Dissolution

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Introduction

In creating this collection, I aimed not only to write a book of poems about a subject close to my heart, but also to situate my writing within certain formal and thematic traditions of poetry, thereby allowing my work to be regarded as a part of an existing and constantly developing literary conversation. I drew inspiration for Dissolution from a number of poetic styles, but I was drawn most intensely to the field of documentary poetics. In order to understand Dissolution as a work of documentary poetry, it is important to discuss the history and characteristics of this emerging poetic genre.

Documentary poetic style has no universally agreed-upon point of origin, but Charles Reznikoff’s Testimony, first published in prose in 1934 and later as a longer poetic work in 1978, is often looked to as one of the earliest works in this category. Testimony takes poetry in a direction not previously considered to be within its scope; it is a collection of compiled courtroom transcripts, lineated in poetic form and sequenced but otherwise modified very little. The poetry found in Testimony is not enhanced with metaphor, hyperbole or metonymy, but this lack of abstraction and figuration only serves to make the work more powerful. Keeping the text stark and raw and the voice mercilessly objective, Reznikoff tells the stories of others with unprecedented honesty, not hiding the subject matter behind the language but also not sacrificing the artistic quality of the poetry for the sake of its journalistic attributes. In an interview with L.S. Dembo, Reznikoff explained that “the testimony is that of a witness in court—not a statement of what he felt, but of what he saw or heard. What I wanted to do was to create by selection, arrangement, and the rhythm of the words used as a mood or feeling.” In creating his collection this way, Reznikoff

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illuminates racial and class-based injustices within the legal system, as well as a general condition of violence and tragedy in the United States. The very existence of *Testimony* shows a push at the boundaries of what constitutes poetry, as well as a testing of the limits of what poetry can do. *Testimony* stands in direct opposition to W.H. Auden’s famous claim that “poetry makes nothing happen.” Within the pages of Reznikoff’s great work, poetry bridges the gap between art and journalism by turning raw sourced material into art, thereby giving a new kind of platform to the voices he is representing. This use of poetry to draw attention to a larger social issue is at the core of documentary poetics.

In 1938, American poet Muriel Rukeyser published “The Book of the Dead”, a large work of sequenced poetry focused on the Hawk’s Nest Tunnel Disaster, a mining tragedy in West Virginia in which anywhere from hundreds to thousands of miners died from exposure to silica dust. “The Book of the Dead” documents and explores the events of the disaster, as well as the lives of the miners themselves. Rukeyser uses details of the town, conversations with residents, and even construction cost data to both expose the complexities of the event and tell the story through a lens that gives voice to the dead and voiceless victims of the tragedy. With her use of documentary style, it seems almost as if these dead and voiceless are speaking for themselves.

Though Rukeyser’s poetic sequence is not approached with the same intentionally cold objectivity that marks Reznikoff’s *Testimony*, it is unmistakably a work of documentary poetics. The use of sourced material creates the documentary element to the work, while the humanizing eye Rukeyser turns towards the disaster and the physical form of the text keep “The Book of the Dead” unmistakably poetic. Like Reznikoff, Rukeyser uses poetry as a medium to provide a new kind of voice for a larger tragedy or social problem.

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In Philip Metres’ analysis of documentary poetics, he portrays documentary poetry in general as a kind of humanizing testimony, arguing that “While it may be that such poems will not ‘stand up’ in a court of law, they testify to the often unheard voices of people struggling to survive in the face of unspeakable violence.” Though they use different tones and approaches, both Testimony and “The Book of the Dead” do exactly what Metres suggests; they elevate unheard or suppressed voices into the realm of the poetic.

More contemporary works of documentary poetics show that the genre is currently being adopted in many different forms as a powerful medium for social commentary. Many modern poets experiment with the idea of poetry as a tool for allowing readers to see tragedy or social injustice through a humanizing lens. Two of these poets in particular deserve mention here, both because I have looked to their works extensively for inspiration and because they have made especially powerful contributions to the field of documentary poetry.

C.D. Wright, an American poet who passed away this year, is one of those authors whose strikingly innovative work can be seen as an exceptional development in this genre. Her book One Big Self, first published in 2003, documents the lives of inmates she visited in Louisiana state prisons. Presented as a linked poetic sequence, One Big Self sometimes lets its source material shine through in direct quotes from inmates and guards, patent numbers, and distances from town to town. But Wright’s own poetic voice comes through with just as much strength, imagining the memories of inmates and incorporating her own emotions and sensations into the work. Another of Wright’s works, One With Others, is also written as a long sequence of documentary poetics. One With Others traces the life of Wright’s mentor, V., and her involvement as a white woman in the 1969 March Against Fear. A large part of this documentation is done by imagining and cataloguing the environment and time in which V. lived; Wright both uses existing source material and creates

her own, imagining grocery lists and Dear Abby columns that illuminate certain elements of life in V.'s world.

The other contemporary poet whose work I have drawn from and who has made an exceptional contribution to documentary poetics is A. Van Jordan, whose book *M-A-C-N-O-L-I-A* feels especially like a documentary in the filmic sense of the word. Complete with shifting perspectives, imagined interviews and cinematic directions, the book tells the story of MacNolia Cox, the first African American to make it to the final round of the National Spelling Bee. In order to ensure she did not win, the judges gave her a word that was not on the official list. *M-A-C-N-O-L-I-A* explores both the documented and imagined effects of this loss on the rest of MacNolia Cox's life, and the work is an incredibly moving example of poetry that is documentary but not limited by mere transcription of facts, names and dates. A. Van Jordan's imagined perspectives feel incredibly real and deeply emotional, but they also serve as important tools for shedding light on the racial climate in which MacNolia Cox was raised. This work, along with the aforementioned others, provided the most inspiration for me as I began to conceive of *Dissolution* as a project rooted in documentary poetic style.

In addition to fitting my own work into the context of documentary poetics, I also aimed to produce a work that would be a valuable contribution to existing literature on addiction and substance abuse. Literature has had a long and turbulent relationship with addiction. Much of the literary discussion of drugs and alcohol has come from the tendency of famous authors throughout history to abuse them. In Ralph Waldo Emerson’s 1844 essay *The Poet*, he makes the claim that there is an inevitable tie between writing and substance abuse. Emerson writes that any great poet “knows he speaks adequately, then, only when he speaks somewhat wildly…; not with the intellect, used as an organ, but with the intellect released from all service…This is the reason why bards love
wine, mead, narcotics, coffee, tea, opium... or whatever other species of animal exhilaration.”

Roger Forseth’s more contemporary essay “The Alcoholic Writer by Any Other Name” reaffirms this sentiment by pointing out that “the connection between ‘darker...dangerous...destroy...’ and ‘success’ has been with us at least since Dionysos and Icarus...denial - or at least the rationalization - of destruction, then, becomes necessary to art. Booze causes great poems.”

It is clear that the tie between authors and substance abuse (particularly alcohol abuse) has been long established. Notable works of literature have responded to the prevalence of addictions, particularly alcoholism, by creating characters that struggle with and face their own addictions. From Thomas Hardy’s *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and its questioning of the dangers of drunkenness to Hunter S. Thompson’s drug-filled and psychedelic *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, novels in particular have shed light on substance abuse. But poems and memoirs have also explored the themes of drug use and addiction. Again, the focus has been overwhelmingly on alcoholism, but not entirely so. Jessica Hendry Nelson’s memoir *If Only You People Could Follow Directions* is a book that influenced my writing and inspired this project significantly. Nelson’s book is a memoir told through linked essays that create a thematic sequence. In the book, Nelson addresses the struggle to find stability and sense of self while bearing witness to addiction in her family. Her essays also address the complicated relationship she has with her home, and the phenomenon of feeling herself grow and change while her hometown peers seemingly remain the same. Reading the work of someone bearing witness to addiction without experiencing it in the same way herself was invaluable to my own writing process.

Charlie Smith’s poem “Heroin” describes, from a first-person perspective, the life of a heroin addict; the rest of his collection *Heroin: and Other Poems* goes on to repeatedly use heroin as a

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metaphor for desire. Aside from Smith’s work, there is remarkably little poetry focused specifically on heroin addiction, and there is very little poetry about drug use written by any other perspective besides that of the user. As someone who has witnessed heroin addiction very closely without being a drug user myself, I became aware that the perspective I would bring to the topic could be quite different from those perspectives that had already been put into poetic form.

Charlie Smith’s “Heroin” begins with the speaker reading “a passage about how no one talks / about heroin anymore...”8 In my own search for poetry surrounding heroin addiction, I found that, as Smith writes, there was almost no poetic conversation focused on this very real and very devastating problem. In Smith’s same poem, the speaker describes himself as “one of the few rural junkies in the nation.”9 As someone witnessing addiction on an increasingly large scale in a small and rural area, this resonated with me. If Smith’s statement was true at the time of his own addiction, it is certainly not true anymore. In the past few years, the presence of heroin has increased dramatically in my own rural state of Vermont, and I have seen this especially in my hometown of Brattleboro. Smith’s idea of his isolation as an addict in a rural area, as well his claim that heroin is not talked about, led me to think of a conversation I had a year ago with a dear friend who is now in recovery from heroin addiction. This friend, who is referred to in my project as “The Guitarist”, told me that by the time he was caught and arrested, the addiction epidemic in our hometown had been enormously present for years. Due to a lack of conversation on the subject, however, he had begun to believe that perhaps you had to be an addict in Brattleboro to know that addiction existed there.

This remark is undeniably significant, and representative of what I began to feel was a problem practically as dangerous as heroin itself: a complete lack of any conversation about, or even any acknowledgement of, the addiction problem or its severity. This is not to say that the truth

of Vermont’s heroin epidemic is not beginning to come out more and more. Political leaders and the media have begun to recognize and respond to the fact that the presence of heroin in Vermont poses an increasingly large threat. Governor Peter Shumlin’s January 2014 “State of the State” address was devoted entirely to a discussion of the opioid crisis sweeping the state. In his speech, Governor Shumlin made a plea for a more candid and open discussion about the presence of heroin in Vermont, saying, “We often hear in the news about the criminal side of drug addiction... we must bolster our current approach to addiction with more common sense. We must address it as a public health crisis, providing treatment and support, rather than simply doling out punishment, claiming victory, and moving onto our next conviction.”

The speech was Vermont’s first large-scale public call for awareness of the heroin problem as being more than an issue of crime and punishment.

A few months later, an April 2014 article in Rolling Stone cast Vermont’s growing problem into the national spotlight. The article begins with the true story of Eve, a Vermonter who, like so many other Vermonters, began her journey into addiction by abusing Oxycodone. A quote near the beginning of the article reveals the evolution of Eve’s views on heroin:

“Junkies, she thought, were people in places like the Bronx or Baltimore, not the middle of Vermont. But soon more people she knew were shooting up, and Eve’s shock morphed into curiosity, heroin’s corrosive reputation diminished by the fact that everyone compared it to a drug she’d already tried: ‘It’s like oxys,’ she kept hearing, ‘only cheaper.’”

Besides illuminating the all-too-common story of painkillers leading to heroin abuse, Rolling Stone reporter David Amsden’s article also addresses a presumption that I found to be largely present in Brattleboro: heroin addiction is not perceived to be a largely destructive problem in rural areas where it is less expected. Despite this lapse in perception, the heroin problem had already risen to the level of an epidemic by the time Amsden’s article was published. My group of

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childhood peers had already been rocked by the first overdose and death of one of our own. Only five months after that, the friend referred to as The Guitarist was exposed as a heroin addict; by the time of Governor Shumlin’s speech and the article’s publication, he had already been shooting heroin for several years.

The opioid crisis had clearly been going on for a long time, but it only began to enter large-scale public conversation in 2014, after building to a lethal level; in his speech, Governor Shumlin revealed that Vermont’s 2013 rate of overdose deaths from heroin had practically doubled from the year before.12 But his speech seemed to go relatively unnoticed in Brattleboro, as if it did not apply there. When Amsden’s Rolling Stone article came out and highlighted Vermont as a major site of a grave opiate epidemic, it seemed that the biggest reaction among the Vermonters I knew was embarrassment. By and large, people were not happy that the problem was being talked about; they were resentful of a national magazine for reporting on a problem that many thought had been dramatically exaggerated.

However, Rolling Stone’s article is no exaggeration, and the fact that so many residents of my town did not see this points to the gravity of the problem that emerges from lack of open conversation. It is understandable that a problem like heroin in a respectable, middle class, artistic town like Brattleboro would be considered shameful. When heroin is continuously talked about as a matter of criminals and punishments, or discussed only in statistics, the human side of the epidemic is lost. The faces of heroin addiction become the faces of monsters and idiots, not the complicated portraits of individuals with passions, dreams and complex histories. This is the type of addiction narrative that leads to public shame, embarrassment, and denial. In order to open up a widespread conversation surrounding heroin addiction, it seems that a more humanizing lens is needed. Too often, addicts, dealers, and bystanders are polarized as good or evil. Humanity and individuality are lost in this process. *Dissolution* exists in an attempt to bring these things back.

12 Shumlin, “2014 State of the State Address.”
After the heroin overdose and death of my friend Alex in early 2014, my own perspective on heroin changed dramatically. My parents certainly knew almost nothing about the extent of the problem Brattleboro was facing, and it had never been talked about before. Suddenly, when Alex died, heroin began to show its face all over my community. I realized I knew far more people who had tried heroin or gotten hooked on it than I ever thought I knew, and I began to hear stories of friends who knew other overdose victims in the area. I learned where Brattleboro’s methadone clinic was, after years of driving past it every day on the way to the supermarket. I found myself torn between feeling guilty for being away at college as the crisis worsened, and feeling as though I never wanted to return to Brattleboro. The innocence of my quiet town and my peers was suddenly called into question.

When Alex died, the largest and most immediate response I saw was on social media. Facebook posts expressing sadness and sympathy soon deteriorated into fights about whether our wonderful, artistic, funny, and now dead friend had always been stupid or weak in character. Many people tried to blame Alex for his own death, and the rest looked to blame someone else: the school system, the government, or our other friends. I watched this unfold online from my dorm room in college, and, unsure how to respond, I wrote the first rough draft of a spoken word poem called “Sunday.” My poetry had always been rooted in spoken word style, and I believed strongly in the medium of performance poetry as a tool to connect members of an audience in a vulnerable and profoundly human way. “Sunday,” a revised version of which has been included in *Dissolution*, was my first attempt at using poetry to talk about heroin. A few weeks later, I performed the poem for the first time and was approached by a large number of people whose lives had been touched by drug abuse and who thanked me for writing about it. It was at this time that I decided (though I don’t know that I did so consciously) to continue writing about heroin in Brattleboro. The more heroin went on to impact my life, the stronger this idea became. When The Guitarist, one of my best friends and the first person I ever fell in love with, was arrested for possession of heroin later that
year after keeping his addiction secret for years, I found it hard to keep the theme of heroin out of my poetry at all.

After being introduced to documentary poetics, first through Muriel Rukeyser’s “Book of the Dead” and then through poets like C.D. Wright, it became clear to me that this was a genre I wanted to draw from heavily in creating this project. Philip Metres describes documentary poetry as arising “from the idea that poetry is not a museum-object to be observed from afar, but a dynamic medium that informs and is informed by the history of the moment.” In my life, the heroin epidemic was and is the history of the moment; it is discussed too little and overgeneralized too much, and I saw documentary poetics as the “dynamic medium” that could tell the story in a new way. From my own experience with spoken word, I had already come to view poetry as a powerful and dynamic medium for social change and human connection. Incorporating documentary elements became a way to portray my town and its ongoing tragedy through a number of creative lenses. This created a more complete and innovative poetic portrait of the environment and my subjects, and it also challenged me to push my own writing continually in new directions.

Documentary poetry, additionally, is described by poet Mark Nowak as “not so much a movement as a modality within poetry whose range I see along a continuum from the first person auto-ethnographic mode of inscription to a more objective third person documentarian tendency (with practitioners located at points all across that continuum).” Because of its roots in spoken word and performance poetry, my own work falls more into the former articulated mode; it tends to be quite confessional and autobiographical in nature. While I did want to preserve certain elements of this style within the collection of poems, I also wanted this project to be an intense challenge in form as well as in subject matter. I wanted my poems to vary in form and style while still remaining linked in a narrative sequence. In their book The Modern Poetic Sequence, M.L.

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13 Metres, “From Reznikoff to Public Enemy.”
14 Nowak, “Documentary Poetics.”
Rosenthal and Sally Gall define the modern sequence genre as characterized by “a group of mainly lyric poems, rarely uniform in pattern, which tend to interact as an organic whole."\(^{15}\) I went into the project intending to create a cohesive body of work that serves as a hybrid of documentary poetry and verse memoir, while staying true to the “intimate, fragmented, self-analytical, open, emotionally volatile”\(^{16}\) qualities of modern sequence poetry.

The result is *Dissolution*, a collection of poetry that grew from a synthesis of documentary poetics and spoken word conventions. Many of the poems focus on either Alex or The Guitarist, as those are the two people whose connections to heroin have had the greatest impact on my life. Some other poems are more autobiographically focused, dealing with my own conflicted feelings about home and addiction. Others back away from the personal narrative style and use both real and imagined source material to look at different elements of the crisis. The poems within the collection span a range of poetic styles, the result of an effort to continually push myself out of my stylistic comfort zone.

The first poem in the collection is a glossary of Brattleboro street slang. In order to explore the epidemic of heroin in my hometown, I felt it crucial to portray my town as the idiosyncratic and beautiful place I have always known. C.D. Wright's *One with Others* uses small fragments of daily life to characterize the town where her subject lived: “2 pounds of Oleo costs 25¢. / And 5 cans of Cherokee freestone peaches are $1. / The Cosmos Club president held a tea at her lovely lakeside home...”\(^{17}\) I saw a glossary as a way to achieve a similar result, using words to create a sense of environment and general character.

The poems “Heroin”, “Lie”, and “Into” are all written in the style of dictionary entries. This form is taken directly from A. Van Jordan's enormously powerful *M-A-C-N-O-L-I-A*. In the case of

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\(^{17}\) C.D. Wright, *One with Others* (Port Townshend: Copper Canyon Press, 2010), 12.
“Heroin,” the dictionary entry is left unmodified; the rest of the poem appears as a footnote at the bottom of the page. This was an attempt to portray both my frustration with the definition of the word “heroin,” which lists the drug’s effects as “euphoric,” and the idea that the true extent of heroin’s effects on Brattleboro are kept largely out of discussion.

The fifth poem in the collection is an erasure-style poem, created by crossing out words in a gubernatorial press release in order to create a very different and much more cynical message. The cynicism here comes from a sentiment I have heard from several friends who are recovering addicts or who have tried heroin before. Among heroin users in Brattleboro, there is a popular opinion that the same state officials who are now trying to fight the heroin problem are the same people who created it. When Brattleboro began to have a large problem with Oxycodone addiction, the government executed an extremely diligent mission to get “Oxys” out of the hands of current and potential addicts. However, the state did not do anything significant to support current addicts who were now left without the drugs they had become functionally dependent on. Once Oxycodone was impossible to find, many people who were becoming sick from withdrawal fell prey to heroin dealers who came up from Massachusetts to offer a high that was similar but cheaper and more accessible. I wanted this poem to reflect the attitude that many affected residents feel towards the government’s efforts to treat heroin addiction; there is gratitude, but it is gratitude mixed with deep resentment.

Dissolution employs many other poetic styles and forms as well. “Poppies” is based off of the ghazal, a 12th century poetic form characterized by rhyming couplets and a repeated refrain. The next poem, “Dissolution”, takes the same ghazal form but breaks it apart as the poem moves

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18 See the Merriam-Webster Dictionary's definition of “heroin.”
towards its end; in this way, the poem literally dissolves from a formal poem into visually chaotic free verse.

The poetic forms used also include a homework assignment, a bail receipt, a dialogue, a family tree, and other styles that, like many documentary poems, break away from any visual expectations of what constitutes poetic form. These poems are woven through the collection along with multiple free verse and lyric poems that I have included in order to keep the balance between a documentary work and a confessional verse memoir.

There are other points of inspiration I feel compelled to note here. “The Accused” is loosely based off of information from an FBI press release detailing the results of long-term heroin investigations focused on Vermont. “Processing” was stylistically inspired by the penultimate episode James Joyce’s incredible book *Ulysses*; this episode, written in a style Joyce referred to as “impersonal catechism,” contains a number of emotional moments that have the emotion stripped out of them by the rigid and overly scientific question-and-answer form in which the entire episode is written. Several other poems - “Witness Testimony”, “Sunday”, and “Brattleboro”, to name a few - are inspired by stylistic conventions of spoken word poetry, which include anaphora, clear narrative and a conversational tone spoken to an addressee.

*Dissolution* is a collection whose poems cannot fit into only one poetic formal category. In writing these poems, I have experimented with lyric sequence, spoken word narrative style, and documentary poetics. Each poem has been a challenge, either in terms of form or subject matter. The project carries immeasurable emotional weight for me; as well as being a rigorous academic and creative journey, the writing process has continuously affirmed for me the importance of starting a conversation about addiction and recovery. The heroin epidemic in Brattleboro is about more than just arrest statistics and methadone clinic waiting lists. For me, bearing witness to

heroin addiction comes with betrayal, loss of innocence, love, and a fundamental change in my perception of home. Whether through longer lyric poems or through glossaries and bail receipts, I tried to capture the complexities of being a bystander to addiction in a way that was multi-faceted in style as well as in theme.

The heroin epidemic in Brattleboro is still largely left out of conversation. Many of the previous responses to Vermont’s heroin crisis that do exist have rendered the crisis in black and white, offering an oversimplified portrait of victims and perpetrators, users and dealers, right and wrong. The primary focus of this project was on turning a humanizing eye towards the crisis, the effects, and the affected. Very little poetic work exists at this time that deals primarily with heroin and its effects, especially within the context of a small town. *Dissolution* is my contribution to both documentary poetics and poetry surrounding heroin addiction.

*Awareness and communication is an essential step in moving through a crisis such as the heroin epidemic, especially in the context of a small town. I have always seen poetry as a way of allowing people to recognize the humanity within one another. I can only hope that this project will help to start a bigger conversation, one in which addicts and even dealers are viewed with empathy and compassion. It is not enough to label addicts as weak and dealers as evil; in order to fight back against such a devastating epidemic, we must understand that its complexity goes beyond polarized categories and value judgments. With this collection of poems, I will attempt to start breaking those binaries and judgments apart.*
Bibliography

Books:


Essays, Poems and Articles:


This work aspires neither to objectivity nor to unembellished truth. Some names within these pages have been changed, others omitted, still others merely shortened. Some events are recounted from my memory or from the memories of others, and some imagined. This is not a universal story of addiction. This is a story of guilt and innocence, of growing up, of deep betrayal and deeper love, of beautiful people caught in a terrible trap. This is a story of a town.
Glossary of Terms – Brattleboro, VT

Bag:  
A very small Ziploc bag full of heroin, usually about 100 mg, sometimes labeled with a nickname or cartoon picture. 10 bags make a bundle, 5 bundles make a brick. A bag looks like nothing really, a quarter of a high at best, and sometimes it is just that, but the potency can vary - sometimes fiercely, fatally so.

Baggie:  
A small quantity of marijuana, originally kept in a Ziploc bag but now sometimes in tin foil, in a coffee filter, in a creased high school diploma, in bunched up Dunkin Donuts napkins, etc.

Bean Broth:  
The kind of terrible coffee you can only find at a gas station rest stop after days on the road touring from state to state, the coffee that’s almost too terrible to be welcome but that still gets purchased and consumed out of sheer desperation.

Buck:  
Crazy, out of control, reckless, bizarre and belligerent in a sense bordering on legendary.  
(Variations: Buck mega, buckwild, buck wilderness)

Chill (adj.):  
(Referring to things) Low-key, fun, having no potentially stressful or irritating factors.  
(Referring to people) Able to hang out without making others around you annoyed or uncomfortable. Requirements to be chill: taking a joke, tolerance for light to moderate mockery, being able to participate or at least turn a laughing eye towards recreational drug use and recklessly excessive alcohol consumption.

Chill (v.):  
1. To relax, to stop worrying and melt into the situation like all your friends are doing, to stop killing the vibe.  
2. To hang out with no intended plan of action or long-term goal, to do absolutely nothing and have a great time doing it.

Dimebag:  
Ten dollars worth of weed. (Tip: Dealers hate dimebags, and selling you one is a waste of their precious time, and they’re busy folks, so even if you’re a close friend you better be buying one cause you’re actually broke as shit. If not, come on, you can rustle up enough cash for 20 bucks worth at least, don’t be stingy, you know you’re gonna need the rest of it eventually. Make the investment.)

Harmony:  
The true center of town; A parking lot just up from the corner of Elliot & Main St. (near the Carter’s Little Liver Pills mural nobody can ever really figure out) where everyone - like, everyone - who is anyone goes to hang out, shoot the shit, sit on the sidewalk, chain smoke, open their hatchbacks for shade, roll spliffs, hacky sack, and find other friends to meet up and go jump in the river with on hot days.

Hit:  
1. One inhale’s worth of marijuana.  
2. A small amount of something you’re trying to mooch off a friend (e.g. “Yo dude let me get a hit off that organic coconut water.”)

Hohan:  
A noun or adjective - or even verb, why limit yourself? - that can be used to identify or describe any person, at any time, for no purpose other than to be unadulteratedly silly.
Nana's Chowda House:
The band’s first practice space, disgusting and gritty beautiful, tucked behind the fire station on a road just private enough for streaking; the wine-stained, weed-scented, slanted-couch backdrop of innumerable pipe dreams.

Rodney:
(variations: Rodney Ram) The band's first and only band van, a '97 Dodge Ram Van that permanently stunk like old urine, old weed and old pistachios. A would-be fifteen-passenger with the back two rows ripped out and a precarious monument of amps and cymbals and cables erected regularly in their place. Full of rattles and squeaks but seemingly immortal until the transmission blew in the 'Dacks just outside of Saranac Lake, conveniently the same weekend the cops found the guitarist's case of needles and bags, arrested him as he cried quietly with his eyes to the ground, and left everyone else standing by the side of the road, shocked and disbelieving, rocked to the core.

Smoke up:
To supply a friend in need with enough marijuana to get high - not just a hit, because that would be a dick move, but maybe half of a bowl pack or a few good bong rips - enough of your own hard-earned supply that your friend can feel a little band of heaviness forming around the crown of their head and start to forget that they had kinda said they were gonna get a haircut today at some point, but it's fine because nothing is really important except how life-altering Warren Haynes' solos are and how much fun a trip to the Circle K would be.

Stoned:
(variations: high, baked, blazed, gone, fuckin' done)
High on marijuana - unlike "high", which for some reason means the giddiness in your belly on a fantastic August day just as much as it means the strange heavy soothing of heroin cooling your fingers and shaking its way up your arms, “Stoned” refers only to reefer, weed, pot, marijuana, Mary Jane, green.

Straight:
Entirely. (e.g. "Dude, this bean broth is straight hoohan.")

The Spot:
A patch of red brick sidewalk/pathway just across the footbridge from the co-op parking lot, marked only by a bench and some occasional chalk art. The eternal home away from home of every barefooted Brattleboro teenager learning to chain smoke, drinking large coffees and singing along to out of tune bent-neck acoustic guitar covers of punk songs, or lying on the ground only slightly out of the way of passing shoppers, feeling the Vermont sun and the dirt of the bricks painting the skin, knowing happiness can’t ever get more pure or more free. The birthplace of the most unconditional and laid-back friendships, and occasionally a band or two.

Tryna:
Contraction of “trying to.” (Eg. “I don’t know what you’re up to after this, but I don’t have to work tomorrow and I’m definitely tryna...”) The word you use when you have your sights really set on something, usually imminent consumption of alcohol or excessive consumption of drugs, and you want to let your friends know that you have your schedule cleared and intend to have as much mind-bending, palm-clamming, room-spinning fun as the time and supply will allow. The word to show you are real into the idea of getting fucked up - sometimes fiercely, fatally so.
Sidewalk Radio

Between bricks and mortar
we’ve slipped our secrets,
our vices wrapped in plastic
and tin foil, our stingy dimebags
folded into coffee filters.

Here I found your love for me,
stuck into this broken wall
with the last of your pocket change,
and the behind-the-restaurant smell
of pizza crust and sour cocktails.

Here I rolled it and smoked it,
leaned back against the concrete
till the surface melted just enough
to cradle my swirling eyes,
to hold me like Sunday morning.

Here I heard the pebbles speaking,
telling who loved who, who dosed who;
where you’d kissed all the other girls
who loved the thought of a boy in a band;

where we sat when you told me they
had never mattered like I mattered,
where we fought, fell and confessed;

whether it was true that you stole
a Hamilton from your mom’s purse
and held it out like a peace offering
in exchange for your first high.

In our sidewalk radio,
there are no DJs,
no commercial jingles before the news,
no call-in contest prizes.

Only the muffled mumbles
of racing hearts, hushed negotiations,
the flick and ding of addictions,
the raveling and unraveling of promises.

Only the slow and static hum
of the ground listening.
Heroin \(\text{\`her-wən, \`he-rə-}\) 1. A strongly physiologically addictive narcotic C21H23NO5 that is made by acetylation of but is more potent than morphine and that is prohibited for medical use in the United States but is used illicitly for its euphoric\(^{21}\) effects.

\(^{21}\) See: Euphoria \(\text{\`y\-\`fər-\`ə}\) 1. A feeling of well-being or elation. As in, the feeling that the problems on your shoulders are light as rain, the expectations you’ve always tried to reach can now fit right into your clenched fist. As in, the feeling that abstract words are not unattainable anymore - in fact, everything around you is just whistling out the same soft song of love and life and happiness. As in, the unimaginable *euphoria* that comes even when stuck in traffic, the calm soaring before the sore arms; before the sickness; before the drop in body temperature; before a ten dollar high becomes nothing more than a pinch in the arm, not even strong enough to wake you from a daydream; before the money is gone; before your friends call their other friends instead; before snorting isn’t quick enough and it needs to go straight to the heart, and that well-being needs to be raw and sharp and screeching around the hairpin turns of your body at breakneck speed, that calm needs to be right the fuck now, it needs to pierce through the cold shivers of wanting and wrap around you like a goddamn blanket; before a bathroom break is the only salvation; before the *should quit*; before the *couldn’t look my mother in the eye* kind of high; before the nodding off; before the black blurred edges of vision, before the swinging-door breeze of your friends walking out, before the storm.
Finding Needles

Our hands clasped tight for stability, we trip-stepped between the stones gathered by the foundation of the old barn, once for sheep or cattle, now for rusting red Schwinn skeletons and spare car tires where mice have curled their small bodies for warmth.

He took his glasses off, cast his naked eyes into the near darkness, on one of these last nights before the new crop of frost would creep in, slow and inevitable, to bejewel the barn door.

We hadn’t loved each other long, but on these black-indigo evenings I yielded all my strength to the pull of his hand, and packed my apprehension into my pockets, trusting him to lead. He took me places he thought would impress me; I followed, so easily awed.

We sat side by side, never touching, keeping precious room for our adolescent nerves to sit and squirm between us. There in a gap between rock and rock and coolcold air, something shone in crescent moonlight: skinny metal, surely not ours - the first time I’d seen one outside a hospital.

He kicked it away with a careless sneaker, muttered about what kind of scum you’d have to be to leave that kind of thing where it could hurt someone. And then it was gone, down to the soil, out of sight.

Later that night I would fall into his arms, awkward and soft, shivering against the pale steadiness of his chest. No way of knowing that the next time I’d see a needle so close, it would be in his bedroom -
his thin frame on the bed, leaning forward, sleeves rolled up, showing me everything - the needles that got him arrested, the bags, the tiny tracks across his forearms, and me on the floor – cross-legged, watching wet-eyed as the truth slithered out – still shivering, years later.
MONTPELIER – December 1, 2015 – Gov. Peter Shumlin today announced a new treatment option for opiate addiction: naltrexone, an injected, long-acting medication that reduces the urge for opioid drugs like heroin by blocking the body’s opiate receptors, preventing the effects of opioid drugs from getting to the brain. A person must be opioid-free for at least a week before receiving the injection of naltrexone, which is then administered monthly, to support recovery.

The Health Department has trained more than 50 health care providers in the protocol for administering naltrexone. Naltrexone is not an opiate, and is not a replacement or maintenance medication like methadone or buprenorphine.

The pilot is a joint project of the Agency of Human Services’ Departments of Health and Corrections, and West Ridge Addiction Treatment Center in Rutland. People under the supervision of the Department of Corrections are at a higher risk for opioid addiction, and Rutland is one of the areas of the state with the highest need for comprehensive medication assisted treatment and recovery services.

“Naltrexone is especially promising for treating people coming out of our correctional system, who may be motivated to stay clean but are struggling because of the way naltrexone works to block the ‘high’ from using opioid drugs like heroin or prescription painkillers,” said Gov. Shumlin. “This new treatment can help recovering addicts avoid a relapse.”

About 350 individuals will participate in the pilot program, which will be expanded to other parts of the state in coming months. Individuals participating in the naltrexone pilot will also participate in addiction recovery counseling and care management services.

“The first few weeks after release from prison is the riskiest time for a recovering addict,” said Agency of Human Services Secretary Hal Cohen. “By offering this new medication choice, combined with psychosocial therapy and strong peer support, we aim to change the paradigm from medication assisted treatment to medication assisted recovery for people returning to the community.”

This pilot project is funded as part of a three-year, $3 million Medication Assisted Treatment and Recovery grant from the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services/Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration awarded to the Health Department in August. The purpose of the grant is to enhance and expand access to medication assisted therapy and recovery supports for opioid use disorders to the people and regions of the state with greatest need.

The pilot builds on the progress Vermont has made in the effort to combat opiate addiction since the Governor made the issue the focus of his State of the State Address in 2014. Since then, Vermont has expanded treatment through the Care Alliance for Opioid Addiction, with an additional 1,000 Vermonters in treatment. As of Oct. 15, the pre-trial services program called for by the Governor in that speech has been fully implemented and is currently available to all eligible populations statewide. That program helps those addicts charged with non-violent crimes access treatment and, if successful, avoid jail. In addition, the State has distributed thousands of opioid overdose rescue kits, of which hundreds have been used to reverse opioid drug overdoses.
The Accused

I.
Sarah Ellwood’s Jeep, 600 bags
in the center console, the windows glowing
blue in the lights of the highway patrol car
while Sarah was in South Burlington,
taking hits in the hotel room -

not off the stash, just
off the weed that keeps getting cheaper;
An eighth a night is nothing when the
money comes and goes like it does-

passing the pipe to Felicia,
to Unc, 223 grams under
the Bible in the bedside table

280 grams of coke in the bathroom,
Unc counting cash, while outside the door

the cops put their hands on their holsters.

II.
Troy Barnes of Rutland
kept his kitchen hot: a loaded
handgun in the pantry by the
beans & emergency candles,
200 grams in the house itself -

maybe in the spice cabinet,
maybe in the bookshelf
between the graying dust jackets
of presents from his grandfather,

maybe beside the coffee pot
that still bubbled and brewed as
Troy had his breakfast interrupted.

The DEA, the FBI, the ATF, the police,
wavering their warrants like battle flags,
never bothered to knock on the door.

III.
Eight names in the indictment,
But Miguel and Mario stood out. The others
are just “Others” in the headline;

the ink of their names will fade faster
from the gaze of the grand jury.

Miguel was down in Jersey, Mario
on Elliot Street in Brattleboro,
between the old café and the dermatologist,
two Escalades in the driveway.

Even when he called his boys in New Jersey,
even when he made the out-of-state supply runs,
he did it with 802 inked across his neck
circling his throat like a noose, as though
it was the state that was killing him.

And maybe it was that way, and not the other.
Track Marks / Inherited Behavior

I was eating breakfast on the campus green the morning the warrants went through; stretched out in the sun beside the library, feeling a world's width from the traffic stops and stuttered backwards glances of home. No thoughts of Brattleboro then, just Bill Withers in my ear as I cracked rigid crystals of sugar in the bottom of my coffee cup, and the world's alright.

Burlington Septembers stretch and bend in a yawning, languorous heat; groomed university lawns glow golden green in the changing air. Our shadows grow long with the darkness of the stories we left behind when we turned forward, fresh smiles and forgetfulness in hand. We throw change into the campus fountain, hoping for shiny new lives, but the whispers of our hometowns follow us around corners, and our wishing pennies just collect and turn submarine green.

153 miles from the hard sugar and cold coffee of my morning, on the street I used to skip down with my friends on Fridays, they pulled Mario from his sleep, left his silken dreams to unravel on his pillowcase as they folded his shaking head, soft as a dollar bill, into the cruiser, as he shivered shirtless and chilled. Those cotton sheets stay warm with body heat; those handcuffs are cold, gray ice.

Heroin was just the family business; Mario's younger brother had started selling in the high school parking lot right after the biology class we had together.
where they taught us DNA, and nature
versus nature, and inherited behavior,
and he disrupted the class almost
every day, and I rolled my honor roll eyes
from the other side of the room.
The arrests were bound to come eventually;
Mario’s shivering hands between the cuffs
had never had a chance to be clean.

At the old corner market, while I was far away,
the sunlight streamed in blue and white.
The cops blocked the doorway,
all flashing badges and legal talk,
and they took Mario's mother away
and his little sister, a plastic basket
in her clammy teenage hand,
forgot to be cool, and cried
screaming, ugly tears in the aisle alone.

The police inspector may have stayed
calm, may have wished the store owners
a nicer day, but the salt stains from the store floor
are still stuck to the bottoms of his shoes,
white rings marking the places
where her tears fell fast, heavy and graceless.
And the next time I came home,
the stains were everywhere I went, lying
beneath all the places I used to go;
salty-white circles beneath my feet,
settling into dust.
Into /ˈin(t)ə/ 1. (prep.) Expressing movement or action with the result that someone or something becomes enclosed or surrounded by something else: As in, By the time the Governor felt it right to write the word “heroin” into his speeches and budget plans, it was far too late for us because we had already begun turning into memories, losing our blood and our concern for keeping the plans we’d made, our eyes already had shrunk a little more into the boldfaced O’s of their sockets, even the ones of us that weren’t shooting up, because the breath of addiction was on every summer breeze and it blew through our windows and into our bedrooms no matter how above it we pretended we could be. 2. Expressing movement or action with the result that someone or something makes physical contact with something else: As in, when you are betrayed by someone you really loved, you do not fall into his arms anymore but you do not run either, you stay still as though you are rooted into the ground beside his doorstep, you keep your ears open so you can desperately listen for more promises to pour into the complicated cage of your body, with hope that with the right sincere tone he can break you free from the moment, even though it really all is ending right then and there. 3. Indicating a route by which someone or something may arrive at a particular destination: As in, if it’s a clear day and the music’s bumped you just right and you’re tryna, we can jump in someone’s busted Subaru and head into the woods on the dirt road that was everyone’s first smoke ride; we can point into the landscape and look for pieces of our old selves in the trees we pass; we can remember our first rides even as we work on forgetting them, and when we remember them everything is green and yellow and soft and tastes like iced coffee with the ice cubes already melted and sounds like Q-Tip and Phife trading Q&A’s at a late-night breakfast table, and we never have to worry about getting too high, because we were the smart kids in high school and we’ll always know exactly what we’re getting ourselves into, always.
Poppies

The kids here push against the boundaries of the town, they stretch and grow in curious shapes around each other’s bodies, they shake each other out of sleep.

They want the world like they’ve never wanted, all of its perfumes and technicolor. They stay up to inhale moonlight from their windows, to fight off sleep.

On warm nights, they sneak out, hands like spider webs, to catch a new thrill. Everyone knows that alone and at home is the worst way to sleep.

Whoever has their license will drive, Kid Cudi and Sublime interchangeably blasting from the stereo, away from the town that always feels so half-asleep.

Just out of town, on the slopes of old farm fields, they park the cars, roll the joints, pack the bowls till they can dream without sleep.

So high, so high up, above cares and report cards and condescension and scorn, they don’t see that all around the field's edge are poppies, petals closed & asleep.

Every night the kids hit the bowls, and every night they never see them; _Papaver Somiferum_, white & pink-petalled, thickening the air with soft & quiet sleep.

This is the dream: gliding over the muddled streetlights of town, just like they’ve made it out, like they’re going to be different, like they’ll be able to sleep knowing they’ll always wake again, knowing they’ll live forever, breathing in vitality with night air and smoke clouds, they’ll rise up out of that small-town sleep.

But all around, the poppies are growing over, growing closer, fertilized by curious minds, closing in to lull them deeper into a curious and darker sleep.
Dissolution

There is no need to be awake for this, the sturdy earth and floorboards giving way under your feet, the gray echo of voices in the room, the slow spiral, the falling away.

You know what will come, the relief and release, the poppies’ lull and sway. The needle will feel like home; the sharp edges of vision will start blurring away.

And you will melt like the rest of them, into your bed, dissolving into the bloodstream of our sidewalks, a moment of numb happiness

in this communal high, this bleak and bitter town meeting, where we watch our ashy white friends washing away -

that is, if we can still see straight, or if we can still stomach it without looking away.

Your town taught you to trade in boredom for numbness, for dissolution, for a nothing so big it would make you give everything away. I know - that’s why I left - not just to succeed and keep moving -

not to find a new group of cool kids

and a new sidewalk to chalk on -

but to cover myself with textbooks and drown myself in cocktails with friends, to small-talk myself far
from your pills and powders, to pretend
I never wanted the same kind of nothing, to pretend I

wasn’t also searching
for a freedom song higher
than the rooftops of
my
old downtown, to find another set
of sunburned streets

in which I too
could wear away

On Place

The night I came back to college,
the sidewalks froze over - as we scuff now
over them, over them, over them,
they rumble and crack like the bass notes
and drum hits of a soul groove, all our hellos
and how are yous ringing out solo melodies
over the beat of unrelenting winter rhythm.

Such a relief to be alive here, to run my feet
over this ice, to slip and slide back into
the world of projects and late night
work and welcoming each other home -
for this is home now, these small daily acts
of purpose and paperwork, these outstretched
fingers and jumping minds, these dance steps
down the grass to our diplomas - it’s so good

and so strange, to peel the word home
from the sidewalks and alley bricks it used
to stick to, and place it on my forehead
like a banner, backwards, so when I look
in the mirror I can see I’ve gotten away.

But I keep going back there, keep
making the trip to peel its last traces
from the old theater, the old smoke ride
on Broad Brook, the woods by the high school,
even when I know I could leave them and never
look back - I’m a ghost when I go back,

because I left, I found something new,
and now my town and I have run all out
of shit to shoot. But I keep going back,
to crack and pry the last pieces of myself
away, chisel in hand for the spots
that just won’t give, the spots
where maybe I’ll have to bleed
to get free.

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**Lie /lɪ/ 1. (v.) (Of a person or animal) be in or assume a horizontal or resting position on a supporting surface:** as in, when the news of our group’s first death flooded our Facebook pages, and I had my eyeliner already smudged on and my jacket zipped and a coffee in my hand and a class to run to, and instead I stayed for hours to *lie* on the coarse carpet, palms upward, jacket still closed, letting my phone *lie* there out of reach as it beeped with notifications of irrelevant small talk and where-are-yous from college friends who didn’t know that in that moment I just needed so much to *lie* flat and close against the ground, there, as though the carpeted concrete of my dorm room floor was soft Connecticut River valley soil and I could sink down into it, damp and cool and still breathing. 2. (n.) an intentionally false statement: as in, the guitarist saying he was having stomach problems was a *lie* that he told so we wouldn’t get curious when he went to the bathroom every hour or two, for ten minutes at a time, no matter whether someone was in a hurry or he needed to be onstage or we had stopped on the road to get dinner and couldn’t order till he came back to the table, hazy, heavy-footed and slow-speaking. (v.) **tell a lie or lies:** as in, when I *lied* to myself by saying things could get back to the way they had been, and we could someday all jump off the rocks into the clear cool water of Indian Love Call together again like best friends do, or smoke each other up on summer nights and tell secrets like it was no thing, or trust one another with our lives again, even after all the nights he *lied* saying it was only tiredness that almost killed us when he almost fell asleep at the wheel driving the van home on the highway at night, not just once, but again and again and again.
Homework assignment for March 22, 2014:

To prepare for future discussion, reflect on the following prompt: Why and how is sense of place important to you? How does sense of place affect the type of art you make, the way you make it, and your reasons for doing so? Please reference one of our readings on sense of place in your answer.

I think you can’t ever fully separate a person’s subjectivity from his or her physical location. The place or places where we’ve grown up have played an enormous role in determining our value systems, our speech patterns, etc. For me, no matter how hard I try to write about other things, the town I grew up in always seems to wrap its long fingers around my poetry, dragging it back and keeping it always close to home.

When W.T. Pfefferle interviewed poet Martha Collins for his book *Poets on Place*, she said that in her mind, “There’s always a little tension between ‘Here I am’ and ‘There I was.’”. In my own life, I feel this tension very much. The town I grew up in is not always welcome in my mind. I would like to try to shake my town off of me, to shrug it off like an old jacket. I want to say that I don’t feel my town around me, that I never think about it. But it isn’t true. I know, because certain parts of my town keep writing themselves onto my pages: the places where everyone smokes weed, the spots we used to hang out in, the stories we told. I think I hold onto those still-life moments because lately, I’ve been worried they’re going to disappear.

Because things are changing at home. Suddenly there are stories about people getting kidnapped, getting stabbed. Suddenly, the DEA is sitting awkwardly outside our pizza place in cars far too shiny to be local. Here, in my tiny town. And maybe we don’t gossip about it much, but we all feel it there around us. Our streets are a little scarier at night now, our groups a little smaller. So I write about my town so that if things ever get bad, we won’t forget the place that used to be so
innocent, so safe. Even though I don’t live there anymore, I can’t separate myself from that place. I feel those sidewalks and backwoods trails in the space between my pen and paper, every time I pause for breath.

Sometimes when I go back, I feel like like my town and I have nothing to talk about. But even if the streets and the rivers won’t talk with me anymore, I’ll still talk about them. Otherwise, I’m not sure anyone will.

Blue
March 22, 2014

When his roommate comes home, a frost is pushing at the edges of their floorboards. She follows the crystal lines to his cold fingers, blue like icicles and outstretched towards the door. His deep brown eyes have clouded with winter fog. The beads of concentration on his forehead have frozen into snowflakes.

She opens her mouth and breathes every sigh of life she can think of: the warm drip of melting snow, the songs of chickadees, the waxing and waning sound of swingset chains, the flat slap and roll of his skateboard takeoff.

But it all just comes out like a cry, not even a scream, stunted, choked. And as she runs to his face, she drops to the floor near his arm, all blueblack veins and syringe-handle plastic. And his fingers stay stretched out past her, out to the doorway, out to nothing.
Sunday
For Alex

I watched your feet hit the board so many times
and every time, you’d glide weightless
on sidewalks and streets and parking lots,
surfing waves of asphalt, catching
exhaust fume currents in crude cutoff shorts.

You once told me it was easy, but I know
that it takes a special kind of fearless
to fly like you did – to float like you do.

It seems strange that the sun is shining
today, even though you are not here
to smile up at it;

I don't want to go outside today.
I want to bury myself deep
in the way I felt yesterday;

I want to comfort myself
by thinking that the cold on my face,
the car keys gone from my pocket,
and the aching in my head
are my biggest troubles.

But today is a telephone ring
in a minor key
in the middle of the night;
It has come to jar and start us,
to shake us from dreams.

On this day after you left us,
we take to our keyboards,
stampeding onto message boards
to hurl words at each other.

Our fingers are billy clubs,
we punch out angry words
on the keys, trying to find solace
by finding someone to blame.

I think if you hadn't gone,
you would have told us
to go outside,
to stretch out our hands
and hold one another.

We all want to crawl back
into the things that brought us
as much comfort as childhood:

hot chocolate and blanket forts,
drawing on the walls,
keeping each other so close
we forgot the darkness.

We are so young,
we are so new.
Sometimes the world
makes us tired, so tired.

Even the softest sunshine
stings our eyes some days.
Sometimes we reach for hands
and find needles
and can't tell the difference.

Sometimes the world makes us feel
far too small to ever forgive ourselves.

So let's find someone to hold,
each of us, and hold them,  
so that our arms can feel the pulse  
of someone who could one day  
help us save ourselves.  

We do not have to punish ourselves  
for feeling small.  
We do not have to hurt ourselves together  
because we all feel alone.  

Let's forgive because we can,  
because humankind is a different  
kind of kind, because we all ache  
the same when push comes to shove,  

because we all miss  
those lightest days when the daylight  
took every single trouble away  
and we all miss tree forts and innocence  
and even in our darkest moments  
we can still hear ourselves singing;  

because the most fearless among us  
are still afraid of something,  
because the brightest among us  
can't always see the way they glow.  

Let's smile as wide as our muscles allow us  
and prove to our minds that our bodies  
can still stretch into ecstasy like they could  
when we were so much younger.  

Let's prove we can be okay - because  
in a world that spins us and loses us,  
we can still be okay.  

We are not junkies and criminals,  
we are not bad eggs and bad influence.  

We are tired children,  
dazed in a field of poppies,  
trying to find home.
On Getting Coffee After the Death of a Friend

There is a smell here that isn’t childhood. It creeps across the curbside topsoil and up the cracked café steps,

seeps from the bending sunflower stems, metallic and acrid. It is the smell of finding out the stream behind the supermarket wasn’t for playing, but for tossing needles. It is the smell of a friend’s scarred skin as he rolls up his sleeve, the smell of bridges burning,

of ash and track marks, the smell of tracks rusting by the train station in the sun, where we taught our younger friends to pry the child safeties off their lighters - this is what it is to grow up, pry off your childhood, one hit, one sip, one bump, one prick, like it’s nothing, like it’s home.

There is a sound here that isn’t happiness. It isn’t a lullaby around our shoulders, it will not sing us to contented sleep.

This sound is sour, secret, close. It is the sound of the things our parents
would never know to tell us, that the opposite of our fairy tales
is our town, that going home will cut us but not heal us.
It is the wailing alarm of adulthood, yanking us by our ankles out
from under our blankets, ringing out its din of loss and death
even when we cry for a quiet moment.

And we will talk over the sound, as we pay for parking and hug
each other around the meter. And we will hold our coffee cups

close to our noses, trying to breathe in softly because we have learned
that if we cover our ears, if we plug our noses we will not

have our hands free to help each other up, or to place our palms
on each other’s backs. Instead, we learn to speak

a little louder when we express love, we learn to fill our windows
with basil and sweet flowers, and meet each other at the coffee shop

in the middle of the day, to stitch our smiles together.
This handiwork will make us whole.


Family Tree
Processing

*How long was the phone call?*
Twenty-eight minutes, forty-four seconds.

Where was the Poet?

Sitting on the porch steps with the hot phone screen against the side of her face, picking at her fingernails, letting corner chips of painted keratin fall against the fabric of her work pants.

What things did the Poet learn while on the phone?

That her friends were pulled over at night, six hours from home. That their band van was searched and a bag was found. That only one friend - the guitarist - knew about the bag. That that friend’s wrists were suddenly in handcuffs. That he was suddenly gone.

What else?

That her friends had stayed up all night, paying the police to get that one friend out. That her friends were too tired to drive. That her friends were not coming home as soon as they planned. That her friends, when they came home, would not be quite the same. That some dense and heavy silence would be sitting among them.

What was in the bag?

Needles; one spoon; tiny plastic baggies - some empty, some full and rubber banded together; one white lighter.

What was the amount of money given to the Glens Falls Police Department?

Five hundred US dollars.

In what format was it given?

Cash: One hundred dollars from the guitarist’s own pocket, the last four hundred withdrawn by the rest of the group from the band account.

How many heroin addicts did the Poet think she knew, until the phone call?

One.

What had been the fate of that one addict?

Slumping into death on the floor of his apartment, March 22, 2014.

How many months after that fate did this phone call come?

Four.

How many heroin addicts did the Poet in fact know?

Several more, though she was only beginning to learn this.
What was special to the Poet about the Subject of the phone call?

He had been the first person she trusted her most underexposed thoughts to, she had let them develop in his mind, let herself grow in the palms of his hands.

What assumption concerning the Subject had the Poet held until this moment?

That she knew all of his secrets.

Was this assumption correct?

No.

What did the Poet do upon hanging up the phone?

Looked at the peonies by her feet as they opened up to the sky and bent slightly sunward; stood up and took a sip of water; fought off a suffocating feeling of sickness; walked to her car, went to work; buried the news inside of her like an irretrievable bullet, the lines of scars beginning to form underneath her eyes; made deep breaths and shallow smiles; felt all throughout her body the stabbing pains of shrapnel and demolition.

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Officer Log, Clinton County, NY, Night Shift

- shift starts 23h30.  
- 23h09 chocolate glazed doughnut from cumberland farms, pre-wrapped (chocolate on uniform sleeve).  
- 23h48 traffic stop, old camry, tail light out, car registered to the
• 00h01 traffic stop, jeep liberty, excessive speed, two teenage females. warning. no ticket. • 00h27 large coffee from circle k, gave directions to couple looking for the old state road up by ausable chasm. • 00h32 traffic stop, saab 95, excessive speed. driver couldn’t find license, traffic stop lasted longer than usual, coffee cooled in the cruiser. ticket issued, 70 dollars. • 01h00 call to assist nearby officer with dui check and subsequent dui processing. 01h39 done. • 02h06 large coffee from circle k. • 02h12 traffic stop, erratic driving, subaru outback, three teenage boys and one teenage girl. poorly hidden bag of marijuana in center console led to search, rolling papers and marijuana residue found. citation issued. • 02h35 call to pub, break up minor domestic altercation after last call, no citation issued. • 02h59 traffic stop, excessive speed, subaru legacy, ticket issued. • 03h16 traffic stop, erratic driving, dodge ram 15 passenger, band leaving performance venue to drive out of state. marijuana left out on center console led to search, called in backup to help search through musical equipment, small cable bag found containing several small bags of heroin, cotton (presumed to be for purification of aforementioned substance), metal spoon (presumed to act as container for dissolution of aforementioned substance), three syringes. driver readily admitted to possession of said cable bag, other parties in vehicle seemingly unaware of its existence or of drivers drug use. driver arrested, taken in by backup. 03h42 done. • 04h02 small coffee and day-old corn muffin from cumberland farms. used restroom. • 04h19 traffic stop, excessive speed, mitsubishi outlander. unable to find pen. warning. no ticket. • 04h27 wipe forehead with left wrist, smear chocolate glaze by mistake, clean with napkin. • 04h30 shift finished. • 04h42 return home, shot of bourbon, undress, into bed beside wife, quiet. • 05h12 sleep.

BAIL RECEIPT
CLINTON COUNTY, New York
Police Department
then, his name,

(which no longer seemed attached to any particular person
but more at though it had been caught by chance
on this slip of paper after free-floating under the fluorescents)

then, his phone number,

802 - [redacted] - [redacted]

then, the amount paid,

$500.00

then, the charges, including, but not limited to,

possession of marijuana, impaired driving, possession of heroin

not listed:

how the defendant should tell his parents after a thing like this,
especially with one of them breathing more raggedly on the couch
every day, the TV on for comfort, looping old home movies

Waves

I.
The Governor says the addiction problem
is a rising tide,
as though it is as natural as the moon,
as though it will rise
and fall cyclically and beautifully,
as though its only sound
is a slow lapping of waves at our sidewalks,
and the swish
of cloth mops as we soak up this flood of emptiness
with elbow grease and good spirit.
The Governor says opiate treatment has gone up
770 percent in fourteen years -
hold on tight, we're spinning in one hell of a wave.
The Governor says it started as an OxyContin
and prescription problem,
but doesn't say that when he cracked down
on those cracks
in prescription safety laws and overexcited doctors,
he never thought
to extend hand or net to the folks whose fixes
he'd taken away;
he never says that this strange lapse in logic
let heroin swim through our streets, let it surf in our veins.

II.
The guitarist says it, on the hood of my car,
after getting home
from getting bailed out, his urgent fingers
around a cigarette,
telling it like it was, sounding so relieved that the cops
found him out,
the weight of a well-aged secret finally sliding away,
a tide retreating.
The guitarist says for him, it was Percocet first -
pills from a buddy's doctor,
a real doctor, so they had to have been safe. The guitarist says

he would never have shot up - never given heroin
a glance across the room -
but when the Governor took the Percs away,

there was nowhere
to go to get help, there was no one to confess to,
and when that same buddy
texted offering a cheaper, quicker wave to ride,
it was just a matter of time
before his mind got too foggy to look for another way,

and his cold fingers sent out a clammy, nervous yes.
**Telling My Best Friend about the Guitarist, though I Am Not Supposed To**

*Did you see him?*

I looked at his mattress, I saw a sunken place in the middle of it.
I looked at his wall, I saw the shadow of a man sitting.

*How is he?*

He is the palest shade of happy. His bed makes him comfortable, the sun makes him shiver. But he is there. He lets me put my eyes close to his, to try to see him. He is still seen and seeing, listened to and listening, felt and feeling, held and holding.

*What does he look like?*

His forearms are corpses, he hangs old sweatshirts like burial shrouds around them. The veins below his elbows are railroad tracks.

*Why did you look there?*

He asked me if I wanted to see where he had gone.

*Why did he want to show you?*

Because once, I was his gateway. Once, he looked into my eyes and it took hours for him to come down.

*What did you tell yourself?*

Don’t cry for his body. His eyes are his to bleed from, his veins are his to make landscapes from. It’s his right to write chalk outlines into his skin.

*What did you do?*

I covered his legs with blankets. I joked with him.
I closed the shades. I forgave him.

*Why did you do it?*

Because once, I loved him. I loved him.
Witness Testimony

It was the middle of the day when I saw him, the sun hit us hot and unforgiving, there were no more shadows to hide in. He doesn't look the junkie part anymore; his skeleton hides deeper under his skin than it did a year ago, when the arrest made us all turn our backs on each other.

He says his mom's been healthier, says their roof is getting fixed and their garden is growing better than ever. He says he feels good, says he's making good clean money, says he'll buy a new truck with it, says he's been going to the clinic.

His hands are grimy. He builds stone walls now; says it keeps his mind off the itch and scratch of the urges that creep up his wrists, quick and insistent.

He works with his hands, says it isn't the band but it feels good anyway. He barely plays his guitar anymore. He won't go to the bar anymore because the smell of alcohol makes him remember. But he still calls me 'bud.' He still calls me 'neighbor.' He still calls me, and I let it ring.

This is the truth:
He still wears the same heroin smile. He tries to cover it with stubble and garden soil smudged across his cheeks, but the corners of his lips droop down, and his mouth moves without his eyes, and he laughs like he's afraid he'll wake something.

I, too, am afraid to wake something; To face him is to face the feelings we packed away inside of ourselves, or packed into bowls and got stoned on, or packed inside of songs we wrote, but never put words to.

This is the whole truth: There was a time when we got each other high, when we got high on each other, when we lit spliffs till our smoke clouds made the beams and gray doorways of a church, when we blew smoke rings and ate Doritos till we found God.
We were skinny, we were playdough, we touched each other so gently with our fingers, and our fingerprints hung there on each other’s small bodies even after we’d showered.

When we got high, we looked at the stars together — we named them as if no one had ever named the stars, as if no one had thought to connect them before;

We were the first people to ever look up like that and see what we saw like that, nobody could see what we saw like we could see it.

But the stars only last for so long, and I loved the ground more than the sky, and I couldn’t breathe from so high up, and I didn’t want to be all of his answers anymore. Before too long, our playdough bodies lost their forms, and we let them fall between other fingers.

This is nothing but the truth: I had a need to get out, it was inside me; hand to God, this need I had was in my fingers, pulsing, ticking — so hard I could hardly keep myself still — wanting to take me out into wherever it was that outsiders came from.

So I went, to seek solace in seminar rooms, in firm handshakes and libraries and interview clothes and the soft, eager rumble of the world happening. He found something like peace in his quiet dissolving, his eggshell off-white lies, his late-night drives out of state.

He took the words we’d bottled up inside and shot them through his arms. Weed could never get him high enough to see the stars the same way we had seen them; he became all needles, and tiny plastic bags, and sweatshirts in July, and bottles of soda, and trailed-off sentences.

And nobody ever knew, or the ones who did would never tell, because secrecy grows deeper
than life itself in our fossil shell of a town,
stripped to its bones, its meat, flesh and soul
all crumbled into powder, all dissolving.

So help me, God, I didn’t know it would happen
like this — didn’t know he would ever
fall so far down to get so high up, I didn’t know
he could pack the truth away like that, so deep
behind his eyes, so camouflaged in half-smiling.

And when it finally came out,
When I finally learned how long a lie
could stretch, I followed that line back
to the beginning, and it led to me, my God, it led
to me. And though he told me that his fall
was no one’s fault but his own, those words
tasted just as smooth and light as lying —

And I want to know better than to be guilty,
but I can’t know if just a little more
of our star charts and our smoke clouds
and our fingerprints on each others’ skin
could have saved him, could have kept it all clean.

This is what I know, now:
It was the middle of the day when I saw him.
His hands are grimy. He builds stone walls now,
coats his skin in dirt and rock. And I had just
come from the backyard, my hands full
of spring soil, planting for the new season.

And we stood there before each other,
and there was soil across both of our faces,
and so much dust beneath our nails,
so much, as if both of us were still trying
to bury ourselves.
Brattleboro

My hometown calls me every two weeks, asks me if I’ve gotten my hair cut, if I’ve seen the weather reports lately.

My hometown tells me things have been the same, as if to console me, as if sameness is the safety I’ve been looking for, as if my old streets can save me.

My hometown does not want to talk about dreams, because they burn out like cigarettes, and they singe our fingers when they do.

My hometown talks selectboard politics and gas prices, and cocks its head at the name of anyone who left and never returned.

My hometown protests injustice from the comfort of its co-op parking lots.

My hometown likes to tell the TV screen all the things it thinks we could have done better.

My hometown has been sketched onto the map with train tracks & track marks; it reeks like spoiled hope and when we all come home to visit it realizes we’re better off staying away.

My hometown hurts like a scraped knee, grieves like an angry mother; my skin has not hardened to the sting of its apologies. Unfamiliar scenery is so forgiving, But my hometown sees right through me, and when I see my reflection in its slow old rivers, I can’t look myself in the eye.

My hometown stares at the world
with half-asleep eyes, detached
and falling away, glazed over
with topsoil and cigarette ashes,
but still somehow shining
in our streetlights, & watching
all of our crooked walks home.

My hometown smiles with crooked teeth,
tattoos around its birthmarks
so they stick out like fool’s gold.

My hometown drinks its coffee black,
leaves its laundry out, forgets
to hold the door.

My hometown wields
sidewalk chalk and guitar strings;
It can make enough art to battle
an army of bad days. When my hometown’s
name is called it stands up straight,
takes bruises and beatings and bumps them
into the basslines of a funk jam;

My hometown gets *down*
with the energy of a hundred teenagers
who just learned what PBR tastes like;

My hometown doesn’t put on makeup
the morning after,
and has wrinkles for dimples
from smiling through tears.

My hometown calls me
every two weeks,
asks me if I’ve gotten my hair cut,
but loves me even when I haven’t.

My hometown does not want to talk
about dreams, it just wants to see them
once we’ve made them real, just to
say it’s always known we could do it.

My hometown tells me things have been
the same, and although it may not be true,
those words are still soft blankets
over my ears, and this quiet perseverance
of the same is soft & gentle, and in the face
of so much sadness, every chalk-dust cloud
is a miracle, every crooked smile is a testament;
My hometown lets us go,
but does not forget us,
My hometown reads the weather reports
of all the places we've gone off to,
just to know if we're still warm enough –

And my hometown still shines
a light on the porch for us,
and my hometown still shines
scarlet in every sunset,
and my hometown
still shines.
Notes:

→ The Accused:
Based on information taken from the Albany, NY division of the FBI, as reported in a press release announcing the success of three long-term ongoing heroin investigations. Some names have been changed.

→ Erasure (Gov. Shumlin Announces):

→ Waves:
Based on a quote from Vermont Governor Peter Shumlin that introduces “the rising tide of drug addiction and drug-related crime spreading across Vermont” as the sole focus of his 2014 State of the State address.