

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

HOW IT STARTED:
A COLLECTION OF POETRY

ERIN SERVEY
SPRING 2018

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for baccalaureate degrees
in English and Psychology
with honors in English

Reviewed and approved* by the following:

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ABSTRACT

These poems—inspired by my own autoimmune disorder, psoriasis, and anxiety—deal with inner disorder, illness, and the attempt to figure out the origins of such struggles many of us face as part of being human. I pull in figures—such as, deceased poet, Hillary Gravendyk, and well-known wife of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Zelda Fitzgerald—whose lives create intrigue in the way they lived and died with their disorders. Through my own lyric voice I attempt to capture the complexity of disorder, with the help of some history (Biblical references that allude to how lepers were treated and mention of an island that used to be a leper colony). If anything, these poems aim to capture moments and feelings of isolation associated with disorder or illness, as well as open up the question of how inner struggle can influence outer struggle, and to examine the possible origins, not only of my own struggles, but of tough, relatable human experiences.

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Note:

“Asheville”, second place winner of the Mathew Mihelcic poetry award, appears in the 2016 online issue of *Klio*.

Fragile

(In Memory of Hillary Gravendyk)

What haunts us is our softness. —Hillary Gravendyk

Her lung disease spread like
a hole burnt in soft newspaper
on the ground, paper
through which grass grows
through a charred circle.

Her lung tissue thickened
and scarred.

I imagine that paper gap expanding...

I wonder
how it started,
paper burning, flitting,
eating away at its heart.

I wonder how her chest felt—
the fragile ruin, paper
in the wind like grey moths.

Asheville

--For Zelda Fitzgerald

I awake from a dream of heat and fire.

Glints of sunlight reflect off the walls.

I was the American flapper
diagnosed with schizophrenia.

At Highland, I am aged,
sedated in a hospital bed,
clenching a ballet slipper.

Outshone by an alcoholic husband
I was placed in hospital after hospital,
then brought here for insulin
shock treatments—coma inducing.

No dancing here.

Mania keeps me hostage and virulent
eczema worsening, red

and scaly,

spirit of fire-- *a nightmare*

(no stanza break)

in my present condition. Delusional,

I believed I was a salamander,

though Pliny was proved wrong that salamanders

extinguished fire

with their cold bodies.

In a letter to Scott, I said,

I was "tired of being told

that you used to wonder why

they kept princesses in towers..."

I feel as though I'm in one.

I awake from a dream of

heat and fire, the slipper

falling from my grasp,

glints of light reflecting

off the walls,

iridescence surrounding me.

Maybe I Am the Demon

It's a sickness--an invisible kind,
the feeling in my chest
when people tell me
I'm working too much, do nothing
about it, as when there's no energy
left for my feet to reach
the floor in the morning
when work won't
cut me a break.

Some days the only place
to summon whatever demon
is inside me
is the back of my eyelids.

You'll Probably Have Them Your Whole Life

Now there were four leprous men at the entrance of the gate; and they said to one another, "Why do we sit here until we die?"

—2 Kings 7:3

Pant legs rolled to my knees,
my anxious flesh—
I rub coconut oil
on spots of psoriasis.

Like heavy steam,
the scent of oil
ascends around me.

The kettle begins to sound.
I make herbal tea
to ease my thoughts,
the herbs
easing these afflictions.

(stanza break)

Skin scales fall.

The doctor said,

“Genetic,”

but no relative of mine

sheds skin like this.

Maybe what’s passed down

through generations

isn’t a flesh affliction, but a soul’s

projection, the warm steam

rising to meet me.

Miriam

As long as they have the disease they remain unclean. They must live alone; they must live outside the camp. —Leviticus 13:46

Often when my skin flares
and flakes, I'm asked,
is it contagious? I consider
another time
of this monstrous disease:

Miriam struck with tzaraat—
what's more than skin deep
becomes appearance.

She's cast into isolation
for seven days, at first
sight of the white, skin sores.
O Lord, please heal her, Moses says.

Dead Sea salts heal
what's more than skin deep.
O Lord, please heal her.

(stanza break)

She's sent out again, and back,
examined by a priest
who sends her out again
to confirm tzaraat.

O Lord, heal her now,
says Moses, *I beseech you,*
and she was healed.

Feet in the sand, I wait
for the new covenant.

Prescribed

Avoid nightshade plants

meats, alcohol

and picking at plagues.

Take vitamins, supplements,

use apple cider vinegar, probiotics, dead

sea salts, coal-tar ointments,

steroid cream,

tanning for light therapy.

I must relax—

a vacation to somewhere

tropical, near the equator,

or, I think, a trip to space

for some magical solar remedy.

I must accept

my immune system

keeps me struggling.

(stanza break)

The doctors say
it's lifelong, no cure.
They try to sell me
immunity.

Social Anxiety

My French professor lectures on
Saint Simeon Stylites who stood atop a pillar for thirty or forty
years
for religious purposes, so they say.
Yet what would drive someone to live
as a hermit? I thought
while watching the French movie for class.
Maybe I should follow his lead with
ascetic self-discipline,
simpler than alienation.
Might I get a stiff spine
from standing up (unless
the pillar has room to sit)? In that case
I'd climb to the top for physical isolation,
stay and live without society...
Simeon high above, high enough
no one could see him cry
tears of satisfaction from solitude until...
people flock to stare, as they did for Simeon.
oh...*zut*. Snapped back from distraction. I leave
class with the rest.

Daydreaming in Isolation

Jazz plays in my room and I imagine

another hand's moisture

meeting mine,

like taste of an exotic fruit

I may or may not enjoy,

swallow either way.

To dance with another I must endure

eye contact—or lack thereof—

and sway in the breeze of movement,

realizing my steps crave closeness.

A turn away from my dance partner pulls me

back with momentum that presses our hands together again;

a glass shatters when a hand closes in

with such force;

the butterfly effect would say,

closing of my eyelids before sleep at night

might precipitate rain.

(stanza break)

It's in the smallest actions.

Sometimes, it rains all night.

Past Bed

Phrases of *love is patient* and *love is kind* reside,
framed in my parents' bedroom, facing their queen bed
occupied usually by one body.

My father caves quickly to sleep
on the well-used couch downstairs.

I have no knowledge of stories
about where my parent met,
or when they might have kissed last.

They shared some past bed.

I exist, my three siblings exist.

They wear wedding rings still.

My mother saves a meal
for when my father gets home late
after work that lasts too long, leaving him angry
and ready to collapse on the couch
after eating, sometimes
not even making it to the kitchen
sink, his plate tossed on the floor,
hands limp and eyes shut.

Blind Blackbirds

—From Sartre's *Baudelaire*.

Skin—our large organ—doesn't pulse,
Its lack of fur or feathers
reveals us, vulnerable.

I feel my heart beat
through my skin
as if from a flicker of wing,
as if from Sartre's
rare, blind, blackbird
haunted by a certain
whiteness spreading over
his wings.

Those white, blind blackbirds find
they can still fly
without full sight,
the sun's glint reflects
off black.

Awareness

During class you stuttered and stumbled on words,
drawn to me, breaking
on the inside. Neurotransmitters failed.

You saw my project on awareness
of mental illness, a safe house.

Weeks later, you told me you broke down,
thought of hanging
yourself, which explained the text
lighting up my phone.

You wrote me a letter of gratitude, while
in the hospital. I didn't visit.

The phone rings again.

Sometimes, I don't answer my phone.

Three Friends and I Bond at a Diner, Post Car Accident

My thin hands shake.

Each tink of spoon

on the tea cup reverberates through the diner.

I clasp my cold hands around

my cup of black tea,

stare into depths.

I remember

I was jolted awake from tight seat-belt restraining

the instant

my glasses flew off. I found out later

he fell asleep at the wheel

after we all had, too.

We could have died.

Avoiding eye contact,

I'm about to cry,

disturbed by how quick

it would have been for us to die

in our sleep.

We should have stopped for coffee.

(stanza break)

Anything else I can get you? says the waiter.

Guilt persuades

the backseat nappers

to order fries.

I take the driver's hand,

comfort him.

For the longest time nobody says anything.

Momentarily together,

we are alone.

Odd Jokes

Why can't we peel off the label,
make an appeal to take odd
out of ODD— Oppositional
Defiant Disorder,
or add to understanding
of ADD: Attention
Deficit Disorder?

Attention: these disorders can grow,
the children's
lives made harder by
biased notes on their records
based on this thing we call disorder,
as if it's possible to live
without disorder.

After drinking too much coffee,
a friend, jittering, says,
I have ADD.

To Jump at a Cough; To Laugh Like a Crow

My sick head on a pillow, I hear
crows call out. They bring morning.
I shed skin scales; they shed feathers.
Fever can stifle logic, opening me
to extraordinary meanings.
All these exaggerated lepers
in the mind: I imagine the sun a pill,
hear cawing, open my mouth wide—
a stiff bird beak—
swallow. A laugh breaks from my throat
while the sun's rays heal my skin.

“The Friendly Island” Leper Colony*1866-1969*

Molokai was not the place
they say it is now
or what they want it to be
when suffering Hawaiians were shipped to live
below cliffs, skin
contagious on a boat that stopped
far off the coast,
that those exiled already
wouldn't storm the ship.

The newly exiled
were thrown overboard for the swim--
hopefully they knew how
to make it ashore.

To cover up fatal lesions the Isle's
name was changed
from “Leper” to “Friendly.”

(stanza break)

Tourists visit the volcano,
isolated from history,
fanning to stay cool in the heat,
suffering. Diving under water they're
isolated from knowing
who else swam here, or at least,
tried to.
I wonder if
I would have made it to shore.

Piss and Psoriasis

My humidifier puffs out streams
of vapor.

My skin cracks and peels with psoriasis
slowly spreading,
and my nose bleeds.

My family is out of town at
my brother's and sisters'
robotics competition.

I would have gone too, except for work
this morning.

I lie in bed, in the late night darkness.
I think, finally, I can get some sleep.
My old dog snores, lying on a pillow on the floor.
Over the humidifier's hum
I hear a sharp, streaming hiss
of my dog peeing on my carpet.

(stanza break)

Switching on the light reveals
the expanded urine, absorbed,
yet she lies there, as if nothing happened.
Her bladder isn't as good as it used to be.
I put her out of the room and
sop up the rancid liquid.

The dark-pink, imperfect circles
of psoriasis on my elbows and inner ankles
remain and I breathe air that's
heavier than before.

Lack of Glasses

I walk home in rain and droplets blur,
shining with a glow from
a car's headlights,
like an impressionist painting:
less clear and somehow more
spectacular
against the rush of tires on the wet street—
amplified through declined sight.
I inhale mist. A few faceless people pass.

Step and breathe a whisper,
this night now vespers.

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ACADEMIC VITA

Erin Servey

EDUCATION

-
- | | |
|--|----------------|
| THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY University Park, PA | May 2018 |
| Bachelor of Arts, English; Bachelor of Arts, Psychology; French minor | |
| Master of Arts in Creative Writing | |
| Penn State Erickson Discovery Grant | April 2016 |
| • <i>Undergraduate award of \$3,500 given to support summer SHC thesis work.</i> | |
| Barry Directorship LA Scholarship | September 2016 |
| • <i>Awarded \$1,000 for fall semester internship enrichment funding.</i> | |

EXPERIENCE

EDITORIAL INTERN

The Hemingway Letters Project | State College, PA May 2016 – Present

- Demonstrate attention to detail through accessioning and managing documents into Docushare database. Scan and upload resource texts and organize and proofread transcription files.
- Communicate effectively with Penn State faculty and contributing scholars.

WRITER | COPY-EDITOR

Onward State | State College, PA January 2016 – July 2016

- Wrote 1-3 articles a week and discussed ideas at weekly staff meetings with a group of the 35-45 members.
- Promoted to Copy-Editor in March. Copy-edited articles weekly based on grammar and the Onward State style guide.

EDITOR | WRITER | SOCIAL MEDIA TEAM

April 2015 – May 2016

Spoon University (Penn State's chapter) | State College, PA

- Wrote 2-4 articles per month; most article received 500 + page view in the first week.
- Helped run the PSU Spoon Twitter and Instagram accounts, took photos, and edited for 2-4 other articles a week.

ITS LAB SUPERVISOR | CONSULTANT

April 2015 – Present

Penn State University Lab Consulting | State College, PA

- Contribute excellent customer service by helping students with computer and printer issues.
- Exhibit self-management in maintaining my assigned lab group and supervising consultants.

WRITING INTERN

August 2015 – December 2015

Information Center for Indigenous Knowledge (ICIK) Journal at Penn State | State College, PA

- Attended ICIK events/talks, took photos, and wrote articles about events. Met with my advisor 2-4 times per month.
- Helped Penn State's Student Society for Indigenous Knowledge (SSIK) create a Wordpress site.

EDITORIAL INTERN

January 2014 – May 2014

Citystatearts.com | State College, PA

- Maintained performance and art event listings on the website.
- Wrote feature articles on performance topics and maintained a directory of artists and performers.
- Communicated with artists and performers in the area for information and photos for the site.