

5-2022

Life In/Verse: A Poetry Collection

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LIFE IN/VERSE: A POETRY COLLECTION

A Thesis

by

DAVID A. ESTRINGEL

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major Subject: Creative Writing

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

May 2022

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May 2022

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ABSTRACT

Estringel, David A., Life In/Verse: A Poetry Collection. Master of Fine Arts (MFA), May, 2022, 102 pp, references, 14 titles.

Life In/Verse: A Poetry Collection embodies the collected poetic works of Xicanx writer/poet David Estringel. The collection sequentially follows his growth as a poet and overall creative development, highlighting organic shifts in poetic voice, use of language and space, theme, and rhythm. Through poetry, the nuances and multiple facets of his identity are explored, ultimately leading to a clearer sense of self and poetic voice, demonstrating maturity and seasoning that can only come with time, experience, and acceptance. Pulling from literary influences, such as Homer, Raymond Carver, and Federico Garcia Lorca, significant and all too human life experiences are unapologetically exposed and displayed for all to see in free-verse and haiku poetry forms that touch on love, loss, longing, the erotic, and—last but not least—poetry.

DEDICATION

The completion of my graduate degree and emergence as a poet would not be possible without the support and direction of “Mef” Hardin, my first Creative Writing instructor at the University of Texas at Brownsville, who was the first to ever call me a poet. Lastly—but not least—none of this would be possible without my mother Alda Estringel, who taught me the power of language and the written word.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to extend my sincerest gratitude to Dr. Steven Schneider and Dr. Christopher Carmona, the former and current chairs of my thesis committee, respectively, for guiding me through the thesis process. My sincerest thanks also go to my thesis committee members, Dr. Brit Haraway and Dr. David Bowles. Their guidance, advice, and support have been invaluable during my journey toward the completion of my MFA in Creative Writing degree.

I would also like to acknowledge the significant role my UTRGV instructors have played in the development of my writing and worldview. I would also like to thank peers from whom I gained a great deal of inspiration and encouragement.

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PART I

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

My emergence as a poet happened 30 years behind schedule. It was during my senior year at the University of Texas at Brownsville (and after a switch in majors from Anthropology to English) that I found myself immersed in literature, reading two to three novels a week, by authors such as Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., J. D. Salinger, E. M. Forster, William Shakespeare, Albert Camus, Raymond Carver, and Tama Janowitz. Like a lightning bolt, I fell in love with words after my first reading of Forster's *Maurice* and the power they had to reach across time (approximately 80 years) and reflect the sum of my parts (my life) in the present: "He [Clive] educated Maurice, or rather his spirit educated Maurice's spirit, for they themselves became equal... Love had caught him out of triviality and Maurice out of bewilderment in order that two imperfect souls might touch perfection" (Forster 98-99). It was then and after becoming completely enthralled with Raymond Carver's short stories that I decided that I wanted to impact people in exactly the same way: I wanted to be a writer.

I always fancied myself to be a short story writer, much like Carver, unapologetically capturing life in all its beautiful ugliness and unabashed realness: "Sometimes he'd walk in the door and for no good reason throw his lunch pail across the living room... He'd go to work with a thermos bottle of vodka in his lunch pail" (Carver 133-134). That was the plan, anyway. There were many attempts at putting pen to paper, but nothing ever manifested upon the page but

frustration. In truth, I had nothing to write about as up until that point, I had led a very sheltered life. All needs were provided for, and my only work was school.

Looking back, however, plenty of fodder existed (though mentally out of reach). My entire life (at that time) had been spent in the Rio Grande Valley and—to me—seemed to have been one long experiment in suffering. I was a socially awkward gay boy in Brownsville, Texas (one of Fate’s cruel jokes) born to parents who never should have been together in the first place (joke #2). Adding insult to injury, my entire adolescence was defined by vicious, daily bullying at school for being gay, resulting in ongoing cycles of depression and passive suicidality. Over time, I allowed myself to fade into the background, turning into vapor, then nothing. In sum, I ceased to be a person. I had no voice. Luckily, shortly after my initial epiphany (to write), I took my first poetry class, which (unbeknownst to me) would change my future and me forever.

The language of poetry resonated with me on every level. I found the ability to condense pages of prose into a few lines of verse, which was appealing and more in line with my communication style. The connection between verse and song lyrics also did not escape me, touching on my deep love for music and the need to express myself quickly but wholly. Most importantly, I found that this new way of conveying meaning easily tapped into my internal world in a way prose never could. I knew poetry would be my art, as did my instructor “Mef” Hardin, who one day handed a poem back to me with “YOU are a poet!” written at the bottom of the page in blue ink. The dice were cast. I was a poet...then life happened.

After graduation, I no longer had school’s structure to help me prioritize my goals. I found myself in need of a career and money, gradually pulling away from my creative drives for the sake of more mundane pursuits that most in their 20s value. The desire to write never left my mind, though. I still wanted to be the next Raymond Carver but tapping into the drive to make

that happen was always a challenge. At one point, I managed to write some poetry, but I was not adept in the ways of publication, so the pieces went unread and, eventually, lost somewhere in time and between moves from one apartment to another. Navigating career, the entanglements of relationships, unstable finances, my sexuality, recurrent failed attempts at adulting, and the constant search for a psychological and spiritual center, seemed to cast a frivolous light upon my creative ambitions for the majority of my 20s and entire middle adulthood.

As most people approaching their 50s, the thing that I feared most happened. My mother became sick and was rapidly declining in health. I moved back to the Rio Grande Valley from Austin, Texas, after a 20-year stint, to take care of her. Within a six-year period, life became burdensome with hospital visits, mounting debt, job losses, and a numbing sense of isolation. In an effort to pull myself out of the mirk, I decided to “reclaim” my old self—the happy devil-may-care youth with burning creativity—and carve out some happiness for myself by returning to my old passion, English. I started taking literature courses with the intention of earning a graduate degree and, maybe, teach freshman English or composition classes as a side hustle. As an elective, I took a poetry workshop course, remembering how fond I was of the class so many decades ago, then lightning struck a second time (just when things seemed their bleakest) and a passion for writing (poetry and short stories) was reignited and manifested into a body of work that would, eventually, published in a book in 2019 of collected poems and short stories titled *Indelible Fingerprints*.

Life In/Verse: A Poetry Collection highlights poetry that was crafted during my time in the MFA in Creative Writing program between the years 2018 and 2020. It presents work within five sections, each demonstrative of work produced during a specific period of creativity and developments in style, theme, tone, and use of language. The first section presents work that is

an amalgamation of a life, long and fully lived, bringing in fragmental elements of past works (ex: “Blue Sky through Bare Branches”), Classical allusion (ex: AI! AI! AI! [A Tartarus for Youth]”, haiku poetry form (e.g., “Gossip” and “Fireflies”), dirty realism (e.g., “Lithium”), and an exploration of erotic themes (e.g., “Kiss Me, Again, Again, and Again”). The voice utilized within these works, while poetic, serves in a predominantly utilitarian manner, seeking to organize thoughts and meaning in a lyrical fashion. The work is largely confessional, connecting to long-stagnant emotional undercurrents through the use of striking imagery, symbolism (e.g., *gin and tonic* representing *happiness through forgetting*) and emotive language (though at times bordering on cliché). The second section demonstrates an evolution of my work and a discovery of voice through the experimental uses of theme (i.e., “Storms”), structure (e.g., “Smooth Whiskey”), sound (e.g., “And the Beat Goes On”), and a deeper exploration of the erotic (e.g., “Blue Room” and “Coffeehouse Romance”). While still largely confessional, the work from this period reflects more attention and care paid toward word choice and usage, strategic use of line-breaks, and the use of pauses and negative space on the page. The poems are notably more focused on darker themes (i.e., mental illness, disgust with society, despair, toxicity, hatred, futility, and death), taking bigger risks in terms of subject matter and personal vulnerability that stemmed from increased connectivity and transparency to an obscure internal emotional environment, including sexuality. Consequently, this period produced the least number of pieces but some of my most penetrating work. The pieces in the third section heralded a period of creative reclusiveness, resulting from the intensity of the emotional breakthroughs realized, prior, focusing on the haiku poetry style. During this period, crafted work was predominantly done in 5-7-5 form save a handful of micro poems and free-verse pieces that were produced, monthly, for a literary magazine during a stint as Poet in Residence. This period was particularly important

as it was not only a return to poetry's initial appeal (i.e., the conveyance of meaning in a succinct manner) but a lesson in poetic economy and self-editing. It was through exploring haiku that a great deal of self-reflection was undertaken, and the nuances of my evolving poetic voice became clearer. In the fourth section, poems delve, deeply, into self-identity and its different facets. This period was marked by intense emotions related to the physical and mental decline of my mother, who was repeatedly admitted to skilled nursing facilities due to her disabilities, casting a light upon my role as a caretaker and her diminishing identity and voice (i.e., "A Cloudy Day at Colonial Manor," a persona poem told in her voice, and "Intermissions"), as well as my identities of being Mexican American (i.e., "Digging for Lost Temples" and "Burn"), a gay man (i.e., "Damn! God's Got a Fucked-Up Sense of Humor"), a sexual being (i.e., "little deaths"), and a poet (i.e., "*Cajeta* [Gimme Some Sweet!]). The works during this period were poignant and honest expressions of internal turmoil associated with accepting the sum of all my parts after a lifetime of indifference and—in some cases—denial. According to Wojcek, "one notices that a number of [outsider artists] created art in response to adversity, suffering, or personal crisis" (187). The fifth—and last—section marked yet another experimental phase of the development of my poetic voice via the incorporation of the concept of *duende* into my poetry, inspired by the works of Federico Garcia Lorca. While producing the least amount of work during this period, these poems are, perhaps, the most meticulously crafted and overall successful of the entire collection (in terms of publication). With these pieces, we see a palpable distancing of self from the work, taking on more of a narrative, philosophical voice that neutrally embraces pluralism and the duality of life (i.e., "Coda-Switch" and "Duende"), while still maintaining attention to the use of sharp imagery and novel use of language (i.e., code-switching). Most notable, is the shift in maturity. The erotic becomes sensual (i.e., "Eating Pears

on the Rooftop”) yet melancholic (Pattison 40), focusing on making the real beautiful and the use of symbolism (Pattison 41), using the color ‘green’ to symbolize death.

Influences

The Use of Allusion: Classical to Fleetwood Mac

Apart from a handful of creative writing courses, my journey as a writer began with little formal literary (and to a greater extent, poetic) training, relegating me to what some may refer to as an “outsider artist” (Wojcik 179). Truth be told, I have read very little of other poets’ works. Instead, most of my time and energy had been directed towards reading literary prose and large works of verse, authors ranging from Classical (i.e., Homer and Virgil) to English (i.e., Thomas Hardy and E. M. Forster) to contemporary (i.e., Kurt Vonnegut and Henry Miller). Since my youth, Greek mythology has always held a special place in my heart. Tales of gods and goddesses, as well as heroes and monsters, captured my imagination and filled many days and nights with excitement and wonder. This was not just the stuff of childhood, however. My love for all things Classical was reignited during my college years through taking various literature classes that not only required me to read books like *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, *The Homeric Hymns*, and *The Aeneid*, but others that heavily utilized Classical allusion and symbolism, namely E. M. Forster’s *Maurice*: “Soon afterwards he was confirmed and tried to persuade himself that the friend must be Christ. But Christ had a mangy beard? Was he a Greek god...? More probable, but most probably he was just a man” (Foster 22).

While the use of Classical allusion doesn’t offer my works a sense of literary credibility—the way it has to other writers’ works in the past—it does act as a vehicle to connect what happens in a mundane world to that of the spiritual. This is, perhaps, best exemplified in “Ai! Ai! Ai! (A Tartarus for Youth),” which laments the challenges today’s youth experience

growing up in a harsher, crueler society that values competition and winning over unity and solidarity. The poem consists of ten stanzas with the first nine chronologically representing an individual's journey through Hell or *Tartarus* (i.e., modern life):

I.

Ai! Ai! Ai!

Sated with stolen life,

emerged from mother's Night,

there is longing to be free

from the warmth of darkened humours--

to be crowned by The Light of Artificial Gods.

Our worlds quake and rip,

tossing us upon gory shores

beyond fertile crests,

illuminated by a cold Sun.

Messengers sweep down in clouds of winged oblivion

to wet lips with Lethe's waters

upon cruel fingertips.

"Shhhh."

II.

Ai! Ai! Ai!

Blinded,

light brings pain

in rushes of movement and sound

that sting the flesh.

Icy

with invasions

of steel and sterile prodding,
souls rouse to profess philosophies
in cries and screams
that crack the air,
unheard
like the falling of leaves upon the ground
from distant trees

III.

Ai! Ai! Ai!
Swaddled bodies,
searched in vain for the safety of familiarity,
tell much, tell little
like symbols in scrying mirrors.
Their fictions, written with sweat and tears,
anointing
foreheads, eyes, and lips
with benedictions of shameful regret.
As if it were better to have the heads of babes
dashed and bloodied
upon the Rock,
than to suffer Spartan destinies, impaired.
Left only to linger—a world apart—
in bloodless mediocrity.

While “Ai! Ai! Ai!...” does not rely on allusion within the context of *intertextuality*, it does echo Dante Alighieri’s journey through the nine circles of Hell. The tenth stanza acts as a *coda* that rejects the cycle and what we have become. From the perspective of a narrator, we see the

witness acknowledge the horrors of life with futile acceptance, comforted by the idea that his time within the mortal coil is a temporary thing and that with a natural death comes a release from suffering:

X.

I, I, I,

will crawl to the grave,

worn

and weary,

upon the Earth I have salted

with tears,

violent and hot--

but harmonious--

in Time's own poetry,

where I will find

the Peace and Solace of Rest,

drinking from a forgetful cup,

enshrouded

by the arms of my brother—

The Undergloom.

As seen in the eighth and tenth stanzas of “Ai! Ai! Ai! (A Tartarus for Youth),” characters from Greek mythology are also used, though more symbolically than literally. In the eighth stanza, the narrator speaks to disparities in power within socially and culturally endorsed paradigms of heteronormative relationships and the conditioning of women to be subservient to men:

VIII.

Ai! Ai! Ai!

There is a science,

oppressive

and cold,

behind the collisions of heavenly bodies of light (in love)—

clashing

explosions of atoms

over chasms—

the spaces in between—

that define and separate.

Souls, burning brightly,

cannot coexist

in their starry majesties

without a surrendering of fire.

My Ares takes your Aphrodite.

Such symbolic use of Classical allusion can further be seen in the tenth stanza, where the mythological river Lethe (as seen in Stanza I) is used to represent a desired state of oblivion:

“...where I will find/the Peace and Solace of Rest/drinking from a forgetful cup/enshrouded/by the arms of my brother/The Undergloom.” Similarly, Classical symbols can be seen in other works, such as “In the Ether” (i.e., dawn represented by “...the folds of Aurora’s robes.”) and “life in/verse,” which speaks of “my muse,” which is an indirect nod to Calliope, the Greek muse of epic poetry: “for sooth/of my Muse’s vanity/compulsion rules/mad scribblings abound.”

The use of allusion in *Life In/Verse* is not entirely centered around references to Greek mythology, however. More contemporary influences--namely pop cultural—can be noted within

the work's pieces, pulling from 70s rock-n-roll, children's cartoons, 30s jazz, and Raymond Carver. These allusions refer the reader to artistic (i.e., literary and musical) sources that lend to poems' meanings, through metaphorical language via the use of echoes (i.e., indirect references) or intertextuality, using lyrics or passages verbatim or in part (Machacek 2007)). The poem "And the Beat Goes On," a beat-inspired piece that criticizes conformity and capitalism in American culture, makes reference *Gloopstick*, which is a fictional substance taken from the 1978 cartoon special *Raggedy Ann and Andy: The Great Santa Clause Caper*. It acts as a symbol for of the *synthetic* and *artificial*, referring to a substance with which the story's antagonist, Alexander Graham Wolf, plans to cover all Christmas toys, leaving them preserved and admirable but inaccessible: "Tearing away at the fabric, unraveling, woven from Gloopstick youth and plasticine smiles/repulsing at the hoards in their mindless quests for extra-flavor and double-coupon days..." Echoes of other works from pop culture in poems continue, such as the homoerotic "Coffeehouse Romance" that makes use of *pun* with the word "cathedral," which holds dual meanings within the poem (i.e., a place of worship and my favorite collection [book] of Raymond Carver stories): " You leave me/unaware/that for a moment/you/ were everything/that mattered/my cathedral..."

Allusion (in the form of intertextuality) can be seen in varying ways in a handful of works. The poem, "Storms," takes its name from (and is inspired by) the Fleetwood Mac song of the same name sung by lead singer, Stevie Nicks. Adopting the deeply confessional style of the singer, the poem speaks of the narrator's inability to successfully hold onto love due to his never-ending battle with his own internal demons (symbolized by storms), while simultaneously and quietly accepting his fate. Here, a fragment of the song's lyrics, "Not all the friends in the world can save us" (Fleetwood Mac 5:12-5:18), along with a reference to a lyric in another Fleetwood

Mac song, “The Chain” (“we will never break the chain” [Fleetwood Mac 1:04-1:07]) in a reconfigured fashion, tell the sad tale:

And that deadly call
within me—
like the wind—
must howl,
breaking the chain of calm
that threatens to drown
me
in the deep
of my own waters.

Nothing
can save us.

Not you.

Not me.

Not all the friends in the world.

My penchant for Stevie Nick’s style goes far beyond the confessional, however. There is a genuine resonance that exists between her work and me that is largely fostered by the vulnerability that is present in her work, which communicates the intensity of her experiences and—more importantly—her experiences: a thing I have not been able to do for most of my life. Through her work, she connects to her audiences’ own trials and tribulations, leaving them feel not so alone. This sort of bravery—I find—is very much aligned with Carver’s use of dirty realism to communicate and connect to his readers.

Other examples of intertextuality in *Life In/Verse* can be found in later poems, “Digging for Lost Temples” and “Coda-Switch.” In “Digging...,” reference is made to “stranger fruit,”

which alludes to 1938 Billy Holiday's song, "Strange Fruit" that tells of lynchings of African Americans in the American South. The reference "stranger fruit" similarly refers to the lynchings but within the context of the oppression and persecution of Mexicans in the American Southwest during the early 1900s: "I swung low from sturdy boughs in the Southwest, proving Stranger Fruit—plucked in all its hues and flavors—tastes coppery and bitter in Life's maw." The poem "Coda-Switch," which speaks to the rejection of Catholicism in the face of sexual oppression, alludes to two works, Robert Frost's 1923 poem, "Nothing Gold Can Stay," and the Holy Bible with the well-known verse:

"Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your father. But even the hairs on your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows." (Matthew 10:29-31)

Through allusion, the piece exposes the irony of living a life in Christ: "All that is good is gold/but nothing gold can stay/for even the most treasured of God's sparrows/fall from flight/silently screaming/impaling/upon the holy stabs of His Electric Crown of Thorns."

Whether used within the context of echoes or intertextuality, allusion is used metaphorically, not for a lack of content. The topics and themes of my free-verse work, though personal, reflect the victories and adversities all people experience, as well as commonly known parts of pop culture; therefore, careful attention was paid to the use of allusions can fit comfortably within the paradigms of most readers (Kawamoto 720), as well as uncomfortably through the unapologetic use "hyper-realism" (Yaeger 20) within dirty realism (e.g., "little deaths") and kitchen-sink realism (e.g., *And the Beat Goes On*) oeuvres. Such an interpersonal approach is highly associated with "the creativity of 'outsider artists'" (Wojcik 194).

Haiku: The Essence of Things

My first introduction to the haiku poetry form occurred during my senior year of college, after I had switched my major to English and took my first creative writing class. The first poem I ever wrote was an ekphrastic haiku, prompted by a picture of a tropical flower. While initially a challenge to wrap my head around, I found that embracing the beauty simplicity and substance (as seen in Hakutani 516), paved the way to inspiration and a rather successful product. Since that moment, haiku poetry has been a staple in my catalogue. This form (unlike any other) can capture life's events in distillate forms, conveying "super-posed "(Kawamoto 710) ideas of things, feelings, and happenstances in their purest essences. I quickly embraced the traditional 5-7-5 syllable format, initially (and today, still), focusing on subject matter associated with the simple beauty of the natural world (Kawamoto 711); however, more recent works, while still honoring the 17-syllable tradition, often deviate from the typical 5-7-5 structure and themes:

Weeds #3

Object of my scorn,
I salute your firm resolve
with a calloused hand.

Trees #1

Sentinels
Watch o'er a desolate field.
Leaves whispering histories.

The Story of Us

Our asymmetries

mesh and catch like well-greased gears—

a brutal machine.

Over time, subject matter deviated from the norm, capturing real-life moments we all experience day-to-day. Traditionally, heavy and doleful emotions are often the subjects of haiku poetry (Kawamoto 711). To a large extent, the angst and dysfunctional love experienced in day-to-day life, however, are often the subjects of my haiku poetry (just as much as the free verse that dominates the rest of my work), which change the context of some pieces to that of *senryu* and—in some cases—haiku/*senryu* hybrids. For example, “Weeds #1” introduces a classical haiku subject, nature (i.e., weeds), with a cynical twist: “Damned, tenacious weed/plucked by hands—angry and vain/ Teach me how to live.”

Many liberties are taken in my haiku/*senryu* poetry. First, pieces tend to be titled, which many look at in a negative light. Some may be quick to judge that some anxiety exists (on my part) that readers won’t understand what the poem is about (Brower 188), as there can never be just one interpretation of a haiku (Kawamoto 715). More often than not, the title provides a deeper level of meaning to the verse and a glimpse into what I think about the actual subject itself:

The Man in Your Mirrors

Words slash your jug’lar

draining love from pleading eyes.

I see my monster.

Newborn Credos

Peals of newborn babes
cry hot philosophies
of a world rushing in.

Secondly, words (and the letters that form them) are malleable. Depending on the subject matter, letters (syllables) are omitted for the sake of the haiku's syllabic integrity when the words that go in a line are non-negotiable but, simultaneously, dishonor the 17-syllable rule. In such situations, for example, the word "over" becomes "o'er" and "whispering" becomes "whisp'ring" to keep aligned with the traditional 5-7-5 rule. Other times, shortened words are used for effect to change the tone of a piece, taking it from lofty to mundane (and relatable):

Stained

Indelible, God's
fingerprints leave stains 'pon
human destinies.

Overall, this love affair with haiku poetry has been transformative in terms of my growth as a writer and poet, affording me a brief respite from the extraneous details of my own thoughts and internal white noise. More than any other form of poetry, haiku has become a gateway to connecting to the essence of my experiences and—indirectly—myself. Through this short form, I have been able to achieve a level of personal and spiritual healing that I never thought possible (even more than through my free verse). More importantly, it has been invaluable in terms of my ability to self-edit and say more with less.

Ultimately, I have learned get out of the way of my own creative process and open my eyes to the world happening around me:

Genesis

Fives...Sevens...and Fives

fall from Heaven like drops of acid.

Now...I see.

My Place in Contemporary Poetry

My journey as a poet has been one of immense expansion and contraction. Through verse, my internal worlds and dimensions, that have long gone obscured (and, yes, even avoided) have unfolded before me via the connections and experiences from my past, only later to become clarified and refined, ready to fully explore and navigate with clarity and certainty. I have seen poetry's power to move and inspire. I have experienced its ability to heal and restore, "by salvaging [the] discarded objects" (Wojcik 189-190) of my past and reconstructed myself into the writer (and person) I am today. More importantly, I have seen poetry's ability to transform its readers and writers, therefore, transforming itself. Having succumbed to the push and pull of this constant state of flux, I have found myself wondering who I am, exactly, as a poet. As much as I would like to, I do not fancy myself as literary (at least by traditional standards), though I have churned out a piece or two on occasion that have challenged this notion. Am I a *gonzo* writer (in the tradition of Hunter Stockton Thompson) with my anti-establishment scribblings about religion, politics, love and the devolution of "the American Dream" (Bruce-Nova 39)? Maybe, but my love of tradition and need for artistic legitimacy suggests otherwise. Truth be told, I have spent the better part of my time, as a poet, trying to find the right label to assign myself but to no avail. If this process has taught me anything, it is that 'poetry' is as varied as the poets who write it. What I do know is that there is a place for all of us poets in the world of poetry and some amazing work comes from the fringes, and that is OK.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX

Life In/Verse: A Poetry Collection

by

David Estringel

Throwing Down the Bones

Laying the foundation

You Get My Meaning

What's this sex thing between you and me?

Tell me what I want to hear!

That strips me of my skin?

See me!

That crumbles the Earth beneath my feet?

Catch me!

I can't stop this free-fall.

Save me!

Through the ether.

Again.

Solace

what to do with these moody blues?
words capture little, collapsing on the tongue.
like wicker baskets of water,
the head can't hold thoughts
that run cold, along the lengths of silvery city streets.
hope shimmers from afar—
Solace—
beneath the amber promise of errant street lamps.
what can contain the things that teem and spill
from gray matter
and make red this life's blood?

Black ink.

Kiss Me, Again, Again, and Again

The coppery taste of meat beneath your sweet breath lingers
like a penny on the tip of my tongue.

Heads or tails?

Can't lose—

Lucky me.

My equilibrium's fucked raw,
as my hands drink-in the warm curvature of your hips.

O, glorious spit—

a little dab will do ya—

streaked red and hot,

never take me from this place,

leaving me

haunted by the ghost of that breath—

your Heaven,

your Hell—

that leaves me...

quivering.

Words can't capture what's smeared on this cheek

by fingers,

sticky and sweet—

so why try.

Kiss me,

again,

again,

and again,

in that white muslin dress of thigh-stretched daisies

that roll and grin like morning shadows,

smiling at secrets hidden in dark places.

Lithium

Dishes are piled high in the sink.

Papers strewn about

(My business for none to see).

Cobwebs frame doorways,

waving, familiarly, in silent clamor.

I walk these floors,

dirt, beneath bare feet,

from many roads taken

and the soles of passersby.

Stumbling,

I pass books stacked high on chairs and tabletops.

(No more room on the shelves)

Ones I'll always remember. Ones I chose to forget. Ones never to be read.

How funny it is to see this place

(This place where I live, rosy-hued),

when the switch is flicked.

God, this place needs a good cleaning!

Contentment (Sittin' on the Front Porch)

Suck'n gin from ice cubes,
clouds drift across pale azure.
Crickets join the fun.

Gossip

Let fir'y tongues wag!
Words fall like eggs from cartons.
My shell is harder.

Fireflies

Like will o' the wisps.
stars dance against a black sky
then fall in my hands.

Blue Sky through Bare Branches

I look, upwards, at blue sky through bare branches,
the dewy wet of cool, green grass on my back,
clinging,
sinking,
pulling me further away from this place.
I long for the stillness of being
found only in the shedding of this meat that plants me here.
Oh, to touch those spaces in-between.
To graze my lips upon that azure skin.
O, opiate kiss,
Like a stone, skipping across limpid pools.
let me caress that face with my lips and sink into your oblivion.
Your everything!
But I am bound,
here,
by bare branches,
between me and a beckoning sky.
Biting my lip to taste blood,
I long to smear red what God has painted blue.

When I Think of Him, I Think of Black Coffee and Toast with Red Plumb Jam

My father kept to himself, seeking the dark quiet of his room with its door that was always closed. But in the mornings, he would cook breakfast for us. I remember the smells of Folger's and the slow burn of bread that pulled me from my bed to the kitchen every morning. A plate was always waiting for me at the table with its usual fare—two eggs, 3 sausages, and 2 pieces of buttered toast. I would look over to him at the sink, where he would stand, taking sips of coffee between giant bites that would polish off his slice of toast and red plumb jam in no time at all. Every day his head seemed to hang lower and lower. Too many thoughts, I suppose. *Funny thing to notice as a kid.* His shoulders appeared heavy, defeated, burdened with the weight of his small world. I would watch and wonder when he would leave, but he never did.

Some nights I would catch him at the kitchen table with his big iron box that was meant for his "important papers," but my mother always called them "bills." Papers with lines. Papers without. Papers with numbers. Papers in envelopes he never let us see. All covered the tabletop, threatening to spill over the sides like milk from a toppled glass. I would watch him, as he sat beneath the kitchen light that hovered over his head like a halo. His head and shoulders still hung low but heavier with a world that was becoming bigger and bigger, as he circled the rim of his coffee cup with his finger. I wondered when he would leave, but he never did.

I woke up one morning to the smell of blueberry pancakes—the kind my mother used to make on special occasions or when there was bad news. I was twelve.

Pyre

Let hungry flames lick.

Devour this flesh that binds

and let me be free.

Olokun, the Deity of the Ocean Depths

What stirs in your murk,

crawling upon ocean floors?

O, help me see ME.

Poetica

From silence souls speak

With words foreign and strange,

Unless you hear in tongues.

Olokun

Sundays are the days I go the ocean and make my offerings to Olokun, African deity of the ocean depths—the bringer of good things to those who walk the earth. Prosperity, children, wealth, and strength—inside and out—we are blessed. They say where he...she...he...it lives is only inhabitable by the most resilient and adaptable creatures. Able to survive complete darkness, crushing pressures, and grave-like cold, these things go about in all their “otherness,” frightening to behold in their unapologetic oddity. Nonetheless, “others” endure because there is little else to do in a world of murky solitude. So, on Sundays I throw fistfuls of roasted corn and pork rinds into the sea. I crack open a bottle of red wine and pour libation. The cresting waves turning blackish purple, as wine mixes with salty brine. The waves crash in and take my offerings out to his...her...his...its icy depths. *I love you, Olokun*, I think to myself, as seagulls circle overhead, catching my prayers in their beaks, flying off to deliver my silent words. I gaze out into the great expanse of blue and feel small in the presence of The Infinite. Headed back to my car—the waves crashing in my ears, I noticed some scribbling on the sand. “I love you, too,” it says. Continuing to my car, I don’t feel so small, anymore.

Angels in the Morning

As you lay sleeping,
pale shadows yawn and stretch o'er me
to kiss your shoulder.

As I Wake

The alarm clock rings.
You hit snooze, suspending time,
holding me longer.

Gin & Tonic

Bitter on the lips,
spirits of juniper berries
bless and honey tongues.

Old Filament, Broken Bulb

A white bolt from above
rips
through the clouds before our eyes—
an epiphany—
showering cuts upon the kitchen table,
releasing bad blood,
testing our guile
and gristle.

A Dog's Life for Me

I look at my dachshund with his black and tan fur, shimmering in the noon sun, run about the backyard in his typical devil-may-care fashion. He stops to sniff errant blades of grass with a sense of immediacy and earnestness that makes me feel like an underachiever...and I smile. Rolling over, he stretches his front paws, outward, swatting them in unison at something unseen. What does he see? With rejuvenated conviction he darts across the lawn and runs in circles four or five times. His long floppy ears swatting the air, as if it was a cunning fly on a kitchen wall. Spent, he drops to his soft tummy on the coolness of green grass, all four, stubby legs splayed out, flat, like misshapen pancake. I call him, but he doesn't respond. Instead, he sniffs the air and squints his eyes, as the breeze wafts through his long, black whiskers, barking at the air—at God—just because.

It's good to be a dog.

the lights are on but no one is home

the lights are on, but no one's home,
these glimmered eyes, lamps left on long ago.
dimmed to dreams of a new life to come,
the lights are on but no one's home.
damn these thoughts in their deafening sum!
this longing is all I know.
the lights are on but no one's home,
these glimmered eyes, lamps left on long ago.

In the Ether

As you lay sleeping,
pale shadows yawn and stretch o'er me
to kiss your shoulder.
The alarm clock rings.
You hit snooze,
suspending time,
holding me longer.
Here in the ether--
the warmth of these disturbed sheets—
we fly with polln'd wings,
rising, falling,
and rising, again,
through bands of yellow, orange, and rose,
that hem the folds
of Aurora's robes.
Soaring,
Heavenward,
eyes closed to the world 'neath us,
substance falls away,
leaving us
sweetly aching.

Only Cats Walk Fences

Remember these hands you loved to kiss
that, now, fall cold upon your skin--
a wintery rain
of fingerprints.

Look at us,
lost in the night sky,
as the myth of us--
a symphony of falling stars—
dies in our hands
like fireflies.

Where do we go from here?
Contempt
has replaced the love in our eyes,
but unlike you and I,
only cats walk fences.

Try as we may,
we cannot escape
our gravity—this pull
that sends us tumbling
to the ground,
crushed into dust
like fire ants under God's thumb.

Round
and round
and round
we go.

Where we'll fall,
nobody knows.

AI! AI! AI! (A Tartarus for Youth)

I.

AI! AI! AI!

Sated with stolen life,
emerged from mother's Night,
there is longing to be free
from the warmth of darkened humours--
to be crowned by The Light of Artificial Gods.

Our worlds quake and rip,
tossing us upon gory shores
beyond fertile crests,
illuminated by a cold Sun.

Messengers sweep down in clouds of winged oblivion
to wet lips with Lethe's waters
upon cruel fingertips.

“Shhhh.”

II.

AI! AI! AI!

Blinded,
light brings pain
in rushes of movement and sound
that sting the flesh.

Icy
with invasions
of steel and sterile prodding,
souls rouse to profess philosophies
in cries and screams
that crack the air,

unheard
like the falling of leaves upon the ground
from distant trees

III.

AI! AI! AI!
Swaddled bodies,
searched in vain for the safety of familiarity,
tell much, tell little
like symbols in scrying mirrors.
Their fictions, written with sweat and tears,
anointing
foreheads, eyes, and lips
with benedictions of shameful regret.
As if it were better to have the heads of babes
dashed and bloodied
upon the Rock,
than to suffer Spartan destinies, impaired.
Left only to linger—a world apart—
in bloodless mediocrity.

IV.

AI! AI! AI!
What are these ragged paths
to be stumbled upon
under tender foot,
with stones that cut
and scratching thorns from the briar
that temper flesh,
supple and pink,

making hard what was once soft to the touch.

Fed by an earth

that feasts on cuts,

bodies devolve to walk upright—and alone

upon roads, paved with the hands and backs

of brethren.

Knuckles crunching beneath soles like so much gravel.

V.

AI! AI! AI!

O, the passion of attainment,

upon which the masses engorge,

aimless in its metal

and promises

of faceless adulations

and the settling of laurelled wreathes

upon heads of cartilage!

How empty, these violent strikes against the Self,

incessant and passionless,

carving out pounds of flesh,

victory for victory,

‘til nothing remains--

all for narratives

that are not their own.

VI.

AI! AI! AI!

How thirsty are these--

the razor-tongued buds of spring.

Driven

to the drinking of others' tears
for satisfaction of sanguine thirsts.

To revel
in the tearing
of white petals
from tender stems
with poisoned fingertips,
delighting in themselves,
as if masters of ceremonies
at blood-lettings
and vivisections.

VII.

AI! AI! AI!

The sooth of touch's fidelity
has melted away--
soured--
like cream in the sun.

Replaced,
the quality of distance
makes, explicit, one's worth,
across arid plains
of air and silence.

Fallen away, the allures and charms
of communion,
only to make room
for the play of shadows
on Plato's walls.

VIII.

AI! AI! AI!

There is a science,
oppressive
and cold,
behind the collisions of heavenly bodies of light (in love)—
clashing
explosions of atoms
over chasms—
the spaces in between—
that define and separate.
Souls, burning brightly,
cannot coexist
in their starry majesties
without a surrendering of fire.
My Ares takes your Aphrodite.

IX,

AI! AI! AI!

Upon paths paved with gold,
under the azure
of a fanning sky,
herds
are driven in blithe procession
to the precipice.
Cast into the maw
of their society.
Without the iron shielding of wings,
they perish,
masticated,

like everyman's meat,
leaving them shades
that stain the wintry air.

X.

I, I, I,
will crawl to the grave,
worn
and weary,
upon the Earth I have salted
with tears,
violent and hot--
but harmonious--
in Time's own poetry,
where I will find
the Peace and Solace of Rest,
drinking from a forgetful cup,
enshrouded
by the arms of my brother—
The Undergloom.

Nothing Lasts

Stars fall
against the murk
of the night sky,
a rain of fireflies,
dying in mid-flight,
hurtling,
heralding,
upon gentle heads blow,
cruel truths.
Nothing lasts. Nothing lasts.

Listen to the harmony,
that inaudible peal
(Ong)
that sets heavenly bodies to spin,
amidst everchanging kaleidoscopes
of the Void's sacred geometries,
pulling,
tugging at Fate,
with the waxing
and waning
of single points of light.
Nothing lasts. Nothing lasts.

We,
the kings and queens
of planets and moons,
tread upon paths
of celestial dust

wishing, searching
to join hands in communion
with the witnesses
to our ignorant freefall into The Bottomless.
Nothing lasts. Nothing lasts.

The Spaces in Between

How clever I think I am,
pulling words from the air
like rabbits from top hats
to set them ablaze,
across pages
and ravage their pristine virginity.

I bleed.

I sweat.

I shed tears upon reams
so you can feel what I can
no longer.

Here I am
ground down to the gristle,
my passions splayed out--
spread-eagle--
for all to see,
to get...or not.

So what is this thunder
that tears through my chest
and rattles the brain,
still?

The steely determination of memory—
its greedy clutch—
keeps my cup half-full
with unpotable waters.

Emotions—
all but chemicals—
a drop too much,

a drop too little—
rage and fade along with the dying of the day.

Recollections,
the moving pictures
of my silent film,
continue to linger
like birthdays
and the need to breathe,
hungry for hints of light
that pour in from doors left ajar,
for recognition
by the lonely eyes
of morning and evening skies.

The gravity of my verse is diminished
by blood-letting shades
that haunt the spaces in between
ecstatic bodies of black ink.

But for the raging
of my muse's vanity
these scribblings bring solace
and succor to my soul,
as I suckle at the raw teats
of my poetry,

Longing
for an empty cup.

life in/verse

thoughts flow through the air
like drifts of grey ash from a burning tower,
scorching across white sheets
like cigarette burns.

to some, words sound foreign and strange—
no rhyme or reason—
but not to those who listen
in tongues.

for sooth
of my Muse's vanity,
compulsion rules.
mad scribblings abound.

i disturb the peace of blank pages
with the moving pictures of my silent film,
fettering time
before it dissolves like sugar in the rain.

More than Words Can Say

Exploring theme, structure, and sound

And the Beat Goes On

Dropping from the air
upon ears like paper blotters on willing tongues,
raging at the bloodlessness of cardboard cutouts against a shrinking sky,
through psychedelic lenses
let me seeeee, let me beeeee the pulse of silent rage
that rails against the vulgar machine
with words
that organize, legitimize, minimize, super-size, tranquilize, proselytize, tantalize, infantilize,
sexualize, stigmatize the suckled teats of long-conditioned truths.

Poking the bear, disturbing the seas of featureless beige,
stirring the comatose anima with battle-cries of sight and sound
that pierce dusty eardrums like sterling icepicks,
repressed wants teeeeem, solemn faces beeeeeam,
liberated in the warmth of a sun that breaks just beyond the horizon on coffee-house stages,
rousing thoughts
to gestate, ruminate, conjugate, appropriate, sublimate, fornicate, obliterate, determinate,
propagate, exfoliate dangerous visions, birthed from the unfetteredness of a purple haze.

Fueling the scribblings of furious hands upon white sheets with whisky and cigarettes,
Making, naked, ugly underbellies of the angst-ridden and inflamed
with the glorious promises of their ecstatic treasure-trails,
let's revel in the coolness of poetry's heeeeeat, indulged in pollen-dusted skin so sweeeeet
within the honeyed tangles of poets' asymmetries
to detoxify, dulcify, intensify, demystify, purify, glorify, magnify, beautify, electrify, sanctify
our bodily streams of light that sugar lips and candy the fingertips.

Tearing away at the fabric, unraveling, woven from Gloopstick youth and plasticine smiles,

repulsing at the hoards in their mindless quests for extra-flavor and double-coupon days,
looking for a steeeeeal, wanting to feeeeel,
as hollow dollars crumble to coins when plopped upon unsated palms and countertops.

Think! Think! Think! Think! Think!

We are on the brink

of the Fall of the American Empire.

Dig.

Blue Room

Nights
are hardest to bear,
alone,
atop these unwashed sheets
that smell of you and me,
still,
crinkled and heavy
with ghosts
of you and me—
our sweat and loving juices.
I am tethered
to flashes of smiles and kisses
that linger
beneath the sweetness
of heated exhales.
To smell your breath,
again,
and taste you
on the back of my tongue.
To pull you into me
by the small of your back
and sink
into the warmth of white musk--
a tangle of tongues, fingers, and limbs.
To have you—
know you—

again,
inside
and out
is all I want.
Need.
Laying here,
drowning
in us,
my legs brush against the cold
rustle of sheets
you left behind,
cutting the airlessness
of this room.
Rolling over,
I close my eyes
and sink my face into the depths
of your pillow,
escaping the void
that even silence's ring has forgotten,
and take you
in,
drowning
in us,
this lover's kaddish.
The scent of your hair—
blue fig and oranges—
and spit
are but pebbles on the gravestone.

Storms

We live for moments like this,
you and I,
cooled by the safe-silence
of deadened air--
a stillness so heavy
it falls,
crashing around our feet
with the tumult
of resting heartbeats.
I can think.
You can breathe.
We can just...be
for a moment,
until...
But nothing lasts forever
in the eye.
Tears—like rain—must fall,
staining, tattering cheeks
and lips,
eroding the ground
beneath us, where we stand.
And that deadly call
within me—
like the wind—
must howl,
breaking the chain of calm

that threatens
to drown
me
in the deep
of my own waters.
Nothing
can save us.
Not you.
Not me.
Not all the friends in the world.
I am lost
without the thunder.
Without the swell
and crashing of waves.
The murk
that lies
beneath the surface.
My quiet slips away
and I
howl...
driving you,
lovingly,
to warm shelter
away
from me
and my storms.
Just remember me, fondly,
dear friend...when it rains.

Coffeehouse Romance

I see you,
alone,
reading Raymond Carver
at a table for two.
Straight, black hair—
lightly greased—
falling in your face.
You brush it away,
saving a page
with your right thumb,
I notice
the smoothness
of your hands,
the fullness
of your fingers.
Your eyes
are lost in ugly life--
I think they are brown.
The angles
and curves
of your face
sing
in their own silent poetry.
You turn a page.
I long
to dip my face
into your cupped hands
and drink in

the smell of you.
To taste the sweat of your palms.
To kiss the fingertips
that have touched
the sum of your parts.
You catch my eye
so I look away.
You keep reading.
I wonder--
for a moment--
what it's like
to be that chair.
You close your book
and get up to leave.
Passing me by--
warm—
smelling
of faded cologne
and sweaty jeans,
I devour you
at every inhale.
You leave me,
unaware
that for a moment
you
were everything
that mattered—
my cathedral--
and with the ghosts of fingerprints
lingering upon my tongue.

Just Another Day

It's been a week
since you left
and tore a hole
in my atmosphere,
letting in
the gamma rays,
the end of days:
all in a haze
of tears and
holographic "I'm sorries."

Was it you?
Was it me
that left
everything
broken?
For a new love to find?
To be cruel to be kind?
Escaping a bind
that catches the skin
like fingers of crushed glass.

I find myself,
standing outside
the home we made,
wishing these arms—those walls—
could hold you, again.

A chance to feel--
a moment to steal--
but our fate is sealed
with all being said
and done.

If only
I could evaporate
up
into the clouds
of that noon sky
and rain down
somewhere—
anywhere—
without a care
far, far away
from here.

Smooth Whiskey

tick...tock

tick...tock

The days are long in a life of slow motion. Waking up takes too long, despite the violent assaults of the alarm clock, unchained by a snooze button----like me—worn down to the circuitry.

tick...tock

tick...tock

Get up late, again. Take a whore bath in the bathroom sink. Wash what needs it and get out the door. Shower'd be nice...really nice. Maybe tomorrow. Probably not, again.

tick...tock

tick...tock

Office clocks--harbingers of death to my soul--lament the dying of the fire, within. Telephone rings perforate the recirculated air of lungs and mouths like a symphony of electric crickets, tuning-up beneath the hepatic glow of fluorescent suns outside my cubicle's walls.

tick...tock

tick...tock

Driving home in the same car, down the same roads, in the same rancid clothes that need more than just a good airing out, stuck in this bad track mix, playing on a loop, I need a drink. There's a bottle at home. Whiskey, I think--a gift for my 50th. It goes down, rough, but smooth, after a glass or two or three.

Smooth is good in a life of no motion.

tick...tock

tick...tock

(Repeat All)

Sucking the Marrow

Crackling
of hungry drags
from flaming cigarette cherries.

Tinkling
of ice cubes
from sweaty glasses,
thirsty
for heavy splashes of gin.

Ringing
from the silence
of words
that have had their due.

Waiting...

Waiting...

Waiting...

Crackling.

Tinkling.

Ringing.

Waiting...

Waiting...

Waiting...

for the soothing balm

of

“I’m leaving.”

Killers

I cut you
with words
to watch you bleed.

You starve me
with silence
to see me wither.

Funny,
we should look back
upon that lifeless heap
we left--
surprised—
wondering,

“How could you let that happen?”

joshua

I heard, today, that you died
nine years ago.

My friend wasn't sure—
said he heard whispers--
so he asked for your last name,
but I couldn't remember
no matter how hard I tried.

Going down the list
in my mind,
yours was the only one—
a blank space
where my heart and mind—
maybe soul--
used to be.

No surprise.

It's been fifteen years.

Why would I?

Why should I?

You left me
months before I walked out the door.

I was too much.

You weren't enough—
at least that's what you told yourself.

Nothing would change your mind.

You wouldn't let it

And, now,

you're gone.

So, here we are, again,

after all this time.

Me,

trying to feel.

You,

resurrected—

a nameless shadow

on the tip of my tongue

that escapes me,

as always.

My friend thought it sad

to have been dead for so long

without anyone noticing,

but that is the way you wanted it.

Damn your love

of needles and straws

and backroom shame!

Damn, you

and your enemies within,

for not believing you were worth more!

No, you won't get my tears--

not this time.

You've had your fill.

Bet they still taste as sweet.

But, you can have my hate,

dear Joshua.

Neither of us needs it,

anymore.

Gin & Tonic on a Sunday Afternoon

Bitter on the lips,
spirits of juniper berries
bless and honey tongues
with a bite and fire.
Sugared words
that have long abandoned us
take wing in ambrosial flight
from our dark corners--
winter suns--
thawing the frost
that hardens our hearts
and tender fingertips.
Chestnut hair falls before your eyes,
as you read, biting your lip—
the smell of you,
tearing like a machete
through bands of cigarette smoke
that haunt the air between us.
You go to the kitchen to make us another drink.
Suckin' gin from ice cubes,
I sit,
worshiping you, silently,
in reverie
for letting me miss you,
again.
But that's the story of you and I--

hard to swallow
save these fleeting moments--
like bubbles
at the back of the throat
that make us smile.

Looking out the window,
clouds drifting across pale azure,

I wonder where the hell I've been all this time,
as crickets join the fun—
even if just for a while.

little punctures

Self-reflection through micropoetry

Epiphanies

White bolts from above
Rain cuts on kitchen tables,
releasing bad blood.

little death

atop wrinkled sheets,
drowned in the story of us,
i die a little.

Entropy

Tow'rs crumble to dust,
erasing names from gravestones.
Time wins in the end.

Truce

Tired of love games,
Cards fall upon the table.
Maybe, now, we win.

Newborn Credos

Peals of newborn babes
cry hot philosophies
of a world rushing in.

Five-Fold Kiss

My feet, knees, lips, breast,
hallowed by your witchery.
Bless me with the fifth.

Grounding

Sing to me a song
of truths only you can sing.
Its cuts flow, sweetly.

Home

Memories,
like little deaths,
bring me home again.

A Boy and His Dying Dog

My beautiful girl
Melts in my hands like ice cream.
Holes...in me and out.

Drowning Sorrow

Bringing lip to lip,
I pray for oblivion—
whiskey's white fire.

You Linger

The scent of your hair—
blue fig, blood orange, and spit—
ling'ring on my thighs.

Betrayal

How easily torn,
like hanging fruit from the bough,
is the willing heart.

Trees #1

Sentinels

Watch over a desolate field.

Leaves whisp'ring histories.

Trees #2

Grounded in dirt,

fixed by root and weary back,

the oak still longs to touch God.

Trees #3

Retama trees

dance in the summer breeze.

Rain of sun-yellow kisses.

Weeds #1

Damned, tenacious weed,
plucked by hands--angry and vain.
Teach me how to live.

Weeds #2

Even amongst the
most undesirable
peek hints of velvet.

Weeds #3

Object of my scorn,
I salute your firm resolve
with a calloused hand.

Fade

A tangle of limbs,
Lost in the rapture of touch.
I am you, you're me.

Moment of Clarity

Drunk on puppy breath
and cold gin, I am reminded
Love lasts, Life's on loan.

The Story of Us

Our asymmetries
mesh and catch like well-greased gears—
a brutal machine.

The Man in Your Mirrors

Words slash your jug'lar
draining love from pleading eyes.
I see my monster.

Last Dance

This deaf'ning silence,
tumult of resting heartbeats,
becomes our swan song.

Stained

Indelible, God's
fingerprints leave stains 'pon
human destinies.

Deathbed

Hands, wrinkled and bulged,
touch me with frail tenderness.
Ghost of mother's milk.

Metamorphosis

We walk on four legs
two legs, three legs, none.
Metamorphosis of death

Genesis

Fives...Sevens...and Fives
Show'r down like drops of acid.
Now...I see.

Inside Out

Navigating identity within a sum of parts

little deaths

We implode—
explode—
in raptures
of liquid light
that set the skin
to sizzle on the spit
like slow-cooked meat,
pulled apart
in greedy clutches,
peeling
skin from skin,
limb from limb,
sinew from bone
until all is gone,
fallen away
in shreds
and trickles.
Tongues prodding,
hungrily,
for the taste of coppery bliss
of chewed lips,
these beautiful bodies—
diminished
heartbeats and exhales
of viscera and vasculature
with eyelids, aflutter—
fade

into black, into white—
dick-teasing,
mind-fucking
strobes of abstract consciousness.
Hand-in-hand,
together,
we die
little deaths,
again...
again...
and again—
every morning, a resurrection.

A Cloudy Day at Colonial Manor*

This poem is written from my mother's perspective, providing her a voice for the one she lost due to advancing Alzheimer's Disease.

More and more, things slip away...daily.
Names of people, places, things. Where I am.
Where I will be. I am afraid it isn't always clear.
I ask the girl who comes in my room
most mornings; she just shrugs her shoulders, floating
around the room in a cloud of ammonia and pine,
scowling at the candy bar wrappers and
cookie crumbs that always
seem to pepper the sheets and the floor by my bed.
She is nice enough, but I don't know who keeps letting her
in the house. Or where Henry is and why he doesn't
come home at nights anymore. She's pretty enough;
he likes pretty girls. I think about her sitting in my chair
at the dining room table and I hate her. All I can do
is think, though. I haven't left this room in months,
it seems.

They're talking about her again—the voices
outside the door. "She fell again last night."
"Again? Are we gonna have to tie her down?"
Someone laughs. Who the hell is Henry letting in here?

One of the maids came in to give me my pills. I think
she is from Mexico. She said it was four o'clock in

the afternoon. Isn't it night? I hope Henry isn't paying her too much. For what? Lying to me and sitting in my chair all day?

That tall man, who stops by from time to time, is back; he brings me fried chicken strips and apple pie from Whataburger. I like it when he comes, since all those damn maids cook for me is eggs. He says that isn't true, though. "Last time I was here you had Salisbury steak for dinner. You must have forgotten. Happens to all of us." He is nice, but he gets upset with me a lot. "You fell, again? You know you aren't supposed to get out of bed by yourself." Before I can respond, he slips in a "I swear you won't be happy until you break a hip." Words escaping me, I shove an entire chicken strip in my mouth and chew.

He always seems upset with me about something or another. Like the time he told me to stop telling people my daughter was dead. "She is in Dallas with your great grandkids. She called the nurses' station today. Caused quite the stir." All I could think about was what I was going to tell the neighbors.

Sometimes, I think I hate him, but I can't; he looks tired and his eyes are so sad.

'Is your mother here,' I ask.

He says, "Yes."

'Did she not want this food?'" I ask.

"We had extra," he answers checking emails on his phone.

"Does your mother know what a sweet son she has?" I ask, liking him a little more.

“No, but she likes the chicken strips.”

I bet one of those damn bitches is sitting in my chair, right now!

*Colonial Manor is a skilled nursing facility in Harlingen, Texas, where my mother was admitted multiple times due to her progressing Alzheimer’s Disease.

Intermissions

Never fails,
folks always commenting on how young she looks,
with her big brown eyes,
plump face,
and rosy cheeks.
“So beautiful,” they’d say to her—at her, really—
as if placating a child with sweets to solicit a smile.
“You don’t look your age. So beautiful,”
they’d say—
a hint of a blush now bellowing its credo
from beneath a crown of majestic silver
and plastic drugstore hair combs.
Moments like those made her uncomfortable.
Perhaps, she couldn’t take a compliment
or, maybe, such talk—about how well she was preserved—
made her think a deer head mounted on a wall
or an excavated soul, frozen in time
under the precipitant weight of a life long gone.
All you can do is smile
when the words don’t come,
when your *outside*
doesn’t jive with what’s happening within.
So, she just sits there in her hospital bed
and smiles,
replaying old *stories* in her head,
sepia-toned, laden with scratches,
the plots ever-changing with every warp
and curl of the film.

But, the gears are rusty. They catch and stick,
stopping motion and sound.

Stopping time—

another intermission—

as images and truths bubble and melt,
peeling away into the blankness of a white screen.

So, she just sits there, smiling away tears,
thinking,

“The damned projector ate another one.”

Damn, God's Got a Fucked-Up Sense of Humor

I was born a criminal
and mentally ill
on a sunny April morning in 1969.
The sky was blue,
God was in his Heaven,
and I was fashionably late.
My parents were hopeful—
father swollen with pride,
mother already counting grandchildren.
Damn, God's got a fucked-up sense of humor.
Who else could make a sexual predator
look cute in purple Garanimals?
An abomination rock a school Christmas play
in a pair of make-shift, white feather wings
and glittery Converse high-tops?
Good ol' St. Mary's,
where brown (OK, sorta brown) boys like me
go to learn the three Rs,
fade away
into a sea of beige, and
find shame in their bodies
in the process.
Where fear is the heart of love
and there's a special place in Hell for me
'cause God hates sissies—
So sayeth Sister Clair Veronica!
Damn, God's got a fucked-up sense of humor.

Interesting how the tides have changed.
Popstars and Hollywood
with their puppy dog eyes and bleached teeth
telling us how “It gets better”,
promising unicorns
and pots of gold
at the end of colorless rainbows.
Too bad Matthew Shepherd
couldn’t stick around
just a couple of more years
to hear those sweet words--
no leprechaun’s treasure
at the end of a pistol grip
or the bottom of fence posts
on cold October nights.
Damn, God’s got a fucked-up sense of humor.
Turn on the radio.
Turn on the TV.
We are everywhere
for all to see
and have a chuckle.
Walking, talking stereotypes of
who The Unbroken still think we should be.
Am I “Just Jack”
or the Stanford Blatch—
the quippy, queeny best friend,
a comic relief.
Stand back and clap!

Watch the pink monkey dance!

(Are they expecting me to pull a string of banana-colored
anal beads out of my ass?)

So nice to be finally wrapped up
in America's embrace.

Too bad all I want to do
is tear at the fabric of all that is good and holy
like some twisted moth
with an appetite for family values
and holy sacraments
that straight folks don't seem to have a problem
shitting all over--
So sayeth GW Jr!

Feeling a little like my birth day today.

Damn, God got a fucked-up sense of humor.

Burn

Life is slow
here in a border town
where lazy palms
scantly twitch in dead breezes—
dry and pollen-choked.
Everywhere.
Nowhere.
Cattle,
brown against my hand
and an expanse of cloudless blue,
meander aimlessly,
chewing cud
that never quite hits the spot.
Their eyes, like minds—
blank—
close to things made new
by the blessing of the sun,
cast downward
upon cracks and clods of grey clay
underfoot,
where a fire burns beneath the ground.
Life is slow
here in a border town,
where—in-kind—
like a shadow
I wait for a shift,

the balm of a breeze
to kiss the delicate yellow from the retama
and pave my road.
Everywhere.
Nowhere.
Noon rages overhead
(Devil's at the crossroads)
as flames whip and lick the sky,
beckoning
just beyond the watery promise
of the horizon.
So, I close my eyes
here in this border town—
everywhere,
nowhere—
seeing white and the blood
that courses through my veins,
dig my toes into the ground, and slowly
burn.

Cajeta (Gimme Some Sweet!)

“Gimme some sweet!”

we scream

blessed by your MAD words

BAD words

GLAD words

SAD

letting them scorch palates

y quemar nuestros labios

like Holy Wafers

in the Devil’s mouth.

Give us a taste

of life

your *loco*—

salty and caramel-kissed—

with every candy-flip of the page

forming crystalizations

of lithium-pink

opiate rock (candy)

on dripping tips of *lenguas*

(so ready)

that hunger for the taste

of sweet poets’ milk

melting rains of *cajeta*

upon wanting chins and souls

under hot breaths of your WICKED verse.

“Gimme some sweet!”

gritamos

longing for a fix—

ecstatic

spasmodic

orgasms—

of your word-sugar

(tus palabras dulces)

their velvet, fatal stabs

to the heart

(mi corazón)

and the backs of throats

(releasing bad blood and MAD words)

like glistening Astro Pops

sharpened and honed

by the spit and rolling tongues

of PrOphETS—

their anointing mouths

and bleeding pens

working their *brujería*—

confectionate necromancies—

upon lifeless eardrums

y animas

that languished bitterly

in reductive states

of silent subtraction.

C'mon...

Gimme some sweet!

(Some candied teats to suckle)

Gimme some sweet!

(Sticky trickles of sanctified honey-nectar)

Gimme some sweet!

(El fuego...la alma en mi sangre)

Gimme some sweet!

(Good, proper skull-fucks that inject your Truths)

Gimme some sweet!

(A case of “the sugars” that never felt so good)

Ándale! Dame tu dulce

y no me dejáis aquí estropeado!

(Don't leave me here CRASHING)

Digging for Lost Temples

Thumbing through *The Borderlands*, I can't help but feel not "brown" enough. I'm Mexican Lite. Got a case of the "coconuts". There are no rageful battle-cries inflaming this breast. No bitterness lingering on the tip of the tongue (the back of hands and the starch of white collars taste just the same no matter the bearer's color). No tortured soul, the sto for identity and re-appropriation. There's just me and this suit of rosy-beige meat that touts my value best in the dead of winter.

"If you're not pissed, you aren't paying attention," some people used to say. Others, "We're nothing but second-class citizens—wetbacks—to them!" (My back dried three generations ago) Then, there is all this talk of The Wall, as if one had actually never existed before in the first place. How funny people are when the invisible begin to reflect the Spectrum of Things in the cruel clarity of daylight—ancient atrocities shining, unforgivingly, like newly minted coins under brusque fluorescents. When did symbols become more real than the things they represented? (Maybe around the same time 'detention centers' and 'concentration camps' meant different things?) "Better them than me," I would think to myself. "Everyone's got to hate someone, right?"

Call it apathy. Detachment. Indifference. Call it what you like, but don't let an absence of tears convey a treason of the flesh. I know where I come from and where my people have been. I am one of the many brown bodies that was piled in heaps, used as target practice by Texas Rangers that stood proudly before them, posing for photographs. I swung low from sturdy boughs in the Southwest, proving Strange Fruit —plucked in all its hues and flavors—tastes coppery and bitter in Life's maw. I starved outside with the rest of the dogs, staring into diner windows—mind, body, and spirit consumed—barred from entry, wanting for crumbs. The narrative's my own, but the story remains the same.

I'm no one's *machisto*, gangbanger, Latin lover, wetback, or Spic. I am no one's pimp, *Sancho*, *caballero*, or *maricon*. I can't roll my Rs, I hate tequila, and I don't code switch. Sheepskins—paid by my own coin—adorn my walls, not holographic portraits of The Last Supper or La Santa Muerte adorned with plastic red roses from the dollar store. I am not "spicy" like something that is novelly consumed. And I—a being, self-determined, not cast from a vulgar mold— respect God's will as much as he respects mine (which doesn't say much).

The blood of peasants and slaves, warriors and kings run through our veins. Our ears once heard gods' whispers through the rustling of leaves in the breeze and the trickling of streams over time-smoothed stones. We rode the winds--the sun kissing our backs (not breaking them)--as we flew through fields of pale azure upon Serpent's wings, over treetops and verdant expanses. We ate our enemies' courage and drank victor's wine with lips, stained red, from their skulls. (So, step back with your 'tallboys' and that Four Lokos jive!) This is what lies beneath the skin. Melanin be damned! We are the sons and daughters of Earth and Sky, Aztec Temples of Sun and Moon,

buried beneath blanched soil, crowned by cathedrals—papal tiaras anointed by brown blood that pepper the land like so many gravestones. Remember?

Remember!

So, I pray to the Archangel Anzaldúa to help me find my lost sovereignty—my words wafting up into the clouds on velvety ropes smoke of sandalwood incense and braided sweetgrass. Tears of honey fall from Heaven upon my skin, feeding cuts and scrapes no one (not even I) can see. Unfolding her rainbow-hued wings, like Hebe on Olympus, she descends with arms outstretched and an angelic smile. Face-to-face, she pulls me close, blesses my forehead with *chamurrado*-scented kisses then tugs at my ear and says with the fire of cinnamon on her tongue, “*Huerco*, just love the skin you’re in!”

A Taste of Green

Exploring Lorca's 'duende'

Coda-Switch

O, viejas de negro!

How you line the front pews
at Catholic masses
like pushers sitting on street curbs,
rolling rosary beads—
like pills of black-tar heroin—
between jonesing fingers,
craving your next fixes of salvation,
visiones de Dios.

Such beastly things
behind those lifeless veils of pitch!

Those guttural mumbles
under *respiraciones y lenguas*,
drunk with righteousness,
acid and rank
with the smell of death
and the sour of Communal wine.

Spells of atonement, maybe?

Curses of chastity?

Oraciones por mi?

Oh, I think not! (*Creo que no!*)

Why shouldn't our ecstasies—
in all their corporal glory—compare?
Aren't Heaven's truths just as easily scried
amongst kaleidoscopes
of gas-streaked street puddles...

...the glorious freckles of smooth, bare backs and shoulders...
the shapes left behind in dampened sheets the morning after?

O, divine geomancies!

How I love

(need)

our alchemy—the transmutations
of magnificent bodies of light
and living streams that shimmer hot and wet,
setting skin and lips

(nuestra piel y labios)

aflame.

All that is good is gold,

but nothing gold can stay*

for even the most treasured of God's sparrows

fall from flight,

silently screaming,

impaling

upon the holy stabs of His Electric Crown of Thorns.

So, let's dwell on patches of fragrant grasses

and sip (not sin) from our gardens' springs

O, sacred elixir!

partaking of flesh and blood—

our Eucharist—

devouring, 'til all is gone,

shining, *brillante*,

against shadows of cold piety

cast by dark, ringless Brides of the Lord,

before the hues of the day bleed away

into pale shades that
powder and crumble to dust
under the gravity of God's thumb
(love).

Amen.

Duende

Green is the taste of bitter rind that lingers on your fingertips,
cutting through the sweetness of icebox orange smiles
bursting on my tongue, lovingly fed,
conjuring the salty sting of solitude's imminence,
as if a shade.

How dreaded the tic-toc of the clock—
rhythmic shower of dying heartbeats—
hanging, sourly, above us in white clusters,
promising much, offering little
but that which is within our fleshy grasps.
Before dawn breaks and you slip away—a shadow
fleeing the Eye of Day—
you reach backward, hand upon wanting hip, pulling me inward,
stopping time if but for a second longer.

O morning thief!
I am bound by your fragrant tethers
that permeate, infiltrate 'the everything' under my skin
through the hole in my chest that once held a beating heart,
long-since cast at the pink of your delicate arches.
My soul bursts forth as you turn and smile,
then walk away,
leaving behind your indentions and a tattered Lorca,
tossed afloat in the rising, orange currents of morning.

Still, I am drawn to the darkness of my corners,
where Death has found a home.
The purity of her black light defines, reveals all
within this drowned world of light and shadow.
There is no love without fear of absence,
no hope without doubt,
no fulfillment without the memory of Hunger's dull stabs.
We savor and rejoice these fleeting moments—
all that is good under God's blue heaven—
for in the end
all we are left with...all that is true...
is that cold taste of green.

Eating Pears on the Rooftop

Come!

Let us eat green pears—

cold—

at night on the rooftop

under burdened boughs of the old yew

and the moon's pale glow.

Let us love

and laugh at myths and shadow-plays

born of sticks and stones

and celestial light—

the stuff of illusion

(delusion)

that pulls us far from the cold comfort

of home.

There, the close confines of our rooms lie, prepared,

untouched by the deceits of night and day--

welcoming

and pure.

O, to be with you in the dark

(boundlessness within those walls)

behind thick curtains of rich brown and verdant green--

that glorious place of undiscerning Truth,

where glammers crumble to dust

(to dust).

To this

we say, "Yes! Yes! Yes!"

and kiss the silver—sticky and sweet--
from each other's lips,
each soft brush
a rap on the front door.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

David Estringel completed his Bachelor of Arts in English from the University of Texas at Brownsville in 1992, a Master of Science in Social Work (clinical concentration) from the University of Texas at Austin in 2006, a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley in 2022 and is currently working on his Master of Business Administration in Healthcare Management at Our Lady of the Lake University. He also plans on continuing to work towards completing his Master of Arts in Independent Studies with concentrations in Literature and Cultural Studies, Composition, and Creative Writing come the Fall of 2022.

David currently lives at 8116 Bridgepointe Dr., Temple, Texas 76502, where he has just retired from direct social work practice after almost 22 years in the social services field. He has worked in varying capacities—the most recent being in hospital administration—in the fields of HIV/AIDS, hospital social work, administration (non-profit, for-profit, and State), inpatient substance abuse treatment, and acute inpatient psychiatric care. Academic positions include his current full-time position of five years at the Worden School of Social Services at Our Lady of the Lake University, where he functions as a Clinical Assistant Professor of Social Work. He has also been adjunct Social Work faculty at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley since 2013. David has also taught Composition I at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley as a Teaching Assistant for the Department of Writing and Language Studies.