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Looking At Poetry: Poetic Graphic Novels

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THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF ARTS & SCIENCES

LOOKING AT POETRY:
POETIC GRAPHIC NOVELS

By

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Signatures are on file with the Honors Program office.

Looking At Poetry



Ted Dryce

Be Like the Dog

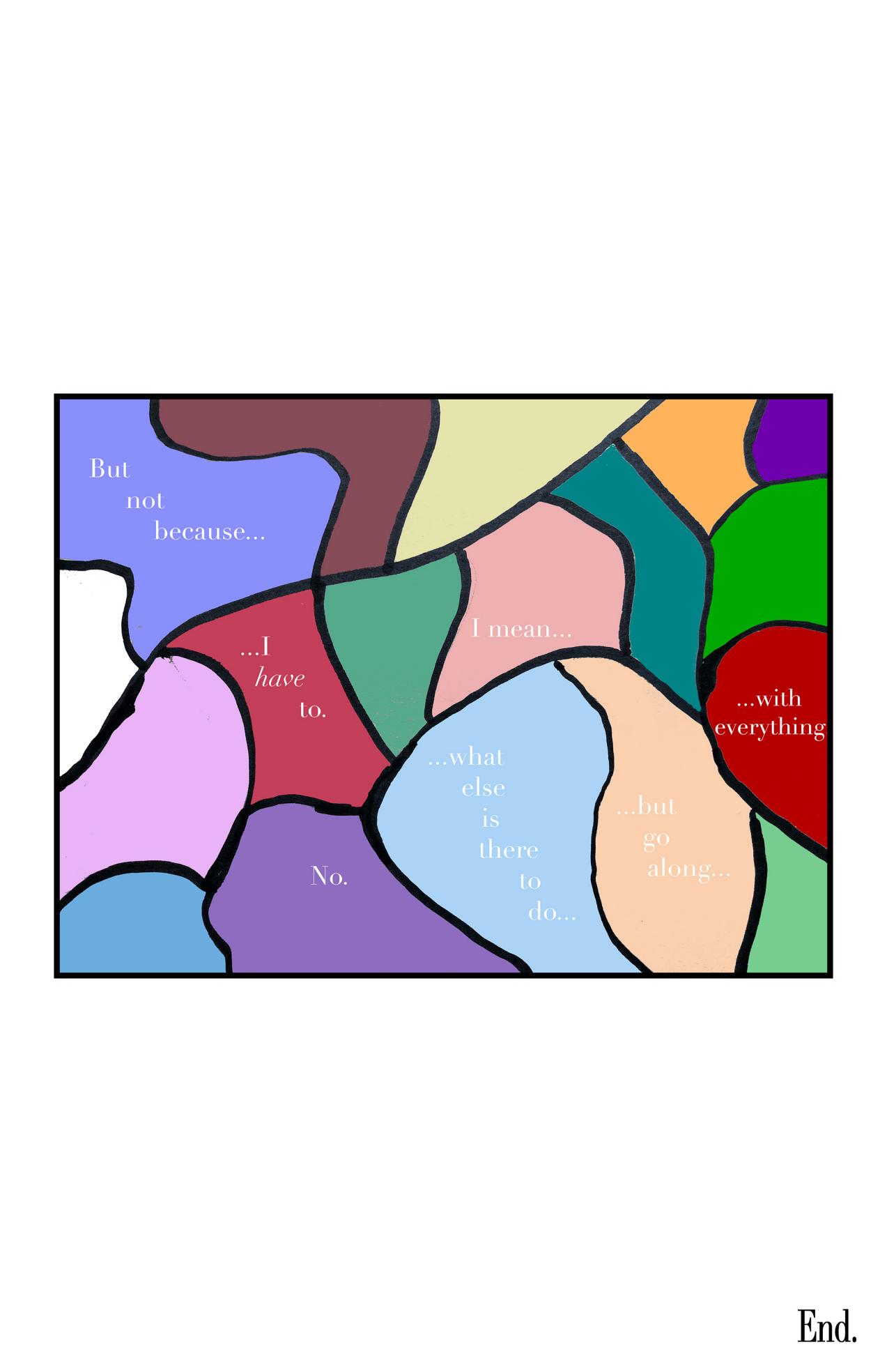


No, it simply takes off without a care...









But
not
because...

...I
have
to.

No.

...what
else
is
there
to
do...

I mean...

...but
go
along...

...with
everything

End.

Late on The Highway

Here I am in the dimly lit hallways

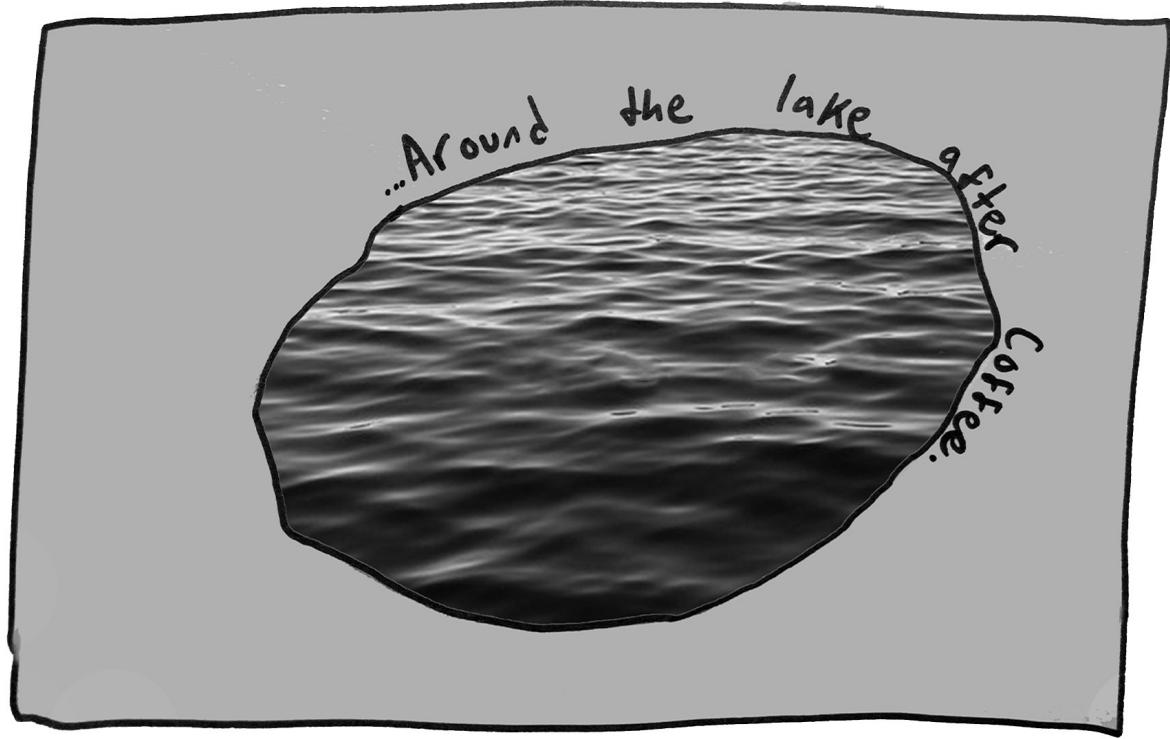
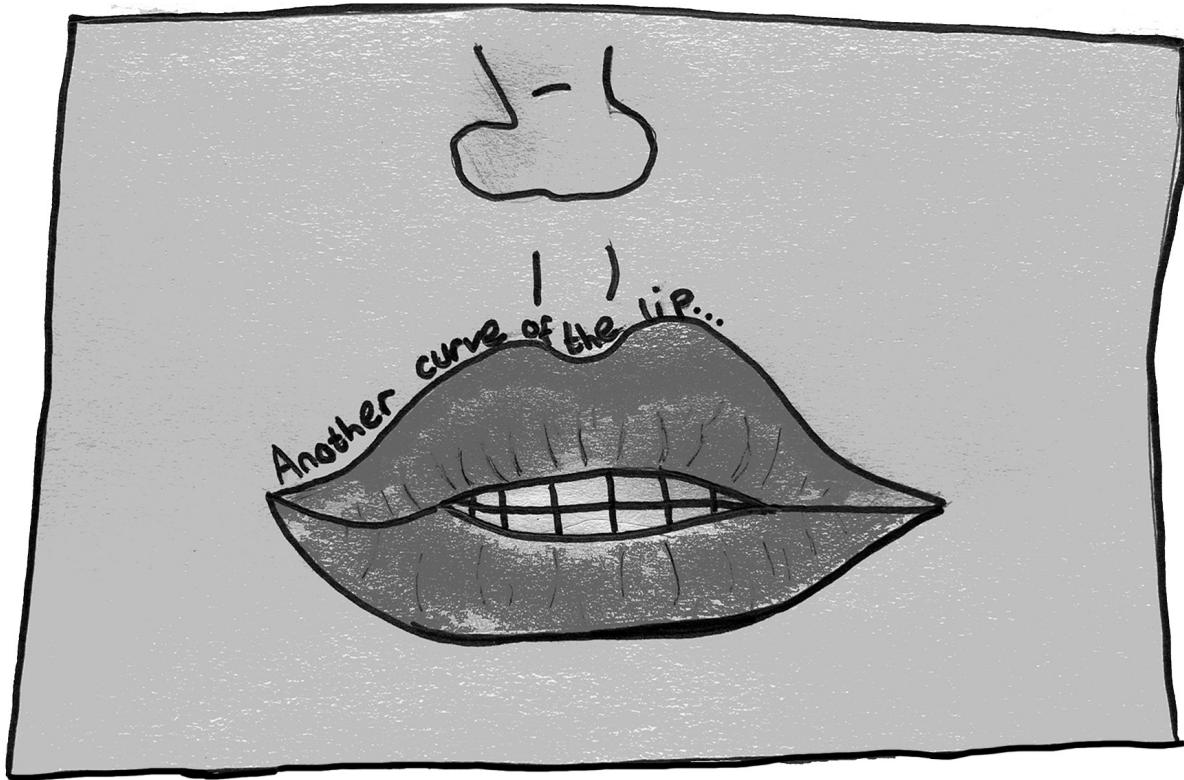
of the road.

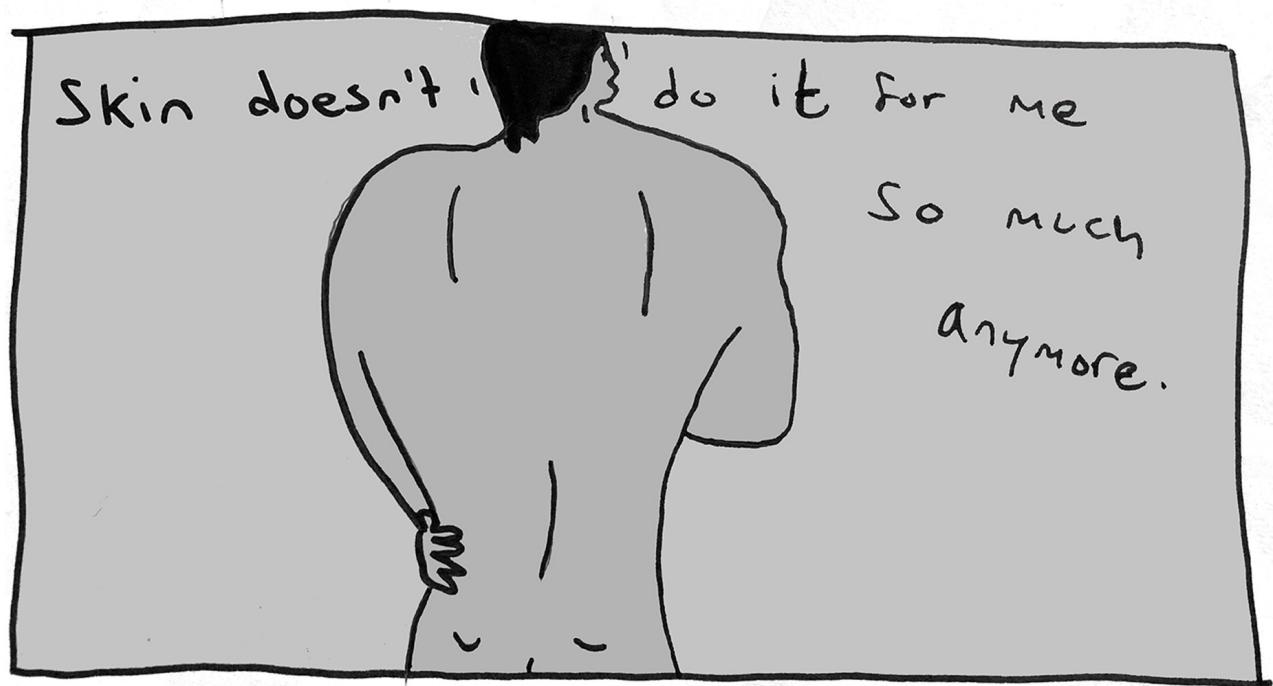
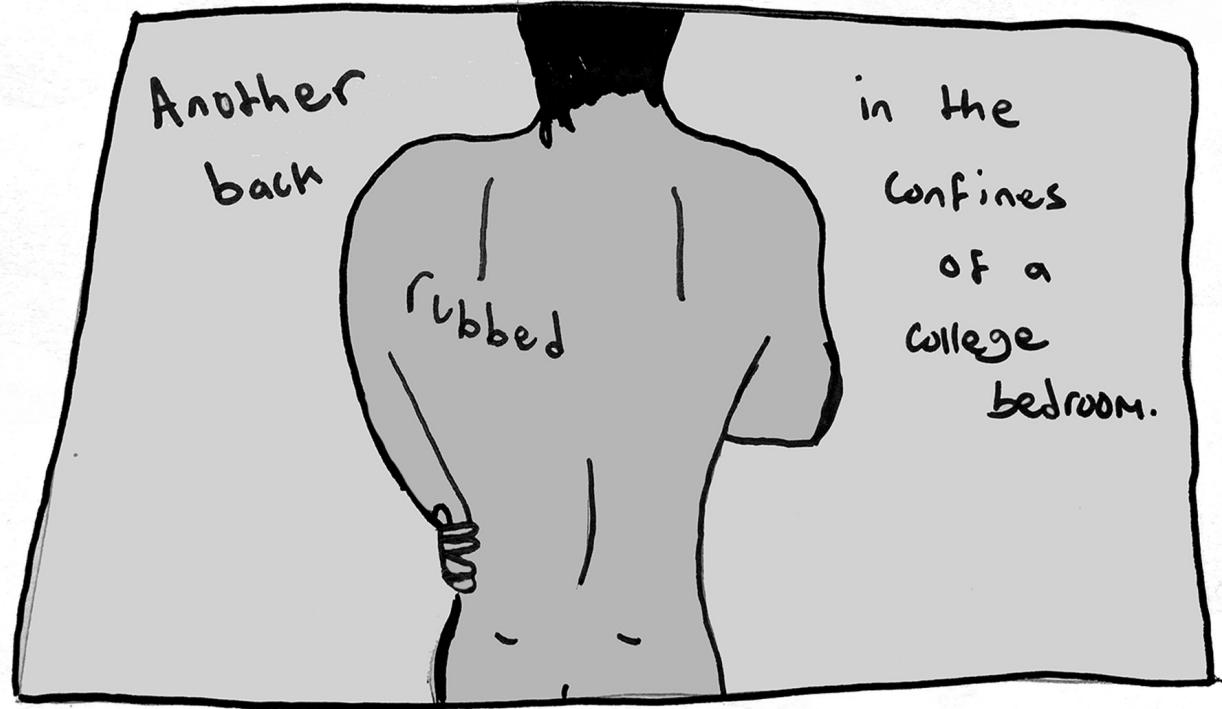
Memories of "maybe"
appear in the Passing Signs,

the
Concrete
bridges.

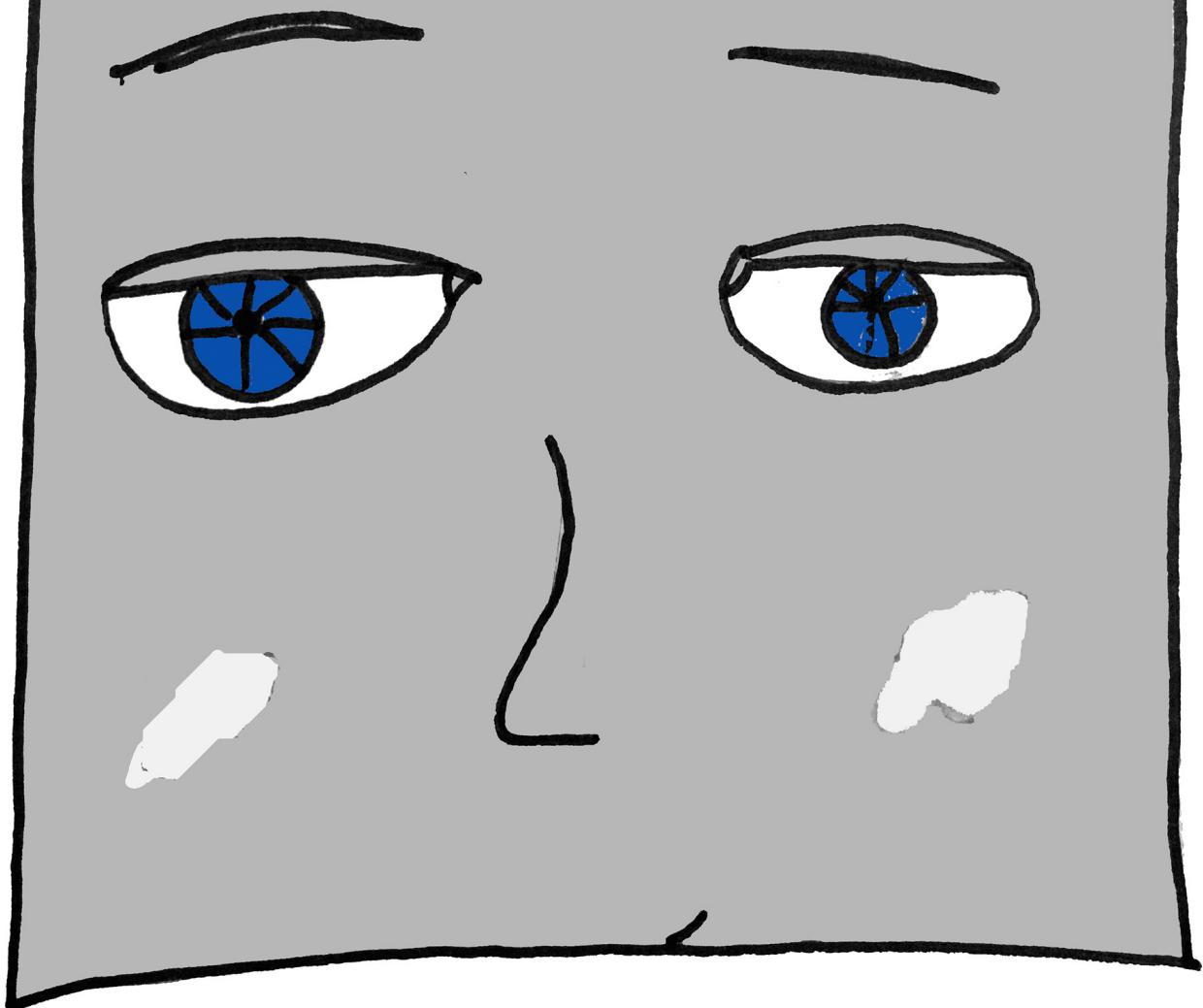








I think it might be
Something in
her eyes.

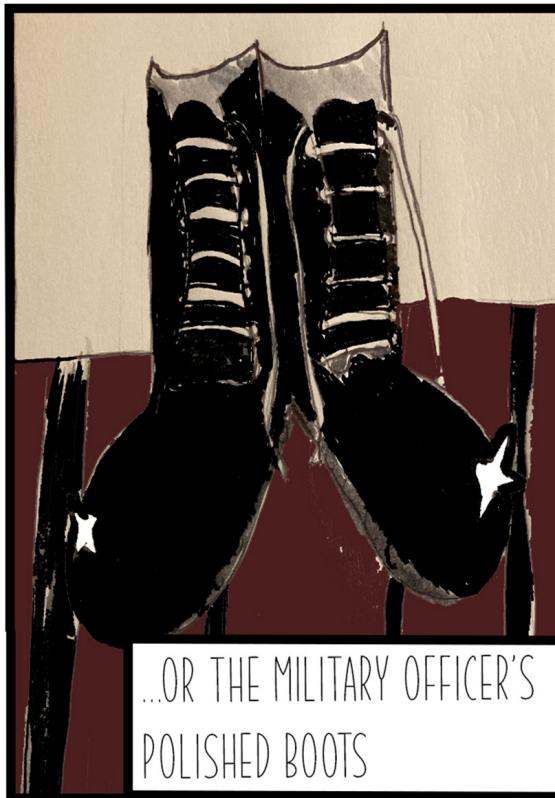


JUICE BOTTLES

UNLIKE THE LAWYER'S WIG...



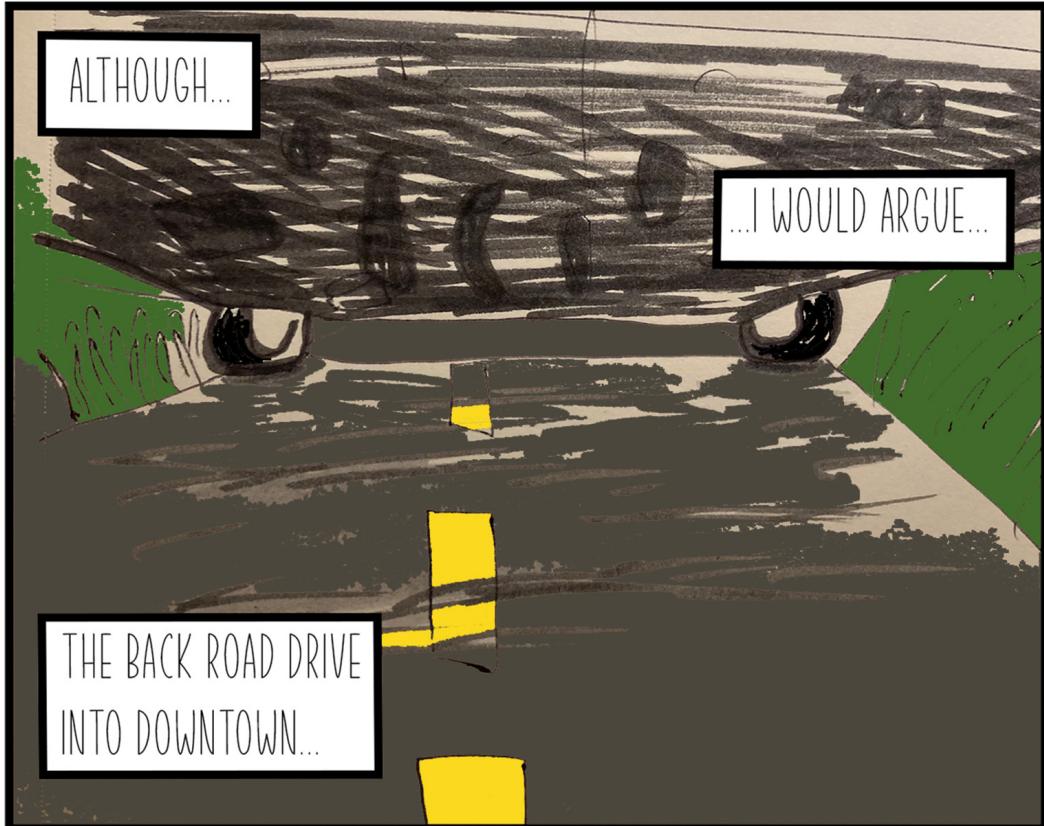
...OR THE MILITARY OFFICER'S
POLISHED BOOTS



MY EVERY-SO-OFTEN TRADITION IS ADMITTEDLY...

...NOT OF SUCH SPLENDOR.





AND THE EVENTUAL SIP...



...OF A SWEET SUMMER SYRUP...

...IS OF JUST AS MUCH IMPORTANCE...

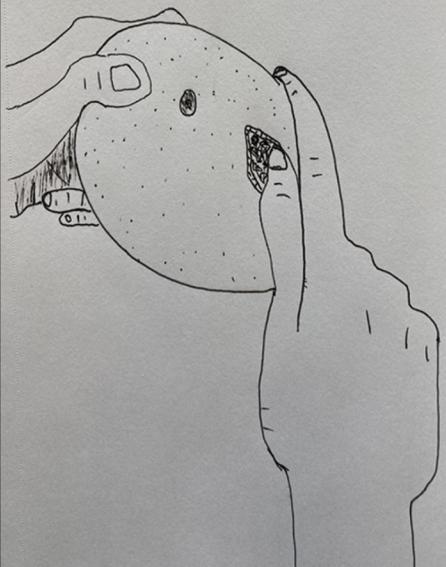


...AS EITHER OF THEM.

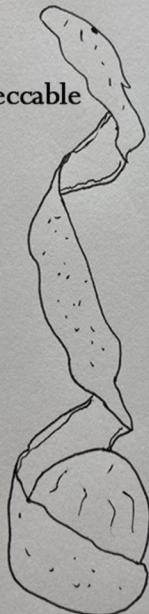
END

Picnic

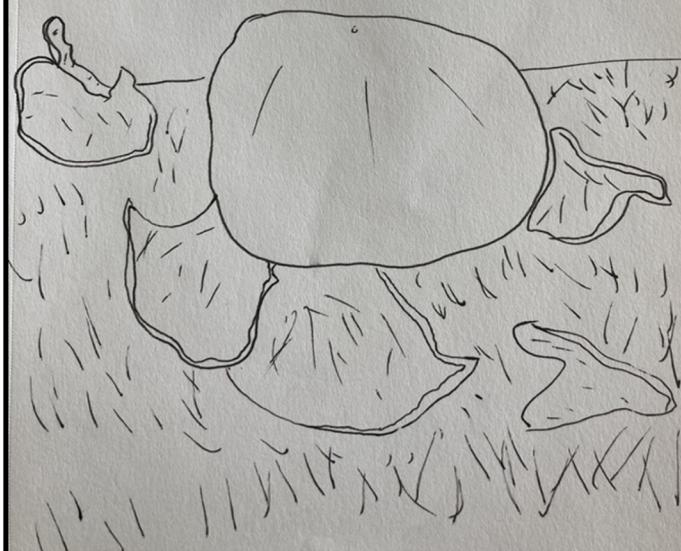
How does she peel the orange skin like that?



A perfect process wherein it holds its shape with impeccable form.



When I peel mine, it's rather regrettable.
I flay the thing like a piece of trout,
tossing bits to the ground...



...before I eat it.





On a Drive

And him in the open window
with headphones on in the spring
wind, on a busy road
where leaves rustle under tires.



And me in the car passing by
with restaurant tips in the glove box
while my hands rest on the steering wheel,
wincing at my aching heel after work.

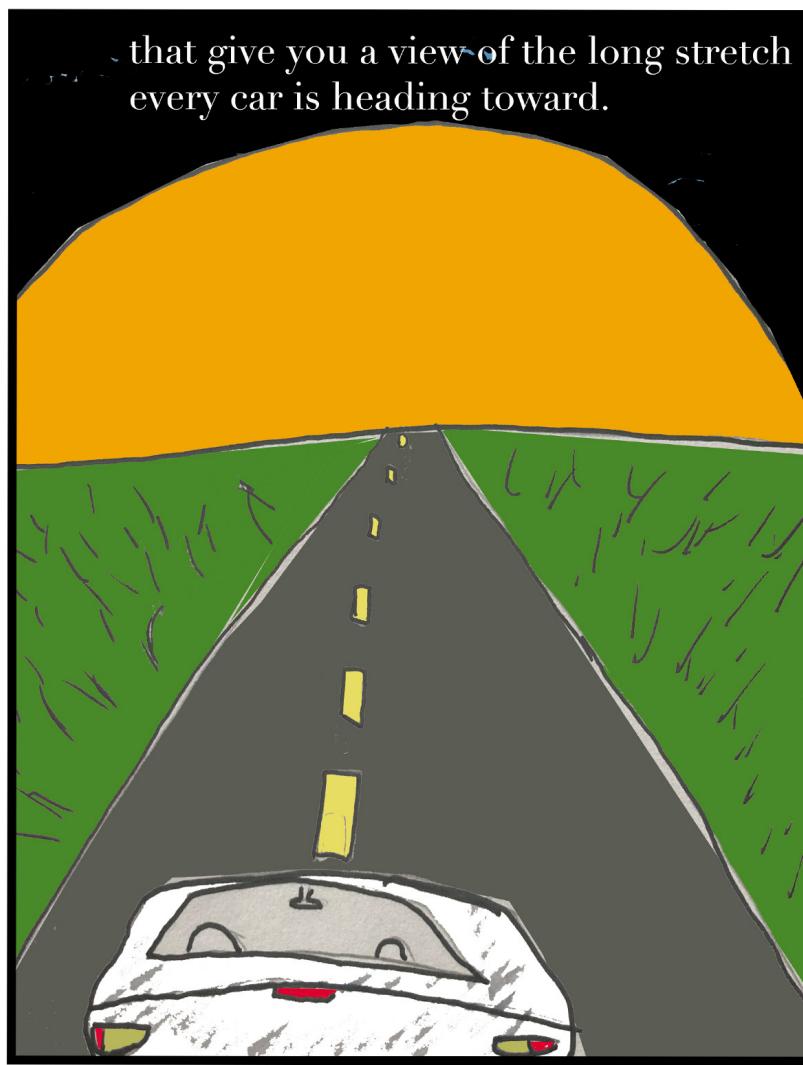


This must be what it's all for –

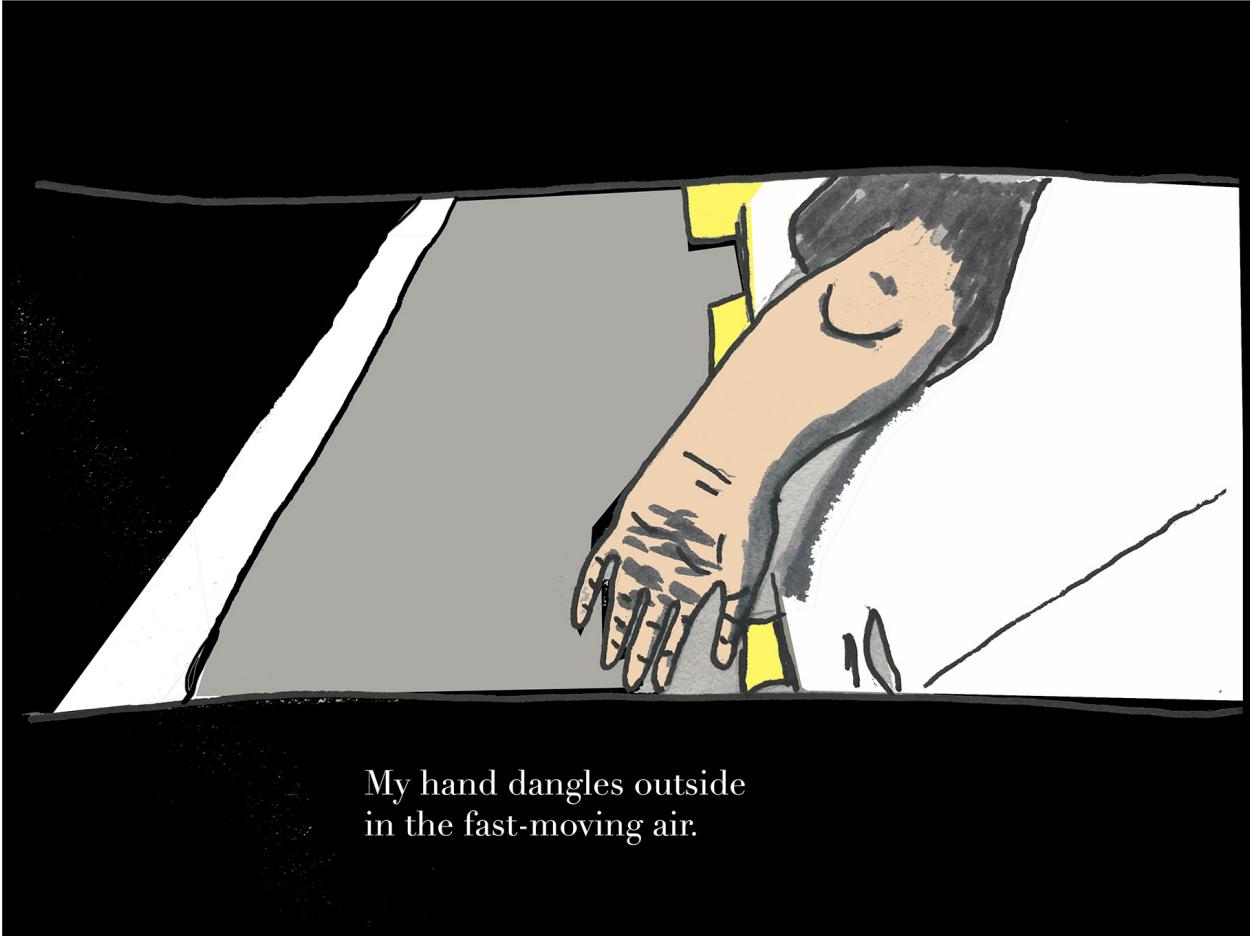




the bridges over the freeway



that give you a view of the long stretch
every car is heading toward.



My hand dangles outside
in the fast-moving air.



The trees sit on hilltops
– unlike home –
earthy pillars
built into the leaves
and golden in the afternoon.

And him in the open window,
and me in the car passing by.



Be Like the Dog

Does the dog think about its run outside?
No, it simply takes off without a care
and looks at you to come along. And does
the plant absorb water with measured thought?
Of course not, it just does. And so
in watching days pass by, I try to do
the same. Watch a new show. Make a left turn.

But not because I *have* to. No. I mean,
what else is there to do but go along
with everything?

Late on the Highway

Here I am in the dimly lit hallways
of the road. Memories of “maybe”
appear in the passing signs, the concrete
bridges. This old girl still jumps at me,
and a bit of hope lingers even as new
faces come my way. A lone traveler:
don’t we all feel that way from time to time?
Another curve of the lip around the lake
after coffee, another back rubbed
in the confines of a college bedroom.
Skin doesn’t do it for me so much anymore.
I think it might be something in her eyes.

Juice Bottles

Unlike the lawyer's wig
the military officer's polished boots,
my every-so-often tradition
is admittedly not of such splendor.
Although, I would argue
the back-road drive into
downtown, the simple hunt
for a parking spot,
and the eventual sip
of a sweet summer syrup
is of just as much importance
as either of them.

Picnic

How does she peel the orange skin
like that? A perfect process wherein
it holds its shape with impeccable
form. When I peel mine, it's rather regrettable.
I flay the thing like a piece of trout,
tossing bits to the ground before I eat
it.

On a Drive

And him in the open window
with headphones on in the spring,
windy on a busy road
where the leaves rustle under tires.

And me in the car passing by
with restaurant tips in the glove box
while one hand rests on the steering wheel
wincing at my aching heel after work.

This must be what it's all for –
the high-rise roads twisting up hills,
the bridges over the freeway
that give you a view of the long stretch
every car is heading toward.

My hand dangles outside

in the fast-moving air.

The trees sit on hilltops

– unlike home –

earthy pillars

built into the leaves

and golden in the afternoon.

And him in the open window,
and me in the car passing by.



Looking At Poetry

INTRODUCTION

Graphic novels and comics are a genre not normally associated with high art. Even their association with what many constitute as literature is somewhat shaky. To most, if any graphic novels can be considered traditionally literary, there are only a select few. However, graphic novel interpretations of classic literary works do exist. *The Odyssey*, *Jane Eyre*, *Frankenstein*, and *Fahrenheit 451* have all been given graphic novel interpretations.

Still, these are adaptations of already famous literary works. Among the mainstream literary tradition, no formal canon exists solely for graphic novels. If one exists at all, it is not widely known among literary scholars. One must be actively seeking out the “classic” graphic novels in order to find them. Simply put, graphic novels are a niche genre that is often overshadowed by other literature.

While fiction novels and short stories are often adapted into visual mediums such as graphic novels or films, there is one literary genre that rarely receives this type of transformation: poetry. However, poetry is a medium that focuses intensely on imagery. Contemporary poetic movements have emphasized imagery more and more. Some poets even use language itself as a visual medium, blurring the lines between visual art and poetry.

There seems to be a logical shift toward the use of visual art with poetry, and graphic novels are the most logical medium to explore this concept with. Poems and graphic novels share a connection to each other through their codependence on language *and* imagery to tell a story or convey emotion. It is possible that these two genres can complement each other in a unique way, a way not seen through graphic novel adaptations of novels or other traditional narratives. In this essay, I will explore how poetry is closely related to visual art with its emphasis on the image.

Then, I will show how language itself is a visual artform – often experimented as one in the genre of poetry.

THE BREVITY OF A POEM

Poetry is first and foremost a literary artform. Words, punctuation, grammar, diction, syntax – these are what poetry is made of. However, out of all the literary modes, poetry is special in its tendency toward brevity. Most poems are written with word counts much shorter than those of essays, novels, or short stories. An exception can be seen in epic poems, long poems, and plays written in verse, but the vast majority of contemporary poetry contains relatively short word counts and concentrated language.

The brevity of a poem usually forces the poet to incorporate multiple images within a relatively short amount of space. This is done to create a sense of structure and tone within the poem, especially since poems do not traditionally follow the rules of exposition like a novel or short story, encouraging poets to dive straight into the details. It's almost as if every line in a poem is the opening hook to a novel. As a result, poetry often contains a plethora of concrete imagery and intense sensory details. Of course, this is not a strict rule, but within the last 100 years, this has become a common trend in poetry.

That being said, I quickly want to address the subjectivity of meaning in poetry. Every person will take something different from the imagery in a poem. Every person will visualize an image differently. My goal is not to define what message or experience any other poet hopes to convey with their imagery. Instead, I simply want to point out how and why imagery appears in poetry, and define the different functions an image may serve within a poem (and with language in general) to better understand how it affects the artform and relates poetry to visual art.

Back to the main idea, this trend toward concentrated imagery in a poem is probably the result of two literary movements occurring in the late 19th century and early 20th century: Symbolism and Imagism. Symbolism was popularized by a group of writers and artists who “believed that art should reflect an emotion or idea rather than represent the natural world in the objective, quasi-scientific manner” (Myers). While this sounds like a denial of the concrete world, poets of this movement actually used tangible imagery in a way that could convey emotion purely through the juxtaposition of objects, people, or settings with symbolic language. W.B. Yeats describes this idea in his essay *The Symbolism of Poetry* when he writes, “If I say ‘white’ or ‘purple’ in an ordinary line of poetry, they evoke emotions so exclusively that I cannot say why they move me; but if I bring them into the same sentence with such obvious intellectual symbols as a cross or a crown of thorns, I think of purity and sovereignty” (Yeats 881). Yeats points out how colors, which are not concrete objects, have innate meanings associated with them. However, they do not constitute as anything symbolical until they are placed alongside tangible objects. Symbolism, in the context of its literary development, required the use of objects and imagery in poetry in order to give tangible meaning to abstractions such as love, time, space, or color.

Imagism was radically different in its approach to objects, in that it “shifted the emphasis from...the mysterious to the actual, the ambiguously suggestive symbol to the clear-cut natural image” (Ramzani, Ellmann and O'Clair). Imagist poets made it their goal to be as clear and precise as possible in describing the objects they wished to highlight in their poems. They avoided using any flowery language in order to deliver the truest and most realistic interpretation of whatever the subject of a poem was. More on the Imagists later, but for now it is important to note that this movement ushered in a shift away from lofty abstractions about human emotion,

toward a more focused approach in poetry – one that was more concerned with the concrete world.

We can see the echoes of these movements in the poems of contemporary writers within the last 60 years. Many modern writers end their poems with a concrete description of an action, object, or person. This final picture often serves to shed light on some sort of intangible experience, without explicitly stating what that experience is. Sometimes they simply highlight a thing in a concise way, describing it clearly as to create an image in the reader's head. Either way, this is an attempt to avoid the loftiness of poetry from the past. Here are some examples:

In Jack Gilbert's poem "Hot Nights In Florida," he ends with a line that says "Outside, the moon is shining on nothing in particular" (Gilbert 200). Robert Bly ends his poem, "The Resemblance Between Your Life and a Dog" by writing "Your life is a dog. He's been hungry for miles, / Doesn't particularly like you, but gives up, and / comes in" (Bly 23). Theodore Roethke writes "Everything limp / But one tulip on top, / One swaggering head / Over the dying, the newly dead" (Roethke 41) in his poem titled "Flower Dump". Finally, Naomi Replansky ends her poem "You Walked a Crooked Mile" with the lines "...and against ten winters / you had one fire" (Replansky 15).

Each poet concludes their poem with an object based in reality. The influence of Symbolism and Imagism can be seen in these endings, as abstractions mingle alongside concrete imagery in some of these endings. This is the case in the poem by Robert Bly. In "The Resemblance Between Your Life and a Dog," Bly uses the dog as an allegory for the unpredictability of life. By using a dog as a symbol for existence, and showing the dog perform the simple action of going into a house reluctantly, Bly allows the reader to visualize an existential concept.

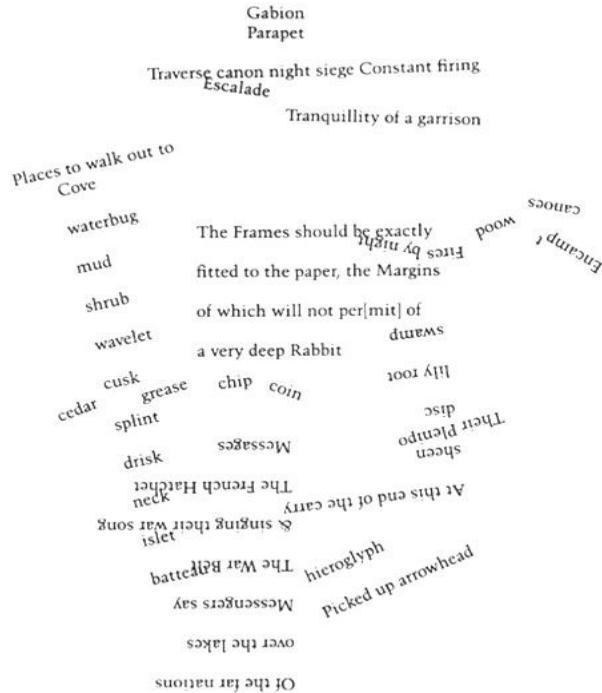
Imagery is essential to contemporary poetry. It is what transformed poetry into a modern art movement. Poetry relied less on abstract and intangible elements and embraced the tangible world in order to better convey the intangible. No more explaining emotion. Poets defined emotion through a form: objects, places, people, things. In a way, poetry became a visual medium.

LANGUAGE IS A VISUAL ART

While I have just asserted that poetry contains small connections to visual art, it is once again important to state clearly that poetry is first and foremost a literary artform. However, its emphasis on language does not necessarily mean that poetry has to function *exclusively* as a literary artform. As long as language is present and following poetic conventions (line breaks, meter, stanzas, or any possible combination thereof), then adding visual elements to a poem does not take away from the literary aspects of it. In fact, some poets and writers in the past have expressed their belief that language itself can function as a visual art.

A group of poets with a philosophy along these lines, known as the Language poets, emerged in the 1970s and 1980s. Their main focus was to approach poetry from a poststructuralist perspective, pushing back against what they perceived as the hidden limits and political oppression found in modern language. In order to go about this, they focused on “the materiality of language – its sounds, shapes, and structures, the look of words on the page.”

Susan Howe is one of the Language poets, and an example of using language in a visual way can be seen in this excerpt from her poem “Thorow”:

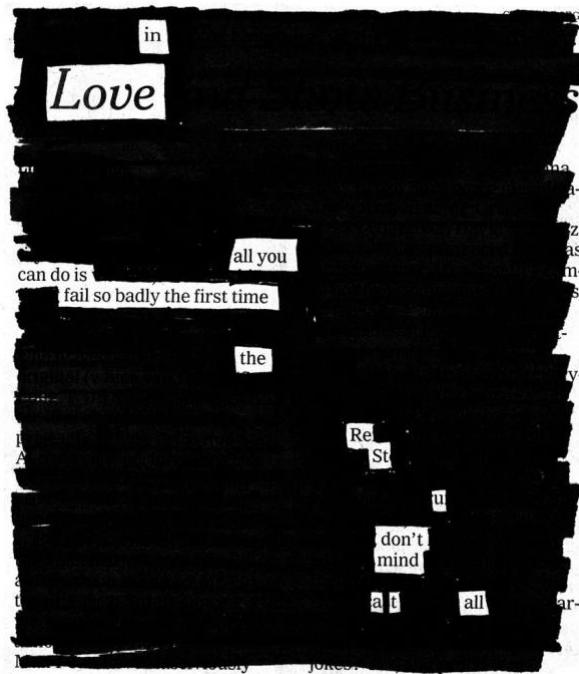


Source: Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry, Vol. 2

In grouping words together and formatting them in unusual ways such as upside down, diagonal, and adding brackets in the middle of words, Howe highlights the visual aspect of writing and grammar. The reader becomes aware of the iconographical nature of text – language is shaped by symbols that are placed next to each other in order to create meaning. When the conventions of traditional formatting are played with, as is the case in this poem by Howe, poetry (and language) becomes a work of visual art.

Lynda Barry expands upon this concept in the introduction to her book *Making Comics*. She writes, “There was a time when drawing and writing were not separated...In the beginning of our writing and reading lives, we *drew* the letters of our name...There was a lot of variability of shape, order, and orientation...The letters were characters” (Barry 1). Here, she is talking about how early on in life, the way in which a child draws letters is not yet automatic, and so instead of “writing” a letter, they are “drawing” one. Children don’t yet have the capacity or skill to discern between the two. This philosophy can be applied to writing in general, even in adulthood. When someone writes notes with a writing utensil, they are really just *drawing* symbols on a page. Writing is drawing, and language is visual. Even typing letters on a computer is still a form of visual art – the writer places symbols next to each other to create words. Font also comes into play with typing, as different font designs can further alter the shape and structure of letters. Therefore, it can be said that all literary work, whether typed or handwritten, is really a form of visual art.

There is another type of poetry that applies visual art in a more direct way: blackout poetry. This form of poetry was popularized by Austin Kleon in 2005 when he published his book, *Newspaper Blackout*. Simply put, blackout poetry is the process by which the poet constructs a new poem through the deconstruction of a full page of text – they blackout (with pen, marker, or paint) any remaining text around the words they wish to use in their newly constructed poem. Here is an example:



Source: "Newspaper Blackout" by Austin Kleon

Some artists have taken this concept to the extreme, creating entire works of art around their selected text instead of solid black. With this technique, vivid works of visual art and language interact in a way similar to text and pictures in a graphic novel: words and images interact with one another simultaneously. In graphic novels, this is seen in the form of specialized lettering and the placement of text bubbles. One major difference lies in the fact that in blackout poems, the art exclusively dictates which words remain from the original text, and the text that remains dictates the subject of the art – they exist symbiotically, one does not exist without the other.

An artist named Tom Phillips used this technique of colorized blackout poetry in his book, *A Humument*. Interestingly, this work of poetry and art was first published a few decades before the popularization of blackout poetry. According to Phillips in his “Notes on *A Humument*” the project was directly inspired by a Dadaist technique called the ‘cut-up’ poem. yet it uses many of the same concepts as blackout poetry through its deconstruction of text and subsequent artwork surrounding it.

He describes his own discovery of the symbiotic relationship between his artwork and selected text when he writes, “...the possibility became apparent of making a better unity of word and image...a widening of techniques to be used and range of visual imagery...the pictorial matter in the book follows the text in mood and reference” (Phillips 372). Through this technique, Phillips was able to create poems touching upon almost any subject using a primary text that “can be made ironically to speak for causes against his [W. H. Mallock, author of the primary text] grain” (Phillips 371). Phillips effectively changed the meaning behind the original text with his images. Thus, *A Humument* provides another example of the close relationship between words and visuals, combining both concepts in a codependent way in which they are undeniably linked.

DEVELOPMENT OF POETIC GRAPHIC NOVELS

When I started this project, I already had a few experiences creating graphic novels thanks to some classes at FSU. However, this was mostly from a formatting perspective – writing scripts, arranging panels, and lettering the comics. These classroom experiences were much different from what I wanted to accomplish with my thesis project because the comics I created in class were focused on narrative stories, usually involving multiple characters and colloquial dialogue. A large difference lies in the fact that I was working alongside an art student during the development of these previous graphic novels.

Lacking an artist to work with was the biggest challenge facing me in the early stages of this thesis. In order to create my poetic graphic novel, I would have to draw every single panel and every single line myself. I had become so accustomed to writing as a way of sharing my art, that the idea of drawing was intimidating. However, it was the only plausible path forward, and

ultimately it turned out to be an extremely rewarding process. I learned many new things about drawing, developed my (still very amateur) skills as a visual artist, and gained confidence in my own artistic style. However, I had to figure out a few logistical details before starting to draw.

The first detail I needed to figure out was poem choice. For this particular project, I was not focused on any sort of intended theme or through line with the selected poems. Instead, I wanted to pick poems that were visually interesting enough in their content to warrant a transformation into a sequential piece of art. The poems could touch on abstract concepts, but these concepts (if any) needed to be grounded in a concrete image.

The second step was to find materials for drawing. This was simple. I purchased a sketchbook, good quality pencils, Tombow pens (perfect for inking), and went for it. My technique was to draw each individual panel on a singular page and then take a picture of it with my phone camera. Then, I would upload the images onto my computer and format them in a sequential style with Adobe Photoshop. I did this for every panel.

In Photoshop, I experimented with effects and colors in the program to give the panels more life. I was afraid that by hand-coloring the panels, the art would not look as polished as I was hoping for in the final product. I decided to use the paint tools in Photoshop, and the result was a final product that looked more professional and polished, yet still allowed me to maintain a DIY aesthetic.

With this process, I was able to add color/shading to each graphic poem that would complement the tone of the written work. For instance, in my poem “Late on the Highway,” I decided to go with a black and white color scheme that captured the contemplative nature of the poem. In “Be Like the Dog,” I went for a bright style with pastel backgrounds that highlighted

the light playfulness of the written poem. And in the comic version of “Picnic,” I kept the art and inking extremely simple to mirror the sparse formatting of the written version.

Next came formatting the comics themselves. Due to the lack of a trained artist, I had to keep the page formats relatively simple. Most pages in this project only contain two panels at a time. This was originally to keep the formatting stage simple, but I began to realize it would also allow for easier readings of each poem. Too many panels might make the reading complicated. However, in future poetic graphic novel projects, I would want to make the comics more ambitious in format with more panels.

Furthermore, I wanted to use techniques exclusively found in comics for the visual portion of this project. Panels are the obvious example, but another component of graphic novels are text boxes, word bubbles, and lettering. Text boxes appear in my comic “Juice Bottles,” and they make the piece look the most like a traditional comic book. The poem version of “Juice Bottles” has short lines, so it made it possible for me to fit them into text boxes.

For the comics without text boxes, I opted for a more experimental lettering style, placing the lettering within the scenes themselves instead of separating them with a text box. The best example of this can be seen in “Be Like the Dog”, where some of the lettering is angled with the artwork, or spread across the page in conjunction with the artwork. The decision to not use text boxes was due, in part, to the limited space within panels and the line length in each poem. Some of it was also my own personal preference for what would fit the comic version better.

Word bubbles also appear in “Be Like the Dog.” This component of graphic novels is usually used for dialogue or internal thoughts from characters. Due to the nature of poetry, I was able to experiment and use a thought bubble in relation to a line from the poem: “...And does / the plant absorb water with measured thought?” Experimentation with mixing traditional

components of graphic novels with the confines of poetic form is a major convention that should be explored in future poetic graphic novels and could be a genre-defining characteristic.

CONCLUSION

Poetic graphic novels are a budding new artform that has barely been explored by individual artists, and even then, the amount of work published in the genre is extremely sparse. Additionally, the work published is based on well-known poetry, usually written by famous writers. My goal with this project was to emphasize the potential for poets to publish their original work in a new and refreshing way. While poetry is greatly appreciated by many readers, the world is currently dominated by visual entertainment. I believe poets can benefit from this shift toward visual entertainment by embracing poetic graphic novels.

Despite the incorporation of visual elements with poetic graphic novels, poets wouldn't have to sacrifice the parts of poetry that make it a unique artform. Line breaks and stanza breaks are encouraged in order to create an initial formatting blueprint for the comic version of their poems. Even better, the original written works can be included alongside the comic versions, as is seen in my project. Visual art gives poets an ample opportunity to write vivid imagery into their poems. Artists and poets will work closely together, and benefit from the published work. Poetic graphic novels are in their infancy, but I believe they can elevate poetry and graphic novels in a symbiotic way that is beneficial for both writer and artist.

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