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## A Collection for a Better Misunderstanding

Mark Smeltzer

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A COLLECTION FOR A BETTER MISUNDERSTANDING

by

Mark Smeltzer

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

English

Approved:

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UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY  
Logan, Utah

2021

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## ABSTRACT

A Collection for a Better Misunderstanding

by

Mark Smeltzer

Utah State University, 2021

Major Professor: Dr. Michael Sowder  
Department: English

Creative forms of expression work to connect us with the world, while also binding us to our own unique experiences. This thesis uses varying forms of poetry to portray the contradictory desires I hold: those of understanding and alienation. I draw inspiration directly and more subtly from poets such as Charles Bukowski, Sylvia Plath, May Swenson, and others. This collection operates with the assertion that different forms and styles accomplish different goals. Some may clarify a difficult thought or experience; others reflect the messiness and fragmentation of our lived experiences.

Part One of this collection seeks to reclaim the foggiest parts of a mind in healing. More traditional forms suggest a need for order and control while making sense of faint feelings and fleeting memories. With this more direct approach, I hope to be understood by the reader and by myself. Part Two breaks away from this concrete tone as the poems focus more on invoking the pains of mental illness. The risk of losing the reader with more erratic forms and abstractions rises sharply, until the collection ends with a more resolute understanding of the need for solitude.

(42 pages)

## PUBLIC ABSTRACT

## A Collection for a Better Misunderstanding

Mark Smeltzer

What if being understood becomes even more dreadful than being isolated? This collection of poetry stands between two extremes, using form and language to reflect the struggle of living on a continuum between being understood and being alone. By echoing the direct style of poets like Charles Bukowski and Mark Strand, as well as more abstract figures like May Swenson and Sylvia Plath, this collection asserts that the contradictions we carry can coexist, and even complement one another.

Part One features original poetry that relies on the senses to recover old memories. A direct style in Part One seeks to gain common ground with the reader. Part Two, however, drifts away from this goal in favor of abstraction. As each poem adopts more unconventional forms, those forms work to reflect an alienated mind.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Mark Smeltzer

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## INTRODUCTION

I'm afraid I don't have a fortifying summer or a pivotal proclamation to justify my writing focus. *Justify*. I don't know a writer whose insides don't rebel at the thought of justifying their work. Yet, we all do it. In this collection, I even use imagery to justify my perspective to the reader. I admire and stingingly envy writers who can write of an epiphany. Or, at least, they keep in their pockets a moment of extreme clarity and purpose that guides them. When I say that I am afraid I don't have such a story, I do not mean that I am sorry or that I worry. It is a fear in the most naked, vulnerable sense. Where others have their road to Damascus or burning bush, I can only smell the smoke on my shirt and rub my yellow eyes. I am in perpetual search of the tangible. For answers. For things. I don't claim to be the only one who does this. Far from it. However, the mental illness that leaves me wondering what I had for breakfast also provides me with an opportunity to explore a life marked by alienation.

In the spirit of the topic, I feel I should also disclose the mental illness that severely impacts me, and in particular, my memory. Mental illness can at times serve as a catalyst to my poetry, while other times it is my greatest foe. It drives my use of metaphor and reliance on abstraction when remembering is difficult. However, it also fuels my aversion to metaphor when lucid memories come forth. When I hear the phrase "show, don't tell" thrown around, I am reminded of the fact that I can hardly recall what I had for breakfast some days or the appointment I told my wife about twenty minutes ago. How can I expect myself to recall a fleshy, poetically significant scene from childhood



that shows a reader what I want to convey? When I finally pluck up the nerve to plainly state an experience, the thought of tucking it behind metaphors and allusions the reader must then decipher can feel like a second silencing.

While it is true that poetry is not necessarily biographical, I cannot help but notice that recollective spark largely missing from my work, that tinge that the reader recognizes as being inspired by the writer's memory. Nonetheless, I also continually push myself to reach across the no-man's land that separates language from ineffable, oft-forgotten experiences. Mental illness could be considered a limitation (and in all honesty, proves to be just that at times). However, it is not enough for me to merely write about mental illness as a hindrance. Instead, I treat this illness as a crucial part of my writerly existence and perspective.

Even poetry cannot seem to touch the ineffable parts of life—that is to say, most of it. Inevitable shortcomings of any language present a unique challenge to writers. When I am struck by a panic attack or the fog of a PTSD episode, any attempt to describe the sensation feels hopelessly inadequate. Luckily, there is more to poetry than showing and telling. My thesis also makes use of form to convey what words could not. I hope to take the idea of “reading between the lines” to its terminus in the same way that noise gives silence its power, using form to bring those the limits of language into relief.

This approach to poetry also offers my audience and me another key benefit. Together, we can recognize the inaccessibility of certain writing as something other than a mere code to be cracked. Instead, language can serve to insulate experiences from an audience too eager to understand something they cannot. As demonstrated in Claudia Rankine's lyric *Citizen*, honoring one's experiences often means alienating readers.

Reader's conclusions come not in the form of connecting with the writer, but in the realization that we are not entitled to a seamless understanding of her experiences.

Indeed, this is rarely possible, if even desirable at all. Similarly, I invite readers to grow comfortable with the competing desires of human connection and distance. For example, in "Ricky Ray Rector," I explore the consequences of mental illness by intimating, but not explicitly stating, the issue at hand. Those touched by mental illness in their lives may immediately resonate with the implications of a death row inmate thinking he can save his dessert for later. Other readers may be more frustrated by this notion of obscuring.

Poet Rainer Maria Rilke speaks of love as an act of two solitudes protecting each other (45). This notion permeates my writing. Yes, we crave connection. We cry out in the hopes of being heard and, ultimately, understood. But I also do not want the reader to think that I crave their understanding in every case. A little knowledge is indeed a dangerous thing, which makes the reader's desire to "get it" that much more tempting to indulge. Ultimately, my thesis probes the limits of language and the inevitable alienation that ensues. The question that remains for me is whether I must alienate the reader to honor an ineffable experience or vice versa.

My thesis gives the reader a choice to make as well: How far they are willing to go to connect with the poem. It is my understanding that two common purposes for reading creative works are to understand others and to feel understood. My thesis engages with an important conversation that cuts to these core assumptions of the relationship between writer and reader. My thesis seeks to bring the contradicting desires to connect and to be distinct into greater relief. I also anticipate the ultimate irony of these desires: once a reader recognizes the solitary nature of a poem in my thesis, they may—hopefully,

they do—connect with me in a mutual alienation from others. I do not argue for a solution to this contradiction; in fact, the undercurrent of my thesis is the belief that these contradicting feelings do not need to be resolved.

## STRUCTURE AND FORM

Individual poems in my thesis vary broadly in form, so it is split into two parts. Part One will reflect my desire to be understood. On the spectrum of “show don’t tell,” this section focuses heavily on showing or attempting to show. For those living with mental illness, for example, it is a common struggle to make their illness visible and understandable to others. “Performance” or justification of one kind or another is often used to make others understand. Poetry is one form of performance, one that I use to demonstrate the desire to be understood, even if it is not fully possible.

Part Two drifts away from the desire to justify my trauma. Instead, the ensuing poems become less accessible, as they grow nearer in accuracy to feelings of my own experience. Labeling my poetry “inaccessible” can easily become an excuse for work that lacks substance and intent. I accept the risk of that interpretation and do not doubt that readers who don’t have previous knowledge of my intent may not accept this reasoning.

Contents of this thesis largely explore mental illness, including the struggle to feel understood. The implied corollary behind this struggle is the question, *is understanding even possible or desirable?* Rilke argues that the inability to make poetry out of the ordinary is the mark of an inferior poet (17). Poems like “My Toy Mower” invite readers with a clear, sensation-driven scene that attempts to reclaim a bit of innocence. My poems tend, however, to move into abstraction and association, reflecting the erratic and burdensome way my mind mal(functions).

## INFLUENCES, INSPIRATIONS

My thesis orbits the competing desires of sameness and solitude, as well as the power of what Rilke dubs “a child’s wise incomprehension” (36). The ability to face incomprehension allows us to see the beauty in and preserve the borders of human otherness. This has become an increasingly difficult balance to strike in recent years, as society struggles to combat the tribalism that breeds fear and hatred toward those unlike us. Consequently, we may rush to achieve an understanding of experiences that are not ours, and, with the best intentions, violate the solitude of those with which we hope to find commonality. If incomprehension means being alone, as Rilke says, then such a solitude must find a way to make itself known in poetry.

Few can express the pain and beauty of alienation quite like Claudia Rankine, whose lyric collection *Citizen*, offers readers a polarizing form:

Words work as release—well-oiled doors opening and closing between intention, gesture. A pulse in a neck, the shiftiness of the hands, an unconscious blink, the conversations you have with your eyes translate everything and nothing. What will be needed, what goes unfelt, unsaid—what has been duplicated, redacted here, redacted there, altered to hide or disguise—words encoding the bodies they cover. And despite everything the body remains.

Occasionally it is interesting to think about the outburst if you would just cry out—

To know what you'll sound like is worth noting— (Rankine 69)

Rankine's book takes the subtitle, "An American Lyric," for a reason. However, I will emulate what I see as the intent of this form rather than the form itself. The alienation of the form in *Citizen* is not fabricated. Rather, Rankine attempts to make visible the all-too-real alienation she sees and feels in her own life. I hope my poems do not frustrate readers just for the sake of being difficult. Instead, I take a calculated risk by sharing my frustrations in the form.

Other works that inform my thesis range from creative inspiration to poignant fact-finding. For example, the poems of Sylvia Plath masterfully model how to lend words to the struggles of mental illness. The poem "Daddy," for example remains an infamous classic that pushes the boundaries of metaphor to reflect the speaker's darkest, most honest feelings about her father. While steeped in controversial comparisons of her life under her father to the Holocaust, I would hesitate to call it hyperbole. In the speaker's mind, nothing in this world could ever compare to her experiences. Whether readers find her comparisons of childhood trauma to a genocide outrageous does not change the poet's feelings about those horrific years. Moreover, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* are an indispensable peek behind that curtain. The collection of journals is a demonstration of what Plath could not—or did not want to—say to others. In private, Plath often struggles to make sense of her thoughts, feelings, and experiences. These struggles are not unique to Plath, but to contrast her unpublished writings with her published work has had a powerful effect on me.

The relationship between writer and reader is also of great interest to me. In fact, I often reflect on my relationship with a text even at the expense of the author's intended purpose for the piece. The meta-fiction *If On a Winter's Night a Traveler* by Italo Calvino challenges readers in a way I admire in a text. The novel places you as the central character, in search of the missing chapters of a book with the same title. The novel alternates between your storyline and that of each new chapter you discover. Unfortunately, each chapter you discover turns out to be the first chapter of a distinct, unfamiliar novel, which you never get the chance to continue. Calvino creates tension by constantly interrupting the normal expectation of reader immersion. You are rarely allowed to forget you are reading a novel. In doing so, he challenges readers to examine their motives.

In his review of *Winter's Night*, journalist Nicolas Celnik distills a few key questions the novel explores:

Calvino has sown a few theoretical seeds, as for when he wonders about who is the ideal reader: is it someone who fits the desires of the writer, or someone whose desires the writer senses and struggles to match? Calvino also explores the new possibilities offered by the digital humanities, wondering what the most used words of a text reveal about it: is it a pertinent way of doing researches in literature? Another thread of reflection: why does the reader keep on trying to read the novel? And, upon discovering that his new book isn't the novel he wanted, why does he still read it? (medium.com).

These questions are not just important for the reader to consider, but the writer as well. My thesis encourages the reader to examine why they read what they do; what they want to achieve; and how their goals compare to those of the writer. Conversely, my thesis will also explore why the writer writes, and how that motive can change. Am I trying to make sense of my experiences? Do I seek validation and understanding from others? Or, do I want others to recognize what I feel can never bridge that gap in human connection?

Charles Bukowski, in contrast, is lauded for his approachability and relatability, chiefly through a sparing, plain, and gritty style. Bukowski's candor elicits complex emotions in readers all the same. Take, for example, the poem "The Look" from his collection *The Pleasures of the Damned*:

I once bought a toy rabbit  
at a department store  
and now he sits and ponders  
me with pink sheer eyes:

He wants golf balls and glass  
walls.  
I want quiet thunder.

Our disappointment sits between us. (321).

Bukowski demonstrates his ability to find significance in the ordinary. Readers do not necessarily need to know why the speaker of this poem is disappointed. Bukowski gives us few clues to go on. Yet, the poem succeeds in eliciting feelings of lost innocence, nostalgia, and the childhood staple of imbuing toys with human qualities. Similarly, Part One of my thesis models this style in the hopes of distilling otherwise murky memories. In "Co-evolution," I do not censor the actions and words I experience



and take extra care to uncensor what my mind would naturally repress. My thesis will adhere to the same notion of finding meaning in the mundane. Bukowski's understated, matter-of-fact delivery also influences how I explore more vivid, often painful scenes and memories. If the poem "Daddy" by Sylvia Plath sits on one end of the confessional poetry spectrum, Bukowski's "the bakers of 1935" is on the other:

...and as we left the market  
 we always stopped  
 outside  
 where there was a large  
 window  
 where we could see the  
 bakers  
 kneading  
 the flour into the dough...

...“those men have jobs,”  
 my father would say.  
 he said it each time.  
 every time we watched  
 the bakers he would say  
 that. (211-12)

The poem tells a story in Bukowski's signature concrete way. To Bukowski, a concrete observation is just as powerful as, if not more than, an abstraction. It just depends on the details he selects. Later in the poem, the speaker's father and mother get into a fight when his father suggests robbing a bank so they can eat steak instead of government stuffs. In my poem, "Where Childhoods Go to Die," the speaker is also a child placed in a position that compromises his innocence. In this instance, it seems that clarity and frugality best reflect the experiences of a child filtered through an adult mind.

The speaker in Bukowski's poem, decidedly a young boy, watches the argument ensue:

“I’ll hold something in my  
coat, I’ll pretend it’s a gun!”

“I’ve got a water pistol,”  
I said, “you can use that.”

my father looked at me.  
“you,” he said, “SHUT UP!” (214)

As a heavy influence on the more prosaic side of my writing, Bukowski succeeds in drawing out painful memories from the speaker, and in turn myself. The memories themselves help me develop my concrete scenes from childhood. But they also remind me of the way children absorb the world around them. While the age of the speaker at the time of the poem is not revealed, the blunt observation of specific details mirrors that of his childlike self:

I walked outside.  
I sat on the back steps.  
I could hear them in there  
talking but I couldn’t quite make it  
out...

I got up from the steps.  
walked away into the  
afternoon. (214)

Bukowski serves as a moderating influence on my writing, and an illustrative reminder of the power of restraint. His poems also put into practice the advice of Rilke to see the poetic potential that surrounds us, wherever we are.

I also owe much inspiration to poets who model frustration with their own self-awareness and inability to immerse themselves in the present. Sabrina Benaim’s collection *Depression and Other Magic Tricks* often reminds me of the sort of grounding

exercises a therapist would recommend. The poem “girl beside you” reads like a mundane summary of a ride on the subway:

curly hair is watching  
 the girl standing  
 diagonally  
 across from her  
     *let's call her crimson lipstick*  
 do the cross word  
 crimson lipstick is wearing  
 headphones  
 & holding  
 an enviable focus  
 in her eyes  
 which are  
 entirely absorbed  
 in the puzzle (24).

The poem maintains this tone, because it is not trying to be anything more than an observation. The speaker reveals the purpose for this tone, however, in the final stanza:

i don't know how to connect in a world like this;  
 in times like these,  
 where I can't even speak about myself in first person. (25)

Therapists often ask patients who struggle with anxiety and depression to observe and make lists in the present tense. While this final stanza brings out an unpleasant thought, the speaker succeeds in staying present, a major hurdle for many living with trauma and mental illness. It is true that this poem, among many in this collection, commit quite a few poetic infractions. She probably should avoid passive verbs whenever possible. However, the speaker of this poem is herself a spectator of her own life, conveyed by the passivity of her observation. Throughout this collection, Benaim holds true to her depiction of a speaker learning to embrace the world in front of her.

Where Benaim explores the catharsis of being present, other influences for this collection could not be farther from the concrete. Slovenian poet Tomaž Šalamun, widely regarded as avant-garde, achieves a stylistic range of hyper-vivid specificity to abstraction after abstraction. The poem “What is What” overflows with awe towards an unknown subject, only referred to as “that”:

that is lovely  
 that is extremely lovely  
 that is so astonishingly lovely it strikes one dumb...

...that is so lovely that everything in the vicinity becomes less lovely  
 that is lovely and amen  
 that is lovely (15)

Šalamun employs little variety, but gives readers much to think about all the same. It may not be possible without personal context to decode this poem. Using the title as a clue, the speaker could be simply calling the word “what” lovely, presumably because of the definition and connotations of the word. Perhaps, the speaker is so enamored by an unnamed subject that he forgot how to use words; this poem was all he could muster in its presence. In either case, when faced with such a confounding poem, I choose to trust Šalamun’s wise incomprehension. After the reader embraces this uncomfortable position, it possible that whatever the lovely thing is is not nearly as impactful as the ecstatic stupor evoked by this poem. I don’t think it is controversial to say Šalamun is not trying to reach as wide of an audience as possible with poems like “What is What.” I do, however, become inspired to experiment similarly when I see that meaning can be derived from the even the most ineffable experiences.

In contrast to the sense of logical abandon of Šalamun, Mark Strand’s *New Selected Poems* helps breathe clarity and concision back into my poetry. The beauty and

impact of Strand's poems largely stem of the importance he places on each word and syllable. A foil to this collection similar to Bukowski, Strand has influenced the way I perceive control in my writing. Strand also models what it is like the straddle the line between knowing "the rules" and breaking them. Poems like "Pot Roast" follow a conventional pattern and style:

I gaze upon the roast,  
that is sliced and laid out  
on my plate,  
all over it  
I spoon the juices  
of carrot and onion.  
And for once I do not regret  
the passage of time. (150)

The scene unfolds neatly before us. Punchy verbs do so much in a compact space. And the stanza ends with a beautiful and suggestive observation. Contrast this stanza, now, to the first lines of Strand's poem, "Poor North":

It is cold, the snow is deep,  
the wind beats around in its cage of trees,  
clouds have the look of rags torn and soiled with use,  
and starlings peck at the ice.  
It is north, poor north. Nothing goes right. (149)

"It is..." is a classic poor first impression, made worse (conventionally speaking) by "the snow is deep" directly following. The concluding line does little but generalize, perhaps foreshadow. Yet Strand does all this because he must understand the need that overrides the rule. Passivity lingers in this short poem. The inhabitants of St. Margaret's Bay, from the couple leaning in the wind, to the geese, can do nothing but brace for winter. Even north itself succumbs to the elements. Strands range and clarity inspire me, particularly in Part One, to write with intent.

Kate Zambreno's lyric novel *Book of Mutter* guides me in the ways of conveying grief, trauma, and the associative nature of memory. In addition to Zambreno's nonlinear form, she also relies heavily on white space to say through silence what words cannot. The power of a blank page is so unique, the use of words to describe it only outlines the effect, and with diminishing returns (shall I try to *quote* the white space employed between pages 36 and 39? What does an MLA citation of white space look like?) The difficulty in deciphering and communicating white space turns out to be a potent representation of the ineffable. In poems like "Sessions with Dr. Aller Always End the Same" and "I'm Confused, Too" use white space to signal changes in who is speaking or thinking. We are rather limited in how we portray dialogue to the reader. Authentically messy dialogue can quickly become inaccessible to the reader. However, I believe it must be attempted anyway, or else I would be depriving an audience of the truth we all say we want in the name of accessibility.

I also draw inspiration from sources that serve a variety of vital functions in the development of my thesis. Collections and individual poems cited provide further creative inspiration, as well as lend scholarly credibility to the concepts I use as springboards in my thesis. One author, in particular, May Swenson, achieves both functions in her *Collected Poems*. Specific poems like "Question" and "The Centaur" are evocative explorations of mind, body, and identity. My poems, "Quo Warranto" and "Lessons from a Trout," expand on Swenson's reflections of nature. Her poems often express dissatisfaction with the material form to which she is bound. Similarly, these noted poems in my thesis reflect the speaker's desire to see the world uninterrupted by human limitations. Meanwhile, Swenson's published essays provide key insights and

arguments that justify my approach. Of special interest to me is Swenson's commitment to ambiguity and fluidity of identity. Questions like "who am I?" and even "what am I?" abound in this collection. The importance of asking the right questions, whether answers are possible, pervades her work. Swenson elaborates and expands on all these concepts in the essays that close out the collection.

Unsurprisingly, I still leave myself with a curse of contradictions. Somehow, the clearest, most blunt poets I admire are also the most confounding for me. The poems that are arguably the most accessible makes my chosen task more difficult. I greatly appreciate, though often fail to understand, how such clarity is produced from something as mired as a human experience. On the other hand, the least grounded, most unconventional often resonate with me the most, even if I cannot always articulate why. There is something cruelly poetic about the inability to understand the simplest things.