

## ABSTRACT

The Limitations of Language as an Intellectual and Visual Artform

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This thesis explores moments when language alone is not enough to adequately communicate. Through a combination of research and creative writing, it highlights both the power and limitations of language. Each chapter focuses on a different aspect of language that can either prohibit or promote meaningful communication. The first chapter focuses on white space as a visual tool that the writer can use to complement or confuse meaning. The second chapter addresses access to language as a factor that limits the potential for communication between individuals. The third chapter focuses on the effects of overabundant language represented visually through the use of overlapping text. The final chapter focuses on typography as a method of augmenting what can be communicated through language.

THE LIMITATIONS OF LANGUAGE AS AN INTELLECTUAL AND VISUAL  
ARTFORM

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## INTRODUCTION

I have always been fascinated by language. As an avid reader from an early age, I remember being awed by the power and beauty that language is capable of. I quickly fell in love with the way language could create entire worlds and characters, communicate complex ideas, and shape the thoughts of both writer and reader. However, as an attempted writer, I also experienced firsthand the frustration that language can evoke when it fails to live up to this powerful potential.

Language is our primary tool of communication, forming one of the main building blocks of modern society. It allows for connection—the private thoughts of one individual transformed into an understandable message that, if all goes as planned, creates a shared understanding in the mind of another. In this way, language is the most direct route to the thoughts, the mind, the experience of someone not yourself. It forms the gateway to understanding and empathy—if all goes as planned.

However, it takes only a second's reflection to realize that often—perhaps more often than not—language fails to fully accomplish this far-reaching goal of facilitating understanding. There are numerous barriers that can prevent language from communicating meaning as intended. These barriers range from the immensely practical and surface level—such as noise interruptions that prevent language from being heard—to the deeply psychological and personal issues that cause a breakdown of communication between individuals.

In addition to these outside barriers, many communication barriers are inherent, inseparable aspects of language itself. As the novelist Theodore Dreiser wrote, “words

are but the vague shadows of the volumes we mean” (7). Whenever we use language, we must find a way to deal with the nature of these shadows, giving them as much substance and weight as we can manage. We must find a way to deal with the unavoidable barriers within language—the impossibility of communicating our volumes—either by accepting these limitations or finding ways to overcome them.

The goal of this project is to write about the limitations inherent within language, exploring the moments when language alone is not enough to accurately and fully communicate. This topic holds both academic and personal interest for me, as it was inspired in part by my firsthand experience with the inadequacy of language in the face of grief. While going through the process of grieving my mother’s death, I experienced disenchantment with language as an unexpected side effect. I wrote in my journal at the time: “Grief takes more from you than I first realized. As if losing someone isn’t enough, I feel like I’ve lost the ability to connect with the people I still have. I had always put my faith in words, but now I know that words fail when you need them most.”

Because this topic was so immediate and personal for me, I knew from the start that the scope of my project had to extend beyond pure research and analysis. To fully explore the limitations of language, I needed to engage with them on a personal level, as a writer and not just an observer of what others have written. I wanted to incorporate my own creative writing on this theme alongside my research to better understand how the writer engages with language, experiencing what it was like to work with and around the apparent limitations of the writer’s primary tool.

I also saw an opportunity to use this project to combine my interest in language with my background in graphic arts by focusing on the limitations of language as they

relate to the visual elements of literature. With this goal in mind, I began researching and experimenting with the use of typography, white space, and layout in creative writing. I was interested in how these design principles could be used to both illuminate and interfere with the meaning of a given text. As I conducted my research, I paid particular attention to writers who appeared to be consciously engaging with the capabilities and limitations of language, addressing these issues in either their subject matter or form.

I did not fully realize the difficulty of what I had undertaken until I was midway through the writing process. The success of this project hinged on my ability to make use of words to discuss the limitations of words, to convey through language the problems that language cannot convey. I struggled with the paradoxical nature of this goal throughout. I knew that my writing needed to be self-aware of this paradox, openly acknowledging and engaging with its own failings as pieces of fiction. This tension that I found myself navigating reminded me of what the writer Italo Calvino calls “the struggle of literature,” which he defines as the “struggle to escape from the confines of language.” As I delved more deeply into the limitations of language, this struggle to escape the confines of language became my unifying (and admittedly ambitious) goal, one that I hope I have accomplished at least in part.

## CHAPTER ONE:

### White Space as a Visual Language

#### *PART ONE: Literature Review*

Words, although the primary substance of a body of text, are not the only means of expression available to the writer. White space, margins, typography, and layout are all elements that affect the way a reader interacts with and understands a text. The amount of impact these elements have within a text varies from one writer to the next, yet these are all tools that can be used by the writer as an added layer of meaning. In recognizing these tools, literature moves beyond a purely intellectual artform to the realm of visual art, taking its place alongside painting, drawing, and photography (among others) as a visually expressive medium.

Poetry is perhaps the literary form most consciously aware of its status as a visual artform. Because of its brevity, poetry requires a level of deliberateness not regularly seen in prose. Every word, every piece of punctuation, and every line break must be placed with purpose. Working within such confined parameters, poets often view margins and white space as important considerations when arranging words upon the page.

A prime example of this visual intentionality within poetry can be found in the works of E. E. Cummings. Cummings uses the relationship between text and white space as a literary tool throughout his poetry to enhance the meaning of written language, bringing at times both clarity and confusion to the words of his poems. As Rushworth

Kidder notes in his study of Cummings' poetic influences, Cummings' poetry demonstrates "visual thinking" that "brings into poetry the aesthetic principles of the painters" (Kidder, 275).

In the poem "I Have Found What You Are Like," Cummings arranges words in a stair-step pattern indicative of movement:

i have found what you are like

i have found what you are like  
the rain,

(Who feathers frightened fields  
with the superior dust-of-sleep. wilds

easily the pale club of the wind  
and swirled justly souls of flower strike

the air in utterable coolness

deeds of green thrilling light  
with thinned

newfragile yellows

lurch and press

-in the woods  
which  
stutter  
and

sing

And the coolness of your smile is  
stirringofbirds between my arms;but  
i should rather than anything  
have(almost when hugeness will shut  
quietly)almost,  
your kiss

Through the use of line breaks and added white space, Cummings creates moments of pause within the poem. These breaks add emphasis on the words immediately following the spaces, such as “sing” (line 16) and “your kiss” (line 22). Furthermore, the white space before “sing” interrupts the flow of the poem’s rhythm, creating an experience for the reader that mimics the “stutter” referenced in the preceding lines (14). In this way, the addition of white space enhances the meaning of the words, carrying the meaning of the poem beyond what the words alone communicate.

“!blac” provides another example of Cummings’ use of unusual structure and spacing for effect. “!blac” contains frequent line breaks, often in the middle of words. Through his use of line breaks, Cummings breaks down language into blocks of letters, forcing the reader to decipher their meaning and experience them in a disorienting way. The line breaks also create a visual, vertical structure to the piece representative of the downward movement the words describe. While the structure complements the sense of downward movement, it also alters the would-be peaceful tone of the poem’s imagery. The poem’s words describe the color of a tree against the sky as a leaf falls from it. This simple imagery, if arranged in a typical structure, could easily convey a sense of calm and serenity. However, the poem’s tone is dictated by the unconventional spacing, which adds an element of chaos to the sense of movement communicated through the poem’s words and structure.

Cummings’ rejection of conventional structure indicates his overall approach to literary theory. His poem “Since Feeling is First” describes his prioritization of emotion over “the syntax of things” (line 3). His refusal to follow traditional linguistic conventions demonstrates this sentiment as well. Rather than letting the structure of his

poems be dictated by the language and typical structure of the genre, he rejects these rules to create a structure of his own that more accurately conveys the emotion he is trying to depict. In this way, his unusual spacing and line breaks evoke emotion beyond what a standard structure would convey.

Contemporary poet Orlando White follows Cummings' example of unconventionality in his own work. The meaning of White's poetry is often inseparable from its form as White takes on language itself as the subject of many of his poems. White's poetry is highly influenced by the idea of the caesura, the poetic term for pauses between language. Of his creative process, White says that he "conceptualize[s] sets of words through the interposition of *white space*" [emphasis in original] (Poetry Society of America). Accordingly, White is highly aware of the effect white space has on the rhythm and cadence of his poetry. "The *space* invokes and animates *silences*" [emphasis in original], White wrote in reference to the white space seen throughout much of his work (Poetry Society of America).

The poem "Block Cipher" (reproduced below) provides an example of White's use of poetry to grapple with the complexities of language:

Under diagram of a letter-less paragraph,  
 block white. Silent quadrates, grid imperceptible  
 where the arrangement cross-puzzles itself.  
 Blank words equidistant by page flecional by print.  
 Structure of paper exists to limit *communicatio*  
 of sound of silence; how word-types appear,  
 how fonts distinguish an ipseity of language.  
 The pages' margins shape set-text a voice unwrit;  
 contains unseen accent, pressure wave code.  
 Where breath within paper functions a sensation  
 thought,  
 actions charge form. Without  
 a point an *i* will forget its direction, or a *j*  
 with its curve will not show its  
 breadth of line.

This poem is undeniably visual in nature, the lines arranged into a block shape with large spaces interrupting every few words. The purpose of the unusual structure is not immediately identifiable. Rather, like the title suggests, the spacing turns the poem into a kind of cipher, something that the reader must try to decode. White writes that the white space and margins “shape-set” the text of this and all poems, adding meaning by joining “a voice unwrit” to the voice of the poem’s words (line 8). In this way, the poem communicates through both language and the absence of language, the two coming together to create an “arrangement [that] cross-puzzles itself” (line 3).

In “Finis,” White again takes on language as the subject of his poetry. The final lines of “Finis” contain the words: “spaces within words are miniature knots / that suspend letters— / the paper / always tightening.” Instead of focusing on the words as the source of meaning, these lines put emphasis on the empty space surrounding the letters, prompting the reader to consider the way words and white space interact together. Fittingly, these lines are also interrupted by large spaces, creating a visual representation of the conceptual role that white space inhabits throughout White’s poetry.

Both Cummings and White demonstrate the way white space can transform poetry into a visual art. In examining these poets’ work, it becomes clear that white space is not only a visual tool but a conceptual one as well. White space can be used alongside language to either enhance or undermine the meaning of the carefully chosen and arranged words. In this way, white space becomes a visual language that communicates beyond what words alone can convey.

## *PART TWO: The Vocation of Words*

This section includes a trio of poems centered around the idea of vocation as it relates to language. Each of these pieces examines a different vocation or profession as indicated by their titles. The use of the word “vocation” in reference to a person’s profession parallels the linguistic theme that connects the poems. The primary theme of these pieces is the vocation of language—the purpose or occupation to which language is best suited.

I introduced this theme and addressed it most directly in the first piece, “The Writer.” That poem discusses the difficulty the writer faces in transferring experiences—whether real or fictional—into language. The writer must grapple with the central paradox of language: the purpose of language is to communicate, but to do so effectively often requires something beyond language. Admittedly, the task that language undertakes is a lofty one. Language attempts to transfer one person’s inner thoughts—what some philosophers and intellectuals would argue is the essence of the individual—into the mind of another. The writer, whose artistic medium is language, faces the difficult task of conveying pieces of himself through insubstantial tools. The poem’s final lines are meant to indicate the ultimate inadequacy of language, as well as the necessary continuation of our attempts to use language to convey that which is beyond its scope.

The spaces separating certain words throughout the poem are meant to break language down into parts. This is reflective of the writer’s task of assembling, giving order and structure to the building blocks of language in order to create meaning. The “Un” prefix, specifically, is disconnected to give weight to the impact of that small syllable, a two-letter combination that negates the word it is attached to. The visual

disconnection of letters from their respective words communicates the disconnect between words and their intended meaning, which the writer attempts to rectify.

In “The Architect,” I wanted to reconsider the insubstantiality of language, this time from a temporal perspective. The parallel between building and language leads to the implication that both the architect who builds with physical tools and the writer who builds with words are subject to the passage of time, which obscures and buries their work. The white space in this poem is intended to convey a sense of destabilization. The first stanzas are arranged in a standard, block-like construction. As the poem progresses toward its conclusion, the order of this arrangement is disrupted by white space that indicates increasing uncertainty. The white space also serves to emphasize certain isolated words like “time” and “nowhere,” paralleling the conceptual emphasis these words have within the poem’s theme.

With the final poem in this section, I wanted to explore a religious perspective on the limitations of language. White spaces the size of words are spread out throughout the lines in “The Priest.” These spaces evoke the idea of gaps, reflective of the gap between God and humanity. This gap is insurmountable by any human effort, let alone by language in all its inadequacy. Yet by some divine miracle, the speaker of the poem (and all humankind with him) are able to communicate with God despite the imperfection of ourselves and our language.

## THE WRITER

If words be not Words,  
But eyes and  
    hands  
    A voice soft, and true,

If Un trust ing

A body of work,  
The work of a soul  
    Who,  
Though he works,

Works not in Under stand ing

Sole man,  
Soul laid  
                                bare

Before the altar of the  
page

Understands naught but

The Truth of words,  
the works of hands,

    which

though they fail  
Fall short

of disaster

The main investment  
Is this:

How do we write  
    about hurt without hurting—  
Each other,  
Ourselves.

Words are not enough  
but they are what we have  
to work with

What do you say when the walls

Shatter

What words do you use to fill the void

So much for second chances

Words are not bricks and mortar  
Both more and less substantial

We are constantly Re writing—  
Ourselves, each  
Other

Our words

without ending.

## THE ARCHITECT

What hope under heaven

More pure

Than that of the architect  
Whose every endeavor  
betrays

Unfounded  
optimism

All those bridges and doors  
begun and built  
Under the assumption  
Of future movement

Unending confidence in a time  
When we will cross them

But time is friend to few,  
does more work to bury  
Than to build

(Buildings  
and words  
can both bury in their way)

And what are we left with but

Time

And a blueprint for further de  
con struc  
tion

We cross ourselves at our  
Points of crossing

Every threshold, every doorframe  
All of our bridges to

Nowhere certain  
Built on faith alone

A protest against the final  
curtain.

## THE PRIEST

Prayer is:

A simple thing  
An offering

Of words  
And wants

Spoken to the Word  
Who knows  
the words

Imperfect as they are  
And we, in our humanity,

Imperfect expressions of  
Imperfect thought

Still commune  
And communicate

With words and  
The Word  
Through those  
words  
we use

### *PART THREE: The Invocation of Words*

This section continues the themes from the first, while considering issues that arise when language is invoked in communication. “The Space of You,” for example, depicts the failure of language to adequately communicate personal suffering, based on my own experience with grief. “Reunion” depicts the common breakdown of language that exists between two individuals who, meeting each other after years of separation, struggle to find things to say to one another. “Hands” describes an individual’s simultaneous desire and inability to change a given reality through language, showing the lack of power words have over circumstances.

The pieces in this section are all written in the first person to reflect the intensely personal nature of language. As an expression of thought, language is rooted in the mind of the individual and unique to the individual who uses it. This personal aspect of language becomes especially apparent in moments when language fails because the failure of language isolates the individual instead of connecting him or her to others, as it aspires to do.

Throughout this section, I used white space as a method of altering how the reader interacts with the written words. In “Aftermath,” the first poem I have included in this section, the spacing is meant to create stronger associations between groupings of words like “you / and I.” In “The Space of You,” the gaps between words add emphasis to the sense of loss. In “Hands,” the white space creates a sense of openness and dissipation throughout the poem, mimicking the speaker’s expectations about the disappearance of love.

The piece titled “Reunion” borders the line between poetry and prose. I included this piece to demonstrate that prose too can make use of the language of white space typically reserved for poetry. The white space in “Reunion” is arranged to indicate dialogue between the narrator/speaker and the other unidentified person to whom the narrator is speaking. As the dialogue becomes more disjointed, so does the spacing in reflection of the disconnect in communication the two unnamed characters are experiencing.

The final poem exhibits the most dramatic use of white space of the pieces I have included. In this way, it offers a summation of the themes developed throughout the poems and prose that precede it. It is also the piece that most directly takes on the limitations of language as its subject. It focuses exclusively on these limitations, while using unconventional white space and line arrangements to visually mimic these limitations and the confusion they cause.

## AFTERMATH

There is an echo  
    in remembrance,  
The backlog of static  
Subtle kickback  
A soundtrack to past pain  
    And joy.

I do not know how to embrace  
Both  
Or  
Either.

You, are either  
The best thing I ever had  
Or:  
The only thing I can't let go  
Or:  
Maybe both.

And I wonder if you know  
How all my  
    Seesaw-  
        madness  
brings me back to home.

There is an echo in remembrance  
And all my memories sound like  
    You  
    And I.

Or:

maybe just you

Alone.

## HANDS

I have learned to love with

O P E N

hands,

Hands

that will never hold yours too tight

Never ask for more than they can

give

Better suited to

s i f t i n g

Through memories after the heartbreak

Than at reassuring you that I am

here

That I will always be here,

See, my hands have not yet learned how to lie

Have not yet caught up to the rest of me

My tongue and its

casual confidence in tomorrows

Always one step

too far

ahead

So at night, while you sleep beside me,

I lie awake and tell myself

The words

I want to hear

Hoping I can turn them into some kind of prayer

Turn that prayer into a promise

A promise that you are

here

That you will always be

here

But my hands, they know better

And as I reach across my pillow

To your reassuring warmth

It is with hands that have already learned

How to L E T

you G O

## THE SPACE OF YOU

I knew that my mother had died by the sound  
That escaped my father's shaking body—  
Noise that cracked the space between us like a rib  
Ringing hollow with the emptiness of unbeing

The dim light shuddering  
Through the curtained window,  
As I shifted awake into aching.

Three days before:

I hold you, shaking,  
As the day moves calmly on, unaware  
That it is taking you from me  
I envy this ease, impotent ignorance,  
The ability to overlook pain

Dying is a universal disease,  
Although you do it better than most

Holding you loosely in your fragile state, afraid,  
Your tender body bruised and breaking—  
There is already too much negative

Space between

us.

Space that lets the truth seep in:

I have lost you, already,

And again.

## REUNION

We talk about the food to avoid conversation on things that matter. The same way two strangers might talk about the weather. We are not strangers. Or rather: we did not used to be strangers, although I wonder if now we are near enough to qualify. Scratch that. ‘Far enough’ would be the better metaphor for this thing dividing us on opposite sides of the table, across plates and twin headaches and years of wanting exactly this—but not this at all.

You are talking past me as though you are trying to direct your end of the conversation over my shoulder to some past version of myself who lags behind, late as always. As I’m sure you remember.

I confess that I am waiting for the same from you:

“How’s the job, then?”

Still waiting.

“Oh, you know. Not bad.”

More of the same.

“And you?”

“Can’t complain.”

And really, what is there to complain about? What more could be said?

We are trying, over and over, to build a bridge back to each other out of materials that can’t hold their own weight. Our words fall heavy into the chasm between us. They are bricks without mortar. So many empty spaces left between them and nothing to fill in the gaps.

“What about Tuesday?”

“No, I don’t remember.”

“Where’s the waiter?”

“We should do this again.”

A comfortable lie to which we both agree. Words without the expectation of meaning—no obligation of further failed attempts to follow. Words with no meaning at all, their weight dissipated into nothingness.

We both breathe a sigh of relief.

## FINALE

Clumsy words,

Clumping-in-mouths-and-

tumbling

out,

spilled drainage of the brain made

audible-and-

unretractable

despite

inevitable

mis-takes

we still take

our chances

(make our choices)

Heavy hearts speaking through

Stra(in)ed voices (silence)

## CHAPTER TWO:

### Access to Language as an Impediment to Meaning

#### *PART ONE: Literature Review*

Language affects much more than an individual's ability to communicate with others. The language we have available to us shapes our own understanding and perception of the world around us and the events that transpire within it. The existence of specific language can validate an individual's feelings or ideas. Conversely, a lack of appropriate language—a gap in access to or the existence of words—can isolate, undermine, or even eradicate an individual's feelings and experiences.

George Orwell explored this inseparable connection between thought and language in much of his writing, particularly as it applies to political rights. In his essay "Politics and the English Language" Orwell writes, "If thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought." In his most famous work *1984*, he fictionalizes the corrupting power of language by creating a society where the widespread restriction of language imposes upon and alters the inner thoughts of the individual.

In the chillingly dystopic world of 1984, the governing Party implements the use of Newspeak, a highly abbreviated language. The shorthand of Newspeak is designed to regulate the thoughts of those who use it by limiting their access to language. Newspeak intentionally lacks words for concepts the Party deems undesirable. For example, there is no Newspeak word for freedom, a deliberate gap in language designed to limit the individual's expression and even conception of what it means to be free.

This demonstrates the deeply rooted connection between concepts and language. Language helps give form to abstract ideas that, without proper and specific language to express them, can only exist in a vague, less comprehensible way and must remain isolated within the minds of individuals rather than expressed as a shared concept.

The contemporary poet Sarah Kay also addresses gaps in language through her writing. In her poem “Postcards,” a poem about the breakdown of a long-distance relationship, the speaker repeatedly asks the question “Is there a word for that?” This refrain references her complicated and confused emotions over the failed relationship and the difficulty of understanding and communicating these feelings. The difficulty the speaker has in communicating while she and her partner are geographically separated is echoed in the difficulty the speaker has in communicating her emotions when the distance between her and her partner is removed, leaving “neither one of [them] with anything left to say.” The poem ends without closure as the speaker is left still writing to her lost love, despite being unable to accurately express her emotions, simply because she “doesn’t know how not to.”

Although Kay’s writing differs greatly in tone and setting from Orwell’s, both writers demonstrate an understanding of the importance of language in its effect on the individual’s ability to process and understand circumstances. As the relationship becomes more tumultuous, the speaker in “Postcards” is left grasping for language, which formed the basis of the lost relationship as she was forced to “build a body out of words” in lieu of her long-distance partner. Yet in the moment when she needs it most, language fails her. She lacks an adequate vocabulary to communicate the complexities of her situation and feelings in a way that validates them to her partner or herself.

Eley Williams also shares Orwell and Kay's understanding of the limitations of language. Her collection *Attrib. and Other Stories* is a collection overtly obsessed with language—both its power and limitations. All but one story from Williams' collection document the internal monologues of their respective narrators through a stream of consciousness prose scattered with linguistic complexities and intricacies. Although it remains primarily in the realm of prose, the stories in the collection often border on poetry through William's integration of poetic techniques. Pushing the boundaries of genre and form, Williams also makes use of white space and margins to add weight to the complications and limitations of language that the stories' themes address.

William's "Concision" addresses a similar theme to that of Kay's "Postcards." "Concision" begins with descriptions of highly specific words, such as the "single Finnish word [that] describes the sudden blast of heat that comes after water is poured upon a sauna's brazier" (69). In this and other examples Williams cites, words hold power through precision. Williams demonstrates instances in which language has the ability to communicate the intricate details of an experience or situation through a single word. These words all represent highly specific experiences that are solidified and shared through language.

The narrator's fascination with these highly specific words contrasts with his or her own experience with the limitations of language. The narrator's frustration with these limitations provides the story's central source of conflict. The action—what little there is—revolves around a phone call in which two individuals fail to say goodbye, ending their call in silence as the right words for the situation elude them. While the narrator recognizes the precision that language is capable of creating, he or she cannot deny the

simultaneous imprecision that causes the breakdown of communication between the two characters. Furthermore, Williams provides no resolution to the tension caused by the lack of adequate language available to the narrator. Instead, the story ends exactly as it begins—with the repetition of the same words and definitions. There is no positive progress toward communication or understanding, indicating that the issues inherent in language lack an adequate solution.

These examples from Orwell, Kay, and Williams all display the end result of restricted or unsubstantial access to language. Without access to the right language to describe their situation, the characters in these examples cannot express their perspectives and emotions to those around them. They are also unable to fully process their own situations without access to specific language to aid them. They remain stuck in a state of prolonged confusion thanks to their limited language, which impedes their ability to process and assign meaning to their experiences.

Conversely, having access to proper and specific language allows for the development of nuance. For example, while there is one word for snow in English, which most native English speakers likely feel fits their linguistic needs well enough, the Inuit language contains dozens of ways to describe and distinguish between different types of snow. Because its vocabulary surrounding the idea of snow is so much broader than the typical Westerner's, the Inuit language allows for a more nuanced view of the topic. Its native speakers are able to distinguish between many different varieties that fall under the single category of snow in English, demonstrating broader perception as a result of their access to language. In this way, the ability to describe is innately connected with the ability to understand. Without that ability—without access to the proper language and

tools of communication—an individual’s ability to perceive and process nuance is likewise limited.

*PART TWO: Grasping for Language*

The first piece in this section is a single work of fiction, split into parts. Each part focuses on the perspective of a different character. While all the characters observe the same events, the way they interact with and process these events varies. Part of the reason for this variance is the different levels of access to language these characters possess.

The idea behind this piece was to take different characters with different levels of access to language and have them react to a moment of confusion. I wanted to demonstrate the way access to language affects internal and external processing. As the characters all try to understand the events happening around them, they each reach for language as a method of organizing and assigning understandable meaning to the events they are witnessing. The characters have varying levels of success in doing so, based largely on the language available to them. Yet even the characters with the most advanced vocabularies are still faced with the inadequacy of language, inadequacy that complex and difficult situations make all the more apparent.

I also included a piece about my own personal experience grappling with a lack of adequate language. This piece addresses more of the emotional impact of not having adequate language to express complex realities. It deals specifically with the way that words and labels meant to add understanding to a situation can sometimes only frustrate communication further by vastly oversimplifying the nuance and emotion behind what they are trying to convey.

## IT HAPPENED ON BROADMORE STREET

### I.

He was standing on solid ground when it happened, but afterward the world seemed to tilt into a twisting kaleidoscope of movement. *Frisson*, the French might have called it—a feeling of momentum, excitement entangled with fear as the moment reached its crisis. There wasn't an accurate translation for it in English, as far as he knew.

Peter was not one to take matters into his own hands, so he stepped backward onto the sidewalk and let the world tumble into movement around him, watching with studied interest as the moment caught others. *Frisson* transfused.

In another time, in another place, Peter might have been truly frightened, but not here on this street that was almost like home to him. He was well aware how insubstantial that word was—a term without a static, solid definition to support it—endlessly fragile. Even so, home was the word that came to mind when his memory conjured up images of these shabby and faded buildings, with all their peeling paint and disappointed hopes.

For Peter, home was a place to leave, not a place to return to. If free will had been his governing principle, he never would have come back at all. But as much as he believed in the power of the individual will, Peter knew that he would never be a fully free agent—his will was tangled up too closely with too many others'—which was how he found himself pressed against the brick of the corner drug store as the crowd rushed around him and Broadmore Street exploded with noise.

## II.

Tyler didn't understand what was happening, or why no one else would look at her. There were all these people around, running by on every side. Running into buildings, shouting, but it was like he was the only one who saw. He tugged on the coat sleeve attached to the hand that was pushing him forward.

"What is it?" his father asked, not looking down or stopping in his stride, attention still fixed on moving the two of them through the surrounding mob.

Tyler didn't know how to ask the question he wanted answered. He looked back at the girl, trying to figure out what it was about her. There was a lot he didn't understand, like why she was laying on the ground, or why looking at her like that made him so nervous.

Tyler felt... something. A twist in his stomach, like he was sick. Except that wasn't it, not exactly.

His father must have understood what was wrong because he glanced over at the girl then too. Well, he didn't *actually* look at her, not really, but his eyes slid over in her direction just for a second.

"C'mon, Ty," he said. "We should go."

Tyler felt the firm hand on his shoulder push him forward once again. Forward, and away. The hand was comforting, and Tyler wanted to leave, but that felt wrong too. The sight of the girl had made him sad. The kind of sadness that was almost like hurting.

"Why..." he tried again to find the words to his question. But whatever words might follow were swept away by the rushing crowd before he could find them.

So instead, Tyler kept walking and didn't look back. It was easier that way, he realized. Easier not to look and not to try to understand.

### **III.**

Broadmore Street, the sign said. It took his brain a moment to catch up to the words, to assign them a context, and he was tired of it all. Tired of the effort. Tired of trying to decipher everything around him, tired of searching through the shapes of strange letters to find something, anything familiar.

Yesterday had marked Andre's sixth week here. The anniversary felt more like a defeat than a victory. He thought he would be better at this by now. He thought he would have accomplished something meaningful, some tangible sign of progress, proof that he wasn't wasting his time in this place. But everything—including the sloping shapes of language—still felt strange to him.

At least the noise was becoming more familiar to him. He had gradually grown accustomed to the constant din that surround him here, indiscernible and unending. Today, though, the noise seemed even louder than usual.

That's when he noticed it.

The girl looked the same age as his daughter, her small frame dwarfed by the older women dragging her into the street. She looked like a rag doll held up by limp and fragile limbs.

Andre stepped forward, uncertain and afraid, but the crowd pressed around him, too thick to move through. In his confusion, he reached desperately for language not his own, only to stutter and stumble—the words escaping him.

#### **IV.**

Maggie thought she was well past being surprised by anything that happened on Broadmore Street. She thought she had seen it all—the old men in gutters, the children begging for scraps like dogs, the dogs left to die on the side of the street because their owners couldn't even feed themselves. Broadmore was a slum. A place for the people who had been broken down by life, the punchline in some cruel cosmic joke.

Once she had witnessed a boy cut open over a can of beans, on a Tuesday afternoon, as normal as any other. A spectacle beating like this one was nothing unusual, even if the girl was young for such a thing. And like always, the horror of public humiliation drew a crowd.

Maggie watched, although she didn't want to. The crowd died down and the whole thing was over in a few minutes. The girl lay flat against the pavement, more from the shame than her injuries, Maggie knew.

There were words for people like her—words Maggie didn't like to repeat.

It was a messy practice, but it was proper. Nothing new. Nothing to be done.

Maggie turned to leave, following the dispersing crowd as the excitement died. Broadmore was a slum, there was nothing more to it. And nothing good would happen there.

## THINGS WE DON'T TALK ABOUT

I.

We are sitting at the kitchen table—  
The three of us—  
Christmas eve is just another reminder  
Of all that sits broken between us  
So we have learned to embrace silence

There are some absences  
Too large to approach with language,  
Some hurts too constant to heal,  
And somewhere in the house  
A door slams  
Another coming or going

II.

I was twenty years old and  
It was the year of watching people I love  
Collapsing inward on themselves

Clambering,  
Disparate  
And desperate,  
We all lost something  
We couldn't get back.

That summer,  
My father lost his certainty  
While my brother lost his mind

Schizophrenia—a word we never  
Dreamed that we would need

III.

I learned that labels  
Are for other people  
They don't make sense  
Of the mess of living

And what do you do  
When a person you thought you knew  
Can be irreversibly replaced  
By an illness you don't

So I sit in silence  
And watch as my father  
Becomes a martyr  
Trying to hold ground in an  
Endless and futile war—

What a supreme act of love  
Forcing medicine down the throat of  
Someone who believes that it is poison  
Allowing yourself to become  
The villain for their healing

### *PART THREE: Losing Language*

In addition to the complications caused by a lack of adequate language, barriers in access to language can occur for other reasons. In the following pieces, I wanted to demonstrate the frustration of knowing that adequate language exists but not having access to that language through failures of memory. These instances demonstrate additional limitations imposed on the individual, which prevent language from accomplishing its purpose. They also demonstrate that an individual's level of access to language is not static but fluctuates over time and varies based on the situation one finds oneself in.

#### **FRUSTRATION or the word for that in French (which I would say instead if only I could remember it)**

My plan to impress you did not follow accordingly. I, great man though I fancy myself to be, was defeated by fish (which I did not expect you to order), and further defeated by my inability to recover from embarrassment (which I will privately confess has always been a fault of mine).

The crucial error occurred years earlier (as it always does) in a time of innocence and the opposite of ambition: once upon a time, when I was sitting in French class unable to force myself to pay attention, unaware that the pride and happiness of my future-French-speaking self hinged upon this moment, I chose to stare out the window as Mrs. Aibileen, well-meaning and clueless, droned on about French vocabulary.

I bitterly hope that the view of the empty soccer field across the street and whatever aimless thoughts went floating through my head during seventh period French

were worth the embarrassment of this moment. My imperfectly planned persona of sophistication and good taste—all a waste—while you sit there looking so poised and perfect.

Still, there are worse things than eating food I can't pronounce (which I did not mean to order) sitting next to you (who are the best thing I never planned).

## **SLIPPING**

Sunlight. Cold water.

It is August,

I think.

I can't put a day to the date,

I am trying.

Numbers no longer stay put  
my mind, a sieve

that lets slip

Thoughts

into abyss,

I think

I mean absence.

I am trying

To be thankful

for the things that stick:

Sunlight. And cold water.

The feel of your hand and

a gently rocking

porch swing.



## CHAPTER THREE:

### The Effects of an Overabundance of Language

#### *PART ONE: Literature Review*

Just as complications in communication can arise from a lack of language, the same is true of the reverse. When language supersedes our capacity for understanding, it becomes meaningless. In this way, an excess of language can become another barrier to communication, creating ambiguity through overabundance. Writers such as Eley Williams and Nicola Barker take advantage of this ambiguity, using an overabundance of language as a linguistic technique for creating confusion and distorting meaning.

In Williams' short story "Platform," even the most basic essence of the story's plot is blurred amid an excess of irrelevant details. The story centers around a single photograph taken at a train station as the narrator says goodbye to a "friend leaving... forever" (121). A large-scale poster version of this photograph sparks the narrator's memories of the moment the picture was taken, but also provides an array of enlarged background details that distract from and overpower the main event of the friend's leaving. The narrator in "Platform" uses these irrelevant background details to avoid referencing the details of the situation surrounding the photo's subject. This avoidance provides a way for the narrator to engage in the "process of trying to forget" the memory captured in the picture (122). The story behind the photograph is never revealed to the reader. Instead, the narrator hides these obvious silences and gaps in the reader's knowledge through an excess of unrelated information.

Through the descriptions of the unrelated situations happening in the background of the photograph, Williams uses language as a tool to obscure rather than reveal. The events leading up to the moment of the story's action—if the narrator's sporadic musings qualify as action—remain unclear even at the story's conclusion. Only a single sentence reveals further information to the reader about the events before or after the moment the picture was taken: “a train pulled in, you hopped aboard, and I went home” (126). Who this unnamed “you” was to the narrator as well as the reason for his or her departure is never addressed, leaving the reader with more confusion than clarity. In this way, Williams draws attention to the failures of communication that occur when language is used in unnecessary excess.

Like Williams, the novelist Nicola Barker demonstrates the consequences of an overabundance of language in her writing, particularly in her novel *H(A)PPY*. Unlike Williams' work, Barker creates a sense of oversaturation through more than words alone, tapping into the visual properties of literature as text upon a page. Throughout the novel, Barker uses visual elements, including colored and overlapping text, to explore the moments when language becomes a source of confusion. Rather than acting as a source of meaning and shared understanding, Barker's use of language reverts words into strings of linguistic chaos, a meaningless tangle of text on a page. By including elements that enhance the visual nature of the text, Barker also shifts the focus from the meaning of the words to their appearance, which is often entirely disconnected from meaning.

These unusual literary techniques create a unique—if somewhat frustrated—reading experience. The more the reader tries to decipher the words that tangle, intersect, and twist across the pages, the more elusive the meaning of the individual words

becomes. It is only in focusing on the experience of struggling to understand the words that Barker's purpose comes across to the reader. The frustrated reading experience communicates the experience of the novel's main character Mira A as she tries to find meaning and cohesion in the excess of information available to her.

Barker's protagonist lives in a post- post apocalyptic world where everything is structured around the Information Stream, a constant rush of data in which everyone's thoughts are visible and information is instantly accessible. Within this world, narrative is viewed as an undesirable threat by those who are in control of the Information Stream and the System it supports. Narrative opposes the principles of stability and certainty that the Information Stream is designed to uphold. To address this issue, the System attempts to strip words of all personal connection and consequence, transforming language into a tool for knowing rather than expressing.

Barker uses the ultimate inability to separate language from narrative to both highlight and celebrate the limitations inherent in language itself. Because narrative allows for multiple, contradicting perspectives from multiple storytellers, it necessarily introduces ambiguity. Barker highlights this concept through the inclusion of text from other competing sources, which sporadically interrupt the novel's main narration, acting as another source of overabundance within the novel. This produces further ambiguity as to how the excess of disjointed narrative fragments fit together. Yet as Mira A learns by the novel's conclusion, "the meaning is contained in the gap" (217). The ambiguity inherent in language and storytelling allows for personal interpretation and significance. In this way, Barker celebrates the limitations of language, arguing that the ambiguity and imperfection of language make communication richer and more beautiful.

Barker goes so far as to suggest that these aspects of language—ambiguity, personal connection, individual interpretation—are sometimes more important than clarity and communication. As Mira A struggles against the System, the unconventionalities of the novel’s text steadily increase in frequency. At the story’s climax, the text becomes so saturated as to be at times unreadable. The overabundance of language in these moments reflects the overwhelming effects of constant access to information; it mimics Mira A’s experience as she tries to make sense of an excess of information disconnected from the framework of narrative that gives it meaning. In this way, Barker demonstrates that language, when oversaturated, fails as a method of clear communication but can still succeed in its suggestive power. The unusual nature of the text confronts the reader with the inherent ambiguity of language. Like Mira A, the reader is forced to create meaning out of the experience of confusion, rather than focusing on the meaning of the individual words upon the page.

### *Part Two: Missing Details*

In experimenting with these principles in my own writing, I wanted to explore the concept of overabundance in regards to both content and form. I wanted first to deal with the concept of concealing through an excess of irrelevant details. This idea was central to the piece “Plain Sight, Not Hiding,” which attempts to create a narrative with important gaps replaced by an excess of minor details. I wanted to create a narrator who would rather conceal and avoid than confront the story’s central conflict. However, I do not know whether my intentions for this story come across as I wanted to communicate them. I ended up with a narrator who reveals more than he or I would like, although the full

extent of the success or failure of my goals for this piece remains up to interpretation on the part of the reader. In this way, the story serves as an example of another dilemma inherent in written communication that I grappled with throughout the entirety of this project: the writer can never know if the words he or she has written communicate as intended without reciprocal communication from the reader.

### **PLAIN SIGHT, NOT HIDING**

I did not regret it. I want you to know that. I said what I said and the words spilled out (and spilled and spilled) and I meant them. I meant them at the time anyway, and that's good enough for me.

What I remember most: your face as I said it. Like putty melting. Pale and soft and dripping. You were melting all over me and making a mess of it and I remember hating you for it. Couldn't you see what I was doing—holding up the sky, saving us? I was a modern-day Atlas, just as pained and underappreciated. You were a modern-day Eos dripping out dew from underneath your eyelids while we both waited for the dawn.

I looked at your shoulder to avoid looking at your face with the melting and the tears. You were wearing that shirt that I bought for you. (What was the occasion? Christmas? Or a birthday, maybe? I can't remember which.) I went into one of those stores along the riverfront where the rich tourists shop, the kind of place where you walk in and a dozen smiling employees in smart black uniforms ask you what you're looking for.

I didn't know what I was looking for then, and I suppose not much has changed.

But I found that shirt, and I liked the pattern of it. The little swooping lines like apostrophes marking you all over with their possession. Or else, like disconnected dashes. Half-formed lines that lead to nowhere. There is nowhere (and no how) left between us. I didn't know how to tell you that.

Once, when I told you I loved you, you told me I didn't love you at all. This was only an outburst of frustration, I expect. You knew I loved you. I proved it over again. A thousand times, a thousand ways. And again, at the last. Or else why would I have stood before you and all your melting-putty mess of a moment and still walked away. But you told me anyway, and in some ways you were right.

Now with you out of sight, it's easy to remember our before. The nights of chamomile and giggling in the dark and pretending we were scientists, explorers, and artists. There was something remarkable between us, if not quite magical. We were incidental and incredible. A combination of atoms uniting in an understated invitation of collision and revision. Followed by destruction.

I suppose destruction always follows in the end, with all the inevitability of a sunny afternoon in Prague. A sunny afternoon interrupted by raining tears, like the ones now dripping from your face.

Where was I? Yes, destruction. Prague. I think I lost my lines somewhere in Prague. On that sunny afternoon like so many others in a city that whispered wonders to us between quiet streets and worn out daydreams.

You played the role of the tourist so well, always at ease in the crowded cafes and squares. I was a fuddled mess of mistranslations and missing guidebooks. And I never

believed in fate as much as I did then, watching you absorb all the light the city had to offer, sitting beside you in the lighted window of a corner café in Old Town.

But after—

Every day since my overwhelming sense of certainty and the rightness of things—you and me and all that—slowly dissipated into something like doubt. I couldn't shake the feeling I was an actor in a play whose ending had been changed without warning halfway through the second act. Someone had changed the script and I didn't know how to follow these new lines that we were saying to each other. Words are only useful when you know which ones to say.

I never meant to doubt you, and for that I am sorry. I can't remember if I ever apologized to you. I meant to, but I felt the need to dam up the well of tears rushing down your face with harsh words that you couldn't forget. If there is such a thing as words stronger than the faults of memory, which can forget almost anything.

I remember what your cousin (I mean the linguist, not the doctor or the one whose job I can't think of) once told me about language. We were tied to Connecticut at the time by an unending string of family obligations, one of which ended with me at a party surrounded by strangers I have to call family trapped in a conversation I couldn't escape with a linguist I had just met. From this unfortunate occurrence I learned that linguists (or so this one informed me) have studied and compared for decades, and all they could come up with, the closest thing to a universal word, is an expression of confusion:

*huh?*

That's it.

Three small letters often accompanied by a half-hearted apology in the form of a shrug.

And that got me thinking, perhaps the only thing we have in common is that we are all confused about something. Or at the very least, we are all questioning. Our private assurances are less solid than we would like. The floor can tumble out from underneath us at any time, (As you always liked to remind me.) so we have learned how to politely apologize for our lack of understanding, putting letters to a sound we all innately recognize—our own limitations echoing back to us through language.

It's just a theory, but it makes me feel better about the words I said to you. At least I wasn't pretending to understand. I was just as uncertain as anyone. I hope you can forgive me. I hope you can remember and think of me and not hate me, the way I will be trying not to think of you and not hating you all the same.

I tell myself to think instead of Prague, but not the rain or cafés. I will think of a Prague without you. Until the absence of you becomes almost non-noticeable, even in memory. I will stroll down the streets of Prague and Connecticut and everywhere we were together. Only this time, I will wander about the buildings in a world that doesn't know your name.

Until I turn a corner and see you sitting (even now) at a lighted café, plastic coffee cup in hand, waiting for me in plain sight, eyes still watering the ground with dew.

In my memory, you never leave, or I never let you. But I will leave again, just like before. Just like always.

Only this time I take my words with me. We could both do with a little more silence.

### *PART THREE: Overlapping Language*

In the pieces in this section, I experimented with visual excess through the use of layered text and expressive typography. In the first piece, “Unrelated, but Important,” I wanted to create the sense that multiple narratives are overlapping and intruding on one another, obscuring clarity in some ways but enhancing meaning in others. I incorporated interwoven fragments of texts—mainly traditional prayers—from a variety of other languages and used different typographic weights to give visual variance to the different voices speaking within the poem. In “Dividing Lines,” I wanted to portray individual suffering using overlapping text to demonstrate the conflict between external expectations and internal emotions. In the final piece in this section, the overlapping text is used to portray the unwanted and restless thoughts of an overactive mind.

#### **UNRELATED, BUT IMPORTANT**

He told me not to worry. **Glória ao Pai e ao Filho e ao Espírito Santo**  
that the fighting was far away.  
*The worst part is the way I should have seen it coming.*  
**I pretended to believe you.**  
I had never been so in love with the way.  
**I Faderns, Sonens, och den Helige Andes namn.**  
the earth moves.  
**Oce nas koji jesi na nebesima, sveti se ime Tvoje, dodji kraljevstvo Tvoje, budi volja**  
beneath us,  
holding up our yearning  
*Gloria al Padre e al Figlio e allo Spirito Santo. Come era nel principio, ora e sempre*  
as in that moment.  
*nei secoli dei secoli. Amen.*

## DIVIDING LINES

The sun is shining and  
The world is somehow, still turning  
I am alive and here and nowhere near  
And I am, somehow, still here  
I am smiling and reassuring  
You have no need to worry  
Restless, unhurried

The sun is shining and  
The world is, somehow, still turning  
I am alive and here and nowhere near  
And I am, somehow, still here  
I am smiling and reassuring I am  
You have no need to worry  
I do not mean to worry you I do not want to cause a scene  
Restless, unhurried, undone and unseen

The sun is shining and  
I don't know how to keep moving  
Collapsing or caving inward  
Falling or crying or dying  
I am coming unhinged

The sun is shining and  
I don't know how to keep moving  
Collapsing or caving inward  
Falling or crying or dying  
I am, somehow, still smiling  
I do not mean to worry you I do not want to cause a scene  
Restless, unhurried, undone and unseen

The sun is still shining

On this sorrow that's dividing

Me in two.

## SOUNDBITES FROM A NIGHT WITHOUT SLEEP

My brain is on autopilot tonight  
Carrying with it a week's worth  
Of conversation  
And cannon fire  
And a headache  
I can't shake

My heart is out tonight too  
Keeping company with the moon  
I wish that I could turn out its light  
Flip the switch  
Place head upon pillow  
No longing, no fear  
No more questioning  
A clean slate

What will I do after I graduate?  
Will I ever learn? What if it's too late?  
Will I regret the chances I didn't take?  
What should I have said instead?  
What if it's too late?  
Will spring come again?

## CHAPTER FOUR:

### Typographic Impact of Language

#### *PART ONE: Literature Review*

In his influential manual on design, *The Typographic Elements of Style*, Robert Bringhurst described typography as “the craft of endowing human language with a durable visual form, and thus with an independent existence” (11). As both a poet and typographer, Bringhurst took a studied interest in the relationship between the intellectual aspects of writing and the letters that shape its visual form. Bringhurst bridges the gap between the fields of graphic design and literature, my two fields of interest, shedding light on the differences between how these fields view the purpose and impact of text on a page.

Despite his interest in type as a designer, Bringhurst avoided overuse of expressive typography within his own poems. “The relation between a poem and its font is often neurotic fixation,” he wrote in response to a journalist’s questions on the subject, declaring that “only a writer with nothing to say should find himself distracted by the letters in which he says it” (Raphel, 1). Accordingly, almost all of his poetry is published in a standard book typeface and type size, although he is generally an advocate for “break[ing] the rules” of type and language as long as such rule-breaking is done “beautifully, deliberately and well” (Bringhurst, 10).

The practical logistics of publication play a large role in why Bringhurst and most other poets do not experiment more with typography. The typefaces used for books are

typically chosen by the publisher rather than the writer. Accordingly, the standard practice is to choose an unremarkable typeface, something that will be nearly invisible to the average reader. In these instances, typography stays silent, acting as a vessel to carry the meaning of the words without adding any further meaning of its own. This industry standard separates the intellectual content of the writing from its form as text upon the page. With poetry, in particular, this separation between writing and text is even more apparent as poems are often reproduced or accessible through many different sources that make use of different—although equally unremarkable—typefaces.

Interestingly, the instances where typography does take a prominent place in poetry are typically instances in which typographic emphasis was added at a later time by someone other than the original writer. There are many examples of graphic designers reimagining the words of poets in a new, visual way. Many designers have even created visual interpretations of pieces of Bringham's writing, adding their own typographic meaning to the poetry of the typographer who carefully avoids dynamic typography in his own poems. In such instances, designers rearrange the poet's words, giving them new typographic and visual weight as can be seen in the following examples:





(Song)

Whether intentional or not, the typographer shapes the words of the poet in a way that alters how the reader interacts with and understands the text. Although the alteration may be subtle, changing the visual presentation of the text necessarily changes the way the text is seen and perceived. As Bringhurst concludes in *The Elements of Typographic Style*, typography is “to literature as musical performance is to composition: an essential act of interpretation, full of endless opportunities for insight or obtuseness” (19).

In addition to Bringhurst’s perspective, which focuses on typography as an artform, there have been several studies on the impact of typography from a psychological perspective. One such study conducted at Princeton University, “Fortune Favors the Bold (and the Italicized),” found that unusual and hard-to-read fonts trigger more extensive processing on the part of the reader leading to better memorization and recall of the text. While this is generally not the goal of most writers, or at least not the primary goal, it clearly demonstrates that typography makes a difference, even if this difference is subconscious on the part of the reader.

### *PART TWO: Typographic Voice*

In going about my own writing I found Bringhurst’s point about the dangers of typography in poetry especially true. The challenge for me was how to engage with typographic variance in a way that felt authentic and meaningful, rather than gimmicky. I wanted my use of typography to add meaning to my writing, rather than distract from it.

To me, the interesting thing about typography is the way it changes the reader’s perception of the text. For this reason, I have included multiple versions of some of the pieces in this section. The first version is set in standard Times New Roman font,

allowing the reader to focus solely on the content and not on the type in which it is written. The second version makes use of different typefaces chosen to complement or further complicate the content.

This experimentation with type proved to be just that: an interesting experiment. However, I ultimately came to the same conclusion as Bringhurst about how overuse of typography distracts from the power of the words themselves. I found myself preferring the versions of the following pieces devoid of typographic interference, although changing the typefaces allowed me more variation in the way I tried to communicate with the reader.

## OPHELIA

Who would I be if I weren't  
In need of saving?  
In need of a hero?  
When even my name is a silent cry for help  
O! Save me!  
from the monsters you invent  
Forget the monsters that exist in man  
And you

Force me into a phoenix flame  
But it is not the dignity of rebirth,  
Only the insanity of self-destruction.

The fire I lit  
With the match you gave me,  
And this, your final gift.

I find a home in the heat  
Then bury myself  
In the aftermath of ash

I know the secret of the phoenix tear  
The deception of downy feather  
And new-formed wing  
Free of wounds the soul still remembers

To be reborn, the heart must burn too  
I need a fire deep enough to melt memory

And if the heat proves too much to handle,  
Enough water to drown in

This, my first and final act,  
Is how I would leave you.  
This pawn is sick to death of playing  
And surely the game will go on  
Without me

I have seen monsters  
I am not certain I believe in heroes.  
And who would you be  
if I weren't here  
To be saved?

## OPHELIA, version II

Who would I be if I weren't

### IN NEED OF SAVING?

In need of a hero?

When even my name is a silent cry for help

O! SAVE ME!

from the monsters you invent

FORGET the monsters that exist in man

### AND YOU

FORCE me into a PHOENIX FLAME

But it is not the dignity of rebirth,

Only the **INSANITY** of self-destruction.

The fire I lit

With the match **YOU** gave me,

And this, your final gift.

I find a home in the heat

Then BURY MYSELF

In the aftermath of ash

I know the secret of the phoenix tear

**THE DECEPTION** of downy feather

And new-formed wing

Free of wounds the soul still remembers

To be reborn, the heart must burn too  
I need a fire deep enough to melt memory  
And if the heat proves too much to handle,  
ENOUGH WATER TO DROWN IN

This, my first and final act,  
Is how **I WOULD LEAVE YOU.**  
This pawn is sick to death of playing  
And surely the game will go on  
WITHOUT ME

I have seen monsters  
I am not certain I believe in heroes.  
**AND WHO WOULD YOU BE**  
IF I WEREN'T HERE  
TO BE SAVED?

## BETWEEN THE LINES

I have been waiting  
For a text message  
From you for longer  
Than I would like  
To admit.

I wish I could pretend  
Not to care, pretend  
That all my wasted hours  
Were not hours sent to you  
With no gift receipt,  
No chance of return  
Or exchange.

You never change.  
And I should know better  
Than to believe  
You would.

But I am a stubborn optimist,  
Which is a nicer way  
Of saying  
A hopeless case.  
And when you do respond,  
After the hours you spent  
Not wondering  
Whether I am waiting for you  
Nor caring if you ruin  
My evening,  
It is with a single word

—okay—

Which I do not know  
How to decipher.

Okay can mean  
So many things  
It should have its  
Own thesaurus,  
One that I could  
Thumb through hoping  
To catch a glimpse  
Of your meaning.

You should come with  
Your own guidebook,  
Something to decode  
Your many pointless defenses.

When you say  
—*okay*—  
do you mean that you agree?

Or is your  
—**OKAY**—  
something different?

I imagine  
—**OKAY**—  
As an undercover aggressor

Or is  
—*okay*—  
your pretense of indifference?

Without you I have lost  
my sense of  
what it means to be  
Just  
okay.

And try as I might  
I do not know how  
Not to think  
Of someone  
Who is not thinking  
Of me.

## **A NICER WORD FOR LYING**

We say goodbye pretending that it is  
Something other than goodbye  
Pretending is a nicer word for  
Lying to ourselves  
Our lies like lilacs in the spring  
Things we hope will grow  
Although we know too well  
The cruelty of April and the rainfall  
That means only rain and  
Not the promise  
Of flowers

A NICER WORD FOR LYING, version II

We say goodbye **pretending** that it is

Something **other** than goodbye

Pretending is a **nicer word** for

**Lying** to ourselves

Our lies like **lilacs** in the spring

Things we hope will **grow**

Although we know **too well**

The **cruelty of April** and the rainfall

That means **only rain** and

Not the promise

of **flowers**

## ON THE ROAD AT NIGHT

There is too much time to think  
When you are driving  
on the highway at night

Wondering whether or not  
You should be anywhere  
But here

When they ask you where you are going  
Do not say away  
As if it is a destination

Continue driving

Focus on the lights and the lines  
Do your best to catch

The ribbon of road that's racing by  
Catch it between finger and thumb  
Tug on the single stitch of this moment  
Watch past and future unravel with it

Remind yourself that the world  
Is full of aches and yours  
Is no different

So when they ask you if you are okay  
Say yes, as if you mean it

Convince yourself that you are not

Tired

Lost

Alone

Smile, full teeth

An all-out performance

Say yes,

As if not okay

Is something tangible

Some dead-end backroad you can avoid by

Taking the other way home at night

Say yes,

Then try to believe it

Tell yourself:

This is only one moment

You will be happy in others

Watch the highway lights flicker

Betraying a weariness you know well

And know too:

It is

okay to

stop.

## ON THE ROAD AT NIGHT, version II

There is too much time to think  
When you are driving  
on the highway at night

Wondering whether or not  
You should be anywhere  
But **HERE**

When they ask you where you are going  
Do not say **AWAY**  
As if it is a destination

Continue driving  
Focus on the lights and the lines  
Do your best to catch

The ribbon of road that's racing by  
Catch it between finger and thumb  
Tug on the single stitch of this moment  
Watch past and future unravel with it

Remind yourself: the world  
Is full of aches and yours  
Is no different

So when they ask you if you are **OKAY**  
Say yes, as if you mean it

Convince yourself that you are not

**TIRED**  
**LOST** **ALONE**

Smile, full teeth  
An all-out performance

Say yes,  
As if **NOT OKAY**  
Is something tangible  
Some dead-end backroad you can avoid by  
Taking the other way home at night

Say yes,  
Then try to believe it  
Tell yourself:  
This is only one moment  
You will be happy in others

Watch the highway lights flicker  
Betraying a weariness you know well

And know too:  
It is  
okay to

**STOP.**

## **GARDENING**

The tubes that crawl

Through nose and mouth,

Necessary weeds.

Each breath

They inflict,

A scraping branch.

Rubbing ragged

Against a soft,

Pink throat.

I am confronted with

An unwanted reminder

Of my own biology,

My body as machinery

Both finite and breakable.

An uncomfortable awareness

Of impending frailness

Of the day when my body

Becomes a garden

With no one to tend it.

And the weeds take over

Our breathing.

And we surrender ourselves

To the dirt.

## GARDENING, version II

The tubes that crawl  
Through nose and mouth  
Necessary Weeds

Each breath  
They inflict  
A scraping branch  
Rubbing ragged  
Against a soft  
Pink throat

I am confronted with  
An unwanted reminder  
Of my own biology  
My body as machinery  
Both finite and breakable  
An uncomfortable awareness  
Of my own fragility  
Of the day when my body  
Becomes a garden  
With no one to tend it

And the Weeds take over  
Our breathing  
And we surrender ourselves  
To the dirt

## CONCLUSION

In completing this project, I have undoubtedly gained a better personal understanding of the nature of language. I have also gained a deeper understanding and respect for the visual capacity of language, and the way that this capacity can be used to augment communication. The visual elements of language can act as tools to enrich communication, adding subtlety and nuance to important moments in a text. I have also learned that, often, the problems inherent in language are inseparable from its power. And both its problems and potency can be used in tandem by the writer who wishes to embrace language in all its flaws.

I do not know to what extent I have succeeded with the goals I set out for myself in this undertaking. At the start of this project, I wanted to both demonstrate the flaws of language, while also producing something of value that partially overcomes these flaws. Throughout this project I have tried to emphasize the variety of ways in which language can fail to communicate meaning as intended. Yet I hope that my writing also serves as an example of what language makes possible. I hope that some form of meaningful communication and connection has been accomplished through the words that I have written. However, even after finishing this project, I cannot fully know to what extent I have succeeded in these goals without the benefit of two-way conversation that connects the thoughts and perceptions of both writer and reader.

My overarching conclusion in stepping away from this project is this: words, as imperfect as they may be, are the best tool we have to peel away the layers of self that

stand in the way of true empathy and understanding. The imperfections of language put into use by imperfect people are still capable of meaningful connection. And although we may never fully communicate all we wish to say through the language we have available to us, we should never stop trying.

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