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The Poetic Process: A Poetry Collection

By

Kirsten Noelle Litz

An Undergraduate Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the
Fine and Performing Arts Scholars Program
Honors College
East Tennessee State University

Kirsten Noelle Litz

Date

Dr. Jesse Graves, Thesis Mentor

Date

Catherine Childress, Reader

Date

An Introduction to The Poems

I am not a poet. Although I was accepted into the Fine and Performing Arts Honors College based on my writing, I had not written poetry until way after the start of my college career. I wrote fantasy-filled fiction novels and prided myself on character building, dialogue, and everything that a poem is not. It had never occurred to me that I could be a poet or write a poem worth reading. It wasn't until my first semester of college in my Artistic Vision class that the idea came into my mind.

In Artistic Vision, the main topic of discussion was, "What makes a good artist?" and "What makes good art?" We debated these questions for the entire semester. Finally, after many classes filled with debate, reading heavy literature, and discussing amazing artwork, I asked, "Is being a good artist making people feel things with your art?" To my surprise, the answer was, simply, yes.

This has stuck with me for four years. In my strive to become a good writer and a good artist, I always kept it in the back of my mind that I wanted to make people feel things with what I wrote. It feels like my purpose on this earth is to continually attempt to be a good artist. It was in that same class where I presented a short story that I was told, for the first time in my life, I should try to write poetry. I had written a fiction story based in a fantasy world, but I had written it in a slant rhyme with a lot of rhythm on accident. I was told to take Dr. Graves' poetry classes and try my hand at writing poetry for real.

It wasn't until the fall of my junior year that I took Dr. Graves' introduction to poetry class and seriously attempted writing poetry. I had hardly read poetry before and I was severely unequipped for the attempt at the time. We read *A Book of Luminous Things*, and I learned that I

loved reading poetry and desperately wanted to be good at writing it. What I love the most about reading poetry is how it can make you feel so deeply, and in a way that fiction writing can't.

While I think that writing fiction can make you feel deeply, and it can be as equally compelling and meaningful as poetry, poetry has a way of its own. Either through vivid, structured and proper poems, or easy-going free-verse poems, poetry gives everything and everyone a voice. It allows you to take one moment, emotion, or object and freeze it and expand on it. Poetry is unapologetic, and that's why I find it so appealing.

As I continued my quest to be a good artist and learned more about poetry, I knew that I wanted to write it. But it was a long battle with myself to determine if I could be good enough at it to continue pursuing it. However, whenever I felt bogged down and that a poem I wrote would be my last, a surge of inspiration would flow through me like it never had with writing a fiction story. A poem would come into my mind and demand to be written, unapologetically. It was due to this inspiration and my newfound love of poetry as to why I chose to write a collection of poems and talk about the poetic processes behind them for my Honors Thesis.

In all these poems I practice different poetic processes, ranging from the structured sonnet to prose to spoken word to free verse. The most common process I practice is prose and free verse poetry. In Robert Hass' *A Little Book on Form*, he explains free verse as this: "The idea was that you didn't impose a pattern on your thought or perception; you let the perception or the thought give you the pattern." I like writing free verse the best because I feel like it lets the poem speak for itself without having to contain it to a certain form. Sometimes a poem will decide for itself if it will have some rhyme or meter, or none. These usually become my most compelling pieces of poetry. Additionally, in this collection I present two sonnets. While free verse is my favorite to write, I occasionally like to challenge myself to practice a strict form.

Also, I wrote a more ambitious piece, a spoken word poem. While I did include a rhyme on the poem, it is meant to be heard more than it is to be read. Conclusively, with each poem I tried to display different techniques while continuing with my theme of writing inspired pieces to make the readers feel deeply the emotions behind them.

The first poem of the collection I named after this thesis itself. It embodied what I not only want my thesis to be, but all my poetry to be. As I learned four years ago in *Artistic Vision*, creating good art means making people feel something from it. This poem explains that I create poetry from an emotional starting point, whether that be my own thoughts and feelings or from another's. It explains my own poetic process, of absorbing emotions and attempting to place them into a form. As Hass writes in *A Little Book on Form*:

“Looking at kinds, fixed forms, genres, stanza patterns, we have been using the term *form* as if it meant to set the preconditions that made a kind of container for the writing. In this sense the sonnet is “a form.” But in the deeper meaning of the term, every sonnet has its own form. Every poem has its own form.”

Knowing this, even this short free verse prose poem has a form of its own. I feel greatly inspired by free verse prose, so it seemed fitting that I start this assemblage of poetry with, not only that, but also a poem that I thought personified what I want the essence of my writing to be.

The next piece is my first attempt at writing a sonnet. “The Night We Fell Apart” became a beast to wrestle. I wanted to match the syllable count of the Shakespearean sonnet exactly, as well as keep the ABABCD CD rhyme with an ending couplet. Additionally, I built in multiple inward rhymes, such as “drives,” “deprived,” “survived,” and “thrived.” Each line speaks directly to a different moment, moving through a few months in time. This poem was inspired by

my own life, and it includes the theme of driving that often comes up in my poems. The sonnet is highly scrutinized due to its strict form, but I hope that I accomplished both of my goals of practicing a poetic process successfully and creating an emotional response to it.

“Wedding Dress Regrets” is a poem that demanded to be written. It came in that surge of poetic inspiration, and it demanded to be rhymed couplets. When I first wrote this poem, it was nearly double the length. It was hard to trim it down, because it felt so important to me that I couldn’t bare to cut anything out. But I noticed that it became too repetitive, and the rhyme was lost about halfway through the poem. By cutting out some stanzas and rearranging the poem, I was able to keep the AABB rhyme scheme consistent. It didn’t lose its importance to me, as omitting some repetitive phrases kept the remaining ones punchy. Allowing this poem to have a rhyme keeps it engaging, even with the fear that it may take away from the seriousness of it. It allowed me to have more creative expression over this difficult scenario of my life. When I thought that I couldn’t understand how I was feeling, creating metaphors ultimately helped me make sense of it. I can look back at this poem and know exactly how I was feeling when I was unsure about it at the time I wrote this.

My more ambitious and experimental piece of poetry is “Don’t Worry, You Can Be the Hero and I’ll Be the Villain.” The lines of the poem formed in my head and got stuck there almost like song lyrics before I wrote them out. I wanted it to be straightforward, and I wanted it to capture my frustration and hurt. I tried to encapsulate feeling angry about being scorned for a breakup and twisted into being the bad guy for doing it, but ultimately giving up the ability to defend myself because the backlash was better than staying in a hurtful relationship. I wanted it to be heard rather than read and have an easy flow and rhythm. When revising this poem, I ended up making it much smaller and converting it to three-line stanzas. Three lines felt right to deliver

my message without making the rhyme feel overwhelming. It was enough to keep the flow and the weight of each of the lines. This was especially ambitious to me because I had never written something that I preferred to be heard, rather than read. It took me out of where I felt comfortable and forced me to try a new practice.

The next poem in this collection is my second sonnet, “Bring Me Back Piece by Piece.” My process for writing this piece was wanting to replicate a Shakespearean inspired poem filled with metaphors and the theme of love. I wanted to try to create a visual piece that represented what I was feeling, while keeping the form. Comparatively to “The Night We Fell Apart,” I didn’t try as hard to add so many things such as inward rhymes. “Bring Me Back Piece by Piece” is supposed to flow easier than “The Night We Fell Apart,” and signify emotions instead of moments.

Another form I wanted to try my hand at was the haiku. In “Road Work Ahead,” I did one of my favorite things when writing poetry: I took a moment and an object and froze them to expand on it. When driving with my niece, we talked about the road work ahead sign on the side of the road. We began joking about it, but then started coming up with lines for a poem. “Road Work Ahead” was born during that drive. I’m proud of it because I did what I love about poetry. I froze a moment in time and expanded upon it.

Driving appears repeatedly through my work and going on drives is one of my favorite pastimes. Again, during a drive, I got inspired by the numbers of miles I had put on my Ford Escape and wanted to write a poem about how I use driving as my escape. “40200” was born from this moment. I wanted it to be free-verse prose, it felt only appropriate for a love letter for my car. It capitalizes on how I use driving as a distraction from my responsibilities yet disguise it as a productive journey. I also liked the idea of having numbers in my poem. I had never used

numbers in a poem before. I kept the poem concise and meaningful to me, and I am pleased with how the final product came out.

The next prose poem of this collection is “Choke Me.” As most of my poems, this one demanded to be written. I wanted to practice something different. I wanted the poem to glide down the page, broken up to represent gasping and being out of breath while also representing chaotic thoughts during a struggle. There are layers to unravel in this poem, and many ways to decipher a deeper meaning from it. I am proud of this poem, as I think it accomplish my two main goals of these works: It showcases an emotional expression and it allowed me to practice a different poetic process.

Due to everything going on in the world because of COVID-19 and the nationwide quarantine, I felt compelled to add a poem about COVID-19 to this thesis. Again, it is a free-verse prose poem. I structured this poem like a small window looking into the bigger picture. At first, I explain a moment that happened to me right before the stay-at-home order. I was driving from Tennessee back to my hometown of Owego, New York, and along the way stopped at a gas station and had this weird encounter with a stranger. Even though social distancing hadn’t begun yet, she was visibly concerned about the effort I was putting in when washing my hands. I understood her frustration, and respectfully kept my distance from her. The poem moves from that moment into the present day, after the quarantine began.

It explains the bigger picture, remarking on both our environment and the unfortunate state of our society. The poem morphs from a personal reflection into a reflection of the world. It showcases each aspect of the COVID-19 crisis: Concern for hygiene, especially handwashing, taking care of yourself more for the sake of others, i.e. the elderly and immunocompromised, and the world being quiet due to no one being out but being so loud because of everyone’s varying

opinions on the matter. It also notes on social distancing, the cancelling and postponing of nearly everything, but then comments on how our quarantine has positively impacted the environment. The poem ends with the question, “What will we learn from this?” and doesn’t offer an answer. I don’t often write something topical, so this practice was new to me, but I am proud of how it came out and hope it reaches its goal to speak on these trying moments of our lives.

“Open Letter from a Caffeine Addict” is one of the most emotional and compelling poems I have ever written. It was as hard to write as it was hard to read, but I wanted to include it in this collection because it is the epitome of what I want to write and my poetic process. It did more than demand me to write it. It forced my hands to type out the words through tears. It forced me to return to it time after time and revise it. In its final form, it is centered and creates an hourglass shape. I did this for two reasons. The main reason was to represent a woman’s body. The poem is centered around the theme of a hard trial in my life when I experienced a miscarriage. The other reason is the lines become small in the moments where I felt small. In this poem, I deal with two major themes, loss and addiction. I use metaphors to both further these themes and juxtapose them against each other. This poem is raw and jarring. It explains exactly how I was feeling and what I was dealing with during the time I wrote it. Again, it is the essence of what I want to accomplish through my writing process.

The final poem in this collection ends on an inspirational note. This is a letter to the strong women in my life who have struggled but adamantly persevered through the disparage of others, and even themselves. “To the Woman Who Gave Up” is an inspirational piece to empower woman to make the best decisions for themselves, no matter the opinions of other. It’s a love letter to women who feel bad because of making the best decisions for them. It’s an ode to the women in my life who have shown me how to persevere, even if they don’t see that

perseverance inside themselves. There is no consistent rhyme scheme to the entirety of the poem, but there is a mixture of couplets and ABAB rhyme. I think this poem will resonate with a lot of people, and cause others to reflect on the powerful women in their lives.

Throughout this collection, I bring up a lot of hard and difficult topics. It is for this reason why I chose to end the collection with “To the Woman Who Gave Up.” I wanted the final poem to leave the reader feeling inspired and wanting to reflect. My goal for my thesis was to become a better artist and create work that incited an emotional response. My other goal for my thesis was to analyze the poetic process, particularly my own processes when writing these works. I sincerely hope that I achieved both of my objectives.

Furthermore, I am overwhelmingly grateful to Dr. Jesse Graves for mentoring me not only through this thesis but through the entirety of my time writing poetry. He has truly taught me how to be a better artist and has made me realize the value of writing poetry and its uses for deciphering the meanings of life.

I hope that you enjoy this collection of poetry, and that it moves you in some way.

The Poetic Process

I am not a poet.

I am an empath,

Absorbing the emotions of others,

Analyzing my own,

And creating something out of them.

As I cram what's in my brain into

Rhyme and rhythm

I hope you feel something deeper

Than the iambic pentameter.

The Night We Fell Apart

Divine the night the crickets beckoned us
To drive into the mountains and forget.
We leave the day behind to wait for dusk
And run away to find unmet regrets.
Alive we seem that night but dead inside,
The next day broken from our ragged past.
We shove our hidden emotions aside,
Unspoken feelings became ones to last.
Then the nighttime drives grew short and lonely.
A friendship deprived by separation,
But somehow survived against it slowly.
Our feelings thrived through devastation.
 But we didn't know the next chapter,
 A love we would find for years thereafter.

Wedding Dress Regrets

White, pure, covered in lace.

Perfect fit, and a perfect place.

Rings ready to be worn—

A veil to be adorned.

Time slips hastily by

Almost to be groom and bride.

But this dress that once fit so well,

Feels more like a heavy shell.

What if this wasn't a wedding dress at all?

Maybe a memento to hang on the wall.

A passing moment, but one that is fleeting,

Something we might not be completing.

This dress is a nightgown,

Only useful when sundown,

But in the light of the day

The dress gets cast away.

No, torn off violently,

Ripped to shreds and left lifelessly

On the floor and stomped on.

It's not what I first thought of.

Because in the night it keeps me warm,

Safe, comforted when I'm forlorn.

Why isn't that enough to get me through?

Why do I want something new?

Maybe it's me, I'm noncommittal.

Did I want something superficial?

I could wear it longer and buff out the stains.

Maybe it just needs to be rearranged.

Cut and sewn back together,

Is it even worth the effort?

Can I wear this dress anymore?

After seeing it so torn?

Perhaps I can persevere

Because I once held this dress so dear.

But the pain I see in the mirror

The reflection couldn't be clearer.

This dress drags me to the ground,

Like weights and chains that have me bound

To a life that I don't want.

This life wasn't what I thought.

I wish I could turn it back to how it was.

But it's too late for that because

The hurt and disdain I can't look past.

Even though once I thought this would last

Forever.

But I never

Expected to be

So unhappy

With a dress.

Don't Worry, You Can Be the Hero and I'll Be the Villain

You can say that I used you,
Or abused you,
Got what I wanted then threw you

Out on the street,
Or that I was weak,
Started something I couldn't complete.

You were the one supposed to leave me.
You broke a promise and trust was fleeting.
I stayed the same but was left depleting.

I said goodbye with my hands on your face.
The tears we cried were masked with disgrace,
And you told me I wasn't easily replaced.

Then you painted me as the villain.
Compared me to a demolition
That ruined your life and your ambitions.

I needed more than you had offered,
But this is where you faltered,
The truth is the only thing altered.

I'll take the blame because it's better than the hurt,
So you can be the hero and I'll be the worst.

Bring Me Back Piece by Piece

Remember when you took my broken heart
And put the pieces back together again?
When you held my wounded body in your arms,
Holding and telling me that I could mend?

Shielding around me, your arms like towers,
Protecting and unfaltering strongholds
Embracing me like a dainty flower,
Making me feel so small, safe and consoled.

Lift me up with ease, your hands like healers,
Bringing me back from a hopeless place
And to one that's safer and clearer,
But now guarding me from my past mistakes.

Breathe into me new life and sensations,
Pick up the pieces to build new foundations

Road Work Ahead

Fractured lives and divergent paths

No one knows what lies before us—

Only a sign to tell.

40200

Escapism is intoxicating

202 miles on the dashboard

Brand new to me

20000 miles added one year later

I escape everywhere

And everyone

The purest form of distraction

Driving from responsibilities

Or sometimes 664.1 miles away

My favorite act of procrastination

Disguised as a journey

40200 miles added to my Escape

Choke Me

Breathe in

Prepare for the grasp

Wait for release

I need to catch my breath

My throat is dry and the

Pain is making me tremble

My head is spinning and I can't focus

I feel sick to my stomach

And I need to breathe but I can't

I cry uncontrollably and think about

Everything that I've done

That has led me to this.

Are you waiting for me to fail?

In many ways it feels like I already have.

But I can't think clearly during this.

I dread the grasp

Of the hand on my neck

Squeezing me into this attack

But relinquish

So easily

And wait to breathe again.

COVID-19

I wash my hands three sinks away from a woman who does the same.
I see the fear in her eyes through the reflection of the mirror,
As she watches to make sure we both wash our hands long enough.
She reaches to turn off the water, hesitantly, yet hyperaware.

She fights with the door, attempting not to touch the handle,
Glancing at me but not meeting my eyes.
Instead she watches my hands, as I rub them together harder,
Almost more for her than me.

The world is quiet now.
But people have never been louder.
They say we're all in this together,
While we're so far apart.

I'm living in an ironic moment of history.
We live in a world that's cancelled, postponed, and suspended.
We isolate because the world is too dangerous to go out in,
Yet the world is thriving due to our isolation.

Turkeys walk through the backyard for the first time in years,
The smog is lifting, the fish are returning to canals because they're clean once again,
And the animals are exiting their own quarantine from a life of hiding from humanity.
Our cancelled world is not cancelled; it simply goes on without us.

What will we learn from this?

Open Letter from a Caffeine Addict

I drink four cups of coffee a day because of my severe caffeine addiction.

The caffeine fights off migraines like a knight and day by day

I crave nicotine

But the coffee battles that too.

The warmth from the mug recreates what was once swelling in my belly.

I miss the warmth because, like the baby, the warmth is gone too

And my belly is empty.

My hands shake violently

And the smell of cigarettes makes me salivate

But I swallow my past addiction down with my new one.

I buy more creamer than milk, which is ironic all things considered.

It's a staple pressed into the seam of my biography that I buy more creamer than milk

Because I'm not a mother, anymore.

Finally, I can breathe again but the smoke is quickly replaced

By the stench of loss felt deep in my lungs

And my lips taste drops of sadness.

My entire life changed in one day,

And in one moment it was ripped away from me and

Clawed from my body without my permission by the unfair hand that dealt me heartbreak.

I thought when you quit an addiction life rewarded you.

But life is not the rewarding type.

Or so I learned.

Maybe I was not a mother.

Simply a carrier of someone I did not ask for,

But a mother I dearly wanted to be for a moment.

For that moment, my addictions did not haunt me.

But now I'm haunted by much more than

The ache in my lungs and caffeine.

Coffee isn't for mornings.

It keeps one awake to avoid the dreams of what could have been.

It's for the darkness.

To the Woman Who Gave Up

Others will proclaim

“How could you?”

Filled with judgements and disdain.

But you were fighting a losing battle,

With a holy matrimony that was anything but.

You will hang your head and think,

“I didn’t do enough.”

You will claim that you were

The woman who gave up.

While day-drunk and dancing you painted a picture

Of a reality where there was such a mixture,

A potion or something magical enough

To bring back together what you had given up.

But just the wish of hopeful expectancy,

Teaches that you still try to the best of your ability.

If giving up means pushing through,

Fighting and climbing in all that you do,

Then I wish I would give up too.

I want you to see what I see in you:

A woman empowered,

Snatching back her life without fear,

Taking back all the hours

Of asking, “How did I get here?”

That is the epitome of effort.

So hold your head up, no longer clouded in fear,
And dance through the hurt,
You are the woman who persevered.