Perennial: An Undergraduate Thesis in Poetry

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A Lee Honors College Thesis:

—Perennial—

A collection of poems
by
Austin Wines
Reclamation of a Matriarchy

Into my lap
a seed falls for two hundred years and
cries me.

I became the salve
between mortar, legacy
and pestle, destiny.

Swallow it,
  blood from your own mouth,
  a pill of stone,
  berries smashed into the dirt.

Say your mother’s names:

Stacy Wines
  Stacy McCarty
Mary McCarty,
  Mary & Ruth Walker
Genevieve-Electa Smith
  Walker,
  Kitchen…

All names are anchored in the abyss of another.
The roots and veins that sew your feet to the same earth forever.

Burrow into the word mother.

Wet dirt of her voice stuck under your fingernails.
digging for a name like bones,
name like the purple fruit
hidden at the heart of a convoluted vine.

Do I eat it? This wild name?
Genesis and Chance

I.
Sometimes I am more deer than person:
I walk through the woods, I see movement in camouflage,
I freeze,
they laugh,
I stare, my red heart bursts, you could be shot
My heart bursts again
I’m bleeding, I burst, I run away. Don’t come back.

Does anybody care what I look like in a field? Does a person in a black cloak ruin a landscape?
The throbbing space between the stars, a bruise.
A cold lake in November,
black coffee, black squirrels, my eyes.
In the right light
anyone can look like a darkness.

II.
I sit on the edge of a collapsing concrete foundation staring at the lake,
a stubborn slab: all angles, all unforgiving.
The lake laps at it, don’t touch me.
The foundation slips forward,
the lake whispers what it knows,
The foundation sinks lower,
the foundation kisses the lake and knows it is wrong,
and the lake swallows it.
The foundation loves on the lake’s terms
very slowly, and then forever.

III.
Two snowy-eyed deer collide in a field, their hearts burst.
Two jittering specks blown across a sunlit cloud of goldenrod,
the first neon subtleties of fireflies.
Two hundred flickers of the moon
and a speckled child is born,
weak legged and drowsy;
it shivers in its mothers slime.

This is the coincidence of consciousness,
The man running toward me is fate.
The fawn Drinks the wet air for the first time.
   A mother feels what she knows
   bleed into the dirt.
   We were almost in love.

IV.

Sometimes I need my knowing to condense on my body and harden,
crust on my skin like dirt,
crust on my skin like something to scrub
roll down my body in heavy drops,
   swirl to the drain
   it bubbles, it’s mud, it clogs.

Sometime, eventually
   because everybody is very busy
It gets pulled up again, by a plumber this time
   in clumps of hair, flecks of rust.
Pull my stomach up my throat, what do you see in there?
What if you keep pulling, hook something else,
   is there anything new in there? is anything left?

   Is anything ever, until we find something new?
A person’s body slides out,
wads of yellow paper, moss, spools of unfinished sentences
   unraveling to the ground.
   He clips the thread.
   He keeps pulling.
Inflorescence

*the process of flowering.*

I am not content.
An essence in the wind
a glint of sun among the goldenrod.

Like a rock, I want to stay
immovable, non-negotiable, unmistakable.

My memory is the last of an echo,
the typewriter with fading ink,
the omitted punctuation of memoirs,
undated photographs,
bodies in motion, bodies decontextualized,
the golden air that cameras won’t capture.

My body:

oarless hull.
Little boy inside me,
trembling, emasculated.

There’s a woman in my dreams always lighting candles for me
They melt down, a man clips the wick.

*Pray while you can.*

Somewhere in an unspoiled world
I walk through fields, dripping in purple sunlight
I am called a name somewhere between Stacy and Peter,
Michael and Mary,
neither a shadow nor light,
love nor pain.

Little boy again, forest exploring, soap-star, damsel,
on a mission to rescue my husband,
examining the ancient carvings of insects
in the soft under-bark.

Clinging to the rinds
of trees are the shells of cicadas.

How do we explain to our children that it’s just a carcass?
Moles

after Richard Siken

When you walk to the bathroom you will look into the eyes of someone who has felt pain.

Through the green parks,
alone in the creaking woods, down rows
of velvet pews, stadium bleachers, the peopled counter of a café, uptown, sitting quietly on the last bus,
someone who knows:

the likelihood of blood,
the taste of carpet burns,
someone entering who shouldn’t, the “what if?”
the bad man in a disguise, the bad man who drives too slow down the street,
the wolf in the nightgown,
the bad man pretending to be just a wolf in a nightgown.

Just like the stories,
just like they said he would, the pencil sketch on the news,
a snapped twig beyond the tree line, the person you’ve never seen before, the person you know, he takes something from you,
before you could comprehend that you have something to give.

This is a hole. I say it like it happens smoothly.

Can things like love and poetry fill anything up?
Drip, drip, collect, its fuller now—
the echo, deeper now.
It’s dripping:
it fills up, it pours over. Can it?

You thrust cupped hands under leaking pipes,
it’s you vs. the soil, you vs. the sun, you vs. the well.

Can you drink a well dry? Ask yourself:
A waterless well is just a pit. A cavity for rot and sediment,
a hole in the ground, rusty metal pumps,
thirst,
the nightmares you wake up from and don’t remember, the nightmares you wake up from and do, fear collects with sweat on your lips, trembling memory:
a place where water used to be, something someone used to need,
a lung you stand on until it won’t breathe again,
collapses silently,
where dogs get trapped,
and boys fall

where their bodies, forgotten
their souls echo on limestone
their teeth break on rocks and coins
eating the wishes thrown down by drunks, children, yearning throats of the downtrodden,
we reach with cupped hands, wish for more than water.
Are you at the bottom of a hole?

Well you put yourself there.

Rock by rock the night is built,
walls surrender to a hole of dove-gray sky,
a sky that has too much to listen for to hear you.

What can we do with a hole like that?

Fill it in?

Bury myself in bed for three lightless days,
bury my feet in dirt to imitate permanence,
sink every pen in a swamp, the
unsure earth swallows them from my memory,
bury my fingernails relentlessly
inside of you,
to find water, bones or hide?

Breath inside a casket, black water at the bottom of a well,
smoke held in your chest
until there’s nothing left expel.
When We Move Like Queens and Rebels

Every time you refuse my hand in public, yellow noise of sweaty bars, air like licked hands anticipating tequila, at the supermarket where mother’s eyes catch you like an innocent man in police search-lights, our eyes catch back like a deer suddenly finding a vocabulary for headlights, and children ask questions like “why didn’t it move?” and “where’s it’s family?” and “is it still alive?” “does he even love you?”

Or is it twenty-twelve again, when the world sat on your chest like a bead of cold air, same color as your skin at night, smoking on the balcony, same color as the leather seats of my Park Avenue. A gay man murdered, beaten like a plum to a prune and back into a real man again, blackened and blued and bleached and thrown like heavy bag into the dumpster.

Our inside world where we know the likelihood of fists twisting our eyes into big, blind, black sapphires, two seconds too long of eye contact in the men’s room, limp wrist, wrong body in wrong clothes, wrong number, wrong guy. Calling you N, the name of a dead boy, a language I hear— isn’t mine to use. Our inside world that lingers like stale smoke and damp heat between our late-summer bodies, just a thought pooling up in your eyes.

What’s a thought to a word? What’s a word to flesh? Flesh to bone? What is bone at the feet of a mob? I wear boots to the club so I can kick in the faces of men like the door to a place where we can dance together without being shitfaced. But we’re both mortal, and faggots. Your skin glistening like an onyx crown. My manhood flowing like a silk robe under party lights. The simple sin of needing somebody.

Let’s kill each other while we have the chance.
Cardinal

Moonflowers budding and spreading
In the azure dusk
Blades of grass whispering
Your body sleeping

Bones like wind chimes, humid,
hollow bamboo, or a nervous muffler
Bones louder than cans
Dragged relentlessly
Behind the wedding limo.

I don’t know if god has consciousness—

Light without the switch
Smoke where there is no fire.
The empty body of everyone’s mother
Eventually
Lying in front of you.

If I saw your body I don’t know if I’d kiss it.
I’ve been known to try and overturn caskets
Your skin no longer holds the light
Your skin is just art, no function
—dusty and pasted back together.

Not the milky splash of skipped stones
The ripples we crochet from our swimming
Our whole bodies stitched like doilies
Baby oil and iodine.

There’s blood across the yard
The flight pattern of a dying bird
Reduced to two dimensions.
Like photographs of women laughing.

Soon, my Labrador
As gently as you wash the tender fontanelle of an infant’s head
Carries a cardinal between its jaws.
So eager to show me the beautiful thing.
**Untitled**

What if you’re the snake around my neck?
What if I’m the snake charmer?
   I struggle, I choke,
   I push, you tighten,
   I sing, you sleep.

*All love is contextual*

Come to the temple
   Kneel at my feet
   Drink the wine.

   We speak in codes of smoke passed between our mouths.
   My tongue commands your blood to rise.

   I know the textures of your body
   Like my own name in brail.

Every way I say it is wrong
   You keep splitting my tongue with your teeth,
   and speak two languages you can’t translate

*What if I’m the snake?*

Put a dove in a cage and it sings
   low and lonely.
   Put two doves in a cage
   and pretend their cries are love songs.

*There is no love without flight.*

Salt of the earth, be the desperate wanderer,
Breath like blood and raw gums.
   Air like cum
   and the muggy skin of overripe peach.

   We rubbed holes in my sheets with our turning.

No, I’m not the snake.
   I am the medicine man
   Sucking out the poison
Of course, it's going to hurt, but it will keep us alive.

Reading over your sleeping body
  Part christening,
  part exorcism,
  part death prayer.

I peel back the sticky rind of your wounds
  like film negatives of family you’re done crying for.

    Take a shot of tequila,
    bite my shoulder.

Peel and bite,
  slurp the juice,
  grapefruit love

    My pulp between your teeth
    My teeth between your teeth

I’m carving my memories into your bones
  But they’re healing too quickly.

Lies roll off your face in place of tears
  I swallow them like crumbs
  Like my heart is starving

Haggard love
  Emaciated memory

    Bleed and run.

He always runs.

I keep saying—he doesn’t know any better.

    He doesn’t know any better than to run into the woods
    straight into the mouths of wolves.
Father,

Lift off the lift chair
and shoot brown woodchucks
off the deck past my bedtime
and let me watch. Bruised boy blue,
wipe your black eyes, chase
your whiskey with swallows of lake water,
from Goguac
and dye your beard black.

Call the camper a cocksucker when the tires are flat
and the mosquitos kiss with the singe
and the stars on their side.
Man of army men and summer browned skin,
don’t shoot your father when he hits your mother
hang him
with your belt when you leave it
looped around your waist.

Unbraid your veins from IV’s
and dig from the dusty flesh
your fossilized spine. Carve
an oar from the bone
and paddle backwards. Teach me how
to shoot machines in the woods,
not animals, dryers that died full
of clothes still damp inside them,
warm refrigerators and
immovable lawn mowers. But Dad,
I can’t shoot my own dog.

Hug my mother when you make her cry
Store the wedding china
together “handle with care.”
Broken down bodies creak as they
crystalize. Native chief,
where are your feathers?
Lies.
Paint the house of colors tan,
Tuck your tie-dyed
behind the tree line and tell me
where you think you came from.

Don’t trust
The electric respiration
whispering women lullabying you alive.
Unplug yourself from the wall
and whither your way home.
Snow Covered

The snow lay clean and silent
freezing peace muffles any noise
from dogs, tires, children and chickadees,
screaming,
even music, heartbeats
it’s just us,
\textit{let\ s not leave tracks.}

There are dogs in the woods
named God and Fear,
a Man has them leashed
and is hunting us now \textit{run.}

Our legs break down in a Barry grove,
our hands fold into our hands
curl into my hair,
a brunette nest
where songbirds take flight
and croon in whistled words
songs of truth no one hears,
just us.

Hot lipped asteroids
burn up in the atmosphere
of your neck.
A shower of glimmers
wide blue eyes only see.
We find a cabin, we pull the blinds, we light a fire
and hide the flame.
It’s too bright for them.

Now this is Spring inside us,
muddy ground shows deep tracks,
where we rolled, trembling.
We fear nothing we can face
we face nothing worse than night.

Come lay with me until morning.
Warm your face to the sun.
Stretch, breathe, \textit{stay.}
This is Truth,
it’s growing greener.
Astrology of Longing

We lie as two yolks enveloping each other.
   Two suns competing for air
   above the landscape
   longing to be longed for,
   painted, photographed.

To be gazed upon by lovers,
   and mother’s and sons singing of our setting,
   bare tips of trees begging.

   All this,
   and still we yearn,

to be worshipped like a coherent, comprehensible god,
smaller people
mapping their lives by our burning,
studied by scholars and poets

naming every ephemeral hue.
Signs of Feeling Everywhere
At least eight trans or gender non-conforming people have been murdered in the first three months of 2018. Many more will be killed or lost to suicide.

This street,
this bed,
like every altar,
necessitates death.

We, so weak and fond of our symbols
make meaning of feeling and
abandon it like a drowning man will kick off his boots.
weight we cannot survive.

An old zippo with initials scratched into it
the ash tray filling and unfilling.
petals wilted across white bedsheets,
dandelions pressed into thick books.

To make meaning I press
Ink to paper,
blade to meat,
teeth & fruit.

How easily skin can tear
like Bible pages,
or a wet map,

books like plums rotting,
heavy with soured, old, feeling,
burst

and suddenly, ink everywhere.

Ink like blood and spit
filling the cracks of your teeth
flowing through the fractures of the pavement,
ink in your veins.

We fall into these bodies and their orbits
orbit of moth to flame,
moth to blue electricity
variations of an end,
sleep: the constant argument.

And if God can still bear to watch, they will be bored,
knowing the words before they’re sung,
To create such a world and still,
    the same story over and over,
    the same characters,
    the same killings,
    always the killing.

Never the hydrangeas changing color
    the thick spined hollyhocks,
    always mistaking them for a weed,
    always someone separating a weed from flowers.

The listeners among us
    will write their names
Christa
Viccky
Tonya
Celine
Phylicia
Zakaria
Amia
Sasha

Scratched into the margins,
bleeding through the pages.
Sugar Water

Palms holding the red pack of cigarettes
Same palms rolling dough
Cut the snake in half
Same palms
Humming birds

Last words of love and morphine
Last echo of consciousness rattling out
Not like a singe
But a wheeze
The sound your lover snoring
As you fall into your own.
Last pulse in your fingertips

Scabbed arms colored you
Blue and deep red
Not like a person
but the shadow of one
in an impressionist’s landscape.

Impressionism is like seeing energy
What is tree, from town, from sea,
Is truly indigo to violet, blue, teal, shades of colors
Suddenly black is white and everything is connected

You were a house with a garden, little pool of water
Long red barn and green apples
Birds pressed into the sky.

The needle in my heel digging for a splinter
As if everything is just cloth and stuffing
And can be mended,
As if I’m the very stitch.