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## POETIC EXISTENTIAL: A LYRICAL AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF SELF, OTHERS, AND WORLD

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**L. Shelley Rawlins:** I am a doctoral candidate at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. My research revolves around qualitative dialogic and phenomenological methods and I am particularly interested in gender and identity performances, as well as relational ethics of being. I have a strong interest in the methodological intersections of phenomenology and autoethnography. Last year I served as editor of *Kaleidoscope: A Graduate Journal of Qualitative Communication Research*. Currently, as I work on my dissertation on protest as existential communication, I also teach introductory feminist theory.

**Abstract:** “Poetic Existential” is a collection of lyrical autoethnography. This body of work explores existential themes relating to globalization and the immigration/refugee humanitarian crisis, “freedom” as personal/political/geographical ideology, and my own experiences of being a situated self alongside others. Lyrical poetry coaxes a person to embody and present experience through restrained (Faulkner 52), yet evocative descriptions – without the neat folds and contextual blanketing common to many narrative approaches. The challenge of autoethnographic poetry is to perform a focused crystallization of experience via lyrical aesthetics (arrangement, word choice, rhythm, rhyme, phrase and line structure, etc.). In the accompanying artist statement, I theorize my poetic engagement with attention paid to what the lyric facilitates in my scholarly work. In this exploratory fusion of lyrical expression, autoethnography, and existentialism, I hope to summon the aesthetic powers of poetry in the service of self-reflexivity, and in relation to the plight of millions of disenfranchised others.

**Keywords:** poetic inquiry, existentialism, autoethnography, freedom, immigration, refugees

Autoethnography is an ethnographic performance of situated self-introspection that seeks to highlight and connect living identity tensions with larger cultural themes. Lyrical autoethnography aspires to explore and re/present lived experience through a reflexive engagement with one's poetic voice. Perhaps autoethnography may be better understood as a performative ethnography of the self's existential thrownness into the world, at the mercy of preexisting signs and others. Considering autoethnography from a lyrical approach, through poetry, facilitates the generation of new perspectives from which to theorize one's sociocultural location (Gingrich-Philbrook).<sup>1</sup> While composing poetry can be just as daunting as summoning meaningful narratives that "show" rather than "tell" about a topic or life event, lyrics enable numerous unique stylizations with regard to form and evocation.

Lyrical poetry coaxes a person to embody and present experience through restrained (Faulkner 52), yet evocative descriptions – without the neat folds and contextual blanketing common to many narrative approaches. The challenge of autoethnographic poetry is to perform a focused crystallization of experience via lyrical aesthetics (arrangement, word choice, rhythm, rhyme, phrase and line structure, etc.). This portfolio explores my experiences grappling with the difficulty of mustering and commanding a lyrical voice that suitably expresses my thematic impulses. To this end, I present a collection of poems, "Poetic Existential," revolving around some related concerns I have at the current moment: globalization and the immigration/refugee humanitarian crisis, "freedom" as personal/political/geographical ideology, and my own experiences of being a situated self alongside others. In this artist statement I theorize my poetic engagement with attention paid to what the lyric facilitates in my scholarly work. These angles include poetic thematics (purpose), dialectics of fictionality and truth/claims, and the ways that poetry's inherent "hyperbolic character" and "indeterminacy of meaning" feature unique access to the fundamental freedom of self-expression, self-reflection, and self-making (Culler 351, 304). Jonathan Culler describes poetry's hyperbolic character in relation to "the flagrancy of lyric operations – a flagrancy that makes them both vulnerable to dismissal and acutely attentive to that vulnerability" (351). I begin by unpacking some of my previously held assumptions about poetry from before I "came to the lyric," so to say.

I am new to writing poetry and it is new to me. But the more I experiment with and compose poems, the more I realize that poetry has acquired considerably more scholarly legitimation for me. Prior to taking a course on lyrical autoethnography, I relegated poetry – and probably poets by association – to the watery devalued domains of romanticism and solipsistic "narcissism." I now realize that this was unfair and faulty, and that there are as many varieties of poetic expression as we care to create and explore. I also now see that romanticism and solipsism can both be important modes for performing self-reflexivity and checking in with self and world.

My primary appreciation for and fascination with poetry stems from its honesty about its reflective, selective, and deflective properties in recounting and accounting for experience (Burke 45). To borrow a concept from Kenneth Burke, poems vividly exemplify the artistic tensions of terministic screens. Terministic screens speak to the constraining aspects of language – the fact that when we choose one word, we have not chosen all of the other possibilities, and so in some ways, we have both set and foreclosed meaning. Scholarly poetry appropriates this form of expression as a lens for study that joins aesthetic prose with academic praxis. The challenge is to express one’s intended meaning, alongside the rigor, but outside the jargon of typical scholarly research. Perhaps poetry is sincerer about itself and what it does – in that the lyric provides for (meta)emotionality in relation to and about the prose. This is to say that the dynamic synthesis of information and affect in the lyrical form draws in author and audience alike. None of this interactivity is universally predictable or foreclosed – and that is my favorite property of poetry.

One of my greatest struggles in composing poetry pertains to selecting and ordering the “what” (topic) and “why” (urgency), possibly to the neglect of the “how” (form). I believe this mechanical tension is why teachers of poetry stress that one should spend much more time on revising and editing, than on composing poems. As an existentialist and phenomenologically-minded person, arranging, un/bracketing biases, reflecting upon, contextualizing, and describing experience are tasks requiring nothing short of tapping into an ethical praxis and conscious awareness of our inherently relational being. Poetry, on the one hand, is “me” and “mine” – my experience of myself in the world. On the other hand, it is also by default, intersubjective. Poetry props-up a life actor “on stage,” offering some solace, or moral, or invocation to others. It is both “to” and “for” others at the same time as it feels “in” and “for” myself. This capacity speaks to the phenomenological temperament of poetry. Culler discusses this “triangulated address” as poetry’s “characteristic indirection” of “disrupting narrative, invocation, or address mak[ing] the poem an event in the lyric present rather than the representation of a past event” (8). This meta-poetic essence instantiates a recurring vulnerable episode in addressing a “potentially responsive universe and skepticism about the efficacy of the lyric discourse” (Culler 8). This triple-bind of my/your/our fringed experience, along with related questions about the authenticity of a work, flows synergistically throughout poetry. Culler posits that this open interchange forms the basis for the intrinsic risk and “self-consciousness” of writing poetry (21). This understanding certainly figures into a potentially rigorous platform for doing autoethnographic self-reflexivity. The inevitably vulnerable labor of revealing and reconciling one’s subjectivity, along with questions about temporal brevity, memory, context, and form, render poetic art an enigmatic threshold for self and other discovery.

The poems in this collection revolve around my current lifeworld concerns – humanity, freedom, mortality, and social responsibility. Delving into this exploration of “what I will write poems about” has helped to make these issues even more poignant and presenced for me.

These poems revolve around two divided, yet interrelated foci: the global immigration/refugee humanitarian crisis, and my own anxious situated self as I struggle to be a good person in the world. My abstractive existential approach is foggy and playful at the same time it is searing and cynical. Juxtaposing these disparate essences is productive because it invites a reader to laugh in despair while also considering their own fragile humanity and potential for action. Freedom is a prominent theme woven throughout this collection and reflects my concern that it is becoming an abusive political ideology, deployed to make people anxious and fearful. Rather than being a spectrum of intersubjective agency with shared responsibilities, freedom has been twisted into a warped marketing scheme for nativism. I believe that freedom involves pragmatism – or, the weight of the choices that we and others come to collectively bear. Consequently, we must disrupt the conservative discourses hijacking our freedom and fight to extend, preserve, and further our and others' life possibilities. This sentiment radiates from the heart of this lyric collection.

Poetry is a vigorous channel of expression with numerous styles and approaches. In Sandra Faulkner's interviews with poets about what their work should do, one artist remarks that "a good poem should combat ignorance with mystery" (Faulkner 69). This statement resonates with my own aspirations. My hope for many of my poems is that their reception pricks one's conscience with their directness, but that they also push a reader to be reflexive about their complacency in the "face" of global human suffering. The ability to conjure a sentiment of intimacy with issues larger than the self, such as homelessness and immigration, is one of poetry's most powerful aptitudes. Faulkner describes what research poetry should be and do: "A poem must connect to something larger than the poet and the particular moment. It should make a reader want to return to the poem again, to see things in new ways, to be surprised, and to consider what a poem has to offer over time" (70). As such, a poem should not only subscribe to the parameters of describing a specific "incident" in an author's life, but rather, also consider linking "this" event with broader social and cultural happenings. This speaks to the centrality of practicing self-reflexivity in poetic craft. Culler claims that what makes poetry fundamentally self-reflexive is the process of creating a textual image that is neither presumed to be objective reality nor sheer subjectivity, but instead the lyric itself "becomes poetry about its own poetic exploration" (101). This brings me to why I chose to engage my poetry through existential philosophy.

Autoethnography calls for researchers to write back to positivist ethnographic methods that study and make claims about people from a distance – frequently through rigid models that undervalue and elide living, situated contexts. Thus, lyrical autoethnography seeks to give the world back to subjective experience via reflections on one's becoming alongside others. Importantly, positivistic methods revolve around finding hypothesized "truth," while autoethnography appreciates that there are infinite truths tied to people's pragmatism, available choices (agency), and the decisions they make in and about their lives. As Sheila Squillante has mentioned to me, this autoethnographic openness is similar

to the ways good poetry trades in ambiguity, offering relatable entries into the experience for others that we may have never considered. Many social researchers consider philosophy, and especially existentialism, to be overly airy, hyper-universal, and/or ambiguously abstract. There is some verity to these assertions, but they also deny the productive potential of philosophy to shift people's consciousness of themselves in the world.

Considering poetry infused with the philosophical veins of existentialism and phenomenology can amplify ambiguity, while simultaneously stimulating meditative thought. Oddly enough, ambiguity can be a viable invitational frame for connection. For example, if I make a claim from the perspective of a sinking boat full of refugees that "I" (a boat; e.g., "Curious Cargo") do not care about their lives, this might coax a reader to "humanize" the boat through their own perspective, possibly becoming further invested because this "careless boat" does not understand humans. It is possibilities like this one that transcend the idea that poems are limited to "true" happenings. Rather, poems are about invoking emotional and philosophical intro- and extro-spection. Culler contends that fictionality is not the crux of the lyric, but does play an important yet constrained role in poetry (128). Drawing on Kate Hamburger's work, Culler positions the "lyric not as world-creating fiction but as real-world utterance" (128). Culler contends that poems make claims about the world, and following Faulkner, the factualness of these claims are far less important than what thoughts or ideas the lyrics arouse in others. Whether or not a boat can be conscious, "Curious Cargo" impels readers to reconcile the imaginary with the real. I find this existential use of fictionality to be potentially wrenching and thus possibly as effective as composing similar work from the perspective of, say, a refugee child. In other words, having an object speak about the death of hundreds of people without understanding or care may stimulate people to want some humanity in the scene. Perhaps this might even inspire them to ethical action and to see what they can do to help the millions of desperate refugees.

In other poems featured in this collection, I consider how the struggles of life may seem uniquely weighty, but they are often largely subjective temporal constructs. And so, I endeavor to be self-reflexive about my privilege while at the same time being honest about my anxieties. When I reconsider some of the mundane stresses from my privileged perspective, I realize how different things were for my 88-year-old grandmother, Nancy. I recount a conversation my grandmother and I had in "Make America Great Again," and attempt to convey the revelations she shares with me. The first half of this collection,

***“Considering poetry infused with the philosophical veins of existentialism and phenomenology can amplify ambiguity, while simultaneously stimulating meditative thought.”***

“Dangerous Nativism,” connects to what I see as dangerous nativist politics, and the distancing potential for people to not care about desperate others in the world. The second part of this collection, “Self, Other, World,” relates to my self-reflexive examination of my living anxieties and the desire for common ground with my familiar and unfamiliar others. As I think back on memories from my youth and young adulthood, my hope is that these occasions offer some comedic relief, but also potential for identification. Life is hard for all of us, but we must not let that routine truth prevent us from reaching out to others and doing what is right.

Autoethnographic poetry is not a litmus test for the truth or falsity of a claim, but rather an invitation to think about life issues in more sensuously embodied and nuanced ways. We receive the world through our phenomenological senses, and this affective aesthetic form works to return us to our experience. As opposed to being told what the world already is, poems create room for reflection and taking stock of our daily actions and past dealings. The lyric has irreconcilable qualities of vulnerability and indeterminacy, which provide “an experience of freedom and a release from the compulsion to signify” (Culler 304). As quantitative methods continuously strengthen their ties with capitalism and normative generality, everyday micro-tensions of grappling with the world fall to the wayside. It is important – now if not more than ever – for people to talk about their struggles, to seek solace, and for others to care to listen. Poetry is a license for exploration, inquiry, and taking stock of one’s emotional life. Poetry is also a philosophy for other-identification and a strategy for realizing self – a self that is manifestly fallible, incomplete, yet strikingly beautiful in all its chaotic unwieldiness.

## Poetic Existential Part One: Dangerous Nativism

### Ode to the Political Correctness of Freedom

Oh Freedom, thank god you're mine  
All mine  
No one can touch you  
Or take you away

It could be yours, too  
If you're like me and love freedom more than people  
More than other people's freedom  
Because it's mine; but I might share some...

Does my freedom to expand my freedom  
Contract yours?  
Freedom is a free market finite commodity  
So don't use it all up or else no one will have any!

The freedom to fill out breadcrumbs of paperwork  
To authenticate it  
And set an expiration date  
For your freedom (so it doesn't impinge upon mine)

god taught us freedom when he made the whole world  
Jesus was free; wasn't he?  
He wanted all of us to be free  
WWJD

Keep *all* the freedom in  
And the heathenish alien rapists drug dealers and murderers –  
The unfree – The NOT me  
Out

Freedom takes a lot of responsibility  
And guns  
No strangers – no Others – no *they* can't be free!  
And walls that forget where their doors might be

## Curious Cargo

I wasn't made for the violence of these tides  
The old man would take me fishing with his sons  
He would clean me, bandage my wounds, give me air  
He berthed me as a good father does

I should never have strayed this far from dock  
Too many people piled on my back  
Pressing me deeper into darkness below  
Gasping for air as it slips from my scars

The baby wailed the first week adrift  
Now all is quiet except the sputtering coughs of my engine  
Directionless roaming – *where* are we going?  
Bodies splash, now and then, falling away like untethered anchors

Curious cargo fleeing for freedom  
I'll never understand a human being  
So fragile, futile... naïve  
Oblivious as my canvas skin wears thin beneath their dirty feet

What *is* freedom anyway?  
The old man told his son it lies anywhere but "home"  
Panic ensues as I buckle and wheeze  
Incasing all in the hug of my folds

Tangled skeletons  
Human and plastic  
In slumber on the ocean floor

## Stranger Exodus

A few heirlooms, clothes, and water  
 A mother can only carry so much  
 And still hold her little hand  
 Perhaps any mystery is better than this misery  
 The hope of a future, a soft place to love  
 Undefined daughters with  
 Winters and gloves

A daughter's sweet face  
 Wincing up at the sun  
 Crystal droplets of sweat pooled on her cheeks  
 Dead husbands and fathers  
 Lie under the sand  
 Killed by other dead husbands  
 Over the land

A stranger exodus  
 To a land of unwelcoming strangers  
 Who'd perhaps rather see all entombed in a camp  
 Than treasure the promising smile of a child  
 Feeling safe, truly seeing  
 For the first time  
 In her wretched being

Foreign to greed and desperate for freedom  
 Faith hoping humanity –  
 But partial "humanity" hates *this* faith  
 Transform or disguise it  
 Little chance to assimilate  
 Just not enough room here,  
 Says the billionaire, with hate

One way forward, no way back  
 In the cultural distance  
 Looms ethnic death  
 Enemies of strangers that have never met  
 This child of history  
 Forgotten, dismissed  
 By muddled memories

## Make America Great Again

My grandmother told me  
She used to be Mrs. Jack Pollitt.  
Wife, mother, ball n' chain  
And deli manager –  
Married to the meat manager,  
But no one knew her as Nancy.

“Women couldn't be people like they can now.  
I had a friend...  
A nice colored girl named Helen.  
One day Daddy came home and  
Raised a storm with Mother.  
Not allowed to let Helen  
In the house to lunch with us.”

“I loved Helen,  
we were good friends.  
I never saw no skin color  
But that day I did,  
And I hated knowing it.”

“I did put a lot of pressure  
on your mother.  
Sandy had the house clean  
Dinner prepared  
And Ronnie was safe.  
Your Poppop and I worked so hard  
So she wouldn't have to  
do what we did.”

“It was different then, you wouldn't understand  
Men couldn't call women by their damn names!”  
Cataract hazel eyes pale and piercing,  
“Even to *think* of not marrying.  
Betty... Oh lord, no, no, not good...”

“I sure did love your Poppop  
I miss him every day of my life.  
Don't know who I'd a been without him  
But it's been 28 years...  
Can you believe it?”

## Poetic Existential Part Two: Self, Other, World

### The People's Court

blue sweater shot  
green pants'  
dog

but in the fog  
the Spaniel  
was a log

green  
awaits his  
companion

blue pretends  
he hit  
his target

a defense of  
near-  
sightedness

and mis-  
placed  
glasses

a sentence  
of anger  
management classes

## Becoming Adult

the toothy silence  
“grown up” dialectics  
prickle the safety  
I feel in my skin  
at the dinner party

what time and where?  
I’ll buy stuff and wear  
the faded black dress  
being, seeing, saying  
to prove that I’m here

I place the salad  
on the table  
next to other salads  
look at me  
I’m healthy too

do you have a job?  
it has been rainy  
the doldrums of dinner  
starving for humor  
I make bad impressions

at least I give others  
an opportunity  
to talk  
about something  
when I turn my back

## Everything Except Mortality is Small

Sandy says: there are big things and small – everything except mortality is small

Bill says: have faith, what's the worst that could happen?

Brian says: don't buy what you can't afford

Ian says: be satisfied with now, stop planning too much

Nancy says: you're smarter than I ever was

Emily says: you talk too much about sunscreen

Sam says: doesn't it bother you that no one knows what you're talking about?

Casey says: I have an inoperable brain tumor the size of a tennis ball, but I'll live with it

Tommy says: don't let your addictions get the best of you

Sarah says: it don't matter

Kristin says: I was never worried about you for a second

Antonio says: mm mmn, that's not me

Simon says: that's the tricky thing about life, capitalism

Tammy says: rent's always due on the first

Craig says: what do you need from me to feel better?

Theresa says: "seacow" isn't my favorite nickname

Jennifer says: when I have kids ALL of their names WILL NOT begin with "J"

Lynda says: I want to live with my parents, forever

Frank says: I can't enjoy music without my chopstick "drumsticks"

Ryan says: money's funny, I had it and now I don't

Tyler says: shattering my femur was the best thing that's ever happened to me

Allison says: what's it like to be post-mom?

Rachel says: I never got "mommed" and I don't know what to do with her

Judith says: our repetitive actions perform normative solidarity

Michel says: institutional discourses shape self-understandings and (foreclose) possibilities

Katie says: I want to be present in the now, but I've been kicked out – I was ready!

Paul says: I don't know who the hell I am and can't be who I want to be

Ariana says: why do they have rape scenes in movies?

Jason says: you are generative, you just need to finish one

Alex says: you are just not a creative person

Ahmet says: you're the only person I've ever loved but I did a horrible job

James says: you're too much for your own good

Crys says: you're destroying feminism

Caleb says: poetry helps me realize how angry I am

Poetry says: just be whoever you are in this moment

## Schrodinger's Trunk (Cleveland 2006)

The day of green  
in Cleveland. Saturated in  
sparkly shamrock stickers  
and temporary tattoos.  
Glitter and emerald  
hair spray mist;  
lounging around  
doing each other's hair  
and makeup  
in the hotel room  
Mrs. Tracy got for us  
(to celebrate her divorce).

The strangers arrive amid  
the bubbly chaos.  
Each of us thinks they're  
someone else's  
friends.  
In the bathroom  
passing a joint around  
they tell me  
there's more weed  
downstairs  
in their car.  
I leave with them.

Down at the Crown Vic  
they pop the trunk.  
My goofy tipsy  
giggly self  
remarks  
how huge the space is  
and climbs in...  
the trunk slams shut.  
Upstairs, Lauren  
checks for me  
in the bathroom  
and asks around...

My body lurches  
alarming pain  
my head strikes the trunk  
as the car roars away.  
Frantic bafflement

in the dark  
What just happened?  
What is happening?  
Feeling around for  
context  
a strategy  
tire iron or  
some kind of weapon.

Millions of minutes  
captured in snow globes  
reckoning if  
I want the trunk  
to open at all.  
I should be  
counting turns  
like in the movies.  
I'm not good  
at being kidnapped...  
Maybe I'm great, though  
I climbed in here...  
Why did I do that again?

Mortality, reflexivity –  
naïve self-stupidity!  
A variant vision –  
reality –  
clouds into my mind:  
Back on the street  
the trunk is shutting  
Lauren yells  
from the entrance:

“Shelley!  
What the hell are you doing?!”

The strangers shrug off.  
Lauren helps me out  
as the car speeds away.  
“Do you *know* them?”  
“No, I thought you did.”

## **Delirium Serious II (p o s t m o d e r n p o i n t i l l i s m)**

Practice of freedom  
Delirium serious  
All the best things are  
Abject, mysterious

Buttons in holes  
Oyster in shell  
Spirits in churches  
Cloistered for hell

X-rays of fractures  
Bolted together  
Big toothy smiles  
Funeral weather

Vague horoscopes  
Predicting your future  
Believing salvation  
Is sewing and suture

Punctum beneath you  
As ice cracks away  
Pumpkins and pizza  
Cats that are stray

Fear and trembling  
Subjecting the answer  
Mortician makeover  
Pink eye and cancer

Subliminal newscast  
A trip and near fall  
Ticklish anguish  
Walking the mall

Boat taking on water  
Barrels of fish  
Misplaced wallets  
Cracked china dish

Lost shoe in sewer  
Bird pooping blues  
Meat fell off skewer

Actors missing cues

Tipped-over paint cans  
Mosquitoes and Zika  
Prosthetic limbs  
Probation and fever

Cats hoarding tongues  
Global warming and water  
Fast moving lungs  
Adopting a daughter

Nuclear power  
Trading watches for phones  
Empty McMansions  
Were never a home

Baby sneezes  
Rough woolen blankets  
Caucasian Jesus  
The iceberg that sank it

Truck stop bathrooms  
Comma splicing  
Soft rotted fruit  
Easy for slicing

Rusty carnivals  
Children in juvie  
Lemony cars  
Healthy kale smoothies

Sunburn lines  
Clothes made by children  
Microwave food  
Pharmaceutical building

The abject is "real"  
Diversion is ample  
Shrugging it off  
Denies us a sample

Genuine lies  
Told to your face  
Critical guise  
Develop a taste

## Meandering Confessional ~ The Jig is Up

1. I don't remember worrying as a child.  
 In fact, I don't remember much about ever being a child at all –  
     was I one?  
 I asked my mom if I've always been like me  
     and she said I had.  
 I asked her what she meant and what I meant  
     she said I'm impassioned and curious  
     like my dad.
  
2. I've been told I'm wild and strange like  
     orange juice and toothpaste.  
 Good things mixed together that sour the experience  
     of either thing.  
 I have ideas of who I'm carrying through this warren,  
     which distracts me  
     from the who I am  
     because I'm focusing  
     on where  
     the whoever I am,  
     becoming  
     is going.  
 Some let me be myself;  
     *I love them.*
  
3. A dizzy dance of donkey tails  
     I push the pin by guessing.  
 And find myself in the "now" again  
     feeling like a kitten.  
 So lovable and unknowable  
     a nascent form surprising itself  
     with new mistakes.  
 Snaking the path as far as I can  
     before stretching myself too thin.  
 Forced back to the start or just  
     wherever I already am.
  
4. In preschool Chelsea said her mom was having a little sister for her –  
     the other kids were electrified.  
 The next day I impregnated my mom

with triplets –  
triplet sisters.

Chelsea was boring again and I was awesome.

It's pretty easy to have babies –  
I think, I thought.

The slithery lie snapped 25 days later  
when Sandy wasn't showing  
what I was telling.

I decided then and there I would never experience  
this freezing, unsteady, deserted skeleton,  
this can't-wait-to-run-away-and-cry-under-a-tree-  
feeling,  
ever  
again.

5. I guess I like control. Err, or I like to feel as if  
I can act on my ideas  
if  
I wanted to.

A duck lifting itself in frenzied flapping  
into sky  
from buoyed bobbing  
on water.

The platitude of will to transitional power.  
It looks awkwardly masterful  
and is happening too quickly  
for onlookers to appreciate  
that an idea has taken flight.  
A decision made and actualized.

Scientists report that one out of ten duck couples are homosexual.<sup>2</sup>

The only thing they're unsure of is  
if this rare  
evolutionary phenomenon  
is related to  
dominance or desire.<sup>3</sup>

(Or the single case of homosexual duck necrophilia.)

It's like being underwater and asking someone if they can smell that.

Or the rigor of a friend picking up their shoe  
with a disgusted look on their face, yelling  
"Eww! Gross! Smell this!"  
and I do.

I hate when I do that.

Is it dominance or desire that makes me love  
to hand my friends scraps of trash  
that they want to hand back to me  
but I won't have it?  
(That was the point!)  
I think I've been doing this forever  
but I can't be sure.

6. In college I began a "Can I have that?" competition with myself.

A bit later, my roommate Casey joined the campaign.

It goes like this:

- i. Be at someone else's house
- ii. Spot something you like and want to have
- iii. Say: "I love that!"
- iv. Listen to the acquisition story
- v. Ask them: "Can I have that?"

It seems to catch people off guard and make them more apt to give you things –  
if they are strangers – like a first time meeting.

I got a ton of shit including: a Jordan jersey, keyboard,  
timpani drum, painting, glass hen,  
frozen pizza, wool socks,  
and humility.

Casey got a car – but it never ran and got towed away –  
She just wasn't cut out for  
"Can I have that?"

7. Come to think of it, maybe I did worry as a kid.

I remember asking "god" if he was there and to  
show me a sign.

Looking up,

I stubbed my toe on a rock,  
tripped,  
and fell.

Skinning my knee on gravel wasn't what

I  
had in mind;  
not my kind of sign  
but a sign nonetheless.

My suspicion piqued, I targeted the tooth fairy  
for my first experiment.

A few weeks later, the loose tooth was a secret  
 wiggly, wormy  
 fleshy strands of mouth  
 clinging to it like love.  
 I put it under my pillow without a word to anyone.  
 At breakfast the next morning I informed my parents that  
 the jig is up.  
 No tooth fairy and  
 Santa can expect me  
 sleeping under the tree  
 waiting for him to  
 disappear  
 as well.  
 Toppling my microcosm.  
 No Santa meant no Jesus or maybe the other  
 way around?

8. It figured itself out and I found nihilism young.  
 I think it felt a little better before  
 but can never be quite sure.  
 Desire for mystery is hostile to dominance.  
 Some tyrannical questions  
 make me feel  
 like I have to answer them  
 and make a skeletal choice between limiting options.  
 I love the people who don't ask me these types of questions and  
 let me be myself.  
 I am free to make the choices I have.  
 It's my sacred infinity.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> From “Lyrical Autoethnography,” a seminar taught by Dr. Craig Gingrich-Philbrook at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, June 2016.

<sup>2</sup> <http://mudfooted.com/unusual-homosexual-duck-necrophilia/>

<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homosexual\\_behavior\\_in\\_animals](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homosexual_behavior_in_animals)