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Ordinary Explorations

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Ordinary Explorations

By

Amelia Endo

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for
Honors in the Department of English

UNION COLLEGE

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ABSTRACT

ENDO, AMELIA

ADVISORS: Judith Lewin, Jordan Smith, and Hugh Jenkins

In her poem "Poetry" Marianne Moore gracefully states the physical reactions people experience as a result of reading poetry, such as eyes dilating and hair rising. Moore asserts, "these things are important not because a/ high-sounding interpretation can be put upon them but because/ they are/ useful". For this reason, I not only read but also create poetry. I wrote this collection of poems intending to trigger reactions from my readers that would be "useful" to them. I decided that the most tactful way to do so was to write about my own personal experiences. Inspired by notable poets such as Linda Gregg, Marilyn Hacker, and James Schuyler, I began to write. My subjects include observations I have made and events from my life. In constructing these poems, both the syntax and the way I bring the "I" forward reveal the complexity of what is seemingly ordinary. Often the poem's narrative pushes out the unexpected, whether in phrasing or in shifts away from what appears to be the subject.

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A Cold December

The storm shutters are open;
I no longer need their protection,
so I stand on the smooth cedar-
wood floor and look through
the thick, dirty, lamented glass.

The deep green oleanders have
dropped their fresh flowers into
the swimming pool. The petals
float across the water's edge,
as clouds swiftly sneak along
the white roofs of lollipop-colored houses,
making heavy the weight of the air.

The Sun returns to bake the
pavement, as the tourists
wearing cheap helmets tool
along the road on red mopeds--

soon they will traipse through
my backyard path too quickly to
admire how light patiently
seeps through the leaves
of the palm trees.

When they arrive at Grape Bay,
will they study carefully
how transparent seawater crashes
onto pink sand (which the
waves will then steal away)?

Staring out my picture window,
I think I hear the call of a tree frog.
But for the first time in six years,
the view from the picture window
is nothing but a memory.

New Years 2006

I smelled green stained bottles on your breath,
but your corky charm prevailed, despite the piercing scent.
Your stare captured a skewed, perfect image of me--
my sharp jaw, my defined collarbone
surfacing under my skin.
And I remember how you looked--
tall, certain, honest.

After Four Years

I woke up with my head on your lap
and your hands resting on my bare back.
They started to shake as you reached out
and grasped the first gift you ever gave me.

It was Christmas and you walked up to my
front door carrying a green bow scotch-taped
onto a brown box, which was naked like my skin.
Inside was a white gold and yellow gold bracelet;
you were unsure which metal I would prefer.
It awkwardly hung below the bone
of my thin wrist, but I wore it everyday.

I spent four years wanting your brilliance,
but in the eleven months since I last breathed
your smell (sweat of laziness masked with
Old Spice) I realize that you will always
keep it tucked behind your piercing eyes.

Insatiable

The half-buzz sounds from my Mother's
old plastic kitchen-timer. I turn off
the stove without testing the texture
and carry the weight of the tall steel stockpot
to release the squirming noodles with
the boiling water that brought them
to life, and without hesitating, pour
pasta into the shallow ceramic-glazed bowl.

The spaghetti, which I douse in vodka sauce,
spills over the bowl's brim as steam seeps
through the in-betweens of the noodles.
They lie sprawled on top of one another,
drowsy from the alcohol aroma--
I have succeeded in their seduction,
so I walk over to the sink to fill up
the tall steel stockpot once more.

Fear

Too frequently, I see
you seethe with
concentration as you
spy on me.

Come:

Creep along the rim
of my brass bedpost,
slither up my spine,
tingle my pain with
your heavy breathing,
replace my calm with
a cold, pulsating sweat,
threaten my smooth skin
to rise, and strangle my
hope to lie peacefully,
because this is your invitation
to your killing.

Stoic

Like the cold tile floors and
bare walls you call home,
where the energy to chase
fireflies no longer lives,
your crimson lipstick-smile is a
pretense so that people will never
know, or at least never ask
about the little hands that used to tug your
ragged skirt-- the one phrase, *blood loss*
compulsively rewinds in your brain.
Your son is dead, and now you've
convinced yourself that you are too.

Summer Job

“The August Sun cannot disturb us in here,”
I assured myself as I sat like a child
on the classroom floor.
My Mother’s one-piece bathing suit was
drenched in sweat and covered
in dirt from free swim, when I was
the aide to camper Angus Durden.

We were by the lake when I received
his invitation to play, on his terms.
His deep green eyes widened as his pointer finger
extended from his pudgy body and revealed
the direction where his little legs would
carry him and where I would
chase after him.

An hour and several bruises later, we made it
inside. Angus plopped into my lap with his
chosen story, and I wondered if he was really
the one doing the chasing.

Prescription

I reach for the larger of the two bottles because it's morning and I can hardly move until the capsule kicks in. The first time I took this pill (or something like it) was in fourth grade, but I didn't like how it made me feel then.

I was taken into the closet-sized room across the hall, past Miss Orlandie's class so I could be observed while the other kids had "Silent Sustained Reading", probably of the classics. I was reading age appropriate books-- *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing*. It took me years to get addicted, but it wasn't my choice, just as it wasn't my choice to have my mind wandering, my body fidgeting, when I was supposed to be writing or reading silently.

Waking Early

Sharp arrows of sun pierce
the window while I use my pillow
as a shield to protect the idleness
I have kept inside me since last
Tuesday. It's been three days and
I've ignored the movement of time
to capture the presence of it. In it,
I find a place to be absent from
anything (obligations, stress,
ambition). What I have here is a bed,
a dresser, a desk, and two paintings
hung on the wall. My breathing has
stayed constant and I am unchanged,
yet gray.

Old Journal

Pages of my high school journal are missing. Bound between the closing and the opening, there are torn edges of paper (heavy, uneven, and delicate). The remaining handmade paper is laden with cross-outs of felt-tip pen-ink and will never be restored.

In the Library

I need a distraction from the subtle pain in my lower back or the realization that my left ear is bigger than my right. The inexplicable noise is coming from my stomach, but my cubicle neighbor doesn't hear it. She chomps on her gum loudly as I notice I am not past question three on the study guide. But more importantly, I need to pause and concentrate on what it was I meant to say.

Dilemma

Its 1:59 AM and I can't stop thinking
of the poem I read seven weeks ago--
the poem I read over sixty times,
by the poet who used "shell-shocked"
to describe her internal conflict,
and not as a reference to the war--
but I understood what she meant;
I related to her. I'm still confused at
relating to anyone. Jordan did say,
write abstractly less, and your audience
will relate to you more. I should be
descriptive and imply more than what
I say. Here, I have blank paper, and now
I must provide concrete details
to fill the page. I'll freely state that
I have brown eyes, but I'm hesitant
to write what can be implied;
I'm used to adapting to someone else's
personality to bridge our gap. I'll agonize
over the next line because I need for you
to understand me, I want for you to relate
to me, but I don't want to be scrutinized.

Trivial Complaints

Trudging through the snow, smelling radiator fumes,
breaking the washer, cleaning clothes in the bathtub,
receiving impersonal e-mails, relying on coffee,
memorizing facts, counting calories, staying up all
night, sleeping during the day, battling
writer's block.

Amtrak Train 229

Every pair of seats I pass is occupied--
one by luggage, the other by its owner,
whose eyes awkwardly jerk towards me and
then away out their window.

I've passed through two cars with no
welcome, and just as I convince myself
I'll be standing until Poughkeepsie,
"you can sit next to me" a pretty blonde
girl proclaims. And my knees thank her
as I sit down, until "So where do you think
the human-race will be in 100 years?"

People Watching Outside the Alumni Gym

“Is there anything on sale my dear?”

An eighty-year-old lady stands, just over five feet. She wears a shocking pink jump suit; I am shocked.

“You mean at the bookstore?” and I can’t stop staring at her identical pink suitcase rolling behind her swift, yet bold stride. She realizes she forgot her credit card, and strides away, leaving me in admiration as I sit under a tree who insists on shaking his leaves all over me.

Starbucks on 39th and 8th

I predict this tall young woman
ten feet up the street has a
paucity of patience.

She wears stilettos as
smoke jaunts into
her lungs. As he approaches,
she attacks, "Why didn't
you call? I could have
waited inside."

"At least you got to enjoy
the fresh air," which they
both knew was drowned
by her cigarette minutes
ago, but during this
climax of confrontation
I am caught staring and
quickly look away.

2:23 PM on a Monday

I skipped breakfast; my lazy eyes drooped
over the sound of buzzing into another blissful dream
that took me away from Monday class-
again. But this was the first sleep I had in fresh clean sheets
in the past two weeks,
so snuggled and buried in a pillow haven.

Not idle--

so I do apologize to you, for neglecting my duty to
carefully prepare a food that would not
hinder your pleasure. But it was a minute too late,
and Tomato Soup has now burned
your tongue.

The Daydreamer

I love a warm glass of milk at midnight
when the middle of August offers a cool
breeze. My lazy days consist of eating
grape-flavored popsicles
while sitting on the worn-in branch of
the Japanese maple. "Grab the Radio Flyer,
Jeffrey!" and we'll still ride down
the hill even if there isn't any snow. I
wish I could stay perched on the trapeze
swing of our rusty play set, but the
August nights consume me.

I am a backseat passenger at midnight,
shouting with laughter while I am
squished against the door handle by your
body (sixty pounds more than mine) as the
car makes sudden shifts along Harbor road.
I blame my sweaty palms on the humidity,
when really it was my elation when you
asked to dance with me. I would sing if
I were free-spirited, the kind of girl I
wish to be (or falsely proclaim myself to be).

Age 7

I'm not a fan of birthday cake, at least not this piece.
The bow in my hair is stiff; my dress itches me.
Twenty kids in sight,
but was it worth having a party
when the only present I liked were clothes for a doll I no longer have?

But I decided losing her was for the best.
Now I explore the creatures in rivers and creeks
instead of playing such childish games.
The dirt is rough and thick as it squeezes
into the crevices of my sneakers.
No one was looking, and I was a brave soul--

Are you still listening to my adventures of the day
my golden pet?
I'm a new age now; a new exciting person,
yet you don't seem to care
that I feed you and place you in a beautiful bowl,
because all you do is swim carelessly and
aimlessly in circles all day.

77 Highland

In the pantry of our old house I
used to climb the shelves in order
to reach the food. You used to use
the laundry chute as your secret
hiding place until our au pair suffered
a near brain aneurysm finding
you. There was the time you
let me light mom's birthday candles
and I lit your sweater on fire (the only
instance when a safety song from
elementary school came to good use).
There was the time I let you see
how fast Dad's treadmill could
accelerate while I was on it (but I didn't
stay on it long, nor did the skin on my
knees).

No More Highways

I remember the night we ran to
the saltwater pool. Our imprints
on the cool stone path marked
the distance we traveled from
the kidney-shaped pool, the restaurant
that loomed over our moonlit shadows,
and the little orange cottages stationed
on an upward slope from the main lobby.
When we arrived, I could not see
where it ended and the sea began.
The echo of our laughter carried across
the stretch of the black ocean,
but no one was bothered.

September 1st, 2010

I was sprawled out on the bedroom rug, reading the Royal Gazette when my stomach sank and suddenly we were in my kitchen with Trevor laughing at Lizzie as she burned the bagel bites. We were on your boat, speeding through the harbor and hitting every wake on purpose. We were lying on Laura's white tile floor retelling Disney movie plotlines on New Year's Eve, ignoring our other friends. We were sitting at our internship desks exchanging e-mails every hour. We were playing Nintendo in my basement, and leaving in between races to pick up mozzarella sticks from Ice Queen. We were watching the old Club Med building implode! We were chugging Gosling's straight from the jug on Horseshoe Beach. We were cliff jumping off of Diving Board Island. We were playing chicken fights against Courtney and Matthew, assuring ourselves we were really the ones winning. We were sitting at the Pink Café, eating fish sandwiches with extra mayonnaise. We were driving down the "bumpy road" even though it was the long way to my house.

I thought my words would be yet another addition to your phony emotional clutter. This is my apology for not believing I could ease your pain. Please forgive me, I am in Schenectady and you are still in Devonshire, without your younger brother or a call from me.

Asking for Advice

This is another
poem about
the resentment of a
flustered female narrator;
a commercial prize.
Shall I place it next to your
heart-ached fiery file?
Or should I write it out
in black ink stitched across
the plea of your wrists?

The Meeting

You found me on the landing
between two flights of stairs
and asked to follow me down.
In a moment's desperation to feel
passion, I buried my old lover's bruises
beneath my breath, and reached for you.

Today, I saw you for the second time;
your long legs jerked a change in path
on the sidewalk as I approached.

You could play the role of a nodding-
passerby with me because our
shared memory is meaningless.
But instead, you avoid my gaze.

Separation

I don't want to remember
the years we spent fighting amid
our jealousy. I was born six years after
you, and two years after you last asked
for a baby sister. Mom said you were
beautiful when you were born, like
a porcelain doll and I was adorable, like
a baby doll; here I have stated the defining
metaphor for you and me--
the type of analogy that defines
difference. Still, I have an infinite
love for you, not because you are my
sister, but because you helped me accept
the separation between you and me.

The Wholesale Produce Dealer

He grew up on a farm in Maui with eight other siblings, but the second youngest died at age five. She grew up in a two-bedroom apartment with ten other siblings, but the third eldest ran away to the mainland. He was given enough money for a pick-up truck, and sturdy wooden crates. They married, the “he” and the “she,” and ran their own business selling produce out of his pick-up truck. They did not have ten children; they chose to have only two.

This story is not a testament to the American Dream, but is a reminder for me to value the distance my Father has traveled to here from Hawaii.

My Mother's Vanity

is immovable. Carved into
the left wall of the master bedroom,
it hosts what is placed and
replaced on its tabletop.

Her collection of perfume bottles
sits where the mirror meets
the white granite table--
the tiny vials are gifts from her children,
when they too were collectors
(of dolls and baseball cards).
Pictures of them reside in little silver-
frames, placed at both ends of the table.

Among them is one large brass frame
with a photo of Carolyn, age Seventeen.
She sits outside, and despite the sun,
smiles with her eyes. She wears
a long yellow dress with black piping
running along the collar's rim, and
wisely watches her daughter from
a 1937 wildflower field of blue.

String Theory

Somewhere in a station of our history,
separate from what we know now,
but still on an old railway trail that
ends with a gray-and-green stone house,
those rooms are strewn with
our socks, dishes, and books. The double
glass doors are open to the back patio, and
the ceiling fan is switched off. It is getting dark.
When you come in, we will both stay.

Don't think I wish this history were ours
in the presence of time that we know.
I no longer have the urgency to be near
you, I've outgrown the concept of need.

Coole Park, 2009

Ninety years ago, you etched
your initials into the bark
of a tree and then turned
and walked alone
into the seventh wood,
making your own way.

It rained while I stood
beneath the tree to study
the markings of your name.
The carved out "W" and "B"
are wide and defined, yet your
last initial barely still remains.

When the rain stopped,
I followed your dirt path.
Grass (straggly, yet strong)
has since grown across
the path's end, separating it
from the water's edge.
I kept my back at the damp soil
to stare at the brimming lake--
a single swan remains.

Goodbye-

it's comprised of two simple words, yet I never understood the word itself—so I didn't say it to you. You said, "I'll talk to you later" I said, "okay" and shut the taxi door--

this very scene had been playing in my head for days, except I could never make out the dialogue, or where it was we were.

I thought it would last longer, but then again my mind is always wandering; was this the conversation we discuss our feelings, or is that scheduled for another time?

"I will miss you" I sent in writing after the taxi drove away. You replied, "I miss you too". You've been experiencing what I've been anticipating, but what did you experience during our last goodbye?