Writing the Rupture: Representations of Invisible Disabilities in Contemporary U.S. American Poetry

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Title: Writing the Rupture: Representations of Invisible Disabilities in Contemporary U.S. American Poetry

This dissertation examines the intersections of contemporary US American poetry and invisible, or imperceptible, disabilities, seeking to make necessary interventions in current poetic and disability studies. It focuses on a few disabilities that, in addition to being physically invisible, are also "socially" invisible (or misunderstood): deafness; obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD); and asthma and allergies. For each of these disabilities there are outward perceptions of "normalcy" until that perception is shattered by way of interruption, or what I term the moment of "rupture."

In recent years, disability scholars have pointed to the poem as an ideal medium in which to represent disability, citing its capacity for "embodiment," and as contemporary US American poetry is thus far characterized by its attention to identity, it serves as a fruitful space for this kind of humanistic project. While the poetic canon at large has grown more diverse, disability is still underrepresented, and even in literary disability circles, invisible disabilities are sorely overlooked. This dissertation investigates how these disabilities and identities appear in the space and performance of US American poetry, focusing on the moments at which they cease to be invisible and "rupture" poetic convention. In addition, this project also serves to itself *be* a rupture in existing disability and US American poetry scholarship.

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Introduction

This dissertation excavates representations of invisible disabilities in contemporary (US) American poetry (~1945-present), focusing principally on living poets. In a largely heterogenous (cisgender, male, nondisabled) literary landscape, poets writing from the margins face steeper odds when it comes to representation, especially if one of those embodiments or identities is disability. This becomes further complicated if those disabilities are "invisible," or imperceptible, whether literally, socially, or—as is the case for the disabilities included in this project—both. For such individuals, this invisibility is compounded by bigotry and stigma; it moves beyond literal and social conceptions and into medical ones, often resulting in no, delayed, or misdiagnosis and trauma. In this project, I analyze poetic representations of deafness; obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD); and asthma and allergies in contemporary (U.S.) American poetry. For each of these disabilities there are social perceptions of normalcy, or *normativity,* until that perception is shattered by way of interruption, or what I term the moment of "rupture." For example, deafness cannot be seen, but the use of sign language can, or deafness may become known in a poem with more tactile or visual language rather than attention to rhyme. Such moments signal a shift in perception from "normal" to "abnormal," rendering the invisibly disabled person suddenly precarious. In the "nothing about us without us" spirit of the disability community and queer and feminist scholars, these disabilities and identities were selected autoethnographically, or with respect to my personal experiences. I am hard-of-hearing and spent a significant portion of my childhood and teenage years involved in the Deaf Community, and I similarly have severe allergies and asthma, and am diagnosed with OCD and ADHD.

These moments of invisibility and rupture translate into the space and performance of contemporary US American poetry, and I read work by poets with these identities and disabilities for the same kinds of ruptures that occur in their social, physical lives. Contemporary US American poetry not only builds upon the Whitmanesque and confessional traditions of writing the body and self, but also expands it, creating abundant possibility for what poems can be and who gets to make them. Here is a space for activism, resistance, and representation for those whose experiences have been historically excluded from the canon. This especially rings true for those invisibly disabled poets who are multiply marginalized. For example, in woman-identifying OCD poet Emily Paige Wilson's poem, "A Treatise of Hypochondria (i)," Wilson asserts her space by taking it from a man (George Cheyne), the poem composed of excised text from his medical book that describes hypochondria in misogynistic terms like "hysteria." Her poem begins: "Treat all bones / as Vapours all skin / as dance" (1). Wilson's poem produces a rupture in a few ways: in her reappropriation of Cheyne's text as a woman who would not have been given the authority to speak to her own condition, and in the claiming of that condition (hypochondria) literally, without metaphor. Wilson, a disabled woman, forgoes male authority and expectations of shame, literally rupturing Cheyne's own text as she ruptures, by publishing within, an overwhelmingly nondisabled (cisgender) male literary landscape.

Finally, poetry is an important place to consider disability and identity because of its capacity for embodiment. More than prose, the shape of the poem is malleable, meaning and logic(s) changing depending on the formal elements in play. Returning to Wilson's poem, enjambment and lack of punctuation create multiple potentialities for meaning. "Treat all bones" could be a standalone instruction, but changes after the break to a second meaning: "as Vapours." Without a comma, "as Vapours" runs into "all skin," which could mean the

"Vapours" *are* "skin." However, a final shift occurs after the line break with "as dance," reassigning "skin" to "dance." The poem's body makes space for different kinds of knowing and being, and a disability poetics of embodiment allows for the dis/location of the literal body as the primary medium for interpretation, ontology, and epistemology. In this way, the poem, with its constant re/making or meaning, gives OCD logic(s) a body where they can run rampant and construct their own realities outside the human bodymind.

Somewhat ironically, this sense of the poetic body and embodiment is also where possibilities for a disability poetics of *dis*embodiment enters. A crip poetics of disembodiment allows for the intangible to construct its own logics, pace its own sporadic, nonlinear narratives. On the page, invisible disabilities can live outside the body, make their own rules, have an agency that the physical body cannot always offer. For example, in asthmatic poet Elizabeth Bishop's poem "O Breath," the agency of breathing is shifted from the physical body to the body of the poem in the form of caesuras. Rather than occurring at more natural places to pause for breath, Bishop's caesuras are often interruptions (or ruptures) in the cadence of a line, coming at moments that force a kind of breathing awareness, allowing the poem, not the body, to initiate breath. A disembodied poetics gives invisible disabilities a space to construct their own bodies that can shift and change at will, according to their desires and compulsions; bodies that—as the invisibly disabled body is suddenly rendered legible by the use of sign language, a compulsion, or an inhaler—move from a state of imperceptibility to one of poetic rupture.

Defining the Rupture

Two days after the poet Bernadette Mayer died, another poet—the Cyborg Jillian Weise—took to Facebook to share a story about Mayer.[1] Weise writes that Mayer was one, if not

[1] Note: Weise uses the pronoun "cy."

the only, openly disabled poet of her generation, and that cy did not realize it until cy saw Mayer's name in the table of contents of *Beauty is a Verb: The New Poetry of Disability*. Weise notes this as especially significant:

> There are so many poets of Mayer's generation who are, in fact, disabled. But dare not identify as disabled. It's a whisper. It's a secret-not-secret. These poets wear the abled prosthetic and aesthetic. They don't want to be "KNOWN AS" [sic] disabled. As if their proximity to disability, and to us disabled poets, might sully their reputation. Reputation is not something Bernadette Mayer ever cared much about. (Weise)

In example of Mayer's apathy for her reputation, Weise recalls a luncheon cy and Mayer both attended at the 2008 Poetry of the Decades Conference at the University of Maine – Orono, where Mayer was a keynote speaker. Weise describes the event as "fussy," with fancy tablecloths and utensils and a strict agenda. But as the president of the university began to address the audience from the stage, speaking with "unbelievable ableism," cy writes,

> Bernadette started howling with laughter. The President stopped speaking. Looked out at the audience, as if maybe he told a joke. Bernadette continued to laugh; riotously, loudly, interruptively. People began to whisper at their tables, "What is happening?" and "What is Bernadette doing?" The President could not continue speaking to us. He just fobbled offstage. And once he was offstage, Bernadette stopped laughing and continued eating lunch. (Weise)

Mayer showed Weise that cy was in a "play," though cy had not known it. That moment revealed to Weise that cy's entire academic life, the conference included, "was a performance," and "mainly for abled types." Mayer's outburst of laughter revealed to Weise that the rules and realities disabled academics are expected to adhere to ("Be quiet when they say be quiet. Listen When they say listen. Be hearing…Be sighted. Build your stage without a ramp…etc.") could be flouted, ignored: "we could laugh at them" (Weise). Mayer's unprompted, un-self-conscious laughter in the face of ableist decorum is what I would call a moment of disabled *rupture*. Mayer, whose disability was invisible, suddenly made her difference known. Even if others in

the room did not immediately think of her laughter as disability, Mayer's laughter was disabled laughter; it caused a friction in the room, an interruption, a disruption of convention—a *rupture*. A rupture is a bump, a wrinkle, a break in the stillness; it is a sudden awareness of difference and tension where before there was none.

My definition of the rupture also takes partial inspiration from the philosophical work of Emmanuel Levinas. In *Ethics and Infinity*, a book of interviews conducted on Radio France-Culture in February and March of 1981, Levinas discusses "the face of the Other," which he describes in many of his essays as the literal face of another, but more than that, "the most naked, most destitute," most vulnerable, and most "exposed" aspect of the other's being (86). Further, in the essays in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas writes that "The face is a living presence; it is expression…The face speaks," and "presents itself, and demands justice" (66, 294). Put more simply, to be confronted by the Other's face is to recognize the Other's humanity—and humanity, Levinas says, "is a rupture of being" (*Ethics*, 87). In the same interview, Levinas describes the Other's face in terms of the way it signifies and is signified. He explains that "The face is signification, and signification without context. Ordinarily one is a 'character'…And all signification in the usual sense of the term is relative to such a context: the meaning of something in relation to another thing. Here, to the contrary, the face is meaning all by itself…it is uncontainable" (86-87).

While I depart from Levinas here (as well as from semiotics more generally), I find in his work a fruitful way to think about the way disability becomes signified and signifies itself. Disability as a holistic category participates in this kind of self-meaning-making, the disabled body a question always already asked by its very existence, but certain disabilities' invisibility complicates that meaning, sense slipping closer to non-sense in terms of normative expectations

and understanding. What I mean is that while all disabled people are to some degree hieroglyphic to those who are non-disabled, the imperceptibly disabled person is illegible to the normate[2] in a way that more visibly disabled people are not. For better or worse, to the normate, the visibly disabled body is its own symbol; it represents and signifies itself, albeit often imperfectly. For example, not everyone who uses an accessible parking space, denoted by the image of a wheelchair, is a wheelchair user. Still, faulty as it is, the wheelchair icon has come to represent people who use *any* kind of mobility aid, and in this way the normate—to the extent they can—understands what the hieroglyph means.

Invisible disabilities, by contrast, do not come with a symbol or signpost for the normate. Unlike their more perceptible counterparts, invisible disabilities take the normate by surprise—in other words, they *rupture*. For this project, then, I define *rupture* as both the *moment at which* and the *circumstance by which* invisible disability ceases to be invisible. It is an ontological as well as epistemological situation: the rupture is how invisible disability is dis- or re-located to the exterior and made known to the normate, and—for the invisibly disabled person—the "uncontainable" externalization of being. The rupture is the signification of one's difference, or otherness. It is the eschewing (whether intentionally or not) of one's perceived performance, or "character" as Levinas puts it, that appears to the world as normative.

In terms of a poetics of invisible disability these notions of rupture hold true, but with some additional artistic context. My definition of rupture is dualistic—both social and literary (poetic)—and informed in part by literary theory and traditions. Specifically, it draws some inspiration and theoretical impulses from postmodernist and avant-garde/avant-guerre studies, as

[2] Rosemarie Garland-Thomson describes the "normate" as "the veiled subject position of cultural self, the figure outlined by the array of deviant others whose marked bodies shore up the nomate's boundaries" on page 8 of "Extraordinary Bodies (1997). Resisting defining it in the text here because I'm very certain I'll use it earlier in the intro.

well as more recent work on disability poetics at large. To start, a poetics of disability of any kind could in many ways be considered avant-garde (though I hesitate to define it explicitly as such for reasons I will detail shortly). In Jochen Shulte-Sasse's forward to Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde,* for example, Shulte-Sasse describes avant-garde artists as "actively attacking the institution of art," and writes that these efforts were "not to isolate themselves, but to reintegrate themselves and their art into life" (xxxvi).

Contemporary disabled poets certainly fit within that definition as they write into and against cultural and literary traditions of what Robert McRuer calls "compulsory able-bodiedness" (2). Many of the poets in the recent anthology, *Beauty is a Verb: The New Poetry of Disability* describe these impulses to break from dominant ableist ideologies. Editor Jennifer Bartlett says as much in her preface to the anthology: "Mainstream writers tend to reflect the predominant view of disability as tragedy. We wanted to avoid this norm not because it isn't valid, but because we are interested in investigating an alternative" (16). Poet Jim Ferris echoes this sentiment, noting that "The larger world of American poetry pays little attention to disabled poets," with few exceptions. Even then, Ferris says, those exceptions are often writing for the normate mainstream, writing that "the disabled poets who seem to get the most attention often write about their disability while asserting that disability does not define them—a rhetorical tack that fits squarely into the 'overcoming overachiever' disability stereotype so reassuring to the nondisabled population" (91).

This avant-garde-esque sensibility applies to disability poetic aesthetics as well as content, with Ferris describing "crip poetry" as a "poetics that valorizes the wide ways of being in and responding to the world, that claims space for alternative, non-normative experience, language, thought and feeling" (91). The avant-garde's "formal principle of collage and

montage" likewise feel affectively crip with their artistic processes of tearing, splicing, and re-configuring (Bürger, xxxix). Marjorie Perloff even refers to "the cutting and intercalation of collage" as a "rupture" in her book, *The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant-Guerre, and the Language of Rupture,* and describes the avant-guerre as "fragmented, dislocated, spliced," all terms one might use to refer to the disabled bodymind (115, 14). Finally, and perhaps most importantly for a poetics of disability, Perloff describes the avant-garde "rupture" as one that makes space: "there can hardly be rupture without a compensatory addition: to cut out X inevitably means to make room for Y" (115). Bürger makes a similar claim, writing that "If it is true that art is institutionalized as ideology in bourgeois society, then it does not suffice to make the contradictory structure of this ideology transparent; instead, one must also ask what this ideology may conceal" (14).

If we replace Bürger's "bourgeois" with "nondisabled" and sub in "ableism" and "disability" for Perloff's "X" and "Y," the avant-garde's relationship to disability poetics becomes especially clear. But it is just that: a *relationship,* not an analog. While I find the avant-garde and avant-guerre useful in thinking through a poetics of disability, to conflate the two would in my view risk not only assigning an aesthetic category to a collective that tends to resist categorization, but also reducing disability to an aesthetic production. While I do agree with Tobin Siebers' claim that there is an aesthetics of disability—one that "embraces beauty that seems by traditional standards to be broken, and yet is not less beautiful, but more so, as a result," I am also wary of that aesthetics' potential for misuse by nondisabled writers and artists (3). As Weise notes in *Beauty is a Verb*, "I can hardly pick up a journal or collection of poetry without coming across blindness or deafness or madness as metaphor. I used to count the number of 'phantom limbs' that cropped up in poems" (144-45). As such, the avant-garde/avant-guerre

informs my definition of rupture as a characteristic or function of a poetics of invisible disability more than describes that poetics itself.

I draw on postmodernism and established disability poetry frameworks in similar ways, and like the avant-garde and avant-guerre, find kindred impulses in both. In his introduction to *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,* Fredric Jameson describes postmodernism as an "appeal to experience" that, while typically considered "doubtful and untrustworthy…recovers a certain authority," and at the same time, it is "distracted" and "seize[s] on…uncertainty" (xiii; ix; xi). And postmodern theory, he writes, "seems necessarily imperfect or impure…a speculative question; it's empirical answer is that none have so far appeared" (xi-xii). The disability poetics described in *Beauty is a Verb* shares these postmodernist values, with poet Sheila Black writing on disability poetry's relationship to confessionalism, often considered to be an offshoot of postmodernism or under its umbrella. Black, quoting Cate Marvin, writes that "the parallels with disability poetry [and confessionalism] are obvious…the confessional at its best or strongest is 'defined by its artifice,' by 'its ruthless desire to convince us its untruths are true,'" and "the confessional often uses 'artifice' and 'untruth' to allow a marginalized speaker to radically reconfigure his or her position" (210). For the disabled poet and disability poetics, the confessional mode works by "allowing its speaker the dangerous freedom to be, or appear, extravagantly personal while making a wider critique of social artifice, social, untruth, and social control" (Black 210). In these regards, disability poetics at large has a kind of postmodernist affect, and in truth the same can be said of contemporary poetry more generally. Ian Gregson argues in *Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism: Dialogue and Estrangement* that while mainstream, contemporary poetry

> has assimilated postmodernist concerns with self-reflexive fictiveness and with the way that language distorts and even constitutes the experiences it is supposed

> merely to describe, it has also persisted in believing in the reality of the political and moral issues it addresses…it reflects a genuine concern to oppose single-minded visions of experience with a self-conscious emphasis on diversity and mutability. (5)

In other words, while retaining much of postmodernism's subjectivity of experience and truth, contemporary poetry diverges from earlier movements that assumed "writers and readers were white…middle-class males," and instead is "acutely aware of voices that insist on their differences from that model and draw attention to their class, gender, nationality or race" (5). A poetics of disability fits nicely within this contemporary, identity-poetry moment, and yet simultaneously, as Ferris notes, stands apart from it. To the normate, disability identity and culture, he writes, "are seen to threaten well-established systems for understanding and valuation," and contemporary poetry is not immune to those systems (91-92).

But while each of these movements, theories, and aesthetics inform my conception of an invisibly disabled rupture, they do not completely constitute it. My definition of rupture brings with it Levinas' signification; the avant-garde's and avant-guerre's anti-institutionalism and collage; postmodernism's subjectivity and experiential authority; and the disability poetics movement's challenge to normative values; it does not end there. To return to Levinas, each of these movements is, in some ways, a "character," or a performance, defined by a set of externally recognizable aesthetics. To be clear, this is not to say that those with physical or visible disabilities are "performing" their disability or that their disabilities are aesthetic "characters" or choices, but that in their visibility they signify in different, more obvious ways than do invisible disabilities. What's more, the disability poetics movement has coalesced overwhelmingly around poets with physical disabilities—and admittedly so. Bartlett writes in the introduction to *Beauty is a Verb* that the editors "hope to consistently consider the social model of disability" in the anthology, and "It is for this reason that we primarily chose poets who have a visible disability"

(15). This framing of the social model, which in summary asserts that individual limitations are not the cause of disability but society's failure to construct itself accessibly, wrongfully suggests that those with invisible disabilities are not "disabled enough" to feel the impacts of societal ableism.

If visible disabilities take precedence, then, it makes sense that the disability poetics movement "emphasizes embodiment" and the poet's "struggle with physical limitations…coupled with society's critique of the non-normative body" (Bartlett 16; 15). This corporeal disability poetics leaves little room for those whose disabilities are not readily visible, or outwardly embodied. A disability poetics that makes space for these invisible disability experiences, then, leans not only into ideas of poetic embodiment but of *dis*embodiment as well. A crip poetics of disembodiment allows for the intangible to construct its own logics, pace its own sporadic, nonlinear narratives. On the page, invisible disabilities can live outside the body, make their own rules, have an agency that the physical body cannot always offer. This is why and how an invisible disability poetics is necessarily one of rupture: like the invisibly disabled person moving from unknown to known, the invisibly disabled poem "passes" for a standard poetic body—until it doesn't. This rupture may be more obvious, such as non-standard spacing, capitalization, spellings, or—like invisible disabilities themselves—it may be more subtle, occurring in the pacing, breath, rhyme, etc. The invisibly disabled poem shakes off its conventional character; it gives invisible disabilities a space to construct their own bodyminds that can shift and change at will, according to their desires, needs, and compulsions. As the invisibly disabled body is suddenly rendered legible by the use of sign language, a compulsion, or an inhaler, the invisibly disabled poem likewise moves from a state of convention and imperceptibility to one of poetic rupture.

Methodology

As a project based largely in autoethnography, my close reading and analysis methods similarly rely on my personal experiences with each of these disabilities. Though the approach varies slightly with respect to each chapter's disabilities, my analysis is broadly based in ideas of translation. This is more literal in my chapter on D/deaf poetics, where there is actually a second language—or at least its contours and grammars—being used, but applies to the OCD/ADHD and asthma/allergies chapters as well in more abstract terms. Put differently, I read these poems the way I read them because of the way I must read—or translate—the world in order to survive within it.

As someone with severe food allergies, I learned to read at a younger age than most, and at a higher level at that age, not because I was a child prodigy, but out of necessity. My ability to accurately recognize and translate the sprawling, scientific words that appeared on food labels was a matter of life and death. My parents of course were responsible for reading ingredients lists the first few years of my life, but once I began kindergarten, where they could no longer protect me from snack packs passed between five-year-olds, I needed to know how to do it myself. Peanuts, the most severe of my allergies, are typically clearly-labeled on ingredients lists, but the same does not hold true for corn, another of my allergies which is not only rare, but has several derivatives. Corn starch, corn meal, and corn syrup are easier to recognize, but corn derivatives like dextrose, maltodextrin, and carboxymethylcellulose sodium are not. More complicated still is the fact that other common ingredients, especially sweeteners like aspartame and fructose, rarely list where that sweetness comes from, and it may or may not be corn. All this is to say: to be allergic is to be an expert at close reading and translation. For myself, this is an

asthmatic way of reading too, as my allergic reactions are often asthmatic, or trigger an asthma attack.

Similarly, my neurodivergence means I am in a constant state of translation—or perhaps more accurately, *mis*translation—where the desire to not explain myself to others tangles with the desire to be understood and known. If I honor my bodymind's ADHD rhythms, for example, moving from task to seemingly unrelated task, what may be interpreted from an outside perspective as a lack of dedication is actually a well-connected series of events, though difficult to explain. My OCD operates in much the same way, my internal logics of cause and effect making perfect sense to me but appearing unreasonable and nonsensical to others. My neurodivergence—or, as OCD poet Alyssandra Tobin terms it, *neuronastiness*—is a series of contradictions and revisions (160). I want to be understood *and* I don't care if I'm not. I want to be known *and* I don't want to explain myself because I know my explanations won't make sense (but I still want to try). I know this is unreasonable; that's the point.

These lived experiences of mis/translation directly inform my approach to reading and analyzing poetry. Speaking as both a reader and writer of poetry, I came to this art primarily because, like me, it is often misunderstood—it requires translation. And in viewing the poem as a body, as something I can crawl into and occupy, I found a means of mis/understanding something both like and unlike my own bodymind. I read these poems like I read ingredient labels, each word, line, space, and stanza full of potential energy. Sometimes, like my neurodivergence, they refuse direct translation, and are more compelling for it. Other times, like listening as someone hard of hearing, they simply require repetition to be understood. But as with any act of translation, there is also a refusal: unless you know the language, there is always

something missed. The poem acts as a container for that absence, allowing us to inhabit and experience it, even if that experience cannot be fully understood.

Review of Literature

Disability is often termed the "final frontier" of equity and diversity initiatives—and even then, those initiatives tend to be aimed at highly visible disabilities. Despite disability's growing presence in academic and literary spaces, these places remain largely inaccessible to disabled individuals, especially those whose disabilities are not easily perceived. This is where this dissertation intercedes, centering those who are excluded, often even within the larger disability community. In terms of scholarly engagement, this project expands upon current disability and US American poetry scholarship and makes new interventions at their intersections, challenging the construction of the canon and the identities it values.

This dissertation makes a unique contribution to existing scholarship by bringing nonapparent disabilities into disability poetics and shifting the primary focus to literary representations by disabled authors. This work builds upon work by Lennard J. Davis (*Enforcing Normalcy*), Robert McRuer (*Crip Theory*), Alison Kafer (*Feminist Queer Crip*), Rebecca Sanchez (*Deafening Modernism*), Tobin Siebers (*Disability Aesthetics*), and David T. Mitchell and Susan L. Snyder (*Narrative Prosthesis*). I lean upon frameworks from these theorists, namely: Davis' and Sanchez' conceptions of poetry as a D/deaf and disabled art form; McRuer's notion of a queer-influenced, fluid identity theory of disability; Siebers' argument for disability's influence on artistic aesthetic and construction; and Mitchell and Snyder's analysis of disability as a narrative function.

However, my work represents a necessary departure, namely from that of Mitchell and Snyder, Sanchez, and Siebers, all of whom consider representations and aesthetics of D/deafness

and disability in non-disabled subjects and productions. While their analyses have been important in changing perceptions of disability's role in/and literature and art, a complete aesthetics of disability cannot be established without the presence of those whose bodyminds are used to inform it. Further, this project contributes to the growing sub-field of disability poetics, building on work by Michael Davidson, Sheila Black, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarashina, Petra Kuppers, and others who argue for a poetic embodiment of disability, but who have not yet extended that poetics to include disabilities that are invisible, or *dis*embodied. This project serves not only to consider these invisibly disabled moments of rupture, but also to itself *be* a rupture in existing disability and US American poetry scholarship.

Chapter Overview

For each of these chapters, I consider the poem's or collection's formal qualities, content, and "the address" as places in which an invisibly disabled rupture may occur. **Chapter one** focuses on deafness, beginning with close readings of modernist hearing poet Edna St. Vincent Millay alongside an overlooked D/deaf poet of the same era, Earl Sollenberger. With these poets, I propose what I term a *visual prosody*, or a poetic expression of D/deaf rupture of hearing, sonically-based conceptions of poetry and poetics. Rather than conceiving of sound as the default for prosody, I suggest a *visual prosody* that has an equal agency in modernist (and subsequent) poetry. Once established, I turn to an analysis of D/deaf poet Ilya Kaminsky's collection, *Deaf Republic*, using this visual prosody as a framework to consider D/deaf poetic rupture in the work of a contemporary poet. In *Deaf Republic*, I argue that the rupture is multifaceted, represented by Kaminsky's inclusion of printed (invented) signs in the text and the socio-political context in which those signs occur, both in the world of the collection and in relation to the ongoing, real-world conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

Chapter two analyzes the work of poets with ADHD and/or OCD, proposing a poetic and aesthetic rupture that is specific to these conditions: OCD's obsessive, recursive images and intrusive thoughts; and ADHD's in/attention, drifting, and hyperactivity. This chapter looks at two collections of OCD poetry as an OCD form and pairs those analyses with disparate ADHD poems. Collections as an OCD form represent a sustained attention, or obsession, while ADHD poems, not making up whole collections themselves, are an extension of inattention. Finally, this section further considers how gender identity helps shape invisibility in terms of non-cisgender-male presentations of neurodivergence, which is frequently misdiagnosed and/or misunderstood.

Chapter three considers work by poets who have allergies and/or asthma, leaning into their perceivable symptoms and reactions as grounds for the same aesthetic rupturing (or reaction) in poetry. I read allergic reactions, like rashes and swelling, and asthma symptoms, like wheezing and breathlessness, into the form, language, and performance of poems. In addition to analyzing work by living, allergic poets Sandra Beasley and Mark Doty, who write into their conditions more literally, I also use the work of modernist asthmatic poet, Elizabeth Bishop, as a poetic foremother. Bishop never wrote explicitly about her asthma in her poems, but her breath/lessness bleeds through, as in "O Breath," making her poetics a useful informant for reading reactions into the less explicit work of others. Finally, the "asthmatic" section briefly engages with recent scholarship in ecocriticism and biopolitics to entwine disability and climate justice. More than the previous two, this chapter also leans more heavily into autoethnography, as asthma and allergies have not been widely included in disability identity, making poets with these conditions more difficult to locate.

Audre Lorde writes that "The visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength." This dissertation asks what that strength might look

like for those whose vulnerability is often *in*visible, too. The included poets represent invisibly disabled additions to the growing body of disability scholarship and poetics. These poets act as ruptures not only in terms of US American poetic convention, playing with form and content to represent their bodyminds in new ways, but themselves serve as necessary ruptures in a canon that, historically speaking, would prefer they remain outside it.

Chapter 1 | Reconsidering Silence and Sound: Visual Prosody and D/deaf Rupture

I. Crafting a Visual Prosody from Modernist Poetics

In their book, *Sound and Form in Modern Poetry,* Harvey Gross and Robert McDowell write: "Since poetry has been written, and more importantly, printed, visual qualities have contributed to prosodical arrangement. Line endings, stanzaic shape, the general appearance of the poem on the page—all contribute to rhythmic effect" (20). In this these authors are not incorrect; the appearance of the poem on the page, or the poem as a written rather than strictly spoken artifact, does indeed affect the poem's prosody, or the patterns of rhythm and sound used in poetry. They go on to write, though, that "these visual elements, however, are and *should* be secondary—in the way that written directions in a musical score are in no sense the music but only useful guides to realizing an accurate or satisfying performance" (20). With this statement, Gross and McDowell assert—whether intentionally or not—a hierarchy for sensory experience within the space of poetry and music.

Though their ranking of an auditory prosody may make sense in terms of an oral poetic and musical tradition, Gross and McDowell are not writing in reference to those oral traditions, but to *modern* or *modernist* poetry. And while they admit that there is, in fact, a prosody that does exist in the visual realm, they in the same moment disparage it as "secondary," prioritizing audible sound over all else. In doing so, they participate in a longstanding literary "tradition" of audism—or, as defined by self-identified DeafBlind poet John Lee Clark in the introduction to his *Deaf American Poetry* anthology, "the belief—imposed by hearing society and internalized by many Deaf people—that people with 'hearing loss' are inferior" (6).

Though not unique to Gross and McDowell, and though the idea of the poem as a primarily auditory experience is still pervasive, other scholars have since addressed the issues

present in this sound/sight poetic hierarchy and pushed back against it. Charles Bernstein, for example, draws similarities between the visual arts of painting and film—especially silent film—with writing. Of film more broadly, he notes that these mediums share a "unique kinship" and "formal affinities," writing that "understanding film provides a method for understanding language, since in its nonlexicality, its grammar of shots and angles, it may contain the essence of the linguistic" (116). Further, Bernstein regards sight, not sound, as the "most prized human sense," but goes on to say that this hierarchy is also faulty: "The problem with these formulations is that sight is imagined to be split off from the other senses and from language, and assumed to be an autonomous realm" (124).

Willard Bohn draws similar conclusions about poetry's linguistic multi-sensory landscape which are of particular significance to D/deaf poetics. Bohn writes that "although poetry is a linguistic construct, the way in which it communicates is influenced by spatial relations as well" (15). Rather than the Cartesian-esque separation of the senses Bernstein describes, Bohn suggests an interwoven, multidimensional sensory experience of poetry. Disability scholar Lennard J. Davis illustrates this construction in terms of the relationship between both spoken and signed languages and the written word, writing that "language is far closer to writing than speech. Speech is an oral production linked to the mouth. Sign language can be seen as a form of writing done in space rather than on paper. Typing, for example, is closer to signing than it is to speech" (20). Since both written and signed languages are interpreted visually, both *language* visually, Bernstein's issue with an isolated sense of sight offers a useful framework for thinking through the seeming paradox of a visual prosody, as well as for understanding the historical exclusion of D/deaf poets from the English literary canon.

The sight-language schism has had negative consequences for D/deaf American poets, especially given the devaluation of American Sign Language (ASL) as a legitimate linguistic system. ASL was not officially recognized as a language until the publication of William Stokoe's *A Dictionary of American Sign Language on Linguistic Principles* in 1965. Even then, it was considered an "invented language," and was listed "immediately preceding Klingon" for more than thirty years until it was finally acknowledged as a "real language" by the Modern Language Association in 1997 (Sanchez 7-8). Disability scholar Rebecca Sanchez writes that even today, "it is still a widely held misconception, even among those who are highly educated, that ASL is not fully equivalent to other languages, that it is just a version of English on the hands or a system of gestural iconography" (8). Although ASL is not "just a version of English," the written "text" of ASL is, meaning that poetry written in English is written in the language of the hearing, but also in the language of the (American) Deaf. Sanchez is in favor of this argument and explains her reasoning in the introduction to *Deafening Modernism: Embodied Language and Visual Poetics in American Literature*. She writes that for her study, she has "very deliberately chosen to concentrate on modernist works that are neither by nor about individuals who are deaf" in order to reconceive of "the ways we think about language" (3). To do this Sanchez focuses primarily on canonical texts, but she also brings in examples and analyses of ASL poetry, which serves "as a basis for developing and illustrating a Deaf poetics" (4).

For this chapter, like Sanchez, I too draw from canonical modernist texts, but deviate in that I also include the written work of D/deaf modernist poets who often go overlooked. Moreover, I build upon Sanchez's "visual poetics" to include what I term a *visual prosody*. I suggest a visual prosody as a poetic expression of D/deaf rupture of hearing, sonically-based conceptions of poetry and poetics. Rather than beginning with more contemporary poetry,

however, I find modernist aesthetics and modernist poets a useful space to begin this analysis, and so begin there. In the second half of this chapter, I use the visual prosody established here to expand D/deaf poetic rupture into visual and textual languaging more generally in the work of D/deaf poet Ilya Kaminsky.

Defining a Visual Prosody

Gross and McDowell write that "visual elements are aids to performance—remembering that performance includes the mind's silent re-creation of a poem as we read to ourselves" (20). But what if the "silent re-creation" is simply the creation? What if the performance is, itself, silent? To that end, in this chapter I aim to broaden conceptions of sound and more particularly prosody in poetry, especially modernist poetry, to make a case for the inclusion of D/deaf poets in the modernist canon. Using current disability studies and theorists as my framework, I assert that for the poem, silence and sound—or the visual and the audible—should not be isolated or ranked hierarchically but should instead be considered on a spectrum. Rather than conceiving of sound as the default for prosody, I suggest a *visual prosody* that has an equal agency in modernist (and subsequent) poetry, first by close reading a D/deaf,[3] synesthetic poetics[4] in the poetry of Edna St. Vincent Millay, then by using the D/deaf poetics her work suggests to inform the reading of poetry by an often overlooked D/deaf modernist poet, Earl Sollenberger.[5]

Before reading Sollenberger within the tradition of modernism, however, it is worth briefly reviewing and/or establishing a working definition of what it means for a poem or poet to

[3] The use of capitalization for the "d" in "deaf" is dependent on the context. When used as an adjective, the "d" is lowercase, but to describe Deaf Culture, it is typically capitalized. I choose to use the "D/d" signifier (except in quotations) where the descriptive and cultural may overlap. For more on this, I recommend the book *Deaf Culture: Exploring Deaf Communities in the United States* by Irene Leigh, Jean F Andrews, and Raychelle L. Harris.
[4] While I do not want to conflate deafness and synesthesia, I view a specifically audio-visual synesthesia as a quality of D/deaf poetics.
[5] I use the terms "modern" and "modernist" here to describe both a literary time period and aesthetic(s). While Sollenberger is not included (that I have found) in modernist anthologies or canon, because of his proximity to other well-known modernist authors and stylistic choices, I include him among modernist authors.

be “modernist.” The most comprehensive word used to define modernist poetry is, perhaps, “freedom.” But freedom from what? Ezra Pound argues for the poetic “image,” and for a freedom from the strict formal, metrical and linguistic constraints of romanticism and prior periods (despite, as modernism scholar Lesley Wheeler notes, sometimes using these constraints himself) (629). In an early edition of *Poetry Magazine*, Pound instructs the reader to not “chop your stuff into separate *iambs*,” saying if one is writing in “a symmetrical form, don’t put in what you want to say and then fill up the remaining vacuums with slush” (205). Robert Frost writes of a “wildness” in “The Figure a Poem Makes,” saying it is “painful to watch our sprung-rhythmists straining at the point of omitting one short from a foot for relief from monotony” (v). W.H. Auden similarly, if a bit problematically, states: “Rhymes, meters, stanza forms, etc., are like servants. If the master is fair enough to win their affection and firm enough to command their respect, the result is an orderly happy household. If he is too tyrannical, they give notice; if he lacks authority, they become slovenly, impertinent, drunk and dishonest” (1008). They all seem to point towards a free verse form, but one that is not *too* free, and an imagism that is not *too* descriptive.

Importantly, modernism’s stress on free verse also served as a point of poetic liberation for D/deaf poets. Clark writes that “Deaf poets in America always have had to contend with sound, not only as a major factor in why mainstream culture considers Deaf people a lesser variety of the human race, but also as it relates to their chosen art” (1). He further notes that, especially in terms of poetry, “this marginalization was especially acute in the nineteenth century, when demands for metrical verse were in force,” so much so that D/deaf poets like John Carlin nearly abandoned poetry altogether out of discouragement (1). Carlin was only persuaded to continue with his art by romantic poet William Cullen Bryant, who recommended that Carlin

"rely on rhyming dictionaries" to better assimilate with current poetic aesthetics—a suggestion that was given to many D/deaf poets before modernism's shift to free verse (Clark 1). And "When free verse came into vogue," Clark writes, "many Deaf poets were relieved. Free verse was more than literal to them, it was physical; it freed them from rhyming dictionaries, syllable counting, and artificial pronunciation" (4). Still, sound is very much a priority for the modernists, and if prosody is strictly audible, it leaves very little room for D/deaf poets. Despite the changing poetic norms, Clark notes that "the twentieth century did not bring full liberation for the Deaf poet," and reasserts that—then and now—"sound is the elixir of poetry" to poets in the hearing world (4). This is where a visual prosody as a form of D/deaf poetic rupture seeks to intervene.

In selecting Millay's poems to inform my definition of visual prosody, I read "Spring Song" and "Memory of Cape Cod" not only for their synesthetic content qualities, but also because they exemplify the kind of poetry I believe Auden, Frost, and Pound are describing. Millay's verse is imagistic without relying on "vacuums [of] slush" and prosodic without being subservient to form. Consider, for example, these excerpted lines from "Spring Song:"

> Want me to tell you? Think you can bear it?
> Cover your eyes with your hand and hear it.
> You know how cold the days are still?
> And everybody is saying how late the Spring is?
> Well—cover your eyes with your hand—the thing is,
> There isn't going to be any Spring. (193)

Though I will not go into much analytical detail here, it is worth noting that, while Millay's lines are indeed metrical (trochaic, if an irregular version of it), they are not by any means "chopped into iambs," and the end-rhyme is subtle, shifting between exact and near rhyme of the letter 'I' in the final word of each line. There is a distinctly casual, conversational characteristic in Millay's poetry that makes it a prime example of the "freedom" and "wildness" sought by modernist poets.

Moreover, Millay is well known for her use of sound in poetry, both in terms of lyric prosody and her performance. With respect to the latter, Millay's audiences were often fascinated by her performative voice, describing it as "enchanting," "beautiful," and "charming," with one newspaper article describing her "spellbound" audience as "she read her poems with a touch of Frost's 'Vocal Imagination'" (a term I will return to shortly) (Furr 98-9). And significantly, as Wheeler notes, Millay's performance and prosody are quite intertwined:

> Several modernist-era poets who worked largely in meter and rhyme were innovators: their use of received forms was an integral part of their response to modernity. Sound-driven lyricism retains a connection to oral cultures that were receding during the advent of mass media…Invocations of a listening audience by Millay and others anticipate later eruptions of oral structures and a performance orientation into U.S. verse… (29).

Derek Furr further expounds on the relationship between Millay's written prosody and audible performance, describing the sound of her reading a sonnet from *Fatal Interview* ("Not in a silver casket cool with pearls"). Furr writes that Millay's "reading is inflected with ways that guide our attention to specific words and poetic effects," and notes how she "strikes hard on the opening syllable of several lines, emphasizing her replacement of iambs with trochees…[which] effectively creates a pattern among certain words and lines" (102). Millay's attention to sound and rhythms between her written text and auditory presentation makes her a particularly useful metric for (re)considering prosody, especially in terms of establishing a prosody that may also be visual.[6]

To that end, I suggest that in "Spring Song" and "Memory of Cape Cod," Millay, a hearing, modernist author, employs a D/deaf poetics that is a sound-vision synesthesia, using sight—or the lack thereof—in the content of her poems in order to hear. This shows, as Sanchez

[6] See also Walter J. Ong, "Literacy and Orality in Our Times," *Profession* (New York: Modern Language Association, 1979), pp. 1-7. Ong notes that "oral verbalization, in pure preliterate form or in residual form within writing cultures, structures both thought processes and expression."

attests, that "deafening [modernist] literature…can productively inform our understanding of English-language texts" (8). But how does this inform a visual prosody? If, as I will argue Millay's poems suggest, we can conceive of sound via sight; and if, as Davis asserts, we as readers are "deafened" by the page, then surely there must be a kind of prosody where the visual is not secondary. If the D/deaf "hear" by sight, then reading, while "deafening," is also a kind of listening, and writing a way of speaking. This is what I mean by a *visual prosody*: the poem's patterns of meter and "sound" that are perceived without need of audition; its rhythms may be seen and felt as well as (or instead of) strictly heard.

Somewhat ironically, Gross and McDowell attest to this idea, inadvertently making a case not just for a D/deaf poetics, but one informed by the use of sign language.[7] "The function of prosody," they write, "is to image, in a rich and complex way, human process as it moves in time. On the lower level, prosody can be *a* direct representation of physical activity" (12). Here, these authors are proposing not only a prosody that is visual, but one that is embodied. In addition to stating that prosody's function is "to image," they further write that meter often "resembles simple human physiology: the systole and diastole of the heartbeat or the inhalation and exhalation of breathing," and that prosody "can also trace the curves of psychological process…the rhythmic structures of prosody reveal the mind and nerves" (12). If the experience of a poem's prosody is one that is heard as well as *felt*, it follows that it may also be seen—especially in terms of a D/deaf, ASL, and disability-informed poetics. Recent work on deaf and disability poetics has emphasized the poem's propensity for an aesthetics of embodiment—

[7] For posterity, my intent is not to use Gross and McDowell as a punching bag, especially given the poststructuralist (and beyond) departure from their work, but I reference them again here as I find their descriptions of an embodied prosody compelling.

something Jason M. Baskin argues is also a (late) modernist aesthetic (1-5).[8] Davis further bolsters the case for a visual prosody (which could, in truth, as easily be termed a "D/deaf prosody") with his consideration of sign language and the poem. He writes:

> As Kittay and Godzich suggest about verse, sign language does not have difficulty in pointing, in indicating. Prose must torturously defy its own constraints to indicate who is speaking, who is acting, where things are. Verse and sign language quite simply are more closely associated with a certain kind of truth of being…Sign language, like verse, is a language in which 'the diexis is *implicit* [*sic*].' In other words, the language indicates by embodying, literally, the narrative. (20)

These conclusions very neatly align with an embodied, image(ing) prosody. Sign language, like the written word, is not audibly heard, yet still has its own rhythms, meters, and even rhymes that do not require audition to perceive. Take, for example, the signs for "fish" and "blue" in ASL. In English, this is a pair of words that, though having the same syllabic construction, do not rhyme. However, from the standpoint of a D/deaf poetics that employs a visual prosody, they do. In ASL, the sign for "fish" is made by quickly shaking a flat hand with the thumb extended upwards, as if reaching for a handshake. The sign for "blue" is almost identical, the only difference[9] being the positioning of the thumb, which is instead tucked down against the palm. These words do not require an audible sound to rhyme because their rhyme exists in the realm of visual perception; their meter, so to speak, is also very much the same. Rather than sound alike, they *look* alike, and are the visual equivalent to rhyming the word "fish" to "wish." This is itself an embodied visual prosody, and while it is worth mentioning that not all D/deaf individuals know or use sign language, a D/deaf poetics—especially one that makes

[8] Baskin suggests that an aesthetics of embodiment, while typically attributed to postmodernist literature, is also present though often overlooked in modernist—especially late modernist—writing, though admits this is a contested position.

[9] This does not account for the minor differences present in regional dialects or slang.

space for this kind of visual prosody—must take sign language and seen/felt rhyme into consideration.

Finally, worth mentioning is the fraught, in certain D/deaf spaces and contexts, word, "silence." In terms of a D/deaf poetics, Deaf poet Meg Day has written on the concept of silence as a distinctly "hearing," or non-D/deaf, modality. In a short lyric essay for *Poetry Magazine*, titled "Sound Consequence," Day writes,

> Deaf poets writing in English are trained well to believe we are the outlier in American poetics: the exception, the accident, even. Because isn't poetry about sound? And isn't silence my thing? …You'd think so, but hearing poets sure have a lot to say about it. This makes sense; they invented it. Silence is just another ableist metaphor, a mismatched name. …Beneath the metaphor, though, is the corporeal denotation built, in part, on the mythology of deafness. You need deaf bodies to invent silence. It's done on our backs. (Day)

While I have used the term "silence" by way of introduction, I want to acknowledge that, as Day writes, it is an imperfect usage and metaphor. For that reason, except when quoting or referencing specific passages, in the remainder of this paper I use terms relating to vision and sight as opposite to hearing and sound rather than silence, both to avoid replicating harm to the D/deaf community as a hard-of-hearing, though non-deaf individual myself, as well as to more accurately represent the D/deaf, synesthetic poetics I propose.

Edna St. Vincent Millay and the Case for a Synesthetic D/deaf Poetics

If prosody is the pattern of meter and sound in poetry, then to fully render my seemingly oxymoronic phrase, *visual prosody*, we must first begin by (re)defining sound and what it means to hear. To do this, I turn to two poems by Edna St. Vincent Millay, "Spring Song" and "Memory of Cape Cod," and a description of the deafened reader by Lennard J. Davis. "Even if you are not Deaf," Davis writes, "you are deaf while you are reading. You are in a deafened modality or moment. All readers are deaf because they are defined by a process that does not

require hearing or speaking (vocalizing)" (4). Of course, we as readers are not *literally* D/deaf simply because we are reading; nothing about our hearing undergoes any sort of physical change. What this means, instead, is that we are metaphorically deafened to the sound of the language we are consuming. While readers may "hear" the words in our minds, the physiological act of hearing is not actually taking place. In that moment—or modality—the language on the page is, to use Gross' and McDowell's terminology, a "nonverbal language." There is no vibration of the eardrum, no invisible movement of waves through the medium of air; despite what we may "hear" when we read, what we are actually "listening" to is a recollection—the *memory* of sound.

Seán Street similarly describes this phenomenon more specifically as it relates to poetry, writing that "Poetry—like sound—creates pictures in the mind, visual images that reverberate in the memory" (18). Robert Frost, too, references this gray area between hearing and recalling—or, more accurately for Frost, imagining—sound with what he terms the "Vocal Imagination." He writes, "A poem should be read as written; poetry is a writer's art, addressed to the mind's ear. I hear my poems better with my mind's ear" (Carlson 520). When reading, while speaking and hearing nothing, we are in fact deafened and engaging with a "nonverbal language" that we take in visually. When reading, anything we "hear" we are "hearing" via our "mind's ear" through the medium of our eyes. Further, as Street notes, not only are we "hearing" via sight, but that sight-induced memory of sound in turn creates a "visual image." Put more succinctly: while reading, sight creates sound's memory, and sound's memory simultaneously induces imaging. What I propose is a kind of poetic synesthesia that allows for a visual prosody to exist. If we may hear without hearing by means of our eyes, if our mind may have an ear that is stimulated by

sight (reading), then it is as much through our vision as it is our ears that we may, as readers, be rendered "deaf."

The poem has always known that there is more than one logic that governs sensory perception; there is more than one way to see in a poem, more than one way to hear, etc. If this is the case—and I believe it is—then the same holds true for poetic elements, including meter and sound. In terms of modernist poetry, the case for a synesthetic, visual prosody is perhaps most strikingly evident in the content of two poems by Edna St. Vincent Millay from her collection, *The Harp-Weaver and Other Poems*. In "Spring Song," Millay, writes of the late—or non—arrival of spring. She begins in a place of stillness and auditory (at least within the world of the poem) silence, stating she "know[s] why the yellow forsythia / Holds its breath and will not bloom, / And the robin thrusts his beak in his wing." (193). Consider again this stanza that follows, in which the speaker addresses a "you:"

> Want me to tell you? Think you can bear it?
> Cover your eyes with your hand and hear it.
> You know how cold the days are still?
> And everybody is saying how late the Spring is?
> Well—cover your eyes with your hand—the thing is,
> There isn't going to be any Spring. (193)

The D/deaf poetics I argue for in these poems is two-fold; it exists both in terms of the poem's presentation as a textual artifact as well as within the content of the poem itself. But though the synesthetic ways of hearing are contradictory, the agencies of sound and sight are held in equal regard. Contrary to the synesthetic quality of *hearing* by sight, in the world of the poem, the "you" is figuratively *deafened* by it, and—in the logic of the poem—must lose their sight in order to properly hear. More specifically, the implication is that the truth that the speaker must convey—that "there isn't going to be any Spring"—is so horrible or unbelievable, so beyond "natural" or "typical" experiences of sense, that it can only be perceived audibly. And

while this does suggest a kind of synesthetic, *seen* poetics, it still relies equally on audible sound and hearing ability of the individuals who populate the poem (even though like the reader, they too exist outside the space of literal sound). However, if we take the "you" in the poem not to be fictional, but an address to the reader, we—the readers—are being "spoken" to and instructed to "listen." The command, "Cover your eyes with your hand and hear it," only works if we are a hearing audience to whom the poem is being read aloud. If we are reading—or hearing through the medium of sight—we are not a hearing audience but, as Davis asserts, a deaf one.

From the standpoint of a synesthetic poetics, the act of covering our eyes is in effect removing our ability to hear. And from a D/deaf poetics perspective, this is not a contradictory statement. In this modality as readers deafened by the consumption of a nonverbal language, we rely exclusively on our vision to "hear." If we "cover our eyes," as the poem instructs, there is no way to "hear" by sight the rest of the language in the poem. If we obey the poem's command to cover our eyes, then when the poem asks if we know "how cold the days are," or if we are aware that "everybody is saying how ate the Spring is," we will give no answer because we were unable to perceive (read/see, and by seeing, hear) the questions. Perhaps, then, the poem is asking us to lie. The repetition of "cover your eyes with your hand" in line eight seems to suggest as much. If we adhere to a prosody that prioritizes sound, that repetition is irrelevant regardless of whether we obey or disobey the command. In a prosody that assumes a hearing audience, we simply convert the poem to a "real language" by speaking it aloud; the performance, more than the poem, is the poem. As an audience we are no longer deafened, and it does not matter whether or not we choose to obey the command; we will hear the remainder of the poem regardless.

Further, though I do not consider Millay's poem to be a visual poem, there are elements of a visual rhyme—or prosody—that bear mentioning in the textual presentation as well (Elleström 439-40).[10] To return first to the previously excerpted stanza, there are of course the exact, auditory end rhymes and syllabic rhythms of the phrases "the Spring is" and then "the thing is" in the line that follows, but these phrases also visually rhyme—they look very much alike on the page. This kind of visual rhyme is especially significant in the sight-rhyme of "bear it" and "hear it" a few lines prior. Despite "bear" and "hear" not audibly rhyming (although they admittedly come close, and I would term it a near rhyme), they visually look quite similar. Like the slight changing in the positioning of the thumb in ASL's "fish" and "blue" visual likeness, the "b" and "h" in "bear" and "hear" are only visually different at the very bottom of the letter; one connects across the bottom and the other does not. This kind of visual prosody similarly exists in this poem in punctuation elements of the text. For example, the repetition of the word "well" with an em dash ("well—") in the second and ninth stanzas, and the repeated parentheticals in the seventh and tenth stanzas, both of which contain the same phrase: "(Better keep an eye out for you-know-who)" and, later, "(Though we'd better watch out for you-know-who, / When we sit around remembering Spring)" (193). These instances of visual repetition further contribute to Millay's visual prosody, creating a sight-rhyme across the poem's text.

Later in her collection, in the poem, "Memory of Cape Cod," Millay makes a similar move. That short poem reads:

> The wind in the ash-tree sounds like surf on the shore at Truro.
> I will shut my eyes . . . hush, be still with your silly bleating, sheep on
> Shillingstone Hill . . .

[10] I want to make a clear distinction here between *visual prosody* and *visual poetry*. As Lars Elleström notes, technically "all written poetry is visual," but not all written poetry is visual poetry, a category he argues is "characterized by a high degree of iconicity." Visual poetry may also contain visual prosody as I define it, but a poem need not be a visual poem to contain visual prosody. For my purposes, I hold with Elleström's definition, and do not consider Millay's or Sollenberger's poems to be visual poetry as such.

They said: Come along! They said: Leave your pebbles on the sand and come along, it's long after sunset!
The mosquitoes will be thick in the pine-woods along by Long Nook, the wind's died down!
They said: Leave your pebbles on the sand, and your shells, too, and come along, we'll find you another beach like the beach at Truro.

Let me listen to wind in the ash . . . it sounds like surf on the shore. (196)

Alongside the sight-sound synesthesia found in "Spring Song," though not quite synesthetic by definition, this poem also enacts a kind of auditory synesthesia, as well as complicates the meaning of what it is to hear. The speaker of this poem is creating with her simile a sort of "synesthesia" of sound: though one of her senses is not being perceived as another, one of the sounds she hears is. One sound—the "wind in the ash-tree"—is being perceived as "surf on the shore at Truro." But more than that, the speaker of this poem is both hearing literally and via recollection. While she hears the actual "wind in the ash-trees," she only hears the "surf on the shore" in the space of her memory, as implied by the poem's title.

In this, the speaker perfectly illustrates Davis' concept of the deafened reader. Physiologically, she is capable of hearing the world around her, and like the reader, she is deaf to the sound of the ocean in her memory and must settle for that sound's simile in the trees. And further still, the speaker writes, "I will shut my eyes," and then immediately commands the bleating sheep on the nearby hillside to "hush" (196). Again, Millay suggests a synesthesia of sight and vision, one in which the speaker, in order to listen, must "shut her eyes." And while a D/deaf individual might realistically do the opposite of the speaker—by which I mean open their eyes rather than close them in order to "hear" someone using sign language, for example—the use of sight to interpret and/or experience sound is perfectly in line with the D/deaf experience.

The D/deaf Modernist Poetry of Earl Sollenberger

In *How to Read a Poem: And Fall in Love With Poetry*, Edward Hirsch describes the "oral art" of poetry. He writes:

> Poetry is a voicing, a calling forth…The words are waiting to be vocalized. The greatest poets have always recognized the oral dimensions of their medium. For most of human history poetry has been an oral art. It retains vestiges of that orality always. Writing is not speech…Nonetheless, "I made it out of a mouthful of air," W.B. Years boasted in an early poem. As, indeed, he did. As every poet does. So, too, does the reader make, or remake, the poem out of a mouthful of air, out of breath. (5)

Clark references this passage in the introduction to his D/deaf poetry anthology and responds simply: "Not every poet" (5). Clark goes on to say that D/deaf poets have "increasingly protested against such sentiments," and that views such as Hirsch's "affects how Deaf poets are understood, or misunderstood" (5). D/deaf poets, he writes "are no oxymoron, but one might think so, given the popular understanding that poetry has sound and voice at heart," and as a result are often viewed as "objects of amazement and dismissal, their work rarely judged for its merit beyond the context of their deafness" (1).

Christopher Krentz makes a similar statement in *Writing Deafness: The Hearing Line in Nineteenth Century American Literature*: that D/deaf Americans were often the victims of hearing people's "frequent paternalism and pity" (43). For the D/deaf modernist poets, this posed a similar problem to that of other minorities: how to write in what was—for many, but especially those who were congenitally deaf—essentially a foreign language, and further still, how to be respected for it rather than ridiculed or dismissed. Krentz offers an answer by reviewing the work of the first three D/deaf authors published in America: John Burnet, Laurent Clerc, and James Nack (25). Krentz writes, "These authors learned to write by reading works in their cultural moment and in the dominant Western literary tradition, which shaped their voices. Yet if, in

writing in the language of the majority, they often replicate hearing forms and attitudes, they also occasionally appropriate English to give a sense of their own unique identities" (25).

That D/deaf authors "learned to write by reading" and replicating the literature produced by hearing writers is in and of itself an argument for a visual prosody and D/deaf poetic(s) rupture. Not only does this suggest a written version of the visual rhyme found in ASL, but like Millay's poems, it similarly implies a D/deaf poetics of synesthetic sight and sound—one in which the D/deaf reader and writer can visually infer qualities of audible sound in the metrics and rhyme of a poem without ever having literally heard it. Though the writers Krentz references slightly predate the modernist movement, the same sentiment is apparent in the work of many D/deaf poets who were writing during that time. Of the subversive use of form in the work of modernist women poets, Wheeler asks, "Could a woman put on sonnet conventions as if donning a man's armor?" (629). Here, I ask an altered version of that question: could a D/deaf poet put on prosody as if donning a modernist, hearing poet's armor? I suggest that they can, and in doing so, redefine what prosody can mean and do. Though there are multiple deserving D/deaf poets I could refer to here, I turn to one in whose work Krentz' and Wheeler's sentiments are especially clear: Earl Sollenberger.

Sollenberger, a Jewish-American Pennsylvania native, was born in c. 1912 and became deaf at the age of six after being kicked in the head by a horse (Clark 103). A statistician by trade, Sollenberger published only two collections of poetry, *Along With Me* in 1937 and *Handful of Quietness* in 1941, before taking his own life in 1947 at the age of thirty-five (Clark 104). The poems found in these collections offer a fascinating, varied look into what it meant to be both D/deaf and a poet of modernism, and exemplify both a visual prosody and what Krentz meant when he said these D/deaf authors simultaneously were shaped by and replicated

traditional Western forms of poetry, but also how they rallied against it. For Sollenberger, I look at two poems that are very different in nature (though not necessarily content), but that both function within the confines a modernist, visual prosody.

Sollenberger's poem, "The Legend of Simon Simplefuss (Without Benefit of Sound)" is a "satirical self-portrait" in which Sollenberger parodies himself as an "ancient freak" who is "deaf, and disinclined to speak" (Clark 58-9). Sollenberger begins the poem with an epigraph from Lord Byron: "I hope it is no crime / To laugh at all things. For I wish to know / What, after all, are all things—but a show" (Clark 105). The quotation is, roughly, in iambic pentameter, and while Sollenberger does not replicate that specifically, he composes the entirety of this long, fifty-nine-line poem in a ballad-like iambic tetrameter. Not only that, but the poem follows a strict, nearly totally exact, AABB (and so on) rhyme scheme. The first stanza reads:

> Better by far this wretch were dead
> Who rashly from his people fled;
> What does his freedom now avail?
> He merely moved to deeper Hell.
> He thought he would ambition try,
> But soon he finds desires too high
> Will bring his beanstalk down with cramps. (Clark 105)

Each of these lines is in perfect iambic tetrameter, and save the near rhyme of "avail" and "Hell," in a purely auditory sense, the rhyme is exact (the first line of the second stanza ends with the word "stamps," continuing the scheme from the first stanza).

Important to remember, though, is that this is literally a *visual* prosody. Though the poem is perfectly metrical and (almost) perfectly rhymes, Sollenberger is D/deaf, meaning he was able to infer—and craft a facsimile of—auditory sound and metrical rhythm without needing to hear a thing. If Krentz's suggestion that the poetry of D/deaf writers is at least in part informed by their reading and replication of poetry patterns used by hearing writers can be believed—and, as

Sollenberger references Yeats, I think it certainly can—then it is not at all unlikely that Sollenberger was aware of other poetic contemporaries as well. This is an especially reasonable assumption when we consider that his college and publishing years, from roughly 1930-1941, were marked by the publication of poetry collections by writers like W.H. Auden, T.S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams, and Muriel Rukeyser, to name a few. And though this poem may not be what writers like Auden would consider "free verse," like Millay's poetry, it does still work within Pound's command for the poet to "use no superfluous word, no adjective, which does not reveal something" (201).

The other of Sollenberger's poems I will discuss, "Birds Will Sing," likewise embodies a D/deaf poetics and visual prosody, but unlike "The Legend of Simon Simplefuss," it is definitively free verse. It too opens with an epigraph, though this time from John Keats, which serves to confirm Krentz's claim that D/deaf poets not only replicated English poetry but appropriated it. With this poem, Sollenberger rejects, explicitly, a hierarchy of sound. The Keats excerpt reads: "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / are sweeter," and the poem asserts just that. The text of "Birds Will Sing" reads as follows:

> To a thrush on a mulberry bough,
> Once upon a time God said:
> "Sing, little fellow, sing
> A sweet tune for that girl there
> On the lawn.
> She is watching, she is waiting,
> She is listening, listening, listening."
>
> The bird sang.
>
> At the end God said:
>
> "That was a good song. My choir
> Back home was listening in,
> And I think that We
> Shall have better music from now on.

That girl there
Couldn't hear you,
But she is satisfied too." (Clark 107)

From the first two lines of this poem, Sollenberger, despite writing in English, upends a well-known English literary tradition. The effect of using the phrase "Once upon a time" in the second line rather than the first creates not just a logical oddity, but it effects a syntactical strangeness as well. For readers whose primary language is English—meaning, for *hearing* English-speaking readers—the inversion is a troubling of the literary status quo. But this syntactical disruption serves an even greater purpose; for Sollenberger, it is a textual mirror of his (very intentional) troubling of the social status quo as a D/deaf individual (Clark 103). Sollenberger, Clark writes, had a "sensitivity to any attempts by others to control him" and wrote "with a chip on his shoulder;" palpable in his poetry is his "dissent" and his "refusal to fit in a mold" of hearing normativity (103). In his work, Sollenberger takes the ideas of poetic "wildness" and "freedom" proposed by hearing modernist writers and pushes them even further into a state of D/deaf poetic rupture, as is evident not only in the "Once upon a time" inversion, but in the remainder of the poem as well.

While modernist poets did play with established structures of meter, form, and rhyme, they still wrote poems that employed the basics of those structures, as the brief analysis of Millay's "Spring Song" shows with its looser, but still somewhat traditional, patterns of meter and rhyme. "Birds Will Sing," however, takes the meaning of "free verse" very literally. Though for the most part each individual line does have its own rhythmic qualities, there are rarely patterned meters or rhyme—at least not in the sense of a standard prosody. There is, of course, the repetition of the "-ing" sound in words like "sing," "waiting," and "listening," and the exact

end-rhyme of the final two lines with "you" and "two," but for the most part the auditory use of rhyme and sound in the poem are either very subtle or not present.

When thinking in terms of a D/deaf poetic(s) rupture and visual prosody, however, this poem opens up—especially if we also read in terms of translation. Although Sollenberger did have his hearing until the age of six, his primary language—the one he used to communicate for the majority of his life—was American Sign Language. Since ASL has no official written language, this means everything Sollenberger composed in English is effectively a work of translation. It may not be readily evident in his poetry that expertly replicates hearing prosodies, like "The Legend of Simon Simplefuss," but in "Birds Will Sing," qualities specific to Deaf Culture and ASL are more clearly apparent. To refer back to Davis, neither sign language nor verse "have difficulty in pointing, in indicating" the way English prose or culture does (20).

Clark does a good job of explaining the differences in a 2005 interview with the editors of *Poetry*:

> I don't understand the vagueness [of hearing culture], the almost-saying-something-but-not-saying-it, or the white lies of hearing interactions. I just went to a Deaf comedian's show…One joke was about two hearing people who haven't seen each other in years. They've grown old and fat, but when they meet they go, "Oh, my, you're looking good!" …Whereas two Deaf people in the same situation would go, "You fat! Wow, can't believe! Hair white! Rumors comment you divorced now?" (173)

Though Clark's example is a bit on the nose, it speaks to Davis' point about sign language and indicating. Like verse, Deaf Culture does not shy away from pointing out the truth, and Sollenberger's poem does that twofold. In the first instance, Sollenberger is pointing in the same way Millay's poems do; they are plainly speaking a truth. While Millay bluntly states "There isn't going to be any spring," Sollenberger likewise plainly states that D/deafness is not a punishment nor a reason to be pitied. The presumed D/deaf girl in "Birds Will Sing" is

unbothered by her deafness, and in the poem, she actually teaches God something rather than the other way around.

But more than that, if we read the poem in translation and with a visual prosody that includes the use of ASL, we can see literal moments of "pointing." Though considered impolite in (American) hearing culture, pointing in ASL is simply a way to indicate a specific person, place, or thing, even when that thing is not there. To use a pronoun in ASL is to point, and this poem is full to the brim with pointing. Though written in English, "Birds Will Sing" is an exercise of Sollenberger's dissent; it is a startling reappropriation of English modernist poetry's fashion in which a defiant D/deaf poetics and visual prosody reign.

Finally, Sollenberger's emphasis on the act of listening in "Birds Will Sing" is of particular note. In the poem, God instructs a thrush to sing to a girl, presuming birdsong is what she waits for: "She is watching, she is waiting, / She is listening, listening, listening." I first want to briefly note the visual rhyme created by the text in the repetition of the word "listening," as well as the visual rhythm the white space around the two standalone lines that follow, which work to partially enact the visual prosody I propose. But more than that, the way listening *happens* in the poem is significant in that it necessitates, by the poem's end, a reconfiguring of sound and what it means to hear. As God commands, the thrush sings, and God confirms that the bird's song is an auditory one: "My choir / Back home was listening in." Immediately after, though, God also seems to confirm that the song has qualities that are not strictly auditory: "That girl there / Couldn't hear you, / But she is satisfied too." An audist sensibility would tell us that this girl was not actually listening because she cannot hear, but the God in this poem—and Sollenberger—suggest a different *way* of listening. Neither God nor the poem ever suggest the girl is not listening; in fact, it affirms quite the opposite in the line "She is listening, listening,

listening." That act of listening is held in the same regard as the girl's "watching" and "waiting," or perhaps in an even higher one, as the fact of her "listening" bears repeating and reaffirming.

What's more, her listening is active; she *is* listening, just as she *is* watching and *is* waiting. God acknowledges that she cannot hear the bird's song, but never claims it is because she is not listening to it. Instead, like watching and waiting, the act of listening for this girl is not something that requires an auditory perception of sound. And paired with God's choir, which does seem to be listening via audition, this suggests a kind of listening that can include sound and hearing but is not necessarily reliant upon them—in other words, it suggests a kind listening that is synesthetic, a listening done by sight and in space. For the deaf girl in Sollenberger's poem, watching and waiting *are* listening (or at least facets of it). She listens without hearing, or hears without need of sound, and does not suffer for it or miss out on the bird's song because of it: like God's hearing choir, "she is satisfied too." With this poem, Sollenberger does more than just reappropriate English, modernist free verse aesthetics; he not only suggests, but affirms, a D/deaf synesthetic poetics and visual prosodies that exist not only in the inner world of a poem or the shape it makes on a page, but in the lived experience of D/deafness.

Concluding Remarks

"When we retrain ourselves to pay attention," Sanchez writes, "to 'listen' to things beyond the verbal, we find that Deaf culture and language have a great deal to say about concerns that are central to mainstream culture and…American literary Modernism" (8). It is this statement that ultimately leads me to propose a visual prosody informed not only by the work of modernist D/deaf poets, but by hearing ones as well—specifically, Edna St. Vincent Millay. But whereas in her study, Sanchez has "very deliberately chosen to concentrate on modernist works that are neither by nor about individuals who are deaf" by focusing on both hearing and D/deaf

modernist writers, I find a D/deaf poetics and visual prosody that is enriching for poetry beyond the scope of identity (3). Moreover, as both Sanchez and Krentz suggest, it has historically been the case for minority and subaltern groups that in order to be seen by the dominant culture they must, at least to some degree, participate in it. Krentz mentions this in terms of W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of a "double consciousness;" Like black Americans, Krentz writes, "In moving between two languages, deaf Americans often saw themselves in contradictory terms, from within but also from without…Like other minorities, deaf Americans sometimes expressed a longing to escape this sense of division and "merge [the] double self into a better and truer self" (45).

By analyzing the synesthetic and D/deaf poetic qualities in the poetry of a hearing author—Millay—to inform a visual prosody and D/deaf poetic rupture, my intent is not to diminish the work of D/deaf poets, but to advocate for their equal representation in the literary canon and for a more level playing field moving forward. As Clark has noted, the D/deaf in American poetry have been sorely underrepresented, and despite modernism's liberatory focus on free verse, their inclusion in modernist (and subsequent) anthologies has been, at best, spare. Clark and others have been working to unearth more D/deaf poets lost to audist history, and this chapter in part is a call to continue that work, to affirm the value of the different valences the inclusion of poets such as Sollenberger can bring to the canon. Following the work of Clark, Krentz, and Sanchez, this section has demonstrated not only that D/deaf poets could and did write within the aesthetics of modernism, but that their unique multisensory poetic and linguistic modalities can also offer rich and exciting new ways of seeing, feeling, and hearing modernist poetry. Further, this discussion of modernist aesthetics, visual prosody, and D/deaf modernist poetry allows for further discussions and conceptions of D/deaf poetic rupture. In the following section, I continue that expansion by turning to a contemporary D/deaf American poet, Ilya

Kaminsky, and further extend D/deaf poetic rupture to better include instances of visual/textual imaging, identity formation, and translation.

II. Deaf Spectacle: Precarity and (De)facement in *Deaf Republic*

Ilya Kaminsky's third collection of poems, *Deaf Republic,* tells the story as a two-act play of the inhabitants of the small, war-ravaged fictional town of Vasenka and their methods not only of survival, but resistance against the violence of the oppressive, occupying soldiers. In the opening poems of Act One, "The Townspeople Tell the Story of Sonya and Alfonso," a young, deaf boy named Petya is shot and killed by a soldier in the town square while attending a puppet show. The first poem, titled "Gunshot," reads in part:

> When soldiers march into town, public assemblies are officially prohibited. But today, neighbors flock to the […] puppet show in Central Square.
> […]
> When Petya, the deaf boy in the front row, sneezes, the sergeant puppet collapses, shrieking. He stands up again, snorts, shakes his fist at the laughing audience.
> An army jeep swerves into the square, disgorging its own Sergeant.
> *Disperse immediately!*
> *Disperse immediately!* the puppet mimics in a wooden falsetto.
> Everyone freezes except Petya, who keeps giggling. Someone claps a hand over his mouth. The Sergeant turns toward the boy, raising his finger.
> *You!*
> *You!* the puppet raises a finger. (11)

The poem goes on to describe how, as the Sergeant turns away from Petya to watch the puppeteers—named Sonya and Alfonso, the former of whom is Petya's cousin—the rest of the town watches Petya "lean back, gather all the / spit in his throat, and launch it at the Sergeant." Though it is the spectacle of the crowd at the puppet show that prompts the soldiers' intervention, it is not the one which drives the Sergeant to violence; that spectacle is Petya. And, similarly, though it is the act of spitting that *ultimately* undoes Petya, spitting is not what originally singles him out. Petya's deafness—the prominence of his laughter in a moment that

calls for silence—is what stirs enough anger in the Sergeant that he will eventually open fire. For the Sergeant, the actual spectacle—the puppet show—is banalized and ultimately replaced by the spectacle of Petya, suddenly outed in the crowd as "other." It is not Petya's deafness, however, that is or that causes the problem. The problem is in the Sergeant's prioritization of and reliance on auditory communication and sound. Kaminsky illustrates this point poignantly in the poem's final line, where the gunshot from the title finally appears—not as a sound, but as sound's ominous and affecting absence: "The sound we do not hear lifts the gulls off the water" (11).

In a note titled "On Silence" in *Deaf Republic*'s back matter, Kaminsky writes, "The deaf don't believe in silence. Silence is the invention of the hearing." Importantly then, to Petya, his laughter is neither silence nor sound—it is simply laughter. But to the hearing—or non-D/deaf—Sergeant, Petya's laughter is a rebuke of his command. Silence exists to the Sergeant, and it is the existence of silence that makes Petya's laughter precarious—a rupture. Taking partial inspiration from Emmanuel Levinas' theorization of the "face of the Other" as "the most naked, most destitute," most vulnerable, and most "exposed" aspect of the other's being," in terms of D/deafness (and disability), I define *rupture* as both the moment at which and the circumstance by which invisible disability ceases to be invisible (86). It is an ontological as well as epistemological situation: the rupture is how invisible disability is dis- or re-located to the exterior and made known to the "normate," and—for the invisibly disabled person—the externalization of *being*.[11] The rupture is the signification of one's difference. It is the eschewing (whether intentionally or not) of one's perceived performance that appears to the world as normative.

[11] Rosemarie Garland-Thomson defines the "normate" as "the veiled subject position of cultural self, the figure outlined by the array of deviant others whose marked bodies shore up the nomate's boundaries." (Extraordinary Bodies (1997), p. 8.

For *Deaf Republic*, this rupture is manifold, occurring not only in the characters of Vasenka via their D/deafness, but in the literal text of the collection as well. After the death of Petya, the townspeople, in an act of resistance, are deafened; they cease responding to verbal commands from the soldiers and begin communicating in "silence:" using an invented sign language (Kaminsky 14). Already the "other" to the occupying soldiers as the inhabitants of a town under siege, the townspeople further mark themselves as different with their deafness—something which inspires the hearing soldiers to increased violence. As for the text itself, Kaminsky instigates a similar "rupture" of hearing and poetic convention via his inclusion of printed representations of sign language on the page, inviting readers—especially those who are not deaf—to look at language differently, to face otherness and, in some ways, confront the ways they are implicated in its production.

To that end, the remainder of this chapter asks two primary questions. The first is: How might a developed theory that privileges sensory encounters of sight and movement revise a hearing understanding of D/deafness and the language of disability? My own experience as a person who is hard-of-hearing and a (conversational, but improving) user of sign language largely informs this question, especially because my degree of hearing or deafness is continuously in flux, and therefore means my sensory priorities are similarly in a state of constant revision.[12] To put it differently, my "face," to use Levinas' terminology, is always dis- and/or re- locating, throwing me into various states of in/visibility and otherhood, or what Judith Butler refers to as "precarity" (134).

Further, as Butler notes, if the "face" is not strictly a human face, but also "operates as a catachresis" where the communicative "face" can be located in other body parts and movements,

[12] My hard-of-hearingness is structural and related to my ear canals, but also due to tinnitus, which changes daily.

then especially for D/deaf users of sign language, in addition to the literal face, the voice, body and hands are also a "face," or signification of otherness (133-134). Finally, if we take Butler's word "precarious" slightly out of their essay's post-9/11 political context to mean not only "dangerous" but also "visible" or "vulnerable," in D/deaf users of sign language where the communicative "face" is also located in the body and hands in addition to facial expressions, their speech—whether visible or audible—locates them in a state of visibility. For example, though it is Petya's audible laughter that draws the attention of the Sergeant, it is his deafness—the unexpectedness of his vocalization—that causes the rupture. The precarity of Petya's deafness in this instance is also in his lungs and throat, and later in Kaminsky's collection, it is the bodies and hands of the deafened townspeople.[13]

What I would like to suggest are the multi-valences by which the "face," or a face, might be signed into existence, looking especially to sign language and "silence" as moments of rupture whereby the other becomes signified. D/deafness as a disability remains invisible until a D/deaf individual's use of sign language or the failure to respond to auditory stimuli renders it visible, a "rupture" of the perceived hearing status-quo that makes a spectacle of that which was previously unknown. This rupture locates D/deaf people, and especially D/deaf sign language users, not only in a state of mis/communication, but also one of visibility.

As a means of expanding upon the idea of D/deaf spectacle, I turn to an analysis of that which is often understood as an "equalizer" between the D/deaf and non-D/deaf worlds: the written (typed) word. In terms of d/Deafness and disability, however, the "equalizing" effects of text can, and often do, more nearly mean that the dis/ability status of the author of the text is

[13] While I want to acknowledge my significant departure from Levinas' and Butler's actual theorizations of the "face" and "precarity," I find these terms useful touchstones for thinking about dis/location of otherness, especially in terms of sign language and D/deafness as methods of political resistance in Kaminsky's collection.

erased, and by extent, "normalized." In *Enforcing Normalcy*, Lennard Davis explains this "equalizing" erasure in terms of electronic communication: "In the space of e-mail, for example, some disabilities disappear…In 'talking' with Deaf colleagues on e-mail, particularly those whom I have never 'seen,' I [have] no way of knowing which of these people [are] disabled, or in which way" (13). In a written text, there is no explicit indicator—or spectacle—of dis/ability unless the author intentionally supplies that information; without explicitly revealing one's status or identity, the disabled author is (de)faced by the lack of the spectator's (reader's) gaze. The invisibility of the body in text "equalizes" the body, which is to say, text allows the reader's assumption of the body of the author as "not disabled."

The second question this chapter then asks is: In terms of the invisibility granted (or enforced) by textuality, what might constitute a text that is D/deaf? To investigate these questions, I read Ilya Kaminsky's *Deaf Republic* as both a destabilization of the "normalizing" functionality of text and as an example of the "other" (re)asserting its difference, not only in the actions of the collection's characters in the war-torn, fictional city of Vasekna, but also in the artifact of the text itself.

Citizen Spectacle

In "Gunshot," the citizens of Vasenka are rendered deaf by the Sergeant's violence, and it is in that deafness that they find the means to fight back. The opening lines of the poem that takes place the morning after Petya's death read: "Our country woke up next morning and refused to hear soldiers. / In the name of Petya, we refuse" (Kaminsky 14). The townspeople's overt resistance to the soldiers instigates with their "refus[al] to hear" in this poem, fittingly titled, "Deafness, an Insurgency, Begins." The citizens' deafness, like Petya's, becomes their spectacle. That said, unclear in this collection is whether the townspeople's resulting deafness is

meant to be interpreted literally or metaphorically, though the most probably assumption is the latter. But as Kaminsky never makes the distinction himself and given the suffering the townspeople undergo throughout the collection, I suggest it does not matter if they are actually deaf or not.

In US American Deaf Culture and Community, one is not required to be medically (or lowercase-d) deaf to be culturally (or capital-D) Deaf. Those who are hearing (or hard-of-hearing) but involved in Deaf Culture by way of shared language, such as children of deaf adults (CODAs), are still considered members of the Deaf Community; in this way, one may be Deaf without being deaf. In *Deaf Republic*, the medical fact of the Vasenkan citizens' hearingness or deafness does not matter because it does not save them. If they are hearing and their lowercase-d-deafness is a metaphor, their capital-D-Deafness—their refusal to "act" hearing—still places them in the path of the occupying soldiers' violence. Whether they choose deafness or become deaf, the townspeople are members of Deafness as a community, culture, and means of resistance. To the soldiers, they are all now doubly othered; their "faces" are in their faces, but also in their movements, bodies, and hands.

In the same poem, Kaminsky writes, "when soldiers compliment girls in the alleyway, the girls slide by, / pointing to their ears […] at ten, Momma Galya chalks NO ONE HEARS YOU on the gates of the soldiers' barracks. / By eleven a.m., the arrests begin" (14). The sudden deafness of the townspeople not only defies the soldiers, it unnerves them to the point of quarantine by arrest and, later, by other means. In the poem "The Map of Bone and Opened Valves" a few pages after the arrests begin, Kaminsky writes, "This first day / soldiers examine the ears of bartenders, accounts, soldiers— / the wicked things silence does to soldiers" (16). Kaminsky's use of the word "silence" here is particularly significant, especially in terms of

audism, or, as defined by DeafBlind poet John Lee Clark, "the belief—imposed by hearing society and internalized by many Deaf people—that people with 'hearing loss' are inferior" (6). Silence, as a hearing concept, is only actually silence to the *audist* soldiers; the townspeople and their language is only "silent" where sound Is considered the priority, or default. The word "silence" in this passage, with audism in mind, may be substituted for *signing*—a language that, to those using it, is not silent (since silence does not exist), but is to the hearing, non-signing observer. If we read the silence in this poem with a deaf sensibility in mind, the soldiers' wickedness—or their anxiety—is produced not just by the lack of audible sound, but by the presence and language of the other.

In *Peace and Proximity*, Levinas writes that "the face of the other in its precariousness and defenselessness, is for me at once the temptation to kill and the call to peace" (167). Butler expands upon this notion in their essay, "Precarious Life," by concluding that this contradiction "operates to produce a struggle" in the viewer witnessing the other (135). It is impossible to say if the townspeople "produce a struggle" of internal ethics within the soldiers, only that they respond to that otherness with anger and fear; the spectacle of silence tempts them to "wicked[ness]." This is further realized in the poem, "Checkpoints," where the soldiers "install hearing checkpoints" in the streets and nail up signs that read: "DEAFNESS IS A CONTAGIOUS DISEASE. FOR YOUR OWN PROTECTION ALL SUBJECTS / IN CONTAMINATED AREAS MUST SURRENDER TO BE QUARANTINED WITHIN 24 / HOURS!" (Kaminsky 22). This is a phrase that echoes eugenicist arguments, such as those made by Alexander Graham Bell, against the intermarrying of deaf and hearing people, as the union may produce more people who are deaf (Bell, Greenwald and Van Cleve). In Vasenka, as in reality, the presence of disability produces nervousness in the non-disabled. "*It is a hearing*

world," Kristen Harmon writes in her article, "Deaf Matters: Compulsory Hearing and Ability Trouble," quoting a deaf, non-signing woman in the audience of a conference panel about deafness, sign language, and identity (31). In the introduction to his book, *Crip Theory*, Robert McRuer foregrounds Harmon's "compulsory hearing" phenomenon by defining what he calls "compulsory able-bodiedness" (2).

Though too complex a concept to fully explore here, "compulsory able-bodiedness" can be reasonably simplified to refer to "the culture…[that] assumes in advance that we all agree: able-bodied identities, able-bodied perspectives are preferable and what we all, collectively, are aiming for" (9). This culture, McRuer writes, "repeatedly demands that people with disabilities embody for the other the affirmative answer to the unspoken question, 'Yes, but in the end, wouldn't you rather be like me?'" And of D/deafness in the culture of compulsory able-bodiedness, that translates to the question, "In the end, wouldn't you rather be hearing?" which, McRuer concludes, is really a "thinly veiled desire for Deafness not to exist" (8-9). This desire is not veiled, even thinly, in *Deaf Republic*; the soldiers label deafness a contagion, set up "hearing checkpoints" and quarantine zones in an attempt to contain deafness with the goal, ultimately, of stamping it out.

What's more, those individuals who are "able-bodied" and socialized into the culture of compulsory able-bodiedness are either incapable of or unwilling to (or both) conceive of the disabled body as a site of celebration. When confronted by this disabled Other, the non-disabled expect to see anguish because they cannot imagine the Other being, or revealing, anything else; the disabled body is already precarious in its "otherness." It produces nervousness in the normate; it "must be explained, or at least tolerate the inquisitive gaze (or the averted glance) of the questioner. The question never has to be put because…it is always already asked" (Davis

xvi). So when this Other addresses the spectator in a state of happiness, or when that visibility is embraced rather than hidden away, the "Other" is even *more* spectacular, *more* demanding—and in turn the spectators—or in the case of *Deaf Republic*, the soldiers—grow more apprehensive, unable to make sense of a body that refuses to apologize for its difference, that refuses to be (de)faced.

In terms of D/deafness and D/deaf users of sign language, the enthusiastic refusal of hearing (de)facement is best represented by the phrase "Deaf Gain." Irene W. Leigh, Jean F. Andrews, and Raychelle L. Harris describe this phrase in their book, *Deaf Culture: Exploring Deaf Communities in the United States*, as a perspective that many people in the D/deaf community in America hold, which states that rather than accepting the cultural narrative that they are suffering from a hearing "loss," they instead celebrate the "benefits of being deaf" (21). A collection of essays, *Deaf Gain: Raising the Stakes for Human Diversity*, offers multiple interpretations of the concept of "Deaf Gain" across various cultural and environmental contexts, but editors H-Dirksen L. Bauman and Joseph J. Murray expound upon it concisely in their introduction. They write:

> Rather than defining their particular sensory orientation in relation to a norm of hearing, deaf individuals live within the plenitude of their particular sensory orientation and languaculture. To many in the deaf community, being deaf has nothing to do with "loss" but is, rather, a distinct way of being in the world, one that opens up perceptions, perspectives, and insights that are less common to the majority of hearing persons. (xv)

The characters and text of *Deaf Republic* exemplify many of the cultural concepts and enactments of "Deaf Gain." For example, when the citizens of Vasenka are deafened by the Sergeant's gunshot, they do not lament the "loss" of their hearing but embrace their newfound vulnerability as a mark of community and solidarity, as well as a means of resisting the

oppressive occupying soldiers. This deepened sense of unity is another layer of Deaf Gain, calling back to the kind of community and joy one gains as a member of Deaf Culture.

Rather than viewing themselves as disabled, for instance, many D/deaf people instead consider themselves a "linguistic minority," more akin to an ethnic group built around shared language and ways of being (Davis 3). Jason Farr refers to this kind of shared-language community as "resonance." If we consider the townspeople of Vasenka as experiencing—and creating—this kind of resonant community of shared visual and vibrational language, what they (Deaf) gain becomes clearer: not only the solidarity of resistance, but new ways of thinking and being. For example, the poem "A Cigarette," begins, "Watch— / Vasenka citizens do not know they are evidence of happiness. // In a time of war, / each is a ripped-out document of laughter" (Kaminsky 30). In this community of deafness that the townspeople have found, in their shared language, they are proof of joy even in times of great struggle, and even if they do not immediately realize it. Their language, separate from the language of the soldiers, grants them access to a kind of freedom. And later, many years after the occupation when the country of Vasenka has finally surrendered, after hearing children have been born to the deafened citizens, the townspeople still "dim the lights and teach their children to sign,"—not because they *have* to, but because they understand that deafness is not frightening, is not a curse, but simply a different—and joyful, fulfilling, wonderful—way of being.

To the soldiers, though, deafness still represents a contagion, and only serves to further highlight deafness as a spectacle in need of quelling. One of the most significant examples of the spectacle of deafness comes in the response to these mandates by Sonya and Alfonso, who are teaching a sign language largely of Vasenka's own invention in Central Square: "When a patrol

walks by, they sit / on their hands" (22).[14] Without having made sound, they "silence" themselves in the eyes of the soldiers. When the patrol walks by, Sonya and Alfonso are freed from the Sergeant's gaze—they are (de)faced without the othering signification of deaf spectacle—and as a result, the Sergeant passes them over, instead reacting to those who are more obvious in their deafness. He "stop[s] a woman on her way to the market, but she / cannot hear. He loads her into a truck. He stops another. She does not hear. He loads / her into a truck. A third points to her ears" (Kaminsky 22). But the (de)facement, as in our own world, is only temporary; at some point the Other must communicate, must rupture, and in doing so, make their difference visible.

One day, Sonya is finally taken and made to march naked through Central Square with her "arms raised up" so she cannot sign—so she cannot communicate or make a *scene* with the spectacle of her deafness. She is posed like this before a firing squad who only shoot when she appeals to their need for sound over silence. In one of the only moments of (audible) deaf vocalization in the collection, she yells, "*Ready!*" and "The soldiers raise their rifles on her command" (Kaminsky 33). This moment serves not only to reinforce the audism of the soldiers, but also subverts the soldiers' desire for speech in what Michael Davidson calls a "deaf performative" or "a form of speech that enacts or performs rather than describes—its meaning contained not in the content…but in the results it achieves" (216).

For Sonya, that "result" is the same as it would have been had she not audibly spoken anything at all: death at the hands of a firing squad. It highlights the extent of deaf "otherhood" in the view of the soldiers: by vocalizing audibly in this moment, rather than complying with their missive to not be deaf, Sonya further centers herself in that deafness as her speech, rather

[14] Important to note is that, as far as can be gleaned in the text, these Vasenkan signs are a *sign-language* and distinct from sign language as a linguistic system.

than her "silence," becomes the spectacle, or what Davidson refers to as a "scandal," an "eruption of speech" that deaf people may "utilize…to critical ends" (216-17). Deafness gives Sonya (and the other citizens) a method of reclaiming her (and their) agency in a town under an oppressive military occupation; it becomes a scandal, a spectacle of resistance, a rupture—a hyper-visible signification to the soldiers of her (and their) un-ownability.

The (deaf) Other's communication, whether visual or vocal, audible or "silent," elicits extreme reactions from the hearing soldiers and produces in them the "temptation to kill," first in the murder of Petya, the arrests and deaf women disappearing into the backs of trucks, and finally in the public execution of Sonya (and others). Her death, like her deafness, is made into a spectacle; a warning to the rest of the townspeople of what their difference will earn them. It is a demand for the citizens to be (de)faced. Deafness is not a punishment, but in its visibility it becomes punishable, and the only way for the townspeople to ensure their safety is to stop *resisting*; to stop being so visible; to (de)face themselves by abandoning sign language and deafness (if such a thing can be done). For the Vasenkan townspeople, deafness is the opposite of invisibility, and it is invisible—or hearing—that the soldiers would like the deaf citizens to be. In this collection, Kaminsky refuses to allow the erasure of D/deafness, and in doing so he boldly affirms the (deaf) Other.

Precarious Text

When referring to the bulk of a poem or to the poem as a whole—its shape, content, form—we typically use the word *body*. If we view the poem not only as *having* a body, not just as an *extension* of the body, but as being a *body*; and if, in written poetry, we view the page as an integral part of the poem and not simply the poem's medium; then the page and poem belong to the same body. Further, if language is a mode of communication, and if the "face" is a mode of

communication, and the poem is composed of both language and the space of the page, and if the "face" can be more than a literal face, then surely the poem and page can also be "faces." But Kaminsky's poems in this collection are not simply faces; these pages are an address, especially to a hearing reader. They are, alongside the characters within the poems, spectacular. Describing "The Persistence of Vision," a short story by John Varley that depicts a utopian society in which all the inhabitants are blind and deaf, Davis writes that "Varley has to face the dilemma of how to represent signing in a medium that authorizes the scriptable. His narrator must conceptualize a world in which the priority of speech and prose is made irrelevant" (21). In the story, Varley's narrator—a seeing, hearing man—is unable to depict the inhabitants' "hand gestures" in his written text, and instead represents them by omission by using a parenthetically isolated em-dash: "(—)" (Davis 21).

While I would argue that this is textually a kind of othering, it is also necessarily an erasure. By signifying a hand sign (which, in the specified quotation, refers to a name) with an empty space, the sign itself (and thus the name) is disappeared. Though this is a visual rupture in the text, the *actual* rupture of the signer's language goes unrecognized—it is (de)faced. None of these observations are intended to criticize Varley's method of textually representing a signed language (within the context of the story the signification by omission makes sense, as the narrator does not understand the language and is figuratively "drawing a blank" when addressed with it), but to further establish why Kaminsky's own aesthetics of sign language representation in *Deaf Republic* are themselves precarious and representative of a text that is D/deaf.

As a textual artifact, the collection's prefatory poem, "We Lived Happily during the War," while affecting in content, does not immediately stand out as different in its visible presentation—which is to say it looks the way a printed poem in English most typically looks: a

title and stanzas left-aligned on an otherwise blank page. Its appearance is, in terms of conventional poetry publishing standard; we look at the page and know we are reading a poem. The second poem, however, begins the work of rupturing expectation. Titled "Dramatis Personae," this poem functions less as a poem and more as a character list for the poems in the following "Acts," signifying difference from what one might consider a "typical" collection of poetry (Kaminsky 3, 7). The poem—or character list—is yet further complicated by its content: rather than simply listing out and describing the players, the poem serves to instruct readers in the sign language used in the collection. For instance, the character "Momma Galya Armolinskaya" is the owner of the theater where the puppet show takes place, but she also "instigates insurgency," partially though her employees, the puppeteers, who "teach sign language from the theater balcony" (7).

Rather than describing their sign language via omission, as Varley did, Kaminsky tackles the problem of representing a non-written language by describing the physical motions of the hand signs in verse: "for *Soldier*—finger like a beak pecks one eye. / for *Snitch*—fingers peck both eyes. / for *Army Jeep*—clenched fist moves forward" (7). The description reads more like instruction, implicitly asking readers to visualize the words not as metaphors, but movements; they serve as translations as well as imagery. Moreover, this instruction serves to implicate readers into an important political context: as learners of this invented language of resistance, readers become participants in that resistance. By including readers in the instruction of this sign language, Kaminsky assumes—rightly so—that readers do not speak Vasenkan sign language, placing us in a position of linguistic minority. This is similar, too, to Kaminsky's own positionality as a deaf American immigrant, and adds a layer of significance to the translation-like aspects of this collection. Born in Ukraine, which is a bilingual country speaking both

Ukrainian and Russian, Kaminsky lost most of his hearing as a young child and then immigrated to the United States as a teenager, where he began writing poems in what—after sign language(s)—would be his fourth language: English (Armistead). Having been part of a linguistic minority the majority of his life, by inventing this Vasenkan sign language and including it alongside English poetry, Kaminsky turns the tables on English-speaking readers, implicating us in the townspeople's resistance while simultaneously instructing us as learners in a linguistic minority.

For the D/deaf reader of this collection, the inclusion is similarly political, but for the hearing, the participation is also an invitation into a D/deaf sensibility. Davis writes, "Even if you are not Deaf, you are deaf while you are reading. You are in a deafened modality or moment" (4). If hearing readers are "in a deafened modality" by the act of reading, it is especially true for hearing readers of *Deaf Republic*. This is not to make deafness into a metaphor, but to further suggest a kind of linguistic and modal community-making move on the part of Kaminsky. Like the townsfolk who are deafened (whether literally or metaphorically) by the gunshot in the collection's opening poem, hearing readers too are placed in a "deafened…moment" by both the act of reading and by Petya's murder. Silence (or "silence"), like readers, is active in these poems: in reading, hearing readers are actively choosing to be in this deafened moment and are simultaneously deafened by the silence of and after the gunshot.

Finally, this deafening is replicated again in Kaminsky's decision to additionally print representations of sign language, rather than only describe them as Varley did, in the text. First by the act of reading and then by the narrative, hearing readers are affectively placed in a "deafened modality" a third time via this textual rupturing. Engagement with these poems changes from reading the metaphorical "sign language" that is written text to an interaction with

an actual "nonverbal, nonauditory mode of sign language." By asking hearing readers to engage with this literal, textual sign language, Kaminsky yet further "deafens" them, placing them in a state of "otherness" alongside the townspeople in his book. And via instruction in this sign language by Momma Galya's puppeteers, all readers, hearing or D/deaf, are asked to identify and participate in Vasenkan resistance.

Still, while affecting in their context, these descriptions and instructions are not visually "abnormal" on the page. The first textual notice we get of any deviation from the American poetry "norm" of page presentation occurs on the title page for Act One: "The Townspeople Tell the Story of Sonya and Alfonso" (Kaminsky 9). Beneath the title, deafness is represented on the page not only in the text and characters, but in the form of an image: a pair of illustrated hands touching at the fingertips, mirroring the shape of a slanted roof. Below the hands, the single word: "Town" (*Figure 1*).

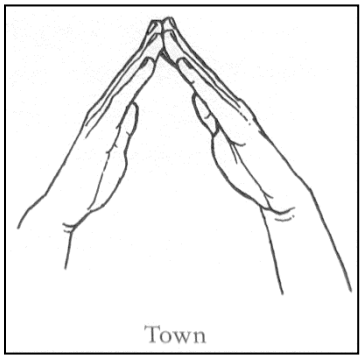


Figure 1

Importantly, while there is precedent for non-standard (or non-textual) elements in poetry, as in avant-garde, avant-guerre, and Modernist aesthetics, the significance of Kaminsky's illustrations lies not only in their presence, but in what kind of language and *languaging* they represent. In other words, while the inclusion of an image and/or secondary language may not itself constitute a rupture of poetic convention where these aesthetics are concerned, these signs as static, two-dimensional representations of a fluid, three-dimensional language does set them apart as unique. Further still, these images are a rupture in that they are a distinctly deaf/disabled injection into an overwhelming ableist and audist literary canon.

While detailing the relationship of D/deafness and the written word in 18th century Europe, Davis tells us that "Writing is in effect sign language, a language of mute signs" (59). Kaminsky takes this idea a step further by literally writing in a signed language, depicting hand signs not only via textual description and translation, but by picturing the hands themselves in a state of suspended action. The portrayal of the signed word (or, more accurately, concept) is working on the page in the same way as the text, but it both simultaneously *is* and *is not* (the) text. While Kaminsky's inclusion of images alongside text may not in themselves serve as a rupture or signifier of difference, the impossibility of fully rending what they *do*—movement, vibration, expression—singles them out as other. This becomes especially clear if we remember that this collection of poetry is actually written as a play, or puppet show—something that, like sign language, is done in real time and in three dimensions—and what we engage with is a flattened version of it. These printed, static signs, then, are to an extent untranslatable: they are not simply images or aesthetics; they are more than what they are.

Returning specifically to Figure 1, like the written and spoken English word—"town," for example—is not literally a town but a kind of naming, a signifier that is meant to represent "town," to convey the idea of "town," so too does a sign signify meaning. By that definition, a signed language can technically be considered *textual*—and yet, unlike English, sign language is neither audibly "spoken" nor "written," and cannot be "read" within the same parameters as a spoken or written language, meaning it is also *not* text.[15] And, while I would argue that in the blank space of a page text is a "rupture," in that it "erupts" from the page's emptiness, it is not necessarily othered in that eruption; that text would appear on the pages of a book is

[15] William Stokoe, a Gallaudet University professor, created a written "phonemic" version of American Sign Language (ASL), known as "Stokoe Notation," but it is not commonly used. Also worth noting is my unfamiliarity with sign languages beyond ASL, and so for the purposes of this paper, I refer primarily to English and ASL, and draw conclusions through that lens.

unsurprising. The content of the text may be shocking, but the presence of the text itself is "normal." But Kaminsky's textualized signs are precarious in their "rupture:" they other the body of the page in a way that standard, alphabetical text does not. By illustrating signed language as an alternative text, Kaminsky is refusing to allow the otherwise standard page to (de)face deafness with its "normalcy."

Moreover, the spectacle of the signs is multifaceted: not only are they a visibly precarious Other when set alongside written English words, they are also conceptually precarious in their duality as both *text* and *not text*. In choosing to depict a signed language in his poems, Kaminsky is giving the printed signs their own kind of agency. These text-signs are insistent in their visibility; the reader has no choice but to bear witness to them. In *Deaf Republic*, before the reader even has the chance to avoid the Other, it asserts itself with an unavoidable address. In addition to more written references to the Vasenkan citizens' sign language, Kaminsky inserts visual portrayals of signs throughout the book, each related to the poems beneath (or beside) which they appear.

In addition to "Town," readers are supplied with visual representations of signs meaning: "The town watches," "Army convoy," "Hide," "Match," "Curtain," "Story," "Kiss," "Be good," and "Earth," always with the signs' description as a caption underneath (Figures 2-10). However, on the final page of "Act II," Kaminsky places four of these signs in a vertical row without the captions (Figure 11) (73). Without the captions as signifiers, the signs appear to be functioning as a poem of their own. The poem's physical location in the collection is also noteworthy: the signs appear on the right page, and though there is

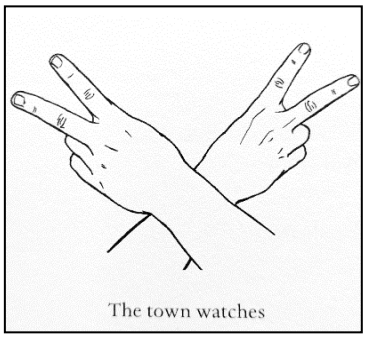


Figure 2

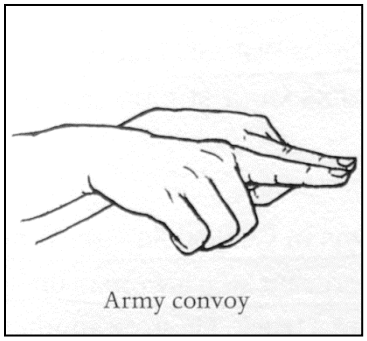


Figure 3

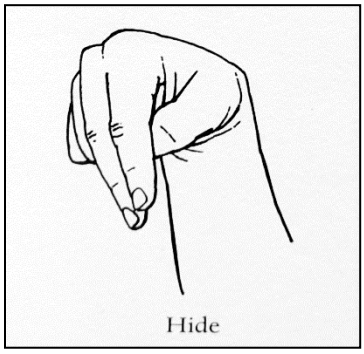


Figure 4

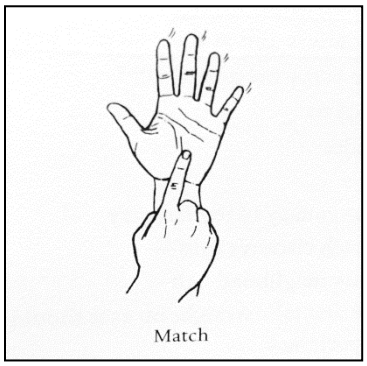


Figure 5

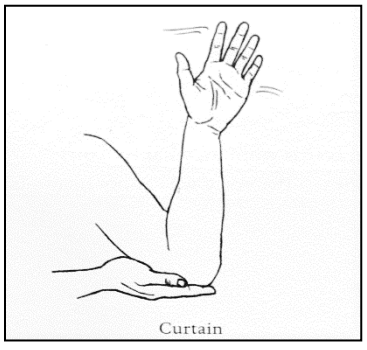


Figure 6

a poem preceding them, the bulk of it is not visibly in concert with them. The page to the left of the signs is blank, save for a single line of poetry stretching across the middle of the page: "We are sitting in the audience, still. Silence, like the bullet that's missed us, spins" (Kaminsky 72). Already a spectacle, and made more so by their lack of captions, the signs are rendered even *more* spectacular by that single line of verse and its own uncertain positioning. It is unclear whether that line belongs to the poem, titled "And Yet, on Some Nights," on the page before it, if it stands alone as an untitled poem, or if it pairs with the string of signs on the page that follows—and herein lies the "apprehension of the Other's precariousness."

In each prior appearance of the signs, not only were they labeled with their respective meanings, but they were clearly associated to the text of the poems with which they were paired; for example, the sign for "The town watches" is placed alongside poems in which the townspeople are watching something unfold. In this instance, however, none of the words that the signs signify appear in the text beside which they appear. Here, the signs are indeed "making demands" upon the reader in ways they previously have not. Not only are they insisting on being seen, or perhaps on not being invisible, they are also "produc[ing] a struggle" (Butler



Figure 7

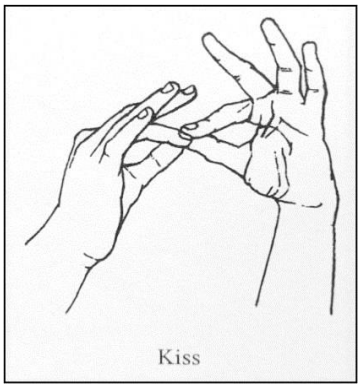


Figure 8



Figure 9

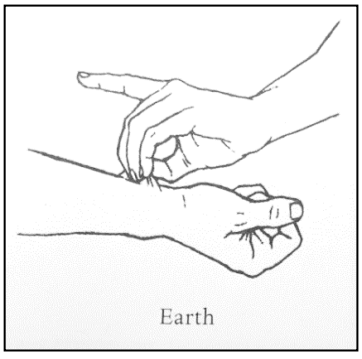


Figure 10

135). Without the captions, the disembodied signs are confronting the spectator, insisting that the reader remembers their meanings.

Even if the reader remembers the meanings of the signs, the "meaning" is still unclear without the text of the poem to use as a foothold. Levinas explains that "apprehension" using the biblical story of Jacob and his brother Esau in Genesis chapter 32, in which they are destined to meet on the battlefield, and Jacob is anxious and afraid, uncertain whether Esau is marching towards him as "friend or foe." Levinas reaches the conclusion that "[Jacob] was frightened of his own death but was anxious he might have to kill" (164). In terms of a reader-text relationship, though, that sense of apprehension is perhaps best described as what Ato Quayson terms "aesthetic nervousness." Quayson explains this "nervousness" as an "issue of subliminal fear and moral panic," referring to work by disability scholars who have already described the "unease" the normate experiences with regard to disability (14). The desire to not be disabled collides with the reality that anyone may become disabled at any moment, producing feelings of fear and revulsion in the nondisabled.

Quayson extends this fear into the literary realm both in actions between characters in stories and in the relationship between the reader and characters (and in the case of *Deaf Republic*, the text itself as well). He writes that while the "primary

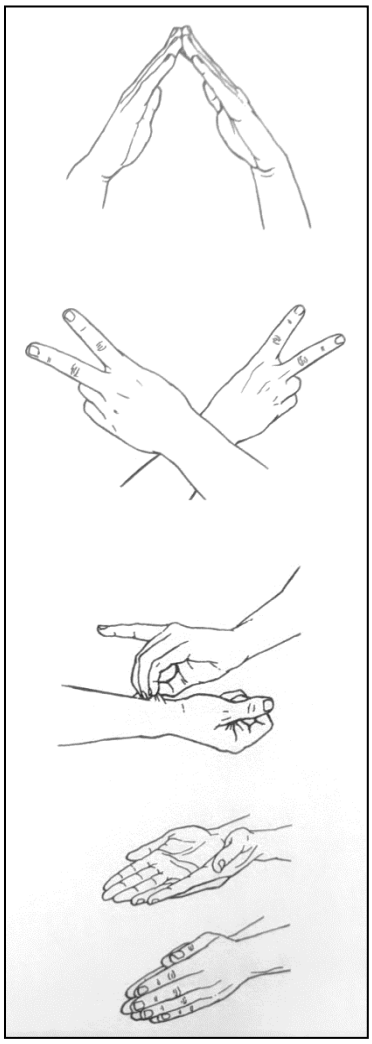


Figure 11

level in which [aesthetic nervousness] may be discerned is in the interaction between a disabled and nondisabled character," such as the Sergeant and Petya, or more generally, the deafened Vasenkan townspeople and the occupying soldiers, "in most texts aesthetic nervousness is hardly ever limited to this primary level" (15). Instead, this nervousness is "augmented by tensions refracted across other levels of the text," such as symbolism, motifs, narrative and plot structure, and other literary devices (15). But the "final dimension of aesthetic nervousness," Quayson says, "is that between the reader and the text" (15). He writes that a reader's "status within a given text is a function of the several interacting elements" in that text, such as a reader's identification with a character's situation or struggles, an "alignment" with the narrator, the "necessary reformulations of the reader's perspective" in response to plot and narrative changes, etc. (15).

This kind of identification certainly occurs between the reader and characters of *Deaf Republic*, especially since—while the central backdrop of the collection is war—there are several love poems between (or sometimes within) scenes of struggle. By injecting scenes of marital and domestic intimacy and joy against or into scenes of violence, Kaminsky creates a deeper sense of identification between the reader and the characters. For example, the poem "While the Child Sleeps, Sonya Undresses" is voiced by Alfonso, Sonya's husband, and is a tender portrait of the pair of them bathing each other while their infant sleeps (29). Especially as it comes after a poem titled "Question," which reads entirely, "What is a child? / A quiet between two bombardments,"

this bathing poem, at the start, feels like that hush between bombings (28). It begins with humor, perhaps even innuendo: "She scrubs me until I spit / soapy water. / *Pig*, she smiles" (29).

The poem likewise ends with a meditation on love and intimacy: "Soaping together / is sacred to us. / Washing each other's shoulders. // You can fuck / anyone—but with whom can you sit / in water?" (29). Moments like these reify the humanity of those in Vasenka; these scenes are relatable to us as readers, regardless of our deafness or hearingness. But because these characters *are* deaf, and because the text itself, too, follows deaf logics, for the hearing reader, these moments also produce anxiety. If, as Kaminsky says, "silence" is a hearing invention that the deaf don't believe in, then lines such as those that come between more universally recognizable moments of intimacy in poems like "While the Child Sleeps, Sonya Undresses" confront (hearing) readers with their difference, both in content and in textual representation. Those lines read, "*A man should smell better than his country*— / such is the silence / of a woman who speaks against silence, knowing // silence moves us to speak," and "*I am of deaf people / and I have / no country but a bathtub and an infant and a marriage bed!*" (29). If, again, silence only exists for the hearing, then what might it mean to a hearing reader to be confronted by this paradox—this silence that is not silence—and how then might hearing readers interpret the italicized lines?

We know from poems like "Gunshot" that italicized words in this collection are used to imply auditory speech, as in the italicized words "*Disperse immediately!*" and "*You!*" immediately following the actions of the (hearing) Sergeant (11). But in "While the Child Sleeps, Sonya Undresses" and other poems, such as "Before the War, We Made a Child," italicized words are dislocated from sound, speech relocated to the movements of bodies, hands, even hair. Even "Before the War," before the "insurgency" of the townspeople's deafness (temporally,

though not sequentially in the collection) begins, Kaminsky inserts D/deaf aesthetics and communicative logics into the world of the poems: "Her trembling lips / meant *come to bed*. / Her hair waterfalling in the middle // of the conversation meant / *come to bed*" (23). When we reach Sonya and Alfonso in the bath in the collection's "present," these logics are in place, but for a hearing reader, necessarily changed by the townspeople's deafness. What is actually happening, for example, in the line "*Pig*, [Sonya] smiles" (29)?

In "Before the War, We Made a Child," the italics, while signifying communication, carried only *implied* meaning; "*come to bed*" was never explicitly spoken or signed—or at least readers may infer as much, given that at the time, Sonya and Alfonso were not yet deaf. But the italics in "While the Child Sleeps, Sonya Undresses," where Sonya and Alfonso *are* deaf, do not carry the qualifier of "meant" and are instead used in the same way the italics denote auditory speech from the Sergeant in "Gunshot." Sonya is deaf when she "smiles" the words "*Pig*" and "*A man should smell better than his country*," meaning—according to the governing logics of the rest of the collection that says the townspeople are (to a hearing sensibility) "silent"—she is signing rather than audibly saying them. In fact, readers are outright told by the poem that "*A man should smell better than his country*" is "silence," and if, again, silence is a hearing invention, this poem's paradoxical silence is necessarily confronting hearing (or audist) sensibilities.

The "silence / of a woman who speaks against silence" and the italics that both mean *sound* and *not-sound* is how Quayson's "aesthetic nervousness" transcends the character-reader relationship and inflects the (hearing) reader-text relationship with the same kind of precarity. This is also the struggle produced by the *text* but *not-text* of the signed but un-signified "poem" that concludes "Act Two" of Kaminsky's collection (*Figure 11*). The (presumed hearing)

reader—addressed by the Other, finds themselves located in place of "apprehension:" the Other has delivered an "[un]translatable imperative," though the meaning is also not "secret" (Butler 131). The (hearing) reader is apprehensive of the Other's visibility and, simultaneously, of participating in the Other's (de)facement in an attempt to understand, to "make peace" with the Other. Or, as Butler phrases it, "these two impulses are at war with each other, like siblings fighting. But they are at war with each other in order *not* to be at war" (137). In sign languages, the visibility and movement of "silent" speech are the confronting "Other" that draws the spectators' gaze; D/deafness is the spectacle hearing people want to watch but cannot bear to see.

Concluding Remarks

To understand the full significance of *Deaf Republic* it must also be placed within its larger political context. It is a text that is "other" in its D/deafness, but it would be irresponsible and an incomplete picture to isolate that from its simultaneous "otherness" as a text that is Ukrainian American. Critically important to this collection is the context of Kaminsky's own lived reality as a Deaf Ukrainian and Jewish American immigrant. Kaminsky, who was born in 1977 in Odessa, Ukraine and has been deaf since the age of four after a misdiagnosed case of the mumps, has discussed how he "grew up watching the collapse of the USSR" before his family left for the USA, where they were granted asylum as they fled the anti-Semitism of post-Soviet Ukraine (Kois, Young). Though his family originally settled in New York, as an adult, Kaminsky moved south and lived for more than a decade "only eight miles from the US/Mexico border" (Kois). In a recent conversation with *Slate,* Kaminsky tells interviewer Dan Kois that, while living near the border, "it was not unusual to have your car stopped and searched for people trying to cross the border, or to see people being taken away in ICE vans," and that he could not

help but notice the "similarities between images of violence caused by this [American] empire…and images of violence in Easten Europe" (Kois).

In *Deaf Republic*, Vasenka acts as a stand-in for Kaminsky's hometown of Odessa, and the occupying soldiers mirror the fascist Russian and Nazi forces that have sought to control Ukraine since World War II (deNiord). But the land that is modern Ukraine has been a contested site for far longer, enduring conflict for more than a millennium and having been subject to the changing control of several political powers. This near-constant exchange has resulted in a centuries-long dispute over what constitutes a Ukrainian identity that is vitally important context for reading *Deaf Republic*, especially given Russia's ongoing antagonism and invasion in 2022. Like Ukrainians, the citizens of Vasenka must constantly re-assert their identity, even if it means re-inventing it.

Jon Henner and Octavian Robinson write that "Languages are a political category," and this is especially true within the world of Kaminsky's Vasenka (4). The political power of the townspeople's deafness is that it figuratively renders the soldiers speechless, as their orders quite literally fall on deaf ears; the political power of their signed language is that it allows them to communicate outside the language of the oppressor. Henner and Robinson write that for deaf people in an overwhelmingly hearing world, "translanguaging"—or the use of signed language in addition to spoken and written language— is "often strictly regulated and driven by ideology wherein hearing people try to enforce a very specific way of speaking and writing—one that is not *deaf*" (4). Though Henner's and Robinson's article refers more to issues of language fluency and education, the hearing soldiers occupying Vasenka certainly try to enforce the use of a language that is distinctly "not *deaf*."

We see this in instances like the arrests, killings, and brutalization of the townspeople and the signs hung by soldiers declaring deafness a disease. But rather than drive the townspeople to audibly speak, the violence toward their deafness and language serves to deepen their resolve and affirm the beauty of their linguistic resistance. In "Search Patrols," for instance, as "soldiers drag a naked man up the staircase" to search him, the poem's speaker "teach[es] his children's hands to make of anguish // a language— / see how deafness nails us into our bodies" (63). Even in "anguish," their sign language, a language by and of the body, is a language that cannot be silenced because, to the oppressor, it is already silent. In a setting dominated by the sensibilities of the hearing soldiers, silence becomes a paradox. It renders the townspeople simultaneously invisible and visible, subtle and precarious, like Sonya as she marches to her death: her signing, her "silence," is what prompts the soldiers to require her to hold her hands above her head, rendering her "silent," and yet it is the positioning of her hands that "loudly" signifies her otherness.

In a note on the Vasenkan signs in the back matter of *Deaf Republic*, Kaminsky writes that while this is a sign language "invented" by the Vasenkans, some of the signs depicted are derived from other sign language traditions ("Russian, Ukrainian, Belarusian, American Sign Language, etc.") while others "have been made up by citizens, as they tried to create a language not known to authorities." That the sign language in *Deaf Republic* is a language meant to defy an occupying oppressor adds further real-world significance to the collection. For the reader, it signals the very real conditions Ukrainians have been and are presently living under—or, as Kaminsky says of the collection's prefatory poem, "We Lived Happily During the War," it "prevent[s] people from reading *Deaf Republic* as a tragedy of elsewhere. Deaf Republics, with their hopes, protests, and complicities, are everywhere. We live in the Deaf Republic" (Kois).

The poem itself says as much, while also implicating the American—or, more broadly, the non-Ukrainian—reader: "And when they bombed other people's houses, we // protested / but not enough, we opposed them but not // enough […] we (forgive us) // lived happily during the war" (3). The rest of *Deaf Republic*, though, complicates that happiness; it reframes it. In the USA and Ukraine, in all these "Deaf Republics," Kaminsky says that while there is violence and suffering, "at the same time, there is happiness. People fall in love, laugh, make children" (Kois). For the non-oppressed, happiness becomes guilt, while in Vasenka these moments of joy represent rebellion, resistance, and perseverance. That happiness is reflected in poems about love, sex, children, and lullabies, but also in the townspeople's (re)invented identity: their community of deafness.

Deaf Republic offers a new way of thinking about disability and D/deafness, a new frame through which to view the precarity of the Other's "face." This collection is an example of what "Deaf Gain" can look like; it is celebration and affirmation of D/deafness, D/deaf Culture, and signed languages. But in this work Kaminsky does more than simply celebrate D/deaf Community and language; he affirms for a hearing world the value of prioritizing different ways of being, thinking, and knowing. Rebecca Sanchez writes that even today, "it is still a widely held misconception, even among those who are highly educated, that [sign language] is not fully equivalent to other languages, that it is just…a system of gestural iconography" (8). Kaminsky's elevation of sign language, both in *Deaf Republic*'s characters and in its textual renderings of hand signs, issues a challenge to such sentiments and reinforces the need to reeducate the culture of "compulsory hearingness" prevalent in literary communities. Like the deafness and "silence" of the citizens of Vasenka, this collection stands in resistance to the poetic canon that has so often, as Clark notes, shut deaf writers out.

In addition to these frameworks for considering D/deafness, though, *Deaf Republic* also comments more broadly on language's capacity to re/form identity, shape community, and serve as a means of political resistance, especially in the context of Ukraine's ongoing struggle for sovereignty. In his introduction to *Words for War: New Poems from Ukraine*, Kaminsky quotes from several emails he received from Ukrainian friends and family members during a conflict between Russia and Ukraine in 2013 in which Putin, under the pretext of protecting Russian-speaking populations in Ukrainian territories, occupied Crimea and Donbas (xx). In one of these emails, the Russian-language poet Boris Khersonsky tells Kaminsky he will no longer read his work in Russian, but Ukrainian, as "a protest action in solidarity with the Ukrainian state" (xxi). Of this statement, Kaminsky asks, "What does it mean for a poet to refuse to speak his own language? Is language a place you can leave? Is language a wall you can cross? What is on the other side of that wall?" (xxii). These are also the questions at the heart of *Deaf Republic*, in which the townspeople's deafness and sign language, like Ukrainians refusing to speak Russian, become ruptures—methods of resistance against an oppressive occupying force. On the other side of the wall there may be hardship and struggle, but as *Deaf Republic* asserts, there is also love, joy, community, and ultimately, a path toward freedom.

Chapter 2 | Obsession and In/Attention: Poetics of OCD and ADHD

In March of 2023, at the Association of Writers and Writing Program's (AWP's) annual conference, I sat on a panel called "Neuronasty: A Poetics," titled after a recent essay, "I Will Not Be Calm: The Neuronasty Manifesto," by Alyssandra Tobin, a poet with obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD). The panel was made up of four poets, Tobin, K.B. Brookins, Bethan Tyler, and me, all with different, but frequently overlapping, kinds of neurodivergence: attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), OCD, autism, depression, and anxiety. We shared our own poems and neurodivergent poetic processes, with Tobin's essay as an informant. Of the term "neuronasty," Tobin writes, "I needed a phrase that wasn't *crazy*, that wasn't *mentally ill*, that wasn't *neurodivergent*. I kept falling through the cracks, or seeing my friends relegated to one label or shunned from another…Where do we go when all we want is…to be told *hey, you weirdo, I love you not in spite of but because?*" (160). To be "neuronasty," both in our lives and our writing, is a refusal "to be locked up and hidden away," and a means of transformation: "We write words of danger. We take our fear and our paranoia and our awkwardness and we turn it into magic" (160).

At the panel's end, during a question-and-answer session, one person—a self-described "neurotypical" publication editor—asked us to participate in an experiment wherein we would anonymously send him our work, and he would see if he could tell we were neurodivergent by the legibility of our poems. All four of us on the panel visibly bristled, but I was the one, with my ADHD lack of impulse control, who happened to be holding the microphone. I told him he'd missed the point: that we weren't experiments, and that if he'd heard what we were saying, he'd know none of us were interested in being legible. "Read our manifesto," Tobin demands in her

essay, “and let our poetry do the talking. We have so much to say. We’re begging you to listen” (162). What we *aren’t* begging for is to be understood.

A neurodivergent poetics takes up the “neuronasty” mantle of refusing to hide while refusing to explain. In this way, it hearkens back to Modernism’s “difficult” poetry, something Marianne Moore describes in her essay, “Feeling and Precision.” In defense of poetic difficulty, she writes that “feeling at its deepest…tends to be inarticulate,” and that “expanded explanation tends to spoil the lion’s leap” (499). T.S. Eliot says it even more plainly: “poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*” (232). The idea that poetry is (or even should be) difficult is not a new one, and a neurodivergent fits within that difficulty with a notable exception: Moore’s and Eliot’s poetry is difficult almost for the sake of it, or because it is emotional and philosophical; neurodivergent poetry is difficult because it is neurodivergent. Even complicated poems like “The Waste Land” can be analyzed and explained into terms that are broadly understood—it’s a poem about loss, brokenness, the bleakness of post-World-War-I Europe.

This is not to say, however, that neurotypical writers are never intentionally illegible; poets like John Ashbery, James Tate, and the surrealists do not seem particularly interested in creating work that is easily digestible. The difference between difficult poetry and neurodivergent poetry is one of ontology: neurodivergent poetry is illegible because neurodivergence is illegible. A neurodivergent poetics remains necessarily inaccessible to those who are neurotypical. Tobin describes this inaccessibility by highlighting the ways neurodivergence itself is already inexplicable, often even to the neurodivergent person themselves. She writes, “I wanna get you caught up on this mess that’s my brain but the voice in my head won’t let me. I can only dance around it, share clues with hints and whistles. But I can’t

whistle. I can't dance" (160). A neurodivergent poetics doubles down on that inaccessibility, bringing together a form that values strangeness (poetry) and already "strange" minds to create work that is intentionally illegible to neurotypical readers and critics. It preempts the sentimentality of mainstream disability discourse; it says, *we don't care if you understand*, and in doing so, necessarily requires that any legitimate, informed criticism of neurodivergent poetry must be done by other neurodivergent writers.

And even then, a critique of neurodivergent poetics can never be enacted completely—a neurodivergent critic can get closer to a neurodivergent poem, but they can never fully inhabit it. Is it unreasonable, then, to attempt to write about neurodivergent poetry, to theorize about neurodivergent poetics? Maybe so. But neurodivergence is not reasonable and neither am I. Or, as neurodivergent author Steve Fellner writes, "I [have] an unreasonable mind" (155). The analysis of neurodivergent poetry is unreasonable, and I believe it should only be attempted by people with similarly "unreasonable mind[s]" (155). What can a neurotypical critic say about a neurodivergent poem that has not in some sense already been said by the neurodivergent poet's doctor or psychiatrist? "Disease," Fellner writes, "confuses the reasonable" (156). A neurodivergent critic may not totally understand a neurodivergent poem, but they will not be confused. A neurodivergent poetics exists in a space of continuous negative capability, is unconcerned with comforting the normate or being understood, and in doing so acts as a poetic rupture even within a literary canon filled with other difficult poems.

This chapter analyzes the work of a few contemporary poets with ADHD and/or OCD, proposing a poetic and aesthetic rupture that is specific to these conditions. Though these disabilities do *originate* in the space of the mind and influence thought, their manifestations also frequently extend to the body, where they may cause a rupture in otherwise perceived normative

behavior. In fact, it is the corporeal expressions of these disabilities that often leads to their diagnosis. The American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (Fifth Edition), or DSM-5, defines OCD as "characterized by the presence of obsessions and/or compulsions," where "obsessions are recurrent and persistent thoughts, urges, or images that are experienced as intrusive and unwanted," and "compulsions are repetitive behaviors or mental acts that an individual feels driven to perform in response to an obsession or according to rules that must be applied rigidly" (235). It further notes that while the content or themes of obsessions and compulsions are individually variable, the more common "symptom dimensions" are cleaning and contamination, symmetry, repetition, ordering and counting, forbidden or "taboo" thoughts, harm (self or others), the body and health (body dysmorphia and hypochondria), and hoarding (235-6). ADHD is defined by the DSM-5 as a "neurodevelopmental disorder" characterized by "impairing levels of inattention, disorganization, and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity," which entails "inability to stay on task, seeming not to listen, and losing materials…overactivity, fidgeting, inability to stay seated, intruding into other people's activities, and inability to wait" (32). The DSM-5 also notes that ADHD may cause social impairments similar to certain characteristics of autism, such as difficulty communicating and interest hyperfixation (32; 50).

OCD and ADHD reveal themselves in the work of poets with these invisible disabilities in a few ways. As contemporary poets, these writers are already working within a neo-confessional tradition shaped around personal experience and identity, and the poems they make adhere to those characteristics while complicating them with disability. In the work of both the OCD and ADHD poets, for example, the personal is at the forefront of the subject matter, but this is a personal that is socially obscure. Intrusive thoughts, hallucinations, awkwardness and

outbursts move from the often-secret space of the bodymind to the page, annoying, unsettling, and improprietous—or as Tobin puts it in her manifesto: "We won't be silent about the clumps of hair pulled out. We won't be silent about the bugs crawling across our skin, about the inability to make eye contact, about the way our voice can be loud and unnerving" (162).

These already invisible disabilities are further obscured by societal misunderstandings and connotations, as both "OCD" and "ADHD" have been misappropriated by media and culture, resulting in misconceptions and doubts about these conditions, their symptoms, and their intensity. The ADHD poet Thanh Bui, for example, addresses such doubt in her poem, "Prove It," writing in part about the micro-aggressions people with ADHD experience. Written as a dialogue in which one speaker attempts to tell a story to the ADHD listener, the story's flow is frequently interrupted by italicized thoughts—presumably from the listener, though it is unclear—that address something other than the story being told: "*this is the part where you tune out anyway*" (Bui). Further, the poem is set in block form with slashes instead of line breaks and is told from multiple, shifting perspectives, both physically and textually (visually) mirroring ADHD's characteristic inattentiveness and fragmentation of thought.

In a similar vein, OCD poet Alyssandra Tobin's self-addressed poem from her collection, *Put Eyes on Me Not Like a Curse*, "Ok It's Time To Listen Up Alyssandra," is frequently interrupted by repeated language or phrases such as "Listen" or "Listen up" as the speaker attempts to talk themselves through an OCD episode (3). This OCD rupturing occurs more corporeally as well. For example, in another of Tobin's poems, "I Complete My First Obsessive Compulsive Test with My Doctor Who Wants Me to Have Only the Noblest Thoughts & Urges," not only does the body *in* the poem physically rupture stillness in response to the mind's impulses with "tremors and flashes," but the body *of* the poem bears the marks of rupture,

formally laid out with large caesuras and with some lines depicted in all capital letters (6-13). When asked in an interview about the relationship of her OCD to her writing process, Alyssandra Tobin replied,

> Even when I'm not trying to write an OCD poem, I end up writing an OCD poem. It permeates everything I think, every way I act, and thus everything I write…My rituals turn into repetitions on the page [and] interestingly enough, the page is the only place where I can give voice to things my OCD prevents me from saying out loud…on the page, however, I can say whatever I want. (Tobin)

For Tobin and the other OCD and ADHD poets featured here, the page and poem become a sort of surrogate body, a space where the strange, inconsistent, and at times distressing logics and experiences of these invisible disabilities can be allowed to exist in their respective paradoxes. Disembodied from the bodymind of the human in which they live, OCD and ADHD can embody their respective ontologies and epistemologies via the body of the poem in ways often impossible outside of it.

In the introduction to *Disability Aesthetics,* Tobin Siebers, discussing the ways in which human feeling is central to aesthetic production, writes of disability's role in this production, saying, "We need to consider, then, how art is changed when we conceive of disability as an aesthetic value in itself. In particular, it is worth asking how the presence of disability requires us to revise traditional conceptions of aesthetic production and appreciation" (10-11). While I build on Siebers' framework here, I make two major adjustments: First, Siebers analyzed strictly visual art forms, I expand his disability aesthetic into the realm of the poem, which is still in a sense visual, but predominantly textual; and second, Siebers considered disability aesthetics in work created by non-disabled artists. While his analyses have been important in changing perceptions of disability's role in/and literature and art, a more complete and authentic aesthetic(s) of disability cannot be established without the presence of those whose bodyminds

are used to inform it. With all this in mind, I read an (invisible) disability poetics in these and other selected poems, specifically leaning into OCD and ADHD symptoms pertaining to compulsions, hyperactivity, and in/attention. In the work of these poets is that "changed" art that Siebers describes when thinking in terms of an aesthetics of disability.

I. OCD Poetics: Obsession and Dis/Embodiment

To close out the fourth chapter of his book, *The Man Who Couldn't Stop: OCD and the True Story of a Life Lost in Thought,* David Adam jokes, "I knew my OCD was bad when I decided to write a poem about it" (79). He claims he no longer has a copy of the poem, and regardless, describes it as "too awful to share," but supplies readers with a brief synopsis nonetheless: "The gist of it was that I was a stone and that my friends were fish. They sprouted legs and walked on the land. They grew up. They changed. They evolved. I stayed as a stone" (79). The poet Paige Lewis references this moment in Adam's memoir in an article for *Poetry Foundation*, "Portrait of the Poet with OCD and Pogo Stick," but their experience with OCD and poetry is the opposite: "My OCD makes writing a poem terrifying" (Lewis).

They go on to clarify that their OCD makes *beginning* a poem frightening because much of their OCD "revolves around a sense of control" and that beginning a poem "without knowing where it might go" is anxiety-inducing, but that once they are in the throes of the poetic process, "it's as clear as [their] mind ever gets," and that "writing poetry feels like taking a break from [their] OCD, a kind of divine reprieve" (Lewis). Though Adam and Lewis approach the poem differently, one thing that binds them is the failure to launch, or more specifically, the fear of launching. Whether the poem is a reprieve or source of embarrassment, Adam's and Lewis' experience with OCD is like that of Adam's stone: of being stuck, arrested by their own minds'

desire for certainty and control. Lewis describes it as "sabotage." On the other side of Lewis' "sabotage," though, is a poem, however much of a struggle it is to get there. In this section, I close-read two collections of poetry by OCD poets who manage to "pogo," as Lewis describes it, beyond self-sabotage and into obsession in their writing: *Hypochondria, Least Powerful of the Greek Gods* by Emily Paige Wilson and *Put Eyes on Me Not Like a Curse* by Alyssandra Tobin.

While the poems from ADHD section are often less overt (or perhaps more *covert*) in their engagement with an ADHD diagnosis, these two OCD collections are steeped in the language of OCD and demonstrate a different kind of poetic rupture that is more based in acceptability—or expectation—of poetic content. And though many of the ADHD poems I will discuss do indeed mention ADHD and/or its habits, these OCD collections further stand out in that they are *collections*, which I suggest is a characteristic of OCD poetics, while disparate poems align more nearly with ADHD's inattentive qualities. As an OCD form, collections operate as a kind of sustained attention, or obsession. OCD poet Cynthia Marie Hoffman's most recent book, *Exploding Head*, is a solid example of this phenomenon. Wilson's and Tobin's collections are shorter, chapbook-length (up to forty pages) books, but Hoffman's is a full-length collection (fifty or more pages) exploring life with OCD, though it is never mentioned explicitly in the poems themselves.[16] Instead, OCD comes in the form of an angel that haunts both the speaker and the poems for the entirety of the book.

Introduced in "The Angel," the book's third poem, unlike Biblical angels who greet their visitations with "be not afraid," Hoffman's angel is definitively ominous and frightening. Like the dreadful hallucinations of "demons" and "shapeless or shadow-like figure[s]" often experienced by those who suffer from sleep paralysis, Hoffman's angel arrives when she is most

[16] Hoffman describes *Exploding Head* as "an OCD and anxiety memoir in prose poems" in her biography on The Cloudy House, a project book discussion web forum Hoffman co-created (thecloudyhouse.com/about).

vulnerable (Jalal et al. 163). The poem begins: “The angel stands in your room, its presence a dense swelling in the dark. You lie in bed. You are afraid of angels” (Hoffman 4). As the poem unfolds, the angel never does anything but “breathes,” but the speaker becomes obsessed with what it *might* do, what it desires: “The angel wants its whisper swirling in your ear. If it gets the chance, the angel leans over the bed…Cover your ear. You have been chosen. The angel is going to tell you the secret of heaven” (4). In this, the figure of the angel comes to represent not only the speaker’s OCD, but her inability to escape it—though she tries by hiding beneath her quilt. The poem ends there, a semblance of refuge: “The quilt is a field of tiny pink flowers” the speaker finds peace in, though it is short-lived; the angel returns five pages later as “A tower of eyes, tall as a man” who, rather than waking the speaker from her nightmares, “lets them chew like moths on the ruffles of your brain” (9).

As the book unfolds, the angel (sometimes more than one) inserts itself seemingly at random, like an intrusive thought, giving the speaker instructions—or compulsions. In “Angel Number Seven,” for example, seven angels give the speaker “the multiplication table of sevens tot recite like a prayer” that “wards off the future, until the future comes,” (13). Even in poems without “angel” in the title, in moments where it seems the speaker has managed to escape, the angel often appears. In “Transference,” a poem near the end of the book, the speaker indeed seems to feel free of the angel. The poem opens, “Lately, you don’t feel the angel in your room. The dim shaft of white that attends the darkness is just a bathrobe limp at the closet door,” (47). However, even in this moment when the angel—or OCD—appears to have disappeared, it leaves behind its shape. OCD is often colloquially referred to as the “doubting disorder,” with the nature of compulsions as certainty-seeking behaviors in response to the anxiety that sense doubt creates (Rowe). For Hoffman, this fear is what permeates the collection, and fills the shape the

angel leaves behind: “At night, you lie in bed afraid the angel that has never left you has left you” (47). This is the trap of OCD, and the primary reason I conceptualize a collection of poetry, vs. individual or sporadic poems, as an OCD poetic form. The logic of OCD cages the person with OCD in a cycle of fear; it convinces you it keeps you safe, that one more compulsion will bring the peace of certainty. If the angel of OCD is what keeps you safe and the angel has disappeared, you are no longer safe, and the empty place where the angel used to live is a constant reminder, a door left open. The obsession-compulsion anxiety loop is large and recursive, and a collection allows the necessary space for that spiraling and constant returning. In other words, more than a single poem, a collection makes room for the OCD poet to write into obsession and doubling back.

Hypochondria, Least Powerful of the Greek Gods

In Emily Paige Wilson’s book, the reference to disability is in the collection’s title itself, which serves as its own subtle form of initial poetic rupture. Hypochondria, or health/illness anxiety, is on its own not classified as a subtype of OCD but an anxiety disorder and requires more symptoms than excessive worry—such as rumination, compulsive checking and certainty-seeking behaviors—to fall under the OCD umbrella (Ferguson). At first glance, then, Wilson’s anxiety—though still technically an invisible disability—is not clearly recognizable as OCD. Our initial encounter with the word “hypochondria” speaks to the imperceptibility of disabilities like OCD. Anxiety and depression, for example, are physically invisible, but more common, and therefore more visible, in social settings. These conditions are part of contemporary society’s lexicon; there are commercials for depression and anxiety medications marketed as such on television. They are more readily talked about, more easily and frequently diagnosed, and as a result, better understood and accepted by society at large. By using “hypochondria” in her

collection's title, Wilson toys with OCD's invisibility by making it a contradiction, both more and less obvious: *less*, at first, because of course, readers don't know what they don't yet know, but were a reader to perform a web-search the term, "OCD" is not in the initial results; OCD is, quite literally, made *more* invisible. This is where the paradox lies: the fact of OCD's invisibility is precisely what renders it further invisible.

A second more poetic rupture occurs when the title is read as a whole: *Hypochondria, Least Powerful of the Greek Gods*. The capitalization of the word "hypochondria" does not immediately stand out—or it is formally unremarkable, invisible—as any first word in a title or sentence would hold to that convention. It is only in reading the antecedent "hypochondria" with "Least Powerful of the Greek Gods" that standard is breached. It occurs in two primary ways. First, as described in the previous paragraph, "hypochondria" conjures a set of medical- and anxiety-related expectations, and paired with sentence-structure conventions, it is again paradoxical: it stands out as something poetically unexpected in its content while formally adhering to norms.

To that point, in a published exchange between disabled American poets Jennifer Bartlett, John Lee Clark, Jim Ferris, and The Cyborg Jillian Weise on the state of disability and (American) poetry, Bartlett writes in her opening statement, "My feeling is that all 'schools' of poetry and the agencies that go along with them have disregarded 'disability poetics' as a category" (Bartlett et al). The other poets agree, Ferris and Clark referencing ableism in the poetry world (and generally) as the reason, and Weise expanding on it bluntly in what cy terms the "trap of ableism."[17] On those occasions where disability is represented in poetry, Weise says, it has been as a poetic device: "disability is for able-bodied writers to write, because it's easy for

[17] Weise uses the pronoun "cy," which is short for "cyborg," rather than gendered pronouns.

them, and they don't have to think too hard about it, but disabled writers should stay out of it altogether. And the metaphors. The moon is blind. The sky is deaf. My love is lame" (Bartlett et al.). Clark follows up with a similarly frank analysis, nothing that "There's something amiss—and missing—in publishing," and touching on the irony that editors do not reject that kind of "bad poetry," but that they *do* tend to reject disability-centered work by disabled poets because it is "too niche" or "not poetic material" (Bartlett et al.). "Disability is a major, major realm," he writes, "But you wouldn't know it from reading literary magazines or any of the 'name' anthologies" (Bartlett et al.). They go on, but the crux of the argument is this: though the publishing landscape is slowly changing, there is precious little space for representations of actual, not metaphorical, disability in poetry, making Wilson's "Hypochondria" in the collection's title stand out all the more.

The second rupture occurs in the realization that "hypochondria" is capitalized not only because it begins the title, but because it is a name—moreover, the name of a new Greek god Wilson is adding to an established pantheon (which in turn ruptures the pantheon). Though there are disabilities represented in the Greek myths, they are more often names that over time have become synonymous with disability, such as Narcissus and Achilles, rather than beginning in disability, or are not so explicit in their revelations, as disabled poet Petra Kuppers describes Eurydice's limp: "her foot bitten by a snake, now on wobbly feet" (110). In crafting the Greek goddess Hypochondria from the disability rather than the other way around, Wilson subverts not only typical cultural interpretations of Greek myths, but stakes a claim anathema to ableism: that even gods can be inherently (not only by accident or injury) disabled—and if that is the case, it forces a reconciliation with assumptions that disability is weakness or a flaw, but simply a different way of being. Even as the "Least Powerful" among them, Hypochondria is still a

goddess, and as Wilson notes in the fourth (and final) iteration of the poems after which the collection was titled, "Hypochondria is the only goddess who is worshiped without being asked" (38).

Further, Wilson's injection of Hypochondria into the pantheon complicates (or "crips") the aesthetics of the idealized classical Greek bodymind, especially as it was conceived of and replicated by the Nazis. In *Disability Aesthetics,* Siebers describes Nazi art as inspired by the unrealistically perfect bodies found in classical Greek statuary. He writes that "sculpture and painting cherished by the Nazis exhibit a stultifying perfection of the human figure," and that the Nazis rejected modern art "as degenerate and ugly because they viewed it as representing physical and mental disability" (5). Though the ancient Greeks were not immune to disability, and—as Martha L. Rose describes in *The Staff of Oedipus: Transforming Disability in Ancient Greece*—indeed "noticed disability, commented on it, and sometimes made fun of it in ways that would make us shudder," this does not mean the ancient Greeks "despised all disabled people as a class or even grouped disabled people in a class" (3). Still, Rose writes, "ideas about disability in the ancient world are part of our common consciousness," and one of the most pervasive of these ideas is that the ancient Greeks were antagonistic to disabled people (2).

"Classicists and nonclassicists alike," Rose says, "are quick to remember that the Greek Classical ideal included the notion of the perfectly proportioned human body and to conclude that all disabled people who varied significantly from this ideal must have been uniformly reviled" (2). It makes sense that the Nazis, with their obsession with perfection, would latch onto this notion, however incorrect or incomplete it may be. But Siebers brings up a compelling alternative to this perfectionistic aesthetic body of Greek statuary in the figure of the Venus de Milo, questioning if she would "still be considered one of the great examples of both aesthetic

and human beauty if she had both her arms" (5). The Venus de Milo, he writes, as an artistic example of "disability as a unique resource" for aesthetics, "is one of many works of art called beautiful by the tradition of modern aesthetic response" even though it "eschews the uniformity of perfect bodies to embrace the variety of disability" (5). It seems significant then that in addition to textually inserting disability into the classical Greek aesthetic narrative by naming her invented goddess "Hypochondria," Wilson uses cover art for her collection that reimagines the Venus de Milo, visually signaling the disability aesthetic Siebers describes.

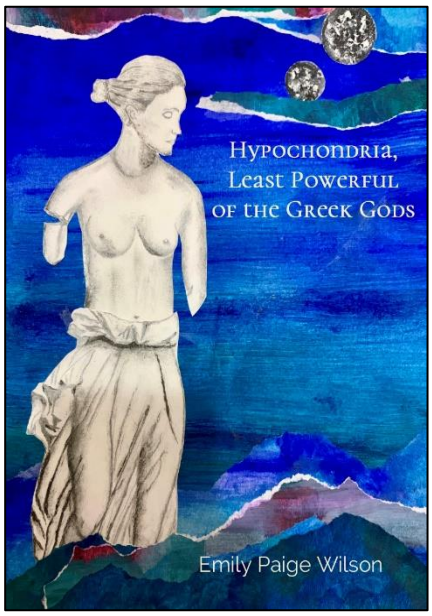


Figure 12

The cover art by Eli Sahm is an avant-garde-like multimodal collage, featuring colorful cut and torn paper and visible paintbrush strokes framing a sketch of the Venus de Milo who, unlike her marble inspiration, is still in the state of becoming the statue we recognize (*Figure 12).* Her left arm is still elbow-length and reaches her navel, while a large chunk of her right bicep dangles precariously, appearing as if it might break off any moment to reveal the statue's familiar shape. What's more, Sahm's drawing seems to be a more realistic depiction of a human body. Where the Venus de Milo has sculpted (literally) abs, perfectly symmetrical breasts, and an hourglass curve to her waist and hips, Sahm's Venus is straight-hipped with undefined abs and no curvature, and her breasts are distinctly different sizes with unevenly spaced areolas. Perhaps, then, what Wilson is suggesting both in her poetry and via Sahm's artwork is even more radical of an interjection: that Venus de Milo's name is not Venus, but Hypochondria. In addition to Wilson naming her goddess Hypochondria, this initial encounter with the reimagined image of the Venus (or Hypochondria) de Milo gives us a hint

about how to read the poems in this collection: the form may at first seem familiar, but a closer look reveals the ruptures.

While Wilson's collection is made up of many formally "typical" poems, there are distinct moments that subvert poetic expectation. In terms of poetic structure, Wilson makes use of conventional forms such as tercets, couplets, strophes, and prose poems, and though there are very few moments of recognizable rhyme scheme, that in itself has become unremarkable as free or blank verse has risen to be the dominant form in contemporary American poetry. For example, the collection's opening poem, "A Treatise of Hypochondria (i)" is, on the page, visually unremarkable—a small, blank-verse poem in tercets—especially when held up to the content that immediately proceeds it (1).

The first moment of a more structural formal rupture occurs on the following page, not with a poem, but with a section break. Rather than a number or other simple marker of separation, the break is denoted by two dark, imperfect circles inked in mottled black and gray (*Figure 13*). The spots are unsettling, resembling cross-sections of tumors or glands as they might appear on an ultrasound. They seem to bleed through the page—and indeed, give the effect of saturating the collection as a whole: the same image appears before the final poem ('A Treatise of Hypochondria (iii), on a translucent insert behind the front cover, and on the cover itself, the colorless orbs ominous and out of place against the cover art's bright blues, purples, and pinks. The rupturing here is, as many in this collection are, twofold. First in the simple inclusion of the image itself, for much the same basic reason the printed hand signs in Kaminsky's collection discussed in the first chapter are: images are atypical in contemporary collections of

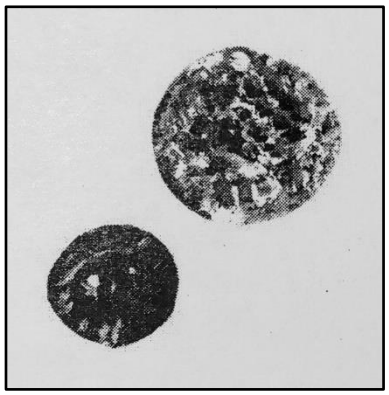


Figure 13

poetry.[18] The second has to do with the nature of the images: the way they seem to literally bleed through the collection, almost disease-like, almost a pox. To that point, the spots also resist clear identification: Are they indeed tumors, glands, or some kind of cell? Are they a pox or rash? Are they hinting at danger, or are they false flags, benign? Before reading a word within Wilson's collection, these spots have told us how to read it: with a sense of uncertainty.

That uncertainty permeates the work itself. Returning to the formal qualities of the poems themselves, the second poem, "I Am Constantly Seeking Reassurance," unsettles the apparent conventional precedent set by the first poem in tercets (5). The formatting of this poem is strange and wild with few clear stanza breaks. While some lines, like the opening two, are what we might think of as standard, the poem breaks apart from there, large swaths of blank space interrupting the verse:

> My thoughts are homeless & stealthy.
> They make an orange moat
> of my tongue,
> some slack-sided
> constellation of moans that would confuse
> farmers' crops into growing
> crooked stalks.
> Please tell me
> I am not
> going
> blind. (5)

Here, Wilson crafts a visual representation of in/visibility: the blank spaces—or invisibility— created by the line breaks and heavy caesuras is quite literally visually ruptured by the emergence of single words or short phrases within those spaces, an eruption of language. This particular style of visual signaling is significant in this collection because of how

[18] Note: "Deaf Republic" paper being revised into larger chapter, argument is essentially that Kaminsky's inclusion of printed (invented) sign language images are ruptures visually & textually, but also linguistically. At present, it is scheduled to be the first chapter of the dissertation.

infrequently, and where, it occurs. Including this poem, the same type of stylistic disruption only occurs four times across the book, and those occurrences are spaced out in a way such that the arrangement, too, mirrors this in/visibility. After "I Am Constantly Seeking Reassurance," twenty pages of standard poetic forms pass before the next appears in this style—that poem aptly titled, "A Warning" (5, 25). The latter two poems formatted this way, "Coping Mechanisms" and "Sisyphus Tries Meditating," come sooner and back-to-back, structurally figuring the experience of OCD into not only the bodies of the poems, but the larger body of the collection: the intensity of OCD waxes and wanes, sometimes to the point that its presence can almost be forgotten, sometimes to the point that it overwhelms, one wave crashing immediately into the next. These four poems mimic those periods of invisibility and breakthrough in their individual structures while the collection weaves those periods into the fabric of the artifact itself.

Four other poems, three in a series all titled "A Treatise of Hypochondria," and "Hypochondria Reads Her Tarot," stand out formally for different reasons, but also serve as a fruitful place to begin shifting from considering form alone to one of considering not only content, but the ways form and content interact and make meaning.[19] The only one of its kind, in "Hypochondria Reads Her Tarot" Wilson unsettles notions of regular poetic form by presenting the poem in a "regular" textual style, but not for a poem. The poem is written as a list in all capital letters of the Tarot cards the goddess Hypochondria draws, "DAUGHTER OF WANDS / THE DEVIL / THE MAGICIAN / FATHER OF WANDS," with each card corresponding to a footnote at the bottom of the page. These footnotes are where the majority of the poem's text actually appears, with the bulk of the page remaining empty. The form itself is a tenuous sort of

[19] There are three sets of poems in Wilson's collection that share names: a set of two, titled "Poet as Doctor;" a series of three, titled "A Treatise of Hypochondria;" and a series of four poems titled the same as the collection, "Hypochondria, Least Powerful of the Greek Gods." For the two with longer titles, for ease and clarity, I will refer to the poems with abbreviated titles and the number. For example, "A Treatise of Hypochondria (i)" becomes "Treatise (i)," "Hypochondria, Least Powerful of the Greek Gods (i)" becomes "Least Powerful (i)," and so on.

invisibility—the kind that arises more from uncertainty than actual imperceptibility: like the ominous, tumor-like spots that bleed through the book, like the slippage between hypochondria (anxiety) and hypochondria (OCD), the structure of this poem resists easy categorization. Is it a poem or something else? And if something else, what? Many kinds of documents contain footnotes, but which kind of document is this? Is it only a poem because we say it is, because it appears in a collection of poetry? Here is another paradox of in/visibility: as OCD is so often only known when it breaks containment, this poem too is only visibly different in the context of other more standard poems—or when it stands out from the normate.

While the content of the other poems in this collection is also concerned with hypochondria, and therefore disturbs notions of what belongs in a poem, as mentioned, this particular poem serves as an interesting point of transition to discussing content more independently. The interplay of form and content here is non-standard due to the formal qualities already discussed, but becomes more significant when those poetic footnotes are read instead of simply viewed. First, it should be noted that of the four Tarot cards listed, two are uncommon, or at least uncommon names for other cards, and not included in most "standard" or "original" Tarot decks, mirroring the same kind of canonical "rupture" that takes place in naming Hypochondria a Greek God. While not inventing new cards, as Wilson does with Hypochondria's deity status, for someone familiar with the standard Tarot deck the inclusions of "Daughter of Wands" and "Father of Wands" would stand out as peculiar. Even so, Wilson plays into the in/visibility dichotomy here: familiar with Tarot or not, these titles still *read* like legitimate card names, and may be easily glossed over. Like so many behaviors of OCD—and to be specific to Wilson's collection, hypochondriac OCD—these tarot-but-not-quite-Tarot cards

hide in plain sight. In other words, to quote one of my own OCD-centered poems, they are "observable only / when being observed" (Hendrix).

These moments of in/visibility continues in the poem's "footnotes," which, again, are really the poem. As it is on the shorter side, I include the entire text of the footnotes here:

> [1]Her doctor's daughter was born a drought. This difficulty has made him resentful.
> [2]As Hypochondria listed her symptoms, she held them precious and blue as bird eggs.
> [3] When her doctor heard her symptoms, he held them like blackberries not worth the bramble. The briars of trying to tell a truth about the body.
> [4] She can't remember where into her skin his cold sticks slid, only that they glowed with the softness of a whitegold light. (8)

First, in a broader sense, is the matter of the disabled bodymind represented in poetry. While illness and disability have certainly (and famously) been written about before, Wilson's poetry is representative of a new way of writing about the bodymind—one that does not apologize or lament it, as in well-known poems like John Milton's "On His Blindness," but in which the condition of the bodymind simply *is*. Hypochondria and its (or her) symptoms are not metaphors or devices, but realities. In "Hypochondria Reads Her Tarot" in particular, though, Wilson goes beyond rupturing the standards of poetic content and uses that content to highlight one specific kind of social invisibility for people—especially women—with OCD: medical sexism. We learn in this poem that Hypochondria, who is a woman, has a male doctor who is already resentful towards women, as his own "daughter was born a drought." While we are not given the conditions of this "drought" daughter, we can understand it to mean that she is, in some way or another, a disappointment. Perhaps she is barren (infertile, by choice, queer), perhaps she is disabled, or perhaps she was even stillborn; in any case, this doctor's perceived failure of his daughter has "made him resentful," though it is unclear that Hypochondria knows that is the reason she receives sub-par treatment.

In this, Hypochondria is like most women and femmes: she goes to the doctor asking to be believed, and she is not believed. Hypochondria presents her symptoms to her doctor carefully, "precious and blue as bird eggs." She knows they are fragile things beneath the scrutiny of her doctor's gaze, perhaps more so because, as Hypochondria, she is already used to not being taken seriously about her body. Here, Wilson highlights one of (hypochondriac) OCD's contradictions of invisibility: to be diagnosed with hypochondria is to be seen as sick, and as a result, to not be believed—by others or even oneself—about one's sickness. If the symptoms of hypochondriac OCD often manifest as fear of disease, how is someone with OCD supposed to discern when they are actually experiencing illness? And since people with this subtype of OCD tend to make more visits to doctor's offices and emergency rooms, it follows that medical professionals might discount an OCD patient's symptoms of illness as psychosomatic, especially if that patient is a woman. Since most people who are diagnosed with OCD are women, they are doubly invisible.

Hypochondria knows this. She does not need to know about her doctor's disappointing daughter to know that she will be treated differently due to her OCD and her womanhood, so she cradles her symptoms like the small, breakable things they are. And she is right to do so: when she lists them for her doctor he treats them with disdain, holds them at a distance, "like blackberries not worth the bramble." The "briars"—Hypochondria's OCD and womanhood—keeps the doctor from even bothering to look too closely at the fruit. By the end of the poem, Hypochondria is no better off. The doctor does *something* to her body, but what is unclear, and further unclear is how Hypochondria feels about it. She "can't remember" even "where into her skin his cold sticks slid," only a soft glowing. This act of disremembering, whether intentional or not, highlights another OCD symptom in depersonalization: the OCD bodymind is invisible,

unknowable, often even to itself. This is the final act of this poem's rupture: Hypochondria may not remember what was done to her, but in writing this poem, Wilson makes sure we know it—whatever *it* is—happened (and happens).

A subtler example of combined formal and content disturbance is the series of three poems titled "A Treatise of Hypochondria." Subtle, because these poems do not formally announce themselves as unconventional quite so strongly as poems like "Hypochondria Reads Her Tarot," each one small and unassuming on the page, the longest line among them, found in "Treatise (ii)," containing only five words, and the longest of them, "Treatise (iii)," containing only ten lines (15, 41). In fact, the only thing formally strange about these poems is the seemingly random capitalization of words, and even then this practice is only considered unconventional in more contemporary contexts, with massively popular poets such as John Milton and William Blake commonly using capitalization to signify stress or importance (Stevenson). So while this sort of capitalization may initially stand out in 21st century poem, with a title including a word like "treatise," which hearkens back to eighteenth century (and even older) texts by the likes of authors like Jonathan Edwards and John Locke; and given that the title also announces itself as engaging with classical Greek literature (even if the deity is invented); it might be reasonably assumed that this formal capitalization choice is simply homage to these older texts. This is especially true when combined with the poem's content, which often include archaic spellings of words (which, in truth, may also be read as a formal quality).

For example, "A Treatise of Hypochondria (i)" reads, in its entirety:

> Treat all bones
> as Vapours all skin
> as dance

the Humour of living
consequently
brought forth

our Ancestors
rising
to make Complaints (1)

Again, in terms of total poetic structure, a small, free-verse poem is not unconventional in contemporary American poetry, but the apparently random capitalization and anachronistic (or at the very least, British) spellings of words like "Vapours" and "Humour" do stand out as strange, if only vaguely. Formally, this small moment of difference is one that may be easily ignored, though that begins to change with the content. Initially most prominent is the use of the word "Humour." Derived from the Latin word for "liquid" or "fluid," early Western physiological theory believed in four "humours" of the body, "blood, phlegm, choler (yellow bile), and melancholy (black bile)," the proportions of which in a body determined a person's personality and mental and physical qualities (Britannica). While, again, perhaps an uncommon concept in contemporary poetry, the more archaic formal qualities make this strangeness another easy one to brush off as homage. Delving further into content, though, the word "Vapours" becomes stranger than its physical presentation when paired with other contextual and formal decisions.

To start, in the opening lines, to "Treat all bones / as Vapours" is a troubling of the concrete: What does it mean to treat a bone—a solid, structural piece of the body—as a "Vapour," something shapeless and ephemeral? I suggest that this moment, which is not only the first in the "Treatise" series, but the first poem in the collection itself, bridges form and content to instruct readers on how to read the book as a whole; to treat the "bones," or conventional, formal structures, as "Vapours," unfixed, a facade constructed around precarious, uncertain content. These poems of the OCD experience, tumultuous and ambiguous, unsettle the very

scaffolding of this book, rending it as precarious as the OCD bodymind that appears within the pages. As Hypochondria cannot trust her own body, her own thoughts, neither can we as readers rely on conventional, poetic expectation in this collection. At every turn we are reminded of this, too, is a space of precarity.

Finally, in the book's ending notes and acknowledgments section, Wilson provides us with one final moment of in/visibility of those strange moments of capitalizations in this series. She reveals that these poems, rather than simple homages, are in fact what are known as "found poems," or poems constructed using the words of something written by someone else. Even more significant is Wilson's source: late eighteenth century author George Cheyne's long work, *The English Malady: or, A Treatise of Nervous Diseases of All Kinds, as Spleen, Vapours, Lowness of Spirits, Hypochondriacal, and Histerical Distempers, Etc.* (43). Wilson's use of this book in this way represents a rupturing not only of text, but of textual and metaphorical human bodies. In crafting this found poem, Wilson literally pulls text from text—one might even imagine it leaves a noticeable blank space, like the ones Wilson includes in her less formally typical poems—and in doing so, though not literally, ruptures the textual body, or the words on the pages. But further, and more compelling, through this process Wilson makes of herself a Frankenstein, pulling pieces from the bodyminds Cheyne's work describes to craft an entirely new one in the goddess Hypochondria. Constructed from someone else's "Vapours," "Humours," "Ancestors," "Systems," "Bodies," "Blue Peppercorns," and "Pain," hypochondria becomes a being with a body, autonomy, and a name: "Hypochondria, Least Powerful of the Greek Gods," here to step out of the shadows, cease being invisible, and inflect the light of normativity with a shadow of her own.

Put Eyes On Me Not Like a Curse

If Wilson's collection sporadically ruptures formal convention, Alyssandra Tobin's *Put Eyes On Me Not Like a Curse* refuses it almost entirely. Composed of poems that ramble, withhold, explode, and contract across the page, Tobin's collection as whole could be called a formal rupture. This occurs in many of the same ways that Wilson's poems do, with large visual caesuras, and reappropriated forms, so for this section my analysis leans more into Tobin's content. First, though, important to point out is one major formal similarity between Tobin's and Wilson's formal choices: the apparently random capitalization of words that actually results from the excision of text from another source to create a new poem. While Wilson uses Cheyne's medical book, Tobin takes a different approach, pulling text for two of her poems, "In Which the Poet Describes Intrusive Thoughts Using the Language of Her Many Times Great Aunt's Salem Witchcraft Trial of May 2nd, 1692" and "My First Obsessive Compulsive Test With My Doctor Who Wants Me to Have Only the Noblest Thoughts & Urges" from the court transcripts and papers of the Salem witchcraft trial of Susannah Martin. In another similar move to Wilson's poem composed of footnotes, the latter also borrows the framework of the Yale-Brown Obsessive Compulsive Scale (YBOCS), the bulk of the poem written as responses to the questions asked on the YBOCS assessment.

The section of "My First Obsessive Compulsive Test" that demonstrates both formal conceits most completely reads:

> HOW FREQUENTLY DO YOU DO RITUALS?
> her being a Rasional woman before shee was so handled
> her now present condision all that know her
> can testafy to the truth shee yet remains a miserabl creetr
>
> under a strang distemper & frensy uncapibl of any rasional action
> her distemper supernatural & no siknes of body
> but that some evil person had her thay swabbed her body (12)

The first of these disturbances is, again, in the form: the stark, bold capitalized letters that form the YBOCS question-as-subheading. These subheadings pull their weight, splitting the poem into pieces that mirror, formally, the internalized OCD eruption of intrusive thoughts. Further, like Wilson's poem, they reappropriate a form not typical of poetry, using psychological assessment form questions as scaffolding for this long, at times visually unwieldy poem, acting paradoxically both as interruption and structure. Finally, there is the intrusion of the only capitalized word, "Rasional," and the strange, archaic spellings of that and many other words within this section, signaling difference and working in similar ways to these formal qualities in Wilson's found poems. And though Wilson's collection does engage with OCD/hypochondria directly in the poetic content as well, it is often (though not entirely) in subtler terms, hypochondria the condition replaced by Hypochondria the goddess, embodying many OCD aspects as personality traits rather than symptoms. In other words, Hypochondria is OCD personified more than experienced.

Tobin's poems, on the other hand, are frenetic and meticulously messy with OCD, their work embodying its symptoms and logics more literally. In this particular instance, the spelling contributes to that energy, especially with words like "miserabl," "strang," and "uncapibl," the words, to a contemporary audience, more like a typographical error, seemingly rushed and unfinished. The textual and formal elements of this poem (and indeed, most poems in Tobin's collection), operate similarly to Wilson's, acting as visual interrupters of poetic convention, but Tobin's collection wades more deeply, content-wise, into the strange (or "strang") and at times almost "supernatural" experiences of the OCD bodymind, crafting poems that draw the reader into that experience with her and lean into a crip poetics of dis/embodiment.

One of the more prominent places this dis/embodiment comes into play is in the long poem, "Ok It's Time to Listen Up Alyssandra:" (3). The poem is written in the form of an address and given Tobin's use of her own name in the title, it at first appears that the poem is a self-address. That notion, however, is quickly unsettled in the second line, the self-address complicated by the strange usage of the "I." The poem begins,

> Thou hast no idea What you're dealing with.
> Thy Blood flows because I swim thy Heart
> beats because I drum thy Breath is steady
> because I only mess with you when you're
> awake & don't know how to breathe. (3)

In language that shifts at random from archaically religious to conversational and back, the self, or "I," in this poem is revealed to be not the expected speaker, Alyssandra, but a mysterious, severe, preacher-like one, demanding some sort of reverence from the "you" its management is apparently keeping alive. *Apparently*, because the slippage between dialects belies not a conversation between the "I" and "you," but an internal inconsistency in the speaker, signaling reason for doubt.

In one particular instance the slippage is more prominent, the speaker's language shifting from something almost Biblical to the speech of a schoolyard bully: "You really / think you control the snaking of fate? Thou / art one egotistical lil bitch" (3). This sort of oscillation is yet another form of rupturing, linguistic and dialectic expectation undone even in the small space of single lines, and what's more, it mimics the internal wrestling that takes place within the mind of someone with OCD, the logics, like this language, slippery and mercurial, but with authoritative bearing, nonetheless. Finally, the identity of that unreliable speaker/"I" is revealed as the poem continues:

> Listen:
> you'll consult a Psych and she'll ask you *have*

you tried breathing exercises & thou will say
the OCD fucks with my breathing & she'll
respond *well have you tried not thinking*
about breathing.
[…]
Listen up Alyssandra:
I'm an edgeless Body & thou art filled with
disgusting molecular Flesh… (3)

If the speaker in the first lines is the one controlling the breath of the "you," and that same "you" admits to their "Psych" that "the OCD fucks with [their] breathing," then the "I" is OCD, the "you" is "Alyssandra," and the speaker/addressee relationship is inverted, the author (Tobin) speaking as OCD speaking to the self (Alyssandra), creating a convolution of conventional poetic logic. The self-address is not unpopular in contemporary American poetry, but despite the author including her name in the title, this is not actually a self-address. It is a complication of the "persona poem," in this case that persona being something that is itself a contradiction of the persona—the OCD that informs, instructs, and sometimes even controls the self, but is not the self. In this poem, OCD with its "edgeless Body" is given a body with literal edges (the page) to inhabit and speak from in a voice that is removed from Tobin's (and/or Alyssandra's) physical body(mind)—or disembodied—yet lives out and enacts its logic(s) by *em*bodying the poem. Put more (and less) simply, OCD is dis/embodied in the text. Even the holder of agency in this poem is paradoxical: Tobin (Alyssandra) wrote OCD into the poem, but it is OCD in the poem who speaks.

That odd agency shift is further evident as the poem unfolds, OCD both reminding Alyssandra it is in control and, at the poem's finish, enacting/embodying that control in a very literal way. In order to keep the insides of her body inside and functioning, OCD reminds Alyssandra, "thou will never speak of / the Future without casting Incantations to / ensure I do not think you art getting cocky," further instructing her to "Knock on Wood to make sure the

violent / Things don't happen & knock on Wood to / make sure you are not jinxing the Good" (3). OCD—who, it is worth pointing out, has an agency and selfhood in this poem not unlike Wilson's Hypochondria, signifying a further dis/embodiment—adopts competing belief systems like its clashing dialects, instructing Alyssandra to perform both pagan rituals and Christian ones, as in the lines, "Oh Alyssandra, / remember whenever you see Roadkill you / must make the Sign of the Cross," further complicating any notions of a cohesive, singular logic.

Not to be reduced to metaphor, however, OCD's more literal, conditional logic sequences also appear in the poem: Not only must Alyssandra "make the Sign of the Cross" when she encounters roadkill, she must make it "once at / least preferably three times or else your Car / will flip your Tire will explode your Body / will suddenly be much softer & in the wrong / Order smeared on Pavement" (3). And as in reality, this logic extends to the mundane. The rituals must be performed even if there is no real death or danger, which OCD acknowledges with vicious humor: "Sometimes / the dead Animal is just a Log in the end but / thou must mark the Rites nonetheless. You / think genuflecting at an old Log keeps you / alive. You gotta hark that" (3). OCD knows its rules are ridiculous, and it knows that Alyssandra knows, too, and seems to delight in her inability to stop it, even for something like a log in the road. Ironically, while making fun of Alyssandra, OCD also seems, at times, to buy into its own con, unable to find the way out of the maze it constructed. Immediately after the pseudo-religious joke, "You gotta hark that," OCD takes on a more serious instructive tone, less like a curse and more like a teacher:

> But don't worry
> I will show you exactly what dying looks
> Like then you can wonder if it makes you
> wretched to have this Gore in your Head:
> no wonder you can't wear less than 10 Rings
> that's how some kinda Death finds you no
> wonder you are always tired it's a divinely
> exhausting business constantly gaping at

Death & having only these flimsy Rites
with which to fight it (3)

The internal workings of OCD (the disability) are laid out plainly by OCD (the speaker) here: OCD is ridiculous, frightening, irritating, distressing, exhausting, but it's worth it because it keeps you safe. The contradiction of OCD (both) is that it is both insidious and nurturing; a fire-and-brimstone preacher who terrifies in the name of salvation and divine love. The paradox is overwhelming and consuming, like Tobin's racing, punctuation-spare lines that feel like spinning wheels, the car accident referenced in the poem that OCD and Alyssandra have worked so hard to prevent always already happening in the mind—a rupture in temporality.

Visually, the poem is as overwhelming as the language and pace, the random capitalizations unexplained (in other words, not a "found" poem like the other instances) and inauspiciously Biblical, the lines condensed into two single-spaced, equal-width columns of text that dominate the page, making it feel crowded and inescapable. The structure feels ominous, especially when considered alongside all but one the rest of the poems in this collection, which are widely spaced or leave large areas of blank page. The shape of the poem is strangely unsettling, as if trying to warn or remind readers of something terrible, and that sense of foreboding comes a few pages later in "My First Obsessive Compulsive Test." Under the section heading, "HOW MUCH DO YOUR OBSESSIVE THOUGHTS INTERFERE WITH YOUR WORK, SCHOOL, SOCIAL, OR OTHER IMPORTANT ROLE FUNCTIONING?" schoolchildren in the poem get "hopped / up on war" and chant "SADDAM / INSANE" in the school cafeteria on September 11, 2001, and we realize the towers of text in "Ok It's Time to Listen Up Alyssandra:" are *the* Twin Towers, the poem functioning the way OCD logics often feel: as omen (3, 7).

Though one of the less-discussed aspects of OCD, it is often this sense that something is incorrect, or that an innocuous happenstance is a harbinger of something sinister, that leads to the more commonly known compulsive symptoms. Those symptoms are often the only external sign that someone even has OCD, the logic being that they must perform these actions a certain way and/or a certain number of times in order to prevent the bad thing from happening, even if that "bad thing" is an unknown. Like compulsions, in these two poems, that kind of OCD logic is invisible until it isn't, when the towers of text in "Ok It's Time to Listen Up Alyssandra:" suddenly become the Towers in "My First Obsessive Compulsive Test," which—if read alongside the latter's form of long lines diminishing down the page into a point—fall, or if viewed from the bottom up, send up a plume of smoke. The question in the pages between and after these poems goes unwritten, but looms large in the collection: Would performing an OCD ritual have prevented the tragedy? Where there should be a logical certainty (no), OCD simply shrugs and says instead, *do it anyway, just to be sure,* promising its own kind of certainty via "flimsy Rites" that, because they are paradoxically uncertain, must be performed again, and again, and again (just to be sure). The uncertainty must be managed, somehow, even if illogically.

That recursive, obsessive (compulsive) logic appears both visually and in the text at the end of "Ok It's Time to Listen Up Alyssandra." After acknowledging the exhaustion of living with its rules, OCD as the poem's speaker and OCD as the disability converge, the poem's finale the most literal embodiment of the disability in the collection as a whole. Though long, it is worth sharing the entire passage here in order to experience the full formal/textual effect. Following its two previous "no wonder" statements, OCD begins the end with a third, noting that books take Alyssandra a long time to finish because, always,

there will be a
sentence thou must read again. There will be
a sentence thou must read again. There will
be a sentence thou must read again. There
will be. There will be. There will be. There
will be. A sentence. Thou. must. read. again.
must. read. again. thou. must. read. again.
there will. be a sentence. thou must read.
again. thou must read. again. thou must read
again. thou must read again. thou must read
again. thou must read thou must read again
thou must read again again again thou must
read thou must thou must thou must thou
must again no again (3)

OCD obsession and rumination are most clearly on display in this passage, both in the visual/textual repetition of the words and phrases and in the conceit. Not only are we witnessing OCD logic playing out on the page, we are also necessarily inside of it; Tobin has created not only a visual and conventional rupture in with the form and content of her work, but in this moment, she also creates one of self—the selves of the "I"/OCD and "thou"/Alyssandra in the poem, but also in the readers. Here again is the Levinasian "face of the Other" that produces in us a "struggle; here is Davis' implicit diexis, the hearing reader in a "deafened modality:"[20] in this moment, Alyssandra is fully in the grip of OCD, and so are we. Our sense of self, of distance from the text, is unsettled as we move from consuming the text to being consumed by it, to drowning in it; OCD has entered us, even if only briefly, through language.

We experience Alyssandra's fatigue as well as OCD's (the speaker): worn out by its own labyrinthine logics and rigid rules, the once certain, assured preacher OCD is exhausted, the dialect still Biblical but less intense, the capitalization and punctuation slowly falling away until even standard sentence usage is abandoned, the fire-and-brimstone heat gone out of it. And in the end, one last moment of rupture drives the exhaustion, and the sadness, home. In the final line,

[20] This is in reference to another chapter that is already partially written.

between “again” and “again,” a quiet, solitary “no” in a large, blank space. The caesuras act as gasps for breath, the “no” a plea between them, and for the first time since the poem’s start the speaker is called into question: Is OCD begging itself for a reprieve it cannot give, or has Alyssandra briefly broken through, only to have her agency revoked a final time? In true OCD fashion, what remains is an uncertainty that is impossible to satisfy.

II. ADHD Poetics: In/Attention and Hyperactivity

“I fear that my legacy will be an unfinished poem,” reads the first line of the opening poem of Angela Aguirre’s audiobook of poetry, *Confessions of a Firework*.[21] The poem, titled “ADHD: An Honest List of Fears and Confessions,” is also the first in the collection’s “Identity” section and is composed, as the title suggests, as a numbered “list” of ADHD anxieties. In this list, Aguirre describes herself as “the best of intentions with the worst execution” and “a red dress at a funeral,” noting with a bitter irony that “someone so full-speed-ahead can so easily get left behind.” These feelings of being incorrect or out of place are not uncommon to people with ADHD, and in this poem, Aguirre leans into that discomfort and points to the paradox(es) of ADHD reality. While ADHD—and by extension, an ADHD poetics—shares many of the same qualities and symptoms as OCD, such as rumination, poor impulse control, and hyperfixation, there are marked differences in the ways those elements are felt, as well as distinctly separate symptoms as well.

Though hyperfixation in ADHD technically aligns with OCD’s tendencies toward obsession, for example, the experiences vary greatly. OCD obsessions and ruminations are overwhelmingly negative and distressing, stemming from severe anxieties, while ADHD

[21] *Confessions of a Firework* was originally published as a paperback in 2015 by World Stage Press, but has since gone out of print and is only available as an audiobook.

hyperfixations, while still "obsessive" in nature, more resemble autistic "special interests" and are generally focused on something the person enjoys (CDC). Though hyperfixations may cause distress, as these episodes of intense focus can be difficult to extract oneself from and may be frustrating for both the person experiencing it and others in proximity, the obsession itself is predominantly not distressing, unlike those found in people with OCD. While it may seem paradoxical for a disability most often understood and characterized by *in*attention to also have a tendency for *hyper*attention, in actuality, the hyperfixation/inattention dichotomy (referred to as "in/attention" from here forward) more often acts like cause and effect.

The ADHD brain is what's known as "stimulation seeking," the hyperfixation often paradoxically resulting in inattention. The intense focus on one subject causes the person with ADHD to inadvertently exclude attention to everything else, and vice versa, the frustration sometimes experienced due to the inability to focus in turn driving the person to seek out something stimulating enough to latch onto (DeWitt; Haverkampf 8). These seemingly at-odds traits of in/attention are one of the more major ways ADHD is not only literally invisible, but socially invisible as well, the disability most known for lack of focus.

This is especially true when it comes to women, nonbinary, and transgender people, who are chronically under- and mis- diagnosed, especially during childhood, as their symptoms often are illegible as ADHD given the tendency to treat it as a synonym for *hyper little boy syndrome* (Kok, et al). ADHD, already physically and socially invisible (or misunderstood) at large, is further obscured in women and transgender people as the stereotypical "hyperactivity" symptom frequently manifests very differently than in cisgender (cis) men and boys. Historically, ADHD was considered to be a (cis) "male dominant disorder," with other genders more often diagnosed with and treated for depression and anxiety—which are now understood to be common

symptoms of untreated ADHD—due to their lack of stereotypical hyperactivity and impulsivity presentations found most often in cisgender men (Faheem, et al). And while in/attention is present in ADHD diagnoses across the gender spectrum, it is not the primary symptom *except* in cis women, their "hyperactivity" an internal, cognitive process vs. the externalized, physical energy prominent in cis men—in other words, a non-male "presentation" of ADHD is not a presentation at all, but a lack of one, or an invisibility.

More research is needed to accurately trace these differences beyond the gender binary, but existing studies indicate that nonbinary and transgender people are more likely to have ADHD than their cisgender counterparts yet face more difficulty obtaining a diagnosis (for this and other disabilities) due to transphobia in medical settings (Strang, et al; Gruberg, Mahowald, & Halpin; Lee). All of these things come together to construct a non-cis-male experience of ADHD that is physically, socially, and in many cases even medically, invisible—until it isn't. For cis women, nonbinary, and transgender people, the behavioral markers of ADHD still apply, predominantly in the form of in/attention, though also in more subdued moments of physical hyperactivity, such as fidgeting, but the first ADHD rupture occurs in simply obtaining a diagnosis as people who exist as non-cis men.

In this section, I read work by ADHD poets who identify as women and/or nonbinary/transgender. But unlike the OCD collections, the poems included here are disparate, some of which are *included* in full collections, but that do not represent entire, cohesive works, which I suggest is an extension of inattention and, for this project, a formal quality of ADHD poetics. As far as my research has taken me, individual collections centered on the experience of ADHD, like Tobin's and Wilson's OCD-themed books, do not (yet) exist, which is a formally significant representative of inattention. Where OCD's obsessiveness can sustain itself through

an entire collection, ADHD's inattention cannot, the poems occurring as single pieces. In fact, the most "complete" collection of ADHD-themed poetry I have found is a single, special issue of a small online literary magazine called p*erhappened mag* featuring work by writers with ADHD, and even then, it is not quite accurate to call the attention sustained, as it is a collective rather than individual attention, the work coming from disparate places and coagulating (or hyperfixating) in one place, like a flock of similarly-inclined but mismatched birds. From the special issue, titled "Running" after ADHD's tendency for rapid-fire, associative thought processes, I analyze poems by emerging poets Thanh Bui and Lucas Olson. Additionally, I pull a selection of poems from established poet Jennifer L. Knox's collection, *Crushing It*, reading the singular, explicitly ADHD poem within the book in tandem with others that, while not ADHD-themed, still show evidence of its symptoms and tendencies in the poetic construction in order to suggest a more cohesive ADHD aesthetics at large.

Running: Thanh Bui

In the introduction to *perhappened mag*'s ADHD special issue, poet and issue co-editor KB Brookins writes about their struggles being diagnosed with ADHD for the first time as an adult near the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic. They share that this was an overwhelming time of "confusion" and "complexity," but that they made it through that time—and other difficult times—by writing poetry (Brookins). What's more, during this particular time, they discovered something about the relationship between their ADHD and poetic practice. They write, "I realized just how deeply my poetic instincts—lists poems [sic], run-on sentences, and the like—were influenced by how my mind feels like a marathon without the satisfying touch of the ribbon on your chest after running, and running, and running" (Brookins).

Thanh Bui's poem from the issue, "Prove It," perfectly emulates ADHD's "marathoning" cognitive process, both in form and content. Formally, the poem is at first glance standard, if visually dense: a prose-style poem laid out in a single, un-enjambed block of text. Upon closer inspection of the text itself, though, little breaks in formal convention begin to appear. First is the near total lack of capitalization, only a single "I" in the second line in uppercase (we will come back to that). Then is the strange internal formatting: each line is broken up by forward slashes, and the text on either side of that slash alternates between italicized and standard. Finally, rather than spelling out the word "and," every instance of it in the poem appears as an ampersand symbol. All of these elements—including the more conventional prose-poem form—come together to make the poem visually embody ADHD's "running" thought patterns, associative leaps, and inattention, the eye unsure of what to focus on or where to place that focus. The lowercase text and ampersands especially contribute to this racing effect, as if the writer was in such a hurry to put pen to paper she could not risk pausing to capitalize or spell out words (like "and") unnecessarily, lest she lose the thought—though she often loses it anyway, or at least appears to. This "running," though, like in/attention, is paradoxical: for all the speed, the forward slashes interrupt it with sudden, jarring stops.

For Bui's poem, though, it is nearly impossible to discuss the form without the content, intertwined as they are. For example, the poem opens: "yes, omg, ok, so this guy comes up to me & / *this is the part where you tune out anyway* / but then that wasn't even the end of it because he KEEPS going on about how / *five million people died & I wanna be believed*" (Bui). Here, those formal choices—namely, the forward slashes and alternating italics—reveal the poem's internal logic, signaling, with the text, a conversation. That conversation, however, makes little sense, especially as it continues: "/ oh, but i shit you not, he looks them dead in the eye & says / *don't*

you get tired of living / without even knowing anything about us! / *fight-hungry & grace-poor?* / just walks away!!" Up until this moment, while strange, the alternating text makes enough sense as a back-and-forth, at least in terms of one poetically interpreted.

However, as the logic of the conversation begins to fall away with the poem's progression, an ADHD epiphany interrupts the poem's assumed logics, its embodiment of the disability becoming clearer: the standard text is not the speaker, but what the speaker is hearing (more specifically, to whom she is listening), and the italicized text her internal monologue. The second fragment "*this is the part where you tune out anyway*" reveals itself not as an accusation to the external conversant, but an internal self-admonition for not being able to pay attention. The (internal) speaker's ADHD literally interrupts the poem, the internal monologue preventing both the speaker and the reader from being able to pay attention to what is being said. This is further evidenced later in the poem, the speaker acknowledging the gaps in what she's hearing: "oh. okay. i'm sorry to / *here, another nothing*" (Bui). Bui's wordplay in this moment is also significant, the sonic slippage between "*here*" and *hear* highlighting again the fact that what she has heard is "*nothing,*" the rhyme allowing for an almost-sense with the common phrase, "I'm sorry to hear," before ADHD's inattention interrupts it.

Additionally, as with the ending of Tobin's "Ok It's Time to Listen Up Alyssandra," in Bui's poem, not only is ADHD embodied in and rupturing the poem, but the reader; we are in an ADHD modality while reading, experiencing the telescoping in/attention and self-deprecation alongside Bui's speaker. That single capitalized "I" acts as a similar moment of slippage, too. While every other instance of "I" in the poem, whether self-referential or heard, is lowercase, this particular one occurs with a very specific desire: "*I wanna be believed*" (Bui). In this moment, the speaker's self, via the capitalized, subject proper "I," seems to briefly transcend the

ADHD logic and space of the poem, acknowledging a version of her bodymind that can look at what's happening in the poem as readers can: It is a moment of subtle meta-cognition, an awareness of the situation without the ability to change it. The "I," the meta-self, is short-lived, and is again subsumed by the "i" in the poem, the self inextricable from ADHD.

Further complicating that "I/i" is the revelation at the end of the poem that perhaps not everything in italics went unsaid, the external conversant apparently responding to that "I" in "*I wanna be believed.*" There is already evidence of an unspoken (in the poem) part of the conversation on the side of the speaker, as the conversant's speech includes responses, such as "no, of course you're not overthinking it" and "you are not being hysterical," suggesting not only an exchange, but one in which the (internal) speaker's ADHD and/or mental health is acknowledged by both parties (not to mention the gender-coded "hysteria" often associated with women's mental health and disability) (Bui). Throughout the poem, though, the internal monologue of the speaker does not line up with the conversant's questions and observations, that speaker actually admitting (to herself and readers) to deceiving the conversant: "*two years ago, to save on time…i started lying to you*" (Bui). However, the conversant's final words in the poem are "i believe you," creating a final schism in the logic of the poem while reifying the agency of the singular "I." If the italicized words are the speaker's internal monologue, and if all the selves in the poem are represented by a lowercase "i" but one, that standalone capitalized "I" represents a rupture in the fabric of the poem, a single moment in which, for both speaker and reader, the internal and external worlds are aligned despite (or perhaps because of) the influence of ADHD on the speaker's agency.

Running: Lucas Olson

In nonbinary writer Lucas Olson's poem, "How to Put Away Scissors," *perhappened mag*'s special issue theme "running" is once again on display, though expressed differently than in Bui's. While "Prove it" feels fast-paced with break-neck stops and pivots, Olson's poem feels less like a running for speed and more like a running *into*. Though set into ten rather conventional stanzas, "How to Put Away Scissors" is more akin to Tobin's and Bui's rupture via extended dis/embodiment, the reader invited into the experience and frustration of performing simple tasks with ADHD. The dis/embodiment shows up most completely in the poem's address to a "you" that is at first only implied and then finally made explicit in the sixth stanza, the "you" simultaneously disembodied by omission and embodied later in the poem when the address becomes direct, drawing the reader into the poem more completely.

Composed as a set of meandering instructions, Olson's poem begins: "Open the drawer. / What's missing, once found, / must be returned / or else be lost again. / Set the scissors on a junk-bed. / To find them at all is a miracle (Olson). To start, the poem seems innocuous enough, the act of losing a pair of scissors not necessarily a phenomenon known only to those with ADHD. There are two hints that there is something more at play here, though vague: the apparent hyperbole that finding lost scissors is a miracle, but larger, that instruction on how to find them needs to be given at all. The shift into the second stanza begins to further disturb that sense of normativity as the commands given become unrelated and disconnected: "Decide to change / into pajamas. / Unbutton the cuffs. / An empty glass on the bedside / wears a drying lip-print on the rim. / How long since the glass has been full?" (Olson). Suddenly, the speaker is no longer looking for scissors, but changing into pajamas, and the instructions change to match, as if the original task has been overwritten. Just as quickly, though, the focus shifts again to an empty

glass beside the bed, and as the attention moves, so does the priority as the third stanza begins: "Get that first. / Thirst is more important than change" (Olson). Here, rather than completing or even hinting at remembering the initial task, ADHD works in the poem to pull the speaker/reader along associatively, the most pressing thing the next thing the speaker encounters.

Olson's speaker even acknowledges their own neurodivergence here, though similarly to Bui, in a self-deprecating way. Rather than changing into nightclothes to go refill their glass, the speaker continues, "going downstairs in pants / is what normal people do" (Olson). Not only does the speaker admit that they are not "normal," which they most likely mean as "neurotypical," but they also create a wrinkle in the poem, shifting from simple instruction to implication. This moment is one that, for the reader, "produces a struggle;" it forces a reconciliation not just within the world of the poem, but outside of it: the reader must negotiate for themselves whether or not "going downstairs in pants" is "normal," and by extension, whether or not *they* are "normal." Readers are not given much chance to contemplate that complication, however, as the poem shifts again in the next stanza: "Pick up the glass. / Put it down on the desk. / The clutter has a scissor-hole / outlined in empty-headed notepads.

Written in one notebook, incomplete: / *Have you noticed shameful thoughts b/c of lack…*" (Olson). Again, the drifting mind is wrenched back to the task at hand—or the most recent task at hand: refilling the glass. This train of thought is yet again quickly interrupted, though, as when Olson's speaker goes to collect the glass, they notice an empty space where the scissors should go, and we (both the speaker and readers) are thrown, if only briefly, back to the poem's title, reminding us what it is the speaker set out to do. Briefly, though, as an ironically unfinished thought written in one of the notebooks that borders the space where the scissors should go moves the speaker/reader back into self-critique and shame, and finally employs the

first direct use of the "you." Like Bui's single capitalized "I," this moment serves as a sort of meta-address, the notebook bringing the self into the poem in a more literal, concrete way—only this time, instead of the "I" retreating, the address here breaks the self open, letting it seep through the rest of the poem. But not yet.

The next stanza (the fifth) pivots to yet another distraction: beneath the notebooks is a closed laptop, and the speaker remembers a document stored there that they need to retitle "before time misplaces the unformed" (Olson). The sixth stanza instructs: "Sit down, open it, / hear the fans whir to life" (Olson). Then, like the whirring fans, focus spins out and back in again, overlapping and colliding circles of in/attention: "There is a beer can not in the way. / Throw it away (downstairs)" (Olson). The parenthetical here serves as a reminder, launching us backwards not only to a prior (though not the original) goal, but also into shame. The poem continues, "Consider that, standing / can in hand, fingers on the doorhandle. / While you're down there, fill the glass / that you are not holding" (Olson). The need to go downstairs to throw away the beer can causes the speaker to remember the glass they need to refill, which they must return to the desk to collect, but the "you" in this instance is darker, the only prior use of it associated to "*shameful thoughts*," the self interpreted through a lens of "*lack*"—but lacking what? The shame of whatever this self lacks is compounded by the literal lack of the unfinished sentence in the notebook.

Over the next three stanzas, the first of which is a single line, that shame unfolds quickly in a self-punishing, rapid-fire demonstration of what the speaker has failed to do: "Stop. Return to the chair. // You did not write the title down. / You did not throw out the can. / You did not get the glass. / You did not close the drawer. // You have not changed. / *…lack of focus* / is how the sentence ends" (Olson). Conspicuously absent from this list, however, is the original task of

putting away the scissors. ADHD's rupture here is multifaceted: first, in the quick succession of address to the self/reader via the use of "you" more directly and inescapably than anywhere else in the poem, and second is the shift in temporal affect. Up to this point, time in the poem has felt meandering, the thought process mired in distraction, attention seemingly dragged from one thing to the next, where—however briefly—there is at each juncture a pause of consideration. Here, though, those disparate associations collapse into one moment, every thread spiraling suddenly back to the scissors. This strange temporal unmooring in the poem is a dis/embodied ADHD symptom: executive dysfunction, sometimes also called "decision paralysis," which makes information processing and decision-making difficult. Again, in this moment with the ambiguous "you" address, readers are drawn into that modality alongside the speaker, stuck spinning out and overwhelmed by all the things we should have done, but did not—or could not—do.

In one final turn, though, the poem ends not in this moment of shame and frustration, but with a kind of radical self-acceptance. The final stanza pivots us back to the first—still not to the act of putting away the scissors, but to the concept of the miraculous in ADHD existence. It reads, almost soothing, "You can not change. / That is the miracle" (Olson). To someone who is neurotypical, that word "miracle" in reference first to finding scissors and later to not changing clothes may seem overwrought, but for someone with ADHD, like Olson and their speaker, it does not feel so much like hyperbole. At the start, the "miracle" is finding scissors, or really anything, with ADHD's inattention that often manifests as forgetfulness, or even something similar to a lacking sense of object permanence. As the poem-as-ADHD-cognition unfolds, we come to understand how easily the scissors (etc.) are forgotten, their literal absence becoming a

mental one—a sense that something is missing and a desire to fill that gap, even if the speaker attempts to fill it with something the wrong shape.

By the end of the poem, however, the miracle is in recognizing that this logic, this supposed order of operations, need not be adhered to. The phrase "You can not change" works to subvert not only that order, but also the shame that permeates the prior stanzas so thickly. In one sense it is literal: you do not have to change clothes in order to put away the scissors; you can simply put away the scissors—which is, after all, what "normal" people would do. Therein lies the second sense: *performing* normativity is not the same thing as *being* "normal." Whether the author means "You can not change" to mean you can choose to not change, or to mean you *cannot* change, as in lack the ability to, the implication is the same: you can be ADHD. You can (or cannot) choose who you are, how your brain works, your ADHD and all its recursive logics—and that, too, is a perfectly valid way of being; that, too, is a miracle.

Crushing It

Kimberly Nguyễn, the other co-editor of *perhappened mag*'s ADHD issue, writes in her introduction, "I became a poet not despite my ADHD but because of it (Nguyễn). Jennifer L. Knox, author of the poetry collection *Crushing It*, has not publicly shared a similar sentiment, but her poems seem to do it for her. Though, unlike the OCD collections included in the first section, this book at large is not ADHD-centered, the poems within it still bear ADHD's marks—openly in the two poems that reference ADHD outright, "How to Manage Your Adult ADHD" and "Crushing It," but characteristically in many, if not all, of the other poems in the collection. While only that one poem is explicit in its mention, a few others make references to certain facets of ADHD, or at the very least, neural/cognitive disability; specifically, the poems "Monochrome Rainbows," "The New IQ Test," and "Ode to Your Hypervigilance," each of

which engage with aspects of an unspecified type of neurodivergence on the part of the speaker. Though worth analyzing on their own, I do not touch on those poems, but instead pair "How to Manage Your Adult ADHD" with a poem that is seemingly entirely disconnected from ADHD or neurodivergence to more fully illustrate what an ADHD poetics can look like.

While, again, Knox's book is not centered around ADHD, its structure nonetheless reveals an ADHD epistemology. Knox is known in the US American literary landscape for her surreal, darkly funny poetry, and *Crushing It* is no exception. The joke—and the ADHD aesthetic and rupture(s)—begins in the overall composition of the book itself. The collection is divided into two sections, the first of which is titled "Mines" (3). The poems have nothing to do with literal mines, however, and seems instead to be a metaphorical mining of experiences, the poems that begin the collection involving meeting a new family, sitting with moments of self-introspection, and many instances reflecting on conversations with others. Though this kind of experiential and situational "mining" is an accurate way to describe the first section, the joke is made clear with the title of the second section: "Ours" (37). "Mines" is revealed to be a double entendre, not only referring to that more obvious digging into of the self, but also acting as an intentionally incorrect form of the possessive *mine*. "Mines" is indeed more oriented around first-person experiences than "Ours," which places the self into the collective world, but even those boundaries are flimsy and in on Knox's joke: the self does not exist in a vacuum, is always an aspect of the social.

Before even analyzing individual poems, in drawing attention to these arbitrary self/collective divisions, constitutes a disability aesthetic. Specifically, it enacts key points in Alison Kafer's proposal for a "political/relational" (PR) model of disability in which "disability is seen less as an objective fact of the body or mind and more as a product of social relations,"

and that "'demand[s] an unsettling of [disability's] certainties'" and "pluralize[s] the ways we understand…instability" (6-7). In other words, like self/societal blurred lines in Knox's collection, disability is not solely an individual experience, but a collective (relational) one. These disability-informed, fluid self/other boundaries permeate the entire collection and make space for a more distinct ADHD poetics and aesthetic to unfold in individual poems.

"How to Manage Your Adult ADHD" is one of the two poems that engage most directly with ADHD as an aesthetic (both of which, significantly, occur in the opening "Mines" section of the book). Like Olson's "how to" poem, Knox's is written as a series of commands and an address to an initially implied "you" that becomes more explicit as the poem unfolds, though Knox's also becomes more complicated, the "I" and "you" within it merging, breaking apart, and multiplying. Before delving more deeply into the address, however, it is important to make note of the poem's initial, more formal conventional unsettling. Again, similarly to Olson's poem, "How to Manage Your Adult ADHD" proceeds as a list-like sequence of steps, but where Olson's more conventional form at first keeps their ADHD invisible, Knox's form constitutes difference on sight. Preceded and followed by visually standard or at least unremarkable poetic forms, "How to Manage Your Adult ADHD" quite literally ruptures the relative stasis of the book's otherwise conventional structure. Written as what reviewer V. Joshua Adams calls a "chaotic mock-outline," the poem unfolds as an out-of-order, numbered and lettered list. The sequence is as follows: 1, 1a, 1b, 3, 7, 49, ii, 4, 8, 9, 99, 999, 12, 1221, 13, 13a, 13af, 14-19, 27, 28, 39, X, xx, ∞, Y, Z, zz, zzz (16-17). The ordering skips around with no apparent pattern or logic with only very brief moments of sequential cohesion, though even those act as sort of red herrings. The 1, 1a, 1b string, for example, begins the poem with a logic that it cannot sustain, mathematical expectation unsettled by the next number in the pattern: 3 (16).

Similarly, there is a reprieve from the numerical chaos once we reach 13 and 13a, but that relief is short-lived as it precedes not to 13b but "13af," which based on similar humor in the rest of the collection is likely meant as a joke, "af" a common Internet abbreviation for the phrase "as fuck."[22] Another moment of brief "typical" logic occurs at the end of the poem with the shift into letters with X, Y, Z, though it is again unsettled by the proceeding "zz" and "zzz" indicators. While portrayed differently than in Olson's work, this poem, via the apparently illogical numerical and alphabetical sequencing, enacts and dis/embodies ADHD patterns of thinking. Where in Olson's this is represented in the associative jumps from task to (seemingly) unrelated task, in Knox's poem those jumps are given labels. If we were to assign numbers or letters to the tasks in Olson's poem, we can imagine they might look something like this, and in both cases, we can perhaps picture a document in which this organization makes sense, where those gaps are filled and these are pieces of a larger sequence rather than the sequence itself.

There is a method to the proverbial madness that Olson and Knox can follow and make meaning from that is unintelligible to those without ADHD, and in this way, in paradoxical ADHD fashion, the rupture occurs because of what *is* there as much as what *isn't*. J. Logan Smilges refers to this kind of precarious vacancy as "rhetorical absence" or "silence," and though they write specifically of the relationship of queerness and disability, their explanation is useful in touching on the significance of that absence. They write that absence is "unstable and uncontainable," and that we might read silence "not only as an absence of speech but also as an invitation to consider other ways [of] signifying" (5). In "How to Manage Your Adult ADHD," Knox signifies difference not only by formally embodying ADHD's "chaotic" and associative cognitive processes, but also by the conspicuous absence of the in-between.

[22] This is a colloquial term meaning "very." For example, to say something is "cool af" would mean the thing is "very cool."

In terms of content I look at the complicated you/"I" address in "How to Manage Your Adult ADHD" and at Knox's language and subject matter more generally, concluding my discussion of the latter with a brief, paired analysis of a non-ADHD centric poem from the collection. This poem's beginning again bears a resemblance to Olson's, starting with a command: "1. Stop the action" (16). At first encounter, the address is once more engaging with an implicit "you," either the speaker's self-address or an address to the reader, participating initially in the speaker/reader slippage and dis/embodiment found in previously discussed poems. Like the complicated sequencing, though, the logic of the address begins to unravel from there.

The next lines start the work of that unsettling: "1a. Does that include apologizing? / 1b. Because I'm sorry about this poem. I'm so embar- / rassed. Please forgive me" (16). These sub-points shift the perspective from an implied "you" as the reader to, presumably, one of the self, the "I" in "1b" apparently, and logically, the unspoken "you" from "1," linked by the question in "1a" since it responds to "1" and is in turn responded to in "1b." The poem appears to confirm this implied-you/"I" slippage as it progresses, the next six points on the list operating solely in that implied-you space before becoming literal in the next four: "9. To soothe yourself, recite *Ghostbusters.* 99. Again. / 999. Let's show this prehistoric bitch how we do / things downtown. / 12. I'm sorry again" (16)[23]. The implied-you, now explicit with "yourself" in "9," again appears in conjunction with an apologetic "I" in "12" as a complicated, disembodied self-address, but one whose logics are at least discernable. Like the sequencing, though, these moments of more normative (or neurotypical) sense-making are quickly made strange. Immediately following the apology in "12" is the introduction of both a new logic and a new persona in the poem.

The next points read:

1221. [mechanic lopes in wiping his oily hands on a rag]

[23] "Let's show this prehistoric bitch how we do / things downtown" is a quote from the 1984 movie *Ghostbusters*.

"Welp, I'm pretty sure you had yourself a full-fledged
nervous breakdown back there!"
13. Stop apologizing.
13a. Right?!? Fuck you! [breaks beer bottle]
13af. [Steven Seagal-style] Make meeeeeeeh. (16)

With respect to convention, rather than adhering to poetic norms of describing the mechanic and his actions, as in something like, "a mechanic lopes in, wiping his oily hands on a rag," Knox creates her own symbolic logic for referential action and scene-setting with the use of brackets and by omission of articles and punctuation. Instead of in a poem, these bracketed moments seem more like they belong in a script or screenplay, lending a strange, film-like affect to the poem. Despite that break from convention, rather than obscure logic, Knox simply reframes it. We still understand, for example, that the mechanic is the one speaking in the next lines, partly due to the use of quotation marks in the lines following his mention, and that the exaggerated "Make meeeeeeeh" is meant to be said in the style of action-movie actor Steven Seagal. This reframing is an ADHD one, a textually-embodied hyperactivity, the effect of the brackets and abbreviated speech not unlike Bui's lowercase text and forward-slashes in "Prove It." Knox's invented logic of bracketed text as action or scene-setting remains mostly stable throughout the poem, but the speaker and address become muddied again beginning with "13a" and "13b." While the mechanic's part in this invisible conversation is clear, set off by quotation marks, the argument that takes place in the lines that follow are less so, "13" returning us to the speaker we've come to accept as both the "you" and "I" in the poem." The move to points "13a" and "13b" feel initially similar to the poem's beginning, implying a conversation with the self, but unlike the exchange that takes place in "1" through "1b," this dialogue implies a direct conflict of self with self—a paradox.

Without either of these pieces of conversation set apart in quotation marks, the poem's internal, established logic suggests these are being said by the same speaker, but therein lies the rub: how do we know we can trust this poem's logics when they have proved themselves inconsistent and changeable? In "14-19," for example, the address *does* change drastically, becoming a meta-rupture by breaking the fourth wall: "Dear reader…wanna make out?" (16). Even that bracketed text which seems to act as an anchor in the poem changes function, if only slightly, by the end, the action within interrupted by a parenthetical address, presumably, again, to the reader: "X. I dance [Bugs Bunny imitating Danny Kaye in *Hot Cross Bunny* (1948)]… / xx. …for *you*, dear reader! / ∞. [hands them the box, they shake it (hint: the bird's dead)]" (17). Ignoring the fact that this line is the first and only mention of either a box or a bird, the unraveling of what was once a reliable logic is a textual enactment of ADHD's cognitive unpredictability. Even the parentheticals (the only two in the poem) change logics, the first acting as a citation and the second as an address. As in Olson's poem, this is often internally frustrating, the speaker of Knox's devoting significant time in the poem to apologizing and fighting—presumably with themselves—and these frustrations are dis/embodied in the poem's form and content, the reader experiencing ADHD's in/attention and associative leaps in the act of reading.

Finally, and again similarly to Olson's poem ending with positivity and acceptance, the speaker in "How to Manage Your Adult ADHD" also comes to her disability: "27. Have a sense of humor about your ADHD" (16). Knox must be doing a good (or perhaps a very bad) job of ADHD management, then, as every poem in this collection is funny. It follows that, even when not mentioning her ADHD, Knox's poems are all ADHD poems by virtue of being humorous since. To be clear, I am not suggesting that all funny poems are ADHD poems, but that Knox

establishes humor as an ADHD aesthetic for her own work in "How to Manage Your Adult ADHD." While any poem from this collection could realistically serve as an example, I have selected the short poem, "Getting a Wax From Marisol," partly due to its brevity, which allows for it to be quoted in its entirety here, but primarily because it enacts Knox's ADHD humor aesthetic while also including (without mentioning) a moment of ontological ADHD rupture. The poem reads:

> She tells me about giving herself a Brazilian
> when she was nine months pregnant.
> "Girl, you should be the fucking president,"
> I want to say, but instead I stick with
> "You did not." "I did! I was like…"
> she mimes tunneling up her butt cheeks—
> "where's the top of this thing?!" (61)

Regardless of one's personal sense of humor, Knox's poem is undeniably funny, engaging with a long history of crude body-comedy. To put it crassly, in a book full of humor that runs the gamut from dark and subtle to slapstick, this poem is the collection's version of a "fart joke," if somewhat elevated. Even the feminism is wry and sarcastic, as if having the nerve or self-loathing (or both) required to wax one's own genital area while nine months pregnant qualifies one to be president. The use of conversation is also one of Knox's primary vehicles for delivering comedic lines in this collection, as seen in this poem, "How to Manage Your Adult ADHD," and many others, but here it pulls double-duty in terms of an ADHD poetics. The first and perhaps funniest moment in this poem is the line, "Girl, you should be the fucking president," and yet this is the one line set in quotation marks that is not actually spoken—though we don't know that at first encounter. Instead, our expectations are subverted, ADHD's tendrils of self-doubt literally wrenching the poem in half, the line "I want to say, but instead I stick with" acting as a hinge, an internal pivot that only we and Knox see, Marisol oblivious to the

joke she's missed out on. Despite the poem's humor, that line tinges it with a subtle sadness, undercutting the comedy of the joke that precedes it by revealing the joke was left unsaid. Here again is a version of Smilges' "rhetorical absence," a self-inflicted "silence" that is revelatory by omission. For Knox, this "silence" is paradoxical, but the poem becomes a body where that paradox can exist, ADHD's characteristic impulsivity both happening and not, the joke both said and unsaid, ADHD a dis/embodied rupture on the page.

Concluding Remarks

In her manifesto, Tobin declares, "We the Neuronasty are a song with only a bridge and no chorus, no verse. A constant connecting to nothing, a loop stuck in time. We spin our wheels uselessly. We sputter and spit" (161). In this, Tobin draws attention to that neurodivergent move from invisibility to visibility, the shift from internal to external. An outside observer may not be able to see, for example, a neurodivergent person's inner world that is a "loop stuck in time" or a spinning wheel, but that invisible difference does not—cannot—stay concealed indefinitely. At some point, neurodivergence bursts through, becomes observable; it "sputter[s] and spit[s]." Aguirre similarly points to these moments of externalization in her poem, "ADHD: An Honest List of Fears and Confessions," writing that she has always wanted to be "more fireplace than firework," or more settled, more constant, more controlled (Aguirre). For neurodivergent people, especially those who are women, nonbinary, and/or transgender, these instances of neurodivergent rupture are often socially punishable "offenses" that ultimately, and ironically, lead to the development of further neurodivergences.

The National Center for Gender Issues in AD/HD (NCGIADD), for example, notes that more often than men, women with ADHD are more likely to "believe that they are 'stupid' or 'bad' because they are forgetful, can't pay attention, or remember as easily" as others—feelings

that are often reinforced in classroom and work settings (NCGIADD). Gendered socialization of women to be calm, still, and quiet often runs directly counter to the symptoms of ADHD, and especially in school and career settings, the emergence of these symptoms frequently results in punishment, leading women (who, again, are significantly underdiagnosed) to "demoralization," anxiety, and depression (NCGIADD). Similarly, OCD, despite being more common in women, is frequently misdiagnosed as a general anxiety disorder, and carries with it greater rates of anxiety, depression, and eating disorders in women than in men (Fawcett, et al.). More to the point, OCD in women often flies completely under the diagnostic radar and is dismissed as gendered neuroticism, as symptoms of OCD in women differ significantly from those more common in men. In women, these symptoms most often present as cleaning and contamination obsessions, with comorbidities of disordered eating, which unfortunately align with gendered stereotypes of women as homemakers and—at least in the United States—a toxic diet culture aimed predominantly at women (Fawcett, et al.).

For both ADHD and OCD, however, symptoms like poor impulse control are common in all genders, but because of sexist social conditioning, represent difference in people who are not cisgender men, rendering these instances of neurodivergent rupture more obvious. Aguirre describes this in her poem as well, in a moment that calls back to Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's theorization of the normate's stare: "People will not always tell you when your different is showing," Aguirre writes, "but their eyes will."

But to be unabashedly neurodivergent, or "neuronasty," as Tobin notes, is to not care about the stare, even to defiantly invite it. "Us neuronasty are united in a shared shame," she writes, "and united in revolt against that shame" (162). Neurodivergent poets, and a neurodivergent poetics, participate in the same kind of shame and not-shame unification. The

body of the neurodivergent poem, like the neurodivergent person, is paradoxical: it is a body that is not a *body*; it is a mind outside the mind, alive and visible on the page. Neurodivergent poems, Tobin writes, "halt and jolt and gape and wound. They give and receive knives" (161). The invisibly disabled poem may look "standard" or "normal" in their page presentation, but they bite; they have their own agency, and they'll take the reader's and make them neurodivergent, too. OCD and ADHD poems obsess and hyperfixate, they pay in/attention, and construct their own logics and narratives inside a body that can handle them, can dis/em/body all the unreasonable thoughts and impulses the physical body cannot.

Chapter 3 | Breath/lessness and Bumps: Asthmatic and Allergic Poetics

According to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), I am legally disabled, but no one would know it just by looking at me. This is never more of a problem than when I have to fly. In addition to severe asthma, I also have several food allergies ranging from mild to fatal, with peanuts being the worst. It is so severe that airlines have me coded as a "pre-boarder" so I have time to wipe down my seat, tray table, and anything else my skin might come into contact with just in case a prior passenger ate something with peanuts. Skin contact results in an uncomfortable, days-long rash. Inhalation of peanut dust or accidental consumption leads to nearly instantaneous anaphylaxis: my blood pressure plummets, my heart races, and my throat and airways rapidly swell shut, which in turn triggers an asthma attack. I have learned from experience that once symptoms begin, I have about half an hour of consciousness to find an emergency room or inject myself with epinephrine. My rescue inhaler can sometimes buy me a few more minutes, depending on how quickly I use it and how bad the reaction is. It's a terrifying ordeal that I have unfortunately been through a handful of times, and one I try my hardest to avoid repeating. But the people in the airport who see me stand up and walk to stand in the pre-board queue beside mobility aid users and the elderly know none of that. What they see is a young, able-bodied person trying to cut the line, and they often let me know.

Lennard Davis describes the visibly disabled body as a question "always already asked" by the normate; its presence "must be explained, or at least tolerate the inquisitive gaze (or the averted glance) of the questioner" (xvi). Though people certainly do ask about a visibly disabled person's difference, it is at the very least considered rude; parents will instruct their children not to stare, or admonish and apologize for them if they make a comment. Invisible disabilities do

not receive the same hedging; people assume you are not disabled and, in my pre-boarding experience, inconsiderate and impatient. Most often I simply get dirty looks, or overhear people grousing about "entitled millennials" taking up space that is not theirs. Other times, people address me directly, or even touch me. Once, a man in a military uniform grabbed my arm and jerked me out of line to scold me. When I told him about my peanut allergy, he let me go, but said, "that shit isn't real." Another time, a woman pre-boarding with a newborn on her hip told me it was "not my turn yet," and when I explained she did apologize, but not without adding, "I hope my baby doesn't end up like that." While waiting to board my plane, after being accosted for looking "normal," I have been asked countless questions and been given unsolicited, often pseudo-scientific advice: Does it hurt? Would you take a cure? My dad fixed his soy allergy by eating a soybean every day. There are essential oils that can help with that. Even without being visibly different, my body constitutes a rupture; its presence as "normal" in a space designated for those who are "abnormal" paradoxically renders it a visual and noticeable other.

Until I stand in a line I don't look like I belong in, until I wheeze, cough, blister, break out in hives, or pull out an inhaler or EpiPen, I do not look disabled. But there are entire restaurant chains I cannot set foot in due to my allergies, parts of the world where I could never comfortably live because of my asthma, and several experiences I will never safely have because my asthma and allergies are so intertwined—I have turned down so many invitations to go camping. But I do get invited; nothing about the way my body moves or looks leads people to believe they should not. Only when I decline, when I am forced to disclose, is my difference made known. For people with allergies and asthma, all of these things—wheezing, bumps, inhalers, avoidances—are involuntary disclosures. Even the word involuntary feels fraught and contradictory; I use my inhaler of my own volition, but it is necessity, not speech, that discloses

for me, and in that way is also involuntary. These disabilities force a rupture, necessitate disclosure, and at the same time simply are ruptures or disclosures: even if I do not use an inhaler or ask a restaurant for a list of allergens, a reaction—a wheezing breath or cough or bright red rash—discloses difference itself, externalizes the body's internal, invisible situations.

Yet more complicating is the social mis/understanding of these conditions. There are people, like the military man at the airport, who believe things like food allergies do not exist, or at least are overblown, and for understandable reasons: a recent study reveals that while 19% of US adults believe they have food allergies, only 10.8% actually do (Gupta, et al). When only half of the people who claim to have food allergies end up having reactions, it makes sense that it would breed skepticism in observers. Conversely, asthma is more common, with some 260 million people globally and roughly 15% of people in the US having an asthma diagnosis (Global Health Metrics; Pate, et al). The complicating factor, however, is that asthma is most often diagnosed in children, and of those children, as many as 3 out of every 4 "outgrow" asthma, or do not have symptoms into adulthood (Litonjua, et al). What's more, in the 8.7% of US adults who do not outgrow their asthma, the overwhelming majority (70%) experience symptoms that are mild and require little medical intervention (CDC; Rees). Both its prevalence and its general mildness serve to obscure the disability status of asthma, and locate those with more severe asthma in a paradox: their condition is serious, but (outside of medical settings) is often not taken seriously. For both asthma and allergies, pervasive, reductionist myths regarding the severity and seriousness of the conditions ultimately results in an invisibility that is not only physical, but social (Newman).

This kind of double invisibility extends into the realm of poetry and poetics. Because these invisible disabilities are not often thought of, or understood, as disabilities, poets with these

conditions are often left out of disability conversations both more generally and in terms of disability poetics. While there are exceptions—such as allergic poet Sandra Beasley, who has had publishing success as well as publicly claimed disability as an identity—allergic and asthmatic poets remain largely unknown in the canon and to the public. When conducting research for this chapter, for example, other than Beasley and Elizabeth Bishop, every other included poet was found through crowdsourcing and conversations: I emailed Beasley to ask if she knew of other living poets who were open about living with severe allergies; I took to social media to see if anyone identified or knew of someone who identified as asthmatic.

For the other disabilities represented in this work, while invisible, the people who have them still quite often identify as disabled (or D/deaf), making them relatively easy to find. Overwhelmingly, the same cannot be said for those with asthma and allergies. Despite both conditions being listed as disabilities by both the ADA and Section 504, people with asthma and/or allergies seem far less likely to identify as disabled or to consider asthma or allergies as part of their identity, either personally or poetically. By contrast, the proud existence of the Deaf Community/Culture and efforts in recent years to destigmatize cognitive disabilities and mental health mean that these experiences are more readily claimed and extended into poetry.

On the other hand, the social invisibility of asthma and allergies as disabilities seems to have prevented community and identity formations, making their presence difficult to discern, especially in terms of a poetics. But these poets *do* exist, and deserve inclusion and recognition in disability and disability poetry communities and conversations. That is the mantle this chapter takes up: not to force an identification or aesthetic production, but to showcase a disability poetics of asthma and allergies already, if somewhat secretly, in place. In the pages that follow, I consider what these poetics might look like, and put forth several questions: for asthmatics, what

constitutes breath or breathlessness in a poem? What does wheezing look like, sound like, feel like? And for allergies, where are the bumps, the rashes, the hives, and what do they look like in poetry? How do they spread? What makes a poem itch?

For both these disability categories, I look to the point of rupture, the ways in which these invisible conditions become visible, to suggest poetic aesthetics of allergies and asthma, even if that ontological moment is only recognized by those who share in these experiences. Poetics of asthma and allergies confront mortality differently; they are shaped by a constant awareness of one's proximity to death, whether by breath/lessness or a systemic allergic reaction. What heaves in them, spreads through them, ruptures them, is fear expressed not only as itself, but also as morbid humor, hypervigilance, and the absurd patience of waiting to find out if a reaction, this time, means death. These poems are containers for breath and allergic reactions, their bodies holding—and experiencing—safely what the body of the poet cannot.

I. Breath/lessness: A Poetics of Asthma

Glasswork artist Nicholas Dertien's piece, *Breathing Glass* (2012), in name seems a contradiction: glass is static; breath is not. And like breath, representing *Breathing Glass* accurately on a page, too, is impossible. The primary element, a sheet of glass painted with curved, branching lines that resemble the alveoli in a pair of lungs, represents only part of the equation of breath—the physical body in which it moves. The mechanical function, however, is lost in still images, like the one below (*Figure 14*). To "breathe," the piece relies on an overhead projector, but more than that, on a human to facilitate it. When projected onto a screen, the alveoli-glass



Figure 14

appears to inhale and exhale only as a human—presumably Dertien—makes active adjustments to the light and focus. The glass does not breathe, and neither does the projector, though both are physically required for breathing to occur. What *actually* breathes—or what facilitates breathing—is the human element actively choosing it: zooming in and out, inhaling and exhaling.



Figure 15

In *Breathing Glass*, Dertien forces an awareness of breathing, something that is mostly, and for most people, a thoughtless and automatic process, except on rare occasions. Dertien, an asthmatic, draws attention to the act of breathing experienced by those who *must* think about their breath, for whom breathing is often not a passive, but active undertaking. In *Breathing Glass*, Dertien makes viewers aware of their breathing, while in another series, *Photograms & Vessels of Asthma Attack* (2009), he draws attention to its precarity and fragility (*Figure 15*). Unlike *Breathing Glass*, the blown glass vessels in the *Photograms* series are stills and therefore *still*, almost ominously so. What's more, these vessels as *blown* glass serve to literally still the breath, capturing the act of breathing, something which is typically transient and ephemeral in a physical, fragile container. Investigating the question of whether the "sensation of [asthmatic] breathing [could] be imaged," Dertien forced himself to have an asthma attack, sketching on paper what



Figure 16

that felt experience looked like, then "translated" his drawings into blown glass vessels before ultimately photographing them to resemble x-rays, "imaging" breath, via the vessels, "back to the body," conceiving of "light as an embodiment of inhalation" (Dertien). The vessels in these photographs freeze the act of breathing, complicate it as asthma does. They ask questions: how do these pieces move together? What does it sound like? Can they be separated without breaking?

In one particularly distressing photograph, Dertien takes one of these asthma vessels and inserts it into another of his creations: a blown glass headless and limbless torso (*Figure 16*). The transparent body in the piece, titled *Photogram of Asthma Vessel (bubble lung in torso)*, looks almost as if it was photographed underwater, black vein-like shadows filling the body's cavity. A large, white bulb with a vertical stem—the "lung"—fills the center of the torso, seemingly inflated with air, the stem reaching up toward the would-be neck like a trachea. The combined affect is one of suffocation or drowning, or rather trying *not* to suffocate or drown, the attempt made more complicated by the "bubble(s)" in the lung: three large, tumor-like white blooms taking up precious space for air. These bubbles—or asthma—render an already tenuous situation further precarious. The instinct to breathe becomes risky, something that must be actively measured and controlled in order to survive: the bubbles drive a desire to take in more air, to breathe deeply, but breathe too deeply and the glass body will break. Dertien's work is a visual rendering of an asthmatic's shallow, focused breathing—something the poets in this section similarly render on the page.

The poem, too, acts as a container for breath. In Charles Olson's poetry manifesto, "Projective Verse," breath and breathing are integral to the poem's construction. Olson argues that breath should be the poet's foremost concern, writing that "the line comes…from the breath,

from the breathing of the man who writes," and therefore, it is solely that writer who "can declare, at every moment, the line its metric and its ending—where its breathing, shall come to, termination" (Olson). More than simply making these claims, however, Olson's form here enacts the very thing he describes: visually, through the use of excessive and at times erratic punctuation, Olson—the writer—controls the breath-space of the line, or vice versa. That punctuation serves as a kind of ruptured moment in the breath, the pauses in the natural inhale-exhale speech rhythm at times so quickly recurring they almost mimic a stutter.

Take, for example, the following passage:

> If I hammer, if I recall in, and keep calling in, the breath, the breathing as distinguished from hearing, it is for cause, it is to insist upon a part that breath plays in verse which has not (due, I think, to the smothering of the power of the line by too set a concept of foot) has not been sufficiently observed or practiced, but which has to be if verse is to advance to its proper force and place in the day, now, and ahead. (Olson)

Olson draws attention to the role of breath by writing about it literally, yes, but also in the way he writes. The passage, which is only one sentence, is broken up by pauses in the form of eleven commas, a parenthetical, a repeated phrase, and finally an end-stop (period). More literally, the commas and parenthetical aside force a kind of breathing awareness—they signal, visually, an arrest, or moment for breath. The repetition of the phrase "has not" both before and after the parenthetic similarly signals the breath—or perhaps breathlessness. In repeating this phrase around the larger pause (the aside), Olson creates a sort of gasp: the parenthetical between these two "has not[s]" feels simultaneously like a place to catch one's breath and the inability to do it, the repetition acting, itself, as both inhale and exhale on either side, a punctuating breath.

The sentence itself, too, is simply so long that there is reasonably no way, if reading aloud, one could get through it without pausing for breath, and in this way, Olson's punctuation direct readers where those breaths should go. Though of course not written in verse, this duality

of Olson's breath/lessness in text and form operates in much the same way as the asthmatic poetics I propose in this chapter. In terms of asthmatic poetry, I read these pauses, these gaps, these starts and stops, as erratic breathing, gasps for breath, coughing and wheezing, or perhaps even as moments where the poet had to stop to take out and use an inhaler. In this section, I read poems by contemporary asthmatic poets Matthew Rohrer, Mark Doty, and Jeannine Hall Gailey for these kinds of asthmatic poetic aesthetics, using the work of Modernist poet Elizabeth Bishop as a kind of framework and poetic informant.

Elizabeth Bishop, "O Breath"

Elizabeth Bishop's life and work as a prolific 20th-century asthmatic poet poises her to be, for my purposes, a poetic informant, or a poetic foremother, for reading and establishing a more contemporary and coherent poetics of asthma. Bishop, who died in 1979 on the cusp of where I suggest are contemporary American poetry's beginnings, experienced debilitating asthma for most of her life (Lombardi 16). While her poems in print avoid mentioning asthma by name, Bishop described her struggle with severe asthma in great detail in her notebooks and letters, especially during the years she spent living in Florida, where the warm, humid environment worsened her symptoms significantly (Lombardi 1). Bishop's experiences with these symptoms made her poems a container for labored, asthmatic breathing, even if never mentioned explicitly.

Despite writing to Marianne Moore that Florida was her "favorite" of all the states she had visited, Bishop's other personal writings reveal that while there, she suffered from distressing asthma attacks almost nightly, and her symptoms became so debilitating that she had to begin giving herself injections of cortisone and adrenaline, sometimes hourly, so she could breathe (Kennedy 57; Lombardi 16). And while much of Bishop's work is known for its

celebration of travel, due to her asthma, she also experienced it as a sense of homelessness and a source of fear, writing to her friend and personal physician Anny Baumann from Key West in 1948, "as soon as I get to a place I like best of all it starts again" (Lombardi 18). Still, despite not writing poems of asthma explicitly, Bishop's asthma still shows up in her work, perhaps nowhere more obviously than in "O Breath," the final in a series of four poems from her 1955 collection *A Cold Spring* (which itself is dedicated to Baumann). The poem reads:

> Beneath that loved and celebrated breast,
> silent, bored really blindly veined,
> grieves, maybe lives and lets
> live, passes bets,
> something moving but invisibly,
> and with what clamor why restrained
> I cannot fathom even a ripple.
> (See the thin flying of nine black hairs
> four around one five the other nipple,
> flying almost intolerably on your own breath.)
> Equivocal, but what we have in common's bound to be there,
> whatever we must own equivalents for,
> something that maybe I could bargain with
> and make a separate peace beneath
> within if never with. (Bishop 77)

In terms of establishing, or at least informing, a contemporary poetics of asthma, where the breath catches, halts, and heaves, I first draw attention to Bishop's form and what the form does, how it ruptures poetic convention. The poem appears, for the most part, visually standard, save for the caesurae (or blank spaces) that bisect each line. Even then, though, caesurae themselves are not immediately noteworthy as rare or unconventional, only perhaps a bit archaic—a caesura occurring in every line, as Bishop does for this poem, is more often associated with texts in the Old English and classical Greek and Latin traditions, such as Beowulf, Homer's Iliad, and Virgil's Aeneid. Traditionally used as a break in a line around a metrical foot, the word *caesura* comes from the Latin *caedere*, literally meaning "to cut" (OED).

In poetry, this "cut" typically denotes a pause or interruption and is used most often to complement or direct the meter and rhythmic performance of the poem, but in terms of musical performance, especially in instruments that rely on air like woodwinds and brass, caesurae are often used as moments for the players to catch their breath. Given poetry's performative, lyric nature and oral tradition, it does not seem a stretch to apply the musical meaning to a poem, especially when reading a poem aloud. To that end, if we read "O Breath" aloud and explicitly honor the caesurae, the moments of pause act as a rupture of breath because, rather than occurring at what we might consider more natural-feeling places to pause for breathing, Bishop's caesurae are often interruptions in the cadence of a line, coming at moments that force a kind of breathing awareness, and in turn allowing the poem, not the body, to initiate and dictate breath.

While the first line is technically in a regular meter—iambic pentameter—the poem as a whole is in a meter that is irregular, which itself might make it more difficult for a caesura to equally bisect a line, though not impossible. The caesura in line two, for example, comes at a moment that feels more natural, almost acting as a comma, even though the line's overall meter is not regular. The second line, though not *quite* in iambic pentameter, similarly reads in a pattern that, while perhaps not a strictly regular meter, is at least written in a more natural pattern of speech, though metrical irregularity dominates the poem from there. And while breaking briefly from regular meter does not itself constitute a break with poetic convention (Shakespeare similarly broke his own rules), it is significant that Bishop constructed these first two lines very conventionally—or with an air of poetic normalcy—and then intentionally broke the poem apart into free verse. This shift, while subtle, represents a sort of rupture, the more traditional opening lines lulling readers into a sort of poetic complacency and expectation only to then subvert that expectation.

What's more, "O Breath" is also almost technically a sonnet in length, though of course not in meter, with fifteen lines instead of fourteen, which acts as a further subversion of the sonnet-like expectations Bishop establishes in the first two lines. To return to the caesurae, however, more than the comma-like, "regular" pauses like the one found in line two, most of these lines are broken at awkward places, as if the poem itself is gasping for breath. Compared to the pause in line two, "silent, bored really blindly veined," the break in line twelve, for instance, feels distinctly out of place: "whatever we must own equivalents for." While the pause between "really" and "blindly" in line two might reasonably read in a regular cadence, the caesura between "own" and "equivalents" explicitly interrupts a phrase, like a sharp inhale or desperation for air. Similar interruptions occur in several lines, but perhaps most notably in four, "live, passes bets;" eleven, "Equivocal, but what we have in common's bound to be there;" and thirteen, "something that maybe I could bargain with." Significant, too, is that these awkwardly spaced breaks become more interruptive and more frequent as the poem progresses, the majority of them appearing in the final lines, as if breathing is becoming more laborious the longer it continues.

In her monograph on Bishop's poetics, *The Body and the Song*, Marylin May Lombardi similarly writes of "O Breath," referring to the poem's structure as a "rib cage of words" which "give[s] the agonies of asthma visible shape," describing the poem's rhythm as mimicking asthmatic breathing: "halting" and "labored" (33). I concur with Lombardi's analysis, but further suggest that the form does not only "mimic" asthma, but actively enacts it. The poem is not *like* wheezing, not *imitating* labored breathing; the poem, its body, *is* wheezing, gasping, breathing irregularly. Like lungs, the poem's textual body expands and contracts, inhales and exhales, wheezes. "O Breath" is an asthmatic poem and it *is* an asthmatic poem; asthma is not simply

mimicked in the poem's body, it occurs within it, constitutes it. The poem embodies the experience of asthmatic breathing, and in doing so, becomes a body with agency of its own—an agency capable of acting and enacting its will, its rhythms, on other bodies. In other words, as it embodies asthma, it simultaneously *dis*embodies it, the asthmatic breathing occurring not only in the body of the poem itself but projected outwards and inflicted upon the bodies of readers.

"O Breath," then, ruptures not only formally, but physically: it produces a change in the body of the reader by directing (or redirecting) breath and forcing an awareness of breathing, which in turn confronts the reader ontologically. Jean-Thomas Tremblay describes this confrontation of being in *Breathing Aesthetics*, writing that "Becoming conscious of our breathing confronts us with our finitude" (1). To read Bishop's poem—especially to read it aloud—causes in the reader an existential rupture. Its gasps and sighs make the reader's lungs too gasp and sigh, and in doing so, draws attention to the problem of mortality: the asthmatic poem can never die, but it reminds us all that we will. As a form that breathes without breathing and, more to the point, suffocates without suffocating, the asthmatic poem is a body that dis/embodies invisible disability, not only rendering asthma visible, but also robbing it of its capacity for harm, even as it affectively replicates that harm in the bodies of readers.

Finally, in terms of content, "O Breath" similarly provides a useful metric for reading asthmatic poetics and aesthetics, even when the content is not as implicitly or explicitly related to the act of (or struggle with) breathing. Important context for Bishop's work, and this poem in particular, is her queerness. Though she did not publicly "come out" as a lesbian until 1976, Bishop had romantic relationships with several women over the course of her life, most notably in her longtime partners Lota de Macedo Soares and Alice Methfessel, the latter of whom Bishop was with from 1971 until her death (Marshall). It naturally follows, then, that much of Bishop's

poetry is rife with queer undercurrents, but "O Breath" stands out as one of only a few that is more overt. Lombardi notes "O Breath" as "one of [Bishop's] only published poems about the eroticized female body," and further describes it as "a captivatingly ambiguous love poem that plays with the narrow passageway for authorized speech permitted a woman" of Bishop's standing in 1955 (33). On the surface, the poem is quite reserved, the spare bodily imagery of the breast and nipples couched in halting, reticent verses.

But, as Lombardi writes, beneath that murky surface "we sense something moving invisibly: a faint image of erotic coupling or its aftermath" (33). Bishop's queerness runs as an undercurrent in "O Breath," and alongside it—nearly inseparable from it—is the undercurrent of her asthma, too. Even beyond the form, breathing is prominent and palpable in this poem, the speaker watching her lover's chest rise and fall—perhaps, in Lombardi's reading, as she sleeps—and it is the lover's breath, too, that stirs her own body hair: "See the thin flying of nine black hairs / four around one five the other nipple, / flying almost intolerably on your own breath." The lover's easy, steady respiration is thrown into contrast with the speaker's—by way of the form's—labored and uneven breath: "such shallow breathing is almost intolerable to the speaker because she herself is forced to gasp for air" (Lombardi (34). Asthma, though never mentioned in name, wheezes through the disparity between the speaker's and lover's breath, and like Bishop's queerness, lives in secret beneath the poem's surface—until it doesn't. The "silent" thing that moves "Beneath that loved and celebrated breast" is the lover's breath, perhaps also desire, but also comes to represent the speaker's asthma. It moves "invisibly" in the lungs, is not externally perceivable, until the moment of rupture by way of audible wheezing, coughing, or breathlessness, or the use of an inhaler; asthma moves "invisibly, // and with what clamor." As in

the physical body, asthma likewise moves stealthily in the body of the poem, silent and unknowable until its "clamor" is revealed.

This is the kind of asthmatic poetics I see Bishop's work suggesting and enacting: a poetics that, by those without asthma, may not always be recognized on the surface or be understood, but that exists in the poem and has its own agency regardless. Several poets and critics have described the role of breath in poetry, but a poetics of asthma probes the different affective registers that breath—or more accurately, breathlessness—can take. Bishop's "O Breath" serves as a representative of what asthmatic breathlessness can look like in a poem, both formally and in content, and it does so without need of audience recognition. Bishop is a useful litmus specifically because her asthma is well-known to contemporary audiences and because her poetry never mentions it explicitly, which opens up the possibility for reading asthmatic aesthetics into contemporary poets whether or not the fact of their asthma is known. Asthma is there; readers may not recognize it by name, but they will feel it moving—even if invisibly. Asthmatic rupture is felt, even if not perceived specifically as such. That said, for the purposes of both disability representation and for furthering the establishment of an asthmatic poetics, the contemporary poetry I turn to now is by self-identified asthmatics and engages with asthma directly.

Matthew Rohrer, "Poem for Asthma"

In "Poem about Breath," a poem dedicated to the memory of Elizabeth Bishop, David Wagoner imagines what Bishop might have been thinking, feeling, and experiencing as she penned "O Breath." He writes, wondering about Bishop's use of punctuation and caesurae, "It wouldn't be right for breath to have full stops. / It *does* go on, though people with trouble breathing / Think about it, and breathe, and think about it" (249). For Bishop, and for others

"with trouble breathing," breath is not a passive, automatic function, but one that requires thought, awareness, even practice. This kind of active breathing occurs throughout "O Breath" via Bishop's caesurae, though it goes unnamed. Rather than lurking beneath the surface, the presence of asthma is not only explicit, but central to Matthew Rohrer's "Poem for Asthma." Like Bishop's "O Breath," Rohrer's poem, too, *is* asthmatic, actively *enacts* asthma and asthmatic breathing, though he arrives at that asthmatic aesthetic somewhat differently. Rohrer's short "Poem for Asthma" reads:

> Hold on while I do a breathing exercise
> I am just paying attention to myself, or the universe is vast
> And the universe is imperfect, I stop what I'm doing and look right at it
> I say "Doc is this thing going to kill me?"
> He pronounces it "asmer", a voice calls me from a tower before sunrise
> Or in a terrible panic I bite through my own mouth & am pinned to the floor
> I am clubbed in the head by a wintry cloud
> Am pulled bodily from my dream
> A tree tries to warn me of the wind, independent of the wind
> "Oh, absolutely man" is my answer to everything (*Painted Bride Quarterly*)

To begin, as with Bishop, with form, Rohrer's poem notably stands out as different from "O Breath" in its lack of visual caesurae, though they still occur in several lines in the form of commas. As in Bishop's poem, lines like "I am just paying attention to myself, or the universe is vast" are bisected with a pause, though the meter on both sides is irregular. Even with these moments, however, Rohrer's poem distinctly also lacks an abundance of punctuation, containing only a few commas, no periods, and only one end-stop in the form of a question mark—which itself is less of a stop, more open-ended. This spare punctuation lends a sort of breathlessness to the poem, the moments of pause beyond the comma caesurae occurring only in the form of that question mark and, more significantly, enjambment. This is Rohrer's version of Bishop's caesurae: the breath in the poem still signified by space, though at the ends of the lines rather than (visually) within them. Rohrer's non-end-stopped lines force a kind of breathing awareness,

requiring the body, not punctuation, to initiate the pause, making that blank space at the end of each line precarious, especially as there seems to be no pattern or indication as to which lines continue logically into the next and which do not.

The second line, for example, flows logically into line three via the conjunction *and*, "I am just paying attention to myself, or the universe is vast, / And the universe is imperfect," but line three does not follow the same pattern: "I stop what I'm doing and look right at it / I say 'Doc is this thing going to kill me?" In terms of regular punctuation, these lines read as though there should be a period after the word "it" in line two, but like Bishop's caesurae, it is space, not punctuation, that signifies the pause. But like Bishop's caesurae, Rohrer's use of enjambment here does not necessarily signal difference in itself, as this kind of formal choice is fairly common in the work of several poets, contemporary or otherwise. In fact, formally, poems like Rohrer's do not initially stand out at all—prolific poets like W.S. Merwin and Mary Oliver employ similar methods.

What *does* distinguish Rohrer's formal choices as asthmatic is their relation to the poem's title, or more broadly, the way form and content inform each other in this poem. After "Poem for Asthma," Rohrer's enjambment and spare punctuation become invocations of asthmatic breathing, the title allowing these otherwise somewhat standard, unremarkable formal qualities to serve instead as asthmatic ruptures within the poem's structure. Asthma in the title informs the breath of the poem, signaling a difference, however subtle, between more standard usage of the same formal properties; this poem written *for* asthma is also written with an asthmatic breathing aesthetic; the poem is both for asthma and asthmatic itself, the patternless pauses at the ends of Rohrer's lines, like asthmatic breathing, irregular and largely unpredictable. Another example of this a-rhythmic breathing occurs toward the end of the poem in lines seven and eight: "I am

clubbed in the head by a wintry cloud / Am pulled bodily from my dream." In all instances before line eight, the verb follows an "I" or implied "I" that is performing it: "*I do* a breathing exercise," "*I am* just paying attention to myself," "*I stop* what I'm doing," "*I say*," "*I bite*," "*I am* clubbed in the head by a wintry cloud." In line eight, however, the "I" is dropped, almost as if there was not enough breath in that moment to say it; the *being* stays the same, but the level of urgency changes. One line trips into the next, almost like a falling off, or—more to the point—like a gasp for air in the poem; a rupture of breath. The movement in this poem is the movement of asthmatic, irregular breathing; it is focused until it isn't, until the lungs—or the poem—assert their own needs and rhythms.

Similarly to the role of the title, the first line of the poem works to establish this poem as different—it is both a poem and not a poem. By opening with "Hold on while I do a breathing exercise," Rohrer initiates the poem rather unconventionally: not with action, but inertia. Rather than begin the poem, the speaker instructs readers to wait; we must allow the speaker to complete a breathing exercise before continuing into the poem. This beginning with hesitation dis/locates the reader from the poem, the space between lines one and two suddenly unclear. The speaker does not tell the reader how long to wait, only to wait; we do not know where or when the poem will actually begin. In line two, however, the speaker does not turn out toward the reader, but inwards: "I am just paying attention to myself." If the speaker is paying attention to himself, has the poem begun, or are readers still waiting for it to begin—waiting for the speaker to finish his breathing exercise? Almost as quickly as the speaker turns inwards, though, he pivots and looks back out with "or the universe is vast / And the universe is imperfect." The poem continues in this pattern, moving from the internal to the external—or, to put it differently, between moments of inhale and exhale. Rather than waiting for the speaker to finish the

breathing exercise, readers are participating in it. The poem is not a poem, but an asthmatic space, one focused on active breathing. As the form literally enacts the breath, moving and pacing it irregularly, the poem's content seeks to control it in the form of the breathing exercise. The poem, then, is also not a poem, but a container for breath; like a lung inside a body, it holds the breath while something else directs it. It expands and contracts, inhaling and exhaling in a regular rhythm even as the internal rhythms are disrupted and sporadic; if the content that shapes this poem's body, its *whole*, is a pair of lungs breathing under direction, the form—its starts and stops, its gasps and shudders—is asthma wheezing inside it.

Finally, Rohrer's asthmatic aesthetic also works, however subtly, on a metaphorical level as well, especially in the penultimate line: "A tree tries to warn me of the wind, independent of the wind." Here, rather than a literal tree and literal wind (or truer to the poem, the ominous absence of it), the tree and wind may be read as representative lungs and breath. This metaphor works both visually and kinetically. Visually, the roots and branches of a tree fan out like the alveoli of the lungs; kinetically, like Dertien's *Breathing Glass*, the tree's branches do not actually move without interaction, without wind, or breath. The tree, without wind, still manages to issue a warning to the speaker, or the viewer, but how it does so is unclear: What constitutes warning of wind without wind—what warns of movement without movement? If, as I suggest, the tree is representative of lungs and the wind of breath, then that warning is the invisible presence of asthma. Asthma in the lungs occurs independently of the breath; the wind—or breath—is simply what signifies its presence. Rohrer's poem enacts poetically what Dertien's *Photogram* does visually: like the blown glass "bubble lung" inside a glass torso, "Poem for Asthma" draws attention to the fragility of breath, especially when that breath is hindered by something like asthma; if the breath is not controlled, the whole thing will shatter.

Jeannine Hall Gailey, "Breathing in the Asthma Capital"

In 2006, the publication year of asthmatic poet Jeannine Hall Gailey's collection, *Becoming the Villainess,* Knoxville, Tennessee ranked among the worst places to live as an asthmatic, only missing a place in the top ten by less than half a point. The survey, conducted annually by the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America (AAFA), determines the rankings based on twelve factors across three broader categories: prevalence of existing asthma deaths and diagnoses, environmental risk factors, and prominence of medical need (AAFA 2006). This is the backdrop for Gailey's poem, "Breathing in the Asthma Capital," the complicated realities of asthmatic life in this region compounded by its proximity to one of the darker chapters of America's history: the development of the nuclear bomb. Gailey quietly confronts this history in the poem's opening stanza: "In Knoxville two miles from Oak Ridge / I grew up with a yard of lilacs" (4).

On September 19, 1942, Leslie Groves, commander of the Manhattan project, made the decision to establish a nuclear weapons development site in Oak Ridge, TN (Johnson & Jackson 3). Selected for its relative isolation and abundance of "untapped non-farm labor" in the nearby city of Knoxville, Oak Ridge became a "secret city," the town's 75,000 residents sworn to confidentiality until August 9, 1945, when the United States dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, and the *Oak Ridge Journal* ran a front page under the heading, "Oak Ridge Attacks Japanese" (Johnson & Jackson 8, *Oak Ridge Journal*). While there is no conclusive evidence that the nuclear development activities in Oak Ridge worsened rates of asthma specifically, in the years since its closure, studies conducted by the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR), a branch of the CDC, indicated a higher prevalence of public health concerns, including increases in certain types of cancer in the surrounding counties (ATSDR). In

her poem, Gailey suggests that Knoxville is an "asthma capital" at least in part due to its proximity to Oak Ridge, weaving in a context for asthma (and breathing in general) that is not only biological or environmental, but ethical as well. Gailey's poem also serves as a final, and complex, example of poetic asthmatic rupture in this chapter, complicating the act of breathing in both content and formal registers.

As in Bishop's and Rohrer's poems, the most explicit mentions of breath or asthma occur in the poem's title, "Breathing in the Asthma Capital." Gailey's title, however, is also where this poem deviates: breath, breathing, or asthma are never mentioned in the body of the poem, and instead, breath/lessness is metaphorical, or represented by its absence and asthmatic triggers. Gailey's poem reads:

> In Knoxville two miles from Oak Ridge
> I grew up with a yard of lilacs
>
> despite stray dogs, stray cars jackknifed into lawns
>
> the lilacs press their tiny mouths
> cool and faded
> to my fingertips
>
> despite crushed cigarettes and smells of tar
>
> lilac branches climb uncertain
> above asparagus, moss, strawberry leaves
> they rise like watery flames out of red clay
>
> despite seasons of radioactive snow
>
> despite spring shedding its wreckage
> on rotting house frames, gravel roads
> on overturned crates of mangoes on I-75
>
> the lilacs go on burning
> radiant
> and thick against a grey May sky. (4)

Formally, the poem more or less follows a pattern: a stanza of multiple lines, usually three, interspersed by single-line stanzas, with the exception of the opening couplet and final two tercets. Like Rohrer's poem, though less explicitly so, in combination with the poem's title, this form may be read as a kind of breathing exercise or rhythm. The title, with its active verb "breathing," suggests that the body of the poem takes place within that action, or is at the very least concerned with it. If we then consider the poem's form, visually, the stanza pattern resembles expanding and contracting—or inhalation and exhalation—and this formal breathing pattern especially makes sense in terms of an asthmatic poetic aesthetic. The poem's opening couplet does not immediately stand out as significant in terms of breath, but in comparison to the subsequent single lines and tercets, the couplet begins to seem like a shallow inhale, and the single lines a thin exhale—perhaps even a wheeze. As the poem progresses, the "inhalation" stanzas expand into tercets, as if the poem is attempting to breathe more deeply, or is gasping for breath, interrupted by, again, single-line stanzas of exhalation. The final two tercets, unbroken by an exhale, then come to feel like desperation: two deep inhalations, or attempts at it, so necessary there is no time or space to breathe out. In this formal gasping, the poem's body is experiencing the asthmatic sensation of dyspnea, of shortness of breath: the physical feeling of not being able to catch one's breath or breathe deeply and effectively. Also known as "air hunger," this sensation is not only physical—and physically uncomfortable—but panic-inducing, with functional brain imaging studies showing that air hunger actives "limbic structures involved with anxiety and fear" (Banzett, Lansing, and Binks). Gailey's poem is hungry for air; it breathes—or tries to breathe—deeply, but remains unsatisfied, the poem unfolding in a formal representation of panic, or desperation, at the end.

Despite Gailey never mentioning breathing or asthma again outside of the title, this same invisible attention to breath occurs in the content of her poem as well. Rather than describing her breathing troubles explicitly, Gailey uses the image of the lilac to represent breath, asthma, or possibly both, and similarly pulls other elements of asthma into the poem by way of asthmatic triggers. The most enduring example of this is the presence of lilacs throughout the poem. That presence, I suggest, also constitutes a moment of rupture by subverting not only poetic convention and tradition, but also in a sense that may seem contradictory to the rupture in what the presence of the lilacs, to a non-asthmatic audience especially, may conceal. To the first point, the lilac has been an enduring favorite flower of poets in English-speaking America since its introduction to the continent around 1750 (Judy). One of the earlier well-known examples is Walt Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," an elegy for Abraham Lincoln, where the lilac represents the cyclical nature of death and rebirth, but also points to the brevity of life. With a significantly shorter bloom time than most other flowering plants—about two weeks—lilacs, writes literary scholar Sara Judy, "anticipate their own decay," the purple blooms seeming to "decline toward brown the moment they open" (Judy).

Another example, and perhaps the most prominent, is T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," which opens with the lines, "April is the cruellest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing / Memory and desire." The lilac as an elegiac symbol persists even into more contemporary American poetry, with poems like Ann Stanford's "Done With," Philip Levine's "Burial Rites," and Danez Smith's "Little Prayer" all leaning into the image of the lilac to describe destruction, death, and mourning. In "Done With," Stanford's lilac is trampled along with the rest of a garden as her family home is torn down, where Levine's and Smith's lilacs are inextricable from death. Levine's lilac grows beside the place where his mother's ashes are

buried, while in Smith's poem, lilacs grow in a place of violence: "let him find honey / where there once was a slaughter // let him enter the lion's cage / & find a field of lilacs" (#). Whatever the specifics, the lilac in the American poetic consciousness has become synonymous with brevity, mourning, and a morose sense of nostalgia. This is where Gailey's lilacs are subversive and constitute a rupture of that elegiac convention.

While the lilacs in "Breathing in the Asthma Capital" do, like Whitman's poem, signify a cycle of death and rebirth, they deviate in that instead of mourning, Gailey's lilacs are more closely representative of active struggle and persistence, evidenced by the repetition of the word "despite." The speaker of Gailey's poem "grew up with a yard of lilacs" in spite of all the things that should have killed them: "stray dogs, stray cars," "crushed cigarettes and smells of tar," "radioactive snow," and even the "wreckage" of spring, or pollen, fertilizing other plants that might have choked out the fragile lilacs (4). What's more, to describe their endurance, Gailey counterintuitively uses the word "burning," turning the lilac's association with destruction on its head to instead represent its survival and proliferation: "the lilacs go on burning / radiant / and thick against a gray May sky" (4). Rather than this "burning" representing the lilacs' demise, it paints them instead as thriving in such great numbers that their "radiant" color fills the sky like a fire, or perhaps that they cloud it in blooms of purple smoke (4). In this way, Gailey's lilacs come to represent not grief or loss, but persistence—and more specifically, the persistence and cyclicality of asthma and asthmatic breathing.

In addition to other asthmatic triggers that denote asthma's and breath's invisible presence in the poem, like cigarettes and tar, lilacs themselves (as well as other pollen-producing plants) can aggravate an asthmatic's lungs and make breathing difficult. As Judy notes, too, a lilac in a poem "locates us in time" in their narrow bloom window from late April to late May,

which is also the period in which spring pollen levels are at their peak in the Southeastern US—including Knoxville, Tennessee, where Gailey's poem is set (Smith). The lilacs may be interpreted more literally as the presence of asthma in the poem; they represent one of the things that triggers asthma symptoms or makes existing symptoms worse. In other words, the lilacs are *literal* sources of asthmatic aggravation as well as temporal markers for asthma symptoms' seasonal nature. Though asthma persists year-round, like the lilacs, it is (most often) at its height in Spring. But as Gailey's lilacs adhere to their "traditional" cyclical symbolism they simultaneously subvert it, rupturing the image's expectation of loss with one of endlessness. Rather than nostalgic, these lilacs, like asthma, are chronic: they do not burn up and disappear but "rise like watery flames" and "go on burning" (4).

Finally, the image of the lilac also paradoxically stands as both companion to and in stark contrast with the nearby city of Oak Ridge, TN. The contrast is perhaps the most evident: despite the ways the lilacs may impact the speaker's asthma, they are still things of fragile beauty thrown up against Oak Ridge's ugly nuclear and industrial historical significance. But as a companion, the lilacs are an unwitting participant in that history, or at least in its aftermath. Though, again, there has not as yet been conclusive evidence that the Manhattan Project's presence in Oak Ridge worsened health outcomes for people in the city and surrounding areas, Gailey's decision to include it even though her speaker lives in Knoxville—and in the poem's opening line, at that—feels significant. Regardless of the lack of definitive proof that the Manhattan Project was health-detrimental, Gailey's intentional pairing of Oak Ridge with the "Asthma Capital" suggests at the very least that the speaker believes there is a connection and makes a larger argument about the ways industrialization and the business of war affect public health.

These lilacs, like the Manhattan Project in Oak Ridge, deal paradoxically with both brevity and longevity. The lilacs last two weeks, but return every spring, and more broadly, are immortalized as symbol and metaphor in American poetry; the Manhattan Project was only active for four years (1942-1946) but changed not only the historical significance of the small town of Oak Ridge, but permanently altered the face of war on a global scale. The existence of both the lilacs and the Manhattan Project—if not in Oak Ridge, certainly in Nagasaki and Hiroshima, Japan—have direct implications for public health and well-being, though admittedly in quite different ways. The lilacs and the nuclear bomb (Oak Ridge) are seemingly strange bedfellows, but in pairing them in "Breathing in the Asthma Capital," Gailey blurs the lines between congenital and inflicted asthma (and other disabilities), subtly weaving a bioethical disability framework into her poem. In *Breathing Aesthetics*, Tremblay writes,

> …breathing makes life out of an orientation towards death. To be a breather is to be vulnerable…as long as we breathe, and as long as we're porous, we cannot fully shield ourselves from airborne toxins and toxicants as well as other ambient threats. Becoming conscious of our breathing confronts us with our finitude. (2)

This is the work of Gailey's poem, as well as Bishop's and Rohrer's: they force an attention to breath and breath/lessness, and in doing so, orients us towards death. Each of these poems, but Gailey's in particular, unsettles the act of breathing, complicating it with asthmatic formal and content choices, but also by asserting, as Tremblay writes, that "Breathing is inevitably morbid" (1). Bishop's, Rohrer's, and Gailey's poems all redirect the agency of breathing from the human body to the body of the poem, but "Breathing in the Asthma Capital" further complicates that agency by drawing attention to the ways in which other bodies—the government, the environment, war—impose their own wills on the ways (and if) we breathe.

II. Bulges, *Bubbles*, and Bumps: Allergic Poetics

In her memoir, *Don't Kill the Birthday Girl: Tales from an Allergic Life,* Sandra Beasley, a poet with several life-threatening food and environmental allergies, details the realities of growing up and navigating life with those allergies. This is a life that requires meticulous calculation and diligence; it is marked by an abundance of care, both preventative and responsive, coupled with (and informed by) an abundance of fear. "For those with allergies like mine," Beasley writes, "each day requires vigilance in terms of what we do, the company we keep, and where we sit in relation to that bowl of mixed nuts. One person's comfort food is another person's enemy" (3). That discerning fear and vigilance, while necessary for survival, do come at a social and emotional cost, especially for young children who do what they must to avoid painful and often terrifying allergic reactions, but may not yet fully understand *why* they must do it. Though her prose is tinged with humor, the experiences Beasley describes are those of alienation and isolation, not infrequently at the hands of those she loves. The memoir takes its title from a recurring example of one such experience, with Beasley recounting the strangeness of celebrating her birthdays, especially as a child. She writes that her mother would craft a "Sandra-friendly sweet" as a stand-in for Beasley's birthday cake, while everyone else was served "the real dessert of cake or brownies" or more typical birthday treats (2). She writes,

> After singing, after blowing out candles, after presents had been opened, after everyone had eaten, someone would say it:
>
> "Now, don't kill the birthday girl."
>
> Which meant no kisses, no hugs, no touch of a hand or mouth. From that point onward, anyone who touched me ran the risk of giving me hives, or worse. Even today, it's a phrase I repeat as part joke and part prayer. (2)

As an adult, that invisible distance, once enforced by her mother, is now Beasley's own responsibility to manage, and while age brings understanding, the pain of its necessity has not lessened. At holidays, where her mother used to act as her protector, Beasley now steps away

from family embraces on her own: “Everyone understands why I avoid contact. Yet I can’t help but wish it wasn’t their last impression of me before the long drive home” (2).

Given the scarcity of available literature written by those who understand it (Beasley was the first, and is still one of the only, I have encountered), I feel compelled to confirm that the isolation Beasley describes is something I am intimately familiar with. I too had specially made but aesthetically hideous birthday treats while my friends and family sat around me, eating beautiful cakes with colorful frosting that, like a toxic, fluorescent frog, would send me to the hospital. I have had to dodge the hugs of my young nephews and their peanut-buttery hands. At the same time, however, there is still that twin flame of fear—care—and with it comes community, not only in the network of people who practice that care, but also in the development of a specific, shared lexicon. Like Beasley’s family, we call foods I can tolerate “Raye-friendly,” and like Beasley, I also believed that and other terms and phrases to describe my diet were invented in, and specific to, my household. But as Beasley writes,

> I thought my family’s habit of calling the foods I can eat “Sandra-friendly” was unique, until I saw a book by Emily Hendrix called *Sophie-Safe Cooking: A collection of Family Friendly Recipes That Are Free of Milk, Eggs, Wheat, Soy, Peanuts, Tree Nuts, Fish, and Shellfish.* The more I have read, the more I realize a whole culture of catchphrases has emerged in addition to the key medical terminology. (3-4)

Without consulting each other, and without living in “community” with each other as members of the Deaf Community so often do, people with severe allergies and our families constructed a shorthand—a small, but shared language to describe our unique needs and experiences. Even when the words we use are different, they still carry a meaning that translates. They are the same shape, or close enough, to a shape we collectively understand: as a child, Beasley described the feeling of her allergic reactions as “bubbles” in her chest; I described mine

as *balloons* (25). Though the words are different, the meaning stays the same: we both know what it means to burst.

This duality of care—the fear and isolation paired with the contradiction of community—as well as the common experiences and expressions of allergic reactions and the shared language we use to describe those sensations, are the primary means I propose for determining instances of allergic rupture within the space of a poem. Whether literal allergic reactions occur *on* the body, as in the case of hives or a rash, or *in* the body, like anaphylaxis, they have a corporeal texture. In the body of the poem, I suggest that allergic reactions likewise have texture, but one that is affective and often subtle. The poems in this final section—by allergic poets Sandra Beasley and Mark Doty—sometimes mention allergy outright, but in each of them the threat, isolation, and shared lexicon move invisibly *on* or *in* the poem's body, hidden until they aren't—until something comes along that forces them to react.

Sandra Beasley, "Allergy Girl"

Sandra Beasley's first book of poetry, *Theories of Falling*, is a collection concerned with, as the title suggests, what happens when we go over the edge. These poems are bound up in larger questions asking what defines the thresholds of motherhood, death, war, and predominantly desire, but also of the body and self, the personal borders we enforce and often cross. While most of these crossed boundaries have to do with relationships, one poem near the collection's start, "Allergy Girl," folds into these poems the existential threat of severe allergies, complicating that desire and the speaker's relationship to the self and, particularly, her lovers. "Allergy Girl" is the only poem in the collection that mentions allergies outright, but its presence is a rupture in the tone and content of the book, and once read, spreads rash-like to the rest of the poems, inflecting each with an undercurrent of worry.

On the surface, "Allergy Girl" stands out as different primarily due to its length relative to the rest of the poems in the collection. By far the longest, "Allergy Girl" is a poem in nine sections that spans ten pages and condenses into it the work of "growing up"—the speaker's coming-of-age narrative that contextualizes the adult persona who speaks in the majority of the collection.[24] Its length and breadth, coupled with the word "allergy" in the title, already single this poem out as a moment of rupture—a "bump" in the book's arc; it lifts, like allergic hives, from the otherwise smooth surface of the book. More than that, though, is its content, both in terms of the collection itself and the larger American poetic canon. As previously mentioned, an identity category has not developed around allergies the way it has for other disabilities, or for disability at large, making poets who write into allergy a poetic rupture in and of themselves. The failure of severe allergies to be recognized, even by those who have them, as being within the category of disability has resulted in a lack of identity and community formation that extends to the US poetic canon. With "Allergy Girl," however, Beasley makes being allergic into an identity *and* injects that allergic identity into the space of a poem. Whether "Allergy Girl" was a title Beasley's speaker chose or that was thrust upon her, by using it—especially as a title—she in effect claims it and makes it into a kind of name. More than that, though, Beasley's "Allergy Girl" stands out in that it doubles down on that allergic identity by bringing in both descriptions of allergic reactions and the strangeness of a life with allergies, as well as by using the language of allergy—especially in poems where that language, in context, is surprising.

One example of that allergic strangeness occurs in "Allergy Girl I," where the speaker recalls her origins as an infant "wasting" from hunger (16). Milk, the standard source of nutrition for babies, does not work in any form for the speaker of this poem: "My mother tries to fix me

[24] Though the poems are not labeled as such in the collection, for clarity and ease, I will refer to each poem in the series as "Allergy Girl I, II, III," etc.

with *more milk, more milk*. / Doctors run tests on my squalling body. No breast / is safe, no cowgoatsoy [sic] milk. I nurse on apple juice" (16). The speaker sets herself apart in this opening stanza of "Allergy Girl" as something almost alien—what kind of baby cannot tolerate *any* milk? Beasley couches both impossibility and, subtly, isolation in the stanza's final sentence, "I nurse on apple juice," conjuring images of an infant suckling an apple or a bottle, but unnatural and disconnected from a mother either way. Even if the physical distance from the mother is not literal, as in Beasley's family gatherings where she dodges touch, the infant speaker's inability to nurse directly from her mother positions her as other—a sort of glitch in the natural order.

Much of this oddity hinders on that word, "nurse," and its capacity to be interpreted in multiple ways. There is, of course, the usage I have mentioned, where nursing refers to the act of a mother nursing a child, and the impossibility of an infant nursing in the same way on an apple, or bottle of apple juice; in other words, nursing as a human-to-human process. But an infant may also nurse a bottle—a not uncommon act, though one that is still in a sense disconnected from the mother's body. Further still, the word "nurse" is also used to describe soothing, caretaking, and healing, as in nursing a wound or nursing a patient. In this way, Beasley's speaker may be nursing a bottle, but also nursing the maternal wound, the mother-child rift caused by her allergies—the existence of which becomes evident in the remainder of "Allergy Girl" and in several other poems in the collection. "Allergy Girl I" goes on to describe the relationship of the speaker to her mother (and sometimes father) in terms that reinforce allergic isolation, using words and phrases that evoke distance. The majority of the second stanza reads: "My parents agree on one rule: *Don't break the baby*. / They pour quarters into the arcade game of adulthood, / working the mechanical claw right, left, right, back, / aiming for the stuffed bear, missing" (16).

To start, the speaker's parents using the word "break" instead of something like hurt or endanger further alienates—by which I mean both *isolates* and *makes alien,* or other—the speaker, her body viewed more as a fragile toy or malfunctioning machine than a child. That alienation only intensifies as the poem continues, with the parents' "arcade game of adulthood" in the form of a claw machine, with softness and normalcy, or the "stuffed bear," trapped behind a pane of glass with the only means to try to reach it the metal claw, a poorly-calibrated extension of their arms. Or perhaps the stuffed bear is the speaker, walled into the machine by her allergies, the glass case and metal claw attempts at sterile safety and care. Whatever the case, the claw, though aimed, keeps missing the bear, reinforcing the speaker's isolation. Similarly, in the third stanza the language shifts into something more clinical, the speaker's mother becoming a scientist: "My mother dissects labels: / *casein, protein, lactylate*. Easier to cook from scratch" (16). In the fourth (and final) stanza, as with the claw machine, both parents are again distanced from the speaker, though this time via the language of medicine: "They cradle me in Benadryl" (16). Nurturing, for the speaker's mother, looks like dissection, or separation, the role of motherhood one of meticulous analysis, quarantine, and substitution (making food "from scratch"). Benadryl—an antihistamine medication meant to halt allergic reactions—not a bassinet or blanket, is the speaker's "cradle;" she is swaddled in drug that is used to suppress. And yet despite their clean and clinical distance, so different from the messy tenderness typically used to describe early parenthood, none of these things stem from an absence of parental love. This is one of the ways I read allergic rupture into Beasley's poem: isolation that is an act of great care, not evidence of its lack.

This clinical, medicalized language represents not only extensions of care, but also the shared language of allergies—learned, invented, and understood—bleeding its way into the

space of the poem. One example if this is Beasley's use of the phrase "cowgoatsoy milk" (16). First, while the portmanteau is not altogether uncommon in contemporary poetry, the condensing of cow milk, goat milk, and soy milk into "cowgoatsoy milk" is a subtle textual representation of one of the necessary, but annoying, regular occurrences in allergic life: repetition. While the phrase does not actually repeat in the text, those with severe allergies—and especially food allergies—will recognize "cowgoatsoy" not just as a quickly-rambled list, but a mantra. To have severe food allergies is to repeat, forever, that memorized list at every restaurant, holiday gathering, birthday party, banquet; when beginning new jobs; when planning nights out; even when visiting family, who should remember, but forget—anywhere and everywhere there might be food. The collapsing of cow, goat, and soy into "cowgoatsoy" mimics how, over time, these repeated lists become automatic, each allergy losing its singularity to stand as part of the whole. The fact that "cowgoatsoy milk" is a repetition that *isn't* one is one way this poem blisters; the repetition is invisible, an allergic sensibility that ruptures the poem, but only if the reader has insider knowledge.

The listing of ingredients, "*casein, protein, lactylate*," serves a similar function (16). The language of food allergies especially is often meticulously specific; like the speaker's mother in "Allergy Girl I," we must all become scientists—or at the very least, good close-readers and researchers—for our survival. That means looking at ingredients lists and not assuming safety because certain words—like milk or soy—do not appear. Those with severe food allergies "dissect" ingredient labels in part by learning names for food derivatives. For Beasley, whose allergies include dairy, egg, and soy (among several others), knowing that words like "casein" and "lactylate" refer, respectively, to protein compounds found in dairy and plants (often soy) is the difference between having an allergic reaction and not (*Birthday Girl* 2). Even "protein,"

while more familiar language, is too vague; without knowing what that protein is derived from, it holds the potential for risk. Allergies leave very little room for ambiguity; knowing the minutiae and specificity of ingredient language is a necessity and, without hyperbole, can mean the difference between life and death. And while the particulars of mine and Beasley's lexicons might differ (for my wheat and corn allergies, my derivatives are maltodextrin, dextrose, and modified food starch), it is still a language whose contours we understand. Like the claw machine, this language too creates an allergic distance, paring down and separating food into isolated parts. I am fatally allergic to peanuts, for example, but I can eat things cooked in highly-refined peanut oil, the refining process stripping out—distancing—the peanut from its allergy-causing proteins. Allergic language, like allergic life, is specificity, dissection, alienation.

Allergic language ripples through most of the remaining sections of "Allergy Girl," highlighting, again, distance and alienation, though Beasley also uses this lexicon to highlight other hidden facets of allergic life. "Allergy Girl II," for example, reveals the way severe allergies alter not only the experience, but also the language, of childhood. The poem begins, "Each food was a shape eyed by the antibody, / looking for an immunoglobulin hole to match" (17). That medicalized language is then thrown into stark relief against the speaker's childhood in the second stanza: "My bloodstream was a Fisher-Price workbench, / full of exact and waiting geometries" (17). Beasley describes this loss of childhood to allergies in *Don't Kill the Birthday Girl*, writing that "teenagers with allergies, unlike most, know they're vulnerable" (36). And though the speaker in "Allergy Girl II" is a toddler and not a teen, the poem makes it clear that even very young children have some sense of their difference, though perhaps not their mortality. Beasley's speaker describes her childish understanding of allergies via the toy workbench, and similarly drawing attention to her youth with misheard medical terms:

> Peanuts tumbled by, harmless. But a cashew—
> that fit into the open crescent, *there*, its immune
> goblin hole. My antibodies had their plastic red
>
> histamine hammers ready—smack smack
> smack—skin of my forearms, chin, chest
> rippling out with each little blow— (17)

The move from "immunoglobulin" in the poem's first stanza to "immune goblin" in the third draws particular attention to the speaker's childhood, and the ways allergies intrude upon it. The image of antibodies holding "plastic red / histamine hammers" to pound foods into the toy workbench's allergen-shaped holes is a similarly jarring image, the mechanism by which allergic reactions occur explained cartoonishly, so a child might understand. As the language of allergies ruptures the surface of the poem, the childhood in the poem, so too do allergies *literally* rupture the innocence of childhood. Allergies make alien a child, a lexicon, a poem; they set up invisible fences around the body, becoming known only when that perimeter, whether by reaction or language, is breached.

Mark Doty, "Theory of the Soul"

At the annual Hippocrates Poetry and Medicine Symposium in May 2018, poet Mark Doty joined fellow poet, and also physician, Rafael Campo in a panel conversation about the intersection of medicine and poetry. Near the conversation's beginning, Campo makes that connection by suggesting that poetry is a way of inflecting the medical profession with the discomfort of vulnerability and offering both patients and medical professionals a means of sitting with that discomfort, saying, "In medical training we're always expected to have the right answer, to think that there is a right answer. When we go to a poem, we must contend with the [fact] that there isn't necessarily a right answer" (1520). Doty responds,

> I would think it would be difficult in medicine to say, "I look at the problems you're having and I don't know what's wrong with you." It is much easier to look

> at a poem together and say "I don't know what that means," but we can feel something there. And that not knowing together is one of the best things human beings do, to dwell in uncertainty together. So poetry, by nature, invites us to not knowing… (1520)

This notion of the poem as a space for people to "dwell in uncertainty together" is a throughline of much of Doty's poetry, particularly his poetry of illness and the body. Though perhaps best known for his poetry detailing urban gay life, Doty is no stranger to writing medicalized poetry. Though this branch of his work is predominantly concerned with documenting and navigating the devastating consequences of the 1980s-90s AIDS crisis for gay men, Doty also writes, at least once, into his experience with severe allergies. In that singular found instance, the poem "Theory of the Soul," Doty's allergies rupture the page similarly to Beasley's—via the specific, medicalized language of allergic life. In fact, the poem's opening stanza is entirely composed as a list of allergens, though the context of that list is not revealed until the second stanza. Doty writes:

> Ligustrum, penicillium,
> three ragweeds, fusarium, marshelder, pollen of timothy, sweet
> vernal,
> cocklebur and feathers, dog and tuna, dust mite, milk and yolk:
>
> the allergist's assistant
> pierces the skin of my back with ten clusters of needles,
> each dipped in tinctures, and we wait to see which ones make
> me sick. (18)

From the start, we see Doty's tendency toward uncertainty, though there is a sort of subtle, allergic irony to it: though it is unclear, for the moment, which of these allergens will cause a reaction, the list of what might harm the speaker is meticulously specific. What's more, there is the uncertainty borne from the language in the list itself, common words like "ragweeds," "pollen," "feathers," "dog and tuna," dust mite," "milk and yolk" appearing alongside more clinical, unfamiliar words such as "Ligustrum," "fusarium," and "marshelder"

(18). Even "timothy," "sweet vernal," and "cocklebur" are a bit strange, though more immediately recognizable as plants, given context clues. "Penicillium," while discernable as something to do with the common drug penicillin, is still similarly, ironically obfuscated in its specificity as the name of the allergy-causing fungus that penicillins are derived from rather than the medication itself. But as in "Allergy Girl," though the meanings of several words might be strange and unknown, to those with severe allergies, the particularity of the language used is still a kind of familiarity.

As the poem progresses, however, allergic uncertainty unfolds beyond the use of language. The poem goes on to mention other allergens used in the allergy testing tinctures by their common names—"solutions of mouse hair, / lobster and egg"—but what the speaker is actually allergic to remains a mystery. In the fourth stanza, we learn that the speaker *does* have an allergic reaction to one of the allergens he is tested with—something I will return to in more depth shortly—but which allergens may have caused that reaction go unsaid. Instead, the poem turns away from the allergy testing, moving to a rumination on death, largely via a conversation with a friend named Claudia, that comprises the majority of the long poem. When the speaker tells Claudia about the reaction, she asks, "How can you know when you're not awake?" (18). The speaker answers, by way of narration, "I tell Claudia this is what troubles me: I've been around enough / dying / to trust that last breath wings out something more than air" (19). While poetry and death are by no means strange bedfellows, Doty's meditation is a significant, if subtle, departure from that standard: "Theory of the Soul" represents a preoccupation with death that is specific and familiar to allergic life.

Like Tremblay's assertion that "Breathing is inevitably morbid," for those with severe allergies, so too is eating and interaction (or touch). To be allergic is to confront the precarity of

life, which is to confront death, in perpetuity; it forces a keen and constant awareness of one's mortality. A Taiwan-based study, for example, found that allergic diseases (including asthma) were associated with higher rates of concurrent psychiatric conditions, especially anxiety and depression, as well as higher rates of eating disorders in those with food allergies (Tzeng, et al). Research out of California by allergist Charles Feng and psychiatrist Jea-Hyoun Kim yields similar results, with Feng suggesting that "the psychological repercussions of food allergy…is sometimes more serious than the food allergy itself," and referring to a patient of his—a twelve-year-old girl "who was so anxious about her peanut allergy that she would sleep holding an EpiPen" (an adrenaline auto-injector used to suppress severe allergic reactions) (Khamsi S5). Doty's extended death-meditation, while not entirely concerned with allergic life, is still a symptom of living it. To paraphrase Tremblay, allergies orient life around the presence of death, and sometimes even *toward* it, as in the case of Doty's allergy-induced rumination on death, or the morbid humor of Beasley and her friends. As she notes in her memoir, "my friends would joke that if we ever decided to kill ourselves, I had the tastiest options by far" (38).

But Doty's death-meditation serves as a subtle example of yet another facet of allergic life: patience. For all the practiced speed and quick-thinking that stopping an allergic reaction requires, there is also a lifetime spent waiting—for allergist appointments, in emergency center waiting rooms, for restaurant wait staff to check with the kitchen, to see if a food will cause an allergic reaction (which can take anywhere from seconds to hours and sometimes even days or weeks). While we learn that the speaker of Doty's poem has had an allergic reaction in the fourth stanza, we do not find out what actually caused the reaction until the seventeenth stanza, in the second to last line of the poem: "The doctor who recommends, once I am breathing regularly, // that I avoid oysters, / and encourages me to call him again" (20). By shifting from the allergy

testing to an extended meditation on death, Doty paints his readers into the reaction's temporal landscape with him; he forces us, like the speaker, to wait to find out the cause. In addition, this drawing-out further asks readers, again like the speaker and like allergic individuals, to "dwell in uncertainty." The allergen that caused the reaction—oysters—is a revelation at the end, not only in Doty's insistence that we wait to find out, but also because of its isolation: the poem's end is also the first (and only) instance of "oysters" as a possible allergen. Though he does mention "seafood" as one of the injections in the ninth stanza, it lacks the specificity of the other reactants listed and as a result, misdirects readers back to the seventh stanza—the red herring, as it were, of "lobster" (18-19). As readers, we learn the reaction's origin at the same time as the speaker; we wait out the process, "dwell in uncertainty," and consider our mortality with him.

Finally, in a similar move, and to at last return to the speaker's allergic reaction proper, Doty further complicates the reader/speaker boundary by including the speaker in that reaction. Immediately preceding the allergy test in the second stanza, which ends with the speaker and the allergist's assistant as they "wait to see which ones make / me sick," Doty writes:

> She says, You're okay, right?
> and leaves the room. I'm a little tired, holding my face
> in my hands, warm, leaning forward,
>
> and then a doctor says,
> How long ago did you give him that shot? A nurse says, Ten
> minutes.
> A shot? Adrenaline, the doctor says, you had an allergic
> reaction
>
> to the allergy test.
> I thought if you blacked out you'd see it like a movie,
> people gathering above your head, but of course I wasn't there
>
> to know I was gone. (18)

In the poem, we move directly from waiting for the allergy test's results to the assistant and a doctor checking up on the speaker, but there's a gap—for readers, a stanza break, but for the speaker, an allergic reaction so severe he "blacked out," or lost consciousness. In that gap, we as readers effectively "black out" with the speaker; we experience the emptiness of unconsciousness in the blank space between stanzas, and the disorientation of coming-to after. Like the speaker, we weren't there to know we were gone. As with the oysters at the poem's finale, we experience, both by omission and revelation, the allergic reaction at the same time as the speaker. We endure it with him, learn of our fate with him from the doctor and assistant, and then, while waiting to find out the cause of our near-death, contemplate our mortality and eternity with him. We share, too, in the speaker's delusion, and are similarly disoriented by it: the Claudia he speaks to, he reveals in tenth stanza, "isn't even in the room, / I'm talking to the Claudia I carry around in my head" (19). "Theory of the Soul" dis/locates the reader both temporally and ontologically, the poem's and speaker's bodies transcending the page to allow readers to experience, at least in part, the allergic reaction and contours of allergic life.

Though they of course vary by the individual, Claudia represents one final example of a subtle allergic poetics: the coping mechanism. Beasley has her mantra, "Don't kill the birthday girl," and her morbid humor. I have my own refrain, "Discomfort does not equal danger," and what I half-lovingly call my "panic room," which is mental visualization of a space I "go to" in order to feel safe (and admittedly, I have a bit of that morbid humor, too). Doty—or at least the speaker—has Claudia, who may be a real friend, but is imaginary in the space of the poem. These coping mechanisms come into play in moments of fear, of course, as panic can worsen an allergic reaction, but also to deal with the reality that something as random and mundane as an accidental bite of oyster might be what's written on a form next to "cause of death." There is

some humor in it—like Beasley's friends chanting "Death by chocolate...Death by ice cream!" as an acceptable means of suicide—but it also presents a perfect opportunity for an existential crisis, especially in the moments after a bad reaction (*Birthday Girl* 38). Doty's speaker copes with that crisis by talking through it with an imaginary Claudia:

> I tell Claudia this is what troubles me: I've been around enough
> dying
> to trust that last breath wings out something more than air—
>
> But where was I,
> or that, if the self's embalmed by an injection of seafood and
> dust?
> Animation, intelligence, the gathered weight of half a century
>
> switched off like a lamp? (19)

Doty finishes the poem on a similar note, just before he reveals the oyster as the allergen, writing: "We are what we make? Yeah, Claudia says, // all that. But where / is my work, while I'm prone on the allergist's floor?" (19-20). As we readers join the speaker in his brush with death, we also join him in his existential crisis as well as his attempts to cope with it. And while again, poetry is not an unusual space to grapple with death, Doty's speaker highlights this wrestling in a very allergic way. There are several mundane ways to die, allergic or not, but to be casually "switched off like a lamp" by a wayward brush with an oyster, peanut particle, or drop of milk—not by choking, but due to a cellular miscalculation—might be among the most ridiculous. It sometimes feels that way, at least, which leads those of us who have severe allergies to dark humor, to existential crises and coping mechanisms. It leads us to ask ourselves, as Beasley does, the question the world poses to us first: "[Am] I unfit to survive?" (*Birthday Girl* 36). In "Theory of the Soul," Doty collapses the distance between speaker and reader, forcing an allergic experience and awareness that ruptures, like a reaction, the perceived non-allergic body of the poem.

Concluding Remarks

To close out the introduction of *Don't Kill the Birthday Girl*, Beasley answers the question she poses regarding allergic people's fitness for survival before she even asks it, declaring, "This is not a story of how we die. These are the stories of how we live" (4). In these poems of both asthmatic and allergic experience, there is, as Tremblay puts it, "an orientation toward death," but there is also a fierce and determined orientation towards life (1). In "O Breath," Bishop's poem is asthmatic and breath/less, but that breath/lessness takes place in the presence of a lover, the speaker's breathing stirring the hairs on her lover's chest. In "Poem for Asthma," Rohrer's speaker, while doing a breathing exercise, contemplates the universe and his place in it, asking the doctor, "is this thing going to kill me" before answering the question himself: "Oh, absolutely man" (Rohrer). His answer, however, is not directed towards asthma alone, but "to everything," suggesting not a defeat, but a desire for experiences and life. Doty's "Theory of the Soul," while more contemplative, indicates a similar inclination toward living, the near-death crisis (and allergy testing) implying a want to stave death off, to know what to avoid to prevent it. Beasley's "Allergy Girl" speaker, recounting childhood, has survived it; Gailey's lilacs in "Breathing in the Asthma Capital" return year after year.

That persistence, the animal drive to survive, represents in each of these poems an asthmatic and allergic aesthetic, a paradoxical "[making of] life out of an orientation toward death" (Tremblay 1). And death does loom large in these poems, even if not explicitly stated; that is, after all, what will happen if an asthmatic or someone with severe allergies cannot breathe, or if a reaction goes too long untreated. But like a cough, gasp, or rash, life erupts from these poems, ruptures—pointedly—the stillness that death would bring. An asthmatic's wheeze or cough happens as a result of attempting to breathe more deeply, to gather more air; an allergic

reaction is the body's way, though misguided, of ridding the blood of something it thinks will cause harm. In other words, as much as these ruptures signal the potential for death, they also paradoxically represent the body's insistence on survival. In this chapter, asthma and allergies, invisible in the literal body until the point of irritation and reaction, move similarly in the bodies of poems. They lurk, silently and subtly, until they don't—until we read the poem aloud and feel the gasps for air in the form, until the language turns strange and isolating. And sometimes they stay there, like an inhaler or EpiPen in a purse or pocket, the contours maybe visible but the form a mystery unless—or until—the viewer is in on the morbidly funny joke.

Conclusion

In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard discusses the "unusual image" in poetry, describing its "ontological significance" for the reader (2). He writes that "In the resonance we hear the poem, in the reverberations we speak it, it is our own. The reverberations bring about a change of being. It is as though the poet's being were our own…the poem possesses us entirely" (7). While Bachelard refers to this ontological shift in terms of embodying a poem by reciting it aloud, as I argue in chapter two, these "reverberations" and resonances need not be verbal or audible to create that ontological transference. This is a testament, first, to the poem's capacity for embodiment already well-described by disability scholars, but also for its capacity for *dis*embodiment that I suggest in this project. As Bachelard notes, there is an established precedent for poetry's transformative abilities, though he describes this predominantly in ambiguous terms, where poetry is a "phenomenology of the soul"—specifically in opposition to it being a bodily or mental phenomenon (4). Though I have no issue with souls, or with poetry's ability to affect the soul, I do believe poetry can also ontologically affect the body and mind, especially in terms of the poets and poems I have included in this project. For these invisibly disabled poets, the affecting "reverberations" may be audible, but they are also distinctly physical and mental. Each of the poets represented here appear "normal" until the point of rupture—until they must sign, have an outburst, use an inhaler or wheeze. Their disabilities are invisible until they are not.

The poems they write, too, are invisibly disabled. Their "resonance" may occur in Bachelard's terms, but also in terms of their disabilities. The D/deaf or hard-of-hearing poem may physically vibrate, the OCD or ADHD poem may perform compulsions or wander, and the

asthmatic or allergic poem may wheeze or break out in a rash, yet all of these "reverberations" happen beneath the poem's surface—its apparently "normal" body. But these moments break through that surface, dis/embodying these invisibly disabled registers in moments of rupture where they bleed through, making themselves known, as in Ilya Kaminsky's printed and invented signs or Alyssandra Tobin's OCD repetitions taking over the poem's text. And these moments "bring about a change of being," the invisibly disabled poem's logics and rhythms subsuming our own, dis/locating the reader into the experience. They cause a shift in the reader's ontological situation, asking them—at least for the space and time of the poem—to sit inside the discomfort of contradiction: to be in the silence that is not silence, to be unreasonable and make non/sense, to breathe into and against death.

Though I have separated each of the invisible disabilities included in this project in order to analyze them for their own particular ontological, epistemological, and aesthetic registers, the reality is they do not occur in a vacuum. Deaf people, for example, experience neurodivergence and mental health concerns at about twice the rate of the general population, with ADHD and autism among the most prevalent—and despite that higher rate, neurodivergence in d/Deaf communities is still under-diagnosed (Nelson & Bruce; Black & Glickman). Neurodivergence rarely occurs in only one way, with OCD and ADHD being frequently comorbid, and autism, Tourette syndrome, and anxiety and personality disorders often occurring alongside either or both as well (Sharma, et al.). People with allergies and/or asthma too are significantly more likely to be neurodivergent than the general population, with recent studies suggesting higher rates of psychiatric disorders and mental health concerns in people with these conditions (Tzeng, et al.; Oh, et al). Elizabeth Bishop, for example, described this experience in letters to her physician, writing that she was concerned about her mental state's impact on her asthma: "Every

magazine of paper I pick up has an article proving that asthma is psychosomatic, everyone now things it is almost entirely, if not entirely, mental" (Lombardi 19).

The psychological toll of not having one's conditions taken seriously is something Sandra Beasley writes about as well in her memoir, *Don't Kill the Birthday Girl*, with both she and Bishop describing the social ramifications of their conditions as exhausting and anxiety-inducing, which in Bishop's case, also served to worsen her physical health in turn (Lombardi 19, Beasley 12-13). And, given the autoethnographic nature of this work, all this is true of myself as well: my hard-of-hearingness and ADHD work in tandem to locate me in a space of inattentiveness, or at least make me appear that way; my OCD convinces me "safe" foods are suddenly unsafe, or sets off psychosomatic allergic and asthmatic reactions, or vice versa, my allergy and asthma symptoms sending me down an OCD-fueled rabbit hole. My ADHD and OCD feed off each other as well, my poor impulse control leading me to perform compulsions, or my ADHD hyperfixations spiraling into full-blown OCD obsessions, turning them from something fun into something necessary. I convince myself of misheard words and fixate on possible alternatives; I speak without thinking and, worried I may have hurt someone, obsess and self-punish. Like the poets and poets included in this project, I am in a constant state of mis/translation. The multiply-invisibly-disabled bodymind feeds itself, contradicts itself, is unreasonable and recursive.

The multiply-invisibly-disabled poem is much the same. Each of the invisible disabilities represented here come together, as in the body of the poet, to suggest a layered or series of rupture(s) and a larger incomprehensibility of invisibility. I use the term "incomprehensibility" because that is, to a degree, what this kind of poetry and these kinds of bodyminds are to the normate. As previously noted, there is no such thing as a perfect translation; there is always

something lost from one language to the next. This is similarly true of disabilities, especially invisible disabilities: they may be explained as intricately as possible, but never quite fully experienced, and therefore never fully understandable, or translatable. To be multiply-invisibly-disabled, then, is an impossibility in terms of translation, and for the poem represents a slippage of one invisibly disabled aesthetic register into another. For example, repetition is a facet of both OCD and D/deafness, though for different reasons—one based in obsession and the other in mishearing. In a poem by a D/deaf and OCD poet, how might we then differentiate between these two versions of repetition? I suggest, perhaps annoyingly, that we cannot, and that this inseparability is, at least in part, the point. The invisibly disabled poem, like the invisibly disabled person, cannot be divorced from its disability, even when it goes unseen, and especially when there are multiple disabilities represented. These misunderstandings and mistranslations are layered, both knowable and unknowable, and contradictory: to rupture in one way may or may not look like another rupture. To know might not be *to know*.

The larger disability and disability literature communities must become more attuned to this kind of un/knowability. Despite recent strides for greater inclusion, especially for those in the D/deaf community, the disability community as a whole is still lacking when it comes to representation and inclusion of those who do not *look* or *seem* disabled enough, and this has trickled into poetic and other literary spaces as well. The recent rise of Mad Studies as a theoretical discipline has helped, but its specificity as separate from Disability Studies to my mind only underscores the issue, and those with asthma and severe allergies are still left out of most disability discourse, especially in literary circles. It is my hope that by undertaking this project and detailing a poetics and aesthetics of invisibly disabled—but still distinctly disabled—poetry, both literary and community disability spaces might begin to make more room for

inclusion and identification for those whose disabilities are dis/embodied differently. We who are invisibly disabled bring rich and complex ways of thinking, knowing, and being to the spaces we inhabit and the poems we write. We *do* disclose, we *do* rupture, but we should not *have* to rupture to prove we are disabled and that we belong. Perhaps this is an unreasonable ask. I ask it all the same.

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