

1. nonfictional fiction — autofiction

a. about poetry

i've been thinking about writing poetry recently.

is that okay? i've never been good at it. i'm either too descriptive or too loose with my words. i tend to mull words and phrases over and over in my head for hours days months until i feel like they're good enough to even be written down. typed, pasted onto some document that i'm going to ignore for eight years. i was thirteen then, and lonely. i had no friends, i was surrounded by people, i had no service on my phone, etcetera.

i would look out the window even when i knew the windows were too dirty to see outside. outside it would be raining; cold, and dark. overcast. the clouds were grey. everything seemed pretty grey to me, to be honest. i downloaded three songs onto my tiny hand-me-down phone with the sliding keyboard. i played them for nine hours straight, looping them until the songs were flavoured with the stale classroom air, dyed the brutish white-yellow of the mass-produced fluorescent lights, stained with the dirty water splashed from passing cars as i waited for the bus home.

the poetry unit in grade eight posed a threat to me. i understood them viscerally: i could taste the emotions, the clicking sensation of the words. i like that you could have rules, and then break them, and then make new rules, and ultimately abandon all of them in the end. it seemed fun. i couldn't do it, though. i was bad at writing, at interpreting. i could barely look my teachers in the eye as i apologized. sorry for running away (literally) (physically?) from you. sorry for being too scared to speak. sorry i rubbed and scraped at my fingers until they were raw and dripping with blood. sorry for leaving bloody handprints on your desks and chairs. i was afraid i'd get it on the papers and books.

my ninth grade french teacher told us about samurai death poems. she said it so fast, all at once, that i thought i misheard. i popped an earbud out and looked at her quizzically as she wrote the pattern on the board. "don't make me go on a tangent," she began saying, but it was too late.

death poem? i felt as if i was dead already. a posthumous poem would be pretty cool.

"it's like a haiku, but there's more."

i wrote so many 短歌 [tanka] poems. i repurposed the format until it was worse than appropriation. bastardization. i filled them with the play-emotions i thought i was feeling. poured out my metaphorical heart. i wanted to feel things that i couldn't.

love? i wanted to write about love as much as anyone did. (as much as everyone does.)

"did you have any regrets?"

what, you want me to tell the truth? i regret meeting you. i regret moving to the new house. i regret having been born. is that what you wanted to hear? i'm sorry. i wrote myself silly trying to conjure up an image of myself that wasn't a cowardly disaster. i wrote letters to her and to you, to myself in the past-past, to a dead me that lay in the rubble of a classroom no one went to.

it was all pretend. i wish i had the courage to tell you that i wanted out. was that an option? by the time you came to that conclusion yourself, i was so far gone that any touch rendered me to bone fragments. be careful with those, they're sharp.

it's okay, though. i may not truly exist anymore, but sometimes the words draw a picture of me that kind of look like a person if you squint.

oh, i almost forgot to say: i dreamed of you last night. my body was dead, and my mind was driving a car with you in it as you tried to find the murderer. it was a perpetual night-time.

it was raining, and your hair was wet. i used to carry an umbrella for you. i wrote your essays, gave you a little pink bag of chocolate on february fourteenth. i drew little happy faces and animals on the corners of your assignments and sat across from you on the bus home, everyday.

okay, i'm lying. is this poetic enough? i'm still pretending. maybe i'm chasing after these fleeting memories because they were fear and suffering, a mess that i try to avoid everyday. maybe they were the closest i was ever going to get to love. is that it? they were close to hatred. i swore i never liked you, i never hated you—or maybe i always did. i always hated you, hated the way you dismissed your truths, the way i was just a stain or maybe an experiment, a disposable doll. i hated myself for being passive, for believing the words people used on me. words have power, too, did you know?

you were never good at writing. there are things you've said i'll never forget, but most i have forgotten long before you uttered them. look, i'm trying my best here. do you think i can be a poet? you made fun of creative writing last time you called.

yeah, speaking of calling: i heard your voice and felt something for the first time in a while. it's terrible, how your senses try to trick you. it's been how many years? too many, and yet not enough. that was a predictable line, but you know how tropes are. have to have them in there. pepper them in. have you read anything recently?

(i'm so used to writing to this "you" that i'm starting to think it's me.)

in the beginning we were the same, right? you hated that. i didn't hate it as much, but i rarely cared about anything, and i didn't really know you, either.

i just knew people thought we looked alike. why would people want two people who look alike to date? i didn't get it. if we were twins, why would we fall in love? i was your shadow as much as you were mine. it was a joke.

i mean... this is a joke too. you think i care about poetry? about you?

there's nothing left here
no chrysanthemums, no love
it's 5AM, just
me alone, spitting out words
dreaming of nonexistence

dreaming of freeform
poetry—i aspire
to manipulate
phrases, prose, emotions, and
the ever-elusive you

me?

b. about writing

i write. but for what reason, and with what words? do these sentences make sense to you? are they recognizable because they are the common vernacular? is it because i have assimilated the faux-corporate speak that trickles into the university system into my own mind? when i first learned how to speak (in shanghainese), how did i form sentences? perhaps baby-speak is the only language i know.

吾想妈妈了 吾想回去

[i miss my mama, i want to go home]

i read that some immigrants have difficulty expressing intimate emotions in english. i think i have problems expressing affection (amongst other feelings) in any language. can't you see my actions? my two hands, the drawings, the midnight notes, the desserts in the fridge? i'm bad at writing. i have nothing to offer. my thoughts are repetitive. coping methods? sharing my observations? letting you know about my life? that's not (entirely) true. i'm still sad, i'm still not quite fully put-back-together, and i have unresolved problems from before i could even write.

if i couldn't write, then i couldn't verbalize. reading and writing are tied integrally to my self: as much as drawing, actually. i learned to draw and read and write simultaneously. i drew the fantasies i wished were real, i wrote down what i felt and thought (i thought in coherent sentences. or perhaps the only ones worth writing down were in fully-formed sentences); i read and digested quickly the words of others, adopting phrases, borrowing and never giving back - isms, stealing big words and metaphors.

in order not to be seen as someone stupid or someone taken by surprise, i developed a habit of thinking in full sentences. these were

ready to be written down, typed, exported from my mind straight onto a document and handed in. i began writing with the confidence of someone who knew what the ending would be—or perhaps i was so sure i could Make It to an ending, carve one out so forcefully that i never considered not starting the sentence. if anyone asked me a question, i could shit out an answer that sounded convincing. i was trying to convince myself.

over the years, i became obsessed with things like commas (adding more to put pauses, forcing you to think like me), brackets (i have more thoughts, more tangents. here's another:), flow, and rhythm.

my writing is me as much as my art is me, and if it isn't good, or objectively interesting enough for you to look at, then i fall apart. conceptually. what am i if not a pile of shit-metaphors and extended allegories, a crumbling high-rise full of mock-parables, a writhing mass of braindead jelly, a single traumatized little kid, a broken pencil?

i met someone new today. she's already a writer. what can i say to that? "i envy you," maybe, "oh, that's cool," perhaps. i said first that i wanted to do an MFA, and then she said "nice! i also want to," and i felt inadequate. not because of her, but because immediately i began to shrink away. i know i'm nothing special, but i've always wanted to be. the attention that i didn't have as a child: i want it all now! she said to me that Art is good too, because i have another avenue of self-expression. i laughed: "yeah, i guess!"

i've read lots of other people's writing in the last 3-and-counting years of university. i've seen people wield great symbols that they hold close to their hearts, using their home for their artwork. i've seen them talk about deer, monsters, car crashes, death, lovely evenings from the roof, sweet wine, bodies, menstruation, their boyfriends, their villas, posters and not posters, death, the digital

self, the rocks this land rose from, old books about dragons, a stash of stickers, a character (or two), perceived mental illness in upper-middle class caucasians, loneliness, death. i have (again) two rather small hands, and i am not ambidextrous, so i can only tell you one story at a time, but my printing is quite messy i'm sorry i am stalling for time i don't have

anything of value. what can i write about? my art and my words are linked, and they reflect me insofar as i am willing to divulge or remember. or craft. i'm fake, my words are fake, my art is fake and to be real would be to lose if not everything, a great deal of what i've worked hard for. and it isn't anything Big, either. i've simply worked hard to be recognized as a normal person who has nothing wrong with *her*; a working throat and functioning mind, a neurotypical gender-conforming Good Student.

none of that is true, and none of that matters.

i'm sorry, there's still words lodged up in here, and i have to get them out before i sleep. something hurts, and i don't know if it's purely psychosomatic or maybe it's Real Legitimate Heartbreak, and i've been nursing feeding indulging it for the last 6 years or so.

perhaps the real coping method is to write it out, over and over again, until i truly feel like killing myself. i gave a wanderer five dollars because he kept standing there, calling out to me repeatedly, waving his hands and pointing. i only have five dollars, i'm sorry, please don't hurt me.

i keep thinking about something i read on the plane:

“【他】常常操心·因此会有一颗很疲软的心·无力·冰冷” .

[He worries often, and thus has a weak heart; powerless, ice cold...”]

as straightforward as that sounds, i've always believed that with more pain, stress, and pressure, you'd become harder, and the reinforcements around your hear would be stronger. nothing can hurt you if you've grown accustomed to it, right? but i suppose the truth is that the more you worry and the more you get hurt, the weaker the skin is, and the scar tissue renders that part of you 废物 [wastage]. i'm weak, maybe more so than ever.

speaking of thoughts, here's another: there is no inherent value in existing. i'm trying hard to believe that there is, but it seems impossible. everyday i face my computer: To Work is to Prove You Exist. to be productive is to have value. if you produce good work then you are good. to exist is to take up space and resources. you were loved at birth, but after that, love comes conditionally. be a good daughter and you will be praised. write a good paper and you will receive an A and a backhanded compliment. be a fucking doormat and maybe she'll keep you around as her closest confidant, best friend, an easy fuck.

i exist, and i am here, and i am making stuff, but who wants to see it?

who cares?

... about me, or about whether anyone wants to see it? am i making things for others? do i care what others say about me? if i cared anymore, would i be here? fuck, whatever. i'm tired. maybe i'll write something good next time.

2. poetry — chronological sets of tanka spanning six years, six months, and twenty-six days

a. about you and i

we, two of a kind;
stupid mismatched pair, but still
we dream the same dream
the borders of ourselves blur:
i am you, and you are me

you're a nobody
a somebody, a maybe
once pre-existing
concept i conjured up to
fill the space of a body

there's nothing left here
no chrysanthemums, no love
it's 5AM, just
me alone, spitting out words
dreaming of nonexistence

dreaming of freeform
poetry—i aspire
to manipulate
phrases, prose, emotions, and
the ever-elusive you

b. about my failure

right now, it's almost
five AM, negative two
degrees Celsius.
i count syllables on my
fingers, waiting for the sun.

flowers, summer, warmth,
some hazy floating concepts
that mean nothing now.
i've become accustomed to
everything bitter and bland

the unknown does not
scare me, as it scares others
i'm only afraid
of my own stupidity
of the known, but forgotten

one more for the road
i'm sticking and pasting this
inarticulate
fantasy poetry all
full of shit and fancy words

unrelieved tension
sits high on my shoulders, stuck
trying to wiggle
it out, rising crashing waves
ennui, loneliness, pushing

c. about nonsense

[are you listening?
all i hear is a swallow
steady, steadying

]

the day after i forget
what and why and where and if
there is, or isn't
a possibility, but
i write poems to reject

[open the window
but keep the blinds shut, curtains
closed and the lights off

]

watching from afar
an outsider's point of view
like a fishing boat
lost at sea, under the stars
wandering till we find home

i'm not scared of the
dark heavy emptiness that
extends beyond my
knowledge, experience, eyes
that can pierce through lonely nights

d. these are not poems.

*this is really weird
what the fuck am i doing
i should really stop
i have lost track of the time
and i am also hungry*

i drank some vodka
it tasted really nasty
can't get used to that
but i think that's the point, though.
if you're used to it, you're fucked.

quiet solitude
or cold hollow loneliness
what's the difference?
any qualified people
out there willing to tell me?

being a poet
sounds nice. like a dream, almost
i'd love to use words
like they served me, with passion
plus faith, and above all, love

i've got a problem
i seem to enjoy suffering
whether mine or not.
my stomach hurts. that's good, right?
maybe this is atonement

everyday is shit
amazing i'm still alive
i thought i'd have died
long ago, at the peak of
youth, preventing potential

no seriously
my guts hurt. they fucking suck
why am i conscious
i'd rather dream endlessly
with limitless appetites

these must be enough
i can't break free from the mold
without limits, what
am i doing, exactly?
if I follow the syllable count, its tanka
poetry

(but is it really?
have I truly followed it?
are my haiku good?)

without this structure, without someone
telling me to
(shut up)
how do i know if this is real poetry?

let me try again.

it is storytime
the day breaks and words begin
their meandering
plunging into the earth, through
the clouds and past the ocean

