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Carefully guarded borders

Yekaterina Mikhailovna Zemmel
University of Tennessee

To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Yekaterina Mikhailovna Zemmel entitled "Carefully guarded borders." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Marilyn Kallet, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Accepted for the Council:
Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

To the Graduate Council:

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We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:

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Arthur Smith

_____
Benjamin Lee

Accepted for the Council:

_____
Carolyn R. Hodges
Vice Provost and Dean
of the Graduate School

Carefully Guarded Borders

A Thesis Presented
for the
Master's of Art Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Yekaterina Mikhailovna Zemmel
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Abstract

"Carefully Guarded Borders" is a collection of poetry that focuses on the experiences of individuals often seen as *other*—deviant women, gender transgressors, and immigrants. The poems, along with the critical introduction, present a challenge to linear trajectories of poetic descent by offering openness of interpretation, as well as openness of form. The collection is arranged associatively, and its thematic threads recur rhizomatically. Although at its inception "Carefully Guarded Borders" was a biographical account of the migration from Tajikistan to the United States, at the time of the manuscript's completion, this theme was subverted by cross-currents; the finished work questions borders at the same time as it reinforces their necessity in defining openness.

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Movement and Openness within “Carefully Guarded Borders”

I hold that poetry is an expansion in every direction, and a poem is representative of a single unit in a totality; thus, this collection is in itself a segment of a line in a complicated web of Relation. In order to perceive poetry as a generative force, we must reject the linear analysis of influence posited by Harold Bloom in his *The Anxiety of Influence*—poetry is not bound by the violence and limitations inherent in identifying poetic precursors. Instead, I would argue for Eduard Glissant's poetics of Relation, a theory that does not invalidate the linear, but dismisses the centrality of Bloom's theory, subsuming it within the network of interrelation.

Anxiety of influence is an unnecessary force in poetry: poetic tension can be staged by degree of revelation or withholding of information; tension can also be inherent in the subject matter of a poem, and in fact, several of my poems address the process of emigrating a hostile country, as well as the difficulty of remembering. I have looked to several poets to aid me in my approach to transcribing my experiences; I have discovered yet others with whom to disagree and write against. Poetry borrows, revises, and extends continually, and exists in opposition to anxiety, which is a sort of paralysis, a constant vigilance, a looking over the shoulder that leads to slow progress and stumbling.

Despite its violent revisionary logic, *The Anxiety of Influence* remains an imposing authority imbuing poets and critics alike with frustration; Bloom's terminology for poetic influence invades their minds and vocabularies. Even those looking to expand on the theory of influence seem unable to get outside of it, identifying—as Douglas

Robinson does in his “Dear Harold”—as a “Bloomian ephebe1” (241), speaking of “predecessors,” and the idea of “confrontation” as a point of contact between a new and an established poet. Moreover, Bloom's theory expects and answers the recalcitrance of those who openly disregard or deny the validity of *The Anxiety of Influence*: those poets, Bloom asserts, are still inevitably swerving away from their predecessors, who exist perfectly well unacknowledged. This swerve, which is the (metaphor of) declination of the poet from his literary predecessor, is echoed in varying forms in Bloom's theory; with each “ratio,” the move away from the precursor intensifies, until finally, the ephebe reaches *Apophrades*, in which his formidable writing is so indistinguishable from the forefather's, “that at first we might believe the wheel has come full circle” (Bloom 15-16). To expand the understanding of Bloom's originating metaphor of swerve would mean moving outside his cramped circle designated for poetic influence; such a re-vision of *clinamen* (or swerve) would demand a redefinition of the relationship between poets.

This view of *clinamen* as an expanded relational network was what Lucretius had in mind in his *De Rerum Natura*2, which expands from the idea that in order for anything to be created, atoms must swerve, make contact, and influence each other's trajectories. I rather like the metaphor of *clinamen* in signifying the relationship among poets—the interaction that I envision is more fluid and discursive than what Bloom has in mind; poets inadvertently interact not only with other poets, but with prose and criticism, rather than functioning in a chain reaction of influence moving in a line of filiation from strong

1 The term, so loosely used by Bloom, more commonly signified (in ancient Greece) a young man undergoing military training.

2 More favorably translated as *On the Nature of the Universe*, rather than the alternative *On the Nature of Things*, which connotatively detracts from the expanse of the philosophy within.

poet to ephebe, *ad infinitum* (Bloom 44). With the more limited view of *clinamen,* Bloom creates anxiety—the intimate and obviously subjective investigation of a few lines of influence among the "strong" poets is reductive, and Bloom is aware of this. In an examination of the movement of atoms—especially if this movement is the extended metaphor in a theory of poetry—it is necessary to consider not just the the separate (arguably invisible) entities, but the very fabric they constitute.

Edouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* proposes such a fabric—Relation—in which there is an "interdependence of the cycles" whose "corresponding patterns of movement are in tune" and "construct unities whose interdependent variances jointly piece together the interactive totality" (92-93). Relation, also, is "totality in evolution, whose order is continually in flux and whose disorder one can imagine forever" (133). Such a view of a totality in flux is both dizzying and exhilarating when applied to the relationships between poets, and yet it is necessary, as this revision in perception would not only create a valid space for "weak" poets, or those who seem eclipsed, subdued in the periphery of the literary canon, but it would also elucidate some of the fractures in Bloom's violent and monolithic *The Anxiety of Influence*. The fissures in this theory are many, and in recognizing them we can see Bloom—despite his leaning—working within the same fabric that constitutes Relation; in repositioning Bloom, his prediction of the death of poetry—"murdered by its own past strength"—can be amended.

Although Bloom postulates that his "concern is only with strong poets, major figures," in a notable uttering, he admonishes that we must "know each poem by its *clinamen,*" or the distance it travels from an acknowledged predecessor, which allows us

to “'know' that poem in a way that will not purchase knowledge by the loss of the poem's power” (43). Through “know each poem” he sets—perhaps inadvertently—a different aesthetic that supported by the singular and individuating “each,” with an implied *every* appended. As a poet, and also as a reader, I am unwilling to accept the disregard of non-canonical poetry, or poetry that could be said to exist on the periphery; I question the critic (Bloom) who believes a poem not widely read as one not worth reading, who practices that violent imposition of hierarchical thinking. Here, in the “know each poem,” Bloom allows *any* poem, every poem. Thus, not only is the poem a part of Relation (and even with the narrow scope of *clinamen*, the poem is still distinct), but it remains “an irreducible singularity;” it is what gives the poem freedom, this “right to opacity,” which is “the real foundation of Relation” (Glissant 190). In the act of approaching each poem, there is an entrance into the double-contract of understanding: the poem as the entity or atom; the poem as a movement to weave into a fabric—the poem is a strong and amalgamating fiber.

Glissant expunges the inevitability of the linear, and places into wider perspective the hierarchy that is taken as standard by Bloom. Instead of altogether dismissing limited trajectories—despite acknowledging their “manner [as] fragmentary, reticent, and stubbornly blind”—he redefines them, explaining their place in a larger scheme of Relation (31). *The Anxiety of Influence* attempts to legitimate “some impossible global truth,” but Glissant argues that “it simply adds something to Relation insofar as [it] is a synthesis-genesis that never is complete” (174). Relation subsumes the linear trajectories. Within this rhizomatic Relation, poems (as well as any supposed lines of succession) are

interconnected, not in the one to one ratio of violence and conflict, but in a one to all generative matrix. Even within a familial lineage, the predecessors of one are many, and multiply exponentially with each step back to examine a generation—the great-grandparents are more numerous than the parents; one, it is needless to say, begets/ influences more than one, projecting an expansion in several different directions. To describe poetic expansion in terms of the dominating influence of a single poet on a single successor is to "epitomize ethnocentric and frequently naïve projections of Western thought" (Glissant 59).

Bloom concludes *The Anxiety of Influence* with *Apophrades*, "or the return of the dead" (15) by allowing the motion initiated by his description of *clinamen* to come full-circle; it appears that the furthest swerve away from the predecessor of which a poet is capable, the highest degree of poetic achievement is to create poetry that is indistinguishable from that of the precursor3. Bloom locates success in the perpetuation of the strong poet's strongest moment, the stagnant ideal, and thus reinforces the monolith of canonization. Homogenization seems to be the goal, a reversal of the devolution of poetic excellence whose center is Shakespeare, who was immune to anxiety of influence (Bloom 11). *The Anxiety of Influence* proposes an absolute and intolerant rootedness of oedipal struggle and lineage; poetic ability passes on from predecessor to ephebe through misreading. This scheme enforces a strong center and disregards the periphery; simultaneously, the theory hastens the death of poetry, the decline of which is already visible in the "Modernist and post-Modernist heirs" (Bloom 10).

3 The example Bloom provides: John Ashbery's poetry equalling in excellence that of his predecessor, Wallace Stevens.

On the other hand, Relation is "an absolute (that is, a totality finally sufficient to itself) that, paradoxically, sets us free from the absolute's intolerances" (Glissant 27). Relation celebrates that which is non-hierarchical, non-linear, and rather than falling into stagnation and death, "the poet's word leads from periphery to periphery...it makes every periphery into a center; furthermore, it abolishes the very notion of center and periphery" (Glissant 29). Trajectories that lead to a presupposed center are inadequate. Glissant employs the structure of the rhizome to destabilize the notion of the center, or even the need for the center: Relation subsumes all, and it is this moving totality that is more democratic, more descriptive of reality. Deleuze and Guattari declare in *A Thousand Plateaus* that they "will never ask what a book means, as signified or signifier; [they] will not look for anything to understand in it. [They] will ask what it functions with, in connection with what other things it does or does not transmit intensities, in which other multiplicities its own are inserted and metamorphosed" (4). Glissant echoes, "Relation informs not simply what is relayed but also the relative and the related" (Glissant 27). He calls for an expansion, a zooming out, a "poetics that is latent, open, multilingual in intention, directly in contact with everything possible" (Glissant 32).

Such an openness, a multiplicity of possibilities and interactions may seem intimidating, but only because Relation resists the violence of comprehension[4] with which we are familiar. I would contend that the Western poetry world is most comfortable with the "great" poets and the linear influence they transmit to their followers. This is, of course, a generalization—there many poets who successfully contest Bloomian structures

4 From the Latin *comprehendere*, to seize, to arrest, to snatch.

of filiation through innovative forms or adaptations of well-worn received forms for their material, and I hope to soon discuss my interaction with them. At present, however, I would like to address one of the persistent symptoms of linear filiation—the demand and impatience for the next "great" poet. In a recent *New York Times Book Review*, David Orr examines the need for "greatness" in poetry; his essay "The Great(ness) Game," takes up where *The Anxiety of Influence* leaves off, with extolling John Ashbery, and bemoaning the lack of another "great" poet to fill the expected vacancy created by "Ashbery and his generation" (14). Orr continues on to defend the need for "greatness" in poetry, presupposing a clearly Bloomian framework, as he pontificates on how to define "greatness," and whether we should allow the likes of Elizabeth Bishop to join the ranks of "great" poets. This contemplation of *how* to define "greatness" presumes that we have the need to define it at all, that poetry necessitates an exclusive and clearly defined canon. Orr acknowledges poetry's expansion, and the need for multiculturalism, and yet dismisses non-American writers as "the perfect surface upon which to project our desire for the style and persona we associate with old-fashioned greatness" (15). Does not the emergence of non-American/ immigrant writers instead suggest a rejection of the singular standard of "greatness," does it not signal an openness afforded to us through the realization of Relation? As an immigrant poet, I function within what many view to be a periphery of poetry; I do not strive for the kind of "greatness" that is exemplified by canonization, nor do I view the contribution of the canonized poets as any more significant. Participation in multiple trajectories, meaningful expansion of poetic networks is more important than attempting to attain recognition.

David Orr is in opposition to this view, claiming that “when we lose sight of greatness, we cease being hard on ourselves and on one another; we begin to think of real criticism as being 'mean' rather than as evidence of poetry's health” (15). However, I maintain that as long as the desire to emulate and uncover poetic “greatness” persists, we are not critical enough, keeping too narrow a scope, rather than widening poetic possibilities. Moreover, criticism of poetry is not limited to identifying “greatness,” but is instead as multivalent as poetry itself. Orr concludes his essay by condescending: if we can't achieve “greatness,” perhaps we should instead focus on writing poetry that is “moving and funny and beautiful”(15). Does this mean, then, that poetry that is whiny, cute, and pretty is the mark to strive for? In what direction should poetry propel us? I think that poetry with an argument, poetry that is important and poetry that *does something* is what matters more than achieving “greatness.” Poetry should, in effect, *be* criticism through its stance: the focus on the image alone, or poetic language alone, is not sufficient—without openness, poetry does not defamiliarize the everyday events and objects, but needlessly iterates them one the page.

Although Edouard Glissant offers the negation of linearity through Relation, the rhizomatic model of poetic interactions can be daunting; moreover, a reader examining a single poem—or even a series of poems—would not necessarily perceive the poem(s) as participating in a network. If, through Bloom and others' influence, we are trained to recognize linearity, it is linearity that we will acknowledge, and linearity that will continue to define the limits of poetry. Patriarchal power structures are stubbornly persistent; Lyn Hejinian, in “The Rejection of Closure,” articulates poetic ways of

resisting them. Relying, in part, on Umberto Eco's *The Open Work*, she situates openness within a singular text , asserting that the "open text is one which both acknowledges the vastness of the world and is formally differentiating;" the text, or poem "is form that provides an opening" (41). As a contrast, Hejinian gives examples of a "closed" text in the introduction to the chapter: the poet who creates a "closed" text is one who maintains a "smug pretension to universality" within the work—a "poet as guardian to Truth[5]" (41). Such poems do not allow readers an entrance, do not allow multiplicity and multilingualism—the "closed" poem, although a portion of the fabric of Relation, does not function to reveal the possibility of networks, and instead works to reinforce the linear. Thus Relation, although not dependent on open texts, is obviated through them; the open text reinforces collaboration between readers and readers, between authors and readers, between authors and authors. The multiplicity of intersections and the plentitude of interpretations undermine hierarchy and linear relationships.

The "open text" is one that "invites participation, rejects the authority of the writer over the reader and thus, by analogy, the authority implicit in other (social, economical, cultural) hierarchies" (Hejinian 43). I do not claim that all the poems in "Carefully Guarded Borders" succeed in maximizing openness, however I do think that because of the variety of form and subject matter, as well as a maintained vigilance of perspective, none of them create a "closed text." For example, "Nomad," a pantoum[6], utilizes repetition to achieve the effect of defamiliarization. And although the repetition of lines

5 These characteristics are unsurprisingly similar to some of David Orr's qualifications for or signposts of "greatness. If even a few of the guidelines by which Orr defines "greatness" are symptoms of a closed work, the definition of "greatness," and the endeavor to define it are further problematized.

6 See Stephanie Lenox's poem "The Dance" in *The Heart That Lies Outside the Body*.

is different than the sort of repetition in Hejinian's *My Life,* I crafted the poem believing that repetition "challenges our inclination to isolate, identify, and limit the burden of meaning given to an event (the sentence or line)" (Hejinian 44). The form enhances the poem, not merely in representing the subject matter mimetically—although I had hoped to recreate the rhythm of "the train that never plans on stopping" that appears in the final stanzas—but also in describing the movement of memory, the halting rhythm of remembering my childhood. The combination of memory and consciousness, like the progression of the pantoum, is a progression of two steps forward, and one step back, in order to repeat what has already been said, but also to learn from it something new. No one line in "Nomad" is remarkable—the language is accessible and mostly ordinary—the poem almost deceives the reader into finishing it; as in the poem itself, so to the reader, it is the movement that becomes important. So often, the home, the destination are important, not the movement: because it is grounded in motion, "Nomad" defamiliarizes and destabilizes the reader's normative perspective.

Because several of the poems in the collection rely on relocating memories to the forefront in order to write about the experiences, movement—not just the literal movement to describe migration, but movement representative of the process of memory—is a recurring element. "Thus Far, A Summer of Ease" offers a pre-apocalyptic idyll, a crystallization of a summer moment; despite the focus on the "boons of summer" in the city by the Pamir mountains, there is the "back and forth" both of the speaker and mother, and the two-step process of remembering. The literal movement in this poem is more precise than in "Nomad," and thus, a more condensed lyric. "Dushanbe: Return

After Exodus" relies on several different kinds of movement, (re)creating an atmosphere of unease. The title indicates transience; the movement of memory in the first stanza is not the easy back and forth of retrieval, but the re-telling of events is problematized by the traumatized father. The breathing, the very motion of atoms, the associative leap between the father-figure and Lucretius echo and intensify the movement described in "Nomad." The "peach-stone in pocket" in the final stanza is a remainder from the bounty in "Thus Far;" the poems are intelligible separately, but in combination, the repetition and iteration of focal elements becomes evident.

Not only is there a thematic unity, but unity of overall image—as with the structure of the pantoum, there is repetition for the purpose of examining different emphases. The "breasts of my motherland" are "apexes of elevation" in the poem "Object of Desire." Whereas the former is an affectionate term, the latter is more ambiguous, and the emotion is left to the reader's interpretation. "Object of Desire" was initially a response to the well-known "mother's nipples" prompt—poets such as Brenda Hillman, Robert Hass, and Galway Kinnell have written poems based on the same prompt—as I was attempting to write it, I found that I could not address it directly. As with other poems in "Carefully Guarded Borders," looking away from an object is more persistent than an intense focus on a singular thing: especially with the topic of mother's nipples, I very deliberately approached the subject indirectly, and began with the difficulty of writing about it. In an earlier draft, the poem began with a dialogue between an interrogator and the speaker, and an explicit refusal to address the mother; after several revisions, however, I began seeing this opening exchange as potentially a point of

closure. With such an entrance, the poem could be little else than a response to the assignment—the interpretive power and openness cheapened by the easy admission. The former title of "Object of Desire"—"Scraps"—was further explication of the poetic approach, and was merely descriptive of the poem's shape; the new title provides a tenor and unites the sections with tacit connections, allows the poem to reach outside of itself and connect with other pieces in the collection.

In this poem, the objects of desire are unattainable, shape-shifting even in the opening stanza: "the donkey skin that had been fooling everyone" conceals the speaker previous to the moment of revelation; even the "automaton" is a construction with hidden parts. Fuller disclosure occurs in the spaces between stanzas and between sections, and again, the poem is assembled from discursive movements. In the final section of "Object of Desire," the conflation of the human mother and the country allows for palpability of alienation—it is assured confusion, and as with previously discussed poems, there is a sense of movement and a lack of closure as the poem ends.

The title for the collection comes from this last section—here, "carefully guarded borders" is iterated, but differently: the associations are literal (a country with a closed border; a brusque and forbidding mother(land)). And yet both, rather than halting movement, make figurative movement possible: the borders provide the possibility of travel, serve as signposts for direction in interpretation. The guarded borders suggest a potential danger in the process of crossing them, and simultaneously imply the necessity for escape or rescue; borders also imply bordering countries and interconnectedness, albeit on a smaller level than Relation—the very Relation that can be seen as a collection

of linearities and the intersections between them. The “carefully guarded borders” obviate the rigidity of patriarchal filiation at the same time as they defy them—just as Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* insists on strictly delineating relationships among poets, but, as I presented earlier, can be re-defined as a limited (and violently limiting) trajectory.

A few of the poems arise from the unwillingness to write autobiographically, and there, undoubtedly, the title of the collection may suggest closure and inaccessibility: some of the shorter poems about my childhood, despite several revisions, remain tight-lipped, no more than fragments. However, even poems such as “Apprenticeship” and “Belarus, 1990” invite participation, allow the reader to create the circumstances surrounding the poems. I hoped for a balance between specificity and uncertainty, selecting enough information to create a connection, and yet stopping at a point that provided a reader with an interpretive foothold. In “Apprenticeship,” the common action of cooking an eggplant provides entry, while the relationship of the speaker with the mother, and the relationship of the speaker to others is brief enough for a reader to create interpretations. The world of “Belarus, 1990” is potentially more alienating and unfamiliar, but the images provide some comfort: the rhythm of walking, the gray landscape and the movement of the umbrella.

Although several poems in “Carefully Guarded Borders” are economical[7] and provide a clear sense of boundaries, necessitating readers' interpretation—there are a

7 The ones I have in mind here are “Diversion,” “Where I Was Born is Now Dead,” and “Pride.” Some elements within these shorter poems recur elsewhere in the collection; these poems provide points of connection, as well as serve to contrast the longer pieces.

couple poems that are more sprawling, experimental in form. “Accomplishment Pancakes” symbolizes the expansion that can (and should) occur in the reading of a poem, especially a poem that seems restrained. The nine-line poem is rather domestic, uneventful, while at the same time vulnerable and personal—it is different than most of the other poems in the collection—there is a focus on a scene, but rather than alienation and restlessness, the poem depicts companionship and warmth, before abruptly, almost self-consciously ending with the description of the pancakes. The footnotes intend to expand the poem, to provide the back-story for some of the elements, and to explicate others[8]; I initially thought the poem unsalvageable, and hesitated to include it with the others. However, even if it is not polished or well crafted, “Accomplishment Pancakes” is illustrative of boundaries: in expanding the poem through footnotes, I removed some of its openness, and whereas in an unexplained version, the reader has several options for interpreting the word “blotchy” in the final line, the footnote dictates the meaning, creating closure[9].

“Subjective History of Bread,” is only a slightly more open text because of the variety of elements present within, and because of the interpretative effort necessary to combine those elements. The poem within the poem, “Third day of Fasting,” serves as a nucleus, as the generative moment for the rest of the poem—and again, the poem depends on repetition, as the fasting in the central fragment is echoed in the “waiting in line” and

8 It is perhaps of interest to note that at the time of writing this poem, I was unfamiliar with Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*. Compare the use of footnotes in “Accomplishment Pancakes” to the footnotes in this introduction; although inevitable due to the word processor, once combined, the numeration extends from the intro to poem.

9 Or openness: this additional information in the footnotes of the poem could also be an expansion in a direction provided by the speaker/poet. I was content to pronounce the footnotes for the side of *closure*, but a recent reviewer disagreed, and not unfoundedly.

"rationed bread." Delayed gratification, therefore, is not just literal, but also exists in piecing the poem together; with each of the three sections that begin with a year, there is further remove from the process of making the bread, as it is fetishized. Simultaneously, on the left side of the poem, the ingredients of simple bread attempt to undo the commodification and recreate the experience of making bread—the spacing simulates the patience, the time investment necessary to make bread. I like the experimental form of "Subjective History of Bread," the separation of the central element—the lack of temporal identification within it, and a more generalized desire for bread; however, the form can also be distracting, detracting from the argument of the poem. In re-evaluating the poem, I find myself agreeing with Joseph Brodsky,[10] in that "the moment art relinquishes the principle of necessity and comprehensibility, it surrenders its position and dooms itself to fulfilling a purely decorative function" (221). The form is not necessary for the subject matter—it is unclear how it is contributing to the development of the poem; on the other hand, several of the aberrant-form poems in Brenda Hillman's *Loose Sugar* (especially the "visitor fragments") expose the process that is concealed in a unified poem, and defamiliarize effectively.

Rather than using poetry to re-create my personal experiences, I prefer to allow my history to facilitate the crafting of the poems—the difference is in the emphasis. In a time when singularly autobiographical and self-referential poems are abundant, the skillful crafting of the poems is important, as well as the poems that have the potential to

10 In the same essay, Brodsky states that the poet indebted to his predecessors for language, and that "he should write in such a way as to be understood by his ancestors" (222). I do not think it necessary to explicitly extend my stance on such a pronouncement; my critique of *The Anxiety of Influence* can be applicable to some of Brodsky's views as well.

incite change (Van Duyn). I wish to situate my poetry in a realm more political than autobiographical, and poems such as "Ars Poetica" and "Fallout" make definite gestures towards exposing the difficulties of global circumstances, as well as the difficulties inherent in the revelation. "Fallout" concludes with an overwhelmed speaker who wants to "silence these half-memories," and yet, the poem does address the consequences of the catastrophe; the tension reflects the conflict subsequent to the Chernobyl disaster, as there was an oscillation between levels of disclosure.[11] The poem also foregrounds that such events are often forgotten, and become more like a fading bruise, rather than a wound that leaves a scar—the poem could serve as a reminder that the catastrophe continues to have effect, and is an ineradicable part of the history of a people. I have often thought that "Fallout" is too ostentatious a poem—the details of the second half of the poem too graphic; and yet, I agree with the words of Susan Aizenberg, "forgive me if this seems/ extreme—I don't know how to make things/ ordinary anymore" (45). In this context, it is ordinary to avoid addressing difficult issues; it is ordinary to focus the poem on an image, without incorporating the image into an argument; it is ordinary to write about the self without acknowledging the self as implicated in a much larger network or relations.

Although "Ars Poetica," focuses on a single childhood incident, it carries the conviction that in poetry, the violations matter most—the complicity of the reader with the poem must move beyond accessibility, but into defamiliarization and change, a realization of openness and Relation. The poem begins with the anticipation of food, the impatience and collaborative effort of those waiting; the first half of the poem almost

11 *Glasnost*. Also, see Vladimir Gubaryev's excellent play *Sarcophagus: A Tragedy* for an example of the range of reactions following the Chernobyl catastrophe.

depicts the crowd as ants, swarming around something dying. The speaker is not present until the last third of the poem, and is described only through the relationship with the fish living in the bathtub. That relationship with the fish is disturbed by the necessity to survive: what is an object of affection becomes food, a sacrifice to provide sustenance for the family. The perception of fish as a commodity is undermined by "Ars Poetica;" moreover, the final line is ambiguous: is it with acceptance that the speaker eats the fish, or is it a traumatizing surrender? The fish is a recurring symbol in "Carefully Guarded Borders," and whereas it is consumed and silent at first, in "Diversion," the fish acquires agency and walks away sassily—again, there are borders, and unexpected movement through the seemingly impenetrable.

In writing this introduction to my collection of poems, I have been wary of creating closure by providing too much background to the work, and thus forestalling some interpretations. As a result, I have not addressed several of the poems: it is my hope that you will consider the ways in which the poems intersect, and extend from the material provided. Moreover, I hope that the first part of this introduction can be more firmly attached to my poems than the latter portion; I hope that a rejection of linearity and closure is implicit in my work. In "Carefully Guarded Borders," "greatness" is not important—rather, my work extends the possibility of movement, even beyond walls that seem opaque and unscalable—*The Anxiety of Influence* is one such barrier, but of course, there are many others. Let us perceive and extend Relation, which can be seen in the original context of *clinamen* in Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura*:

Although all the atoms are in motion, their totality appears to stand totally

> motionless...This is because the atoms all lie far below the range of our senses. Since they are themselves invisible, their movements also must elude observation...Often on a hillside fleecy sheep, as they crop their lush pasture, creep slowly onward, lured this way or that by grass that sparkles with fresh dew, while the full-fed lambs gaily frisk and butt. And yet, when we gaze from a distance, we see only a blur—a white patch stationary on the green hillside. (45)

Let us embrace and perpetuate multilingualism, and allow linearity its own place, not as an imposing hierarchy, but as part of the greater substance that is poetry, that is the world.

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Nomad

What does it mean to leave and not remember leaving?
Tajikistan taught me how to live in exile.
Beloved birthplace that I can't return to—
Roof of the World, rooted in seismic trouble,

Tajikistan: taught me how to live in exile.
I don't remember departing from the mountains,
Roof of the World, rooted in seismic trouble,
refuge of cities ripe with violence.

I don't remember departing from the mountains,
breasts of my motherland, nameless peaks,
refuge of cities ripe with violence—
a mere impression of flying over them.

Breasts of my motherland, nameless peaks,
snow-covered knuckles of a clenching fist.
A mere impression of flying over them,
persistent covering of ground and ocean.

Snow-covered knuckles of a fist clenching
made movement home. I live in the
persistent covering of ground and ocean,
the destination growing unimportant, obsolete.

Made movement home, I live in
memory of sleeper cabin, conductor just departed,
the destination unimportant, obsolete,
he's in the corridor and closing windows.

Memory of sleeper cabin: conductor just departed—
aboard the train that never plans on stopping—
he's in the corridor and closing windows,
outside, the birch trees propping up the sky.

Aboard the train that never plans on stopping,
I ponder the involuntary spasm of travel.
Outside, the birch trees propping up the sky,
train's susurration on steel veins of cities.

I wonder at the involuntary spasm of travel,
beloved birthplace that I can't return to.
Train's sussuration on steel veins of cities,
The sounds of leaving, and forgetting, having left.

Apprenticeship

Sauteing the eggplant in olive oil,
adding it to the limp, translucent onions,
I smile like my mother in an old photograph,
my mother who knew
the precise gestures of food.
And from a young age I helped her
salt the eggplant before cooking it
to rid it of inherent bitterness.
She also knew and taught me
how to talk shit
about people the moment that they left,
just barely crossed the threshold of the door.
From her I learned distrust, so now—
in friendship, like in cooking,
I like a sense of readiness:
I wash the cutting board, I sharpen the knives.

Accomplishment Pancakes

In the almost-afternoon morning,
He opens his eyes, pupils constricted
from the brilliance of dreams.[12]
Our bodies are reluctant[13], having lain
so long together; hunger
drives us out of bed.[14]
This is the morning of Accomplishment[15] Pancakes,
he proclaims, flipping over
blackberried, blotchy[16] little things.

---

12 I want to approach the subject indirectly, I want to make it something I tell another, a persona in the poem. I want to let you overhear my conversation. (Eavesdropping, voyeuristic poets.) What do you want to know? That I've never before been happy, have always had all my small joys tempered with such meddling guilt. My parents cultivated wariness of good things, and always I created doubt and carried it in my palms to extinguish any fledgling, warming flame.

13 I am reluctant to write about the present because of its proximity; it is too personal. Even now, I want to say that I haven't had enough time to process the present, but that's not true. Writing about the present makes me feel exposed and unimportant. After all, any present becomes a past, becomes warped by subjectivity.

14 Once, there was the first day—a beginning—when I walked up the small hill between our apartments, and between games of Scrabble, he fixed me roasted beets in olive oil, with garlic—so unexpected, and I wanted to live in that moment, open it like a book and fold myself between the delicate pages. I didn't know then—as I know now—how he could chop bok choy for the stir-fry, his hands and knife blade becoming one in the precision, the bok choy saying its name over and over very fast with each cut.

15 The accomplishment of reading, writing—the work that is left to be done; we plunge into our scholarly endeavors, and I feel young and out of place among the stacks of books, the poetry and words with which I'm trying to become more comfortable.

16 This one word—blotchy—is a symbol of endearment, although it could be seen as an undercutting, undermining of the feeling I want to portray. I want to see the imperfection and simultaneously acknowledge the happiness, rather than focus on the blemish, which would only instigate the newly-extinguished guilt. It is weeks later, as I pour the coffee, I know I don't believe in being lucky, but I am fortunate, am happy.

Belarus, 1990

My father, you feed us with your efforts yet one more week.

It starts to rain as you walk out of the unused airport,
the deal accomplished at this new black-market site:
with ration coupons running out,
you traded in the rations of alcohol for loaves of bread.
And with each step of carrying provisions home,
the saggy fabric of your worn umbrella moves
like the asthmatic lungs of your father,
the slick gray sag between the metal spokes is frantic, arbitrary rhythm.

Fish

I'd seen her four months ago when I visited a friend at the psychiatric hospital; the girl had been there for weeks and Jesus had started speaking to her before meals. She complained about it loudly to everyone.

She was smoking a long cigarette outside of Kroger, chatting into her shiny pink cell phone. *I'm trying to be happy in November*. The word *happy* was like the sound a fish mouth makes in air.

I want to tell her that I, too, am thrashing in the nets of melancholy, brought up onto this littered shore, reluctantly saluting the unfamiliar white sky.

Use of Force

Suspended without pay, effective immediately.
Arrested on charges of a sexual relationship with a student.

The girl is seventeen,
she skipped Biology for a week, avoided dissections;
I penned excuse notes: *Please allow…*
Blood rushing to a fist clenched is her cunt,
her cunt I fucked with fingers in the faculty lounge,
thinking of oceans, "glassgreen and stormy."

Creation is a venture of not only mind, but body—
the orange nipples, orange mouth,
strong arms interpreted by Schiele—
he couldn't have been not implicated with
the headless torso, muscular white legs,
green dress hiked up as she steps forward,
pelvic thrust, hips: narrow, young.
He painted violent angularity to skin,
knowing flesh lacerates flesh
into remembering, and then attachment.

The girl is seventeen
and I am twice her age.
Her cunt: indignant mouth.
I try to grade the art portfolios in my back room:
collage, self-portrait, photo-narrative.

Discount the circumstance of meeting,
tilt back the abacus to zero—
I am worn thin with the "what if"—
there are less plausible events than mine,
more complicated, improbable as
the discovery of bread:
thresh, grind—combine
girl and me, my girl—
defiant cunts (they'd say).

Three counts of statutory rape, two counts of
sexual battery by an authority figure.

In This Difficult Economy

I watch what the roaches will do next.
Last week, in the cupboard where
I keep flour, there was a cluster of
hatchlings, each no bigger than
pupil constricted with sunlight—
they were eating a grain of sugar.
Although horrified when
I found another roach family
behind the outlet plate, I admired
their ability to seek out warm, closed-in
spaces this winter. They like electricity,
flock where the flow of it is most felt,
a warmth between the plug and
socket, or where cord connects to
stereo—they crawl in, somehow
between the hard shell and electric
interior, and continue their coupling.

Ars Poetica

Even before the cistern truck
sloshed fish into the barrels at the store,
the pushy customers swarmed and spread
the word until in ordered droves
the horde received and carried their allotted shares
in plastic bags up to their cement flats.
My parents bought one fish,
and still alive they brought it home.
I was allowed to put the fish into the bathtub,
where I could watch it swim and
love its gills and feed it crumbs.
And on the third day it was dead.
We ate it.

Thus Far, A Summer of Ease

Tajikistan, 1989

Street vendors offer boons of summer:
dark amber sweetness of dried apricots,
translucent golden raisins by the cupful.
Three women in zig-zag patterned dresses
dawdle in the marketplace;
a surly boy prods two goats, the smaller one
is dropping turds in the dirt path.
A little farther: smell of scorched lamb
on seasoned skewers. On our
walks in the park by the airport,
I held mother's hand. The dirty
bus-stop kiosk under the mulberry
trees already scattering fruit marked
our half-way point.
Every day—
there and back, now, back and forth
again in memory. Sometimes the treat
of carbonated water sweetened with syrup
in a freshly-washed octagonal glass.

Old English has one word for *greatly wounded*

Forwundian.

(Recite the sacred word)

I imagine a boy standing by the dumpsters behind graffiti-covered apartments; he is swinging a rock on a frayed rope above his head—a hardened look on his face, jaw tight as the rock breaks free and travels in its fixed purposeful direction through the air.

Recite.

Tightly.

Gaze.

Words like tethered stones orbiting.

(*Nobody I have known has ever died*.

"Pull your clothes tightly about you.
Fix your gaze.")

Post-Op

Wisdom teeth made their own plans—persistent, root-tentacled, pushing
for years through moist gums to the dim surface, wielding their enamel;
unnaturally angled bouquets of nerve, marrow, bone—impacted.
I ignored the warning signs and x-rays: bone of my jaw (tooth-bearing, hinged),
set them straight.

We carry out her discontent, grow bony armor. Like moles or embryos we push to surface.
...

Gauze-packed mouth, blood and spit,
dissolving stitches only half-way closed the holes; the holes
developed their own hunger, snatched scraps from mouth.
In medicated haze. My tongue too sensitive,
too large—remaining teeth too sharp, inevitable.

We're conquered—lifeless pebbles evicted from comfortable rooms.

From Nowhere

Last night I re-lived a long-lost dream of flying: tucked legs under,
broke the line that had me tethered to this winter season,
flew over those yellowing leaves in the park by the airport.

Severing the sap-filled veins, the trees reverse nourishment, pull
resources underground, recede into themselves. Falling, the leaves
dream of days when they were a diopside background to everything.

In a photograph my father took and home-developed, my mother,
younger than I am now, hand on stroller, sits on a park bench;
her expression is *Not again!* as I bravely posit the selected leaves

into the stroller, and a little pile accumulates. I have the biggest
leaf in my hand, and look industrious; my mother appears ready
to go home. When people ask me where I'm from and if I've ever

returned, my answer—like my life—half-scripted, half-abridged:
Too dangerous, I haven't made it over. In fact, I am from nowhere,
not just unable to return, but if I did, there would be nothing

of the place that I remember left; a city scraped clean to its
geography, a few hovels, irregular electricity. My memory
is of a place that exists only in the picture,

sometimes I wonder if I didn't make it up—the safety of a city
in the valley, the ordinary sun-bathed day in autumn, family out
on a Saturday for a stroll: these cannot happen given the conditions.

In this present somewhere where I am not from, dead leaves crawl
warbling for affection in an unrecognizable place that could have
once been a park. They are impatient for shelter, if not for home.

Where I was Born is Now Dead

The child I once was
sat under the overwhelming jasmine,
took it as given
that there was no bread, but there were flowers,
plentiful as tanks, the flora of the streets.
No dolls except the ones I fashioned of hibiscus blooms,
pulling out the pistil, drawing eyes and mouth
at the flower's green base.

And now, I find the person who I am a stranger
realizing: the death of a place
is when one cannot go back to it.
I cannot comprehend my childhood,
my birthplace, swept cleanly, violently off all maps.

Fallout

Two decades later, Chernobyl is a bruise—
blunt impact, capillaries burst,
blood burrowed between skin and flesh,
black-and-blue radiation level maps.
My present safety is a deceptive hide, I feel
half-drowned in past,
in Minsk
four years after the disaster:
radioactivity in soil leached poison to food;
foals grew eight-legged.
Children born with organs in skin-sacks attached—misshapen, breathing.
Hydrocephalic twins
abandoned,
orphanages still
filled.
Whole villages evacuated; subsequent victims' cause of death as *radiation* was expunged.
The hand-held Geiger counter I owned at seven had no more meaning than a thermometer to me.

I want to crawl into a tree, hibernate as bears do,
silence these half-memories.

Red Tulips

When the Soviet Union disbanded into a handful of ruffian states,
everyone sold their things for whatever kopeks they could get.
My grandmother, though, bought red tulips,
pressed them to her chest during the bus-ride to the flat;
out of the dust of May, she opened the door to hoarded heirlooms:
mother's prized accordion, silver-plated samovar stashed
in the bedroom corner; arranged the flowers in the vase,
and transgressed social boundaries with her, the other
woman who was never named, or spoken of, except
when my father told me that this woman stole and hid
my grandmother's passport—in what? a desperate act
to keep her lover captive in a disintegrating country?
And when he told me, it resonated with the prosaic parts of me,
those portions that insist on thinking of all the hiding places for the documents,
the passport keeping still and silent—where?

My Former Lover Transitions,

the surgery to remove his breasts is in a month;
Reduction mammoplasty. Wait till you see the scars!
in practiced masculine voice that sometimes falters.
He speaks of it so coolly, as though testosterone from the injections
were a plane, high altitude, and he, a passenger not knowing
there's been a crossing, a new country breached.
His facial hair--sparse goatee, bushy sideburns--
spreads *with the audacity of kudzu*, he proclaims;
his squat male body: broad shoulders, hairy sockless feet,
hips—narrowing persistently, and those huge tits,
vigilantly bound by several stretchy layers.

Gabriel, he calls himself now, intersex,
a creature mythical or angelic.
At times I think of him as female.
I make mistakes with pronouns, although never
in front of him. I think of his nipples, the aureolae
soft and generous, neither pink nor brown,
how they'll diminish into maleness.
I'm not sure how I feel about my new nipples—
I haven't met them yet.

Pumpkin

I wanted to speak of love,
but with the pumpkin in front of me,
I cannot look at the periphery.

Escape autumnal gray,
I sit inside it, my skin tightens.
I made a sister out of the seeds.

Within a single leaf, the change to
two or more colors. The pumpkin, I think
could be several things.

Stem, former umbilical, is dry.
Ten resonant sections, prior to blade.
I try hard to pick up the cleaver.

(I try to pick up the heavy
I try black handle
I try eyeless socket)

I want to scrape
insides clean, roast the slices.
Puree to make filling for a pie.
Wanted to write of love!

Diversion

When I lived between resonant white walls, I used to have bad dreams. Then one day I found in my body a place where a substantial furry moth was keeping still. I became short-tempered with stationary objects.

Every so often the villagers mumble my story:
On the second day the fish in the bathtub was fed up with breathing in little pieces of her own shit, remembered her legs and stepped out. Smacked her sweetlips, walked through the door with a swagger, giddy-feeling her clean feet on gravel.

Object of Desire

I put Her nipple to my mouth; what I hadn't expected was
a thaw, a peeling away of the donkey-skin that had been fooling
everyone.

Before I had made love to women, I was an automaton; afterwards,
too raw.

It takes water for a seed to sprout. (Soil for it to grow.)

I could say that I clung to them as substitutes for comfort my mother
refused to give, but that is only half-true.

*

A photograph: Patterned wallpaper, patterned blouse, my mother—even
her eyes are smiling, mischievous; she is blushing at what is not in the
photograph, the person holding the camera is

*

She pulls up the neckline of her nightgown.
Her hair in the sunlight, like spun sugar.
Her smell of yeast and dish-soap.
There must have been a time when she was happy.

*

My mother is a country with carefully guarded borders.
Totalitarian regime, attentive equilibrium, no tourists.
Within the walls, the country flourishes invisibly, or stagnates.
Inhabitants are fed, or starve; it does not matter with an impenetrable
border.

My mother is not a body.
A country has hills, not breasts; the nipples nothing more than apexes of
elevation.
If she is not a body, I am shrapnel. My father and mother made war, and I
was the by-product or reminder, idling close to your heart.

Ockham’s Razor

I am pre-casual-
ty, devising
ways to fear
that which came
afterwards—
the wars, tanks,
gouged sky.
(O!) Lacerated land-
scape of my birth,
mountainous horizon,
magenta, orange zig-zags:
women's native
dress; clay-oven
flat-bread, seasame,
hibiscus & earth-
quakes. Lucretius
had no fore
sight of such con-
flict. Coward-
ly, he said,
to fear death
in combat.
Lucretius want-
ed to pronoun-
ce the harsh,
medicinal
words with sweet-
ness. Honeyed
speech to moist-
en violence:
no more than
smearing honey
on the corpses.

flour

Subjective History of Bread

water

yeast

Third Day of Fasting

We visited the local market.
I remember nothing but bread,
carried it, held it in the car on the way home
pressed to my lips its plastic blanket,
traced the crust with fingers
cradled the bread, cradled within my cells

salt

1988: Flatbread – stone oven, sesame center, my mother and I walked to the bakery, waited in line, bought two: one for home, one for the walk home. Tamed flames, long wooden peel in the baker's hands.

1991: Black peasant bread, behind glass doors on store shelves; its coarseness hides that it's stale. Late October, light snow. I bring home the bread. We eat it with butter and salt. Before any thought there is bread, rationed bread, dear bread; my mother cutting it in thick slices: for dinner—bread and buckwheat.

1994: The loaf-shaped pre-sliced flimsy sponges piled in stores are not bread: too available, gaudy things, triumphs of capitalism. What are they made of?

Domestic Exteriors

What kind of man does coke at sixty?
Sandra asked me at the check-out line,
buying her Salem Light 100s she smoked only
on the days her husband wasn't home.
And I could see her, waiting on the back porch,
looking at the murked-up kiddie pool her grandkids
had outgrown
the dogs lapped water from it in the August heat.
The trailer door, its rusty hinges.
Three days a week, her husband doing
something,

There is a maple in the courtyard, a dirt path
with exposed roots that I walk on each day to
retrieve mail. The leaves on one side of the tree
are dying, as I and others trample on the vulnerable roots,
the maple damaged by the very thing it has no power to retract.

Pride

Germany, three years ago:
The Köln cathedral offers up its jagged breasts.
The girls slumped on the bench, drunk from last night,
wait for the train to take them back to Dortmund.
A woman digging through the trash for glass recyclables
stuffs dirty bottles into her carry-on.
My grandmother, old and toothless on the platform,
And I behind her, acting like a stranger,
in this train station dwarfed by Kölner Dom.

A Few Words To Mayakovsky

Mayakovsky Peak, Tajikistan

A mountain is named after you,
Mayakovsky!
No—
you who thought
your body too small,
your “I” pushing out,
are the mountain.
Not quite Vesuvius,
but you do live
where the seams of Earth
still brawl and arm-wrestle.
Lifting your chin
to the troposphere,
you, formerly
“Three-Headed Peak,”
kick back a few
with the clouds.

Grief

The weather has been wavering between rain and snow, my father
tells me on the phone, international call.
I stop hanging wet laundry on the folding rack, turn off the radio,
expecting more descriptions of Dortmund.
*The gravesite was muddy and your grandmother used a plastic bag
to kneel and place the flowers*.
For months, I had not believed the death, maintained in memory
my grandfather's offhand smirk, his lined face.
A novelist interviewed on the radio had been speaking listlessly
of how since his father's death, life has become less comprehensible;
The interviewer fumbled for words to follow up on this, like a child
bewildered at a crushed egg in the palm of her hand.
It's this fragility of spoken word that warrants disbelief—I need
the days when telegrams transported news:
The distance between words like space dividing people; the printed
words provide remove from the event.
I sit with folded hands, wrung empty with the grief I thought
already finished.
The heater wafts warm air in my direction, the cat laps water
from his new ceramic bowl.

Dushanbe: Return After Exodus

When I asked my father to
    tell me his story, he could
only express it in third person.

Arriving in the city, he noted
    difference of air—pressure
smell, viscosity, how air poured
    into lungs, filled body, thoughts,
the very rhythm of life. He was
   unsure if the air was more humid,
or dust-filled—too solid for 500
    meters above sea level.
Sounds easily reflected from buildings
    and asphalt cracked from heat.

Three years after exodus, he returned
    to obtain passports for our family,
the necessary tickets to safety.

*

Lucretius believed in free-will
    swerve of atoms as they fall,
fortuitous impact of the unseen;
    he thought that contact
coerced everything into being.
    Atom, with its nucleus
inciting motion; human heart
    signaling mind, mind—limbs,
limbs moving in air, and air
    adjusting to movement—maybe
then, then it was that much easier
    to breathe, not when despair
subsumed my father, thrust him into
    the tides of air from a derelict city.

He spoke of breathing: back and forth
    of being filled and empty;
the city crouched in his mind
    like a peach-stone in pocket—
grooved token of sweetness.

Our former home, a twelve-story
sarcophagus. He saw the pissed-in elevator,
smashed stairs, familiar floor-plan:
room facing east where daily
I had woken to dust-swirls,
sturdy sunlight, when I opened curtains
to squint at a new day.

Vita

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