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The Rebuff of Discovery: A Collection of Poems

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The Rebuff of Discovery:
A Collection of Poems

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of Honors

By

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The Honors College

Midway Honors Scholars Program

East Tennessee State University

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Dr. Don Johnson, Thesis Mentor Date

Dr. Jesse Graves, Reader Date

Dr. Joseph Baker, Reader Date

Dedication

My parents and grandparents set the groundwork on which I still stand. A childhood raised in the care of both enclosed memories that I still return to for my poems. My mother, Vicki Ireson, and grandmother, Carol McMahan, both built secure and loving homes for me, and still give unrelenting support. Aside from family, my partner Caleb also gave countless hours in helping me revise, while giving additional emotive support. I couldn't have accomplished this otherwise. I love you all immeasurably.

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These past two years, I have realized my own potential while also discovering my love for academia. Dr. Graves, Wachs, and Johnson have also been beyond supportive in my decision to continue to study at ETSU. I am thankful for the financial support of the Honors College and the moral support of previous Dean Rebecca Pyles. Aside from academic support, I also had the unfaltering support of my mother and best friend, Vicki Ireson. Without her constant support and love I would have never achieved what I thought was an unattainable goal. She is a true blessing. These people have made it possible to achieve a goal I previously believed to be impossible, and the gratitude I feel for them is immense.

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THE REBUFF OF DISCOVERY: INTRODUCTION

It has been a problematic and arduous task to recount and relive some of the events I describe in my poetry. More so to accept the totality of it—holding the completed product in my hands, with the opportunity to illuminate every poem as memory is jarring to say the least. So many variables have helped shape my life in both a negative and positive manner, and have, in turn, affected my writing. Growing up with major depression has molded my writing in a way that is almost inexpressible. Always, I have turned to writing when having difficulties communicating the way that I felt. I spent my teenage years fluctuating between months of crippling depression exacerbated by self-injury, and idyllic nights of walking in the woods or swimming in the neighboring lake. As soon as I had achieved my Associate's degree I delved into another chapter of my life, attempting to complete my Bachelor's Degree. In this odd juxtaposition I base most of my writing—the struggle for life alternating with my delight in its splendor. I find myself writing about the most challenging times in my life along with the most magnificent.

At the age of fifteen, I discovered my favorite lyricist, who still influences my writing as an adult. Conor Oberst was a calming transition from lyricism into poetry, while I was growing up. In the song “Laura Laurent,” Oberst states, “You should never be embarrassed / by your trouble with living, / ‘cause it’s the ones with the sorest throats, Laura, / who have done the most singing.” (Oberst). Oberst’s offering of consolation to his mentally troubled friend has consoled me also. While being raised by my mother and grandmother, I spent half of my adolescence with one and the rest with the other. Because of this, by the end of my teenage years, I had been raised in both urban and rural settings. The bucolic trees and roosters that dotted my grandparents’ yard would be exchanged for the metropolis when my mother would have the monetary means to

support us both. The trees that I treasured so much would be exchanged for parking-lot driveways, and summer days spent dashing through forests were supplanted by playdates with neighboring children in our apartment complex. Even as early as five or six, I frequently turned to paper to express my moods. Miniscule love-notes to my mother were a premature attempt to put my thoughts onto paper, and early classes in high school introduced me to writers that I still study. I was introduced to T.S. Eliot in my junior year, and I return to his poems for enjoyment. Early into my college career, I was well aware of my reverence for literature and decided to further my education in that field. Soon I was submerged in Sylvia Plath, Charles Bukowski, Walt Whitman, and countless others who influenced my writing. While I am fascinated by Plath's life and her intimate poems, I thoroughly relish Bukowski's frankness that can put me into merriment or tears. I am consumed by Plath's poetry on a daily basis, and I strive to understand her own struggle with depression as she conveyed it in her writing. A winter break spent with Plath and Bukowski instigated this project by compelling me to write about delicate and tumultuous stages of my life.

Discussing the influences on my writing is not an easy undertaking. When I reflect on poets that I try to emulate, the disparity between my writing and theirs seems too intense. Bukowski is a man that I find to be a unique person and awe-inspiring writer. Upon first hearing his poetry read, I was sure that I could follow suit. His raw brashness led to much deliberation about Dirty Realism, a style of writing, originating in the US in the 1980s, which illustrates in great detail the routine traits of everyday life. I admired his blitheness and vices. As a rebel, he hated many things, even poets. He asserts:

The poet is a sissy, the poet is nothing, and it was true, they were, they are, a lot of them. Not meaning being a sissy, uh, by sissy I mean they're missing the point,

you know? Like guys are fighting in the schoolyard and one guy gets a punch in the mouth and you're watching this...another guy gets his head pushed down in a fountain and he comes up with a mouthful of blood. These things are never explained, you know? The realities were never explained, everything was hidden in poetry. The reason I kept writing was because – not because I was so good but because they were so damned bad. Yeah.

His honesty, brutal and unwavering, is a quality that I attempt to incorporate in to my own poetic works.

Bukowski's predilection for women and alcohol interests me greatly. In his poem "The Crunch," I find unanticipated inspiration. Bukowski writes, "there is a loneliness in this world so great / that you can see it in the slow movements / of / the hands of a clock / there is a loneliness in this world so great / that you can see it blinking in neon signs / in Vegas, in Baltimore, in Munich" (23-9). Bukowski's overt admission and scrutiny of loneliness in the world is, at times, tragic while also reassuring. Knowing that others have observed loneliness so austere, he defines it as the unhurried movements in the hands of a clock. On the other hand, knowing that an individual can articulate such morose feelings gives me inspiration that I can do the same. I struggle predominantly with allowing myself to write down my most intimate memories, from recollections of suicidal aspirations to my first kiss. I sometimes find myself being ashamed of the most essential times in my life. Permitting myself to write about life's intimate moments has opened a new window for me. Bukowski continues, saying "there are people so tired / so strafed / so mutilated by love or no / love / that buying a bargain can of tuna / in a supermarket / is their greatest moment / their greatest victory" (Bukowski). When I think of Bukowski, I am reminded of the sincerity that can reveal itself in poetry.

Perhaps more than any other Bukowski poem, “me against the world” may be the one that inspires me most to write about private yet formative instances in my life. In a lot of his work, Bukowski gives an autobiographical account of glum occasions. A recollection of being bullied appears in “me against the world”. Bukowski writes, “‘sissy! sissy!’ they yelled. / ‘going home to mama?’ / I kept running. / they were right. / I ran all the way to my house, / up the driveway and onto the / porch and into the / house / where my father was beating my mother.” (Bukowski). Out of all of his poems, this one embodies what I fear most with my writing—overt confessions of memories I’d rather forget. Bukowski’s bluntness about his father’s physical abuse towards him and his mother is overtly revealed in his poetry. While Bukowski reveals his troubled past with ease, I struggle with my own.

In many ways, I feel envious of Bukowski’s writing, while also remaining hopeful that I can also express difficult times in my life in the beautiful way that Bukowski does. Part of my experience of growing up with mental illness was the nagging desire to feel the normalcy that other teenagers felt. I was sure that a life free from mental illness would be infinitely better. As I got older, however, I started to resent my situation less and began to accept the fact that I could create a happy and successful life for myself, regardless of preexisting conditions. One of my poems adequately represents my struggle with depression and suicidal thoughts. On multiple occasions, I have wondered what it was like for my mother to suffer in the aftermath of my suicide attempt. I explain in “The Big Picture”:

I pull out my IV twice in my dreams.
When I wake, the blood has dried,
the sun is sincere and bright and tingling.
My mother’s voice, a melody

while she cleans my arms.

The chorus repeats, "Never leave me. Please."

She still arranges flowers in my hair.

I sleep and dream in a fog of relief.

Discharging my feelings of guilt and embarrassment made it easier to write about my struggle with depression resulting in a suicide attempt. If anything, Bukowski has encouraged me to write about topics I formerly would have never shared with others. Freeing myself from previous reservations and relying on Bukowski's candor about his past, I wrote my first thesis poem, "The Big Picture." This was followed by many more poems that disclose intimate glimpses of my life.

Whitman has also been an essential influence throughout my whole college career.

Whitman's magnum opus, "Song of Myself," is a hallmark of his ability to articulate exquisitely. Whitman begins his poem with "I celebrate myself, and sing myself, / And what I assume you shall assume, / for every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you." (1-3). In this first stanza, Whitman sets the tone for his extensive poem. Words such as "sing," "celebrate," and "good," give this work a pleasurable atmosphere for the reader. He continues a few stanzas later to say, "It [the atmosphere] is in my mouth forever, I am in love with it. / I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and naked, / I am mad for it to be in contact with me." (18-20). Whitman has transgressed all borders and gone into overt sexual poetry. This, of course, was not well-received at the time.

Further along in his work, Whitman transcends orthodox confines wholly, witnessing life all over, but passing no judgment: "The youngster and the red-faced girl turn aside up the bushy hill, / I peeringly view them from the top. / The suicide sprawls on the bloody floor of the bedroom, / I witness the corpse with its dabbled hair, I note where the / pistol has fallen." (150-

3). Whitman acts as the fly on the wall, witnessing an array of scenes but not casting judgment on any. This is a characteristic that I attempt to replicate in my own writing. The children on the hill are no better or worse than the suicide on the floor; they both simply are. Whitman ends “Song of Myself” with the lines: “Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged, / Missing me one place search another, / I stop somewhere waiting for you.” (1344-6). Likely written on his deathbed, this last stanza is evocatively candid and resolute. Attempting to emulate one of America’s best writers is not an easy task. In “A Poetic Retelling of an Unfortunate Seduction” I recount a memory, while also endeavoring to bring in nature and eroticism analogous to that of Whitman’s:

Cold hands on the window sill, arms tense

When you pulled me through.

Muttering and amused, we spread

blankets like grass, our backs gripping

to hold the slanted roof.

The sky, so low, could be stroked

if we reached up.

You kissed my mouth

for the first time.

I lay still, waiting for hot

breath, harsh stubble on my cheek.

While I quivered in the icy air.

Your hands came like waves

over me. Soothing, damning. Knocking
me down, dragging me under.

Maybe the most influential poet to my thesis, Sylvia Plath, remains a prevailing voice in present-day discussions about confessional poetry. George Steiner looks on Plath's life in retrospect, saying,

It requires no biographical impertinence to realize that Sylvia Plath's life was harried by bouts of physical pain, that she sometimes looked on the accumulated exactions of her own nerve and body as a "trash To annihilate each decade." She was haunted by the piecemeal, strung-together mechanics of the flesh, by what could be so easily broken and then mended with such searing ingenuity. (Steiner).

Tormented by mental illness, Plath attempted suicide twice before succeeding in her early thirties. In poems such as "Lady Lazarus" she recounts a failed suicide attempt: "Dying / Is an art, like everything else. / I do it exceptionally well. / I do it so it feels like hell. / I do it so it feels real. / I guess you could say I've a call." (Plath). As I began this project, I was also beginning to read more of Plath. After purchasing *The Colossus* and *Ariel*, I was immersed in the life of a mentally tormented young woman. Plath herself said,

I think my poems immediately come out of the sensuous and emotional experiences I have, but I must say I cannot sympathize with these cries from the heart that are informed by nothing except a needle or a knife, or whatever it is. I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying, like madness, being tortured, this sort of experience, and one should be able to manipulate these experiences with an informed and intelligent mind.

In writing my thesis, I have tried to recount biographical information from experiences I have had. My poetry stems from memories, experiences, and unique images.

Maybe more than any other poem, “Giants” —a memory of sneaking into a boy’s window at seventeen, embodies my attempt at confessional poetry. In many ways, it also expresses a type of denial of an unearthing that I would ultimately learn to accept. Transforming from a teenager into a woman was a fight. A stubborn feminist, I was always put off about the assigned roles of gender. To the extent that one can, “Giants” represents this conversion from girl to woman, which I still rebuff on occasion. When this memory came to me, I initially resented the sentiments that it stirred up. Embarrassed feelings about first kisses were exchanged for a poem:

And now, I still drive by the house
I would tiptoe off to, like a convict
in the dark, plastered on sovereignty and whiskey.
Driving home, the snow and wind
pushing me, the brakes on my car
aching to stop.

Plath said, “I think my poems immediately come out of the sensuous and emotional experiences I have.” Releasing myself from any negative feelings about past experiences, I can recount them in a poetic manner.

In many ways, my goal with this project was not to accomplish mastery of poetic form or tone, but to expand creatively on past experiences in an academic way. Some of the poems in this collection, like “Lake Cherokee” have taken shape simply by reliving memories. Others, like

“You Will. You Will?” are meant to articulate and expand on stages in my life that I still struggle with today.

Part of reflecting on this assortment of poems is realizing where I have fallen short-- poems I wish I had completed, objectives I have yet to meet. Looking past this project, is it my immediate goal to write more formal poetry. As a Bukowski fan, I have spent early adulthood years fawning over his independence and knack for vices. As I transition from Undergrad to Graduate student, I plan on moving past aesthetically pleasing poems, allowing myself to study deeper meanings. To bring this project in full circle, I again return to the inspirational work of Oberst. Each time I insert Oberst’s CD into my car radio, I am reminded of the beauty of life; “And if the world could remain / within a frame / like a painting on the wall, / I think we’d see the beauty then, / and stand staring in awe.” Every line of poetry on every page has been a journey of reconciliation with my past and present—a journey deciphering who I am among all the leftovers of what I have been. An undeniably essential expedition.

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“And by the way, everything in life is writable about if you have the outgoing guts to do it, and the imagination to improvise. The worst enemy to creativity is self-doubt.” Sylvia Plath

The Big Picture

*Animal or angel?
You were carved from bone,
but your heart,
it's just sand. -Conor Oberst*

I reach up my hand to touch the sky
an EMT pushes it down to my side,
says "You're going to be all right."

My hands stretch across my hospital bed,
my mother puts flowers in my hair.
Like Ophelia,
drowning in tubes and sheets.
"Get Well Soon" cards appear around the room
while I sleep.

I pull out my IV twice in my dreams.
When I wake, the blood has dried,
the sun is sincere and bright and tingling.
My mother's voice, a melody
while she cleans my arms.
The chorus repeats, "Never leave me. Please."
She still arranges flowers in my hair.
I sleep and dream in a fog of relief.
I hear her on the phone, whispering about
the gray tint in my once pink cheeks.

These tubes in my nose and mouth
are raw, but the sky is so close.
I reach up my hand,
my mother pushes it back down to my side.

Let's not Shit Ourselves

For Caleb

*If you want to see the future
go stare into a cloud.* –Conor Oberst

It burned my throat.
We'd smoke, Monday and Wednesday,
senior year. Tactless on your couch
with our faces to the ceiling-
and it'd hit me.
I'd roll onto my side
and close my mouth
over yours. Your chest
was like sand, warmed by the heat
all day, stirred like the wind
under the curve
of my hand.

And now, I pass alone
in my car by that persistent house
where we would lie.
I still picture you out front,
sauntering in autumn weather,
down the street to buy coffee
and the muddy wheels
of my car crush walnuts and leaves
beneath their weight.

Giants

*Don't take it too bad,
it's nothing you did;
just once something dies
you can't make it live. –Conor Oberst*

Instead of staying up late
to whisper under heavy blankets,
I snuck soundlessly to bed
while you plucked the strings
on your guitar.

He wasn't like you. He was drunk
and leaning on me, telling
me I was the most beautiful
person he'd seen
and we were like giants
in the backseat of his car
hands scrambling to twist each other nearer.

I crept in late at night
to scattered debris. You'd shattered
all my things. Inaudibly, sneaking
to the bedroom, I swear, you could smell
the stench on me.
You tossed and turned all night,
pulling the sheets.

And now, I still drive by the house
I would tiptoe off to, like a convict
in the dark, plastered on sovereignty and whiskey.
Driving home, the snow and wind
pushing me, the brakes on my car
aching to stop.

Lake Cherokee

*My compass spins,
the wilderness remains.* –Conor Oberst

We stay up late enough to march
uncertain and half-naked in the night.
Drifting revenants through trees
and the moon, so bright, leaves shadows
on the ground. She watches you pulling me along,
slipping softly through the mile of forest
it takes to reach the edge of the lake.

Hushed and still, the bats and bugs
watch from the trees as I point into the lake,
swearing, there is one more moon.
I reach out to touch
her, she ripples away.
Hand in hand, we lie on our backs in murkiness
and pretend it's the sky.

Your mouth on mine, hand
pulling me out, makes me forget
how we shiver, separate from the warm water,
giggling, our bathing suits clinging to ice-cold skin.

Barefoot, I climb rocks with shaky knees,
beads like rain drip from my hair and down my spine.
I steady myself at the top,
feel my heartbeat in my neck.
I put out my arm and wave, whisper your name
making sure you see me while I grip my nose,
jump into lake that looks like sky.

A Poetic Retelling of an Unfortunate Seduction

*Her eyes are black and wet like oil
And she ties your hands with a string of pearls
And you tremble like a frightened bird* –Conor Oberst

After the cat had scuttled from beneath
The house to hunt, we floated like ghosts,
Whispering to not disrupt the house.

Cold hands on the window sill, arms tense
When you pulled me through.
Muttering and amused, we spread
blankets like grass, our backs gripping
to hold the slanted roof.

The sky, so low, could be stroked
if we reached up.
You kissed my mouth
for the first time.
I lay still, waiting for your lips
your hot breath, harsh stubble on my cheek.
While I quivered in the icy air.

Your hands came like waves
over me. Soothing, damning. Knocking
me down, dragging me under.

White Plate, Two Red Pears

*If the world could remain
within a frame
like a painting on a wall,
I think we'd see the beauty then
and stand staring in awe. –Conor Oberst*

A small town, signaled by the
dusty sign at its edge.

I walk these tracks
like a Chinese concubine
with carefully placed feet.
I belong in this heavy-eyed city, settling
in front of a TV screen,
dozing off. I wonder if the snow
that dusted my roof this morning
is lingering still.
I pull out shoe boxes
full of pictures
and cradle each one:
Our heads, side-by-side
on the muddy ground
write a story. I leave empty chapters out.
No more snapshots on freezing Charles Street.

Twenty years shoeboxed,
but no tracks.
I went right then,
camera in hand to capture
all the trees and snow.
I dreamed that night of reducing this town
to those, erasing the rest.

Your Baroque Box

For Colten McNabb (1991-2012)

*I dream of you so often,
It's like you never leave.* –Conor Oberst

Through one month and a week
you had quit smoking.
Instead of spending your nights
on the back porch, a cigarette
to your lips, you sat in front
of a computer, eating your fingernails.
Through that night, the autumn leaves covered
our lawn completely.
We drank coffee on the front porch
the next morning. Later, in a fit of rage, you said
“you don't deserve to die.
You deserve to suffer here.
You deserve to be alive.”

I receive an invitation,
spend an hour picking out
the perfect black dress.
I can already see you,
sober face, clad in your best.
I cry, thinking about the last time
I saw you.
I stand in the back of the room,
looking for the face I had known.
You cross your arms over your chest.
No apologies stream from our mouths.

And I wish it were you
next to me now, muttering stories
and secrets before they inaudibly lower
that box into dark, muddy ground.

The Rebuff of Discovery

Don't you want to be found?

Why do you lay so low in the grass? –Conor Oberst

After humid days and midnight
thunderstorms in September,
all the leaves in my mother's yard
plummet to the ground,
little anchors gripping the earth.
Some cling by threads
to the bare branches.

Most blanket the ground
beneath the drip lines—
bright carousels
surrounding every trunk.
Turning our backs on circles,

we demolish them. Pile up every leaf
in the yard, and burrow our way through
the prickly mounds, pretending
we will never be called inside.
No colds will catch
us from staying out too late.

We tunnel through and through,
probing for a way out-
retreating when we see the light.

You will. You? Will. You? Will. You? Will.

For Mark

You are a boomerang, you'll see.

You will return to me.

You will. You? Will. –Conor Oberst

Our life unfolded-

A bottle of childhood memories

kept beside your tiny bed

shaken over and over again

with every breath of smoke

from parted lips.

Shaken like a snow globe in a child's hands

or a wasp's nest

knocked free from the tree branch

it all depends where you've been.

Because last night you weren't making sense,

slurred questions you've asked more than once,

hands shaking from too many pills.

Low gas and tired legs

keep you here

for a bit.

We talked about all the places you've been

and the strange faces you'd met.

Make-up drowned women

and prostituted children

stand on all the street corners

you'd seen.

"It's a hard world," you said,

"like you'd never believe."

I watched your lips smile and curse

and tell me how much you'd miss me.

A timeless night, slowed down.

We were doing coke, kissing.

When you fell asleep, I listened to you breathe.

A precious ghost, dressed in our sheets,

my nightmare and reverie.

Our past is gone but you're still sleeping here.

In the next room, naked, calling me.

I scream it from the doorway

every time you pack your bags

and leave:

“You’re a boomerang- you’ll see.

You will return to me.”

You will.

You will?

Amy in the Black Coat

You hated sleep. Spent late nights
in the living room, immersed in a chair,
covered in half light, scratching black ink
inside old notebooks. Or rushing
in from night class
breathless and smiling,
powder snow dusting, melting
in your hair. Books in gloved hands,
you spoke quickly,
saying, "Plath's words remind me of you"
and I think I know.
I saw grief printed on her face.

Now, you're pulling at my shirt sleeves.
While I ask you to breathe. Saying, "Come on,
don't act like this, everything is okay.
I'll fetch you tea in bed.
You can pitch it against the wall
if you want."
My hand on the side of your face
An arm draped across your back
while you mumble questions
you swear I don't comprehend.
A hand clutching the inside of your chest.
That night, you twisted in our sheets,
dreaming of that poet
beside me. Woke me twice by gripping
my shoulders and shaking.

Those nightmares
stumbled in from deep-rooted memories,
seized you by your hands.

You Whisper in Your Sleep

For Colten McNabb (1991-2012)

*I thought you were beautiful
but I wept with your movements.* -Conor Oberst

Endless late nights, you sweating by my side
through fever dreams and unclear highs.
You whisper in your sleep, "Would you give your
tired soul to me?
Tie your restless soul to me?"

How could you have known that the storm
when it's gone, leaves fallen debris
I force myself to clean up?
You hid under covers from the hail and thunder.

I scribble fears at night, a book full of words you can't read.
In my dreams, you tear out pages before you toss them onto the bed.
I sit, a child left shaking in an empty bath.
Yelling to empty walls for you to come back,
wrap me in a towel, pick me up
and lay me down in bed.

Time Forgot

For my Mother

*All this death must need a counterweight—
always someone born again.* –Conor Oberst

Mother and I walk
on the hot white sand.
Clear blue waves roll
over our feet.
“Beautiful,” she says.

I shake my head and agree,
wiping off sand
from my knees.
She sprays my back
with sunscreen,
laughing.

We push our feet into the sand,
burning, persistent.
She holds my reddening hand.

White Tiles, White Walls

*A coroner kneels beneath a great, wooden crucifix;
he knows there's worse things than being alone. —Conor Oberst*

I nearly encountered him, once.
He postponed our date—
a passenger in a car,
watching me through his window
while I hurried to the front door of my house,
scarf drawn up over my nose and mouth.

It isn't the same way he understands
me when I lie on my bathroom floor,
drunk, frantic
and pleading for him.

It isn't the same way he watches
me when I tell you in the dark,
that Death's not too far,
but he sees you cry
in your sleep, and won't meet me.

He's scheduling appointments
for me, chokes
up when he hears you scream.