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Formality

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FORMALITY

by

BRYCE EMLEY

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors in the Major Program in Creative Writing
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and in The Burnett Honors College
at the University of Central Florida
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Thesis Chair: Terry Thaxton

Abstract

Of the many aspects of the composition of poetry, the most common component of the form involves emotional response. There is an infinite number of ways to write a poem, and likewise an infinite number of forms which a poem can be structured according to. In writing this collection of poems composing my thesis, I set out to write poetry in as many ways as I could to explore how different forms, devices, voices, points of view, sounds, tones, and as many other variables as I could think of affect poetry as stimulus.

The poems in this collection cover a range of classic poetic forms and styles as well as variations of free verse and contemporary forms. My hope is that the readers of these poems will be able to experience a wide range of emotional responses and gain the same insight into the vast abilities inherent in poetry that I gained in writing them.

Dedication

For my family, whom many of these poems are about or were inspired by,

And for my mom especially, who has supported me without question through more than twenty-two years and counting of questionable decisions.

Acknowledgements

Foremost, I thank Terry Thaxton for being so supportive and honest with my work; without her these poems would have never become what they are. Thank you to Don Stap, who referred me to Terry and was willing to spend time working out an independent study to help with this thesis, and from whom I learned an immeasurable amount in class and in workshop. Also thanks to Martha Marinara, who took the time to direct my proposal and join my committee. I would love to personally thank everyone who has helped sculpt any of these poems in poetry workshops, but this little acknowledgement will have to suffice. A big thanks to Chris Wiewiora, who helped me grow as a poet over the past few years not only by critiquing much of my work with his signature brutal honesty, but through suggestion, direction, and friendship. Thanks to anyone who inspired any of these poems (for good or bad), to Erin Willie for liking my writing even when I didn't, to every poet I read over this process, to my family for making me their Poet Laureate, and especially thanks to my mom for inspiring these poems to be more hopeful than tragic.

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Introduction

Poetry is a cryptic, evasive entity. The *American Heritage Dictionary* has seven definitions for the word “poetry,” with the primary being “The art or work of a poet” (“poetry”). Equally nondescript, the *A.H.D.* defines a “poet” as “A writer of poems” in its primary definition (“poet”). The obvious end to this circular definition is the definition of the word “poem,” which the *A.H.D.* describes as “A verbal composition designed to convey experiences, ideas, or emotions in a vivid and imaginative way, characterized by the use of language chosen for its sound and suggestive power and by the use of literary techniques such as meter, metaphor, and rhyme” (“poem”). The last section of this definition seems to call into question the categorization of poetry if it lacks techniques like “meter, metaphor, and rhyme,” and neglects to distinguish what makes a poem separate from a short story or an essay if it is possible to consider the brief, modern fairy tale prose poems of Russell Edson or Milton’s epic tale of morality written in blank verse respectively as poems when included in a canon of literature that includes Shakespeare’s sonnets, Keats’s odes, Pound’s cantos, and all the other “poems” that come immediately to mind when trying to establish an example of what poetry looks like. In order to connect these poems under a common genre, ironically it may be necessary to consult a more subjective source; that being said, the great Dylan Thomas’s own definition of poetry is “...what makes me laugh or cry or yawn, what makes my toenails twinkle, what makes me want to do this or that or nothing” (Keillor). Thomas’s vague definition suggests a very specific answer: that poetry by definition might be indefinable simply as a medium of literature, that anything affecting can be poetry. If Thomas’s definition holds true, then it stands to reason that the Harry Potter series could very

well be considered poetry, or similarly that the film *Titanic*, Beethoven's Fifth, Andy Warhol's cans of soup, quarterback Steve Young's famous 49-yard touchdown run against the Minnesota Vikings, or even a supermarket employee's bagging job might all equally be poetry (consider the cliché "poetry in motion"). My purpose in writing this collection of "poems" is to examine what it means to put that vague, abstract notion of poetry into practice by approaching it from as many angles as I can and thereby manifest the creation of "poetic" discourse in text specifically.

If prose, free verse, classical form, and abstract structures can all compose poetry, it is necessary to examine exactly how it is that they do that. Robert Frost famously remarked in an interview that writing poetry in free verse is like playing tennis without a net (Simpson). Conversely, Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Galway Kinnell has argued that the conventions of poetry and poetic form can be not only unnecessary, but destructive to poetry at large (Kinnell, "An Interview"). Though it is impossible to consider either poet's opinion as more or less valid or true in an objective sense, the logical reason for the difference of opinion may be a product of the chronological progression of poetry in the scope of literary history. In the 1960s, American poetry began to move largely away from formal poetic conventions. Even renowned, highly influential poets like James Wright and W. S. Merwin who began their careers writing heavily in formal verse dropped poetic form altogether in favor of what Merwin calls "open form" (Merwin, "On Open Form"), or free verse. While Imagist poets like Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams had already been writing exclusively in free verse for decades by this point, this transition in poetry—started by the Beat movement of the 1950s—effectively removed formal poetry from prominence in American literature.

While formal poetry is by no means completely dead in contemporary poetry, a quick reading of nearly any recently printed literary magazine will show that today the preference of form is overwhelmingly free verse. In the same way that contemporary poets grew to feel that writing in conventional form and meter limits and gives unnecessary structure to poetry, I feel that writing exclusively in free verse is just as limiting when there is so much structure and balance to write about; as I learned from the poetry of Anne Sexton, James Merrill, and Richard Wilbur, the form of a poem should be able to reflect any content. In undertaking the task of completing an extensive collection of poems, I not only came to my own conclusion about the effects of various elements of form and classical poetic conventions, but hopefully will succeed in bringing readers insight into these effects. This collection stands as an experiment in writing poems in different ways, as well as an analysis of how various forms, rhyme schemes, meters, points of view, etc. change the experience and construction of a poem.

Like most young, inexperienced poets, I began writing poetry in the highly regulated and metrical forms shared by the nursery rhymes and Dr. Seuss books that I recalled from my childhood, and drew from their meters and rhyme schemes subconsciously. When I first read E.E. Cummings's "anyone lived in a pretty how town" and discovered that there are more ways to write poetry than by the strict, rigid structures I had grown accustomed to reading and writing, I immediately began to write poetry exclusively in abstract free verse. Five years later, I am reading him again and trying instead to imitate his sonnets, which often consist of variations on (but simultaneous adherence to) conventional structural components: iambic pentameter, rhyme, the octave-sestet progression, etc.

After closely reading poetry written by poets like Cummings, Anne Sexton, Donald Justice, and Mary Oliver, who implement not just various forms, but who experiment within those forms and use devices such as meter, allusion, irony, anaphora, and slant rhyme effectively, I began to consciously implement what I learned from my readings into my own poetry. In order to gain insight into how to write formal poetry and meter, what makes different poetic forms effective, what makes affecting free verse, and when each type of poetry is appropriate, over the course of my directed readings I read a considerable amount of poetry by a broad range of poets as well as selected prose about writing poetry. I read David Wojahn, who experiments regularly with the sonnet form, and E. E. Cummings, who typically wrote rather abstract sonnets when he chose to write in form; for examples of free verse, I read Billy Collins, Patricia Smith, E. E. Cummings, Tony Hoagland, and selected poems of essentially every poet on my list; for prose poetry, I read Russell Edson, Tomas Tranströmer, and Mary Oliver; and for general poetry in various forms, I studied Emily Dickinson, Dylan Thomas, Peter Everwine, and others. In addition to collections of poetry, I also read Mary Oliver's *A Poetry Handbook* to study the basic compositional elements of verse. To study more formal techniques, I read Oliver's *Rules for the Dance* as an examination of the fundamentals and theory of metrical verse, as well as Robert Pinsky's *The Sounds of Poetry*, a study of the importance of rhythm and sound in verse. Tony Hoagland's collection of essays entitled *Real Sofistikashun* was also very helpful in giving me insight into the methods of constructing effective poetry outside of the qualities of aesthetics and sound.

As for the title of this collection, I decided to stick with the working title I scribbled down at the outset of this thesis. The word "formality" implies a sort of rigid, methodical compliance

with a protocol, possibly even connotatively referring to obligation. The heart of this collection is a study of those effects in art, an examination of what happens to a poem when it adheres to “compliance” or, equally importantly, breaks from it. What happens when a reader anticipates an end rhyme or falls into the motions of meter? What happens when those patterns are interrupted or completely absent? The inspiration for the title came from one of my favorite songs, a composition by Miles Davis called “Boplicity.” Davis was no linguist, but his understanding of language was sufficient to invent a word that defined his innovation. The track comes from his album *Birth of the Cool*, aptly titled, as it was just that: the beginning of the entire sub-genre known as cool jazz. The *Oxford English Dictionary* states that the function of the –ity suffix is to “[form] nouns denoting quality or condition” (“–ity”). Davis applies this suffix to an already existing noun to emphasize that the track “denotes the quality” of bop, emphasizing that the mix of improvised and notated solos, combined with the incorporation of both orchestral and conventional jazz instrumentation, lays down a controlled, lax intensity that composes the basis of bop music. In the same way that “Boplicity” exists as an abstract concept, an overarching study of all that bop does, I use *Formality* as an abstraction encompassing various aspects of form.

The culmination of my research of the 30+ books on my directed readings list, along with the experience of compiling a collection of original poems unified by the ultimate goal of examining the nature of poetry at large, has brought me invaluable insight into an enigmatic art form. I believe this thesis successfully compiles a collection poems ranging in form, tone, and tense and will promote further growth and experimentation as I continue to make conscious efforts to expand the range and structure of my writing. With this goal in mind, the result of

Formality, I hope, will also give readers not only similar insight into the “requisite” composition of poetry, but a greater appreciation for, and understanding of, poetry at large.

Defined

1. Whittling

a.

whit·tle

VERB: tr.

1. To cut small bits or pare shavings from (a piece of wood)

I make it a point to whittle every week,
to look out onto the vast paved front lawn
of metropolitan living
and meet the sun there,
alone
with a pocket knife
from the collection I've been growing
since I was five or six.

There are no words in this whittling,
language is indecipherable,
impossible to read in the shavings
and too quick for comprehension in the
smooth strips of cutting.

In this whittling there is no knowing,
nothing read or built or found,

just a knife,

the anonymous cars passing by,

and the searching in this way
for whatever is beneath the next
layer of small bits or shavings
yet to be cut or pared.

b.

whit-tle

VERB: tr.

2. To reduce or eliminate gradually, as if by whittling with a knife

in the strip turn strip
of dulling blade
to thinning stick

that simple song
of mindless work
to radiator chorus

a back and forth
of violin bow
too involved

for thought
but repetitious
the knife reduces

more than wood
shaves through
the layers

of timber and skin
eliminates gradually
all the bark

around the self

2. remission is

a.

re·mis·sion

NOUN:

1. b. A period in which a former condition is returned to

not the sequel to a disaster
or Act II of the tragedy

not her left lung
or the hull of ribs where it used to be

not thirty years of accumulated sick days
or plastic-wrapped fruit baskets

not Linda's meat loaf
or Carol's buckeyes

not explanations
or the whole congregation's silence

not an excuse for more poetry
though maybe at least that

not the reversal of roles
or home five days early
or the Mayo Clinic just eight months ago
or the holistic doctor in New York
the insurance won't cover
or three years at best

it's not a return to an illness
but the return of a ghost

b.

re·mis·sion

NOUN:

3. a. *Medicine* Abatement or subsiding of the symptoms of a disease

more forgetting than healing

termites behind the paint

the killer's first death in a horror movie

that space in the back of the mind

tire pressure

starving orphans in Africa

flipping the mattress

fishing for sharks

cigarette smoke

no need for prayer

and mostly just waiting;

waiting and not knowing you are

Inverted Tanka

I would like to hang my self
up on a museum wall
and squint at it a
while, tilt my head sideways and
wonder what it means.

Leaving London

Flight 733, LGW to MCO at 9:30 am
on the 11th, and at 9:38 pm
on the 10th (Big Ben's time) I can feel
the very step upon which I left London.

Halfway across the Golden Jubilee Bridge
I can still hear the lone street performer's words
fluttering out of him and into the night like owls
perching on branches and soaring along the Thames:

It's gettin' dark, too dark to see...

The rain has subsided for now,
but water still seeps from my socks
and onto pavement with every step
toward Strand, Embankment Station.

Feels like I'm knockin' on heaven's door...

The symphony of Stratocaster and diaphragm
set to the slow splashing of waves
to support beam beneath the bridge
and my footfall metronome halts like a terrier

before the wall of car horns and city static,
as if I could just turn around
and it would still be waiting for me,
tail incessantly swaying, now at the chorus:

Knock, knock, knockin' on heaven's door...

Behind me the homeless woman
with most of her teeth
missing sits with a (nearly) empty cup,
warming herself between two blankets

soaked through with rain,

and (I'd like to think) savors
the half-sandwich I saved and gave her,
now one pound heavier though pence
still burden the pockets of my jacket.

Ahead of me is the west-bound Bakerloo
and room 7, bed 11 of the hostel where I'll
dry my socks beneath a hand dryer
if I can find one functional, convinced

nothing lovelier can remain of this city

as the great Eye of London gazes through air
so polluted it's presumed to take nine years
off the life expectancy of Londoners
and follows me in blue fluorescence,

fixed in an impossibly slow turn.

ash cinquain

what's left
after setting
the old self on fire but
to bury the ashes
 in the
 back yard

Metropolist

i.

furrowed brow

amber sky

ii.

empty room flat line of silence

iii.

yellow streetlamp

chloroplast shade

for a tree

iv.

gas station glow cauterizing night

v.

two notches in Orion's Belt

a single eye of Pisces

vi.

asphalt hands cupping yesterday's rain

vii.

dragging the sky for stars like sunken bones

viii.

two ants on my bathroom floor

one in a vacant web

seizuring

About Ducks

The taxidermied ducks forever poised in midflight—synthetic motion in escape from the perpetual hunter floating coyly behind the Amish rocking chair or the plush loveseat—Dad shot himself in the days before the stroke, when hunting was paramount to college funds or sufficient groceries for a family of six.

I can hear them from the kitchen; as he hangs them back onto the living room wall with his one good arm, he tells her that maybe he was whacko then and maybe he's better now, and she tells him not to be ridiculous, that he specifically told her she could remove them, though the more appropriate term would be "hide."

At some point a man has to realize that the variegated feathers of the blue winged teal just don't "go" with the chic olive green now perched on the living room walls; or that the nostalgia of the now dead mallard can only be shared with a Labrador named Buster—now nine years euthanized—a stored rifle, a rusting boat, and certainly not the mallard; or that for God's sakes, they're just ducks.

He stomps out as best as his 18-year-old limp can stomp and fires back some vague insult, only certain stock words of which are intelligible, and I'm left to wonder how he worked the word "fag" into a verbal exchange with his wife of over 40 years.

But we all know this argument isn't about ducks or unrequited tastes in interior design, it's not about simulating the thrill of the hunt or the beauty and serenity of nature; it's about the embers of authority that have been smoldering for nearly two decades, now cooling into ash, a pale but glowing island in an expanse of dust.

inversion at the Mayo Clinic

tonight her room
was a living machine,
a sustained organism

with EKG pulse
and piston breath.
tonight she rose

to greet me,
every muscle's contraction
a contortion

in the simple feat
of getting up,
and looked for all

the world like Moses
wielding her IV
stand like a staff

as she exodused
toward me, hunched
forward, her

epidural tube
trailing out of her
like an umbilical

chord. tonight i
felt her body go to
pieces in my hands

when i held
her, crumble into a heap
to be collected

and reassembled.
tonight her eyes left
two inverted islands

in tepid patches
on my t-shirt—
the same way mine

did to hers
when i was five
and discovered

the bee hive
in the trailer in our
neighbor's back yard.

tonight i kissed
her head where her hair
parted

like the Red Sea
and she glided seamlessly
back to her bed

like a white floral
ghost. tonight these bed
sheets like book sleeves

will hold a tragedy
between them, and tonight
i know i'll be

the only one
of us
leaving here

whole.

Almost Blue

—for Chet Baker, jazz trumpeter, composer, and vocalist

More times than I can count now I've
watched this footage of you
counted all the impossible lines
to time
you grew
eyes buried in the years
buried in time and dope jail
jazz and girls
(but mostly all the girls).
Every time now I've cried

cried for you and for
art so awful and wretched and true
cried for me and my pursuit of art
that pure, of anything that pure.

Out of fear this
strange

magic might run out, I stored away these views
hid them with a flashlight in my pillowcase.
There's a girl here and she's almost you,
almost, you croon, squinting into memory
almost
off-key;
almost.

I haven't written a line in weeks.

When the upright slides
hits the major seventh, and you
haunt *this almost touching, it'll almost do,*

I sing it with you for once.

Nothing happens. No tears.
No raised hairs. I play it again
desperately this time.

Almost me,
almost you,
almost blue

and nothing.

Like every time before, you hold
out *blue* for almost four bars
while the piano
 runs
diminishing
and I take you out
 from hiding.

Bloom

When we burned summer
days like matches and our beards
just sprouted in tufts and patches

and we skipped scabbed
apples across the pond that we gathered
from the grasses of my grandma's lawn,

we would watch the ripples grow out
like years on a tree and smoke
and sip from cans of sweet tea:

you always chained cigarettes
one by one while I puffed a pipe
until it was done.

I could always feel our conversation
shrivel into fall, but you were
always too adamant for me to stall

that customary dry
silence of knowing the fall
of our summer was the bloom of my going.

dark

naturally it is dark in my room
at two AM, and i,
of the midnight
neighborhood walk trailing
cigarillo smoke, am trying to trace

the four fan blades caught in their endless chase:
dogs on lengthless leashes
circling a tree,
susurrus of silence,
but not that i can see them anyway.

i take this moment of quiet to pray,
like i do every night
around this time
in spite of imminent
sleep, which usually interrupts somewhere

between the “please watch over us” prayers
and the “Your will be done.”
amnesia of
soul. again i forget
the Creeds and Jabez, the formalities

and diction, and allow my mind to ease
its way into wandering:
the football game
in the morning, a half-
etched poem, what happened after the gin

the other night, and how little like sin
that sin felt. but can't this
be another
way to pray, no words or
beads, eyes wide open
searching for ceiling.

dissolve

—*after e. e. cummings*

what i wouldn't give to fall
like

(a
le
af
)into dreamless

waking sleep to a television
lullaby
to shut out the lights and drop

the pen
to dig
myself
a hole

in someone
else's thoughts and curl up
inside
let forgetting myself wrap
its tentacles
around me and drown
in its ink

to accept the Eucharist
of
(l
one
l
iness)
and dream
the sitcom dream
count the channels
like rosary beads
as the hours

dis-
solve
on my tongue

double roundel

—after W. S. Merwin's "Half Roundel"

fishers of men
caught a thousand
per loaf, weighed feet
on the waves of
Galilee, drowned
Legion in swine spit
and i still spurned
the call to make
fishers of men.

each week i played
back creeds, swallowed
sermons whole, warmed
a seat beneath
the same steeple
and all my life
the call to make
fishers of men

has fallen on
fine ears, parcel
unopened on
my mind's doorstep.
but i wasn't
blessed to be prey
for a whale, so
the call to make
fishers of men,

after years of
Our Father, the
quick and the dead,
brings me to pray
just to be more
quick than dead, just
not to be a
fissure of men.

splitting villanelle

we started incomplete by Adam's splitting,
he was a rib short but still
a whole-hearted man

when he found her already sitting
in the cool shade of knowledge.
it was Adam's splitting

his lips for that banned
fruit that drove
a whole-hearted Man

into plucking leaves and fitting
them over shame, once nude but now naked.
it was Adam's splitting

the labor of the land
that enabled Cain the first death
of a whole-hearted man,

a death that sounded through ages, loud
as atoms splitting,
clear through myth and religion
and into a hole-hearted Man.

Cider

—after Clive Wilmer's "Chutney"

Apples filled the bottom
drawer of Mom's refrigerator,
unopened since their purchase,
do you remember?

How you came to me with an idea
for the plastic-bagful from
a super market shelf, still crisp with
synthetic ripeness.

We crushed and ground them
by hand in the kitchen,
pressed thin the flakes of skin,
bleeding green and russet.

A vast jar-full sealed by plastic,
left in the fridge two months for us
to find unfermented and add
a synthetic burn—

we drained the whole jar that night,
and with it the last five fingers of Dad's scotch
as old as I was and the waning days of
that youthful November.

You remember it, surely better
than I remember.

Elegy Suite

—for Nick Fusco

i. too great a speed

before the open casket
closed over my swollen face
bloated green made-up
it was swelling tongue and splintered
ribs dilated eyes inverted
knee
it was cracked
asphalt and twisted
metal broken
glass dented
tree
it was too great a speed for this earth
a challenge to Newton's First Law
and a body in flight defying friction
it was my words melting
into blood in my throat
each syllable dripping
from the corners of my
lips inaudible
as my breath became dust
it was the surprising weight of my head
in your hand
and seventy miles an hour over
a bridge on of all places
Cemetery Road

it was too great a speed
and nothing more

ii. shattered

you searched eyes that collected every star
behind your head
and he squeezed your wrist
with the vise of mortality
branded you with a bone
bracelet
carpal-hinged
always burning with a heat
i wish now that i
could know

you learned to speak in tongues
the language of the dying
while he drowned in night
too deep for resuscitation
in the Floridian October
cold as hell

you alone heard his last
groans and gargles
and were able to decipher them

you alone waved to him
from the shore of the living as his
sails shrank into the moonset

you alone can recall the exact
tilt of the car and trajectory
of the body in air

and you alone can receive this
dissonant useless jealousy

you of faint familiarity
you of midnight prayer
you with that searing breath
to hold for endless days
you who will never understand
how lucky you are
you who cracking
in that pane
of loss

could not have shattered
as much as i did

iii. no Lazarus

after that chorus of short
breaths pierced by flat
line harmonized in seconds
at a B sharp or maybe
an F flat
her lungs will become punching bags
she will gasp for words and drown
in air
and remember how to pray
like everyone who has lost
has prayed
when it will be too late for prayer

after four days
she will roll back the stone
herself
weeping as He wept
2000 years ago and find
the strips of linen
stench of death
and still no Lazarus

iv. in the country of the dead

there is currency of dust coins and rust
soil fractions of things
once living
and russet sheets rotted

the language flows
in less than monosyllable
those slurs and grunts and sobs
whose etymologies date back to Abel
spoken to the walls and bed
sheets and ceiling fans whose
response into dreams come nightmare in the waking
burn
absence like incense into the atmosphere
of cold sweat and breath

for the customary cold of longing
there is hearth of bone brick
and ash mortar warmth to make a bed before
in the country of the dead

deathday

every year
there's a certain grey
that resides here
plops itself down
and sleeps in the spaces
between branches

the tired red paint
on the tenant's pickup
has never looked
brighter as he rolls
through the maze
of paved paths

it's your deathday
again
the anniversary of your passing
your expiration date
your deathiversary
whatever

and again i'm squatting here
a month late
eye-to-eye with your granite
epitaph embossed with a tree
and for the fifth time
in as many years

i paint the portrait of your
'97 Chevy Lumina nestled
in a tree
tires slowing as your eyes swallow stars
and your chest ceases rising from a bed
of wet grass and glass dust

i display this great disasterpiece
in the cedar frame of imagination
i often confuse with memory
until i remember the burning in my bent knees
or the acupuncture of wind pricking through
the sweater i've worn too thin for November

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