding, mysterious atmosphere, which is aided in no small part by its attention to space and architecture. In gothic novels, very often, the home seems to take on a life of its own, towering monolithically over the characters, containing endless passageways and secret corridors. The experience of feeling dwarfed or lost by the very structures that might otherwise be comforting and part of home is a quintessentially gothic event. Sometimes characters—especially female characters, find it impossible to escape the confines of these looming

domestic structures, and homes become prisons, or harbingers of horrible secrets that the protagonists must discover. This idea of the gothic ‘secret’ is yet another important trope, and the lost knowledge must be recovered to resolve the plot. Horrible acts of murder, incest, or depravity are covered up, lost in the confines of the twisting architecture of a castle or even a character’s mind. Occasionally, a character purposefully withholds information that might be useful to others in the story. Most often, it is a female character who resists the urge to speak, or who feels disempowered to do so. DeLamotte notes, of female characters in gothic texts, that “again and again they...choose to remain silent, even if it means remaining persecuted and misunderstood” (150). This seemingly insurmountable boundary between speech and silence, said and unsaid is particularly important for female writers. It is another boundary—the line between life and death—that is perhaps most iconic of the genre. The ghosts and specters that so often haunt the structures of gothic novels are visual reminders that transgression between these realms is possible. Similarly, the murders that sometimes occur within the novel show us the horror of that initial breach. Finally, the trope of the double or twin is yet another source of fear, proving that the dividing line between self and other is, sometimes, terrifyingly thin. Again, DeLamotte notes, “reflection is one of the many forms of repetition in Gothic romance; indeed, repetition is so central an aspect of the genre that it may be considered one of its major conventions” (24). These qualities, while not exhaustive, are especially helpful when considering the work of female writers, who often employ them in their participation in the gothic genre.

There is no more appropriate place to begin tracing a lineage of the gothic in poems by American women than with Emily Dickinson. Unlike many other women poets, much has already been made of Dickinson’s characteristic use of gothic images and subjects in her work, and even a cursory glance at her poetry reveals the presence of apparitions,

ruminations about the soul, and of course, funerals and death. In their famous book, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar describe how Dickinson “was trying to find metaphoric equivalents of her life in the female gothic,” poring over the novels like *Northanger Abbey* that were popular forms of literature for women at this time (585). And Dickinson did not have to look far to make such comparisons. Like many female characters in her gothic novels, Dickinson spent much of her life confined to father’s home, and is notorious for being a recluse who wrote her poems largely in secret. Much of the communication she had with the outside world was conducted in words, through copious letters she exchanged with close family and friends. And, as more recent critics such as James Guthrie have suggested, Dickinson may have been suffering from an illness that encouraged her seclusion. These elements of her personal history may have contributed to Dickinson’s manipulation of the gothic in her pursuit of claiming a lyric identity on the page, but in doing so, she helped to forge an important literary tradition for American women poets. One of her most famous pieces, “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,” provides the opportunity to examine how gothic elements fuse with lyric self-performance in order to help Dickinson achieve what Gilbert and Gubar called a “spectacular poetic self-achievement” (582).

Throughout the progression of “Funeral,” Dickinson uses the tension between boundaries of life and death, sound and silence, and knowledge and ignorance to dramatize her creation of a female lyric self. The subject matter of this poem—the passage between life and death—is a popular obsession for Dickinson, and her oeuvre includes many variations upon this theme. As is often the case in Dickinson’s poems about death, the speaker is cast in the role of the recently deceased, who must then look upon the actions of the living in order to re-interpret them. Dickinson takes pains in the poem to associate the speaker with

the corpse. When the mourners “lift a Box,” the speaker feels it “creak across my Soul,” as if the jostling of the body might also affect the deceased’s spiritual incarnation (153). Later, the ghostly speaker acknowledges her liminal state, having crossed over from “Being” but still “Wrecked, solitary, here - ” in the space of the funeral. To be in this in-between state, not alive and also not yet in the afterlife of death, to be this “strange race,” is such a harrowing experience precisely because it enacts fears about the wholeness and integrity of the speaker’s self. The speaker is both dead and not dead, among the mourners but not part of them, trapped as neither one thing nor another. In creating this scenario, Dickinson draws our attention to her difficulty in establishing the lyric “I.” The lyric persona, like the dead speaker, is lifeless in its “solitary” interiority, as well as in its static position in time. Simultaneously, though, it is trapped by its address to the mourners, its status as, partly, public speech. This tension, in the poem, appears intolerable for the speaker, betraying Dickinson’s discomfort with creating a self on the page. In its liminal treatment of the position of the speaker, the poem creates significant anxieties about where this self is speaking *from*, and what kind of place or agency it will be able to stake out on the page.

Unlike many of Dickinson’s other poems that utilize this conceit, the death we are dealing with here is not physical, but meta-physical. Dickinson is careful to note in the first line that the funeral is “in my Brain,” and the details of the scene seem oddly spare and detached. In fact, nearly every description in the poem revolves around the sonic qualities of the service. Dickinson employs repetition several times in the poem in order to drive home the chant-like nature of sounds in this procession. She begins with the footsteps of the mourners who are “treading – treading - ,” but quickly moves on to more explicit mentions of sound:

A Service, like a Drum -
 Kept beating - beating - till I thought
 My mind was going numb - (153)

Here, as the drum beats the speaker's mind nearly into oblivion, we can begin to see just how perilously the poem clings to the boundaries between sound and silence. The sounds of the procession are not merely background music, but rather, ritualistic in nature, designed to draw the speaker into "Being." Sound in this poem causes a frightening "numbness," almost as though the initially declared "silent" self is being eroded via the constant droning of the funeral procession. If we return again to the climax of the poem, when the speaker must reckon fully with her fears about transgressing this boundary, we can now see the full, "solitary" horror of remaining silent:

As all the Heavens were a Bell,
 And Being, but an Ear,
 And I, and Silence, some strange Race
 Wrecked, solitary, here -

These sounds, which are born in the speaker's "brain" and lead her towards "sense" and "reason," are also the sounds of language. The poem exists in a lyric moment of meta-awareness, where Dickinson has dramatized her experience of creating a lyric persona on the page, and has asked the readers to participate in it as an act of creation and destruction. The very act of putting words to paper, as depicted by the ritual of this sound-funeral, is a terrifying moment where a pre-lingual "ur-self" is changed, utterly, by the "knowing" of language. It is in this interplay that we can see the Gothic coming into tension with the Romantic idea of the lyric. While Romanticism is often preoccupied with transcendence—leaving the boundaries of the physical body—Gothicism ruminates on confinement. In this

way, the contemporary lyric as a genre still exists in tension between the Romantic ideal of transcendence (the self “overheard”) and the Gothic anxieties about confining a self to the page: “the terrors of separateness and the terrors of unity: the fear of being shut in, cut off, alone; the fear of being intruded upon” (DeLamotte 19). Thus, the conclusion of the poem that shows the speaker dropping down world by world in order to “[Finish] knowing - then - ” is both a moment of release and egress as well as an experience of true gothic terror—the boundaries having been, finally, breached; the lyric “self” resolving into singularity.

Dickinson’s own idiosyncratic use of grammar, punctuation, and tense mimics the speaker’s fears and hesitations about crossing the boundaries between silence and language, between the confines mind into a lyric self on the page. Although an accumulation of fear, dread, and suspense is a hallmark quality of gothic novels, Dickinson’s poetry does not allow the time and space for such accumulations to happen narratively. Nevertheless, her poems do evoke such feelings in her readers by carefully manipulating the structure of language in her poem. As Daneen Wardrop writes, in her article “Goblin with a Gauge: Dickinson’s Readerly Gothic,” “As readers of Dickinson's poetic Gothic, we become aware of uncertainty as we move from punctuation mark to punctuation mark, word to word, sometimes syllable to syllable” (Wardrop 40). By examining two key lines from “Funeral,” with its characteristic use of dashes and unexpected capitalizations, it is possible to see how these syntactical idiosyncrasies emerge out of gothic tensions in Dickinson’s poems.

The poem begins with a short and iconic line, “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,” and in this line, Dickinson already illustrates how she will engage with the reader during the rest of the piece. The line scans, as does much of the rest of the poem, as clean iambic pentameter, and its sing-songy rhythm helps to propel us across the page. Deceptively, the regularity of the meter gives readers the illusion that they can predict how the rest of the line will unfold,

as the mind naturally anticipates the remainder of the metrical pattern. However, Dickinson's use of punctuation serves to interrupt this pattern, even as the line does, technically, continue to adhere to meter. By capitalizing the words "Funeral" and "Brain" in the center and the end of the line, a grammatical move that usually signals to readers a beginning, readers must wrestle with the logical gap between meaning and practice before continuing the line. While the iambic nature of the language seems to ask us to keep moving, the capitalization suggests that we pause, that we must process each moment as both a new beginning and a continuation of the pattern. Similarly, Dickinson's use of commas in places of the poem that seem, neither grammatically nor logically, to warrant such a pause, causes readers to hesitate before completing the iambic pattern of the line. In this first example, readers must pause to consider what it means to "feel" a funeral while the line, even as brief as it is, withholds for the moment the funeral's location "in my Brain." Even the comma endcapping the line, which would seem unnecessary given the pause implied in the break, suggests the malleable nature of language and time in the poem. In some places, the pause indicated by a break is more firm, as in moments like this one when punctuation caps off the line. In others left unpunctuated, a more permeable boundary between lines is suggested, leaving readers to process these signals for themselves.

In a line in the middle of the next stanza, "A Service, like a Drum -," there are similar strategies, but we can also see Dickinson's famous use of the dash as a separator, a move that, as Wardrop claims, "rends her verse with gaps" (40). Because the next line intends to complete the thought of this line, ("Kept beating...") the dash is a particularly disruptive move to make at the end of the line. Readers, though they may be compelled by the meter and the enjambment to move quickly to the next line, must instead dwell in the gap left by the dash, in a moment of uncertainty, before moving on to complete the thought. These

grammatical and syntactical choices in the poem clearly place readers in moments of tension, where they must fight constantly to balance the consistency of the poem's familiar hymn-like, iambic structure with the roadblocks and interruptions placed in the way of such consistency. Not only is the speaker herself grappling with boundaries in the poem, but the readers themselves must experience these anxieties and hesitations, lingering in uncertainty before making the leap from line to line, clause to clause, or word to word. In this way, Dickinson's use of form and syntax mimic the uncertain nature of the lyric self in the poem. The reader, like Dickinson's persona, must dwell in a liminal state, unable to completely resolve or dissolve on the page.

Confessionalism represents another watershed moment for lyric poetry in America when, emerging out of the relative impersonality of Modernism, poets were rethinking the possibilities for the lyric persona. Often marked by intensely personal experiences and extreme narrative situations—death, sex, childbirth, mental instability—Confessionalism as a movement was already treading close to gothic territory in its typical subject matter. But female poets who helped to define the Confessional period, such as Anne Sexton and, especially, Sylvia Plath, often used these gothic elements to explore their anxieties about self-performance on the page. Like Dickinson, Plath's well-known biography, which included a tumultuous marriage, infidelity, mental illness, and, ultimately, suicide, has at times eclipsed her work. It is easy to make the mistake of dismissing Plath's poems as too personal, too tied to her biography to contribute greatly to a larger tradition, but a close examination of how she utilizes gothic elements to interrogate the boundaries of her own poetic identity illustrates why her enduring legacy is so well-deserved. Plath's iconic poem "Daddy," in addition to helping define Confessionalism, also aided in establishing a tradition of "gothic lyrics" for more contemporary women poets.

“Daddy,” one of Plath’s most famous poems, is certainly gothic in its images and tropes. However, in its nuanced treatment of the entangled father/daughter identities, the poem moves beyond a piece that simply uses gothic imagery and into the territory of the gothic genre. Throughout the poem, Plath uses the conceit of the monstrous dead father to dramatize the struggle to claim her own identity on the page. “Daddy, I have had to kill you./You died before I had time—,” writes Plath near the opening of the poem, setting up a complex situation of address where the father, despite already being dead, must be symbolically killed again through the utterance of the poem (222). The father is a character who has so much agency in the poem partly because of his ability to cross the boundaries between life and death so easily. Various, he appears as both a looming, colossus-like corpse and a monstrous entity; he is a “ghastly statue with one gray toe/big as a Frisco seal,” with the image of the foot reminiscent of a corpse with a toe-tag (222). And later, in what feels like a scene out of a monster movie, the father is likened to “a vampire” who “drank my blood for a year,” with the poem ending, finally, with a stake through his “fat black heart” (224). A vampire, with its parasitic relationship to the living and its ability to rise from the dead again and again, seems like the perfect metaphor for Plath’s relationship with her father’s influence in “Daddy.” Despite his literal death, his influence over her identity is so strong that he becomes, symbolically, the undead, living on through her own lifeblood.

In “Daddy,” Plath’s speaker must wrestle for control of her own identity on the page, but despite her insistence (“you do not do, you do not do...”) the task is not so easy to accomplish. Partly, this is because of uncertainty about the source of the father’s influence over the speaker. In the poem, the speaker searches for her father’s homeland, as though tracing his lineage might take her to source of his power. That source is obscured, though,

both through the devastation that WWII left in her father's native Poland, but also because the name of the town is so common:

My Polack friend
Says there are a dozen or two.
So I never could tell where you
Put your foot, your root,
I never could talk to you. (223)

There is something deeply unsettling, for this speaker, about being unable to locate her father's home. It almost seems as though the "root" of his power over her began in the place his birth, and the loss of this knowledge functions like a gothic secret that must be uncovered. DeLamotte writes, in *Perils of the Night*, that the architecture of a home often contains mysteries of the past that have "been deliberately 'lost' by the villain in an act symbolic of repression and must be retrieved" (DeLamotte 15). But ultimately, it costs the speaker more than the pursuit of this secret to claim independence from her father's identity. What finally cuts "the black [telephone] off at the root" and severs their enmeshed identities is the speaker's own suicide attempt. "At twenty I tried to die/and get back, back, back to you," she writes. In the act of voluntarily crossing the boundary between life and death, the speaker is able to gain some agency over her own identity. When she recovers from the suicide attempt, she is refashioned, "stuck...together with glue" into a new entity separate from her father. Suddenly, the speaker has the power to make a "model" of her father, like a little doll that she can exert her control over. By the end of the poem, the scale between the speaker, who was initially dwarfed by her father's monolithic corpse, has completely reversed; now, she is the giant, holding a small model of her father in her hand.

Plath has received a substantial amount of criticism for her shocking use of the Holocaust as source material in her poems. Although her use of genocide as a figurative

basis for the exploration of her identity is inappropriate, even today, it is impossible to fully understand how “Daddy” participates in the gothic genre without accounting for this line of thinking in the poem. Ultimately, “Daddy” seeks to compare its speaker’s pursuit of an independent self to the suffering and persecution of the Jews, who, like the speaker, were almost stripped of their cultural identities by Nazi acts of genocide. While the poem frequently uses images that set the Holocaust as a backdrop for its address, Plath’s most important treatment of this subject matter helps to establish the power dynamics between her and the character of her father. Plath goes to great lengths to describe her father as a terrifying Hitlerian figure; he has a “neat mustache,” and an “Aryan eye, bright blue.” Her father has “no God but a swastika,” and is clearly marked as a “Fascist,” complete with a pair of boots that are reminiscent of an SS officer’s uniform. And, just as clearly, the speaker of the poem is associated with a Jew, even placing herself, at one point in the poem, as “A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.” In the poem, as in life, being a “Jew” during the Holocaust is a death sentence, not just because of the historical reality of the genocide, but also because the speaker’s own “impurity” prevents her from claiming a solid sense of self. Unlike her father’s clean, clearly demarcated identity, the speaker’s is more muddled and complex, as is demonstrated in a moment where she worries about her lineage: “With my gypsy ancestress and my weird luck/And my Taroc pack and my Taroc pack/I may be a bit of a Jew.” While her father has a seemingly untouchable, monolithic identity, the category of “Jew” the speaker belongs to is much more unstable, able to encompass multiple cultural categories, or to be rooted out from a secret past history or ancestor.

This implied “impurity” or instability of identity as a “Jew” manifests itself in the speaker’s professed inability to speak. Early on in the poem, Plath tries to assume an

independent identity, to claim an “I” by speaking in her father’s symbolic language, but she recognizes the impossibility of doing so. She writes,

The tongue stuck in my jaw.

It stuck in a barb wire snare.

Ich, ich, ich, ich.

I could hardly speak.

I thought every German was you.

This passage succinctly illustrates how Plath layers a complex psychological portrait of her relationship with her father alongside the struggle to create a lyric self-performance in her poetry. This is not new territory for the gothic, or even for female writers in general; as DeLamotte explains, “Feminist critical theory suggests that the problem of saying ‘I’ is important both thematically and formally in literature by women...” (DeLamotte 150). Here, the speaker’s insistent but also, ultimately, unsuccessful repetition of “ich, ich, ich, ich” alerts us that the passage of the poem is not simply about asserting a separate identity from her colossus of a father, but is also about working through anxieties surrounding her own lyric identity on the page. The sound of the German word being repeated, with its harsh, guttural “ch” sound, implies it is a difficult word to spit out, as though it is caught in the throat and cannot escape. What’s more, its status as un-translated German not only highlights the impossibility of communication with her dead father, but also helps to dramatize the speaker’s perceived inability to forge her own lyric identity. But it is not only the act of claiming such an identity, her “I,” that makes language dangerous in the poem. It seems as though every single time she speaks, her utterance is judged so harshly by the arbiter of her father that she is practically sentenced to death. “I thought every German was you,” the speaker claims, as though her father, likened to the figurehead of the German army, was duplicated in every SS soldier, every German citizen who might be willing to turn in a “Jew.”

And when she is heard speaking, language becomes “obscene,” turning into the very agents of death during the Holocaust: “an engine/chuffing me off like a Jew.” In this way, “Daddy,” like Dickinson’s “Funeral,” figures engagement with language and the creation of the lyric self as a kind of death; the poem, at its heart, is also an expression of extreme fear and anxiety that, after so much effort, it’s possible that no identity at all may be able to be claimed under the strict rules and scrutiny of the symbolic “Germans” in the poem.

Plath and Dickinson’s use of the gothic genre as a catalyst for engaging with the lyric has engendered a complex legacy among contemporary American women poets. Although there are far more strands of influence than I can possibly trace in this essay, I’d like briefly to examine a more contemporary poet who participates in, and extends, this tradition in a very different way. In looking at the work of Tracy K. Smith, it is evident that both the dynamics of the gothic genre and anxieties about the boundaries of the self are two elements that continue to define the work of many women poets. Smith, an African-American poet who won the Pulitzer Prize for her 2012 collection *Life on Mars*, provides an excellent example of how generic tensions of the gothic continue to underlie source material that may not be immediately recognized as “gothic.” Although the poems in this collection pull, primarily, from science-fiction sources, the way Smith utilizes these tropes betrays an approach that is fundamentally gothic in nature. Between the lines of its pop culture, speculative approach, *Life on Mars* employs gothic sensibilities towards time, architecture, outer (and inner) space, and the gothic “double” to consider problems about contemporary identity and lyric performance. As such, Smith’s work should be placed squarely within a female gothic lyric tradition.

Two poems, “The Museum of Obsolescence” and “It & Co.,” form a relationship that can help us see how Smith is attempting to renegotiate lyric identity in *Life on Mars*.

“The Museum of Obsolescence” begins with an adjustment to time, couching itself in a future speaker looking back on our contemporary, obsolete world. This move itself is reminiscent of tactics employed by gothic writers, who, unable to launch ideological critiques through a realistic lens of the world, often posed their texts as discovered manuscripts that catalogued long-lost, secret histories. “Displacing their stories into an imaginary past,” Kate Ferguson Ellis explains, allowed “[the gothic’s] early practitioners [to appeal] to readers not by providing ‘escape’ but by encoding” their ideological critiques within a language of the past (xiii). In this way, Smith reverses the usual gothic approach of setting the present in the past, and uses her poem to set the present in the future. What her speaker sees in that present-future is a series of useless, inadequate ways of trying to represent the world. The poem's eye moves from “replicas of replicas” to the equally useless “books recounting wars,” and “maps of fizzled stars” (14). Our beliefs, our language that serves to capture “abstract concepts,” such as “love” and “illness” are all dismissed one by one as toys, relics of the past. The death of these objects of self-expression, these “naïve tools” in the future, reveals, as in the gothic, a larger concern about the present. Are these tools, in fact, already obsolete? Is the poem itself, in the mode of lyric address, also useless, doomed to return to “mute acquiescence”?

Smith dramatizes the search for answers to these questions by showing us her futuristic speaker, wandering wing by wing through a structure that feels more like a tomb or a gothic castle than simply a museum. Everything, in its obsolescence, is permeated with death. The “replicas of replicas stacked like bricks” recall dead lifeless bodies; “pots of honey,” with their sweetness, are “pilfered from a tomb”; even the living man who exists to answer the speaker’s questions is replaced, upon his death, “with a video looping on *ad infinitum*,” like a ghost of his former self that haunts the halls. But, while we’re shown the

material fallout from the death of self-expression numerous times throughout the poem, we glimpse the speaker(s) who might wield such tools only briefly: “Our faulty eyes, our telltale heat, hearts/ticking through our shirts” (14). The line itself is a reference to Poe’s classic gothic story “The Telltale Heart,” but this speaker is not guilty about committing a murder; instead, in another sly reversal, it is the very fact that the speaker dares to remain alive in such a tomb, to continue to claim identity by seeing with her “faulty eyes,” that sets her apart. This sentiment is echoed later on near the close of the poem when the speaker encounters her own image in a mirror, which she describes as “someone’s idea of a joke.” For the speaker to attempt to see her own reflection, to acknowledge the idea that the speaker might have such a whole, singular identity, is so far removed from reality in the poem that it borders on the ridiculous. In this way, Smith uses gothic tropes and imagery to question the viability of creating a lyric speaker in contemporary literature.

In an early, enigmatic line in “The Museum of Obsolescence,” Smith declares, without much commentary, that “It watches us watch it” (14). The pronoun “it” appears nowhere else in the poem, and could be read as a sentient version of the deathly museum itself. But “It & Co.,” a poem that appears just a few pages later, gives crucial new insight into how we might understand this line in relationship to Smith’s claims about the lyric. “It & Co.” is a clear riff on Plath’s original “Death & Co.,” written in 1962—the same year she composed “Daddy,” and less than six months until her own suicide. By framing the book with an overt reference to Plath and the Confessional period, famous for its redefinition of lyric performance, Smith gives readers a strong hint that she is hoping to dialogue with lyric tradition. Plath’s original poem begins by showcasing a gothic double; here, the character of “Death,” contrary to the well-trodden image of a lonely reaper with a black robe and scythe, is not a single entity but a twin. “Two, of course there are two,” she begins, and traces the

consequences of facing death with an entourage (254). Smith, however, complicates Plath's approach to the gothic double by shifting the focus of the poem away from a specific character and towards the lyric voice itself. In "It & Co.," the double we face is not a direct twin of the speaker, but is instead "it," the prototypical lyric speaker of tradition.

Although Smith is anything but straightforward, often playing games and giving us sly associations, through a careful reading, it's possible to see that "it" must be read as the idea of the lyric persona. Smith takes great pains to center the poem around questions about the boundaries between the plural speaker ("we") and the lyric persona "it." She opens:

We are part of it. Not guests.
Is It us, or what contains us?
How can It be anything but an idea...(17)

By casting the traditional lyric speaker as "it"—a self that has no age, no gender, no sex, no immediately discernible qualities of any kind—she points to the fiction of neutrality that often accompanies the lyric voice. In the poem, "it" is "something teetering on the spine/of the number *i*" (17). The line break here is strategic, allowing for multiple meanings in the sentence; before the line continues, the reference to a "spine" recalls the printed name of the author on the outside of a book, playfully pointing the reader towards the illusion of author as speaker. However, when the line continues, we find that the spine is of "the number *i*," which functions like a tongue-in-cheek joke for readers. One way we must understand "*i*" is as the roman numeral for "one," recalling again the idea of the solitary speaker. But, simultaneously, the roman numeral "i" is literally an "I" that Smith has deprived of its capitalization. This choice not only suggests an implicit critique of the primacy of "I," questioning whether the lyric voice can still be claimed with its capital status, but also demonstrates Smith's ambivalence about inhabiting the lyric persona. The lack of

capitalization in “i” works in tension with Smith’s idiosyncratic decision to capitalize “It” as a proper name throughout the poem, which itself remembers Dickinson’s own strategy of using capital letters for emphasis. Other moments, too, suggest “it” is the end-point of a search for lyric persona. The poem claims:

...We
 have gone looking for It everywhere:
 in Bibles and bandwidth (17)

These two texts are not chosen merely for their alliterative qualities, but are instead a snapshot of the poles of the lyric speaker. The Bible casts the lyric voice as monolithic, unquestionable, and immutable, much like the word of God himself. It resembles W.R. Johnson’s definition of the lyric as “immutable and universal,” a statement that has since faded in its applicability to the genre (Johnson 2). Bandwidth, ironically, evokes speech that happens on the internet, a place where identities seem unstable at best and evacuated of real meaning at worst. In this way, Smith raises crucial questions about the status of the contemporary lyric in her poem, but she also exhibits difficulty establishing a lyric persona on the page that is characteristic of the female gothic tradition.

The cumulative effect of such questions about the lyric for the speaker is a fear that, without a lyric persona, it may be impossible to discern the borders of what makes up a “self” at all. The calm destruction of the borders between self and other that happens in the poem indicates a much larger anxiety—that the “self” is no longer a viable or necessary category either, that, in this new world, either nothing is a self or everything is. This anxiety is not unique to the speaker of the poem, but rather, represents the precarious nature of this moment in literary history for the lyric as a genre. Critical and theoretical developments have made it difficult to engage with even the fiction of an essential self, the performance of “the

self overheard” as the lyric so often proposes; but still, there is redemption for the lyric over the course of Smith’s book. By interweaving small moments of personal experience and history with references to pop culture and character performances, *Life on Mars* argues that even our constructed, performative selves have essential value and meaning. The book’s final poem, “Us & Co.,” a reworking of the earlier “It & Co.,” is itself a riff on Plath’s poem “Death & Co.” It’s evident, even by noticing the movement from “it” to “us” that happens over the course of the book, that Smith wants to argue for a more collective, plural sense of the lyric. The short poem, amounting to just a few lines, briefly dramatizes the model for the lyric that the book ultimately argues for:

We feel around making sense of the terrain,
Our own new limbs,
 Bumping up against a herd of bodies,
Until one becomes home. (70)

The many collisions between these nascent bodies, moving against one another, suggests the possibility that we might inhabit multiple identities in the lyric, try on multiple selves, even within the confines of the same poem. It is the process of learning to inhabit all of these identities of “learn[ing] again to stand,” under all of their weight, that provides a new avenue for the contemporary lyric.

My interest in a lineage of female gothic lyrics in American poetry grew out of observations I made, over many years, about the types of imagery and tropes I was drawn to in my own creative work. During my course of study in the PhD program, I also encountered this same predisposition towards the gothic in the work of many other women writers, both contemporary and historical alike. As such, I’ve come to understand the project of my dissertation as fundamentally gothic in nature, expressing similar anxieties about the

boundaries between speech and silence, life and death, and self and other. To illustrate this interest, I will examine three key poems in the collection in order to show how I see my work utilizing gothic means to complicate the lyric persona in the book. The book opens with a quote by the photographer Francesca Woodman, writing about her own work: “Am I in the picture? Am I getting in or out of it?” Woodman’s images themselves recall the gothic genre, as female bodies appear to float like transparent ghosts in their movement, or attempt to blend in to inanimate objects in ways that make them unsettling or frightening. This quote, which asks two deceptively simple questions, marks the book as one that is obsessed with boundaries. What accounts for presence or absence in the images? Where is the line between entering and leaving?

An early poem in the collection, “Floating Girl,” raises similar questions for readers, and also establishes the way this book will treat the material of the female body. The poem begins with a boundary being breached, as the corpse of a girl breaks free from what is holding it underwater in order to be discovered by a passing boat of men. Already, in the first stanza, two boundaries have been crossed: the threshold between life and death, and the border between underwater and surface. It is this permeation, the body’s rise to the surface of the water, that calls for the occasion of the poem. But in its “magic[al]” rise, the body becomes something less malleable and more permanent, likened to “an island erupted in night.” The dead girl’s passage from her secret, unknown grave at the water’s bottom to the surface, floating like an island that has always been there, functions similarly to the revelation of a gothic secret, something concealed that suddenly comes to light. To me, the process of the body being uncovered is also an acknowledgement of some repressed experience coming to the surface, the girl’s corpse returning like an uncanny mirror of the speaker herself. Freud wrote of the uncanny that it “is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is

familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through a process of repression” (qtd. in Bruhm xv). To understand this, it is necessary to look at the relationship between viewer and spectacle in the poem. As readers, we are put in a similar position as the men in the boat—a captive audience regarding, perhaps with horror, the details of the girl’s body. In this poem, it is death and not life that causes the girl to be aesthetically beautiful. Below the surface, her body undergoes a radical transformation, set against what sounds, nearly, like a pastoral setting on land: “She’d made a bed of coral/and anemone, blossoms circling her like a meadow/wreath.” Although we do not see the girl alive, and therefore are unable to judge her living actions, it seems ironic that her moment of greatest agency happens under the surface. There, her body comingles with the coral, and “[comes] to understand//the shape of her body like an argument.” In this way, we understand that it is the process of moving from body to object, person to material, that frees the girl and gives her the agency to return to the world of the living above. Ultimately, I believe the poem functions as a comment about the relationship between female rhetorical agency and body. In this figuration, women have more agency to stake out selves in the world when they have control over the material of their body, but it’s possible they must experience a figurative death in order to wield it.

Another poem, “Sonnet with a Wishbone in the Throat,” continues this line of thinking about speaking and agency. Like the gothic genre, this female speaker is set firmly within the domestic sphere, and is given the somewhat mundane task of preparing a chicken to roast. However, as the poem progresses, it uses gothic tropes and generic approaches in order to argue that female speakers within the lyric tradition are often put in a double-bind, expected to simultaneously occupy the domestic sphere as well as challenge stereotypes about women. While the opening lines of the poem seem innocuous enough, showing the

speaker trussing a chicken for dinner, the poem is careful to specify that the bird is a hen, and describes its body with feminine descriptors, “pliable, soft with cartilage.” This makes the somewhat violent rending of the hen, when the speaker “cut[s] the breast/clean,” much more unsettling, almost as though she is participating in the trussing of her own body. This figurative binding mimics the rhetorical problem of the speaker, who feels incapable of declaring a single self in the poem. Instead of continuing with the quotidian narrative of preparing dinner, the speaker decides, instead, to attempt the impossible task of swallowing the chicken’s raw wishbone. The wishbone itself, with its identical two prongs is an apt objective correlative for the situation of the speaker, who feels she must occupy two selves simultaneously. Predictably, the wishbone does not go down the speaker’s throat easily; it does, however, appear to create a supernatural ability to speak as both selves at once, to allow the speaker to occupy, simultaneously, these two paths. The speaker writes, “When I speak, each phrase kaleidoscopes,/modifies, a duet of whispers I lip into air.” Soon, she finds that this condition is not necessarily the superpower it might seem to be; her intentions for speaking are often muddled, confused, or come out wrong. And, even when she is able to express feeling or emotion, she is also bound to express its opposite as well. Form, too, feels important to the poem, especially given the tradition of using a sonnet as a love poem to a woman. Adhering to the sonnet’s rhetorical structure, in this case, feels more like a punishment. The heavy enjambment, along with the use of overt alliteration towards the ends of lines, as in “bone went brittle, broke” or “Windpipe split in a perfect Y,” make the form of the poem feel compressed and contained, as though the lines are trying to push beyond their own boundaries. In the way “Sonnet” interrogates multiple boundaries, uses extreme or supernatural imagery, and suggests the form of the poem as a kind of compressed space, it also participates in a tradition of the female gothic lyric.

Finally, the poem “Spitting Image” continues to explore both issues of female identity as well as the gothic trope of the mirror or double. The poem dramatizes the relationship between the female speaker and her mother, giving voice to fears and anxieties that she will lose the distinction of her own identity within the relationship. In the opening of the poem, a child-like speaker is hiding under her mother’s bed waiting for her to fall asleep. Rather than focus on a more explicit narrative about the child’s relationship with her mother, the poem instead expands the lyric moment of the mother losing consciousness and drifting into sleep. In the poem, the young girl focuses intently on the boundaries between her own body and her mother’s, as she hides like a shadowy mirror of her mother directly below the bed. This narrative situation is prime gothic territory for female writers in its fascination with the double or twin. Here, the speaker notices:

What separates us:
thin planks, a mattress, soft things

she uses to comfort herself. I press
my palms flat against wood.

By accounting for each layer of separation between her and her mother’s body, the speaker betrays an anxiety about the dividing lines, and seems to desire both the dissolution of this boundary and to fear that the boundary may not be upheld. She indicates this ambivalence by touching her hands to the wood that separates them, both an act of trying to reach the mother’s body as well as a moment of reassurance that the boundary is still there. Like Sylvia Plath’s “Daddy,” the mother figure here enjoys a large amount of influence over the speaker. First, her body is described as “a small bird/suspended above” the speaker. The bird, with its powers of flight, is both an expression of the mother’s agency as well as an indication of her fragility. Later, while the mother prepares to go to bed, the speaker sees her feet hanging over the side as “pillars.” The use of scale here, as well as the suggestion of architecture or

statuary, also recalls Plath's treatment of her father. The mother, like "Daddy," wields an enormous amount of influence compared to the small and hidden body of the child speaker. The poem's climax hinges upon the exact moment of the mother losing consciousness and falling asleep. The movement into sleep, then, is almost figured as a complete loss of identity, as though the mother will wholly evacuate her body, leaving it free for the speaker to enter like a host. The speaker expresses her fear about this possibility several times in the poem, remarking "I try not to give myself away," and, at the end, "Any moment,/I am going to disappear." This anxiety the speaker carries about losing her own identity to body of her double marks the poem as a gothic lyric, using the springboard of mother/daughter relationships in order to express fears about the permeable boundaries of the self.

Examining the threads of the gothic that appear throughout my dissertation has helped me to understand more fully the ways in which I am also attempting to participate in the lyric tradition. Many women poems write about issues of motherhood, identity, and body, but as Plath, Dickinson, and Smith show, when such poems work through gothic means, they also emerge out of a more complicated set of influences than one might initially perceive. Such threads serve to connect women poets to a rich and nuanced lineage of writers, one in which they can both participate in female literary identity-making as well as critique culture and literary tradition. As I have shown, the gothic genre is a crucial context for reading lyric poetry by contemporary women writers. For this reason, it deserves more attention in both creative and critic conversations, and can help to continue enlarging what is already a diverse and thriving genre in contemporary American poetry.

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DEAR SATELLITE

Am I in the picture? Am I getting in or out of it?

—FRANCESCA WOODMAN

POEM AT THE BOTTOM OF THE ALLEGHENY RIVER

Nothing miraculous. Maybe colder
than you thought, maybe darker,

maybe so dim you have to give up
seeing altogether, the way over centuries

certain fish on the bottoms of caves turned
pale as corpses, forfeited the luxury

of eyes. But it wouldn't matter. Here,
the surface is all lies, the moon halved

and distant, some neon streetlamp
that comes on like clockwork.

There's no mistaking the world
is shifting. The surface gluts back

on itself all day long, rocking,
as if trying to remember something

simple, something close—the time of day,
the drawn out syllables of its own name.

But the lesson of water is forgetting,
is taking any name at all. You know this

like a promise in the grayed brain,
a message bearing over you in waves

until you are swayed, until
you yield, malleable, and fine as silt.

FLOATING GIRL

The men in the little boat discovered her
like an island erupted in night. Early morning
she drew, as if by magic, toward the surface.

They saw the sway of arms, the cursive hair
that wrote in time to the current. They saw
the map of veins—the shadowed skin where blood

had banked—and knew. She'd made a bed of coral
and anemone, blossoms circling her like a meadow
wreath. And all day the coral came to understand

the shape of her body like an argument, the soft turn
of its logic: swathe of prickled flesh on her calves,
balletic curve of the hip's bone. Weeks and weeks,

until the girl was more than a girl, ribboned through
as she was with coral's bone. Until she rose to meet
the boat, remade—as men, each season, remake the fields.

DRILLS

Sometimes I believed I couldn't speak
at all, those long hours my mouth kept hollow,
still as the back of an empty drawer. *Shut it,*
teacher screamed as I sweated for my sins:
forgotten homework, sass, back of the brick
building, an older boy's hand snaked
upshirt. Sticky, my uniform gathered a font
of sweat, running down the back like holy ablution.
And after, in the showers, I washed myself new,
rubbed in lotion silky as the stretch of my own thigh.
Put on the dress with its scallops of roses, its buttons
made of fine mother-of-pearl. How I'd fasten
them, hands suturing in and out, steam blooming
until the fabric wetted to my body like a tongue.

ADORO TE DEVOTE

It wasn't my first taste of wine. It was
the first in public. You ordered

red with a pastoral on the label, gold letters
flashing down the sides. You told me

about the myth of the pelican
(you'd read it in a magazine).

How it wounded itself. How it loved
so deeply it gave its own blood.

*

You were already on the ground,
on the patio. Dad was inside

paying the bill. I didn't notice
the parking attendant touch

your shoulder, ask
if you are OK. You weren't

moving, and like a good daughter,
my body obeyed your lead.

*

It was my twenty-first birthday.
We went to a restaurant, ate

perfect medallions of cod steeped
in broth and butter. Our table

by the far wall faced the ocean.
Behind us, a painted beach scene:

blue waves; a pelican in profile,
wings spread open.

*

You were already on the ground.
I hesitated before I moved you, imagined

what the fall had done: fine gravel
in your brow-line, your cheekbone shattered

and sunk. You looked strange, intact,
in and out of consciousness. Your teeth

and tongue dark with purple. My own
mouth stained by the same wine.

POEM IN THE CORNER OF A YOUNG GIRL'S MOUTH

That coy meeting which is beginning
and ending all at once, anatomical

oversight, no name for it I know.

What would she sound like? A good girl
speaks only when spoken to, is flat

like a watercolor which means

the light is always hitting the same place
on her hair, her hands are always folded,

like a reflex, as if they are hiding something:

if you can't say the words, you secret them
into your hand, little whispers she collects

like thread, or fancy buttons

off her mother's dresses, each one round
as an oyster pearl. Mother says, *this*

is what ladies know. There is a price

for speaking, for the lips parting. The mouth
has to break every time.

EPITHALAMIUM

In my family, we eat
our words like bread.

This is how we have not come
to speak of you.

This is how I learn
some things should not be spoken of.

Let us pretend we might have existed
in the same space, that your life
would not mean my death by omission.

Sometimes we shock a nerve so much it dies.

If you had not gone to war. If you had
come back. If she was

some other woman, in some other life:

the dresses fine and made
of cotton, the roses on the table
big as fists.

POEM ON THE VERGE OF INTERRUPTION

Things keep happening. I keep sewing
the seam of the ripped shirt, the needle

sawing back and forth, its slow way
of binding. The cardinal flying,

the sound of traffic on the avenue,
drivers muted in their cars, safe

behind glass. And you in the kitchen
at the big basin washing potatoes,

the brush back and forth until they're clean,
until they hardly have skin at all. Things

keep happening. No one stops anyone else
on the street, no one notices small signs:

the light bulb stuttering out, a flash of red
blowing across the sidewalk, the subtle,

unnoticeable coming of silence, easily,
like the movement into sleep. My palm

working, the silver needle. The raw potatoes
glistening in the basin, clean and white as eyes.

STARLINGS IN WINTER

The fields suffer
them, pare the millet
to seed like an offering
of pearls. Their nests

are lined with dry grass,
twigs, the bits of twine
we use to bind the bodies
of kept fowl before

we strip them to the white
skin. In the hard season,
we all keep our own
treasures. At dawn I see them

moving in and out
of the branches, a single
breath in the old oak's
chest. Year after year

they linger even when
the woods go buzzing
with migratory wings,
that strange hunger

for movement that presses
the flocks, makes them
yield. Starlings keep, massed,
a stubborn thought rustling

in the brain. Stay when the earth
hardens. When the boys whip
their stones, the snow,
the white, shot with blood.

MADAME LA GUILLOTINE

I thought I heard each strand separate,
each thread woven into the others
shorn away like a braid snipped

from the base of the neck. I couldn't see.
Sight doesn't belong to the dying. Still,
the pieces were falling, caught by wind

or gravity or the hands of a child reaching
for a token to remember. What else I heard:
the caw of a crow stretching away from me,

the startled body lifting before it knows
the axe is not for him. The long syllable
of the blade falling down its runners, screeching

within the track's groove. It is a trick
that any substance which grinds
against itself long enough is not destroyed

but made smoother, more pleasing.
I think my favorite animal is the crow.
It understands how to use a tool.

PORTRAIT OF MY MOTHER AS THE VIRGIN QUEEN

Above all, what I have feared is love.
I have been afraid of my body, of its weakness,
its need that feels like a pail filling slowly
with milk. I have watched kids at the teat,

how their mouths are formed to pull
every sweetness towards them, to suck
the body tired, the nipple raw and jewel-like.
Who would choose such a bitter ornament?

Who could understand a creature that gladly
admits anything that arrives at its gates?
I have put my hand to the soft stomach
of a doe, and I have heard her throat

bleating in the labor. I prefer to let the rod
do my speaking. I prefer to let them call my name.

THE NATURE OF WOMAN

When her hands are cold,
they get smaller. That is how she loses

her ring. In the mall,
she tries on clothes for two hours—a string

of women standing naked
in separate rooms. She slides off her pants.

It slips away.
That night, while he sleeps, she thumbs

the shiny ridge of skin,
her empty finger. She remembers what it was like

not to have it. To notice a man.
At first she thinks it is shame. But it's too large for that.

She can't even let herself want it.
She thinks, we all get fucked by the men we deserve.

HORSE-FLY

I offer myself to her, not
with perfume, not with the sin
of too much flesh, but merely because
I am the only breathing thing
in half a mile. After swimming, prone
on the dock's planks, I feel the spandex
suit clinging like a carapace.
Underneath the deck, shallows
thicken with marsh grass, shaded lodes
of snails drift and pull
into themselves at the slightest rough.
The fly hounds me, her hum and drone in my ear.
I understand; we always want
what we see in front of us.
Remember what it was like underwater:
the surface distant, unreachable, like listening
to the whole earth through a glass held up
to a door. She moves to land
on my shoulder and I let her, wait
only a moment before the mandible's sting.
It's my choice to be broken open.
Only the females bite for blood.

POEM IN THE EARDRUM

Little pocket, two side doors
to the brain where outside

and inside meet. It is always
working, even in the dampered

night: metal bedsprings, the old
house settling, the white fridge

lumbering to life. Or your body,
that factory, with its beating

and its breathing—all the cogs
and networks you hear

from the inside too but duller
for their closeness, blunter,

the round edge of a spoon or
a sudden change in pressure,

as in a plane, the popping
and squeaking like a protest

to altitude. And while you rise,
the surface is being written

below, the cities, their cars,
the countryside with its neat

patchwork. How quickly
they become small, fragile,

too far to hear, encased
by the glass of the window, as in

a museum, its uniformed guard,
the finger pressed to his lips.

EXHIBIT

When I saw the bird again, the wound
had healed. Yes, there was the raised place
near the lip of its wing, the little tuft snowed
over with white. But no blood. No gravel
scattershot on the underside, the body fallen

like a weight to earth. What had pierced it?
The sharp prick of the hawthorn tree, branches
lilting with fruit. Black talon of a hawk, claw doubled,
spiraling into the chest. Gone now. Both the culprit
and the absence it carved, so near to the heart

that beat like a wing in the breast on the long fall
down. And they removed the heart, and removed
the swelled crop like a bladder, the winnowed bones
in the throat that the bird used to call out to its mate,
or to sound a warning before it lifted away. Like the way

its wings raise now, frozen and blown open with air, each
patterned feather dilating in succession. And the head's
measured tilt. The lacquered beak that is parted,
carefully, as if on the verge of song.

ISOLATION WARD

If you watch long enough you can see
they are alive,

each bedded figure swathed in antiseptic
white, the clean linen that tents

their sleeping bodies, stretched parallel
and uncannily precise—

like tiles carefully arranged in the floor's border
that twists and turns on itself

along the perimeter of the ward.
These bodies don't turn. They live

in a stillness that covers them
like the skin air makes on a glass of milk.

And I too am a body. The sheet ghosts
my feet, makes little peaks that stand so pointed

beneath the draping, I watch all
my lesser parts get erased.

SPITTING IMAGE

I wait to hear her fall asleep,
hide under the bed. My mother,
with her dark hair pinned flat,

my mother like a small bird
suspended above. What separates us:
thin planks, a mattress, soft things

she uses to comfort herself. I press
my palms flat against wood. Now
she shifts, sits up on the bed. I see only

the shadowed pillars of her feet, feel
only my breath, its calculable measure.
I try not to give myself away.

When she settles, her presence ticks
away slowly, hangs in the air.
I listen to the bed, its creaking

as she starts to slip off. I am so still
now, waiting. Any moment
I am going to disappear.

*

SONNET WITH A WISHBONE IN THE THROAT

I trussed the hen and cut the breast
clean, pliable, soft with cartilage.
I thought my mouth could swallow it
whole, but the bone went brittle, broke
through the skin of my neck like two
thorns. Its prongs scissored out above
my clavicle. Windpipe split in a perfect Y.
When I speak, each phrase kaleidoscopes,
modifies, a duet of whispers I lip into air.
I sound sweet when I want to be bitter. I bite
back my anger's flare. My voice box grows
into an echo chamber, buzzes double-alive.
Forgive me, I must say everything twice:
once to punish, once to entice.

WOMEN'S WORK*I. Mending*

Things she gathered: collapsed hem, chipped
teacup lipping water, the bodiless head
of a doll—eyes shut and gauzed over

with lash. Always, she woke before us,
early light scarring the sky. In the apron
filigreed with eyelets, she bent

to her work, hands inarched
as they grafted what was broken,
what we only knew how to abandon.

And some mornings, we surfaced
from sleep to find her humming over
something unmendable even by her

hands and eyes, mouth sealed in wordless
song. She carried the fragments past the fields,
dark and hirsute with grass, to the metal

bins we kept behind the house. Walking
back, the waking meadow lay quiet
as a tongue struck dumb.

II. *Washing*

Down the glassed ribs, my hands work
the soiled shirt, mill it against the board

that keeps on stuttering out its one word.
When I was a child, I heard my mother

make this sound, her fingers lacing
into wet cloth. I beat my own chest, thumped

my palms in time to her rhythm, bleating out
broken music as she rubbed the sheets,

the collars, her metal bucket rocking. Spiraled
with soap. I sang my music and my mother's body

kept pivoting up and back at the hip, as if all
the washing were one long motion that didn't start

or stop, as if she were rendering, with her cracked
hands, what was pure from the earth.

POEM ON THE END OF A LURE

I count to ten, wait for the sunfish
to stop fighting for air; terrible

to need only what is so close.
Here, the belly won't resist

the sharp end of a knife, opens pink
as a girl's mouth. I take the fish

to water and rinse the inside clean,
break apart the body's small order.

Strip the silvered scales and side-fins
that fanned so beautifully

when it could swim, billowing out
like a dress against wind. I snap

the line again, almost invisible except
for its sharpening of light, send the lure

back below the river's surface. I wait,
cloistered on the banks, my feet pitted

against open tree roots for balance,
their dark curves serpentine, arched

as a dorsal on the fish's boned back.
Slick, those thick knots spreading right

into water. I can't help but love a thing
that understands what to expose.

GOOD CLOTHES

I took her there to see them. In the windowless
room, we touched
each garment through its plastic cover.
Sometimes, we lifted

a dress from the rack
and held it to ourselves. We'd flick
a switch. Without light, it was easier
to be someone else.

Sometimes I was
the woman, and sometimes
I was the man.
Sometimes, I felt

her elbows in the dark, the plastic
pooling at her ankles.
“We ♥ our customers,”
the paper fitted over wire said.

TROUSSEAU

In the dry months the men are gone
to work and the days set in like a kind

of machine. I look for anything to help
me bide, for what is familiar: bluegrass

perfuming the heat, raven's guttural choke.
The spiders' nests meshing in pine. One hot

morning the webs will all break, hang
from the tree limbs ataxic. Bodies

will trickle down the branch, a dark strain
of sap. Then the nest will burst. I'll move

close, watch one of the clutter, legs ghostly
as the veins of an angiographed brain. But now,

how the strands settle on the needles like a white
veil, water sequinning the netted surface. Knitted

houses that only pretend to transparency, that foil
my prying eyes. Some births can only happen in private.

EXCAVATED GIRL

Three hits to loosen the crook
of her spine, five to widen the reach
of her thighs. They sharpened
their blades and tapped around
the prize, worked until their eyes
stung red with rust. The hammers
cleaved the rock, their bodies cleaved
and spit, though she wouldn't
come free. When they saw how
she fused to the bedrock, how
her hair veined through the walls
like quartz, they dropped their axes
and watched her. One by one, their cells,
touched with oxygen, turned on like lights.

HOW I GOT FAT

At the goddamn molecular level. Faster
than cancer, faster

than bright pink lungs
turn black. Right before

my eyes. In front
of the mirror, where,

an hour ago everything was business as usual. In the middle
of breakfast, the softboiled egg

with the top cut off. The yolk glistening, only half-
formed. It could happen

at the dentist, at the DMV, at JC Penney,
at the exact moment the shutter closes

to take your photograph. More quickly than the eye
apprehends a word

on the page of *The Star Ledger*.
For all I know,

it might be happening right now.

POEM IN THE TURN OF A WHEEL

Dizzying, the tire is planetary

spinning on its axis useless
as a child's rolling hoop.

In the packed snow the wheel

moves without moving, blurs
so fast now it is almost

not there—a trick of the eye,

an electron in orbit. When it breaks
free of the bank we are satisfied,

we understand only this promise

of movement it has made to us.
But moving is also wearing away

also leaving the barest parts of us

behind where they settle on the world
like a skin or a shadow, a whisper

that says we were here, yes, alive.

SINKING GHAZAL

The hind end of the ship lurches below the water's seal. My hands
anticipate nothing, not the blind glass, not the portal's fixed seal.

The bridge was built by hungry men, their days spent singing above
the current's rush, fingers pounding rivets until they flush and seal.

What other world is christened by the rocking deep, shapes that disband
and re-form: ghost-fingers of weeds, minnows sharding like a mirror unsealed.

The visible city honks its horns, drowns the call of night's predatory
wings. Light pearls the water, the moon wavering circular as a wax seal.

My eyes assemble fleeting scenes: spidered hull cracking, the ship's
crown of sediment, the stony sea-bed's gloss—wet black hide of a seal.

FIGUREHEAD

Where was my body before the sculptor cut
into oak and found my shape among the rings?

I imagine the man saw me in the trunk
shot through like a vein and delivered.

I am never sharp. I can't cut like the sculptor
cut, my hands smooth-grained and webbed.

Why did I need hands?

I let the water cover me with its fingers.
I want to be inside something larger again.

I WOULD GIVE YOU MY HANDS

Sometimes when you call I don't pick up.
I see it's you, see the picture of you and the dog.

I am doing things.
I am doing my taxes.

Last year I didn't give you a gift for your birthday.
I was doing things.
I was pretending to be a bad daughter.

If I close my eyes I think about your fingernails.
Dad says your hands look ancient like a Neanderthal's.
I think they look like a man's.

When I was seven I begged you to braid my hair.
A French braid, like the girl in the movie.

You said you couldn't make your fingers learn how.
It is so hard to copy something perfectly.

SPYGLASS

If I press its metal ring to my face,
the lid of my eye opens like a door.

Fingers scoped around the body
I make grow thinner and thinner,

a funnel punctuated with vertebrae
of brass. I want to find them

on the shore, my left eye squinted
dormant, blind stone at the center

of a plum. In the lens they look
small, like children herding together

in the schoolyard, setting up imaginary
house. I watch them gather invisible

things: one a clay pot, a fistful
of feathers. One his palms together

to cup a mound of seeds. I wonder
if they can feel my eyes touching them

like a brier pricking the flesh, or
the splinter-tip of an arrow in the body

of a bird, the wing that stops catching
air and lets the earth pull it back.

ODE TO SEA SCURVY

Creatures of the sea, our bones are wed to water, our teeth
make gifts of themselves. White hills of salt.
Away from land's umbilical pull, sand-strangled grass
on the dunes, we become ourselves again.
Skin phosphoring against the sweat-varnished decks,
our thighs slimmed, petaled over with pink. And what miracles
radiate from our joints, make us forget brine of meat,
the festering shit. At night, in water's cradle, our eyes sink
into themselves, gray as the flash of a silver coin.
All the old scars return, flower open like new wounds.

ODE TO HARDTACK

Everything is sweet: smell of pitch-tar, saliva that honeys
the mouth, a parched disc of tack crumbling like dust
over our tongues. Each morning we palm one, brittle,
its surface cratered—a small moon cupped in the hand.
The ship's hold is dark. What happens there happens beyond
our eyes, life boring suddenly through. Snake-like bodies
honeycomb the stores, our bellies, ream us to the core. All day
we feel them mine us, like earth, one dark tunnel at a time.

DREAM WITH WATER BENEATH THE FLOORBOARDS

Red matchstick I thumb alive and send
ahead of me through the dark little emissary,
little locket of light that lets the eye wick

to the cellar's walls, the green line of mineral
where flood rises up waist-high. Groundwater
seethes through cracks in the mortar, laces
between stones, their flat smooth faces
already buried. All night I ferry

buckets to the surface. All night my fingers
seam together and I climb, my sleeping
like one long flight of stairs, my bucket

like a mouth that won't drown. In the end,
I envied the bucket. The way all things
that are empty want to be filled.

*

POEM WIRED WITH KNOB-AND-TUBE

I read the scorched
wood like code, beams

and joists blackened
with the signs of sparks—

light stammered
out into the private

dark for no one. No eyes,
just the raw wood's

resined whorl, its circular
logic. My hand plumbs

the ribbing in the walls,
traces the rough grain

that gathers and parts
around the plank's knotting.

Encases it like a stunted
child. I try to feel

the coppered veins, spliced,
the ceramic joints that bind

them before they plunge
below. My fingers

surface, marked with black,
though the riggings hang limp.

I listen for the wire's spit
and trigger before I touch,

a language that would hiss
through my body hand

to hand, blue me over,
pry me from my every pinning.

BURNED GIRL

Her body drapes neatly
across the doorstep like a gift

someone left. Face up, she reclines
in permanent flinch. The fingers curl

uncannily, almost fused, joined,
because nothing here is singular,

nothing separate: arm dug into
the walled ribs, blue silk shirt

fading in and out of flesh.
There is nobody to testify,

nobody to say it happened
suddenly, or the flames wicked

to her body, outlined it in relief;
or to say her arms welled

open, to say the cloud of fire.
Like she was moving into embrace.

No one can tell what her words were
at the end or if there were words.

Or if there was only silence
feeding silence like air.

HONEYMOON

For a whole week, we visited the shore,
red kernels of shells mounding in our fingers

like beads, like small seeds natives drove
into the ground with one thumb until

they sprouted up green again. I tried to capture
us on the page, but each entry felt vaguer

than the last. Yesterday, we trapped a fish
and skinned it whole. No time here to blade

the body down, bones burring the catch
even as it blisters in fire When we eat we pick

them carefully, the little needles that cut
against sweet pink flesh.

THE BUTLER'S PANTRY

When the house shudders you hear
it here first, all the fine things give up

their hiding, tremble as they settle
against the shelves. Everything has

a place. The champagne flutes'
sharp inhale, the goblets' swollen

bellies bowing out one
by one down the line. So much glass

which more than any other
substance has learned to lie, pulling

all its matter from somewhere
else: the painted walls, the curtain,

a stray flash of color
through the doorway that startles

them all to life. In the drawers
the silver stacks and nestles

against itself, refuses to resist
the body of its mate.

Every spoon, every knife
submits so completely it reduces

to a thin sterling line, holds
even against the drawer's

slam. Don't believe all things
disobey when given the chance.

QUEEN ANT

I searched for her all summer
 in the old house, her offspring
 weaving their hair-line streams
 across the kitchen tile, across

its pitted vinyl that intersected
 like stars. I could not find
 her nest. I ran a rake
 along the flaking foundation,

tore the roots away where
 the house met the earth, and found
 no breach. I sprayed and they returned.
 My husband ate like a monk

over a tacky tablecloth covered
 in ivy, everything zippered
 in plastic, and yet their dark bodies,
 quivering with antennae, freckled

our feet. It was by accident
 I found the den, nestled between
 the two frames of the attic window,
 a spot of white at the end of the ledge

like the follicle of a stray hair.
 Between the panes, I saw her
 black body— her rounded
 thorax, her shiny, ringed abdomen—

and thought how many times
 she had labored to repeat herself, how
 her glistening eggs each held a baby
 like the glazed-over pupil of an eye.

POEM IN THE SHAPE OF A GRAND PIANO

Carvings spine over the cabinet's front,
hairline, delicate as the scaffolding

of a wren's wing. And the etched case,
too, is the wren's patterned body;

its breastbone like a prow—
the Steinway's curved rim. I want

to hold the keys against my palm,
the same cleft of my hand where,

once, I held a small bird as it failed.
When it happened, I felt a door shut

in the chest, heavy as a glossed lid,
watched the eyes, still black, only

the way out was closed. And silence.
But before silence, a low sound flocking

the back of the throat, trailing off
the way I imagine the first key

on the lip of the piano might sound
if I struck it softly. If I let myself.

PARASITE

Thank you to your pure, dark body,
still packed tight in the bud.
Thank you to your soft muscles
which never worked, to your frail
knot of organs, unmoving.
Thank you to your mouth that was never
the gateway to breath or drink,
or sweeter things you would have told
no one. And also, thank you for
no touch, no love, no sex, no tears
for anything, whether tender
or otherwise. And thank you,
thank you to the beginning
of your brain, still blind in the body,
to your lips which stayed silent
so I can speak and speak and speak.

CONTROLLED BURN

I mark the trunk with chalk. My fingers
stain neon, the sign I leave the men
to show them what is expendable.

Though every tree is flawed:
alder with a mummified arm, redwood
found hollow, debris tunneled into the center

like a hive. Sometimes death is the only way
to stay alive. Sequoias germinate
under the black stamp of fire. Sires

survive to carry the char. If I stay
with them and mark my own chest
like a door, would I be tender?

THE FISHERMAN

In Volendam, we acted
like tourists, though I
was the stranger.
The hewn streets, the unfamiliar
orange tint of roofs.

We dressed up:
a young fisherman and his wife.
He smoked a pipe, a net slung
over his shoulder. I wore wooden shoes.

On the way back, we laughed
at the photos. How outside
ourselves we were. A pelican
landed dockside, stopped,
gullet full and draining.
I had never seen one in person.

I thought about his catch:
invisible, gap-mouthed,
pressing through
the throat like ghosts—

they had found themselves a vessel
and belonged to him now.

ONE SMALL STEP*(1969)*

You can't lay a hand on a woman in Ohio. Not even one time, feel the full thrust of your temper swell like a small balloon rising up in the chest, clench your arm as you step towards her. You have to learn to keep some things for yourself. In the flat fields of Ohio, I saw them run a man out of town for less, pink arm of his wife carrying one pale bruise, the shadow of a handprint. Nothing giant. It's getting to be so every argument makes the heart leap, panic about what she'll say. He's gone now, a shock for me. I always thought he was a good man. Kind.

SPACEFLIGHT

I.

I fold the page in the book
you gave me,

open the cover to your inscription:

MKE 10/14/12.

Your knuckle grazed the still-wet
ink where you wrote

my name. The black captured,
like relief,

the fine creases.
I leave it on the bedside for another

three days. Above us,
dead weight circles the planet.

Hunks of metal
whose dimming lights have, by now,

flickered out. They use
the last bursts of their fuel to transfer

to higher orbit,
clearing the way for what is still

operational. On Earth,
I touch the pages.

They are only things,
dumb slices of matter.

II.

(The rate of bone density loss in space is about 1% per month.)

The planet sleeping
and distant, strung over

with lights like an old
circuit board—I forget
I have escaped its pull.

My body lurched free,
for the first time in its living.

In the fading atmosphere,
the land reduces mile by mile
to a topographic map of itself.

Up here, I live by my own
rhythms. I black out

the circular windows.
I hitch my body to anything
that will hold me, press

the straps over my ankles
when I sleep to keep

from losing myself
in the night. The doctors say
I am becoming less than I was.

That my bones are hollowing
at their center. This is the price

I accept for weightlessness.
For feeling my hand grasping
air, buoyed to nothing.

FOG CITY

The summer we stopped trying,
we vacationed in San Francisco,
staying in an old motor inn

with bay windows. Everywhere
was an opportunity to be lost.
The mist rose in the mornings,

obscuring the foothills, and I hid
my face in the guidebook,
or found myself turning

the corner looking for a rose.
On Sunday, we lunched
at the Hong Kong Lounge,

waiting nameless in a crowd
for a table. We watched
as local children balanced,

on thin sticks, grains of rice
they unwrapped from a lotus leaf.
I ordered us the Chao Zhou dumpling,

famous for its translucent skin.
Shrimp rippled pink under the surface
like organs. When the last piece

was left, I reached for it. I bit
down, letting the flesh open
against my hard white teeth.

SELF PORTRAIT AS SELF PORTRAIT

Fat as the roast we had
 for Saturday dinner, I lie
in bed, touch each pillowy appendage
 like a nursing child.

On the iPhone, my milky flesh
 goes blue and artificial. I hear
the camera's digital snap.

What do you call something
 that takes and takes
and never gives back? Do you call it
 a bitch? Do you call it a wife?

DREAM WRITTEN IN MORSE CODE

When you're alone, all
 the small things
 get large again.
 Flat-backed on deck,
 the current pulls
 my small craft.
 The ship spinning. Flat-backed,
 the world

 feels like a ride
 that won't stop. My eye
 faces away from earth,
 glazes over
 with sky. The pupil
 in its see-saw
 of dilate and
 contract. In my pocket

 an envelope full
 of seeds. In my breast
 the remnants
 of a star. I've been drifting.
 Somewhere
 someone spins
 a dial—white noise, static,
 hazy whale-call

 of planets. He is trying
 to find me,
 searchlights encroaching on
 my bee-line
 of dark. He always
 calls it *rescue*.
 Even when I don't
 want to be saved.

MY APOLOGY

When you're at work, I take out your old toothbrush
and dip it in bleach. In my dirty Purdue sweatshirt,

I kneel in the bathtub, grinding the bristles
back and forth on the discolored grout.

The lines turn crimson from iron in the water
and crack a bit near the seams, like red gums.

It bothers you. Over an hour, the bleach does its work,
makes the caulking look almost new. Each time

I check, the shower is whiter, like a scene
from a time-lapse camera. I don't know

how else to show you. In the evening, I read you my poem
about the bird. You nod. How can you ask me why

I don't put our life together in words?
Everything I say is addressed to you.

POEM TRAVELING IN A CIRCUIT

No promised-land. No paradise with yellow
fruits marring the dusky beach, frills
of an unfamiliar plant rippling out

like a clitoris. Not even a great nothing
to discover, suicide cliff-fall to gurney,
its wet mist rising opium-white.

We curse the maps, finger their crossed
latitudes that hatch over us like a cage.
When the world ends it just keeps going.

*

It just keeps going, the end of the world
hatching over me like a cage. At each latitude
I am cursed, my fingers find the edge of a map.

My face rises, misty and opium-white,
my body held on a gurney. I discover suicide
is not even a great nothing. Not like my clitoris

rippling out, unfamiliar, a plant that frills
a dusky beach. When we married, nothing
fruited like a yellow paradise. No promised-land.

Curriculum Vitae

KARA VAN DE GRAAF**Education**

Ph.D. English, Fall 2009-present

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, WI

Areas: History of the Lyric Poem, British Romanticism, New Media Aesthetics

Dissertation: "Dear Satellite: Poems"

Advisor: Rebecca Dunham

M.F.A. Poetry, 2007

University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA

Thesis: "Blue Baby"

Advisor: Lynn Emanuel

B.A. Literature and Creative Writing, 2003

Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN

Advisor: Marianne Boruch

Teaching and Administrative Positions

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, WI:

Teaching Assistant, (2009-present)

Introduction to Creative Writing (English 233), Fall 2010, Spring 2012, Fall 2012

Introduction to Creative Writing Online (English 233), Summer 2012

Introduction to College Writing (English 101), Fall 2009, Spring 2010

College Writing and Research (English 102), Spring 2011, Spring 2013

Fundamentals of Composition (English 095), Fall 2010, Fall 2011

Coordinator of English 101, Fall 2013-present (2-1 course release)

Responsible for working with staff, students, and instructors to facilitate approximately ninety sections, sixty instructors, and two-thousand students working in this first-year writing course. Planned, organized, and held five-day new TA orientation and semester staff meetings. Developed and revised curriculum.

English 101 Mentor, Fall 2011-present (1-1 course release)

Held weekly mentor meetings with new graduate instructors throughout the year. Observed teaching of new instructors and approved course materials. Guided individual research projects for professional development.

University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA:

Teaching Assistant, (2005-2007)

Introduction to Poetry Writing (English Writing 0530), Spring 2007

Introduction to Creative Writing (English Writing 0400), Fall 2006

Seminar in Composition, (English Composition 0200), Fall 2005, Spring 2006

Teaching Assistant to Lynn Emanuel, 2006

Senior Seminar in Poetry (English Writing 1730), Fall 2006

Awards and Fellowships

Finalist, Crab Orchard Series First Book Award for “Dear Satellite,” 2014

Winner, Hoepfner Award from Southern Humanities Review for “Dictation,” 2014

Finalist, Berkshire Prize for Poetry for “Dear Satellite,” Tupelo Press, 2013

Semi-finalist, New Issues Poetry Prize for “Dear Satellite,” 2013

Finalist, Philip Roth Residence in Creative Writing at Bucknell University, 2014-2015

Finalist, Sunken Garden Chapbook Prize for “Dear Satellite” and “Spitting Image,” 2014

Finalist, Crab Orchard Series in Poetry Open Competition for “Circuit,” 2014

Semi-finalist, Brittingham and Pollack Poetry Prizes for “Circuit,” 2013

Finalist, Crab Orchard Series First Book Award for “Dear Satellite,” 2013

Distinguished Dissertation Fellowship, Graduate School, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee,
2013-2014

Academy of American Poets Prize, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2013

Graduate Student Travel Award, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2013

Scholarship, Squaw Valley Community of Writers, 2012

Finalist, Discovery/Boston Review Prize, 2012

Full scholarship, The New York State Summer Writers Institute, 2011

Runner-up, 49th Parallel Poetry Award, judged by Lia Purpura, *Bellingham Review*, 2011

The William Harrold Memorial Award for Poetry, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee,
2011

Best New Poets 2010, selected by Claudia Emerson, 2010

Chancellor’s Fellowship for Graduate Study, Graduate School, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2009-2010

Poetry Center of Chicago’s Summer Residency Award, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 2007

K. Leroy Irvis Fellowship, Graduate School, University of Pittsburgh, 2004-2005

Martha E. McKinney Award for Poetry, Purdue University, 2002

Publications

- “Queen Ant” and “Dower Chest,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* (forthcoming)
- “Sonnet with a Wishbone in the Throat,” *Crazyhorse* (forthcoming)
- “Excavated Girl” and “Horsefly,” *Passages North* (forthcoming)
- “Poem in the Turn of a Wheel,” “Poem Traveling in a Circuit,” “Spaceflight,” and “Madame La Guillotine,” *Meridian* (forthcoming)
- “Manifest,” *The Southern Review* (forthcoming)
- “Trousseau,” *The Massachusetts Review* (forthcoming)
- “Maquette,” *The Laurel Review* (forthcoming)
- “Spyglass,” *Birmingham Poetry Review* (forthcoming)
- “Dictation,” *Southern Humanities Review* (forthcoming)
- “Locking Ghazal,” *Cimarron Review* (forthcoming)
- “Epithalamium,” *Alaska Quarterly Review* 30.4 (Fall/Winter 2013)
- “Ode to Sea Scurvy,” “Ode to Hardtack,” and “Controlled Burn,” *Quarterly West* (Spring 2013)
- “Isolation Ward,” *Cincinnati Review* 10.1 (Summer 2013)
- “Exhibit,” and “Washing,” *Poet Lore* 108.1 (Spring/Summer 2013)
- “Drills,” and “Crime of the Century,” *Hayden’s Ferry Review* 52 (Spring/Summer 2013)
- “Poem in the Shape of a Grand Piano,” *Southern Indiana Review* (Spring 2013)
- “Mending,” “We Take Their Clothes,” and “Poem on the End of a Lure,” *New South* 6.1 (2013)
- “Dream with Water Beneath the Floorboards,” *Linebreak* (January 29, 2013)
- “Burned Girl,” *The Journal* 36.3 (Summer 2012)
- “Floating Girl,” *Third Coast* 35 (Fall 2012)
- “Spitting Image,” *Indiana Review* 34.1 (Summer 2012)

“Starlings in Winter,” and “The Dark,” *Mid-American Review* 32.2 (Fall/Spring 2012)

“Poem Wired with Knob-and-Tube,” and “The Butler’s Pantry,” *Bellingham Review* 64 (Spring 2012)

“Poem at the Bottom of the Allegheny River,” *Best New Poets 2010*, Samovar Press (anthology)

“Rounds,” *Blood Lotus* (February 2010)

“Poem on the Verge of Interruption,” and “Poem in the Eardrum,” *Ninth Letter* 7.2 (Fall/Winter 2010)

“Poem in the Corner of a Young Girl’s Mouth,” *Indiana Review* 32.2 (Winter 2010)

Poetry Readings and Interviews

Contributor Spotlight for *Ninth Letter*, (with Natalie Mesnard, Ching-In Chen and others), Urbana-Champaign, April 2013

Interview for the Boneyard Arts Festival with Natalie Mesnard, *Smile Politely*, April 2013

United We Read, (with James Chapson and others), Milwaukee, March 2013

Commentary and reading for the Bluecast, *Indiana Review*, February 2013

Midwest Interdisciplinary Graduate Conference, (with Ching-In Chen and others), Milwaukee, February 2013

Best New Poets 2011 Anthology Reading, (with Rebecca Hazelton, Brittany Cavallaro, and Jennifer Luebbbers, Madison, November 2011

Winter Festival of Poets, (with Paul Scot August and others), Madison, February 2010

Best New Poets Anthology, (with Seth Abramson, Kai Carlson-Wee, Kevin Gonzalez, and Kara Candito), Madison, December 2010

United We Read, (with Jill Logan and others), Milwaukee, October 2009

Graduate Reading Series, (with Jonathon Moody and others), Pittsburgh, April 2007

Local and National Presentations

“Rhetorically Analyzing Visual Texts in English 101,” English Graduate Teaching Assistant

Orientation, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, August 2013

“A Controlling Purpose Workshop: Designing Activities for the First-year Classroom,” with Nic

Learned, Professional Development Forum, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, February 2013

“Working with Controlling Purpose in First-year Composition,” English Graduate Teaching Assistant

Orientation, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, August 2012

“Only Kinect: Embodied Interfaces and Aesthetic Engagement in the First-year Composition

Classroom,” Conference on College Composition and Communication, St. Louis, March 2012

“Using Student Texts in the Classroom,” English Graduate Teaching Assistant Orientation,

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, August 2010

“A Rhetorical Study of Ten Years of Standard Assignment Sequences,” Professional and Pedagogical Development Conference, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2009

“Making Critical Leaps Through Creative Writing,” Those Who Can Teach Conference, Marquette University, December 2009

“Are We Killing Our Students With Comments?” Panel with Cathy Day and others, University

of Pittsburgh, Spring 2006

Service and Community

Positions

Graduate Student Representative, Creative Writing Advisory Committee, 2012-present
Mentor, New Creative Writing Graduate Students, 2010-2012

Committees

Chair, Curriculum Development Committee for English 101, 2012-present

Member, Writing Program Administration, 2011-present

Member, Curriculum Development Committee for English 101, 2010-2011

Member, Composition Advisory Committee, 2010-present

Member, Faculty Search Committee in Poetry at University of Pittsburgh, 2006-2007

Community

Discussion Leader, Common Reading Experience, 2012

Hill House Center for Creativity, Hill House, Pittsburgh, 2007

Editorial Experience

Poetry Editor for *Cream City Review*, 2011-2014

- Event organized: Contributor Spotlight with Richie Hofmann and Greg Wrenn

Assistant Poetry Editor for *Cream City Review*, 2009-2011