

Drew University

College of Liberal Arts

***The Weight of Seeing***

**A Full-Length Poetry Collection**

**by Indovina**

A Thesis in English (Creative Writing)

by

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## Abstract

*The Weight of Seeing* is my Specialized Honors Thesis and my first full-length poetry collection. I have been working on this manuscript for almost two years, and I intend to continue working on it after my time at Drew. *The Weight of Seeing* covers themes ranging from queerness in the past and present to artists that were active before and during the HIV/AIDS epidemic, personal coming-of-age experiences regarding my journey as a bisexual person involved in subcultural queer communities, and more. In terms of execution, the poems in this collection were inspired by different types of hybrid poetic practices that think about the intersection between text and image: ekphrastic poetry, concrete poetry, and Image:Text poetry (also known as collage poetry), to be specific. An ekphrastic poem is usually based on an existing artwork or image and tends to not necessitate direct incorporation of the visual elements of said artwork. Its aim is merely descriptive, although it is usually imagistic in its description. In concrete poetry, the visual form that the text creates on the page becomes an image, which is just as meaningful as what the text of the poem actually says or describes. Image:Text/Collage poetry combines actual images and/or photographs with portions of text in order to carry an overall energy, narrative, or message to the reader; by presenting images alongside or combined with text, Image:Text poetry forces its audience to use a different set of interpretive skills: not just literary analysis, but compositional analysis, as if viewing an artwork. Concrete poetry also requires compositional analysis, although in a different way; in concrete poetry, text can outline or create shapes, but it cannot create an image with a depth deeper than what the glyphs in the alphabet can render. I felt that borrowing from (and writing poems in) these traditions was the most effective way to write this collection, in the sense that hybrid poetry that fuses text and image does the job of both showing and telling. Because of this, hybrid poems are able to physicalize emotions on the page through different compositional techniques (such as indenting, breaking stanzas, creating shapes out of blocks of text, incorporating actual images, and collaging images and/or text together), which has the power to make otherwise opaque poetry more accessible and palpable to the reader.

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**1.**



## Rubberman

[imagine everything]  
[pressing against]  
[everything]

[the ecstasy of encasement]  
[crawling on a backlit bench]

[the stiff ease of his]  
[slinking sputtering]  
[gagged beloved body]

[black hole]  
[glistening]

•

when I grow up  
I wanna be

just  
like him

•

In 1989, after Robert Mapplethorpe's death in March, a retrospective of his life's work titled *The Perfect Moment* embarked on a controversial and troubled tour. It started at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia and made its way to the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. by that June. It was then quickly canceled in response to the Moral Majority, who had taken on the form of the American Family Association.

In April 1990, *The Perfect Moment* was resurrected at the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati. But then the Moral Majority struck again, this time in the form of the Citizens for Community Values, anti-pornography protestors. All patrons were forced to leave as Cincinnati police videotaped *The Perfect Moment*, each cock and nude body and introspective child and male pairing and gimp suit another excuse to file obscenity charges against the Contemporary Arts Center. The case went federal.

*The City of Cincinnati v. Contemporary Arts Center*

In October 1990, after months of struggle, the Contemporary Arts Center and its curator were acquitted; *The Perfect Moment* did not lack artistic merit. It only lacked a suitable audience.

*The Perfect Moment* can be viewed in fragments all over the world, as well as in print.

But never together in one room.

Too perfectly lived, too whole to be seen again.

●

what does it take to live  
and get away with it

(*Joe, N.Y.C.*, 1978; Robert Mapplethorpe)

## Picnic on the Esplanade, Boston, 1973

I was free,

and we were children,  
eating cake  
for breakfast.

•

When I first met you, I knew  
I finally had it good  
after never having it good—

all those nights of numbed hunger, all those  
dreams of running until my legs broke.

Mental shin fracture, acute tendonitis;  
I wanted days and nights and spaces  
I could never catch.

•

Fear or biology?  
Which kept me waiting?

•

Now I'm 20  
and my hunger came back  
from sabbatical;

hunger is a *magnet*  
and we could all feel  
the tug.

•

We pull each other into our laughter  
and it's all so sudden  
but we needed to need each other  
and we were starving  
("Anyone want a bite?")

and we opened each other's mouths  
along the edge of the punchline

and we bit down, swallowed,  
relaxed into ourselves.

*(Picnic on the Esplanade, Boston, 1973; Nan Goldin)*

## The Invisible Teacher

*after Brenda Shaughnessy*

“I am a man who, sauntering along without fully stopping, turns a causal look upon you  
 and then averts his face,  
 Leaving it to you to prove and define it,  
 Expecting the main things from you.”  
 —WALT WHITMAN, “Poets to Come”

1.  
 I was only fourteen when  
     we found the old man  
         in our basement.  
                     He was sitting in his rocking chair  
                         (any chair he sat on  
                             became his),  
             eyeing my mother and I  
                 with those indescribable eyes  
                     (I would learn  
                         to call them lightning blue  
                             soon).  
 Stroking his downy white  
     beard, he gazed up  
         from the bottom of the stairs,  
                     beckoning me  
                         with his index  
                             finger.  
 My mother nodded as I walked,  
     then tripped down the stairs.  
         The old man stood from rocking  
             and caught me.  
                                     Mom shut  
                                     the door.

2.

Mothers always know  
what their children need  
before they even say  
the word.

Who else could possibly know  
     I needed this old man,  
                     this dead man in a dust jacket,  
                                     in my hands?  
                                             Only her.

We joke it was her fault  
that all of a sudden  
I went poet-crazy,  
that from then on,

there  
was  
no  
turning  
back.

“What is the grass?”  
the old/dead man asks me,  
as if beginning

an initiation—no,  
*my* initiation,  
 into the next world.



3.  
I carried him with me  
    everywhere I went,  
even though I was five inches shorter  
    than him (yes, I remember his height:  
                                    5'11". How could I  
                                    forget?),  
carried him to school with me  
    into classrooms  
(my English teachers loved him)  
  
    into the boys locker room,  
    into the game of *don't look* and  
                    *must look*.  
  
    Locking eyes with  
    another boy. We couldn't  
  
    stop looking at each other.  
  
    *Yes, follow that—*  
        *follow him.*

4.  
My old man told me to never stop taking in everything around me  
(one of his many “Songs”)  
so I allowed myself the freedom  
of nakedness.

I remember when I was eighteen,  
this boy and I were down  
to nothing, and we were talking about  
my old man (dead in this moment  
because we didn't ask for a voyeur or a  
pedophile). So I opened to Section 3  
of "Song of Myself"  
and read along its encyclopedic  
edges:

"Urge and urge and—  
                                urge,  
Always the procreant—  
                                *urge* of the world.  
Out of the dimness..... always...  
                                *in-crease*...  
                                always sex..."

Then Section 4:

“Apart from the p-ulling and hhhhauling stands wh  
 at I am,  
 Stands amusedddd, complacent, com—  
 PASSION—  
 ating.....  
 Looks down, is erect...  
 side-curved head... curious... next...  
 game...

and watching...  
and wondering..."

5.

I continued reading him, but I confess:

I never got past *Calamus*.

I couldn't bear watching him

flip closer to death.

I always do this. Keep the books  
in the mental freezer, never finish,  
and pleasure will always be there.  
I haven't read him in a while.

I need to open him  
again. To continue to  
the next section. What  
would my mother say if I

gave up on us now? Some  
writer I am, denying the page-  
turn, the inevitable. Who would  
I be without his catch, his

lightning stare? "Who need  
be afraid of the merge?"

I am old enough  
to keep going.

6.

p. 284:

*Birds*

*of*

*Passage*

## Ode to the Bear

Fuzz and mass as he  
Tramples through his wood

Unabashed  
After hibernation

His mellow tidings

Sauntering on all fours

Fur untamed  
Unbuttoned  
Unfurling

Sleepy eyes as he  
Jiggles his body

And yawns

And exhales

And scratches  
His big belly

His biker's bliss

With stocky limbs

He lifts himself up

Rubs his back  
Against a tree

Can't reach back there  
But who cares

When he's the biggest  
In the land

Someone will come  
And undo him

With their sharp claws  
And masseur grip

Feeling the way he  
Moves at the waist

As he rocks

Back  
and  
forth  
Against  
the  
bark  
His  
dance  
all  
Mo-  
men-  
tum  
His  
dance  
all  
Hypnos  
with a  
lullaby  
at the end  
of his spine  
he licks his lips

as he gets off

his huge

haunches

heavily

heavenly

hungrily...

I can never keep up with him.

## At the Museum of Sex

I locked myself in the bathroom.  
The patrons wouldn't stop laughing.

In the *Artifact (XXX)* exhibit,  
they gasped at bondage gear,  
head harnesses, the hilts of  
floggers, rave-ribboned and decadent.

Then, someone's girlfriend pointing:  
"Not the raccoon plush!"

In the *Looking at Andy Looking* exhibit,  
no one knew where to look. "Too Much  
Monkey Business" flagrantly rang from the speakers.  
Warhol's silent exploration trivialized, muted by din.

A mother cupping her mouth, looking down.  
A raucous group of 18-year-old boys snickering.

A middle-aged woman thought I was moved to tears  
by the museum's showing of Warhol's film, *Sleep* (1963).  
No. Why did they have to blare WQXR over John Giorno's body?  
Warhol thought he was loud enough for silent film.

Giorno's figure, Warhol's voyeur eye:  
too vulnerable, too lasting for a fickle crowd.

I'm the only viewer (and annoyed listener) of *Sleep*  
for the next ten minutes. No one gives a shit.

How do I tell everyone  
that these artifacts and artworks  
are my long-lost relatives?

How do I tell everyone  
that I know these people,  
that I love them?

To see my family scorned makes things personal.

●

Now I'm late for my train home.  
I stay in the gift shop instead.

I can't even buy anything.  
I browse anyway, shoulders to ears:

Cock rings, whips, vibrators, bondage rope.

Then I find the collars. Then I find the leashes.



## After the Museum of Sex

*Every dog collar  
on Fifth Avenue  
Every leash*

*glimmering*

*glimpsing*

*t e n s i o n*

## Dithyramb

I listened in the wrong mode.  
 My ears weren't primed to your music, Dionysus.  
 I couldn't tell you which note to start on,  
 let alone the relationship between any of the notes.  
 In Western music theory, the major scale is the foundation,  
 the expectation. The obligation to sanitize self-expression.  
 I found your hymn in the unobserved hours of night,  
 the haunting hypnosis of redefinition. Redefinition, not just as  
 returning to definition, but returning to who we were  
 before language, before suppression.  
 Our mode of expression is the Phrygian mode. It is known as the third mode.  
 It starts and ends on the third note of the major scale: the Ionian mode, the first mode.  
 This is sexual information, Dionysus:  
 the ability to start and end on a different note.  
 The Ionian mode is what people are used to experiencing.  
 The Phrygian mode is what I always experience, the need to hear you sing for longer.  
 I keep losing the tune because I'm looking for something else  
 in your music, what I think I'm supposed to be hearing.  
 I misinterpret the tonic, ruining all tonal context.  
 What I thought brought resolution to the song  
 only complicated its sexual journey across the fretboard  
 of your neck, across the surface of my memory. I remember  
 when I was fourteen in the boys locker room  
 and locked eyes with you. I remember  
 when I was fifteen in our message thread  
 and taped my mouth shut. I stole language  
 from myself. I only wanted to hear you, Dionysus,  
 wanted to hear how your song would rise and fall  
 through me. When I was fourteen,  
 "bisexual" was so easy. It still is. It's what I can explain  
 without fear. But this subterranean identity—the tension of its song  
 in unaccustomed ears—is beyond the accepted mode.  
 It is Phrygian in an Ionian world.  
 I could be in the same key this entire time. But I'm searching  
 for a different tonic, searching for a different kind of satisfaction.  
 When I was twelve, I was fascinated by  
 watching people eat online. How they so easily documented  
 the satiation of their hunger. The way responding to their hunger  
 changed them, changed the way they entered a room. You made  
 more than a few of those videos, grapes plopping in your  
 gaping mouth. I want that freedom, Dionysus.  
 I'm tired of ignoring your mode.  
 I'm hungry.

**Gary in Contortion, 1979**

What  
is the one thing  
that no one on this  
goddamn earth can do?  
I've searched the *world* for  
candidates, anyone with  
the capacity for taste  
and surrender.  
No one.  
Can I afford  
the loss before the gain,  
plucking my ribs to tuck in,  
suck myself goodnight? I eye  
my shadow's reflection,  
blush beat behind the  
muted charcoal.  
*Keep going.*  
*Kiss me.*  
I'm at a loss.  
I can't look away. I  
only pulsate, sweat as  
the hips lock and the legs  
rise to the heavens. I pull my  
foot down. It's no better than I am,  
doesn't deserve heaven.  
Clamping inevitability,  
crushing blow,  
just out of reach.  
Fuck. I am lost in time,  
in action. Limbo-freak at  
the edge of something brilliant  
and unfurling. Try reaching  
Mars with your bare head.  
Try breathing out. It's  
impossible. I can't.  
I don't want to.

*(Gary Schneider in Contortion (II), 1979; Peter Hujar)*

## **Pull**

prideful pup pleading  
on all fours, then the leash pulls  
his neck, yipping bliss

## Brian on my bed with bars, New York City, 1983

I know he doesn't like it  
He seems lost in compliance

But I don't complain  
And he doesn't stop

He's on all fours

•

I call him a good boy  
And I mean it

I know this is hard for him  
Being tall and hairy and all

But I want him to know he looks good  
Quivering inkblot in orange fever

•

He won't look at me

Is he jealous or  
Just reluctant?

•

*The camera's bigger than me,*  
I'm sure he's thinking without thinking.

I clear my brain like a throat:  
*The camera's bigger than all of us, chap.*  
*Might as well take it like a champ.*

(*Brian on my bed with bars, New York City, 1983*; Nan Goldin)

**Crevice Pantoum**

better	when	time	shifts
when	night	shifts	down
night	bodies	down	under
bodies	sweat	under	surrender
sweat	against	surrender	lather
against	skin	lather	with
skin	foam	with	fat
foam	sweetly	fat	filling
sweetly	secretly	filling	crevices
secretly	your	crevices	fill

## Feeder Sonnet

The grip of your hypnosis on this body  
chugging change-dreams, sipping air, slipping through  
your voice guiding, no, *coaxing* me out of me.  
What is the voodoo behind your balloon-blowing,

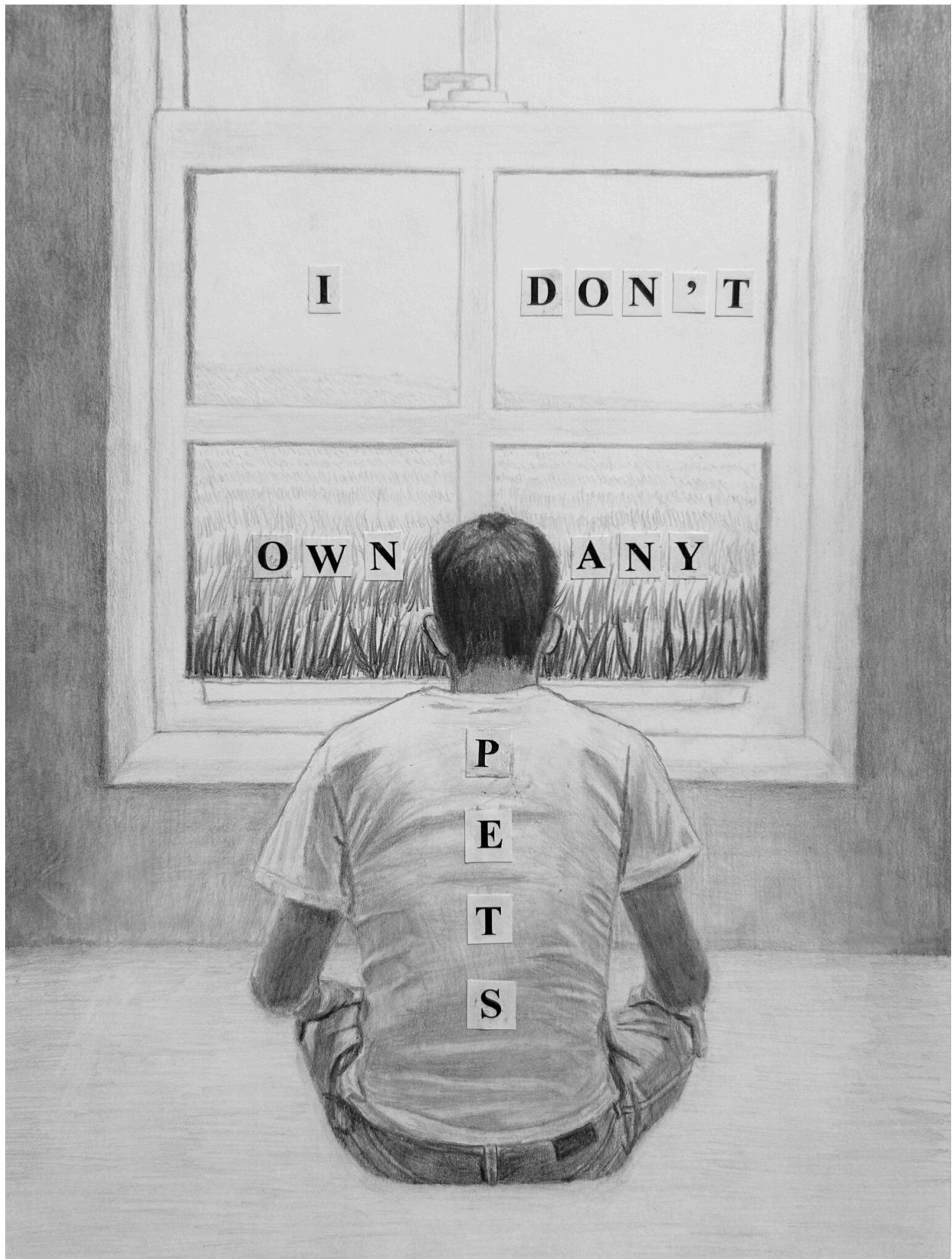
the inflating stretch of my starving stomach?  
Your need is clear: "if you really want  
the chaos, call." Yet I am, characteristically,  
trembling, both at the fear of you

and the love of my own transformation.  
I imbibe the Boost, bobbing the body the bottle  
the burst through my lips brimming thick with  
the antidote bubbling down, blossoming in.

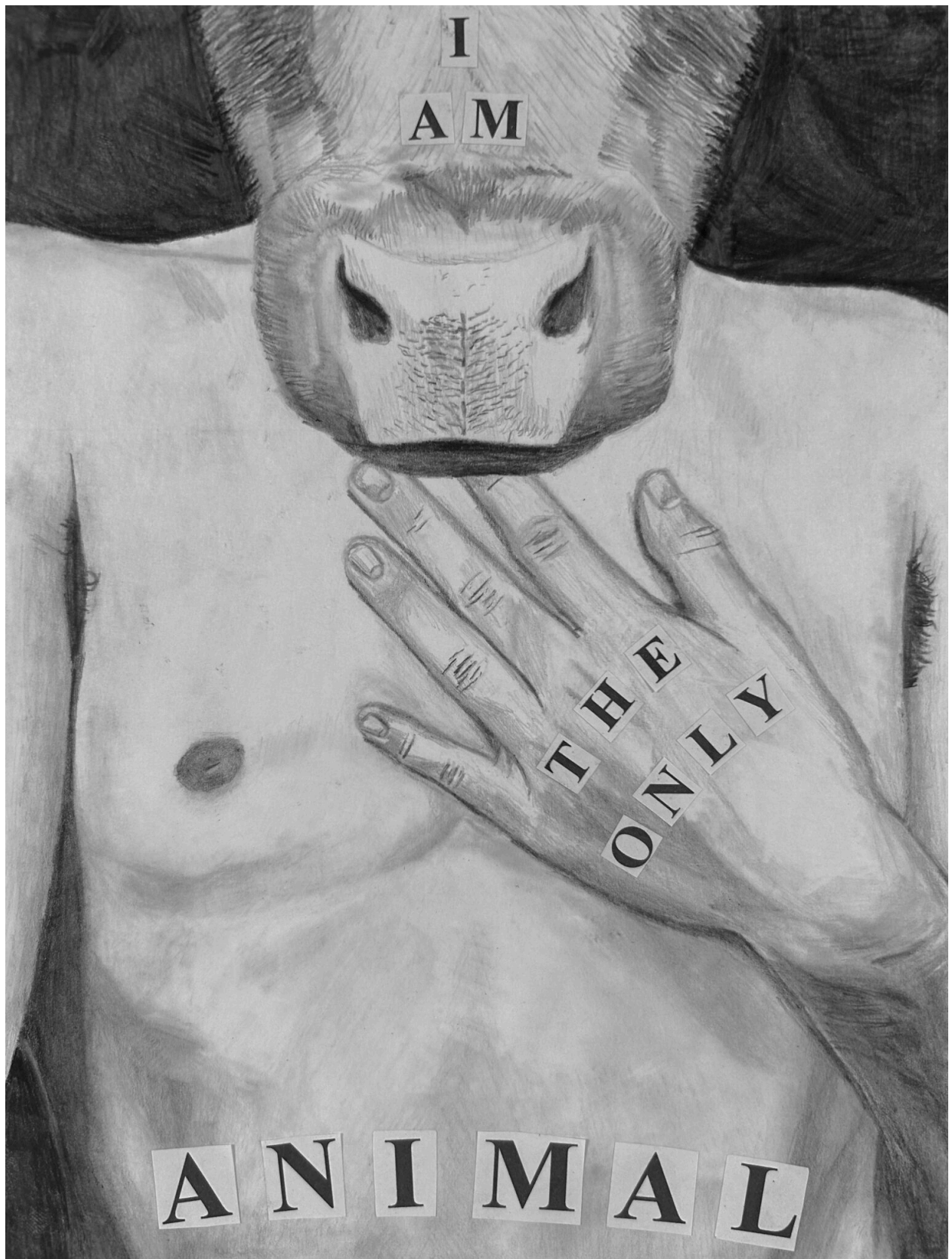
You tell me what I am: your hole to fill.  
Yet no one can do it. I am sobbing, bottomless.

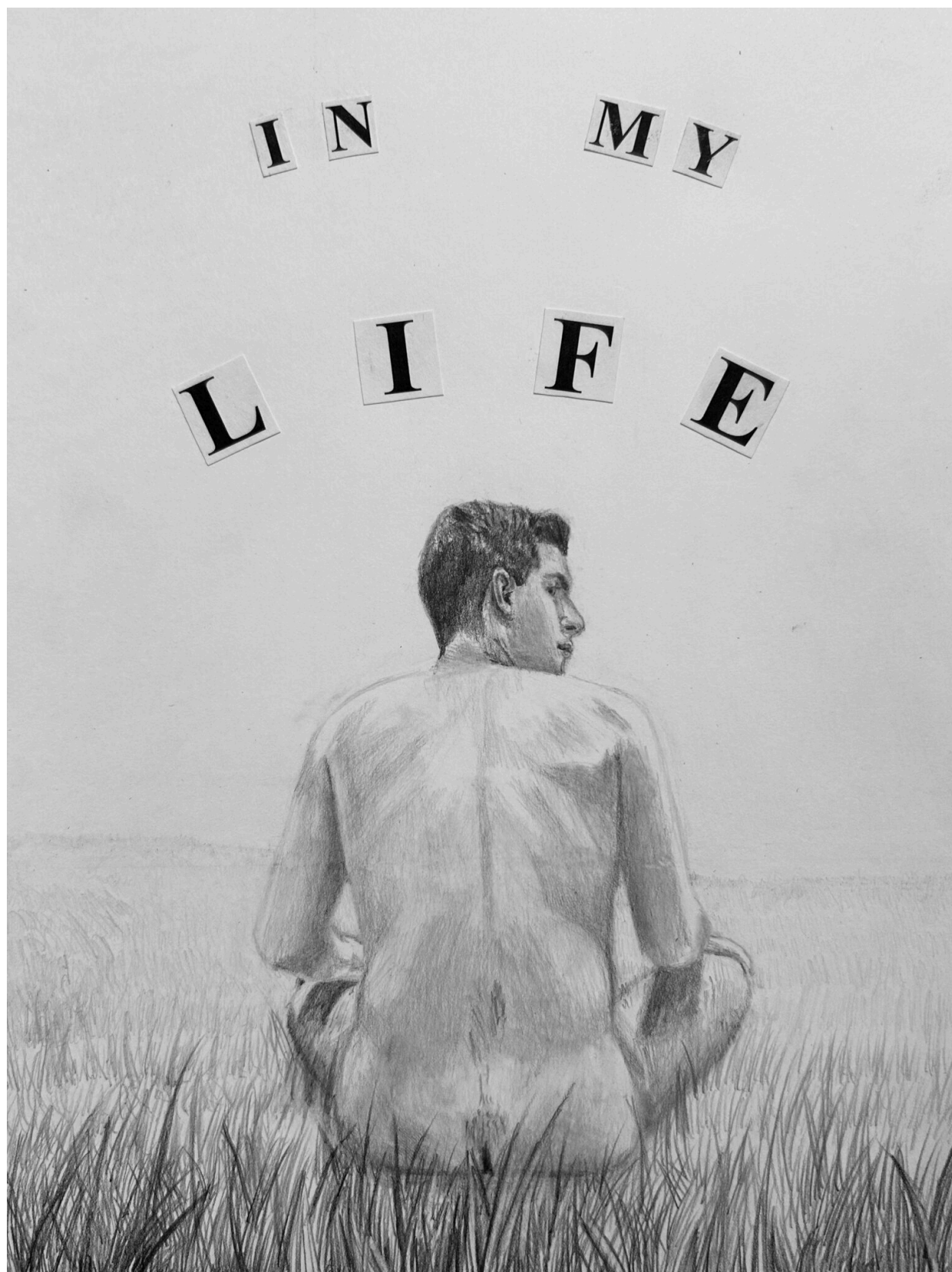
# THE ONLY ANIMAL

A Series









## Probe

I loved being captured  
Playing pretend

The wriggle  
The blushing helpless  
Yank and thrash

The whisper of surrender

•

It's no surprise  
When I'm drawn to his car

Lured by bitter almond  
Baked in vanilla cake

The irony of him holding it  
Telling me to sit

•

No one warns you

Why should they

Shouldn't you feel everything  
Shouldn't you open your mouth

•

i am pale

new

empty

waxing

waxing

waxing

half-full

w a x i n g

w a x i n g

w a x i n g

w a x i n g

•

Blubbered  
Overriding myself  
Grinning gibboused

Satellite eyes  
Scan me

Amygdalin apertures  
Prepare to probe

•

Five fingers  
Lift this moon

The give is  
~~new-full~~

•

I am  
Suddenly  
Very afraid

## Untitled

This is  
where he sits.  
A representation.  
A pile of candy in the  
corner. Sweet. Shimmering.  
Each word here weighs a pound.  
Each candy here weighs one fraction  
of the 175 pounds that were on planet  
Earth. People watch his xerox sit in the  
corner. They think about sweet people, sweet  
things. Then they get hungry. They take. One by one.  
He begins to dwindle. I watch as I lose him to their hunger  
for negligence. Their sweet teeth, their fangs unwrapping him,  
eating him, feeling him melt on their tongues like a group psychedelic,  
a memory inducer that only hits the drug dealer and his product. The pile  
disintegrates. Pounds of him are lost to their greedy, complicit mouths. I look  
at all the wrappers on the floor and I remember his clothes, stripped bare to  
reveal sores to the doctor. He is given an expiration date. Notice how  
I left out the candy box itself. Notice how he is stripped  
of a name. Notice how I replenish him,  
hoping to change the story.

*(Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*



**2.**





## Illegal Abstract

“CDC’s website is being modified to comply with President Trump’s Executive Orders.”  
-CDC

On January 31st, 2025, the CDC removed HIV-related research from its website. It erased from the public eye entire datasets and guides on the care and protection of **LGBTQ+** youth. Then, per a court order by federal judge John Bates, HHS was required to restore all of the CDC pages that were taken down over the first few weeks of February. But now the data is marred with an ugly “warning.” For example, here is a warning written above the webpage titled “Health Disparities Among LGBTQ+ Youth”:

“Per a court order, HHS is required to restore this website as of 11:59PM ET, February 14, 2025.

Any information on this page promoting **gender** ideology is extremely inaccurate and disconnected from the immutable biological reality that there are two sexes, male and female.

The Trump Administration rejects gender ideology and condemns the harms it causes to children, by promoting their chemical and surgical mutilation, and to women, by depriving them of their dignity, safety, well-being, and opportunities. This page does not reflect biological reality and therefore the Administration and this Department rejects it.”

One can’t help but think of the irony of this warning being placed over data discussing the risk of negative health outcomes for **lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, non-binary and questioning** youth. Imagine being seen as defying “biological reality.” Imagine being seen, by definition, as breaking a set of rules you can’t help but break, by proxy of existing. Imagine this as not connected to heightened suicide rates and rates of contracting chronic disease in LGBTQ+ youth—it’s impossible. What is the importance of messages like the above if data on LGBTQ+ people is going to be open to the public anyway? My objective here is to understand the motivations behind the ambivalent messaging of giving the public access to useful data like the “Health Disparities Among LGBTQ+ Youth” page but then dissuading them from buying into its “gender ideology.” In order to answer this question, I looked into parallel events. Within the first 100 days of Trump’s second presidential term, his Executive Orders have gutted Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion offices, positions, and programs from the federal government, while also stating that there are only **biologically male** and **biologically female** people. Simultaneously, Trump’s Executive Orders contain threats to close the Department of Education and return educational authority to the States. All three of these Executive Orders imply the control of information and knowledge: who has access to that knowledge and who controls its appearance, whether it’s **assigned male/female at birth** and not just information, not just language. The results indicate that the importance of messages like the above warning is that they are reminders of who controls knowledge, and how knowledge can get turned on its head when placed in the wrong hands. Each expression of disdain from Trump’s federal government and each attempt at censorship is a thinly veiled confession: that if Trump was a young member of the LGBTQ+ community, he would appreciate not knowing that he was more likely to have poor mental health or contract a chronic disease because then he would die sooner.

KEY WORDS: gender, transgender, LGBTQ+, non-binary, assigned male/female at birth, or biologically male/female.

## Third Eye, 1985

It's in the way we  
butcher the body  
and slice  
and swivel the knife  
and fall back onto grids  
of teeth—we are not just  
what we eat  
but we are also  
*how* what we eat  
eats, shredding until  
we make ourselves unrecognizable,  
pulp. One of our voices  
examines the prices we pay.  
The other examines the prices  
we pay. Both of us are twisted,  
fucking each other with our eyes  
closed; We're hungry but there's only  
cash in the fridge.

•

I'm looking at you  
and I don't understand you.  
Why is there a pretzel  
knotting its salted limbs  
behind price tags for ribs and steak?  
Why do the prices jut in front of  
everything?  
Now *this* is when I see you  
in your war paint. I see  
the queer flesh and curl  
of the pretzel as it floats  
above a black hole, as if about to  
capsize, pass away. I see  
the dying man with tombstones  
in his stomach, black hole prodding for him.  
How did I not see his yellow light of a body?  
Then I blur my eyes: all of this is mere food.  
The red pulsates: Reagan's tongue.

(*Third Eye*, 1985; Andy Warhol & Jean-Michel Basquiat)

## **Updates**

*after Nicole Sealey*

### **Important update from TikTok**

We regret that the U.S. law banning TikTok will take effect on January 19 and force us to make our services temporarily unavailable.

We're working to restore our service in the U.S. as soon as possible, and we appreciate your support. Please stay tuned.



### **Sorry, TikTok isn't available right now**

A law banning TikTok has been enacted in the U.S. Unfortunately, that means you can't use TikTok for now.

We are fortunate that President Trump has indicated that he will work with us on a solution to reinstate TikTok once he takes office. Please stay tuned!



### **Welcome back!**

Thanks for your patience and support. As a result of President Trump's efforts, TikTok is back in the U.S.!

You can continue to create, share, and discover all the things you love on TikTok.

## Full Moon & Faggot

Fraught with the frot of our  
bundle, we warp the night,

entwined, hung  
over frothing moonlit

clouds. “Faggot”  
used to mean sticks

bound together  
until they saw us,

cocks out to the world,  
rosy mooneyed

men making fire,  
rubbing together,

making fire. We were  
caught

by onlookers smelling  
the smoke of our own

kindling. Blew us out,  
stole us to the stake.

Entwined. Hung.  
Set ablaze.

●

“Faggot” comes  
from the Roman “fasces,”

a bound bundle of sticks  
holding up an axe blade.

In ancient Rome, it meant  
the king's power to punish.

Quickly, "fasces"  
becomes "fascist,"

the hacking away  
and slicing apart

of bundles  
of people.

We are the burning bundle,  
bound to the stake.

The king readies his fasces.  
It splits to kill.

The moon bears witness.  
Under its unforgiving light,

our ashes will splinter, sparkle.  
You will remember us.

*(Full Moon & Faggot, 2007; Geoffrey Hendricks)*

## Cookie and Sharon on the Bed, Provincetown, MA, Sept. 1989

Anything I can get you?  
Another pillow? A cold cloth?  
It's well past dinner. We still have  
leftovers  
if you're feeling up to it.  
It's okay if you're not.

What can I do for you?

What can we do?

•

(It's a deep fucking ocean  
and you keep sinking like  
a sand bag leaking time  
leaking familiars the ocean  
is friends with the sand  
but if it was legal I'd  
marry sand in an instant  
swallow it up share  
goods with my lover  
give out by taking in carrying  
you up to shore resuscitating  
us shaking us with the knowledge  
of two months left and what  
other adventures we'll never—)

•

Are you thirsty?  
Is water good?

•

(I want you to know something:  
I am not going anywhere.

I was put on this earth  
to take care of you

and until your time is up  
I will continue to do so.

You hear me?  
I am not going anywhere.

Take this in.  
Breathe.)

•

Which channel?

*(Cookie and Sharon on the Bed, Provincetown, MA, Sept. 1989; Nan Goldin)*

## Aubade

The stuck thing.  
The key

I can't pull out.

The teeth of it

sunk in  
the metal

of memory.

I want to turn  
the handle. Blade

in too deep,

stab wound  
keeping the water

from sobbing out.

I tremble as I  
make my decision:

I knock.

●

He opens  
the door

grabs  
tissues

then me.

He takes  
my hand

brings it  
to his chest



kisses it

•

(something in me  
unlocks: a room filled  
with water.)

•

*Was that*

*the last one?*

## **Aftercare**

a kind of preening  
we would clean each other off  
feather by feather

## After Writing “Untitled”

The Smithsonian robbed you of your legacy, Ross. Then I did it again. I regret ever calling you “Untitled.” In America, we are taught to not know what AIDS is. We have learned how to forget. When I entered Félix’s retrospective, *Always to Return*, the introductory sign evaded AIDS altogether, boasting the “multiple dynamic meanings of [Félix’s] work.” We taste you, Ross, without knowing why. All I taste now is aimless sugarcoating. Your weight is spread thin—no longer a concentrated pile, now a long, rectangular strip, starved of your idiosyncratic gravity. This isn’t you, Ross. Their placard only mentions your name once: in the artwork’s title. We don’t know that it was you whose ideal weight was 175lbs. We don’t even know that you died; you have been erased, sublimated into meaningless pondering. Is hope, then, a perverted kind of ignorance? Next to you, a portrait of Walt Whitman watches you, stilled in silver monochrome. Does he know that this is your body, your sweet sacrament? Does he know he is bearing witness to murder?

*(Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*

## Kathleen laughing NYC, 1994

It's like breathing for you.  
How do you do it?

I'm in front of you  
and I see

joy.

But there's something else...

●

We have to hang on this wall:  
you and your bawling laughter,  
me watching the spirits fade.

Your grin lifts you off the ground  
and into the flash  
and we both know why you're grinning:

We don't know why you're grinning.  
We just act like we do  
to pass the time.

What was the joke again?  
Remind me?

●

What keeps us alive?

I think it's when we know  
we're both doomed  
and so are all our friends  
and nobody gives a damn  
except us. Old, jaded us,

attending too many funerals,  
photographing too many

funerals are all over my walls  
in rows and columns and  
multiplying grids  
entering the dirt  
coffins weighing differently

depending on who knows  
what's inside and who dares  
to look.

We watch as our own species gets  
*lowered*

and you laugh because  
what else can we do and  
who else can we call to other than  
memory?

“Who knows, maybe  
if we call the right people,  
we can join them  
faster.”

●

You, laughing.  
Then us.

*(Kathleen laughing NYC, 1994; Nan Goldin)*

## Bronze phallic amulet, Roman, 1st century CE

This one is triple-pronged.  
On the right, a proud phallus,  
the neck rising, inflating, activated.

On the left, the *mano fica*,  
the protest, the jutting of thumb  
through index and middle.

And down the center,  
scrotum and penis hanging  
with the weight of seeing.

•

According to The Met,  
all three ~~stanzas~~ symbols are  
apotropaic: signs for averting

evil. In other words, humanity  
warding off the evil eye with shock,  
the magic of obscenity.

Later, I learn this amulet's real name:  
*fascinus*, Latin for the power of  
enchantment, enticement—fascination.

•

I imagine a Roman soldier  
wearing this little fetish  
around his neck. (Was he now

doubly endowed?) Divinely protected  
by Priapus, his cock-love knew  
no shame. There is a difference

between shamelessness and knowing  
no shame; it's the difference between  
being freed and needing no release.

## Electric Fan

I return  
to find him missing.  
I don't just mean him:  
    I mean his life.  
    Evidence wiped  
        out.  
    Sanitized.  
        Walls blank.  
        Bedsheets  
        removed.  
    Bare.  
    The art of our life,  
    stolen. Gone.  
And then  
I look out the window  
(inappropriately sunny)  
    to hear that box fan  
    whirring away as usual.  
        The white noise  
        strips the stiffl  
            from the air.  
        The static  
            is a hearty  
            exhale, as if  
the rhythm of  
respiration as it  
        rises  
        and  
        falls  
reached across eons,  
    stretched to an exalted  
    hum...  
  
I don't think life ever ends.  
  
He is here.  
  
He breathes again.

he breathes      again he breathes  
again he      breathes again he  
breathes      again he breathes  
again he      breathes again  
he      breathes again he  
                 breathes again he breath  
es again he breathes again he br  
eathes again he      breathes...

Feel it, motherfuckers.

*(Electric Fan (Feel It Motherfuckers): Only Unclaimed Item from the Stephen Earabino Estate; John S. Boskovich, 1997)*



## **Writer's Statement**

### **What is *The Weight of Seeing*?**

*The Weight of Seeing* is not just my undergraduate Creative Writing thesis at Drew University: it is my first full-length poetry collection. My goal with *The Weight of Seeing* is to embody both a queer history I did not live through and a queer present that I live through every day. Some of the poems in *The Weight of Seeing* contend with queer history through ekphrasis, with poems based on artworks by queer artists who were active both before and during the AIDS Epidemic. Other poems in the collection are more confessional and grounded in the present day, with poems led by my personal experiences as a bisexual person involved in subcultural queer communities. Many of those present-day poems are also based on current issues around censorship of LGBTQ+ language and identity in the United States. *The Weight of Seeing* is also influenced by the practices of concrete poetry and Image:Text poetry, and how these hybrid poetic modes can physicalize feelings of desire, longing, and fear on the page.

### **The Nan Goldin Poems**

*The Weight of Seeing* started off as a small, very specific idea. During Summer 2023, I was taking a class called ENGH230: Topics in Creative Writing, taught by Prof. McIntyre. During this time, I reread a paper I had written for my final in HUM203 in Spring 2022, called “A Look at Nan Goldin’s *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* Post-HIV/AIDS epidemic.” It was about how the photographs in Nan Goldin’s magnum opus artist’s book, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, were prophetic in regards to the coming of the HIV/AIDS epidemic; the act of taking a photo of someone predicted the inevitable need to memorialize them. After rereading this final paper of mine from my freshman year, I felt the need to return to Nan Goldin’s images with the hope of

writing about at least one of them. That night, I wrote “Brian on my bed with bars, New York City, 1983,” which takes on the point of view of Nan Goldin as she is photographing Brian.

The goal of “Brian on my bed with bars, New York City, 1983” was simple: to write a dynamic between Nan Goldin and Brian that subverts heteronormative standards, the standard being that the man is the dominant force and the woman is the submissive, resistless one. Flipping these standards on their head paved the way for finding perceived moments of insecurity in both Brian and Nan Goldin in these new roles, like Brian’s internal remark of “*The camera’s bigger than me...*” (Indovina 24). Writing from the perspective of interpretation of artwork rather than the purely visual aspects of artwork allows me to go even deeper than the traditional definition of ekphrastic poetry, which is usually defined as primarily descriptive poetry based on an artwork or image. This technique of visual interpretation combined with description is a technique I return to throughout *The Weight of Seeing*; it is an intuitive choice that allows me to tap into my perceptions of the emotional underpinnings behind the artwork. Also, as I was writing “Brian on my bed with bars,” I was aware of the toxic relationship between Nan and Brian in real life; Brian was physically abusive toward Nan (which is well-documented in other photos of hers). I was drawn to *Brian on my bed with bars* because of how it depicts masculine surrender and the restorative power of Nan Goldin being in charge of—and deriving satisfaction from—the submission of her abuser. It felt radically redemptive.

As an aside: I want to relate “Brian on my bed with bars, New York City, 1983” to what Nan Goldin says about Brian in her HBO Max documentary, *All The Beauty and the Bloodshed*. I first encountered the documentary quite some time after I wrote “Brian on my bed with bars, New York City, 1983.” The documentary is mainly about Nan Goldin’s advocacy organization, P.A.I.N. (Prescription Addiction Intervention Now), and their recent protests against museums

taking money from the Sackler family, considering their involvement in causing the Opioid Crisis, but Nan also talks about her photography, her life, and the lives of her friends (dead and alive). Regarding Brian, this is what she said about their troubled history in *All the Beauty and the Bloodshed*:

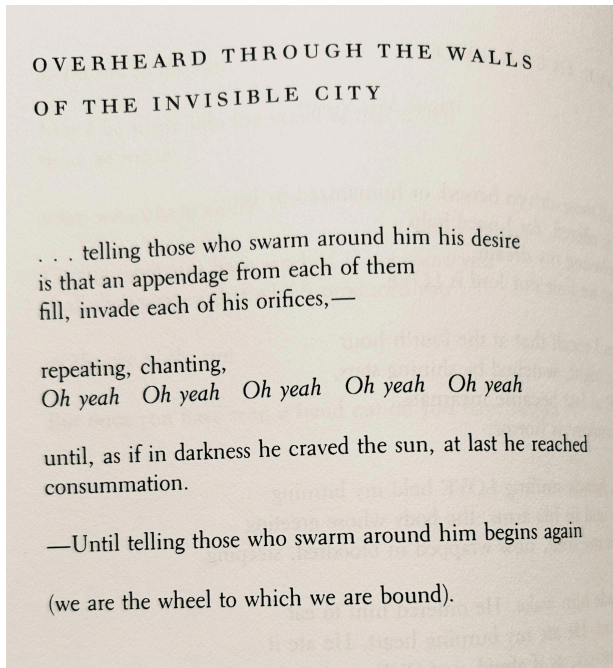
He was very tender. You can see it in Brian's eyes. We had very good sex, and that can keep people together for a long time. And then we started fighting a lot. And I was good at fighting. He wanted to break up and I didn't want him to. And then we went through that a lot, trying to break up. And then when I went to Berlin, we'd broken up. And then he came to Berlin and... And that story. I did a slideshow at some loft, and we went to a bar, and then he realized I'd been with this girl, and he became jealous. And that's what set it off. We were so intertwined, we didn't know how to break up. So this was his way of breaking up. He punched me in the face repeatedly, like boom, boom, boom. And he went after my eyes. I was bleeding and there was this girl, Sylvie, from Paris. Sylvie came in and dragged me out. She saved my life. He trashed the room and he wrote in lipstick all over the room: "Bitch," "Cunt"... He burned my diaries. The greatest luck of my life is that I left the slideshow at the loft where I'd shown it. Because he would have destroyed it. Yeah. All the bones in the orbital floor of my eye were broken. And Maggie said he wanted to blind me. My pictures of myself battered were what kept me from going back. Women who've been battered have come to me and told me that they were able to talk about it because of those pictures. The struggle between autonomy and dependency is the core of *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*. (59:57-1:02:55)

When I was writing "Brian on my bed with bars, New York City, 1983," I knew about many of these details. I knew that Nan's and Brian's relationship was abusive, and that toward the end of their relationship, Brian became physically abusive toward Nan, resulting in photos of hers like *Nan one month after being battered* (1984). However, I did not know about the tenderness of Brian prior to this spring into anger. I also assumed in my poem that Brian's abuse would warrant a desire for revenge on Nan's part, but that does not seem to be the case. In fact, talking about his tenderness in their early years together leads me to believe that Nan holds some feelings of sympathy for Brian mixed into her fear and anger toward him. I, on the other hand, wanted to talk about masculinity (and Brian) like it (and he) was a brute that must be tamed, flattened into submission for his awful behavior; at the time, I felt that was a more palpable conflict point for

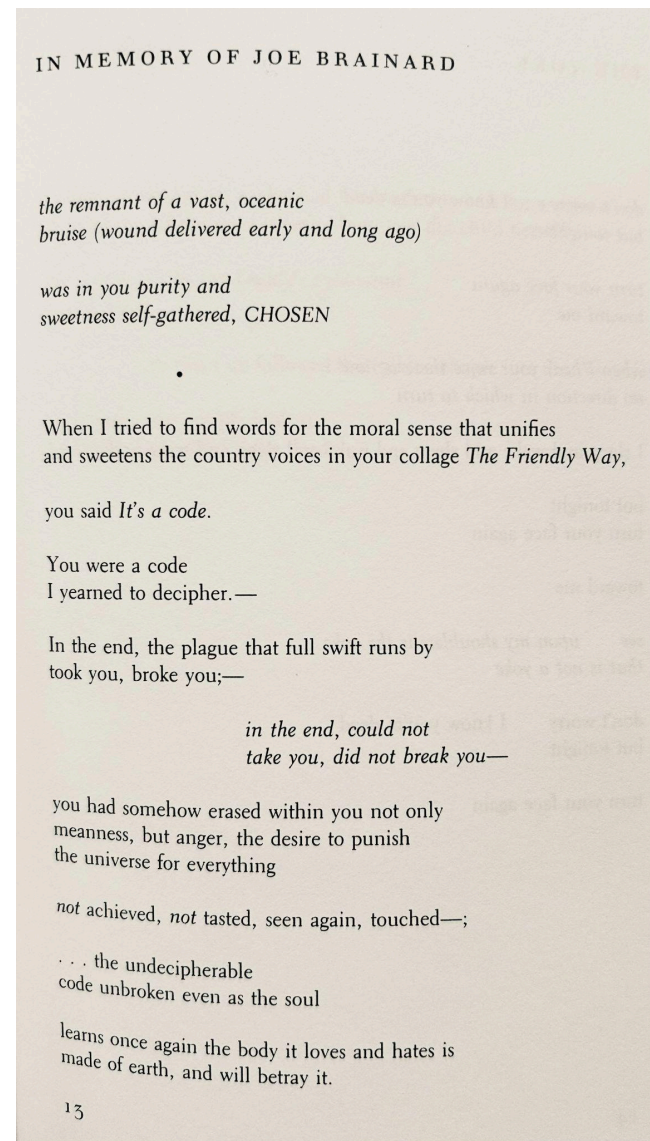
the poem. However, looking back, I think bringing his tenderness (and the almost-too-strong nature of Nan's and Brian's relationship) into the poem would have benefitted it and brought it closer to Nan's real feelings about Brian. Overall though, the beauty of ekphrastic poetry is that it rests on artistic interpretation. The ekphrastic poem becomes an interpretation of the work, and not its canon meaning, which allows for more dynamic possibilities.

During this time, I was heavily influenced by Frank Bidart's poetry, from both a technical and thematic standpoint. What makes Frank Bidart such an inspiring poet to me is two things: 1. his attention to negative space, both on the page and in the context of his language, and 2. his concentration on themes of non-traditional sexuality, elegy, and art.

Two poems from Bidart's 1997 collection, *Desire*, encapsulate these parts of his style: "Overheard Through the Walls of the Invisible City" and "In Memory of Joe Brainard." In "Overheard Through the Walls of the Invisible City" (figure 1), Bidart plays with repetition (the "*Oh yeah*" line), brevity, and punctuation (the stack of punctuation on line 3 "--") in order to paint the picture of an orgy between several men. The brevity of the poem heightens its attention to breath and repetition, as well as how it pauses and resumes across positive space (text-filled space) and negative space (or white space, as is present between the italicized "*Oh yeah[s]*"). On the other hand, in "In Memory of Joe Brainard" (figure 2), Bidart plays with the pacing of the text with the bullet point after the first two couplets, as well as the break in keeping the text flush left on the lines "*in the end, could not / take you, did not break you—*" (Bidart, lines 12-13). Regarding subject matter, "In Memory of Joe Brainard" is about the New York School artist Joe Brainard, who died of AIDS-related pneumonia in 1994. Bidart's attention to spacing, to non-traditional sexuality, to art, to AIDS, and to elegy informed the earliest seedling of *The Weight of Seeing*, that being "Brian on my bed with bars, New York City, 1983."



(Figure 1: “Overheard Through the Walls of the Invisible City.” Frank Bidart, *Desire* (1997, FSG), p. 6)



(Figure 2: “In Memory of Joe Brainard.” Frank Bidart, *Desire* (1997, FSG), p. 13)

The second Nan Goldin poem I wrote was “Picnic on the Esplanade, Boston, 1973,” based on the photograph of the same name. The poem explores innocence and finding your true identity and your found family in your early twenties. By writing about queer community from the perspective of filling hunger (the friends in the photo *Picnic on the Esplanade, Boston 1973* are eating cake), I could also subtly touch on another subject I am passionate about: the feedism

community. Feedism is a niche kink subculture surrounding feeding someone else, being fed, or feeding oneself in order to gain weight. Food, through this lens, becomes a symbol of desire, or a symbol of the expression of one's desires, just as all of Nan Goldin's friends in *Picnic on the Esplanade* express themselves openly through their clothes, their mannerisms, and their unabashed joy. "Picnic on the Esplanade, Boston, 1973" is about the joy of being one's self in its entirety, and a nostalgia for not having to hide in silence. This both draws from Nan Goldin's life (she was 20 when she took this photo) and from my personal life (I was 20 when I wrote the poem). Combining my experiences in finding my community with Nan Goldin's experiences allowed me to enter Nan Goldin's perspective and write the poem as a type of persona poem, weaving the personal into the ekphrastic.

The methods of ekphrastic persona poetry followed me as I began to write about darker themes such as AIDS in poems like "Cookie and Sharon on the Bed, Provincetown, MA, Sept. 1989," which is based on the Nan Goldin photograph of the same name. Like "Brian on my bed with bars," I allow the text to dance across the page in layers in "Cookie and Sharon on the Bed, Provincetown, MA, Sept. 1989," refusing to keep the entire poem flush left. But instead of entering this poem from Nan Goldin's perspective as the photographer, I decided to enter Sharon Niesp's perspective as she tended to a terminally ill Cookie Mueller. Writing from Sharon's point of view meant that I could write from the point of view of someone directly involved in the tragedy at hand; I imagined the reality of needing to keep face as I took care of my terminally ill lover, as I could see the end of our days together drawing closer. This is what created this massively spread-out text structure; the stanzas pushed away from the left margin are Sharon's attempts to keep calm and composed, but the flush left text is what she feels inside and wants to say, but can't say. The text in the middle of these two alignments are stuck between poker face

and panic attack. This again returns to Bidart's technique of layering lines according to indentation.

"Kathleen laughing NYC, 1994" is definitely the odd one out of the four Nan Goldin poems in *The Weight of Seeing*. This is not only because it was written after the summer was over, but also because it was inspired by a chance encounter with a Nan Goldin photo at an art exhibition during the New York Semester on Contemporary Art class. The exhibition was called *Friends & Lovers*, a group installation that was installed by The FLAG Art Foundation. I consider that poem to be similar in approach to "Cookie and Sharon on the Bed," in the sense that there are these three different layers of indentation that speak to different facets of emotion in the wake of grief. I like how text that is spread across the page forces you to scan the paper back and forth, in a way your eyes are not used to. There's a franticness to the way the text of "Kathleen laughing NYC, 1994" is spaced out, forcing the reader's eyes to undulate with the layers of sadness and confusion in the speaker, which is, once again, a combination of Nan Goldin's and my voice. Seeing as I was genuinely confused as to why Kathleen was laughing in the photo in the first place, speaking through Nan Goldin's perspective—that laughter in the midst of strife is key to survival—was helpful in reaching the poem's conclusion: "You, laughing. / Then us." (Indovina 48).

### The Chapbook: *DEVoured*, Spring 2024

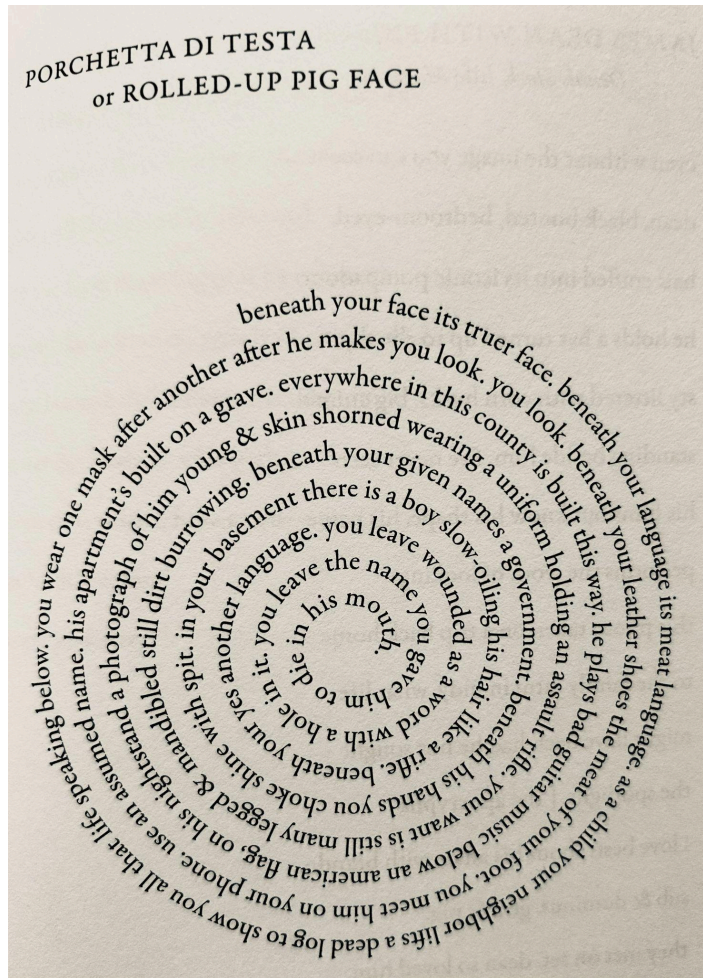
The Nan Goldin poems gave me a sense of the themes I wanted to explore in a larger project: art, queer/subversive sexuality, loss, and resilience. I was able to dive deeper in this direction when I met with Prof. Martin informally on a weekly basis in Spring 2024 to develop a preliminary

thesis in the form of a chapbook titled *DEVoured*. The title is a reference to not just literal eating, but also how sexual desire, illness, and death devour people in their own ways.

One of the first topics I recall discussing during these meetings was the poetry collection *Pig* by Sam Sax, written in 2023. I enjoyed how tight the collection was, both in the sense of length and theme. Every poem in this collection had to do with the pig in some way, whether symbolically, literally, or figuratively. The visage of the pig became a jumping-off point for discussion of many topics and themes, ranging from masculinity to queerness, to police violence to Judaism, among many other themes. These aspects of *Pig* are the reasons why *The Weight of Seeing* keeps returning to the baseline theme of queerness; I wanted everything I wrote for *The Weight of Seeing* to return to that jumping-off point.

One poem that caught my attention while reading *Pig* was called “porchetta di testa” (figure 3). The poem takes on the shape of a spiral that starts on the outside and swirls its way inward. The orientation of the text as it spirals inwards requires you as the reader to change the way you hold the book for each sentence, basically spinning it around so the poem can be legible. The poem itself is about a sexual escapade with a closeted man. Both the speaker and the subject—the closeted man who served as a soldier for the U.S.—engage with each other under false names so as to protect themselves in different ways; the speaker wants to protect themselves from harm while the subject wants to protect his dignity in being “straight.” Even though reading about hidden sexual interactions would influence some of the more personal poems in this collection (like “Probe,” for example), that was not what stood out to me about “porchetta di testa.” It was realizing the fact that a poem can truly take on any shape or form, that a poem’s visual shape worked into the way a reader could interpret it and read it. In this way, a poem can become an interactive artwork.





(Figure 3: “porchetta di testa.” Sam Sax, *Pig* (2023, Scribner Poetry), p. 67)

Reading Sam Sax’s *Pig* was my first real exposure to the school of concrete poetry. Concrete poetry is a type of poetry that prioritizes the visual shape that a poem creates with its text. A great example of this is Sam Sax’s “porchetta di testa,” as its spiral shape is meant to physicalize and visualize the layers of hiding and the layers of identity.

An example of a concrete poem from *The Weight of Seeing* is the poem “Untitled” (figure 4). The shape of “Untitled” is inspired by the candy pile sculpture “Untitled” (*Portrait of Ross in L.A.*) by Félix González-Torres. According to The Art Institute of Chicago’s page dedicated to this artwork, “the label lists its ideal weight [of 175 lbs], likely corresponding to the average

body weight of an adult male, or perhaps the ideal weight of the subject referred to in the title, Ross Laycock, the artist's partner who died of complications from AIDS in 1991, as did Gonzalez-Torres in 1996." The ideal weight of the piece influenced the amount of words in the body of the poem: 175, each word representing a pound of Ross Laycock's body. The poem is from González-Torres' point of view, as if he was watching people interact with the candy sculpture. The artwork itself, like many of Nan Goldin's photos from *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, had to do with AIDS and grief in the LGBTQ+ community, so an ekphrastic and concrete poem about "Untitled" made sense along with the Nan Goldin poems. One can think of a poem as an interactive candy sculpture; you see it as a whole, and you unwrap and eat words from it, savoring them as you leave. Concrete poetry is interactive because it thinks of itself as a visual space, one you have to both navigate around and peer into. Also, "Untitled" discusses weight and the act of devouring, which returns to feedist themes alluded to in "Picnic on the Esplanade, Boston, 1973."

#### Untitled

This is  
 where he sits.  
 A representation.  
 A pile of candy in the  
 corner. Sweet. Shimmering.  
 Each word here weighs a pound.  
 Each candy here weighs one fraction  
 of the 175 pounds that were on planet  
 Earth. People watch his xerox sit in the  
 corner. They think about sweet people, sweet  
 things. Then they get hungry. They take. One by one.  
 He begins to dwindle. I watch as I lose him to their hunger  
 for negligence. Their sweet teeth, their fangs unwrapping him,  
 eating him, feeling him melt on their tongues like a group psychedelic,  
 a memory inducer that only hits the drug dealer and his product. The pile  
 disintegrates. Pounds of him are lost to their greedy, complicit mouths. I look  
 at all the wrappers on the floor and I remember his clothes, stripped bare to  
 reveal sores to the doctor. He is given an expiration date. Notice how  
 I left out the candy box itself. Notice how he is stripped  
 of a name. Notice how I replenish him,  
 hoping to change the story.

(Figure 4: "Untitled." Indovina, *The Weight of Seeing* (2025), p. 32)

(Portrait of Ross in L.A.)

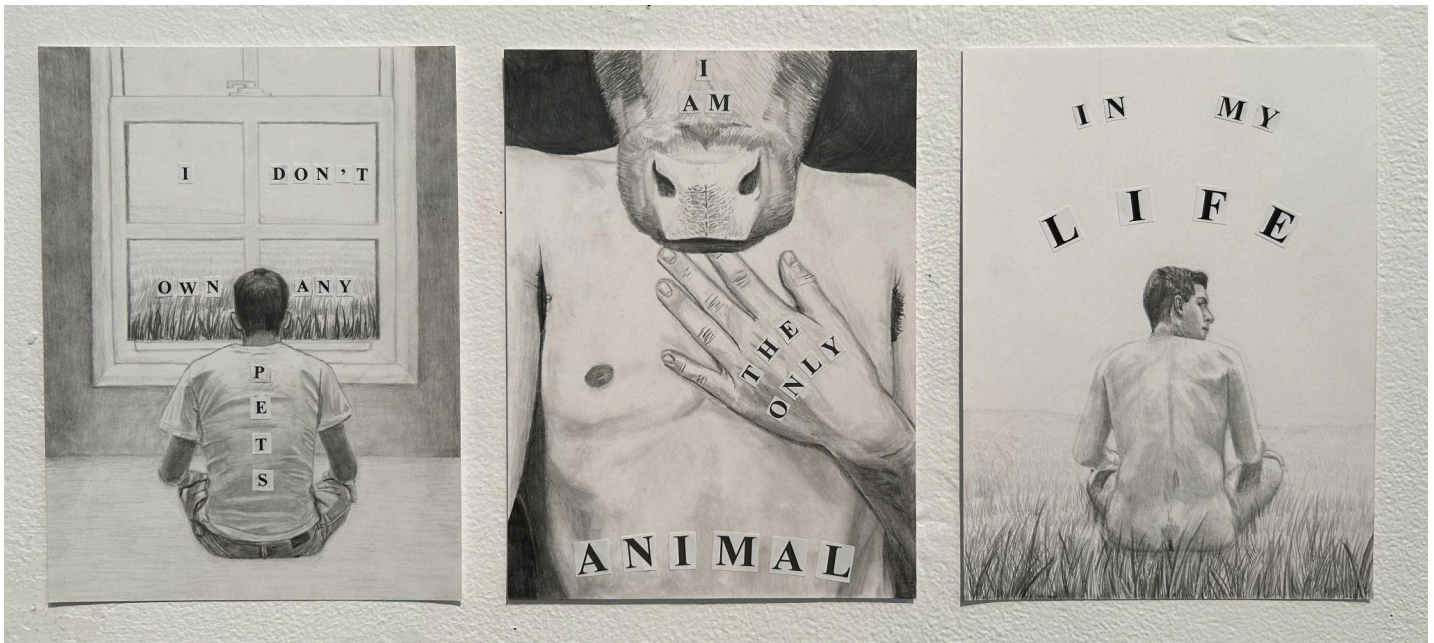
At this point, I realized that I wanted my thesis to eventually have a visual component, one that used words as its medium. This philosophy continued to guide my writing as I discovered other contemporaries to Nan Goldin and Félix-González-Torres, like Peter Hujar. I wrote the poem “Gary in Contortion, 1979” after his photograph *Gary Schneider in Contortion (II)*. The photo is of Gary with his back facing the camera, arched over himself as if he was trying to perform fellatio on himself, his left foot behind his head pushing it down. Even though my poem “Gary in Contortion, 1979” does not follow the outline of the form of Gary in the Peter Hujar photograph, I still consider it concrete because of the undulating length of lines across the poem. The lines formed a set of spikes that could be interpreted as lines from a heart monitor, from the racing of the heart in the heat of a sexual encounter (whether with oneself or another person). I liked the image this text made; it became representative of Gary’s perspective as he “went down on himself,” if you will. The pacing of the text itself reflected this restless, breathless scene as well. Lines like “Clamping inevitability, / crushing blow, / just out of reach. / Fuck.” were meant to have a heaving quality, the heaving that Gary would experience if he was trying to stretch in a way his body would not let him stretch. I wanted to capture both a sexual loneliness and the inability to give oneself what one sexually desires.

### Summer 2024: Brooklyn Poets: “Beyond Legibility: The Image:Text Poem”

In Summer 2024, I decided to take a virtual poetry workshop through Brooklyn Poets called “Beyond Legibility: The Image:Text Poem,” taught by the poet and artist, grace (ge) gilbert. I wanted to learn more about the intersectionality of images and writing, considering the fact that I had already written ekphrastic and concrete poems, and both poetic forms are related to visual image through the text itself. This workshop taught me that Image:Text poems combine visual

and linguistic elements to convey meaning. What makes this powerful is the fact that the visual and textual elements balance each other out; the text tells us what the images cannot say, and the images show us what the text cannot tell. Together, image and text can collaborate and get closer to conveying both personal and broader truths.

The philosophy of this Image:Text workshop influenced a series of artworks I made during my Senior Studio class in Fall 2024: the centerfold series of *The Weight of Seeing*, titled *THE ONLY ANIMAL* (figure 5). *THE ONLY ANIMAL* is a trio of graphite drawings with glued-on printouts of text. I think of it both as one entity and as three separate drawings; they all communicate different aspects of the whole but combine to communicate an overall sense of sexual loneliness, similar to the aim of “Gary in Contortion, 1979.” The first piece, “I / DON’T / OWN / ANY / PETS,” is a self-portrait in which I am criss-crossed in front of a window. In each quadrant of the window, there is one of the first four words in the sentence “I don’t own any pets.” The word “PETS” is glued down my back from top to bottom. The composition of the image conveys loneliness because I am trapped inside the house, only able to look out the window. The second piece, “I AM / THE ONLY / ANIMAL,” is a close-up, shirtless frontal self-portrait in which my left hand is covering the left side of my chest. My head is replaced by a cow head which you can only see the bottom half of. “I AM” is glued over the cow head, “THE ONLY” is glued over my left hand, and “ANIMAL” is glued over my stomach. In this piece, I am posed as different from others because there is something “animal” about me, something sub-human, something subversive or transgressive about my sexuality. The third and final piece, “IN / MY / LIFE,” is a kind of freedom piece. In this piece, I am sitting outside in the field where I was looking out at in “I / DON’T / OWN / ANY / PETS,” and I am naked. I am sitting in the same criss-crossed, back-facing position I was in that piece as well, only naked and outdoors,



(Figure 5: THE ONLY ANIMAL: A Series. Indovina, *The Weight of Seeing* (2025), pp. 27-29)

symbolically free but still alone. The relationship between these three pieces would not have been nearly as evident without the unifying text elements set across all three pieces. These are not just still images; they are one narrative poem that tells a story altogether.

### *The Weight of Seeing* in Fall 2024: Reading, Writing, and Museum Visits

The most influential writers whose work I had read during the Fall 2024 semester were Patti Smith, Brenda Shaughnessy, Claudia Rankine, and Walt Whitman. I will discuss them in pairs, and combine discussion of that pair with a poem that I believe was highly influenced by reading their work together.

Brenda Shaughnessy, Walt Whitman, and “The Invisible Teacher”

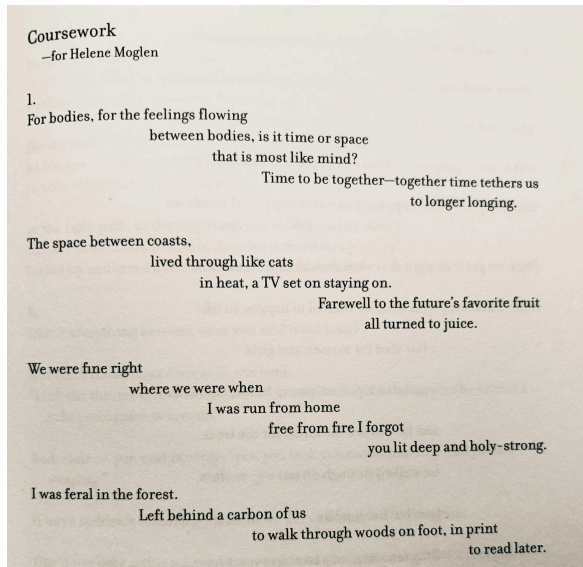
I was lucky enough to actually meet Brenda Shaughnessy during the Writers@Drew event on September 25th, 2024. After the event, I was able to interview her about the process of writing her latest poetry collection, *Tanya*.

However, there was one poem that Shaughnessy talked about during the Writers@Drew panel and before the interview that stuck with me: “Coursework.” This is my favorite poem from *Tanya*, because the goal of *Tanya* as a collection is to chronicle the “influencers” that set Shaughnessy on her path, and “Coursework” effortlessly communicates this goal by being about Shaughnessy’s time as an undergraduate student learning about feminist studies at the University of California at Santa Cruz. “Coursework” is dedicated to Helene Moglen, one of Shaughnessy’s professors at the University of Santa Cruz, someone Shaughnessy credits as opening her eyes to literature and feminist studies.

Reading “Coursework” inspired me to reread the work of Walt Whitman, the poet that inspired me to start writing poetry in the first place. I revisited “Song of Myself,” and recalled how Whitman’s encyclopedic, graphic sense of detail made me fall in love with the power of language when I was fourteen. Thinking about my origin story with Walt Whitman as a 14-year-old who knew nothing about poetry was what inspired the arc of my poem, “The Invisible Teacher.” This poem personifies the book *Leaves of Grass* as Walt Whitman himself, and everywhere I carry the book, I carry the literal man Walt Whitman with me. It was a humorous thought, but also a symbolic one; Walt Whitman weighed heavily on my mind at that time, so having me physically carry him everywhere meant he weighed on me physically as well. Overall, “The Invisible Teacher,” like “Coursework,” is a coming-of-age poem. It goes from me realizing my sexuality at fourteen to being eighteen and having my first sexual experiences to



being 21 and realizing that I never finished *Leaves of Grass*. I owe the form of “The Invisible Teacher” (see figure 7) to some of the sections of “Coursework” (see figure 6), which use a sprawling form that skips quickly across the left and right of the page. In fact, I borrowed from the form so heavily that I considered the poem to be “after Brenda Shaughnessy.”



(Figure 6: Part 1 of “Coursework.”  
Brenda Shaughnessy, Tanya (Knopf, 2023), p. 43)

2.  
Mothers always know  
what their children need  
before they even say  
the word.  
  
Who else could possibly know  
I needed this old man,  
this dead man in a dust jacket,  
in my hands?  
Only her.  
  
We joke it was her fault  
that all of a sudden  
I went poet-crazy,  
that from then on,  
  
there  
was  
no  
turning  
back.  
  
“What is the grass?”  
the old/dead man asks me,  
as if beginning  
  
an initiation—no,  
my initiation,  
into the next world.

(Figure 7: Part 2 of “The Invisible Teacher.”  
Indovina, The Weight of Seeing (2025), p. 11)

### Claudia Rankine, Patti Smith, and “Rubberman”

I knew about Claudia Rankine’s writing for a long time, although I did not know that her work could be classified as Image:Text until the Brooklyn Poets Image:Text workshop from Summer 2024. After the workshop, I read *Citizen*. In this hybrid poetry collection, Rankine not only explores racist microaggressions and the physical trauma that comes with being made invisible (or made visible in a detrimental or possibly fatal way), but she also explores racist

macroaggressions such as lynchings and murders. The entire book is in seven sections, each of which taking on a different angle with the topic of racism against Black people. Rankine's style is surprisingly prosaic, usually rejecting lineated form in order to write prose passages that cut into the reader with clarity while also leaving them with the same questions that a poem would.

Around the same time I read *Citizen* (October 2024), I also read Patti Smith's famous memoir, *Just Kids*. I wanted to learn more about Robert Mapplethorpe, another late 20th century queer contemporary to other artists I had written ekphrastic poems about already, like Nan Goldin and Peter Hujar. There was a raw explicitness yet survivalist necessity to Mapplethorpe's photography that I was compelled to capture in poem form. After being introduced to Mapplethorpe through the eyes of Patti Smith in *Just Kids*, I was inspired to look through his catalog of photographs. After falling in love with the photo *Joe, N.Y.C.* (1978) and learning more about Mapplethorpe as a whole (specifically about his death due to AIDS-related complications and his retrospective, *The Perfect Moment*), I wanted to write a poem from the perspective of someone learning about Mapplethorpe for the first time, and becoming enamored with the world of kink through Mapplethorpe's eyes, and then being disillusioned by the historic battles of censorship Mapplethorpe's artworks endured due to their graphic, almost pornographic content. The third section of "Rubberman," the poem that resulted from *Joe, N.Y.C.*, was heavily influenced by Claudia Rankine's biting poetic prose, stating the facts of the matter in tandem with the grief. For example, here are the first two stanzas from that section:

In 1989, after Robert Mapplethorpe's death in March, a retrospective of his life's work titled *The Perfect Moment* embarked on a controversial and troubled tour. It started at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia and made its way to the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. by that June. It was then quickly canceled in response to the Moral Majority, who had taken on the form of the American Family Association.

In April 1990, *The Perfect Moment* was resurrected at the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati. But then the Moral Majority struck again, this time in the form of the Citizens



for Community Values, anti-pornography protestors. All patrons were forced to leave as Cincinnati police videotaped *The Perfect Moment*, each cock and nude body and introspective child and male pairing and gimp suit another excuse to file obscenity charges against the Contemporary Arts Center. The case went federal.

(Indovina. *The Weight of Seeing*, p. 6)

For the most part, the above text is clipped and factual. Yet words like “controversial and troubled,” “canceled,” “resurrected,” “excuse,” and “obscenity,” when taken outside of their literal meanings in prose, gain another life in the context of poetry. While these words refer to facts about *The Perfect Moment*, they speak to bigger opinions about Mapplethorpe as a person and speak to how he was remembered after his death. There is a venom in a word like “canceled,” and stakes in a word like “resurrected,” when these words become about the reputation of an artist after their death. The phrase “obscenity charges” is so clinical, yet it contains the word “obscenity,” the obscene, the forbidden and disgusting. Clinical language contains emotional language, which is something that Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen* taught me.

#### Out of the Classroom: The Leslie Lohman Museum & The Museum of Sex

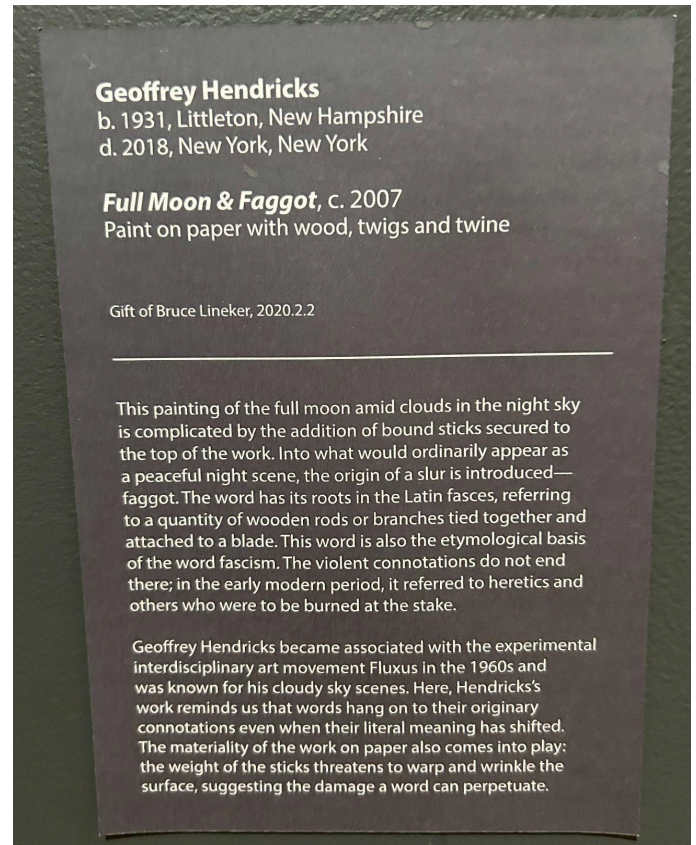
I learned about the Leslie Lohman Museum after discussing the possibility of visiting art museums for my thesis with Prof. Rhodes. I asked her if she had any recommendations for museums or specific exhibitions I should see. The first place she mentioned was the Leslie Lohman Museum. When I visited the museum in September, there were two exhibitions happening: *a promise of lightning* by Andrea Geyer, and a group exhibition called *I’m a thousand different people— Every one is real* (the title comes from a Candy Darling quote). I spent more time in the group exhibition, and eventually encountered the artwork *Full Moon & Faggot* by Geoffrey Hendricks. The title shocked me, considering how pleasant the watercolor painting of the night sky is. What I did not know until I read the piece’s placard was that

Hendricks is a Fluxus artist who thought intensely about the relationship between language, linguistics and visual art. *Full Moon & Faggot* (see Figure 8) is a watercolor painting that is warped by a bundle of sticks (a literal faggot), hanging above it and pressing down onto it. The bundle of two sticks influenced the structure of my poem “Full Moon & Faggot”; I made each stanza in the poem a couplet to symbolize the two sticks bound together. I also was influenced by the placard description of *Full Moon & Faggot*, which reminded viewers that faggot and fascism share a linguistic root: the Latin word *fascēs*, which was a bundle of sticks that held an axe blade. From here, thoughts of togetherness vs. division came to mind, both within found families and within fascist groups, and how gatherings of people can be dangerous, inflammatory (quite literally if you think about the burning of the stake imagery mentioned in the placard), and healing (when thinking about queer community).



(Figure 8: Full Moon & Faggot. Geoffrey Hendricks, 2007.)

(Figure 9: Placard for Full Moon & Faggot.  
Leslie Lohman Museum, October 2024)



The other museum I visited during Fall 2024 was the Museum of Sex. I was specifically there to see Andy Warhol's *Looking at Andy Looking* exhibition, which featured several of Warhol's early films. However, the way that the Museum of Sex works is that you have to walk through every exhibition on your visit; there's no cutting visiting one show to see another. So I walked through several exhibitions before reaching Warhol. This—and the discomfort I felt being in this museum—was the impetus for the poems "At the Museum of Sex" and "After the Museum of Sex." "At the Museum of Sex" was meant to be a critique of the other viewers in the museum, who went just to laugh at sexual imagery, iconography and sexual artifacts that several sexual groups take very seriously. Then the laughing continued into the Warhol exhibition until I was simply uncomfortable trying to take it seriously; the art is real and did not deserve the

mockery it received. I had to speedrun through the remainder of the museum just to get back to where the entrance was, which then led back to the gift shop. I then started looking through the different items at the gift shop, different items used for sexual activity. The most complicated feeling that came from seeing this all was the fact that I hated how much I wanted to experiment with some of these items, how much I wanted to try existing in a different way (that would ultimately just be the truth of who I am in general?). This feeling is what “At the Museum of Sex” concludes with, and this feeling is the image that “After the Museum of Sex” amplifies and perseverates on: the panic of temptation. It is crazy how even awful experiences can lead to some form of personal enlightenment.

### *The Weight of Seeing in Spring 2025: Political Unrest and Other Sources of Pain*

Over winter break, as news came in about the different restrictions and instances of widespread censorship regarding the LGBTQ+ community due to the results of the 2024 Presidential Election, I did what I could to keep on my toes, writing poems like “Updates” after TikTok was banned from the App Store in the United States. TikTok being banned was obviously the least of my worries considering the censorship and potential revoking of LGBTQ+ rights occurring, which would directly affect me and my parents (I have two moms), but censorship of one of the most popular social media apps in the country is still censorship. Around this time, I also wrote a bunch of haikus, little queer scenes that, even if heartbreaking (as is the case in “Aftercare”), were still decidedly queer scenes.

One especially flagrant use of censorship was when Trump used his Executive Order to force the CDC to remove webpages that included data on HIV and other subjects that directly affect LGBTQ+ youth due to fears surrounding ‘gender ideology.’ Soon after this, federal judge

John Bates issued a court order to restore all the pages that were removed from the CDC. However, on some of the restored pages—especially the ones about LGBTQ+ youth, there are these “advisory warnings” written that discuss the rejection of ‘gender ideology.’ I was so angry at this that I wrote the poem “Illegal Abstract,” which not only incorporated many of the words that were originally banned from incoming scientific research but also asked the question of why this message of not buying into ‘gender ideology’ is necessary when we have access to the data on how LGBTQ+ youth is harmed by bullying. The entire thing was so backwards to me that it had to become a prose poem, on the lengthy end for a poem, since its aim was to mimic the form of a scientific abstract. Through poems that I wrote in Spring 2025, such as “Illegal Abstract,” other poems about censorship I had already written for *The Weight of Seeing* gained another startling level of relevance.

### Assembling the Manuscript: Why Two Parts?

When I first assembled what I had written of *The Weight of Seeing* in January, I did not want to divide it up; I wanted it all to be one part. I figured that every poem I had written was united under the theme of queerness, so why split *The Weight of Seeing* into parts?

As I was rereading my manuscript and preparing it for a second draft in February, I realized that there were actually two distinct parts in my mind. Naturally, I had to do a lot of reordering to fit these poems into either Part 1 or Part 2. I had different qualifications for what would be considered a Part 1 poem and what would be considered a Part 2 poem as well.

A Part 1 poem, in *The Weight of Seeing*, has a sense of untouched optimism, or nostalgia for when the speaker felt untouched optimism. “Picnic on the Esplanade, Boston, 1973,” for example, is a textbook Part 1 poem because it is about coming of age in one’s early twenties, and

realizing parts of your identity as you grow alongside other (queer) people on the same journey. A Part 1 poem can also be extremely risqué, containing themes of unbridled sexuality. Poems like “Ode to the Bear” and “Gary in Contortion, 1979” are also Part 1 poems, because they both deal with feelings of piercing sexual frustration. Near the end of Part 1, after *THE ONLY ANIMAL*, a new darkness is brought into the tone of the poems in *The Weight of Seeing*, with “Probe” and “Untitled” ending Part 1 on a dark note.

A Part 2 poem, on the other hand, is less preoccupied with fantasies and more grounded in an awful reality. Poems like “Cookie and Sharon on the Bed, Provincetown, MA, Sept. 1989” are Part 2 poems because they refuse to look away from the tragedy happening to them and those they love. At the same time, I did not want to end the collection on such a dreary note; I wanted there to be some hope despite the loss of community that AIDS caused. The last three poems of the collection are in a very deliberate order. The third to last poem is “Kathleen laughing NYC, 1994,” a glib, bleak, yet hopeful poem about the absurdity of living in the midst of tragedy. The second to last poem is “Bronze phallic amulet, Roman, 1st century CE,” which looks humorously at a type of phallic amulet that Roman soldiers would wear. According to the Met, they thought that the phallus ward off evil—a surprisingly positive spin on the penis looking back from present day’s obsessive self-scrutiny.

The last poem is a poem I have not yet discussed in this Writer’s Statement. It is a poem called “Electric Fan,” based on the John S. Boskovich artwork *Electric Fan (Feel It Motherfuckers): Only Unclaimed Item from the Stephen Earabino Estate* (1997). John S. Boskovich’s partner, Stephen Earabino, died of AIDS-related complications, and his family removed any evidence of him sharing an apartment with Boskovich. The “only unclaimed item” was Earabino’s box fan, which, in the artwork *Electric Fan*, is protected by Plexiglas. It blows as

if it was Earabino's breath, forever exhaling. "Electric Fan" is an ekphrastic and concrete poem because I wanted to mimic the flowing of air from the fan, which sits in concrete form at the bottom of the poem, perseverating on the phrase "he breathes again" with various patterns of speech and rest. I wanted "Electric Fan" to not just be resilient, but vindictive toward a status quo that censors LGBTQ+ people of all kinds, censors evidence of their lives on this planet. A huge "fuck you" is exactly how I needed to end this collection, to feel that I could return to center. The knowledge that we inherently have the tools to resist any form of censorship or oppression is life-affirming and makes me want to live to fight another day.

### Conclusion & Next Steps

I have been accepted into the MFA in Writing program at Columbia University, so my plan is to continue working on *The Weight of Seeing* there. I also plan on dedicating part of this summer to work on some more poems for the manuscript that have not yet seen the light of day.

In the end, I hope that *The Weight of Seeing* not only usurps voicelessness and censorship to reveal truths that must be revealed, but also destigmatizes those of us who are under the duress of stigma and/or have yet to be fully understood. The LGBTQ+ community and its many subcultures—no matter what they were called at any point in history—have existed for as long as humans have existed. It is our job to protect one another through our most human faculties: the arts.

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## Notes on *The Weight of Seeing*

“Rubberman” is inspired by Robert Mapplethorpe, specifically his photograph titled *Joe, N.Y.C., 1978*, as well as his troubled posthumous retrospective titled *The Perfect Moment*. It also references the court case *The City of Cincinnati v. Contemporary Arts Center*, which was, at the heart of the matter, about artistic censorship.

“Picnic on the Esplanade, Boston, 1973” is inspired by the Nan Goldin photograph of the same name.

“The Invisible Teacher” is a queer coming-of-age poem that is also inspired by the form and themes of Brenda Shaughnessy’s poem, “Coursework,” which can be read in her latest poetry collection, *Tanya* (Knopf, 2023).

“At the Museum of Sex” and “After the Museum of Sex” were inspired by an especially awkward and frustrating solo trip to the Museum of Sex, my first time ever attending. “At the Museum of Sex” references two Museum of Sex exhibitions: *Artifact (XXX): Selections From Secret Locations* and *Looking at Andy Looking*, the latter of which was a Warhol exhibition about his early film work.

“Dithyramb” is inspired by the concept of a dithyramb, which was a choral song that was sung in honor of the Greek god Dionysus. Dithyrambs are known for their improvised lyrics and their grandeur of oration. Accompaniment behind a dithyramb would be played in the Phrygian mode, which is neither major (Ionian) nor minor (Aeolian).

“Gary in Contortion, 1979” is inspired by the Peter Hujar photograph, *Gary Schneider in Contortion (II), 1979*, as it is listed in the 125 Newbury Gallery exhibition, *Peter Hujar: Echoes*, which showed from September 9 – October 28, 2023.

“Brian on my bed with bars, New York City, 1983” is inspired by the Nan Goldin photograph of the same name.

“Untitled” is inspired by the temporary candy sculpture “*Untitled*” (*Portrait of Ross in L.A.*), made by Félix González-Torres in 1991. It is a massive pile of wrapped candies. It was meant as a tribute to the artist’s partner, Ross Laycock, who died of AIDS-related complications in the same year. Its ideal weight is 175lbs, the weight at which Ross was healthiest. When engaging with “*Untitled*”, patrons are free to take candy from the pile; the candy is infinitely replenishable.

“Illegal Abstract” takes on the form of a scientific abstract which incorporates many of the terms the CDC has been forced to censor as a result of President Trump’s Executive Orders, several of which the poem actively references. They are included in the bibliography at the end of this document.

“Third Eye, 1985” is inspired by the painting *Third Eye*, made by Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat in their collaborative period. Without knowing it, they were both nearing the end of their lives; Warhol died in 1987, and Basquiat died in 1988.

“Updates” is an erasure poem that was heavily influenced by the form and execution of Nicole Sealey’s full-length erasure poem, *The Ferguson Report: An Erasure* (Knopf, 2023).

“Full Moon & Faggot” is inspired by the Geoffrey Hendricks painting of the same name, made in 2007. It is specifically inspired by the context its placard provided when it was showing at the Leslie Lohman Museum exhibition titled *I’m a thousand different people—Every one is real*. The placard mentions Hendricks’ connection to the Fluxus movement, as well as this specific painting’s association with the linguistic and physical history of the word “faggot.”

“Cookie and Sharon on the Bed, Provincetown, MA, Sept. 1989” is inspired by the Nan Goldin photograph of the same name.

“After Writing ‘Untitled’” is also based on “*Untitled*” (*Portrait of Ross in L.A.*) by Félix González-Torres, but it is specifically based on the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery’s showing of the piece, which provided little to no context as to the piece’s significance in queer art history, therefore enacting erasure.

“Kathleen laughing NYC, 1994” is inspired by the Nan Goldin photograph of the same name, a photograph I had a chance encounter with at the FLAG Art Foundation’s exhibition, *Friends & Lovers*, which showed from October 6, 2023 – January 20, 2024.

“Bronze phallic amulet, Roman, 1st century CE” is inspired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s open-access permanent collection archived online. The amulet I found in the open-access archive had three prongs: the right prong depicted a phallus, the left prong depicted the “*mano fica*” (a rude hand gesture), and the one down the middle depicted a penis and testicles.

“Electric Fan” is inspired by the artwork/found object *Electric Fan (Feel It Motherfuckers): Only Unclaimed Item from the Stephen Earabino Estate*, made by John S. Boskovich in 1997. It is an electric fan encased in Plexiglas. It is the only item that Boskovich could keep that belonged to his partner, Stephen Earabino, who died of AIDS-related complications in 1995. Any other items of Stephen Earabino’s were taken by his family in an attempt to erase his relationship with Boskovich.

## Acknowledgements

Thank you from the bottom of my heart to the editors of the following journals and literary magazines, who have published current or earlier versions of the following poems and hybrid work from this collection:

***Chill Mag:*** “Picnic on the Esplanade, Boston, 1973”

***Fruitslice:*** “Untitled”

***Milk Press (The Poetry Society of New York):*** “Ode to the Bear”

***OROBORO Lit Journal:*** “Gary in Contortion, 1979” and “Rubberman”

***The Oxonian Review:*** “Kathleen laughing NYC, 1994”

***Rogue Agent:*** “THE ONLY ANIMAL: A Series”

*The Weight of Seeing* is my undergraduate Creative Writing thesis at Drew University. I want to extend a special thank you to my thesis advisory board (Courtney Zoffness, Wendy Kolmar, and Kim Rhodes) for your support of this project throughout its various stages. This would not have been possible without you all.

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