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touch the maps in your brain: a poetry collection

introduction

touch the maps in your brain is a more literal title than one might assume at first glance. Through poetry, I set out to explore the transformation of multi-dimensional space and sense in poetic expression within technological innovations of the social and scientific spheres, with a special focus on the connections to mental and emotional experiences.

The focus of space in this project refers to the visual, physical, and occasionally tangible use of relationships between material elements, exhibited in up to three dimensions. In reference to critical thought, my definition of space aligns with cultural materialism, where art serves under, “social uses of material means of production,” with focus on, “the specific technologies of writing and forms of writing,” and the, “mechanical and electronic communications systems,” both areas of technological advancement that are created under the philosophies of capitalist production (Williams qtd. in Qiping). Space is a piece of capital, both physical and digital. Focusing on materialism allows the idea of space to become more accessible than the abstraction of semiotics and deconstructive criticism.

The medium of poetry works well for this project due to its status as a patchwork of global practices. Poetic thought is united only by its need to challenge and innovate on the ideas of the poets that came before, and poetry is therefore notoriously difficult to define because of the constant experimentation it undergoes. Jeffrey DeShell wrote a statement that captures the spirit of this project:

Experimental writing is putting-into-play. Of what? Of the uncontrollable play of language, its freedom and joy, its ecstasy and apostasy. Against/with the attempt to give this language form... language without form is impossible (Stein, Beckett). Form without play is abstract, sterile. (80-1)

Poetic expression uses its combination of care and play to determine new perspectives on what that form could be. A poet's ability to assess potential is just as valuable as their acknowledgement of the past.

In addition to its limitless possibility, the landscape of poetry transforms over time to reflect what is important to the society at large. In the virtual age we live in now, "our daily lives are enmeshed in a network of sentences and paragraphs as extensive as any grid," which present themselves over our whole day (Noel-Tod xx). At the core of poetry is the need to express an idea, no matter how mundane or vapid. The only difference between a poem and the scraps of language scattered across our screens at any given moment is the intention of the poet.

In the same train of thought, a poet's control of space is essential. Even recognized forms such as sonnets rely on patterns to create the emotional impact within the stanzas. In his book *How Poems Get Made*, James Longenbach remarked that poets have a, "devotedly meticulous relationship with [their] medium," and the space it inhabits (151). The page is a place of opportunity for words to mean new and exciting things. The intentions of the author give a poem its purpose. Even when I am not writing poetry, my work has been described more than once as careful and purposeful because poetry is the medium in which I started. The next logical step is to find materials that could enrich the representation of my poetic subjects.

the route taken

The poetry came first. After the drafts were all down, the most important decision was how to structure the collection. In the end, the poetry sorted into three rough categories: the spatial control group, the ones manipulated in two dimensions, and the poems stretched to fit three dimensions.

the control

The first of the three groups, these poems create the most comfortable reading experience of the three. Relying on common forms and genres, they keep a left-to-right pattern that repeats in predictable ways. They still challenge existing poetic style, but in ways that most people have likely seen somewhere else.

- have you ever messed up?: A sestina sounds repetitive in the obsessive way that a person suffering from these feelings could feel. Structure allows readers to be primed for easier absorption of content. This poem almost became a villanelle instead because of the insistent echo of the refrain, but the sestina allowed for a different, less lyrical tone to focus on the frozen vignettes that make up each stanza.
- fun and games: This poem is short and freeform with a loose rhyme scheme, all elements in the poetry I consume. The breaking up of stanzas allows for readability and mental space to process and compartmentalize the words and ideas.
- the Moon: Prose poetry is my favorite type of poem, both to read and create. Not quite poem but not quite prose, the prose poem is a form that has existed for centuries (Noel-Tod). This is a splicing of those two things into a newer style that is easier to follow

than creating a totally new form. The flow of long lines plus the lyricism creates a gripping effect.

- self-care checklist: Self-care is a subject that is often simplified and compartmentalized into Twitter threads or Instagram posts, a boiling down of human complexity into a solution that is too simple to work. List poems are not new, but using a list and a prose poem is a slightly more innovative example of the splicing of elements to create a comfortable hybridity.
- clockwork friend: The spatial movement of the text follows a traceable trail. It still retains its use of stanza and verse despite being visually-motivated.
- ego: Creating connection using pronouns is a scientifically proven way to interact with the reader of a poetic piece (Ro et al.). This poem is about my brother. Many poems end up being about him. I reflect on how well we know each other, and all of the things that I miss because of our distance.

two dimensions

2D experimentation uses paper and does not require a physical interaction to read the words. The most effort that these require are the turning of a page or a second reading.

- vanish no podemos: Poder (can) is a Spanish word. The first draft of this poem was scribbled onto a sticky note from a day when I was talking with a Hispanic coworker about the conjugations and usages of the word. The subject matter of the poem is also about the action behind the word. The girl for whom I wrote this poem is also Hispanic. The two contesting pieces of information had nothing to do with each other, yet they find a correlation to each other in a removed, analytical way. The reader's intuition becomes an invaluable tool for a deepened understanding of the piece.

- blue screen of death: The poem's structure is used to challenge our understanding of what is communicative language. I also make allusions to a more commonly-known technological phenomena, the titular blue screen. We would have never understood a mental shutdown with this level of accuracy until the Windows computer created a new set of vocabulary.
- please let this pass quickly: Creating an image made out of words takes a different type of effort to the spatial control. Painting a picture with words is not a new technique, and likely most American kids around my age encountered similar poems in their high school English and creative writing classes. This poem is a literal representation of the warped lens through which I observed a peaceful night in my friend's living room.

adding the third dimension

As mentioned previously, the poetry was written before I planned the visual and physical elements. Throughout the project, I noticed a divergence of existing postmodern art tradition. The use of embedded literary elements in visual art encourages the art object to create a dissonance between a collage of visual and textual elements (Jenkins). In the case of this collection, the literature came before any spatial explorations. The art became more than a contrast, but rather an extension of the words and tone on the page.

- bedsheets: these poems are displayed on a set of my own sheets, including a flat sheet, fitted sheet, pillow, and blanket. A common motif in my work is my bed because it is an object with a strange purpose and intimacy. As the parameters of privacy shift with new advances in technology, bedrooms are shared with less hesitation. People make videos in their room, post photographs of themselves laying on their beds, and video call people from the privacy of their own homes. For me, my bed is a complicated place. On one hand, sleep is a precious part of my life, so I invest time into my bedroom. On the other

hand, I have also gone through depressive and anxious episodes where I felt trapped within the walls of my room. In a creative writing class, we read a nonfiction essay by G.K. Chesterton that spurred one of the contained poems. Connecting the poetry to an intimate yet mundane representation of my poetic context forces the space within the poem to become a dimensional experience for the reader.

- pancake-brain-filing cabinet: The newfound importance of material, sentimental artifacts in artistic expression requires the evidence of creation in a world where a material object is not guaranteed. The first draft was written playing-card style on an envelope from a birthday card. It has been reimaged as a linocut relief print, which is represented by an ink print, a scanned copy of the print, and with the linoleum piece from which the print originates. The process of making the print is an exploration of the importance of material objects in a digitally-oriented world. Without the lino, the print would not exist. Without the print, no digital copy can be made. The digital copy can be duplicated and distributed as many times as a person wishes, which is a beautiful invention, but a computer can not make a new, unique paper print like the ink-rolled linoleum square. The digital and material elements in this piece are not opposed; they complement each other.
- the cathedral window: This piece is not one poem, but a set of poems whose perspectives intersect. To use only one poem on one topic creates a monolithic perspective of the subject, which results in a flattened understanding of a given topic. Even revision creates a single poem that does not show the shifting of the ideas over time (with exceptions of any documented drafts). Using many poems themed around my relationship to religion allows the space it needs to express itself. The presented work is a trio of poems disguised in different colors of ink as an imitation of the titular window. They will have to be decoded by the reader using dyslexia rulers that contain colored film, which reveal the words printed underneath. I wanted to recreate the care people

need to take to truly understand a person and their feelings. The shortened nature of some digital media often overlooks this complexity, but I hope to remind people to listen before they respond to other people's opinions.

- a model of vertigo: The use of a physical object for “a model of vertigo” creates a new sensory metaphor that illustrates how it feels to be unbalanced. A gyroscope mimics the complicated mechanisms within the inner ear that regulate balance. The poem explores a delicate piece of the human body, and the impact that poor health can have on your everyday activities. The use of a small, hand-held toy mimics the physical models that a doctor might have in their offices. The abstraction from the familiar item pushes the reader to make new connections.
- take your meds: Mental health is a common motif of my work. I am not unique in this respect. Mental health is a important social issue. Advocates use technology to create spaces to both destigmatize mental health and make therapy a more accessible option through telehealthcare (NAMI). “take your meds” is presented using a horde of plastic pill bottles. I have rolled strips of these poems into pill capsules, which can be taken apart to try and reconstruct the poems they contain. By creating pill poems, the reader engages in the practice of working towards gradual results, which is a frustrating yet critical part of the medical process.

conclusions

The work in this collection led me to a revelation: dimensional play is an intrinsic piece of my work. I did not have to look far to find references and depth that I did not catch when the piece was drafted. While the content of my poetry is often fixated on some of the most painful pieces of my life, an urge to play is satisfied through the form and freedom of the words on the page. By challenging the definitions of dimension in poetry, I try to follow the intentions behind

conventions. This project gave me new language with which to express the space in a poem, which will be useful as long as I can read and write.

poetry

have you ever messed up?

Every living human has their body,
and a brain that learns how to nod,
and blossoming social intuition helps a child grow up.
If you don't have the social rulebook, the calculations are a pain.
A manual plugging in of cues grows complicated, lasting longer and longer.
Less adept people need the time to learn it on their own.

This is the burden you shoulder on your own.

You've conditioned yourself to ignore the inconvenience because you've always lived in
this body.

Every year, the list of cues and experiences grows longer.

Gesture, tilt your head, don't raise your hand, raise your hand, wait quietly, step louder
as you enter the room so that you don't scare your roommates, pay attention with a light nod.

All of the fingers on your hands break through your skin, and you map the pain.

Every mental comprehension is stored up.

But have you ever messed up?

Like the moment you pick at someone's skin and they grimace in pain?

Your nails dig, leaving indentations and marks that match your own.

They flinch away from the contact of your body

You press fingers past the sutures of their skulls until you feel under their cranium, until
you know their signs, signals, signifiers that represent the moment they want you to laugh or
nod.

The assumption transforms introspection into obsessive, apocalyptic thoughts that only
stretch longer.

The days are once again longer.

Looking at the sky, you tilt your chin up.

You look back down in a drawn out nod.

You walk to the library on your own.

The disappearance of your friends once wracked your body.

You still do not know how to embrace the thought of measured pain.

You tried again and now your body shakes in pain.

The drive to the ER has never felt longer.

The worst part is the tightness in your body.

You hold your hands up.

The numbness is mostly gone, they're back to being the hands you own.

It takes self-control, but when the nurse recommends taking a walk to relieve anxiety,
you simply nod.

As you retell this story, all your therapist will do is nod.

Her job is to calculate how to sensitize you to the dissonance of social pain.

She knows one day you will find people who do not cling to their own.

She knows that your breaths can draw out longer.

She knows that you can lift your eyes up.

She knows that you will admire the world beyond your body.

With a nod to the girl, you wait a while longer.

The pain of seeing her has drowned itself, then dried up.

The withered husk stays upright on its own, but you've weeded all of the shame out of
your body.

fun and games

let's pretend we live underwater

you can be an atlantic salmon

drowsing through kelp

and wild sea reeds

i'll be a trout

following the memories of mom

to find a place

to safely raise my children

we can be a family

if you'd like

the matching fears bode well

for feelings of security

maybe we'll be happy

and swim between the

wild, breathing bodies

in the street

the Moon

as with most moments,

this one is fleeting

it flits and drifts

i scan The Moon, a goddess to someone, loved and revered. She is a rock to me, and i scan the craters over and over. not to memorize, no, my desolate, cavernous brain couldn't if it wanted to. i admire Her. the slow pull of gravity, the luminance of a giving sun, it brightens in a fuzzy halo that it shares with the atmosphere. the clouds are curling, the wind a breath of a giant i call my father. these things change, shift, but never leave.

always in the sky

visible to smile at me,

The Moon stretches full.

self-care checklist

- prioritize your happiness**
 - **long term. not short
- every moment feels shameful.
 - guilty wastes of days where your soul hides in the corner of the brain
 - where the light doesn't quite break up the cobwebs
 - and potential tumors
 - and the dusty heaps of breathing paper sit untouched
 - you worry about those in the morning as you
 - floss your teeth.
- ★.°☆ drink water ★.°☆
- listen to penelope scott
- the shame leads to those late nights where love is a daydream in the dark, pitch black and warm, dry reality seeps into things that feel more real than the textbook that sits on the floor
- do you want to feel better?
- schedule the appointment
 - hope your therapist is ready to listen

clockwork friend

puzzle pieces.

peas-in-pod...

hold my hand,

smile-with-teeth

push-and-pull:

you know the approximates of my pain, and yours.

and we brag in humility about each other

you waved an old college mate over yesterday

our breakfast together never stops call-and-reply

and fortune smiles on us every day

aren't we lucky the stars threw us together?

programmed to be together.

we walk around in chopping steps.

tick tock

arms lock

puzzle piece.

wait!

the teeth grit

against each other

the pieces have stopped.

the cog wore

too thin

and

the other gear continued along

with [NULL].

[AN ERROR HAS OCCURRED. PLEASE TRY AGAIN LATER]

ego

connections.

you wander away
and ghosts in imaginary wheatfields drift in the dark,
light and neutral they float
until the ground is gone and pride has disappeared.
this is not the ending though.

me.

I am the center of my own universe, everyone says that's a bad thing but I know it's good, it's the flow of the world pushing through me but I still hold the same position, arms outstretched and reaching towards stars in opposite direction, warming the bones and the sinews that contain consciousness, and heating a collection of moments that the honorable call a soul. I am the cradle of beginnings and lives and endings. resting on pillows, the universe creates and processes and moves with rapid eyes. the center of all beautiful things rests in newly laundered bedsheets.

we.

pull out everything from our teeth to our childhood playlists, roll our eyes at the flaws that we see in the people we loved, take off the labels and smiles formed by the random chance of unseen luck. uncover that nothingness the space that all objects in the universe hold between our neutrons, and behold the tree that grew taller than we could ever be. the leaves always pitched through the window of the house we grew too big to fit in.

you.

shed the skin of feeling
and let it free
your spirit wanders
or maybe something else
drifts away
when you're like this

you're always
sopping with nostalgia

we've grown up since I last curled up near your feet. our world is not imploding on itself,
the eyes hiding behind the pictures in our home have permanently shut. we sleep in
beds draped in layers of late bedtimes and rgb keyboards. distance is the real love and
hate.

I will always grasp onto your universe, even when you try to toss it away.

vanish (no podemos)

vanish (no podemos)

so there's someone I haven't told,
poder

the security of knowing but not is only
second to
a traumabonding scene *can (like I
can, you can)*
and she wouldn't, no saying yes in
daydreams *puedes*
since i met you in a school filled
with gold in the halls *can you*
I will be the rat scratching at night in
my walls
puedo

so lay on her bed and talk while she
cleans
I can
and find the discipline to smile
and fight the impulse to split at the
seams

i am now become the blue screen of death

					a	
					glitch	
					in	
			I'm		the	
			sorry		(central	
		my	but	it's	nervous)	
it's	the	promise	without	a	system	restart
	stutters	no longer	the	stim,	but	again
	of	makes	little	a	somehow	until
	places	sense in	blue	tic,	the	maybe
	you	words	quadrilateral		moss	it
	said	or	everything		doesn't	might
	you'd	structure.	would		gather on	maybe
	be:	I'm	still be		the	make
	those	sorry	vaguely		stones	sense
	bright green	but	placed.		rolling	again.
	scissors	without	not to		down	organize
	keep	the	mention		familiar	every
	going		the		mountainsides.	folder
	missing		seeping		restart,	and
	and		of		restart,	then
			exhaustion		restart	get
			at			absolutely
			inconvenient			nothing
			times			done
						anyways.

please let this pass quickly

let this pass quickly, please

something trails from her arm it's obsession dipped in the form of friendship and that girl
the one painting in your house? she is a bittersweet sunrise, all curly hair and hetero
glasses, the quirk of her makes her just my type, all soft edges and her warmth,
somehow calculated.

let this pass quickly please

let this pass quickly please

please please please please please

that's what holds me back

crooked carefulness

sure, let that be the excuse where our heart-shaped hands could be

please let this pass quickly, please please let this pass quickly

watercolor rainbow

enough to feel a smile at your grip

strawberry ice

with lime syrup

sweet and sticky

or maybe hold me tight

bedsheets

Fall into the cotton sheets

They'll swallow you,

They'll let you feel your breath on your own pillowcase

"I dare say that when I get out of this bed I shall do some deed of an almost terrible virtue."

until then i'll be stuck

vibrating limbs

scrape of soft cotton sheets

and dull drag of scratchy fleece

and i'll sleep

maybe

easy to get lost there, easy to be found

the wheeze of the air mattress is an exhale, and all of the scents hovering around intermingle with the dust and dying breath of cells pumped into the velveteen and plastic-coated vessel.

found safety in another strange woman

on her couch

we waited for her roommates to ascend out of earshot

and she revealed a heart to me
and a sliver of her stomach

and younger me trembled
and shook in a bed
bare of a frame
the sliver of light, an incandescent
light that hung from the ceiling and resembled the distrust
that flitted across my parent's faces

they can see everything,
so little me couldn't dare think it

—

the universe does not experience supernovas. it lives through implosions and
indentations in pillow cases. sad sack, bed head, sideways keyboards, all universal
truths
the bed feels mealy today.

pancake-brain-filing cabinet

HOW IS EVERYTHING SO BLANK

PANCAKE BRAIN

or

SQUISHED WAFFLE

EMPTIED FOLDER

and

AN UNOPENED RECYCLING BIN

SO WHAT'S THE ISSUE?

BECAUSE EVERY DRAINED POOL

HAS A DRAIN

and

A STOPPER.

(upside down)

Something has budged...

It crawls, but it still

Presents itself as a small

Sluice of a solution. And

the music hums, and

the verse engraves the

hollow walls of the

Filing Cabinet Brain

with traces of vague clues

on how to make it to

a dead line

without dropping out

of a terminal marathon.

the cathedral window

Broken Oaths

Do you want that paradise?

Or not paradise,

Peace?

You want safety?

Or do you still hold that cloud

heaving with weight

Dark, thick with unfallen

drops, but not enough

It drags behind you on the ground

Is it really your responsibility?

Consider the heaviness of your heart

Is it tethered to that cumulonimbus?

—

take the cup from chapped lips

out here bleeding on a piece of cement

hidden on a hill next to the playground from childhood

you feel softer here, in this exposed hiding place

warmth radiates in the fold and dimples of your cheeks

you pick up my bloody heart from the dark red velvet of a little child's skirt

cradled in your hands it look so small

and place it back in the cavity that formed as Adam fell
men are that they will be joyous

—

top the shape

peak the fit

and let my breath

feel like they're rational

let Me feel less panic,

okay ok alive live living.

my Mother and

God did not send me here to feel like that.

a model of vertigo

I am a brain floating around in a jar

No sensation connecting even when something connects

Whipping winds in tornado

Scratch at the door where no one knows you're there, sit and pant like a starving,
overheated dog

Is this a fever

Is this a fever?

Is this a fever or am i falling back to earth?

take your meds

where'd it go?

all the screaming

not even an echo now

blue screen

no explosion or implosion, it feels like a

jump cut

the sudden silence feels like relief

in the wake of a former friend

the noise gone,

i see the trauma of a human made of muscle and blood

connection, the tethers are hard to keep attached

the universe can't swallow the pill. it sticks, bitter. the universe coughs.

there's a pill for that

why does this feel like that

you'd think that medication manufacturers would know better than to flavor pills without a warning. some people would chew the paper without looking but the anxious would have the clues that they aren't paranoid. they could know that anxiety now tastes like a nilla wafer, and not morning breath

you swallow the rattle down the throat. you think about how the little pellets would taste. you feel bad for the pill shy that accidentally crush the pellets if they chew the applesauce. turns out the rattle was still connected to the snake, and the feeling in your blood morphs you into someone who can finish the weeks-late essay that sits on your chest at night. it will keep you up at night as the antivenin works to increase your tolerance. rattle and snake and venom and antivenom.

the fickle chemical. sweet, ever willing to help you feel better for a time, but you need to up the dose. up up up up up. did you take it this morning? are you really truly on it? have you taken it at all? it doesn't feel like the pill has ever crossed your lips. maybe you're the first and only person ever who is unfixable, unprescribable (you are not the first who feels this, even in your family). the doctor knows what she's doing though. you trust her. so you take a tablet and a half of sugar every morning.

it tastes bad. the circles feel so good, life changing and comforting all at once. they should paint mini pixelated smiley faces on them because they deserve to be admired. but they smell like dad's breath after he fasts. you don't remember the last time your life felt tinged with the positive. your saturated thoughts are kneaded into a moldable eraser that reveals the calm screentones behind the layer of graphite clouded on the inside of the cranium.

the only one you hope to stop using someday. all you need is an air conditioned unit and more control over your surroundings. and a vacuum. the feeling of the liquid in your nose solidifying is ambivalent.

caffeine is dangerous.

my school told me so

an old friend that stuck around out of convenience. it was running a marathon over a mountain and wanting anything to work after the finish line gets crossed. no matter how much you train, no matter what you do, you recover afterwards. no matter how much your body needs to be there, your prediction of the mountains coming in backlit lcd on a cardio machine will not save you from the stumbling crash.

hydroxyzine takes the screaming shower head and changes it to a sprinkle in a shallow swimming pool. a tiny white circle with that proves your independence from the people who don't need you when you're struggling. they leave you with a vision that turns into frosted glass at the corners. you know how bad something has to be to want the creeping fog. this is not fun. it's safe.

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