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The First and Final Poetry of Joanne Deming

Joanne Deming

University of New Hampshire - Main Campus

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The First and Final Poetry of Joanne Deming

Abstract
This thesis is a culmination of my development as a writer at the University of New Hampshire. It explores the idea of the self and how it applies to writing. Because I am legally changing my name after graduation, these poems have come to represent "Joanne Deming" as a writer before she becomes "Joanne Wood."

Keywords
Poetry, Identity, Self, COLA, English, English Literature

Subject Categories
Poetry
The First and Final Poetry
of Joanne Deming

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J

a hook to
gouge to
reach to
slice slide into
the back of
My neck
to pull
to puncture
a tracheotic hollow
your J hand
inhuman
inhumane
metallic filth
a symbol
a wrist-flick
meaning-afforded
meaningless
Frosty Berry

I can taste the strawberry juice of a snow cone
dripping slowly out the bottom of a wax paper cup.
I can smell the unsettled seeping virus
in your skin. Crawling through you, endearing
itself like purple sap to your veins.
The doormat serves its purpose; the bee pollinates efficiently.

You, caked in a layer of ballpark dust, efficiently
work your tongue like a potter’s hands on your ice cream cone,
skillfully twisting upwards until dripping veins wind
down your fingers and you surrender—drop the thing headfirst into a cup.
By then though the sugary sap has endeared
itself to you, its sticky spider cells a virus

clinging to your skin—a pink virus, a delicious virus.
It stinks across the room like a cup
of three week old Raman covered with a cloud of the most efficient
most task driven, little flies. Forming a spiral cone
around their congealed treasure. I suppose the flies have endeared

themselves to you. Yet those that find you endearing— whether
flies or academics or countrymen have some level of wrongness in their veins
some addiction to a problem which cannot be unproblemed.
Like any good virus you do what you do efficiently—

purpling through the body, first washing through the veins
that fan about the stomach muscle,
then building on yourself like a great wart—
your roots digging into the organ’s core
and your tendrils snaking around the bones.

Those who don’t see value in a dripping
snow cone and throw the slush
away are those I have no use for, and though
your fat faced virus endears itself to me like swarming
fire ants I brush it efficiently from my veins with ice and cold.
Yesterday
 *(For my dear friend’s ex-boyfriend)*

we burned your picture
in a pizza-box teepee
in the sandlot out back—

and even though I’ve never
met you
I felt myself buoyed by
the colorful ink-sap
gurgling toward your face.
It was

as if,

as you smoldered
into dirty soot and dust,
a pressure that had been building
on the synapses just under
the surface of my skull
was released into the smoke along with you.

And the chilled breeze whipped you
in circles and away like
it was an overly excited child
trying too hard to help—

And we smiled like maniacs
and danced on your muffled flames.
The Seed

Sweet little sesame seed—
you did not ask to be divided
by the ultra-fine felt-tip
point of my pen.
It was in your dreams to be consumed—
swallowed, by me as it were, since I am
the consumer into whose possession you came.
And yet when you parted
from the bagel's shining surface
upon which you toasted
to a reproductively frozen
crispness,
you knew
you’d never
be able to make it
to human lips.
Your toasted crisp
allowed you a hollow snapping sound,
you cracked in a jagged
toasty pattern—
and the felted ink
bled
into the edges
where it parted you.
You’ll never be consumed,
little seed,
nor shall you ever flower to a plant,
your ovaric core scorched as it is.
But then, you did have the chance
to soak in a bit of ink
and that,
I suppose,
is something.
Come, We All

We ill formed maggots,
we less than living matter.
there is a supple black flower
that smells to us like rapture,
like salty desire.
We crave to bite at its tender petals,
to sink into its soft bed of seeds.
It blooms somewhere above us,
pulsing out dizzying yellow scent,
tantalizing us with the sprawl
of its perpetual layers.
We whip ourselves forward
hoping to be the lucky one
that sinks its ravenous mouth
into the sweet blossom.
The Placenta

Short circular fingernails,
her skin darkened tan
and speckled with dark brown dots,
a tiny raised purple spot on the knuckle—
she stretches them into tight white latex
and lifts the pink and purple mass to the light.

Her fingers move like a pianist’s through the sinews,
like a child letting wet sand drip from his grasp,
just barely catching it with the other hand before it
falls in a swollen pile
on the surf.

The tissue and clots stretch in her fingers,
and she gazes upon it, lays it
in its blue tupperware coffin,
and thinks, now kicking tiny bulbous legs,
warm in a plastic crib several rooms away,
of the product of its brief existence.
I retch.
She looks up at me,
burning eyes bright
not seeing
my disgust
through his twitching little nose.
A Current, of Life or the Things that Resemble it

There is nothing in this hollow except
a blushing pussy willow,
an array of solar functions,
a tree with another’s branch
in its mouth—

Outside it there is
blue fire, there is
a green entanglement of
embryonic life,
there is a painter’s pallet
and a devil’s mask.

The sky goes soft in cobwebs
and a rotund quadruped turns
to look back
as it crawls into the red void.
Mean

Your freckles
like those
of a spoiled, pouting little boy
do not endear me to your childish face
and your hair
hasn’t changed
since you were thirteen.
Grow up, weakling.
Like a stupid
bleary-eyed puppy
chewing a rubber toy
because the high pitched squeal
fulfills some primordial craving
you chase and squeak as though
you had no higher brain function
to weigh the decision
or to realize
the whole act is pointless.
And then, rather than standing up
to own what you say and do,
you hide shriveled behind a wall
shouting cruelties from afar
and hoping
your inconveniences
will just go away.

You sad little boy,
a man’s dick attached
to your adolescent body,
perhaps you’re simply the victim
of wherever it decides to point you.
Or perhaps
your mannish dick is the victim
to be so permanently hardwired
to your weak
gutless
little boy brain.
Either way you seem to have no
method of handling your mistakes
than to be needlessly mean.
You hide from your decisions until forced
to face them and then you snap
and bite until you are let go and can run away.
Grow up, coward.
Possess your actions.
Tippy

Bulbous creature
toothpick-legged
potato of a dog.

But you had to admire
the dedication—

To have taught oneself
to push chairs away
and open a fridge
without thumbs

To have known to wait
until the steak
was on the coffee table
and the man
in the kitchen

To have waddled back to us
panting and happy
her fur soaked and sticky
with the smell of rotten milk.

I recall she never learned
not to investigate skunks
and her fur always smelled
faintly of tomato soup.
Creature

There is anger in the curves
of his body, not simply the focus
of a hunt.

His tree is propped
and unsteady, shrinking away
from his riotous fury.

Without his collection of fern-like
tail feathers, without
the questioning eyes of his underbelly,

he would be uncontrolled
in the power
of his straightened vertebrae—

Instead, he pushes
his sword-beak
toward his tender belly.
Dream, Well-Done

The night swaddles me
as though I am an infant,
and there I am, its babe, its darling.
And you were there!
And you were there!
And you were there!
Wait, no you weren’t there, but that kid who drives the bus was,
and we all sat melting in the Mos Eisley Cantina, smoking pot to the
repetitive jaunt of the band, their bulbous heads
bouncing above their staring eyes,
black and wet and deep, like Harvey Lake at night
when John and I would sit on the dock
swishing our feet in the slimy water.
Baby Jo was better in those days,
not happier, but better;
but then being good only makes a person miserable,
and you can only have happiness with smoldering anger—
I could let myself fall into that fire now,
let the flames tickle at me till my skin shines
a crackly, delicious brown,

but it’s my turn for a hit, so I don’t.
The smoke slips out between my lips and mixes into
the brume above us, our own
private clouds, growing thicker with
each exhalation.
Then there you were in the haze, taking a mug from the
pig-faced bartender and laughing with
some Tatooinian beauty.
My steaming cup whispers in my hands
Amore meus pondus
meum eo feror quocunque feror¹
and I gulp down its burning innards, and slam it
back on the stone table.
Love or fury, take your pick:
a burden is a burden
is a burden.

But being burdened is getting old I think,
rotating on my solitary rotisserie.
My skin starts to bubble a sizzling brown.

¹ Quote from Confessions of St Augustine book 13. Translates to “My Love (or read, my Fury) is my burden, by it I
am carried wherever I am carried.”
Eyes in Green Confusions

A planetary void,
an ocean that saturates its
every thing.
Pollen finds its way
to disembodied nostrils.
Everything drips
and melts
and dissolves.
The sea creature
drools
on its tentacles.
Snow
falls
and is water.
Warm Shadows

You are the creature that floats
in the gray edges of consciousness
upon falling asleep
and waking.
Your wide, rounded shoulders
blanket my small form,
and wrapped in you
I curse my body’s weak need
for air.
My ear presses into
your upper arm
Your chin rests on my head,
your face occasionally twitching
from a tickle of my hair.
Your body rocks with
uneven breath and I,
pressed to you,
and with a breath not as powerful
move along with it.
Then the grayness fades, either
to black nonsense
or reality,
and you disappear,
still trapped within it,
so close I can almost have you,
far enough that I can’t.
What Else is There Besides

nail clippers
in duct tape rolls
in desks-

relying on oneself
to know about nail clippers
in duct tape rolls
in desks.

air ducts
every fifteen minutes
drying
freshly dampened
hand towels.

the broken belt
I patched with red duct tape
and still wear
even though it still breaks.

and in the pocket of my old winter coat
hanging on a hook behind a door
in my mother’s house,
a sleek blue camera
smashed into itself
is waiting for me
to do something with it.
For Doris

There was always something darling
in your horrified reaction
whenever I tried
to serve you rolled up doilies
as food—
tucked together
like pigs in blankets,
a fork to the side
as though it had a purpose.
I’d shriek with laughter
and do it again
and again
and you delivered each time
giving me the same twisted face
and the invariability of it all
felt like love.

I remember specifically
the sickened green of the bathtub—
the matching bar of Irish Spring
roosting on its edge.
And the small blue hand mirror
with the twisted gold-tipped handle
that seemed to add a royal magnificence
to my round child-face.

At home, in the third drawer down
of the bathroom sink, is the small round puff
you powdered your face with each day.
And when I press it to my mouth
it smells like your hugs
and I can almost feel the soft leather
of your skin on my cheek.
Blood Splinter

It was a blood splinter
she said
under my
saran-wrap skin
almost poking through.
Metal coils contaminate
pristine cotton
black rust on my fingers
charcoal in my eyes
my eyelashes rub
and stick
rub and
stick
purple rust on my
fingers in my
nails wedged in
redwood bark
and stuck.
Visible Rushes

Soft and swift as Pegasus,
eight foot wings—
his hair, malleable, bends to the
will of fingers, melts into stiffened
rods of feathers— one between each knuckle.
Bend down against his warmth or
let the wind take you
like a broken sail.
*

Sew my wings, do not
seal them with hot wax,
do not burn them into my shoulder blades—
Sew them with a gentle seam
that my skin, hot and smooth, will mold
like soft scars into the rippling strength
of my feathers.
*

Let the fan blow my hair back
I don’t care how cold it is.
Dust Bunny Roses

The troll’s name is Gustav,
kicking through chuckling leaves,
smoking because it is familiar.
A black squirrel nibbles a cherry
and juices soak his fur.
Bunnies dip roses in dust,
an even coat
of fluffy grayness suckling each
plastic petal.
The painted woman’s cockeyed breasts,
both mutant and beautiful, seem to bounce
with vigor in stillness that mine cannot achieve
in motion. I am her white voyeur— the
other. A version of
the boys who look at me and lick
my hips with their eyes, possessing me in a way
that is theirs, that I cannot control.
She is unaware; she soaks in desire
for herself.
A Selection of Eyes and Grins

The turning flower is
cell walls throbbing
with the strength
of moisture and sun.
Red spores stick to their surfaces
like a disease of the face,
one of pustules and
jellied disfigurement.
But in it is a place for blossomed
existence, a new organization
of old matter. The smiles all drip
and the producer of life and joy
winks at me
sideways.
For H

There must have been something somewhere inside of me
that wanted to choke you.
How else,
in a drunken torrential outburst
of frustrations
turned to pulsing muscle,
could I have pressed my fingers
into your neck and
your neck against the wall
until my nails dug in
and purple roses
grew under my fingertips.
I cannot imagine
who I looked like
to you in those moments—
certainly my eyes weren’t brown,
rather they must have blistered
to a boiling crimson stretching
from my irises
to the roots of my hair.
My freckles surely melted into my skin,
too timid and sweet to watch.
My face, I’m sure, glowed two inches from yours—
a creature steaming from my pores
and spitting from the corners of my mouth.
I want to understand
what breathed life into it-
but then you’re the only one
who’s ever met her.
Static Uncontrolled

Something something something something
red squiggled lines something something
faucets clunk on clunk off something
someone pees through the wall my refrigerator
moans the soft sound of cold production something something some thing
makes me do this even though thinking tastes beige right now I still have to make sense of the lack something closes a door and locks something my knee bends up to my chin because I told it to or my brain did—that one piece of me that won’t listen just tells and tells and tells and never takes an order from me unless I trick it somehow but it always knows
what I’m up to
so
I still
never
something
pip tit
slap slat
something
something something
I Want my MTV

Like freckle-dappled stars—
glo-bright and plastic
as they pulse from the ceiling
and press their imprint upon
closed eyes, certain shimmers clump
together in sticky waterfalls—
a motley of smells and stillframes
attacking all at once—
And suddenly there are grapes in baggies,
and the sickened smell of your dog’s fur before she died,
and something seems
to make you want that music
television back—
In a white room you sit
on blue carpet that’s
almost too blue for
so much carpet
and you draw colorful pictures
of shapes that you scribbled
and then carefully filled with crayon—
the same colors never touching.
And Liv Tyler swings around a pole
for her father, something oddly non-seductive
about her metallic cone breasts—
something oddly non-sexual
about the way Alicia watches
and claps—the way you watch
and clap.
Soft, shuffling tones overwhelm
and topple over one another
calling back upon themselves
to make sure each one follows in line
and suddenly you are in your friend’s back seat,
sprawled out comfortably,
books in your lap,
a touch of window-warmed sun
flitting above your eyebrows.
On Being told to Write Poems that can be “Understood”

Prepare for understanding.
A bell chimes three, but I have digital clock.
Beneath a layer of frozen leaves
is a worm
existing.
When I smoke, I like the unnatural image of my blood cells
carrying the clouded air to every vein before I breathe it out.
I’ve had a bracelet on my desk for years
that I’ve never worn,
and have no idea where it came from.
I don’t kiss, I am kissed.
I think there is something I am trying to write but
it won’t come.
It tickles at the edges of my thoughts
and sits in my wrists, unable to formulate enough
substance to reach my fingers.
I can’t reach it, so I am stuck
and unsatisfied.
There are ashes under the picnic table.
The tip of my pointer finger is raw.
My skin is fair and I often have bruises
without knowing their origins.
The sunlight pushes its way through my blinds,
penetrates me with a dulled brightness.
I’m telling you now,
this is, probably, just a bunch of words.
I’m going to take a nap.
As of Yet

eat an orange

drive to New York

drive back home

drop a teabag in a cracked yellow mug

pull it out

drop it in again

feel pulls and drops and make everything loud—
louder—
scream out toward the black rectangle underneath

your eyelids—

black rectangles that form upon each other

until only bright pinpricks of anything

exist within nothing.

Nothing draws or climbs or bites

without intention of fulfillment—
an innocent ideal

that leads to crackers

then to chocolate turtles

then to a light bulb

burning into your forearm.

only sit

and pretend to know

how to sit,
then stand
and pretend to know
how to move
Sitting, Clothed, Contemplating the Next Poem I’ll Write

The air in this room is unremarkable
but satisfies.
The walls are yellow and pale
and washed in the pinkish light
of our corner lamp. I’m sure
the sunchips in my drawer
are in crumbles. I’m sure
that men dressed as milkmen
think their empty bottles
are still full
and that the cream sits thick
in the bottles’ stubby necks.
I am therefore I think
therefore I cannot see beyond my thought
therefore what I think is probably
all that matters unless it isn’t
which means that what I think
doesn’t matter, which means my whole life
doesn’t matter, which means the water
doesn’t matter and the solo cups
amassed like soldiers didn’t matter
when they stood quietly
and blocked the path
to my sweatshirt
that day. Go delirious.
I’m going to rub the base
of my skull on this futon’s metal arm
and refuse to tell myself
to go delirious.
To instruct oneself
is to misguidedly empower
one’s sanity with both
interior
and exterior
omniscience. So I instruct myself to—
Go delirious.
Let the air in the room wrap
comfortably around you
as air does.
What you’re about to write is half-
oaked and delicate but then
you can’t be sure—what you write
is not difficult and
will remain not difficult only
as long as
the chocolate
doesn’t go away.  
Be oblivious to things  
like chocolate.  
Let oblivion soak into  
the open pores of your skin disregard  
the scratching  
of the mouse  
in the wall. Forget  
that the message  
was from the wrong person  
because that’s just where  
the right messages always come from. Forget  
that you are still clothed  
still lying on the futon arm—  
that the yellow walls layered  
with golden horses on weathervanes,  
sail boats in square-inch oceans,  
abandoned birdcages,  
and ill-matched spoons  
are still washed in pink light  
from the corner lamp.  
What you’ll write will not be difficult  
verging on the edge  
of simplistic, verging so slightly  
that the edge has become a slow drop  
that the edge is detached from the edge  
that the edge is grassy-knoll-soft and you are the lamb rubbing your ears  
in the shining blades. You do know  
how to sleep but you do not sleep easily you only will when you’re curled  
like a fetus on the futon  
your pen’s ink seeping  
into the poem between your knees.
Something Terribly Clever

_A Reflection on the Undergraduate Self_

The collection of poetry I’ve presented here is representative of the very particular time in my life which has marked the beginning of my growth as a writer. In my four years at the University of New Hampshire I have been drawn into a literary community which is far more vast than UNH’s tiny Durham campus and has become a sort of mental oasis for me, giving me the support and encouragement of endless other writers who believe in the importance and power of creative writing. Possibly one of the most important things I’ve learned here has been to give myself permission to be a writer. To imply that my writing is so good that I should be able to call myself a writer or that it is even worth the precious moments it may occupy of a reader’s life feels a bit presumptuous and even arrogant at such a young age; but when everything’s boiled down and only the salt is left the truth remains that I have to write. Something compels me to write poems regardless of any school-related influences or any potential reader. I need to write to make sense of my life, and so I am a writer. Giving myself this title and allowing myself to become comfortable with it was an incredibly freeing experience which changed how I looked at my own process of writing and at other writers as a whole.

Considering these poems as a representative culmination of my growth as a writer at UNH, I decided to encapsulate them with the identity of which they are a product. My thesis _The First and Final Poetry of Joanne Deming_ is titled as such because I intend to legally change my last name to Wood, my mother’s maiden name, after my graduation. Because this dramatic personal change is coinciding with the completion of my Undergraduate degree, the name “Joanne Deming” has come to represent a very particular identity and a very particular time in my life. Though identity is not entirely something which can be defined, we as humans tend to
connect it with the abstraction that is a given name. Thus I am able to connect the idea of “Joanne Deming” with the person I have been for these first twenty-one years of my life. Since I have begun my entry to the world of writing with this name and am changing it so soon, these poems, for me, have come to represent who “Joanne Deming” is as a writer before she becomes “Joanne Wood.”

In compiling these poems with the idea of their writer “Joanne Deming” in mind, I began to think about the role of self in poetry. What is the self and how do writers fight to identify it through the written word? The conclusion I came to is that writers endlessly work to achieve sense of self by imposing importance and power upon what they see and experience and their need to describe it. In this way writing becomes as unique and individual as the person who creates it. Two poets may both write a poem about the same lamp, but the poems will be entirely different based on what each writer sees worth discussing in the lamp and the voice he or she possesses in conveying it— and a third writer may be too fascinated by the wallpaper to notice the lamp at all. This individuality is central to what makes writing a product of the self. Only I can write my poem in my voice about what I see (whether the poem is any good or not is not really the issue at this point), and this discovery empowers my writing and the writing of any poet with a sense of importance and almost urgency for what needs to be relayed. In thinking of this I began to reexamine what Joanne Deming had needed to say in the last three years and discovered a development in the nature of my writing which has taken me so profoundly far from the ABAB rhyme schemes and forced melodrama of my early college poetry.

My love affair with poetry began, I suppose, in the most unoriginal of circumstances. I was nineteen and I found myself, as it seems every writer (or, indeed, every person) will at some point, with a broken heart and a boiled-over anger which had little focus or sanity to it. I had
always enjoyed writing and had played with some terrible, unrequited-angsty-love poetry in the previous year (if you’re keeping tabs that’d be pre-, or perhaps mid-breaking of heart); but it did not fully capture me until I found myself in this state of too-much-feeling and latched into the book of poetry that would change my connection with the medium and sink me irrevocably into its world. That particular book was Erin Belieu’s *Black Box*, a book written in the aftermath of her divorce which possesses a strength of voice, a sickened humor laced with sexuality, and a command of imagery which is overpowering, beautiful, and yet delicately terrifying somehow. This collection of poems intoxicated me and gave a voice to the wretchedness I was experiencing.

It was with this book that I first began to recognize and be captivated by the power of images. One particular poem, “Below Zero,” is a shining example of the way Belieu is able to create fantastical imagery which is both surreal and yet vibrantly clear visually, allowing a tension within the images which allows them to be both beautiful and yet unnerving:

> where the fan chopped like a guillotine,
> where the sheets were always clean,

> and where the white fairy appeared nightly
> riding Western on De Quincey’s
crocodile, crossing her beautiful legs,
batting her wet mosquito wings.

> ... Who could compete in that marketplace,
that bazaar of happy endings and

> endless dunes of blow?
(Belieu 31-32)

I recall that “endless dunes of blow” particularly struck me. The vision of rolling mounds of cocaine stretching out like sand dunes in a desert overwhelmed me with its promise of an endless exquisite happiness which is sickened with the mental-numbness of such a drug. It calls to mind
the same trepidation felt by readers of *The Odyssey* as Odysseus and his men become entrapped by the apathetic bliss found in the land of the lotus eaters. The image alludes to a mental release, but is not a truly positive one because the release is not pure and is rather induced by overwhelming levels of mind-altering drugs.

The fact that I felt such a vivid impact from an image which was really no more than a few simple words introduced me to the extraordinary influence that an image can posses within a poem. I found myself entranced by Belieu’s words. The book builds poem by poem to the climactic ten part piece “In the Red Dress I Wear to Your Funeral,” a poem whose voice spoke so directly to the anger and loss I was feeling at the time that I felt empowered by it. The poem’s beginning, from which the book takes its name, evokes the embittered sense of humor and the striking visuals which are laced throughout:

I root through your remains,
looking for the black box. Nothing left
but glossy chunks, a pimp’s platinum
tooth clanking inside the urn.
(Belieu 41)

This image, this very idea of finding the black box of a failed relationship, is so fascinating and unique and yet it is so perfect it seems incredible that no one (to my knowledge) has found it before. By beginning the poem with a black box, Belieu lends the sense of calamity and destruction with which a black box would generally be associated— and what could be a more beautiful metaphor for the spectacular devastation which the end of a relationship so often is? There is also very present in this image the sense of longing and wistful reminiscence which comes with such an ending. One cannot help but run repeatedly over the memories that haunt a break up regardless (or perhaps because) of how painful they are.
This book and its tone and style worked itself into my poetry for a period of time, though my tone leaned further toward bitterness and did not tread a balance as delicately orchestrated as Belieu’s. One particular poem (not included in this collection) possibly most clearly influenced by Belieu’s voice began “I stand above your chilled remains,/ your tear-stained toe tag clenched in/ my chapped fist.” This period in my writing was marked most clearly by an aggressively forward anger which I had not yet learned to control. It is represented in this collection by the poem “Dream, Well-Done” in which that tone is present but is not the central voice as it was with so much of my writing at that time.

It was also near this period that I discovered Ben Lerner’s Angle of Yaw, a book composed almost entirely of short untitled prose blocks. I enjoyed the form of these poems and was fascinated by the conflict created in having blocks of prose that do not always show direct connectivity between the sentences they contain. Though I did not really know what I was reading I was still engrossed by it and each clever block pushed me forward to the next. One such poem exemplifies the odd disconnect yet fluidity present in these blocks:

THE ARTIST PROPOSES A SERIES OF LIGHTS attached to tall polls, spaced at intervals along our public roads, and illuminated from dusk to dawn. The public is outraged. The law’s long arm cannot support its heavy hand. The public is outrage. Kindergartners simulate bayonet fighting with the common domestic fowl. Does this blood look good on me? Does this blood make me look fat? If you replace a cow’s stomach with glass, don’t complain when you cut your mouth.

(Lerner 38)

What exactly is being discussed in this poem? There are certain social issues which are being addressed but more than anything it is the tonal quality of the images which display their connectivity. It is a poem which made me think three years ago and which still makes me think today.
Discovering *Angle of Yaw* introduced me to an entirely different side of poetry than I realized could exist. I thought poems needed titles. I thought they needed a thesis statement. I didn’t realize they could be so oddly shaped into little blocks. Though I have never been particularly prone to writing prose poetry, it is a form which I am certainly attracted to when reading it and which is so beautifully crafted by Lerner in this book. Though much of the book has an undertone of social commentary it is underwhelming and the true energy of the poems lies in Lerner’s odd but vivid images and wry sense of humor. The shorter untitled poems are surrounded by three longer titled ones, one each in the beginning, middle, and end. This choice in the construction of his book allows Lerner to develop a build and release in each section in which the shorter untitled blocks serve as a tonal base for their longer counterparts.

Another book which I discovered much later but also employs the form of short prose blocks beautifully is Julia Story’s *Post Moxie*. The poems in this book are separated into three titled sections and are untitled on an individual level. Each section conveys its own understated connectivity through related tone and images within the poems. The first section “The Above Song” has a particular sense of stagnancy and an unfulfilled craving for movement within it:

You’re down the street trying to forget about the Holy Spirit. That’s your middle ground for Christ’s sake. That’s what died and entered you. The holy entrance. Your entrails wound round and round the world like a red knitter’s yarn, like a ring of snakes before they turn into fire and then turn back into dim gray waters full of bored sharks.

(Story 13)

The movement which happens within this poem is created solely by Story’s imagination. It moves, but the movement lies in the images and not any real progression of action. This is
representative of the sense of stagnancy present in this first section. The second section “Its Plastic Light” moves slightly from the stagnancy of the first and presents an air of conflict:

When I say you I mean hair-brained  
muzzle-toothed rat-bitten or however  
you’re appearing these days walking  
hand in hand with yourself toward the  
teacher of your dreams this is how you’ll  
get away from me while I drive air in  
another state fill my ears with air fill my  
tonsils with your voice  
(Story 33)

Story’s refusal of punctuation in this poem mimics the kind of restlessness present in this second section. The poem is moving almost too quickly now, and its construction is both deliberate and manic. The poems of this section seem to topple over themselves and into each other as if they are not individual but part of one continuous stream of consciousness which they struggle to contain. The energy driving the poems is restricted, controlled, and repeatedly forced into the shape of these little blocks.

When Story came to UNH to read from Post Moxie I remember she said of her writing process for the book that she felt she had been pouring her thoughts into little containers each day. This struck me as a particularly beautiful way to think about writing and about these poems specifically, and it helped me redefine the way I thought about stream of consciousness poetry. Post Moxie seems to be a book which is all about a contained madness. A constricting force is binding the poems within their small block form. It is as if the content of the poems cannot be controlled, and it is their shape which can only provide some sort of organization for them. Story has a need to contain and objectify things which is on display in these little poems. This containment is present in the title of the third section “The Sky is a Thing.” In the act of objectifying and bottling something as broad as the word sky with something as restricting as the
word thing, Story shows her need to make sense of undefined concepts by containing them within an objective perception.

Around the time that I discovered Story’s book, I was fortunate enough to be able to attend the Association of Writers and Writing Programs Conference in Washington D.C. I attended it with my brother who repeatedly introduced me as being “unfortunate enough to be drawn to writing as well.” Experiencing AWP as an undergraduate student was a rather fascinating experience for me. I was particularly interested in the way that people seemed to react to me as such a young writer. Some seemed to completely accept the idea and acted as though I was any other writer worthy of conversing with. Some seemed to brush me off as though I was too young to even try to start playing this fantastic political game that is writing and AWP especially. Some immediately became so worldly and experienced upon learning of my youth that it was rather interesting to watch them so suddenly caught up in themselves as they tried to sound lofty and wise. These interactions were made all the more entertaining by the introduction of alcohol in the evenings. Being so young and being able to observe this world made up of every sort from wannabe to established writers was overwhelming, yet I felt incredibly fortunate for the opportunity. I was a part of this, but something in my age did separate me from it all and allowed me to watch it objectively.

While at AWP I was introduced to the writer Rae Armantrout. She had a reading which took place during the conference and I went with my brother and sister-in-law to hear her read. I remember being intrigued by her style of minimalism and my brother told me that he thought her poems were better to read than to hear, and so I stopped by a booth that was selling her books later. I found myself entranced by the way Armantrout’s words seemed to drip down a page:

If yellow
is the new black,
the new you
is a cartoon

spokesman
who blows his lines

around bumptious 3-D
Hondas,
apologizes often,
and remains cheerful.
(Armantrout 45)

This section of the poem “New” shows how Armantrout is able to achieve a quick, clever tone without sacrificing her rapidity of movement or clarity of image. Though simple, her style is so captivating that I could not move on from the first several poems but read same ones over and over. I bought both her books Versed and Money Shot there at the conference. Armantrout’s books sparked a fascination for minimalism within me. Earlier in the year my poetry professor, David Rivard, told me that stripping down poems to the barest essentials often helped one realize what is important in a poem and what is not. Here in Armantrout’s work that very concept was being applied in an artful and unique way. I began to think about minimalism and the idea of specificity of images without a necessary connectivity between them, and this began to reflect in my writing. Some poems in this collection which I can point to as being specifically a product of this influence are “J” and “Blood Splinter;” and, perhaps not quite as directly, “Dust Bunny Roses.”

One of my most recent discoveries in poetry is the writer Mary Ruefle. Only this semester I was introduced to her book Indeed I was Pleased with the World, in which her carefully orchestrated words seem to move like music across the pages:

It was a dangerous day.
The earth was shining
and the sun drank its joy.
The little goat was chomping columbine.
All the babies smelled of sweet milk.
The old folk sold their recipes.
All the women followed them.
The men ate, pulled off their boots
and wiggled their toes.
The trout responded to the water
and the hermit found his herbs nearby.
The radiance of circles had never been
wider, more one-inside-of-the-other.
Who began to feed the goat
the pages of a book?
Who began to feed the goat
the tragedies of Shakespeare?
What would we do without them?
(Ruefle 24)

This poem “The Meal that was Always There” displays the minorly playful but mostly observatory tone which is present throughout these poems. Ruefle employs her images with a specificity that makes them stunning such as in the line “All the babies smelled of sweet milk;” and her use of repetition is sparing, calculated, and deliberate in a way that makes her rhythms understated yet unique and fluid as the poems move through each other. Ruefle seems to be very particular in her focus on the specifics of things. She sees beauty in minute details and crafts her descriptions of those details as though they are all that is important in the world. A particular tension which is present in these images, however, is that there is often a sense of separation between the speaker of the poem and the details being described. This creates a friction which adds depth and specificity to the tone of these poems. There is intimacy but also disconnect present in their voice, and this captures the sense of human existence in that we are so connected and yet so entirely far from what is outside of our selves. This manner of thinking has penetrated my thoughts in the last several months and one particular poem in my collection which I believe reflects that influence is “The Seed.” Though I did not have Ruefle’s poems in mind when I
wrote this piece, it is evident to me in retrospect that her writing was certainly in my head at the
time it was written and it most definitely has worked its way into my thinking and my writing
evidenced by the importance which I impress upon a single sesame seed in this poem.

My life at the University of New Hampshire has allowed me to develop so much that I
feel like an entirely different person from the girl who entered the school four years ago. Here I
have learned to look at myself and those around me in a critical manner. I have seen and learned
so much of human interaction, and have more importantly learned to be continuously fascinated
by it. I have learned to observe the world as a writer does, and have impregnated my eye with
the all important status of being my own. My vision, though it is still developing, is mine and is
thus the most important one that will ever exist to me. This is the real root and meaning in my
poetry. My poems are important because they are a product of me; and since my world is the
only one that I will ever experience, they are important to the only world that ultimately matters
to me: my own. In this sense writing becomes the most important thing in any writer’s
individual “world,” and that importance translates to others only when the poetry speaks to
something in their world as well. I consider myself so lucky to be able to appreciate poetry in
this sense. Because I can read, write, and be affected by poetry I am able to experience the
worlds of so many writers who I would never have any knowledge of or access to were it not for
their writing. This connectivity between the individual worlds of writers creates such a vast
network of written word that is a beautiful mosaic of individual experiences, and I am so glad to
count myself as a part of it. The poetry I’ve collected here is a representation of the world of
“Joanne Deming” as she has experienced it up through her twenty-first year. They are of a very
personal importance to me and I can only hope they can serve some sort of purpose and become
important for anyone else.
Works Cited


