

Liam Strong

Final Project

after Monster**Final Act**

Mama, if you live to see me again
I can't make any promises, but I will turn myself
into a film so you might experience the man you lost,
the graduation your hands didn't applaud to,
the wife of mine you never got to critique the cooking of,
& Mama, I swear that you could not have
discolored my face, that your love fills my cheeks up
with the soot of generations, that my veins swirl indefinitely
toward you, toward the vellum of cold steel,
that there is no pallor bright enough to hide me
from them, that the eyes of whitefolk are so infused
within my bloodstream my skin glimmers
like a police car whining with torture.

Mama, if I live to see you again,
I will not show you where on our bathroom mirror
the nails of bodiless names were scrawled, molded
to the point of turning a reflection into
an ice sculpture, a hardened exterior of a man
poised to wither away until all is left are
the shit stains & blood-weights bruised
into the history of a cell floor.

Mama, I am so tired of making
promises with my teeth, because there
is so little man left in the husk of my clothes,
an orange peel carved into whorls of sinew
& marrow unable to pounce, too unblack,
too passively constructed, & as much as I want
to believe I am what they say I am,
there is no mirror untainted with oppression
for me to discern my own shape, & I am left
with the expressions of white men, whose black eyes
reflect my body, left with your eyes, Mama,
which say nothing more,
that I might as well be an apparition
in baggy clothes.

Mama, if you live to see me again,

don't let me become a drinking man,
neck deep in the quelled ochre
of the liquor I never touched from
Mr. Nesbitt's store, don't let me
raise my fists above my collar,
like batons coated in skin, don't let me
rest near the barrel of a gun,
because I am too far gone for
the ambrosia of disappearance,
because what yearns most viciously
within my fingertips is how
they still have never lifted beyond the
door handle of the drugstore,
because I am not suited for the stupor
of disquieted redemption, not rigid enough,
because I am no one's,
 no one's
 no one's
 no one's
but Mama, there is no more bitter a taste
than knowing you see me every day,
that I am all you think about,
that there is no lover or god
who precipitates on the silhouette
of my voice quite like the way
you do.

after The Boy on the Wooden Box

Glass Factory

The river overflows, today and tomorrow,
with bygone summers, with unending coldness,
carrying glass bones, photos of grey Krakow.
Home is a suture,

bereft of bleeding, a missing white tea cup.
Everywhere now, Adonis frowns backwards,
his windswept hair brushed, a stream of lost brothers,
eyes perfect fish scales.

God is a dissonance, an omnipresent din,
quiet chloroform, burning the air silver,
hears everything, prays for the city too.
Safety takes few forms,

but when it shows face, it will startle you fierce:
a flask of vodka, a bolt of new clothing,
a psalm in the streets, a list panicked with names,
names replacing people.

Stay Away, but Come Close

When I looked up
white blossoms
of our desire
faded with the crease line
of waking dreams
yet I wanted nothing
only the accident of each other's nearness
only to have no idea in what way to walk barefoot
through the sandy loam of his hand
to sharpen the constant state of longing
for the breeze of gardenias wafting in his hair
drawing us into hot nights intensely quiet with yearning
ripe for starched breezes, sleepwalkers imagined
in frustrated cotton
so we would have room for flowering
so no one would see.

dissertation for the existentially fraught

the world will take your breath & your legs before
you will be able to scar its journeyed lacquer.
which is to say that the more embroidered my blood is
with the toxins of an unrequited life, the more

malleable the faces around me become, that i can mash
smiles into the grievances of another patient
whose name bears too much resemblance to the paint
coating my walls, but goddamnit if i could rearrange

the clusters of abated cells in my body into constellations,
i would place them too far away for us to feel,
that we would be cold, inhabitable, so that this pain
courage has no strength in fighting, might turn

into an absurd joy, an emptiness bereft of worry,
a mountain hollowed of its stone.

A Momentary Brightness, and then—

I envy the unbroken lead of Catholics,
 how they relieve my hands of the microscopic, unwashed,
 asking if maybe today I can initiate a promise, *the* promise, and pray
 I might solidify my eternity with black ice, coiled cement, so that the arsenic
 of my unbelief could make my arms into travelling towers.
 Which is to say when the heart is to be delivered,

there will finally be a readiness, a baby born right on schedule and delivered,
 but soon after, when I am as tightly knit as a Catholic,
 I can build molehills out of towers,
 which is to say my hands will be permanently unwashed.
 The day we surmounted steel and chewed the anxious arsenic
 from our fingernails, I converted a tragedy into sweat, and I pray

my lips unfurl into revolving doors, open to the lattice of hands which pray
 alone, but I am so far gone that not even hell would deliver
 my tattered robes, drenched in naivety and arsenic.
 So that when I want to carve out of a girl's mouth a Catholic
 church, the stones of brothers and sisters and strangers will remain unwashed,
 rife with unadulterated indignation, their eyes rising towers.

When I terrorize my body with the uncertain, which is a tower,
 which is a belabored ocean, which is a chlorinated lyric, my breath must pray
 you always search between the fibers of unwashed
 soil, and hold with heavy hands nothing, impossible to deliver,
 incapable to breach with understanding and reason, like a Catholic,
 which is to say the poison of language is more harmful than arsenic.

My tongue is tangled in the enraptured arsenic
 of sunsets, and when we lost touch of the oxygen atop the water tower
 in St. Andrew Valley, I wanted to hold you close, closer than a Catholic
 to their pedagogy, close enough you couldn't hear the megaphone below, but only me
 praying
 that we might turn a war of ages into a delivered
 pizza, a sizzling song blemished with hemorrhages unwashed.

My coffin is dragged across my youth and upturned, unwashed
 of dirt, so that when our abated curtains of bodies dissolve into arsenic,
 we will be smaller than nothing, easily delivered,
 and I can construct, out of oak firs and balsam, a tower
 firmly suited to its failure, to its inevitable collapse, which prays
 with unanswered silence, which accepts its gravity, unlike a Catholic.

There is something about arsenic that is sweet, like a prayer,
 a sketchbook of unpublished towers, a sugared song which delivers
 me to you, a Catholic to God, a world unwashed and immense, just behind your forehead.

after Shizuko's Daughter

a slight progression

i.
my dearest mother,
you have stripped me of feathers
and now my elbows
are disjointed without you.
the earth is too full a nest.

ii.
there is no womb for
your grandchildren to grasp breath.
they will not know how
a flower reaches out to
the sun the way death beckons.

iii.
father, my hair is
now shorter than yours, distanced
with delirious
memory, these black mambas
writhing, headless, on the floor.

iv.
smile, Isamu,
you might not be in the frame,
but i can tell when
a photo is meant to be
happy by the way it's held.

v.
maybe now we can
hold amputated petals
to our chests, the wind
yanking our robes like worn flags.
my roots are still young to plant.

Senior Year, the Rapists Brought their Jowls & Teeth to the After Party

No one wants to watch other men evolve into coaches & teach their bros about how to perfectly traipse fingertips along the hem of a girl's waist, because her stomach has to be buzzing with alcohol, and not with acid, & that's the trick really, that they let their fingers become record needles, patiently whirring, delicate, until their eyes spiral toward the center of hers & she remembers only how they smiled. We all have to watch over someone's shoulders, so when the center left member at Reardan dangles the hollow ornament of his beer cup below his thigh, you know his hunger is solved quicker with the vending machine of Ashlynn's lips from trigonometry class, you know that in this moment you are more scared for her than she will be tomorrow, you know that even the air feels as if it is undressing itself, a sweltering skin, a humid music of bodies unfolding into a bed of snakes, but you are no viper. You have devoured too little of too many summers now to remove your name from your hands and place it on your cock, you have fought too few fights to be feared, & so when you clasp your fingers around the slim waist of a basketball, you know there will yet again be a chance you can turn her body away. Everyone always wants the ball, but it takes a phantom to never make a difference. So when you undig the grave of guilt you burrowed with your feet into the carpet of whoever's parents' house this is, you re-hook the belt of Peter from chemistry, you place his eyes between your thumb & index finger & squeeze the lemon juice from them, make lemonade out of justice. But you know, when the music breaks, you will not escape, because you are not them, you don't bear the crowned chip on your shoulder of a white boy, so they will see you & think their claws have been unchained, & there are eyes critiquing your every movement, bristled manes blooming, hoping you revise your decisions, & you know that no one else here is being watched like you are. & maybe the amount of tissue ripped from your body & the bodies of your brothers & sisters will make this excursion less painful, make the tears slipping down the inside of your cheeks go down your throat & not into the foam of a dog, because you know a dog is meant to stay in its cage, whether it is invisible, whether it is simply given, a yard full of dogs. So, because of this, you know you have worked too hard to become the master of your own person, to not allow the alcohol to portion your body into fractions that reanimate the zodiac signs of the people you never wanted to be, so when you remove your name from the retinas of the white buoys in the unsafe harbor of the living room, you allow yourself sanction from this plight, that at least it is not you, that at least it is not another colored boy receiving a predestined conviction, that at least it is a white boy getting one the next day, that when you take your name with you out the door, it will feel so light, but goddamnit, you feel sorry for Ashlynn, because you wish you could teach her how to dance without turning her body into a whetstone, but you know that any hand you put on a white boy will ring like a siren song, & it screams to you how your blood might taint Peter's from chemistry, & it beckons you stray to keep your name as straight as an arrow, because you will not shoot, you'll remain at the sidelines, you'll consummate the thumping of the music with a knife until the song sounds different to everyone else, but it won't, & it will only sing:

*you see the rez's been good to me
 you see the rez's been good
 you see the rez*

you see the rez
you see

after Where the Streets Had a Name

A Letter From Down the Street

A curdled wind runs through the hollow streets of Bethlehem,
hot & broiled, rattling the sand at the base of the city, its stems

only open to the rainfall of shoes for two hours, like a panic attack.
At the edge of the Palestinian horizon, adorned with the hem

of a callused sky, I saw a rape tree, swaying with withered panties,
& maybe then I knew how far my feet had to go to find Jerusalem,

six miles, Sitti Zeynab, six miles, & yet so foreign to my eyes,
this illusion of safety like an oxygen mask soured with phlegm.

I want to take a gallon of milk & pour its stomach at the wall
of Jerusalem & listen to my sister's *al-zaffeh* sizzle with gems,

scar the punitive earth at my feet until its flesh runs deeper
than my mother's lungs begging for smoke, laced in vellum,

& maybe because of this I know how my hands are supposed to hold
another's grief, latticed to sift out the bullet shells shining like a diadem.

Maybe this is how *naseeb*, my fate, curls inward, a horrified armadillo,
how it reeks with words unsaid, my mouth subject to condemn

the unloved lips & tongues from knowing how sweet I might taste,
how terrifyingly I shoulder my reflection, that my eyes to them

see so much less. So pray you Sitti Zeynab, that you never cease loving
me, your Hayaat, your *nur ayni*, your lost granddaughter treading mayhem.

I think I began this project thinking I would write using the easiest poetic forms for each book first (I ordered the poems in appearance of when we read them, though), which I did, more or less. I've always loved the form for tankas, and for *Shizuko's Daughter* there wasn't any way I *couldn't* do a Japanese form, so the series of "a slight progression" came rather quickly in turn; and as the title suggests, I wanted to show a progression from Shizuko's death, to Yuki's tolerance of living without her, to becoming comfortable with being close to Isamu, to finally let Shizuko go, and move on. Granted, this is a lot to accomplish with a syllabic form, but I love the possibilities of condensing so much into so little. I think this series is one of the ones that turned out the best and most cohesive.

Whenever I write sonnets, I tend to throw the metrical limitations and rhyme scheme out the window; I like how contemporary sonnets are just free verse poems limited to fourteen lines, so I took this in a similar direction. Hazel and Augustus talk about poetry and Shakespeare a bit in *The Fault in Our Stars*, so the form here felt justified with "dissertation for the existentially fraught." That being said, their almost existentially driven anarchism seems to fit the looseness and absence of the true sonnet form here. I wanted to show the struggle Hazel felt grappling with her identity and existential beliefs. I messed around with some of the title imagery too, employing an image of constellations in relations to Hazel's cancer. I almost like this poem more without the inclusion of it being written after this book.

I stopped and started "Final Act," the poem beginning this collection in light of *Monster*, quite a few times. Part of me really wanted to make this the sestina poem and not the one I ended up doing for *Godless*, but in the end, I realized that so much African

American poetry tends to act as an outcry, as a ballad, a love song, a realization of oppression. In the back of my mind I really wanted the poem to be epistolary, to Steve's mother, and while I tried to keep the litany of addressing every sentence with her name, I almost wish I could go back and revise it so it truly is an epistolary poem. Regardless, I think this is one of the poems I'm most proud of for how moving and sorrowful it is. The title, also, I think attests to what would have happened if Steve actually was sent to prison for his actions, and this poem functions as the new final act of his story.

"Stay Away, but Come Close" wasn't so much a difficult poem, but had the most difficult beginning stages because I was having trouble finding a page in *Barefoot Heart* that said a lot thematically and said as much as I wanted to say for an erasure. Elva's story, much like Yuki's, was constructed out of coping with so much for so long, and the poem acts as a continuation of what happened when they moved on and changed their lives. Page 147 had the most intimate language in the whole book, I think, so I decided to go with a sort of minimalistic romantic style, and I really love how it turned out. I think the most choppy parts about this poem though is that the pronoun of "you" would have made this poem a bit more consistent, because it goes from third-person plural and the narrator addresses a "he," but goes back to the third-person plural toward the end. I'm fairly sure that functions well, so let's hope it does. It took a while to keep scanning the page for what words I still wanted to use and which ones I already did, but it was so worth it. And because the poem, if done correctly with projective verse, would look sporadic and all over the page, I decided to remove punctuation and keep it to one stanza.

I went from this to a sestina for *Godless*: "A Momentary Brightness, and then—". I've never written a sestina before. And this was probably the most difficult piece to

write, because of the form. I didn't even go as far to make all the end words rhyme, but at one point I forgot to add the final line to the fifth stanza, and freaked out, thinking I had to redo the sixth stanza, but I didn't. I tried to use words that revolved around religious and water imagery, and I tried to not only spread it equally between nouns, verbs, and adjectives as my end words, but I also decided to alter some of the tense use and variations of each words (deliver, delivered, and delivery, for example). All in all, I think this poem turned out alright, but I can't tell if it started to lose steam and become confusing. I really wanted to challenge myself with this form, and I can tell you this is a form you just don't sit down and write every day. Damn.

In Polish literature and poetry, the Greek form of Sapphic stanza has been configured to the point that the Polish have essentially made it something of their own. This is another predominantly syllabic form, but sometimes suggests a rhyme scheme. The Polish utilize a *hendecasyllable*, which is comprised of eleven syllable per line, five in the first "phrase," and six in the second. The stanzas should all be quatrains, with the final line of each being only five syllables. For *The Boy on the Wooden Box*, "Glass Factory" turned out to be just a reflection of the book as a whole, as well as a reprise of much of its imagery. Overall, I really enjoyed the form, and it felt refreshing to try something new.

For *Where the Streets Had a Name*, I felt that it would be befitting to try out a ghazal. I had only known so much about ghazals before this challenge, and I genuinely love the form now. Granted, I didn't stay totally traditional with it, because I think you're supposed to use the same word at the end of every second line in each couplet, but the definition of the ghazal suggested as if you should pertain to the same rhyme scheme that

you propose in the beginning, which I actually did. I also didn't do the true "author signature" at the end, where the author throws their own name in the poem, so I just used Hayaat's instead, since she is technically the narrator here. Incidentally, the poem was originally titled "A Jar Filled with a Garden," but I think that wasn't saying enough and wasn't really speaking to the poem.

Lastly, my least favorite poem of the collection: "Senior Year, the Rapists Brought their Jowls & Teeth to the After Party," after *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. I was originally going to try using a prayer form, since Native American literature doesn't have many (if any) rigid poetry forms aside from lyrical prayers. Instead, I tried to manifest a situation similar to what I did for *Monster* that took place after the book itself, taking Junior's perspective in his final year of high school. I wanted to create another burgeoning outcry in the face of racism and the consequences people of another race undergo due to its faulty institutionalization. For this, I went with a prose poem, and the ending pays homage to a Hanif Abdurraqib poem, "All the Gang-bangers Forgot About the Drive-by." I feel like the poem is all over the place and is difficult to read because of it. It was also the last of the poems I wrote, and no other poetic form was really speaking to me at the time.