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Hanging by the Fingers

A

Creative Thesis

by Jesse Betts

ABSTRACT

This thesis is a poetry collection entitled *Hanging by the Fingers*, and is inspired by the moment in film when “a character is holding onto a ledge or rope by his or her fingers. One by one, each finger loses its grip” (“Hanging by the Fingers”). My collection centers on the complexity of relationships—familial, romantic, and religious. The speaker also struggles to understand how she relates to herself as a wife, mother, and individual. She feels as if she is often dangling by her fingers, trying desperately to hold on as each finger loses its grip. The themes of feeling lost, afraid or inadequate, and trying to find something just out of reach, are present throughout the collection, even though the form and style of the poems vary greatly.

INTRODUCTION

The title of my poetry collection, *Hanging by the Fingers*, is inspired by the moment in film when “a character is holding onto a ledge or rope by his or her fingers. One by one, each finger loses its grip” (“Hanging by the Fingers”). My collection, at its core, centers on the complexity of relationships. I write about familial relationships—the uncertainty of childhood and the uncertainty of motherhood. I write about romantic relationships—what happens to a couple when their relationship falls into complacency. I write about how easy it is to feel uncertain about one’s relationship with God. Most of all, I write about how a woman relates to herself as a wife, mother and individual. In all of these relationships, it often feels as if we are dangling by our fingers, trying desperately to hold on as each finger loses its grip. When a character is dangling like that in film, sometimes there is an adversary peeling or stomping their fingers; sometimes there is an ally trying to pull the character back up to safety. *Hanging by the Fingers* is an apt title for this project because of its many possibilities—they lend themselves well to the complexity of relationships I explore. To introduce my collection further, I will discuss how my poetry is stylistically and thematically inspired by teachers and mentors, contemporary poets and critics, and the diverse genres of film and pop culture.

In “The Retrospect,” Ezra Pound writes, “be influenced by as many great artists as you can, but have the decency either to acknowledge the debt outright, or to try to conceal it” (5). Throughout my academic career, I have incurred quite a large debt by being inspired by countless writers, teachers and critics. My parents passed on their addiction to reading to me at a very young age, and my high school English teacher, Lenore Madden, then introduced me to more diverse writers, such as Adrienne Rich, Sylvia Plath, and even Chuck Palaniuk. Poetry drew me in more than any other genre, and subsequent mentors only expanded my love of

reading and writing poetry. Teachers such as Nancy Takacs and Star Coulbrooke inspired me to explore and experiment. Shanan Ballam, Ben Gunsberg and Michael Sowder helped me further hone my craft. Under these poets' tutelage, I came to understand that "writing, like life itself, is a voyage of discovery" (Miller 242) and that "it is the job of writers to bear witness to the truth" (Kowitz 23). *Hanging by the Fingers* is truly my attempt to discover the truth and write about it. Throughout my studies, I read poetry collections and essays on the craft of writing, and wrote as much as possible. I developed a love of poetry, as well as a dependence on it. Robert Frost said "a poem begins as a lump in the throat." Ever since I can remember, I had lumps in my throat. This thesis is my attempt to transform these "lumps" into art.

In terms of craft, I follow a plethora of great examples. I find that I'm drawn to the accessible language of Mary Oliver, Sharon Olds and others. In *A Thousand Mornings*, Oliver uses straightforward vocabulary to explore her personal relationship with nature. For example, the opening poem of *A Thousand Mornings* reads:

I go down to the shore in the morning
and depending on the hour the waves
are rolling in or moving out,
and I say, oh, I am miserable,
what shall—
what should I do? And the sea says
in its lovely voice:
Excuse me, I have work to do (1).

Because of the accessible language, every level of reader has the ability to appreciate Oliver's picturesque descriptions and insightful voice. Even so, underneath the seeming simplicity of the language, there lies a wealth of meaning. Likewise, in *Stag's Leap*, Olds' use of diction doesn't distract from her emotionally charged poems, but only enhances them:

It's so quiet,
and empty, when he's left. I feel like a landscape,

a ground without a figure (16).

There is something beautiful about the quiet word choice in Olds' collection, especially when it is paired with emotionally-charged content like divorce, as in *Stag's Leap*. The diction balances out the intense anger, confusion and loneliness.

Conversely, Pattiann Rogers uses complex scientific language which yields unique sound combinations and equally complex layers of meaning, as in this example from "Being of this State," found in her collection, *Firekeeper*:

Inside the network of the clearing, among the scratching
And skeetering, the thuz and the tremulous ching,
There is not one insect able to recognize the sound
Of its own beatification (17).

Rogers has the educational background which provides her an amazing vocabulary to choose from, and which suits her purposes perfectly—she celebrates the complexity of nature and all its machinations in *Firekeeper*. Oliver, on the other hand, appreciates the simplicity of nature and that it is always there for her when she needs it. Though their diction choices vary greatly, both poets are telling the truth about nature. I appreciate the craft of both, and have been inspired by both.

Like Olds and Oliver, much of the diction of my poetry is accessible. In "First Time," I describe a scene at Zion National Park with as much approachable language as I can, to better enhance the experience within the poem:

we layered our clothes and traipsed
climbing paths up through streamlets
of melting snow and ice run red
with sandstone mud, to the first
of three Emerald
pools half-frozen in transition
from winter to spring.

However, *Hanging by the Fingers* also includes poems that are reminiscent of Rogers' more intricate diction. In "The State of the Womb" I use more complicated, scientific language to compare a man-made intrauterine device with a similar-looking insect:

A plastic I.U.D. poses like a resting plume
moth in utero—cleft wings stretched
and rolled, a rod hanging perpendicular
to the body—fragile legs dangling
at the border of the cervix,
barely touching endometrium.

Though the word choice differs in "First Time" and "The State of the Womb," the diction adds to the success of each poem.

I have been inspired not only by Oliver's, Olds' and Rogers' use of diction, but also their narrative form—the way they each weave language and image in order to tell a story. Oliver's "Good-Bye Fox" is a perfect example of linear narrative:

He was lying under a tree, licking up the shade.

Hello again, Fox, I said.

And hello to you too, said Fox, looking up and
not bounding away (13).

The poem continues in a conversation between the speaker and the fox, and ends with the fox standing and walking away. The poem is a story, from beginning to end, with a setting and dialogue. Many of Olds' and Roger's poems are also written in a linear narrative form.

Conversely, in Louise Glück's collection, *The Wild Iris*, she exercises concision, withholds details of the narrative, and focuses more heavily on image and sound, which results in her poems having a more lyrical form. The following is an excerpt from the title poem of the collection, and shows how Glück doesn't use linear narrative to elicit emotion:

Overhead, noises, branches of the pine shifting.
Then nothing. The weak sun
flickered over the dry surface.

It is terrible to survive
as consciousness
buried in the dark earth (1).

Inspired by linear narrative and lyrical form, I utilize both in *Hanging by the Fingers*.

For example, “My Turn” is a narrative. The speaker discovers a black widow spider in her house and remembers how her mom used to deal with spiders found around her childhood home. The poem ends with the following lines:

A single pinpoint spider leg waves at me.
I raise my son’s boot and bring it down once,
hard.

The story concludes with the speaker following in her mother’s footsteps to protect her own children. “Bird Dragged Underwater,” however, is a lyrical poem which evokes the emotion of giving birth, without following a linear narrative. The story of the birth isn’t as important to the speaker as the emotion of that moment, enhanced by image and sound. In each case, the form chosen strengthens the meaning of the poem.

Another aspect of Glück’s *The Wild Iris* that I find inspirational to my own work is the way her poems vary in voice. She accomplishes this by adopting different personas; many of her poems are from the point of view of flowers, for example. Each flower has a different point of view and exudes a different personality and identity in a seemingly effortless way. While I don’t adopt personas in *Hanging by the Fingers*, I do vary the voice in my collection. Like Glück, I sometimes use an omniscient point of view to narrate a scene, like in my four “Punishment” poems. I also write poems using a conversational voice, as if the reader is listening in on one side of an exchange. For example, in “Yellow Bruises,” the reader may feel as if he or she is literally

hearing one side of a telephone conversation between two good friends:

I was shaving my legs for the first time in weeks and, you know how I bruise really easily? well, I noticed all these bruises on my legs, from the boys jumping on me or something—that’s how I bruise.

Because of the informal quality of the voice, readers may even feel as if the speaker is speaking directly to them. They may feel as if they know the speaker and that the speaker knows them.

Many of the poems in Lizzie Hutton’s *She’s Waited Millennia* begin as if the speaker is in the middle of a conversation, and the reader is just now able to listen in, like the first lines of “Exempla”:

Or take the actress Ann Todd in *The Seventh Veil*—
the smiling blinking eyes, laboring and trusting
at the facts that were kept, nonetheless, like her own mind,
distant from her knowing (13).

Conversational-style poems like Hutton’s create an intimacy between reader and speaker, and give the reader even more reason to pay attention.

Not only do my poems vary in voice, but they also vary in formatting. May Swenson is famous for the way she plays around with columns, page breaks, line breaks, white space, and punctuation. In the poems included in *The Love Poems of May Swenson*, she doesn’t remain wedded to one format; the format embodies the tone and theme of the poem it is paired with, and because of that, the form enhances the meaning. The majority of Swenson’s “Swimmers” is written in two columns, until the last stanza, which sits in the center:

smiles
of an exhaling
gladiator,
to the shore
of sleep (3).

Ending the poem in the center of the two columns seems to center the reader in a poem that

previously wasn't centered, but split in two. Many of May Swenson's poems are concrete representations of the dominant image or theme in the poem. "Fire Island" is formatted to look like waves, in order to mimic the wave imagery within. Likewise, my poem, "StairFlight" is formatted to look like a winding staircase the speaker is metaphorically running up.

Mark Neely implemented an interesting format for a series of poems included in his collection, *Beasts of the Hill*. These poems are formatted to look like windows, the white space acting like window panes. Each poem is fashioned into four separate squares and each box peaks into a moment in time or a single profound image. All four boxes work together to form a prose poem. Some of my poems in *Hanging by the Fingers* are inspired by Neely's four square poems, but instead of a window, they act as a door. Because I shape my "Punishment" poems into a doorway, the reader feels as if they are looking through an open door into the lives of Adam and his mom. I'm very drawn to poets who experiment with the format in their work because they are trying to innovate as they write. TJ Beitelman's series of "Curses" included in his collection, *In Order to Form a More Perfect Union*, are riddled with vertical dividers which manipulate the eye as you read.

I'm also drawn to another way in which Beitelman innovates in his collection.

In *In the Palm of Your Hand*, Steve Kowit writes,

When we think of the use of mythology in poetry, we often think of a poet alluding to some biblical character or Greek myth...but the mythic world of folk and fairy tales, of comic book heroes, soap opera characters, and old movies, can also be used by contemporary poets—indeed, those pop-mythology characters are often more effective figures because their significance is more fully a part of our popular culture" (92).

Beitelman utilizes the idea of pop-mythology in the fourth section of his collection, "Pilgrims: A Love Story." He turns actor Jude Law and author Gabriel Garcia Marquez (more affectionately, "Gabo") into mythic figures and sends them on a journey of discovery together:

They finish it, the two of them sweating in the unbearable sun. Jude wants to ask once more what It is, but he doesn't dare. The old man is buoyed by something Jude just doesn't get ("Cathedral" 90).

Tracy K. Smith uses pop culture figures in her Pulitzer-Prize winning collection, *Life on Mars*, in which David Bowie makes an appearance, as well as Charlton Heston. I love Beitelman and Smith's utilization of pop mythology because I've always been drawn to film, television and pop culture. These poets are able to make connections and comparisons in the reader's mind, and surprise them by taking something familiar and writing about it in an unexpected way.

I strive to do the same in my "trope" poems. Instead of using pop mythology figures like Kowitz suggests, I use tropes from film and television as inspiration. A trope is "a common or overused theme or device" ("Trope") or "devices or conventions that a writer can reasonably rely on as being present in the audience members' minds and expectations" ("Home Page"). Tropes are expected and accepted by the audience; they're comfortable, enjoyable, and people can relate to them on a personal level. Tropes "reflect life" ("Home Page"). The five trope poems I've included in *Hanging by the Fingers* are inspired by new media tropes, as defined and collected by Tvtripes.org, an online community dedicated to studying tropes found in new media. Tvtripes.org "collects and expands descriptions and examples on various conventions and devices (tropes) found in creative works," such as film, television, video games and graphic novels ("TV Tropes").

While I take inspiration from these tropes, I attempt to follow the example of Beitelman and Smith by using them in unexpected ways in order to surprise the reader. The reader will have expectations when it comes to specific tropes, like the "Bolt of Divine Retribution" trope or the "Falling in Love Montage" trope, but I hearken back to the origin of trope, "to turn, to direct, to alter, to change" ("Trope (literature)") by exploring how life doesn't follow our expectations.

Art reflects life, but life doesn't always reflect art. By turning these tropes on their heads, I use the audience's expectations to challenge and surprise them.

For example, the poem "Blessed" is inspired by the moment in film when a character challenges God and is subsequently struck by lightning in order to remind them who's boss because "annoying the Lord of the cosmos...tends to invoke his wrath" ("Bolt of Divine Retribution"). Instead of simply writing a poem that outlines this particular trope, I manipulate the meaning by having the speaker react to being struck by lightning in a positive way—she thinks the lightning is a blessing from God. In film, the character is often charred but otherwise unhurt because oftentimes the lightning strike is meant to be comedic. The speaker in "Blessed" instead experiences intense physical trauma as a result of the strike, and realizes that the lightning isn't a blessing from God, but evidence that she is no different from anyone else in God's eyes:

But I'm only an electrified skeleton, scarred
in fractal patterns of burst blood vessels, frizzled
brain matter, ruptured
eardrums. Next to many of the same,
I perpetually circumvolve
in your plasma globe.

By adding such seriousness to the poem, the imagery of being struck by lightning is more surprising. "Where I Stand" is also inspired by a film trope that appears again and again in comedies. "A character decides to vent some pent-up complaints about another character and the subject of their frustrations manages to arrive on scene *just* in time to overhear the best parts of it, if not the whole thing" ("Right Behind Me"). What follows is the main character saying the classic line: *He's standing right behind me, isn't he?* This dialogue usually gains a big laugh from the audience. To counter the comedy of this trope, I decided to substitute the second

character in the scene with God, so when the character says that He is “standing right *behind* me, / all the time,” there is a sinister feeling that accompanies the realization. God changes from someone the speaker “should confide in” into someone who is lurking just behind her.

My third trope poem is not as serious as the previous two. It is common in romantic comedies for the two characters who and meet and fall in love through a series of clips accompanied by an upbeat song. “Falling-in-Love Montage” is based on scenes like this; however, my poem is written in a sarcastic voice to show the unlikeliness that this is really the way we fall in love in real life. The ending of the poem is also sarcastic, suggesting that the “Happily Ever After” that inevitably comes at the end of a romantic comedy might not be very likely either:

and then,
the Happily-Ever-After Montage
kicks off, like clockwork.

“StairFlight” is based on a common scene in action films in which a character is being pursued up a spiral staircase. Instead of having a hero chase a villain or a villain chase a hero as is customary, I turn the trope into a sort of love poem. The speaker is going to follow the person running up the stairs, no matter what: “if / you / keep running / I / ’ll / keep running.”

Lastly, the title poem of the collection, “Hanging by the Fingers” is a retelling of another common scene from action films. A character finds themselves hanging by their fingers off a ledge or rope. Instead of having the character desperately trying to climb back to safety, however, I wrote the character so that they think they are safe there. They would rather hang by their fingers than either fall or try to climb back up. It’s not long, though, before the building begins to crumble out from under them. “Hanging by the Fingers” is my attempt to capture the way life has a way of crumbling underneath us, making it impossible to remain complacent.

What I love about my trope poems is that the reader doesn't need to be aware of the specific trope being used as inspiration. Whether they realize it or not, they are familiar with what's happening to an extent because they've seen it again and again in film and television. In *In the Palm of Your Hand* Steve Kowit asks, "How, for example, does one remain honest, avoiding the platitudes and stock responses that come from what we are told we are supposed to feel?" (207). Tropes are used in film because they complete the audience's expectations and elicit a stock response. My poems, however, are meant to challenge and surprise.

My trope poems also reveal the major themes that dominate my collection as a whole. Like Mary Oliver, Sharon Olds, May Swenson and others discussed in this introduction, I explore the complexity of familial, romantic and spiritual relationships. What I strive to do more than anything is tell the truth about the complicated emotions that interweave these relationships. In Louise Glück's "Against Sincerity," she establishes a difference between being sincere about an actual experience, and "the transformation of the actual to the true," truth being an "embodied vision, illumination, or enduring discovery." In order to do this, Glück writes that poets need to have a "conscious willingness to distinguish truth from honesty or sincerity." Being sincere is easier and the pressure is off. However, "the source of art is experience, the end product truth, and the artist, surveying the actual, constantly intervenes and manages, lies and deletes, all in the service of truth" (34). Not every poem in my collection is taken from experience, but I hope every poem has truth in it, nevertheless. In this introduction, I've discussed how I admire conflicting approaches to diction and form. But, as Richard Hugo suggests, "to write a poem you must have a streak of arrogance...by arrogance I mean that when you are writing you must assume that the next thing you put down belongs not for reasons of logic, good sense, or narrative development, but because you put it there" (5). The poets I look up to have a way of

manipulating diction, form, formatting, and inspiration in order to write the truth. *Hanging by the Fingers* is my attempt to do the same.

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