

2022

Authoring Inclusion: The Sonnet's Shifting Form

Aloysius Devine
University of Central Florida



Part of the [Poetry Commons](#)

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/honorsthesis>

University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the UCF Theses and Dissertations at STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Undergraduate Theses by an authorized administrator of STARS. For more information, please contact STARS@ucf.edu.

Recommended Citation

Devine, Aloysius, "Authoring Inclusion: The Sonnet's Shifting Form" (2022). *Honors Undergraduate Theses*. 1224.

<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/honorsthesis/1224>

AUTHORING INCLUSION:
THE SONNET'S SHIFTING FORM

by

ALOYSIUS DEVINE (THEY/THEM)

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the Honors in the Major Program in Creative Writing
in the College of Arts and Humanities
and in The Burnett Honors College
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Spring Term
2022

Abstract

The history of canonical love poetry is inaccurate without the inclusion of minoritized groups. The relevance of the sonnet's incomplete history and its lingering impact on contemporary poetry are not examined enough within academia. The sonnet is taught through white-, straight-, and cisgender-centered lenses, contributing to the erasure of historically relevant sonneteers who do not align with these identities. This thesis celebrates the diverse history of sonneteering, while drawing attention to the remaining narrow-mindedness within the poetic community. This thesis dismantles traditional elements of the sonnet through varying form, subject matter, and stylistic choices.

When viewed in the physical form, these works push for inclusivity by appealing to a multitude of sensory factors. Whether the reader relates to the poems' contents themselves is irrelevant — these sonnets are made to be enjoyed by any person, whether it be through the oral feeling of the language, the abstract physical manipulation, the content, the formatting on the page, the rhythm, or any other factor.

By considering the intersections that allow readers to appreciate content, this thesis reframes how audiences are meant to enjoy poetry. The hyper-fixation within traditional sonnets on strict rhyme patterns and formatting choices, as well as the expectation for the reader to completely understand and relate to the emotional content, is inherently limiting to the art of writing. Poetry can, and should, be enjoyed on an individualized basis without harsh restrictions on the “proper” way to read the works. Through content and form-based reformation, the sonnet can prevail as a genre open to change and relevant to modern and historical minoritized communities.

For Alyx, Jax, and Mom — the three who brought me back to myself through poetry.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
The Historical Elasticity of the Sonnet.....	2
Inclusivity and the Contemporary Sonnet	4
Reclaiming the Sonnet.....	7
The Proposed Inclusivity of the Sonnet.....	10
Individualized Work	11
sonnets series 1: I would still be trans if I were born a man	13
I.....	14
II.	15
III.	16
IV.....	17
V.	18
sonnets series 2: pasted on the shower floor	19
a child’s rug	19
flashback.....	20
of ash and earth.....	21
my mother is a fly	22
safety song	23
sonnets series 3: grant me the joy, here, to love what you made with yourself	24
After Lorde	24
After Brooks	25
white woman’s tears	26
White Man’s Burden	27
sonnets series 4: intersected.....	28
i am clear and understood.....	28
don’t make me speak of sex	29
a love letter to your skin	30
now we hardly look the same	31
les lignes sont mélangées.....	32
the lines are fragmented (English translation).....	33
les lignes sont mélangées (traduction française)	34
References	35
Additional Works	37

Introduction

The sonnet has stretched and reformed numerous times since its conception. With a basis in canonical love poetry, the sonnet was, for generations, stringent in its formal rules and narrow array of subject matter. Classical sonneteers preserved a refined and private tone in their work through content centered around romantic love. The sonnet is traditionally recognized as a fourteen-line poem written with an established rhyme scheme. The style of this rhyme and the stanza length varies between the Petrarchan and the Shakespearean sonnets, as does the meter. For many writers, these rules preserved the dignity of the form. A boxed-in sonnet was exclusive and seductive. It was untouchable, in theory, but evolving in practice.

Despite strict, enforced parameters, the sonnet has demonstrated enormous flexibility within its rules. In Strand and Boland's *The Making of a Poem*, the authors classify the sonnet as "musical, brief, and memorable" (58), rather than through specific line length or meter. Contemporary poets recognize this loose categorization as a more honest interpretation of the sonnet's use. Modern renditions of the sonnet explore slight variations in form that provide room for growth within the genre. In "Holding the Thought of Love," Bernadette Mayer tweaks the sonnet with her unique formatting across the page and her addition of two extra lines (Mayer 22). Sandra Simonds incorporates modern allusion and dialogue in sonnets such as "Lincoln Logs" (Simonds 56). Mayer and Simonds are two of many contemporary sonneteers who seek to rework the sonnet to better fit modern writers.

Collective pushback against the classical narrative of what does and does not count as a sonnet has transformed the poetic perception of traditional genre. This movement toward the evolution of form does not dismiss the original guidelines for poetics, but rather seeks to acknowledge the inherent exclusivity behind strict form.

The poetry community becomes stronger when it remains open to transformation. In Daniel Sawyer's "Form, Time, and the 'First English Sonnet,'" Sawyer comments on how "the history of formal invention is partly a history of reinvention" (223). New approaches to form, technique, and innovation are what propel art forward, and this cannot be done from a place of exclusion, nor tradition. Through my thesis, I recraft the sonnet toward a place of further inclusivity and growth. I stretch the bounds of the sonnet and find means of adaptation and accessibility.

In this thesis, I expand upon poetic inclusivity. I perform the necessary analysis of pre-existing prejudice within the sonnet; I acknowledge the diverse voices that carried the sonnet before me, and I craft a thesis that continues to combat artistic exclusivity. Together, these pieces of history, affirmation, and criticism provide me with the necessary plane from which I advocate for continued diversity, inclusion, and change.

The Historical Elasticity of the Sonnet

Authors challenged the sonnet's traditional form well before contemporary poetry. Jordan Finkin theorizes on the parameters of the sonnet beyond those of Strand and Boland in his article "What Does It Mean to Write a Modern Jewish Sonnet?" Finkin categorizes the sonnet as a poem that is "short...simple...discursive...[and] susceptible to a poet's obsession" (Finkin 80-81). Finkin's definition becomes more expansive when he goes on to identify the importance of the modern sonnet, and how it has become "a genre, a set of expectations that the poet might conform to, rebel against or simply sidle along with for as long as necessary" (Finkin 84). The sonnet's rules are not a box that contemporary poets have to cram themselves into when they

write. Pre-contemporary poetics — those written prior to the 1920s — make it clear that the sonnet has always been more malleable than it seemed.

For much of its history, the sonnet was regarded as the epitome of love poetry. Most individual's familiarity with the sonnet is reserved to Shakespeare's Fair Youth Sonnets, which have long been regarded as romantic and divine. However, even Shakespeare was experimenting with the abstraction of the sonnet. Eszter Törék closely examines the shifting muse of Shakespeare's sonnets within her article "The Personae of the Muse in the Fair Youth Sonnets." In her article, Törék explores the ways in which a shifting muse without concrete description allows for the reader to implant their own feelings and definitions of beauty into the work (Törék 273). The abstract focus of Shakespeare's Fair Youth Sonnets is an early example of expansion of form. In his attention to multiple muses and varying tones, Shakespeare's sonnets push beyond the traditional romantic theme of the sonnet. He creates a space in which the reader can reform the sonnet's intention by choosing how they want to view the muse — whether it be romantic, platonic, or lustfully.

Prior to the American Civil War, Frederick Goddard Tuckerman was writing abstract sonnets. Zoë Pollak's "Sensuous Waste" delves into Tuckerman's unique use of subject within his written work. Tuckerman's bleak portrayals of death and demise within his sonnets act as a blatant rejection of the traditional form and themes. Rather than opening on peaceful scenery and closing with philosophical introspection, as was common among his peers, Tuckerman reversed the classical layout of the sonnet. He opened with his musings and closed on concrete descriptions of detritus and waste. Pollak remarks that "[Tuckerman's] formal poetics depart radically from those of his anglophone predecessors and contemporaries" (256). Tuckerman's

rejection of romantic subject matter within his sonnets is a clear example of pre-contemporary flexibility within the form of the sonnet.

While Tuckerman wrote about waste, Christina Rossetti wrote about non-romantic love. Rossetti's focus within the sonnet revolved around family and womanhood. In her poem "Sonnets are Full of Love," she muses on her close bond with her mother, writing "...so here now shall be / One sonnet more, a love sonnet, from me / To her whose heart is my heart's quiet home" (Rossetti, lines 2-4). Rossetti's form remains bound to the traditional rhyme and meter of the sonnet, yet the relationship she explores is entirely unfamiliar to much of the sonnet's history. Family is a subject that remains relatively untouched by the sonnet's domain. Rossetti provides her readers with an example of the soft vulnerability that comes with blending specified content and form. The depth that comes with utilizing the sonnet alongside the subject of family stretches the genre to encompass a larger breadth of meaning.

Inclusivity and the Contemporary Sonnet

Contemporary renditions of the sonnet are more inclined to openly oppose exclusivity than pre-contemporary work. While many pre-contemporary sonnets paved the way for shifting form and approaching new subject matter, it is contemporary poetry that has overtly broached the issue of inclusivity in poetics.

Before applying the concept of inclusivity to poetry, it is imperative to understand what inclusion really means. Bairbre Tiernan addresses the concept of "full inclusion," specifically in the field of education, within her article "Inclusion versus full inclusion." Tiernan writes, "full inclusion, can be understood to mean inclusion of all students, including those with complex needs" (Tiernan). With the replacement of the word "students" with "writers," "artists," or even

“people,” Tiernan’s definition raises the question of what it means to meet the “complex needs” of a group. In any setting, meeting needs involves intersectional equity and accessibility. Making a genre of poetry inclusive, then, means making it a functional form that writers of color, disabled people, LGBTQ+ individuals, minoritized ethnic groups, and religious minorities can reshape and utilize to tell their stories in accurate and honest ways. Inclusion goes well beyond simply giving diverse voices a seat at the table; it requires the adaptation of tools to fit diverse needs.

This reshaping of poetry is seen among minoritized poets in the modern day. Free form and prose have become a playground on which minoritized writers make their own rules. In her book *Postcolonial Love Poems*, author Natalie Diaz frequently abandons the pretext of traditional form in order to convey the urgency of her work. Diaz’s lack of adherence to classical form does nothing to diminish her poetic skill, which radiates through her language, metaphor, and repetitive rhythm. In “The First Water Is the Body,” Diaz writes, “A river is a body of water. It has a foot, an elbow, a mouth. It runs. It lies in a bed. It can make you good. It has a head. It remembers everything” (Diaz, 50). Using a prose layout that is rich with personification and repetition, Diaz ties together an extended metaphor based in Indigenous belief. Not only does she tackle the issues of colonization, translation, and climatic disaster, but Diaz also expresses a deeper determination to take up space as an Indigenous person through her writing. This is heightened by her incorporation of a technically advanced poem that dominates seven full pages in her book.

Jillian Weise flirts with form just enough in *The Amputee’s Guide to Sex*. In “The Old Questions,” Weise borrows the Shakespearean sonnet’s couplets but breaks the rhyme. She ends her poem after fifteen lines rather than fourteen, and the single-standing final line reads as

intentional. She is reclaiming her power through this slight diversion from form. Weise puts a spin on the contemporary sonnet in an exceptional way. The subject of “The Old Questions” cannot go unnoted, as it revolves around intimacy and romance—the basis of many classic sonnets—while simultaneously contrasting the romantic tone with notes of discomfort and ableism. Weise is reshaping a form, not to accommodate her work, but to enhance it, and she is setting a precedent for those who follow about the ways in which rules can bend.

Julia Koets’s *Pine* explores sonnet-esque subject matter through poems that dance around the traditional 14-line style. Throughout the entirety of her book, Koets brushes against classical forms without ever fully adhering to the rules of the genres. Her poems “Moon Wedding” and “Moon Prayer” (Koets 27, 51), which end after 13 lines, traverse Strand’s and Boland’s parameters of sound, significance, and brevity. Both poems muse upon the ugly realities of loving in secret and in shame. In these ways, Koets is able to reference the sonnet without ever committing entirely. She is discussing the genre without ever letting “sonnet” pass through the lips of her work.

The sonnet’s form is pushed in an even more surprising way within Jos Charles’s *feeld*. In her poems, Charles utilizes specific and intentional diction, transforming the reader’s process of understanding the written word. In “V.,” a fourteen-line poem, she writes “a tran is a thyng e u leeve / wen u scape / a strem / the grls putting their saltie secks in the air / a tran puts so much inn 2 the aire” (Charles 5). While utilizing language and diction in a unique way, Charles exhibits strong poetic devices, such as rhyme, rhythm, and formatting, within this and many other pieces. “V.” is demonstrative of how adapted form can change the reader’s experience with a work. Regardless of the reader’s comprehension of Charles’s poetic themes, they can admire

her poems for the way they read, look, and feel, as well as the ways in which these poems nod at traditional forms without fully adapting to them.

The shape that poetics takes in history is one molded by marginalized people. With a heavy hand in silencing minoritized poets, the evolution of poetic form is wrongly attributed to those in places of privilege. Without the continued advocacy by marginalized people to be heard, poetic form would become stunted, only evolving in the most minute ways. The marginalized voice is one that is nuanced and intentional, and when intent is prioritized in writing, change in form naturally follows.

Reclaiming the Sonnet

The origins of the sonnet can be traced back to thirteenth-century Italy (Finkin 79). While the sonnet's rise in popularity is frequently attributed to English renditions during the fifteenth century (Sawyer 193), sonnets were being written in Hebrew well before they were popularized by the British (Finkin 79). The sonnet is seldom tied to its true origins. Jewish, Black, and queer voices brought the sonnet to where it is today. In contemporary sonnets, it is clear that marginalized poets continue to push the poetic genre further from exclusivity. True inclusivity of a form encompasses the acknowledgment of its creators. In the case of the sonnet, those who have contributed to and revolutionized its change are seldom given the credit that they are due.

When Finkin describes the sonnet's Hebrew origins within "What Does It mean to Write a Modern Jewish Sonnet?," he acknowledges the ever-present tension between "tradition and innovation" (Finkin 80). In doing so, Finkin poses the idea that tradition itself is responsible for the transformation of forms, like the sonnet, by minority groups. Finkin writes, "It is not by chance that much of the critical attention paid to African American sonneteering is devoted to

sonnets of social critique...the vocabulary of that critique is an engagement...with tradition” (Finkin 85). Here, Finkin references another community’s interaction with and development of the sonnet. During and before the Harlem Renaissance, the sonnet was shaped in the hands of the Black community, taking on new form through previously smothered voices.

Lisa L. Moore’s “The Sonnet Is Not a Luxury” describes the imperative contributions to the modern sonnet that were made by Black poets such as Audre Lorde, Gwendolyn Brooks, Langston Hughes, and Claude McKay. These authors’ significant additions to poetry came as a result of them challenging tradition. It was not only form that Lorde pushed against in her writing, but also the profile for traditional sonneteers. At a point in time when Black poets, especially Black women, struggled to attain recognition, Lorde was publishing her first sonnet while still in high school. Moore remarks on how “Lorde’s first published poem takes [readers] inside the Black interior of the modern sonnet, its revision, rejection, and revival” (Moore 249).

Black poets brought the sonnet back into the spotlight as a completely made-over form. As a result of the poetry written by the Black community during the early-to-late 1900s, the sonnet was able to return, “distinctively shaped for contemporary poetics as a feminist, queer, and African American form, as an expression of a ‘black interior’” (Moore 255). The work of poets like Audre Lorde and Gwendolyn Brooks is important, not only for the representation it offers to the Black community, but for the pertinent intersection of Black, queer womanhood that so much of their writing touches on. Lorde and Brooks, as both activists and artists, created representation for a community that, even in the modern day, lacks authentic attention in media.

Modern Black sonneteers continue the admirable work preceded by Lorde and Brooks. Jericho Brown’s Pulitzer Prize winning book, *The Tradition*, tackles complex social issues, particularly those around Black experiences with racism and violence in the United States. *The*

Tradition features a variety of beautifully composed works, several of which hover at and around fourteen lines. Brown's "Duplex" series of poems (Brown 18, 27, 49, 68, and 72), which are all exactly fourteen lines, utilize couplets and distinct repetition that contribute to a unique rhythmic pattern within the poems. Without having to rely on structured rhyme or meter, Brown's adherence to elements of the sonnet translates in a powerful display of emotion. His use of similar, but not identical, repetition within his first and final lines gently resembles techniques used in Audre Lorde's 1951 sonnet "Spring."

Modern sonnets, such as Terrance Hayes's *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin*, break form through the content that they discuss. Rather than lingering on love and desire, Hayes's book delves into racism, social unrest, and hidden history. He takes inspiration from iconic Black sonneteers like Wanda Coleman, who created the surreal form of the American sonnet with inspiration from "the creative potential of blues and jazz" (Ryan 415). Coleman's impact on modern poetry resonates through Hayes's homage to her form within *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin*. Similarly, Brooke's impact can be seen in Hayes's achievement of new form, such as that within "The Golden Shovel." The golden shovel form, invented by Hayes, directly recognizes and pays respect to famous sonneteer Gwendolyn Brooks and her well-loved poem "We Real Cool."

Full inclusivity of the modern sonnet must include accessibility in addition to genuine recognition. Meg Day's "Deafening the Sonnet" addresses the historical exclusivity of the sonnet's form and how that exclusivity pertains more to public perception of rhyme than to the genre itself. Much of the sonnet's changing form has included the rejection of the true, consistent rhyme that is frequently seen in classical interpretations of the sonnet. In modern renditions of the sonnet, rhyme is often the first traditional attribute that is cast aside. Bernadette Mayer and

Sandra Simonds utilize rhyme sparingly within their collections of sonnets, leading the reader to question how necessary it is to the form as a whole.

Meg Day's understanding of what an accessible sonnet means, one that involves "...casting off the internalized poetic ableism of phonocentrism and pursuing accommodation through...the felt sense of [rhyme]" is far more attainable than it initially seemed (Day 201). If the physicality of the sonnet, whether how it feels in the mouth or how it *makes* the reader feel because of its subject matter, is prioritized alongside the sonnet's true history in minoritized groups, then an inclusive sonnet form could be just within sight.

The Proposed Inclusivity of the Sonnet

My goal is to suggest the possibility of the sonnet's growth into an inclusive form, both in poetic and academic spheres. As a White, able-bodied person who does not represent the entirety of the queer, trans, and disabled communities, I am by no means in a position to assert the acceptance of an oppressive form into all minority cultures. I simply present the idea that stringent, rigid forms such as the sonnet hold the latent space for reclamation and reform.

In Carole Maso's speech at Brown University in 1994, she asked the audience a poignant question: "Why do we adopt the conventions of, for lack of a better word, the oppressor?" (Maso 158). Maso concludes that reclaiming forms created by oppressive figures frees the minoritized communities through the act of refusal (Maso 159). While I agree with Maso's justification for reclamation, I would like to take it one step further in reference to the sonnet. By taking the sonnet back into our mouths, pens, and artwork, we can acknowledge that it has been there all along. It is not an adoption of the oppressor's convention when the form of the sonnet is one that was born through marginalized authors' works. Recrafting the sonnet to be inclusive and

accessible is to accept that oppressive forms are capable of adaptation. To do so is to preserve the contributions of the known and unknown Black, Indigenous, disabled, LGBTQ+, and Jewish poets that gave us the evolved sonnet that we see today.

The contemporary sonnet could shift so far from its roots that it would no longer fall within the genre of the sonnet at all. While this is an understandable concern, I feel strongly that artistic intent should drive poetic categorization. The loose outline for the sonnet that Strand and Boland provide is highly subjective. To one author, a “musical” poem might encompass strict rhyme, while to another poet, it might be constituted by soft consonance alone. “Brief” could mean less than one page, less than fifteen lines, or less than a minute’s read to different poets. The truest definition of a sonnet should be the poet’s intention. An author should reserve the right to classify their own work based on their perception of the end product. The acceptance of the poetry community as a whole will always be unattainable. The influence of a poem on a genre is up to those who read, love, and craft the work.

Individualized Work

I challenge the modern exclusivity of a form that has always belonged to minoritized people, despite the lack of acknowledgment for them in its change. In my thesis, I achieve this through inversion of the sonnet’s rules, incorporation of the sonnet’s physicality, and development of the sonnet’s subject matter beyond love.

I creatively demonstrated the flexibility of the sonnet’s rules by writing sonnets that explore form, rhyme, and structure. I did this by creating sonnets that mimic the form of pivotal sonneteers — such as Raymond Queneau, Audre Lorde, and Gwendolyn Brooks, utilizing rhyming variants such as eye and slant rhymes, challenging the perceived formality of the sonnet

with informal and conversational tones, and abstracting the physical forms of the sonnets with collage, layering of lines, and illustration. I extended the sonnet's subject matter beyond the traditional basis of love to include concepts such as gender, shame, sexuality, mental illness, grief, race, and intersectionality, as well as the poetic exploration of the sonnet's diverse history.

I stretched the rules of the sonnet and found means of adaptation through the recognition of minoritized history, the embracing of accessibility, and the celebration of a form changed for the better by minoritized people. By building subject matter around my own identities in emotional disability, queerness, and transness, the goal of my thesis is to reclaim a part of the sonnet for myself and my communities. By exploring subject matter outside of my own experience, such as racial discrimination and physical ability, I hope to draw attention to the communities who pioneered the sonnet from the start.

sonnets series 1: I would still be trans if I were born a man

After Raymond Queneau

If I am worth anything later, I am worth something now. For wheat is wheat, even if people think it is grass in the beginning. – Vincent Van Gogh

Instructions for Assembly:

1. Align sonnets I. through V. in a stack of increasing numerical order (i.e. I. on top, II. second, etc.)
2. Staple the 5 stacked pages together on the marked “X” symbols.
3. Cut the top 4 stacked pages along the dotted lines, carefully maintaining alignment.
4. Move the cut strips to organize the poems in the reader’s desired order.

X I.

I know the weight of the locker room



With plushiest thighs and tapered breasts

The heat that blossomed, blistered, brewed

Flooded my face as I got dressed

Their tempered bodies, soft and pink

Were strange, bright jewels before my eyes

And in my chest, a bubbling sink

Of secrets meshed with guilty lies

In my bed, under the sheets

With savored answers still unsown

The same sweet dream lived on repeat

Of love that didn't end alone

I thought, within my sleep-warm lair

The greatest joy is to be shared.

X

X II.

I know the hate of my body's bloom

With ill-fit clothes and wrapped-up chest

I spun myself a thick cocoon

That let me hide from what was next

The cups I filled, turned black by ink

Were emptied in the muddy tide

And in the swamp, I wished to scream

But parted lips let death inside

In childhood, I felt like wheat

With purpose I could come to hone

Then, through the years, I heard them speak

Of grass that lied just to be known

Inside the silk, I shuddered, scared

I wish one day to take to air.

X

X III.

I know the straight-edged sword I drew

Real face disguised, forever masked

I tamed the beasts, bright red and nude

That clung to me with final breaths

The trees, made thick with rich sap stink

And shedding with the season's pine

Broke open at the evening's brink

To show the moon, clear in the sky

All at once, it came to me

A fact I knew within my bones

The destiny I couldn't cheat

Of names that I had far outgrown

In the light, I said a prayer

Please let me live past this despair.

X

X IV.

I know the gait of rejected truth

The vagrant strides that can arrest

All remnants of my sought-out proof

Replace the good with the grotesque

The gallows, hung like opal rings

Against the sun, began to shine

I thought of every unsaid thing

And yet my face still was not mine

I saw the road ahead twist east

An unseen fork, toward which I roamed

I felt the swell of hopeful ease

Of future I could now transform

The wax, it drips; my lips, they swear

I'll save myself from wings I wear.

X

X

V.

I know the frame of a lover's roof

With mossy stone and ivy tress

The chimney's exhaled, smoky plume

That dwindles into twilit rest

The pangs to which I used to cling

Live on in older, tired times

Preserved in amber, gentle things

Like saplings, whorls, and dragonflies

My house no longer cries and bleeds

The home's great weeping is consoled

On mornings, I pull up the weeds

Of fear and anger and control

When it comes, it strikes me square

This love I feel is unimpaired.

X

sonnets series 2: pasted on the shower floor

a child's rug

The bike race is coming.
From the corner of the block
I can hear scraping pedals, breaths thrumming —
Synchronized as the string of streetlights flickering on in the dark.

My mind is humming
For a place to rest my eyes.
Through the bodies, tall as trees, there is a blanket of grass.
If I let it, the lawn would swaddle me tightly in the low light.

The rearing wheels, drumming up the asphalt's spine,
Pin me on a swath of carpet, cradled in the evening sky.

Last year, a cat darted from a cracked-open porch.
When the racers pulled their brakes, it stood as still as library air.
The scruff caught in the chains, the fur separated,
And I wished to hold the skinned thing — to lie with it in the road.



flashback

wake me from this patchwork nightmare
where the
 present
meets the
 shore
every time I try to swim, love
 you will try to drown me more.

when I lock my door in evening
try to
 bathe
before the
 dark
you creep in below the water
 tear me open like a shark.



of ash and earth

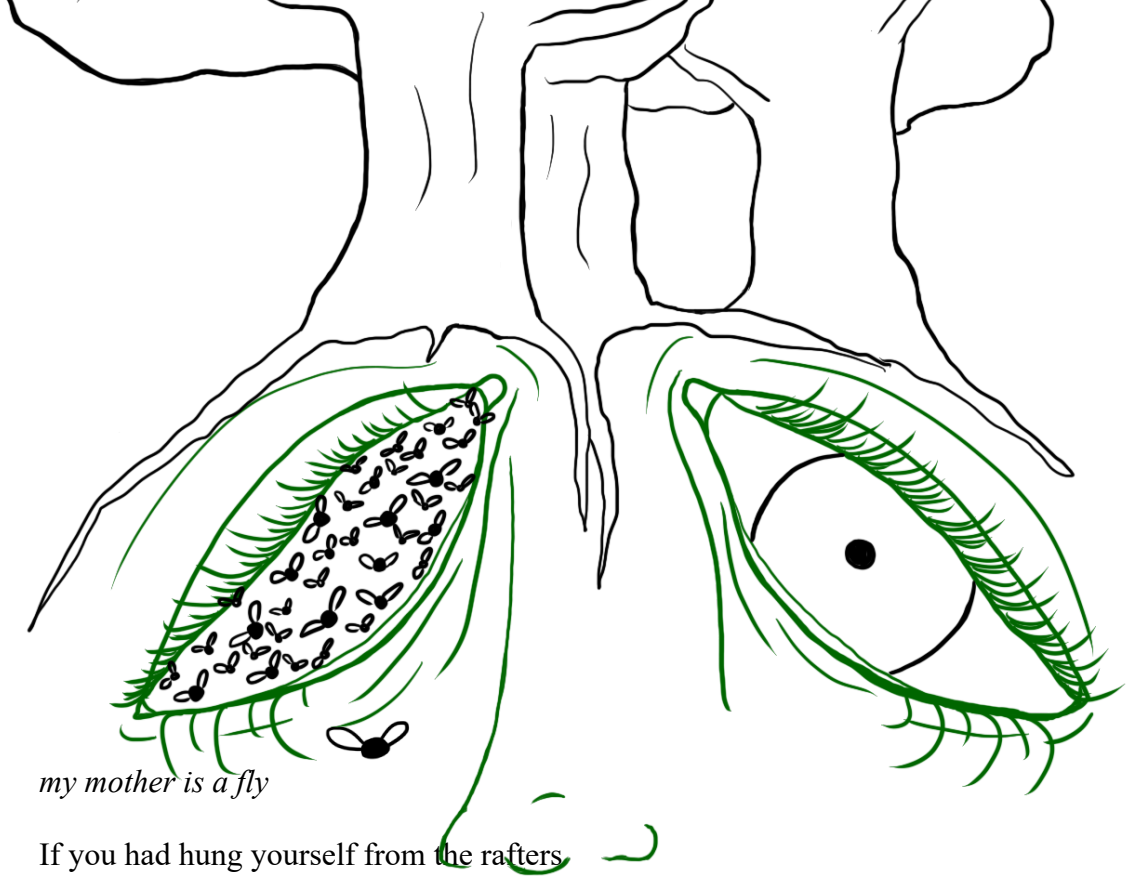
I can't sleep with the lights off.
Almost twenty-one, and night is still a growling bear.

As a child, I covered my mother while she spoke:
"You can't wrap around comfort to keep out change.
A cast is just an imprint of a moment—
Even rocks erode. Even mountains cave."

My jaw rattled with the aftershock of these words,
Threatening to break my teeth with every swallow.
Holding onto control suddenly felt like clinging to a tilted edge—
I could feel myself slipping.

Now, at each night's end, I am Vesuvius,
My mouth a cloud of ash I can't contain.
The corners of my room blur into Pompeii,
Enveloping me in a darkness of my own making.





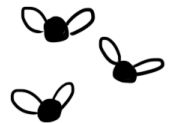
my mother is a fly

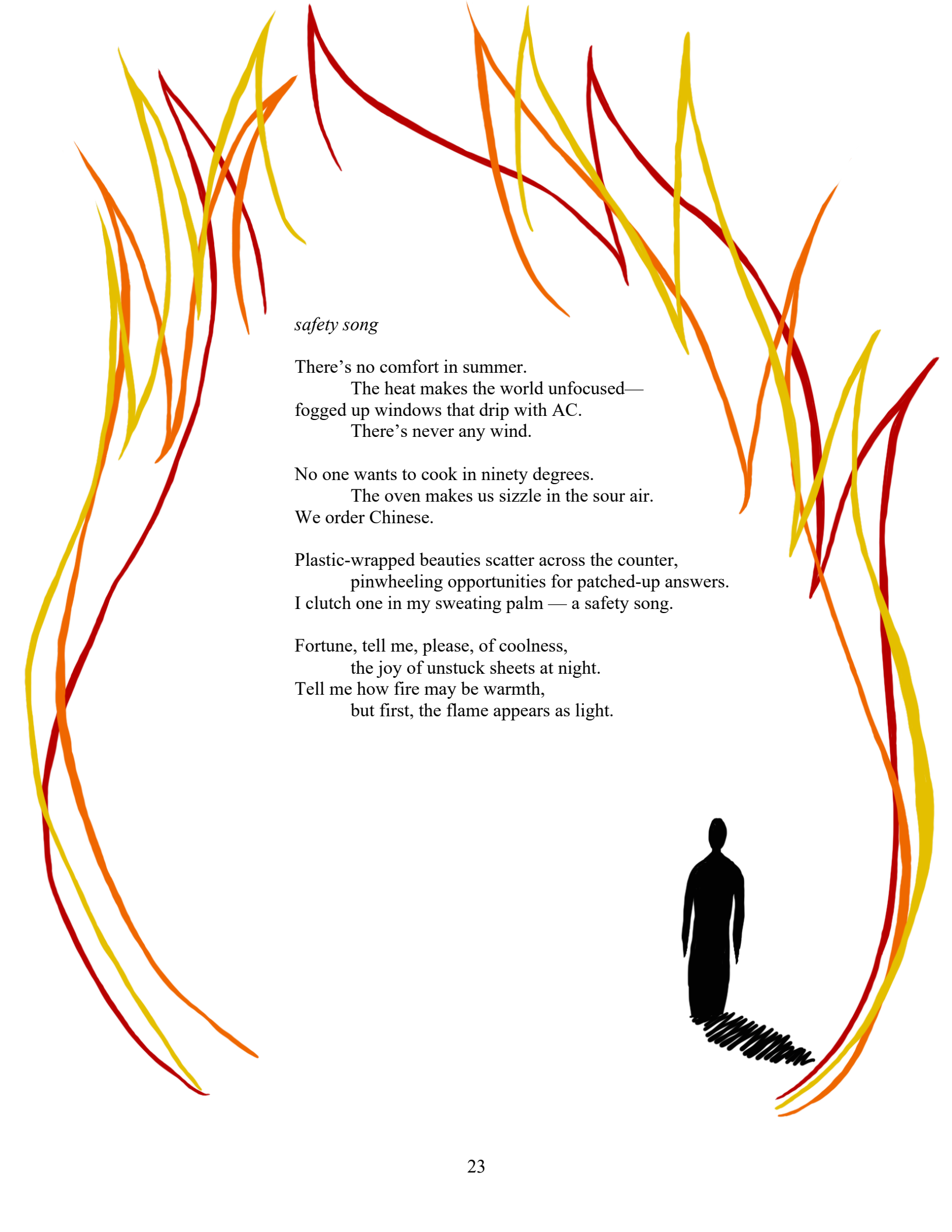
If you had hung yourself from the rafters,
I would see you in orchards
I would never look up
never pick the low-hanging fruit, for fear of seeing you there.

Instead, it is in a quiet, black room, in the shadows of twisted sheets
that I cannot look
your eyes, wide and feral, search for me in the sickly stench
of your own fermented form.

Buzzing fills me
I can see your thimble of heat nestled in a halved pit
your legs splaying, your pulse racing
keep your eyes turned from the light, please mother—

I am so afraid of your tiny being, put to rest
in the carcass of a rotten pear.





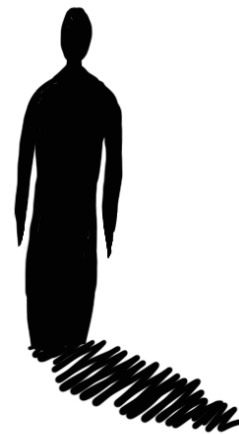
safety song

There's no comfort in summer.
The heat makes the world unfocused—
fogged up windows that drip with AC.
There's never any wind.

No one wants to cook in ninety degrees.
The oven makes us sizzle in the sour air.
We order Chinese.

Plastic-wrapped beauties scatter across the counter,
pinwheeling opportunities for patched-up answers.
I clutch one in my sweating palm — a safety song.

Fortune, tell me, please, of coolness,
the joy of unstuck sheets at night.
Tell me how fire may be warmth,
but first, the flame appears as light.



sonnets series 3: grant me the joy, here, to love what you made with yourself

After Lorde

I am afraid of spring; there is no peace here. – Audre Lorde, “Spring” (1951)

I am transfixed by spring; I have no place here.
The frame of your youth is trailing me.
A path your words paved (no thorns, no weeds),
But my hands shake still, consumed by green fear
If I could only hold myself stronger
And think of you near, with a voice, rising water
That falls from the sky, I might persist longer
And love what I find. I first, was a daughter

With a mother, like you. And when she fell to rest
I forgot about truth. In your words, in your verse
I found something from her – whether sadness or mirth
Of that, I’m unsure. When the sun sets, far west
I unleash every tear. I don’t know you at sixteen,
I have no place here; I am transfixed by “Spring.”

After Brooks

Oh mother, mother, where is happiness? -Gwendolyn Brooks "the sonnet-ballad" (1949)

Oh maker, oh maker, what is truth?
I left my peace in the hands
Of a woman now gone. My youth
Is waning while her words come undone: bands
Of her pain twisting up past my thighs, lands
I'll admit are unknown to my eyes. Oh, I pray
From my pen, I might, too, come to stand
As a maker myself, holding matters that stay
With the world like a thorn. Pulled out, bloody and bland,
To be worn on my neck like a treasure in time.

On a street in Bronzeville, she started to wend
Through the pillared injustice that riddled her mind
She looked to the world and to Heavens. She knew,
"Oh maker, oh maker, I have found truth."

white woman's tears

crying does no good for a drought
pain in earth, pain in wound
even fresh water burns our lips,
salted by tears that melt the floes away.
when the rain comes, and no seeds can break the frozen earth,
we bow our heads and stake down the ends of our words:
“at least we tried.”

At least we tried what?
Where was our kindness toward sobbing
when it was pleas growing from hot dirt,
when we were too busy with sugared drinks
to see the blood leeching through our doorways?

Let me tell you how sympathy is empathy's cruel twin
and how her woes are teaspoon scoops next to glaciers.

White Man's Burden
(Scathingly) After Rudyard Kipling

In the dark of our room, our bodies glow red.
The blood we've shed leaves imprints on the walls,
in the earth, against our faces.
The pomegranates we split open on our linen
won't fade with a generation,
won't come clean in the wash.

This language is heavy with a past
we cast upon ourselves.

When we tilled the Carolinas' soil,
it didn't come up crimson from ink.
The ground spit out memories of the blood it had drank from.
The ones we thought we wouldn't dig back up
weren't laid down with ease.
Even dirt can't dampen betrayal when it screams that loud.

sonnets series 4: intersected

i am clear and understood

This is a fragment of my truth,
Held far from bodies in the night.
A piece, too pink with youth
To be examined in the light.

When your hands come
Down around me, stroking softly,
I'm a lamb. And the thrum
Of your two fingers speaks

More than I ever can. If you
Saw me as a boy, here, I would
Feel just as unsure. But your view
Pierces the darkness. I am clear and understood.

Your embrace erases woman, man, and any other name;
Let the light pour in the window to illuminate our frames.

don't make me speak of sex

Let the light pour in the window to illuminate our frames.
Silhouetted in the doorway, we can find no space for shame

When I hold you to my lips, say
Please don't make me speak of sex,
You smile into my shoulder, sway
And hold me to your chest.

When I tell you how I love
You, fingers tracing up your spine,
You remind me that, together, we are doves,
Our wings entwined.

When my nightmares invade morning,
All you know to do is soothe—
Hands encompassed, gently warming,
This is a fragment of my truth.

a love letter to your skin

This is a fragment of my truth—
Love letter written to your skin
To rum water, moon-lit blue,
The earth's last sigh before night's end.

Bundled up in early morning
You, umber branch, wrapped in the sky.
A russet birthmark, proudly worn
With the soft hair across your thighs.

Let me say, low so not to wake you,
From the well within my chest,
You're the meadow, I'm the fawn who
Found a home in you at last.

You will take up space that's yours, full of light, body aflame.
Let the light pour in the window to illuminate our frames.

now we hardly look the same

Let the light pour in the window to illuminate our frames;
You are someone I once knew, but now we hardly look the same.

If you hold my face to yours and
Trace the lines you do not know,
You can feel, in your raw hands
The changes you will someday show.

The beasts that hide behind my eyes,
With bodies you can't yet see, swarm
From my mouth. A hoard of flies
Settles on you soundlessly. Warm

Blood that falls from you, here
Spilling. Your mind, ripe for them to chew.
Close your eyes, I'll hold you, dear —
This is a fragment of my truth.

les lignes sont mélangées

This is a fragment of my truth
De toi, ceux que j'ai accepté.
Tu m'as donné ces mots ici, mais toutes
Les lignes sont mélangées.

Dans mes rêves, nous parlons comme
No time's been lost between us. There
I can keep you in my arms, safe from
the grasp of death's dark snare.

In my mind, your voice is mute,
La mienne n'est pas très forte ou claire
Mes phrases d'amour, tu n'entends
Pas. Je n'sais pas c'que je peux faire.

Je vois encore ta silhouette. Seule, je ne peux que bramer;
Let the light pour in the window to illuminate our frames.

the lines are fragmented (English translation)

This is a fragment of my truth
From you, these things I have accepted
You gave me the words, here, but you've
Made all the lines fragmented.

In my dreams we can speak some.
No time's been lost between us. There
I can keep you in my arms, safe from
The grasp of death's dark snare.

In my mind, your voice is mute,
Mine isn't strong or clear to you.
You can't hear the words I croon
I don't know what to do.

I still see your silhouette. Alone, all I can do is bray;
Let the light pour in the window to illuminate our frames.

les lignes sont mélangées (traduction française)

C'est une pièce de ma vérité
De toi, ceux que j'ai accepté.
Tu m'as donné ces mots ici
Mais toutes les lignes sont mélangées.

Dans mes rêves, nous parlons comme
Nous n'avons pas perdu de temps.
Je peux te garder dans mes bras,
Des mains de la Faucheuse.

Dans mon esprit, tu es muette—
Ma voix n'est pas très forte ou claire.
Mes phrases d'amour, tu n'entends pas,
Je n'sais pas c'que je peux faire.

Je vois encore ta silhouette. Seule, je ne peux que bramer;
Laisse la lumière entrer par la fenêtre pour nous éclairer.

References

- Brown, Jericho. *The Tradition*. Copper Canyon Press, Fort Townsend, 2019.
- Charles, Jos. *feeld*. Milkweed Editions, Minneapolis, 2018.
- Day, Meg. “Deafing the Sonnet.” *The Hopkins Review*, vol. 14, no. 2, Spring 2021, pp. 196-201, *Project Muse*, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/803591>
- Diaz, Natalie. *Postcolonial Love Poem*. Graywolf Press, Minneapolis, 2020.
- Finkin, Jordan. “What Does It Mean to Write a Modern Jewish Sonnet?: Some Challenges of Yiddish and Hebrew.” *Journal of Jewish Identities*, vol. 7, no. 1, January 2014, pp. 79-107, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jji.2014.0001>.
- Hayes, Terrance. *American Sonnets For My Past and Future Assassin*. Penguin Books, New York City, 2018.
- Hayes, Terrance. “The Golden Shovel.” *Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/55678/the-golden-shovel>.
- Koets, Julia. *Pine*. Southern Indiana Review Press, Evansville, 2021.
- Maso, Carole. *Break Every Rule*. Counterpoint, Washington, D.C., 2000.
- Mayer, Bernadette. *Sonnets*. Tender Buttons Press, New York City, 2014.
- Moore, Lisa L. “The Sonnet Is Not a Luxury.” *The Hopkins Review*, vol. 14, no. 2, Spring 2021, pp. 248-255, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/803561>.
- Pollak, Zoë. “Sensuous Waste in the Sonnets of Frederick Goddard Tuckerman.” *The Hopkins Review*, vol. 14, no. 2, Spring 2021, pp. 256 – 261, <https://doi.org/10.1353/thr.2021.0036>.
- Rossetti, Christina. “Sonnets are full of love.” *Genius*, <https://genius.com/Christina-rossetti-sonnets-are-full-of-love-annotated>. Accessed 2 November 2021.

- Ryan, Jennifer. "The Transformative Poetics of Wanda Coleman's 'American Sonnets.'" *African American Review*, vol. 48, no. 4, Winter 2015, pp. 415-429, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24589775>.
- Sawyer, Daniel. "Form, Time, and the 'First English Sonnet.'" *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 56, no. 3, 2021, pp. 193-224, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/797457>.
- Simonds, Sarah. *The Sonnets*. Bloof Books, New Jersey, 2014.
- Strand, Mark, and Eavan Boland. *The Making of a Poem*. W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2000.
- Török, Eszter. "The Personae of the Muse in the Fair Youth Sonnets." *The AnaChronisT*, vol. 18, no. 2, July 2018, pp. 260 – 274, *Gale Academic OneFile*, ink.gale.com/apps/doc/A603761442/AONE?u=orla57816&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=dfd49ef4.
- Tiernan, Bairbre. "Inclusion versus full inclusion: implications for progressing inclusive education." *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 10.1080/08856257.2021.1961197.
- Weise, Jillian. *The Amputee's Guide to Sex*. Soft Skull Press, New York City, 2017.

Additional Works

Additional sources, not specifically cited, which inspire aspects of this work.

Ted Berrigan, *The Sonnets*
Elizabeth Bishop, "One Art"
Gwendolyn Brooks, "Gay Chaps at the Bar"
Gwendolyn Brooks, "We Real Cool"
Meg Day, "Sound Consequence"
Natalie Diaz, "My Brother at 3 A.M."
John Donne, "La Corona"
Rudyard Kipling, "The White Man's Burden"
Laura Kolb, "Stella's Voice: Echo and Collaboration in *Astrophil and Stella* 57 and 58"
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, "The Children's Hour"
Audre Lorde, "Spring"
Jasmine Mans, *Black Girl, Call Home*
Sharon Olds, *The Father*
Raymond Queneau, *Cent mille milliards de poèmes*
Rainer M. Rilke "Number 8"
William Shakespeare, "Sonnet 30"
William Shakespeare, "Sonnet 104"
Philip Sidney, "Astrophel and Stella"
Diane Seuss, *frank: sonnets*
Crystal M. Yingling, "The Possibility Spectrum: Increasing Diversity & Inclusion in Arts Organizations"