It is not difficult for me to imagine a person who believes the process of completing an honors thesis in poetry to be an easy one, a lighthearted affair that carries little intellectual weight. Upon completing this collection of poems, it is my understanding that, as opposed to academic disciplines in which one may dissociate themselves from the work they do, art does not so easily allow for a lifestyle that affords such reprieve from one’s own intellectual task. Poets take their work home with them and everywhere else—and everything is part of our work. In first conceptualizing this project, I had no idea what a transformative task I was undertaking.

When I first arrived at Western Michigan University to study creative writing I had already quite pompously identified as a writer. It was more than just an activity to engage in, I had very seriously conceptualized it as a part of my identity. In my initial years, I partook in every workshop I could enroll in, where I first began to truly learn to push myself. I was hungry for the art. As I matured into my collegiate experience and my education diversified, I found less and less time to write. The vacuum created in my self-conceptualization during the months that I was not reading nor writing poetry was more destabilizing than I even knew. In my least prolific years as an undergraduate writer I felt least like myself. If I was not a writer, what was I?

I always wrote poetry, but I couldn’t bring myself to write a poem. I would scratch images into small notepads I keep nearby, onto envelopes and receipts, in the notes of my iPhone, recorded while driving, or inked into the margins of my favorite books of poems. But I would never sit down and write a formal poem—just fragments. It wasn’t until I was properly challenged to create poems did I once again move beyond the unrefined images I produced and quickly forgot. As a writer, the honors college thesis served quite opportunely as a challenge, a
challenge of my very being to make decisions every day that fostered a life that allowed me to do
good work and live creatively.

At the beginning of this process I gathered everything I had produced in recent
memory—scraps of old receipts and all. The result was surprising—an eight-page document full
of raw poetry. It was relieving to know that I was more engaged with my writing throughout
recent years than I had thought. For the first time, I could see the common threads that ran
through months of my creative efforts—but it was equally intimidating to see so much
undeveloped creative material in front of me.

Next came the task of fashioning poems out of mere poetry—something easier said than
done. I kept writing new work, but I began grouping it with lines of the existing poetry. I had to
follow my gut, my creative instincts, to determine what felt like it belonged together. Each line
of poetry says or shows a condensed representation of an often complex emotional or intellectual
truth. I had to examine these truths and understand which served one another—who or what I
was talking to. In this method, I could see several basic categories emerge in my writing. There
seemed to be three types of poems emerging from the conglomerate of lines and images;
politically driven poems regarding Queerness, love poems or some version thereof, and material
filled with images, a sort of personal folklore, from my childhood and family. Thus, the first
three poems of my thesis process were born.

It was at this point that I started to step into the rhythm of a creative lifestyle. Rather than
a task to be completed or a deadline to meet, my poetry became a regular part of my life again. I
continued to write images everywhere I could, whenever and wherever they came to me. But I
did so with deliberate energy. I read as if books would be banned at any moment, buying new
books of poetry, printing poems off at work, asking for the poems of my peers, and attending
local readings again. The process of being engaged with other work always leads me to write—almost inevitably. I surrounded myself with old favorites like Richard Siken, as well as poets new to me, both established and up and coming, like Louise Gluck and Marcello Hernandez Castillo. I repeated the process of gathering my disconnected writings to formalize them in a word processor. Often more new writing happens at this stage, and the syntax is fleshed out. Three more poems emerged, falling into similar parameters as the previous batch—though individual in their own right. This process repeated once more—and after each batch of new work I met with my mentor, Dr. Nancy Eimers, to workshop the new poems and discuss my progress. In total I wrote nine new works for this collection, as well as the inclusion of three poems I had already written and published but still serve this collection.

In the next part of the process came edits and revision. I hung copies of my poems and their subsequent notes across the wall above my desk. It was important to see the arc of my journey from a greater point of view, rather than just individual poems. It allowed me to better visualize the work I had done thus far and see how it all fits together. It was at this point that I realized the three working categories I had identified in my own writing seemed to become less rigid and I began to see the characteristics of my identity as a writer flow more fluidly throughout each piece. It was no longer “political identity poem”, “love poem”, and “family/folklore poem” but attributes of each running through each—threaded together by who I am. The love I experience is Queer, my very individual standpoint is Queer, and thus my love and who I am is political. The images that originate in my childhood and carry special meaning for my kin have come to score every poem of this collection. In each poem, there are dimensions I have yet to explore and connections I have yet to realize. This is an aspect of all respectable poetry—as I have always been nurtured to allow the creative process to guide my journey, rather
than force the writing to conform to my own preconceived creative goals. In this method, I have allowed room to continue to surprise myself and accomplish things I never could have planned.

I came to title my thesis/collection *Perennial* not only to represent the themes and images common throughout the collection, but to describe the enduring nature of language, knowledge, emotion, and struggle that transcends generations but reproduces itself in new ways. Whether it be the socio-political position in which Queers are situated, the indignities and resilience diffused throughout kinships both given and chosen, or any other combination of pain and pleasure, life and death, love and subjugation, I discovered myself often relying on that which I inherited. Though the poems are my own, my flowering is almost always the result of another’s planting.

Though the arts and humanities are rarely assigned great intellectual, political, or economic value, the labor put into this collection of poems is more than just logged hours, but an all-encompassing, holistic, devotion that restructured my life in almost every way. Though I have always managed to informally write lines of poetry, I was not allowing myself the greater dignity of a creative lifestyle in which I had the agency and ability to develop intellectual thoughts and complex emotional truths through my chosen art form. What began as a faraway idea and nearly illegible ink scrawled onto any scrap of paper within reach, has now come to fruition through a large reorganization of my life to reaffirm my identity as an artist and human being. I am confident that these poems will have a long life after this thesis, but I am proud of the work I have done thus far, and I will leave my undergraduate career feeling more whole than I ever have.