PITW Workshop Packet 2025

Contents

Saturday, October 4th Workshop

Jon Naskrent | he/him

Reading the *Illiad* (while answering Erica's text about lunch with Rod)

Achilles wallowed by the ships
near the champagne waters beyond the honeymoon coast
while love Patroclus was slaughtered and ruby blood stained diamond arms.
This, at least, is the scene as I picture it. But I am sitting by the fountain
swiping at a phone, and this morning a light spray lingers
over the waves separating the ships and their strained union.
If Achilles' treasure was so precious, why couldn't he match her radiance?
(I know he feared Agamemnon's sturdy arms and gentle linens).
At least one comfort I can take is that sometimes an item poorly maintained
is still beautiful. For example: there was great debate amongst the fighters
over who, exactly, should recover the armor of love Patroclus, but no question
that the tarnished wedding ring would be polished, and then treasured.
There are rare situations where the form of the thing is the thing itself.
Eventually Achilles abandoned his ships, but at what cost?
A great poem detailing his insecurities—
Yes, my love, have fun at lunch.

Collin Garrity He/Him

Catgut

walking slow in a mountain wood
a small frog watches from the leaves
and jumps under my crushing boot,
  no one sets out to be the villain

but the bent stalks in this trampled field
  will outlive our flower crowns
 these dented mountains are our names
carved into the bark of the earth

we will die off to leave our pimpled
concrete for the vines to redevelop and
buried condoms will protect our evidence
long after it should have returned to soil

with each well intentioned release, a hook
  left to rust in the mouth of a catfish

Christina Fales (she/her)

Man and Woman

He was absolutely
invadable: no barrier
at the gate. Anyone
could pass in, and
when they did, they
lingered, made themselves
at home. After a while,
he couldn't tell the
visitors from his own
furniture.

This bothered him – lying
on a sofa, and finding it
suddenly rise up like a
camel at mid-day,
ill-tempered and spitting.
Who can relax when the
house is always on the
move, the tent flaps
clapping, buzzards
hovering, and always the other
tribesmen, disappearing
at the horizon?

Never love this man, though it's
hard not to. His voice
trembles when distracted:
your heart tightens, and
finally what you hear is
the last voice left on the
playground: the ball bouncing
lower and lower… He
could go home – would go,
if he could. But there's
no one there now, so he's
off again, roaming the desert,
thirsting.

Take from my cup, you
think to yourself. Just
let me in, take all I've
got. To him, you say
you're thirsty too,
hot and dusty – a little
way together is
little enough, why not?

All very well, but he
doesn't know the way himself.
Oasis, jungle…
he's dropped his bread-
crumbs, bent his twigs, but
things keep changing.

Never mind, he's got your hand.
He's sure about the
broad, featureless horizon,
keeps his eyes straight ahead.
If the trees lick and
leer after him, say
nothing. Bad dreams are
rooted, after all, and
you're moving forward.
Too late, if at all, you
realize the road is
planted thick to the
skyline.

Who prospers on this journey?
Is it well to turn a
blind eye? If you
speak names aloud, you
risk waking the
sleep-walker. At best, he's
old-fashioned: he'll never
forgive you. At worst, the whole
landscape will heave
and howl, a sandstorm roll in,
stinging every eye,
leave every creature a
cradle of bones.

And so you march on.
How could it be
otherwise? That clenched jaw and
blind courage: they
tear at your heart like
summer rain.

Obedient
is the beast of burden,
head down and sturdy-stepping.
Eyes on both sides,
it sees two ways at once
and drives on
through the middle.

Renee Emerson: she/her

At the Corn Maze

I lose sight of you immediately.
Our daughters drop my hands
to run laughing through the turns
you've taken with calculation.

Your parents never brought you
to this sort of thing, you told me,
as a teen wrapped armbands around
our children's offered wrists.

The shocks of corn rise, golden
spears of a dead army. Now
I can hear sister call to sister,
and you to me, but each turn
we make is always the same

wrong turn. So eventually I choose
a prodigal path, forged by someone
before us, who lost patience
with the slow going, the jagged border
we are not meant to see over.

Michael Akuchie (He/Him/His)

First Time Reading Poetry

Many Decembers ago, I asked
my father for a Tom Clancy novel.
Instead of a sibling, I idolized
the iconic scent of thriller books.
I adored the mystery clothed
in pages, my eyes raced across chapters
to an ending that merited urgency.

One Christmas Day, my father came
bearing a carton of spy novels.
I stumbled across a book of poems tucked
inside a world of espionage.
I picked the foreign object and unlatched its door.
My teenage brain strained to extract
from each line a digestible lesson.
Poetry slept untouched for years.

When I returned in adult form,
metaphors still left me puzzled,
but at least I could point at them.
I prayed for a path to allow
a trickle of meaning, for God to hasten
the realization of a line's motive.
I did all but stitch myself to stanza.

Zoe Korte (they/them)

Today on the blacktop there was a butterfly, and it was already dead but I couldn't get to it fast enough before one of the kids stomped on it anyway, and another blew on it to watch it flutter, and I said no and I said go play but then a child was eating fistfuls of dirt so I had to go and there was nobody to bury the dead. After I sent everyone away I was too sad to touch it with my clumsy mean hands so I used a Kleenex to pick it up and laid it in the garden where it would blend in with the squash blossoms until it disintegrated. I felt ashamed of the stomping and the dirt and the burying, so I looked up species of yellow butterflies and found a picture of a dainty sulphur, identical and chillingly alive.

Today [redacted] I was [redacted] mean [redacted] so I [redacted] laid [redacted] in the garden [redacted] until [redacted] I felt [redacted] chillingly alive.

a child is eating

dirt and there is nobody

to bury the dead

Mark Kumming (he/him)

Curious

Silently, we walk to the bedroom closet, push aside hanging clothes and coats, wiggle in; the door open a little for light. Back in the laundry, Mommy presses Daddy's shirts. We hear the steam hiss from the iron. A slow song plays on the radio behind her. In half light, we take off our clothes: T-shirts, shorts, underpants pile at our feet. Our plain bodies, boney shoulders, the small brown buttons on our chests dimmed in the gloom. Smooth skin of flat tummies — both our navels poke in — we are white where our clothes cover; arms and legs tan from a summer outside making us look like dolls. We raise our hands over our heads — armpits glow white, clean; thin lines of our ribs wrap around our sides. Our long legs straight like rope — knots for knees. She turns to show her back, looking over a shoulder, her hair falling across her face, trying to see for herself the curve of her spine, the bumps of her bottom. She nods at me and I turn. Where we are not the same we look longer: Stare. Neither of us thinking of touch — a question we can't say lingers between us.

Melissa Qualls (she/her)

With My Sister at Medical West Healthcare Center, August 5th

You stand with your back towards me in the changing room,
listening carefully to the saleswoman who details,
in glowing terms,
the benefits of the newest bra inserts.

How much cooler they are
you, in the hospital bed, shivering
How much like a real breast they are
a flak jacket of white bandages swathing your torso
How easy they are to clean
bloody fluids dripping down plastic tubes, so many tubes

And when you turn to the mirror, where I am sitting,
your arm startles up - like a reflex.
You don't want me to see the concave chest wall, the
raised red crisscrossing of scars, the
War-torn space years of surgery have left bare.

My own arm too raises - like an instinct, to
touch you, to hold you, to take your hand and
never let it go.

But instead I watch the reflection of you in the triptych mirrors,
shoulders hunched, nodding your head as
we listen to the calm voice of the woman
who tries to convince you,
to convince all of us,
No one will ever be able to tell
They aren't real. No one.

I promise.

William LaPage (he/him)

Some Hills

1.
January on Earth,
not every darkness portends a past.
Some hills compound their tapestry mirrorment
from cold slate and vinegar, foil of
beaded jewels leading away
along the highway's edge.

2.
Now, as they often are, they are with me
bearing the losses. Evening arrives
balanced on the ridge line's crown.

Below the trees catch wind of being's end
the semi-miracle of common stone
pushing through at a stone's pace
orders of recomposition

my worries haunt me.

Jen Ryu **(she/her)**

Stompin' Around

Meeting someone new
Toes grow sore
From constant tiptoeing
Unsteady and afraid
The ground gives way underneath

A childhood home
With creaky floors
Yet deafening silence

A language more valuable than ABCs
Taught without a single word
Where glances are essays
And hiding is the thesis

Erupting in laughter
That isn't your own
You're larger than life
And somehow still muted

But when you find your own
Walls come down
Walking becomes comfortable
Socks off and barefoot

Pairing wine with warm hugs
Unravelling in their arms
Giggling during Sunday service
Laughter punctuated with snorts
Telling your kids about these moments

Good friends are hard to come by
So if you find one
The downstairs neighbour
May complain from all the stompin' around
After your toes become free

Emily Danker-Feldman (she/her)

Eco-anxiety

she knows
that the City
is no longer
recycling

she has seen
the orange trash truck lift
the big bright blue bin and
dump its contents
into the wrong
color

and yet

she cannot
stop soaking
the empty metal
cat food tins
in the evening
rinsing them
in the morning

placing them
gingerly in her
own Ikea bin
carrying it out
to the street
dumping it in
the big blue one

she does the
same with the
oat milk
container

and the empty
cardboard
boxes that frozen
meals come in

Clarissa Emanuel (she/her)

sunglasses
i look at you
staring back at
me on the table.
my own ego
barely fits between
the marble brown and
gray frames. i see
my brown hair
my undecided eyes
oscillating between
contempt and contemplation
stare back at me
i'm losing myself
between looking at both
reflections. Is it
revenge I desire
Or something
else altogether?
I look at you
staring back at
Me.
Sunglasses.

Sunglasses
I look at you
staring back at
me on the table.
my own ego
barely fits between
the marble brown and
gray frames. I see
my brown hair
my undecided eyes
oscillating between
contempt and contemplation
stare back at me
I'm losing myself
between looking at both
reflections. is it
revenge i desire
or something
else altogether?
i look at you
staring back at
me.
sunglasses.

Sunday, October 5th Workshop

Hailey Pedersen (she/her)

untitled

I don't really want to care
about anything except
that the rabbit ate the watermelon
rind I left for it. In the new days
I eat sardine pasta. The days blend
are sneaky saunterers
are no longer anti-exposure.
Even the pine stands in veiled refusal.
No one questions the private bastard.
It's August again and I am unheard of,
cannot remember the magnesium.
I smell the milk before I pour it.
I worry a saltine into acid.
I am contradiction.
I am filth I am
Attic Woman.
I see a mother guiding a
wandering child.
I used to
believe in good.
Maybe it's out there somewhere
but there are no good people.
Only people.

Jordan Marley-Weaver

Treasure Island

Awakened through the humidity
Tied up to be released from the bounds of my mind

Everything around me is elevated now
Adorned nails, manicured hair
My essence sings to the rhythm of your existence

For me
What was once clouded, dreadful, desolate
is colored with pigments of creation

I used to wander aimlessly
Shower love at anything which captured my attention
Left alone, I found myself shrouded in misdirection
I'd run my hands along my body
Met with a piercing coldness

Flor de Palo Cruz and Jackass bitters cloaked the sidewalk
Each sunset marked another day
I'd lose myself in the ocean,
recovering fragments of the past I'd buried
Arroz con leche
Painted Miami skies
This summer, my awakening, **you** have lit my soul on fire

There are moments between us no one will ever know
I've learned to keep what special to me close
Not that it's a secret
When building an empire
A whisper echoes, it's important to let the roar grow

Caleb Delos-Santos (he/him/his)

Leaving for work this morning feels orange

My bottles of Sertraline come in orange.

I pop a pill,

and a panel of sun slips onto my eyes:

my eyes, dented
from hours I couldn't sleep
until serotonin buffs them out.

Toes lifted, only non-slip shoes
keeping me stuck to the ground,
I meander through the front door

and toward my grey Chevy, that steel bullet,
which crashed into an azure Prius
two years ago next month,

that cold bullet I still steer,
which almost cracked my skull
and their skull. I'm sorry

that memory is muffled
by cicadas wishing me a good morning
and a pill plugging my ears.

And my Chevy, wrapped in the arms of sunrise,
begins to look like it was chiseled out of amber,
the blood of an oak,

as if even wheeled machines, soulless,
carry life in their bones,
life tinted orange.

Dana R. Pierson she/her

Cellophane Wrappers

The Save-A-Lot in Gravois Park disappoints you. No quarters required for entry. Carts have wandered aimlessly off the lot, tempted with new opportunities. You peruse aisles of Utz crackers, lackluster tomatoes, and poorly packaged chicken thighs. Yesterday's piñata hangs from the ceiling tiles. You approach a refrigerator case. Dairy. You think of a time when you could afford glass bottles of Oberweis. There are none here. Once, you were a child. You lived graciously off your parents' dual income. Now, you wonder whether you should save pennies on the sliced block of American. Unwrapped, cellophane missing. You applied to work here. No call back. This was after seeing the Help Wanted sign, after the times you were angsty. After learning about real parties and about guys with fake first names. Barely hiding the word vodka under your breath. Fighting everyone at seventeen and searching for independence at twenty. You walk slowly to the check-out line, nothing in hand. Waiting for the day where you might be able to again afford individually sliced and packaged American cheese.

Masen Johnson he/him

An Inhuman Being

Here you are, duly created,
and placed on the front steps of the Universe.
(or inside the depths of your punishment)

Staring stars,
with brooding eyes,
among other lucky witnesses.
Bear witness to this lie,
this untruth called consciousness.

Is this really real? Are you really here? or are you stuck in
(your own personal hell) the same place you were Before.

The routine
of your Situation
turns you into a machine with wires, buttons, cogs,
among other cold metal parts.

But instead,
the head you're caged in

Cora Mossotti (she/her)

Ampersand

Long Hours stretched into days
I'm lost
Nothing has changed
I am still the same
Out of place
Out of my mind
Comfort seems unreal
The opposite of how I feel
Find me now
Before I come undone.

Sydney Sinks (she/her)

I Think I'm in Love with You but I Don't Know How the Words Should Taste

We bleach your hair the same morning we eat peanut butter cups for breakfast,
leftover Halloween candy you found in your sister's room.
I'm smoking on the front porch in boxers and a t-shirt I found on my floor
next to the pile of paperbacks I can only skim through, noncommittal
and smelling bad — me, not the paperbacks, which do smell like mold, but I smell like cotton
and sweat and, now, tobacco. Not a cute habit, mostly performative,
if we're telling the truth.
I ash it in a paper coffee cup. You swing your plastic Walgreens bag
around and around your wrist.
We mix the bleach on a paper plate in my bathroom. Acrid and burning,
dripping down your bangs and splattering my t-shirt.
The plastic gloves slip down my hands so I just take them off
and throw them in the sink because
it's easier to do things completely, even when it stings.
I promise you I'll wash my hands clean. I think of truths I could tell you.
I use my sadness as an excuse to be unmotivated
and not brush my teeth.
I'm convinced the meds will fail any day now.
I tap my box of Marlboros in my pocket and search for new ways to destroy.
Your hair is blond and tangled; you smell like my shampoo, unrecognizable.
We sit on the floor of my room, listen to 90s pop songs and chew on jawbreakers.
Trick-or-treat candy tastes best in late November and early mornings
when you know you shouldn't have it, when you haven't earned it,
sweeping long strands of blond hair off the bathroom floor.

Monty Webster

Witnessing Nature

The woods has a way
of calming my mind
I went there today
wondering what I might find

I discovered a trail
that I had never tried
and soon noticed a snail
when my shoe needed tied

I scared off some deer
where the path curves around
They could easily hear
the leaf-crunching sound

I said I wasn't stopping
until I ran short on time
Later a big rock outcropping
enticed me to climb

It wasn't a vertical wall
so I didn't need a line
Being careful not to fall
I made it just fine

There was all kinds of stuff
to see hear and do
I went on up the bluff
for the great river view

The lack of a breeze
made the river look calm
There were so many trees
but not one single palm

Don't get me wrong though
I still love the Midwest
No matter where else I go
I like these woods the best

Of course there were mosquitos
along with ticks and flies
I guess everyone knows
life requires compromise

I hoped I'd see eagles
perhaps perched in a tree
I thought about my beagles
at home awaiting me

I watched a spider weave
while a bird sang its tune
I did not want to leave
The day flew by too soon

The river like a mirror
reflected the tree line
A tow of barges travelling nearer
fogged it up for a time

I stuck around awhile
to witness the Sunset
It beat every image file
that I have seen yet

Claire Snowden they/them

Kansas Geometry

The black snake of tar
that keeps the street together
points to a cheap metal table
set with a rock and an umbrella.

In the distance a sign instructs
no one to pause briefly
before moving on. Despite this,
the oak tree is dead.

With a birch like twist,
its lower trunk is stripped,
white. Two plastic chairs wait
in front of two metal barrel drums,

one slightly larger.
The shade kisses us, the dead
grass, one of the chairs,
and half the surface of the oil drum.

The shadow circle of the table
is where S T O P itself goes,
to rest a while
before moving on.

Michael Pfeifer **he/him**

A Prose Poem walks into a bar…

Picture this. All the poems are at a bar. Sonnet. Villanelle. Sestina. Haiku. Saga. Free verse. All of them. They're all decked out. Villanelle and Sestina in matching sheath dresses from a prestige French fashion house. Sonnet in a tailored Saville Row suit stitched by a passion-mad Sicilian. Saga. Garrulous, with a bottle of aquavit and holding court at the big table in the back. Haiku meditating on the tea ceremony by the lotus pond. Free verse scatting on the bongos. In walks a Prose Poem. Looks to be nothing special. Just the simple rudiments of speech headed home from the office. But then Prose lets everything slip and slide to the floor and stands there, a naked statement. No pretense. Nothing at all. Just words. And what words. No form, but function from here to there. A shapeshifter. Formless form. Prose moved like a sinuous mountain stream down the steps and turned across the dance floor like falling snow. Every muscle and bone visible. And with mischief in mind. None can look away. The kiss of a last image, then out the door, leaving behind the aroma of pines after rain.

Frank Corley

Coming Back on the MKT

"Aw, it's just my mom doin' some bitch ass shit," he said,
As the three of us stood watching his friend run away from the cops.

"They ain't never gon' catch him anyway.
If he gets runnin' . . ."
"Why's he running?"
"There's a warrant for his arrest."
"What for?"

We'd been riding back on the trail
When he'd come running toward us.
At first, I thought he was out for a run,
Really fast.
Then, I realized two guys were chasing him.

"In pursuit on the Katy Trail,"
the lead huffed into the radio on his shoulder.
The two of us rolled back down the trail after them,
Like two little boys following a siren.
Like two white men, offering to help the police chase a guy.

"Failure to appear in court.
He was in treatment court and he stopped going."
Treatment court is where you go to avoid jail
For possession. Start using again, stop going,
They issue a warrant, and you go to jail.

"We was over at my house. My momma,
She just don't like Tristan. So she called the cops.
And he ran." So here we were,
Trying to help two more cops chase another
Young kid. I tried to remember, was he Black? White?

"They gonna get a helicopter on him."
We watched as Tristan disappeared into a stand of trees.
One of the cops had something in his hand. A gun? Taser?
Sirens wailed toward us in the distance.
The two cops stood, two hundred yards away.

It looked like they were planning their next move.
As we rode away, a sheriff's Jeep came up the gravel road.
I wondered, what will they do when they get him?
Treat him like roadkill, an inconvenient bump in the road,

The stain to be cleaned off at a truck stop?

We rode on in, shaken by the encounter.
We had tried to help the cops catch another young kid.
We wished his friend a Blest Day. He didn't know.
We wondered his story. His mother's.
Tristan's. What would be next?

A little farther up the road, we saw the man,
The same man we'd seen with his wife, sitting at the trailhead
Hindman Junction. The wife, clearly the abler of the two,
The husband, feeble, masked, exhausted.
Here he was, on the ground, like an animal struck by a car.

He lay motionless in the gravel of the turn, next to his bike.
The wife was well ahead. We called to her, "Ma'am! Ma'am!"
Receiving no response, I pedaled toward her.
She'd turned into their subdivision, airpods on,
Ahead of her husband, she'd seen and heard nothing.

She got off her bike and walked the fifty feet back to her husband.
He was on the bench by then; another man had stopped to help.
"This bottle is unopened," he said, offering.
"No, I don't need any water," he said. "I'm okay. I'll be okay."
"I want you to walk back," said his wife with concern in her voice.

I think she was mildly embarrassed she hadn't seen it.
In McBaine, where we'd first seen the couple,
She'd chatted with him matter-of-factly.
Gently, tenderly, but not condescendingly.
They interacted as partners.

But now, he needed her. And she was there.
"I'd rather ride," he protested gently.
"You should walk," she insisted. He walked.
"We live close," the wife let us know.
And so they walked off, toward home.

Finally, we headed back, worn out.
These humans, I thought, these humans.