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## Auto-Exploited: Narrative Explorations of the Commodification of Time


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**AUTO-EXPLOITED: NARRATIVE EXPLORATIONS  
OF THE COMMODIFICATION OF TIME**

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of  
Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, English

By

Grace Willis

December 2023

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# **AUTO-EXPLOITED: NARRATIVE EXPLORATIONS OF THE COMMODIFICATION OF TIME**

English

Missouri State University, December 2023

Master of Arts

Grace Willis

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis is an exploration of the phenomenon of the auto-exploitation of the modern individual through and in conjunction with the commodification of time. It explores the eruption of gig-work in recent decades in the United States, and the ways in which the modern individual is both consumer and product, buying and selling her own constructions of identity in order to gain time, fiscal currency and a sense of socioeconomic worth from herself and others. Using theoretical frameworks of Karl Marx, Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Catherine Rottenberg and Byung-Chul Han, I explore the ways in which the modern individual is simultaneously auto-subjected and systemically subjected to both the exploitation and auto-construction of her identity. I explore this phenomenon through the lens of my own experiences as a modern individual existing in a feminine-coded body through creative writing, employing lyric essays and poetry to convey my experiences within a gig-saturated society.

**KEYWORDS:** auto-exploitation, consumerism, neoliberalism, commodification, time, identity, gig-economy, gig-society

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A Master's Thesis  
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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

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## **CONSUMERISM, IDENTITY AND THE MODERN INDIVIDUAL**

In 1979 The Clash released a song titled, “Lost in the Supermarket,” that begins: “I’m all lost in the supermarket. I can no longer shop happily. I came here for a special offer: a guaranteed personality.” A metronomical guitar riff threads the duration of the song, accompanied by the consistency of a singular bass note on a loop, allowing the song’s musicality to emulate a form that gives listeners the sensation of being lost in the supermarket. The song evokes a sensation of commodification, of being stuck on a conveyor belt where time stands still or passes all at once as consumers wander aimlessly and search for personalities in the things they purchase-- seeking the auto-construction of their identities through consumerism. The song provides a space in which the characteristics of consumer-centered society can emerge to highlight the redundant and constant nature of the unspoken but consistently implicated truism, “I buy; therefore, I am.” The song was released just one year before the beginning of the 80s, a decade that introduced the personal computer and would quickly become saturated with technology and consumerism in America.

Nearly half a century later, the modern consumer finds herself more lost in the supermarket than ever, searching for products whose purpose has been welded into an indistinguishable conglomerate of what once might have been a more distinguishable “want” and “need”. Emphasizing the construction of the self through consumer purchases and purchasing power, the modern individual is now further constructed and identified not only by what she purchases and owns, and the quantity of financial resources acquired in order to purchase these goods, but by the ways in which she spends, gains, loses, condenses and expands time in order to garner fiscal, emotional and mental currency in a fast-paced economy. The material world— or much of it— is now literally at the fingertips of nearly every consumer in America by way of the



internet and smartphones. The ease of availability of music, movies, household items, clothing and nearly any other commodity imaginable offers endless opportunities to construct and embellish our identities with just a few clicks. Despite its availability, though, this materiality does not necessarily equate to necessities. A disturbing desire surrounds the contrast between the easy accessibility of goods used to construct an identity and the ability to market, sell, and consume one's self, and the inaccessibility of basic needs-- secure living conditions, healthcare, adequate and nourishing food options, green spaces, and both places as well as moments of rest-- for many modern individuals.

Neo-Marxist philosopher Byung-Chul Han asserts that "neoliberalism makes citizens into consumers. The freedom of the citizen yields to the passivity of the consumer" (Han, *Psychopolitics* 29). The feeling of freedom purported by the infinite and constantly accessible opportunities at the modern individual's fingertips is, according to Han, the very thing that creates burnout and overwhelm. Endless options are available for the price of not only our attention, but the perceptions and uses of our time. In a capitalist society, Marx says, fiscal currency becomes the embodiment of human labor, and represents a sort of final form within the world of commodities (Marx 44-45). In a gig-permeated economy, time simultaneously equates to and supersedes in value fiscal currency as a "finished form" within a commodity-oriented system.

### **The Commodification of Time**

Whereas the consumer in "Lost in the Supermarket" constructs his identity in store aisles, the consumer of the 2020's constructs herself from not only physical store locations, but, perhaps more so, from the singular click of an online-shopping purchase. Moreover, we now also find

ourselves lost in the endless flow of information, like water in a shallow, fast-moving stream.

The internet tracks and interprets the algorithms of our search patterns, likes, and saves via social media and online shopping sites, in order to best market our own identities back to us.

There is a “loss” of time at the heart of gig society. More than ever, time has become a commodity we can both waste and condense. We have entered a paradoxical point in present-day society where the overarching narrative is an excess of accessibility: to things, opportunities, people, places, and products, and yet within that excess exists the violence against the self that excess purports. The more money one has, the greater the propensity to manipulate time in their favor. The opposite seems to be true for those with less money or resources, as if time is manipulated without their knowledge or consent. In a gig society, money is not time; money creates time and money eliminates time under the guise of self-service and self-construction, all at the hands of what Han calls auto-exploitation. It is evident that the fiscal economy at play, and which drives, supports and scaffolds all other systems is directly correlated to the emotional and mental landscapes which we inhabit and are being formed within the modern individual.

The endless availability of opportunities that perpetuate the cycle of auto-production and auto-consumption within the modern individual at the expense of one’s distribution of time can be exemplified on scales as small as online streaming platforms such as Netflix, Hulu and Amazon Prime. The modern individual might sit down to watch a television show with the intention to “rest,” to stop moving, to turn off her brain and wind down from the day, or to take a break before finishing the rest of the day’s tasks and obligations. In between the enjoyment of the television program stands an array of decisions the modern individual must make. First, she must decide which streaming platform to choose from. Then, she is given the dual privilege and burden of flipping through the available programs on a specific platform, resulting in what might

be ten minutes of preparation to watch a thirty-minute program. The mind of the modern individual is inundated with endless tasks of decisions which consequently begin to absorb, manipulate and utilize her time as a commodity.

The infinity of opportunities thus becomes burdensome and heavy to the modern individual, enforcing the idea that the modern individual is a social construct. Within the mental and visceral realities of the modern individual the terms “want” and “need” have become all-but synonymous with one another, and an individual’s assessment of what they “want” can no longer be dismantled from what they are told they “can” have, do or purchase without an incredibly conscious, perhaps even painful effort on the part of the individual. The endless options and opportunities to purchase devolve into obligations to acquire, construct and become an “ideal” or “actualized” self. To put plainly the social model of the neoliberal buyer, she is simultaneously the consumer and the product, branding herself via the purchases of goods and services made to appear as if they are always just within reach.

As the modern individual grabs at the materiality of purchases as well as time in the form of a commodity, the ways in which people relate to one another have become riddled with strange phenomena. The panopticon afforded by social media has become a fixation, even an addiction where we willingly and constantly observe one another (Han, *Psychopolitics 27*). There are endless opportunities to “view” one another through the curated images and mixed-medias we put out into the metaverse. Not only are we addicted and bound to seeing one another, but have become addicted and bound to the idea of being seen. Just as it is imposed on the modern individual that the self is constructed and modified through consumerism, the omnipresence of observation made possible through social media platforms fuels the auto-exploitation of the modern individual. As the modern individual purports her narratives of self-

construction and shares them on social media, she is then validated by the knowledge— regardless of whether it is confirmed or assumed— that she is seen. “I buy; therefore, I am,” might serve as a template for another parallel truism, “You see; therefore, I have worth.”

While Foucault identifies a panopticon of power relations in terms of behavior modification through corporeal and social disciplines, Han identifies that we have moved from a discipline-based society to a self-achievement-based society: we modify our behavior based on a need to be seen in order to certify our existence (Han, *Burnout Society* 8). It is no longer just the body of the modern individual that is utilized as a bio-political force, in other words, but her attention span and emotional landscape that is harvested— with her complicity— as resources by larger economic systems who leverage them into routes of efficiency, production and profit. The modern individual is both consumer and citizen, buyer and product, target-audience and marketing campaign (Han, *Burnout Society* 11). Han insists on a passivity that permeates the modern individual’s response to external stimuli. She suffers from an overwhelm of information, options and the insistence of achievements that are societally imposed but also self-imposed. Her system becomes numb, frozen— unable to process the excess of materiality, consumerism and auto-construction that infiltrates her daily life.

In the auto-exploitation of the modern individual through the marketing and purchase of the self there exist narratives of consumerism and labor, both of which are held together by structures of time. With the exponential growth of the use of internet shopping as an avenue to acquire goods, the narrative purported between product and consumer is one that follows suit with the general trend of modern society. There is a need to acquire commodities instantaneously, ensuring as little time as possible passes between the initial desire the modern individual has for the object and the moment she holds the object in her hands. At face value this

narrative is one fueled by a desire for instant gratification. More than that, however, this narrative is one that purports the perception that time is a commodity that can be earned, spent, maximized and wasted. The modern individual's consumer habits are, more than anything, an attempt to actualize the self through her utilization of time. The consumer desire for goods persists, but not as it was practiced fifty years ago. The object of consumer desire in the present day now has less to do with purchasing material goods and more to do with the ways in which the modern individual can utilize the commodity of time. Material goods, which once served as representations of human labor, are now endowed with an additional representation of the commodity of time.

What Han calls "the violence of positivity," -- an unlimited number of goods and opportunities for self-actualization through labor-based achievement-- floods and overwhelms the modern individual's sense of self, essentially renovating her identity of inherent worth and refurbishing the identity with labor and achievement-based accolades (Han, *Burnout Society* 4). This overwhelm and identity-renovation is seen in something as simple as the increasingly-common concept of the "side-hustle". The path to experiencing success-- financial wealth, societal status and respect, and the purported happiness that stems from these things-- is through the maximization of one's time. A stay-at-home mother, for example, might open an Etsy shop, utilizing the time her child is napping or quietly playing to create a web page, market products, communicate with customers and prepare products for shipping. Similarly, a college student might download a second-hand resell app, such as Poshmark or Depop. She can take photos of clothing she wishes to sell, upload those photos with sizing and pricing information; then she can close the app and wait for buyers. While she is studying, sitting in the classroom, or working

another job, she is simultaneously making sales, needing only to take the time to package purchased items and take them to the post-office.

Inherently, the access to endless avenues to earn money that is afforded to a multitude of individuals and their lifestyles is not a bad thing, as access to financial resources is still an essential need for the modern individual's overall well-being. The problem, or one of the problems, however, with this constant access to money-making side hustles, is the narrative purported that an individual's time is of no inherent value apart from her ability to maximize it for financial profit. The modern individual suffers a systemic and self-inflicted violence from the excess of opportunities to earn money, and by consequence earn and manipulate the decorum of her identity. The modern individual's narrative then becomes one condensed and, paradoxically, isolated within the self as the modern individual identifies not just as laborer and consumer, but as an object of endless possibility for self-actualization. To further complicate the narratives purported, these identities, for the modern individual, are no longer separable. Because there is never an end goal for the modern individual to reach in terms of its actualization, and because, as Han says, the modern individual acts from external impositions upon the self as both victim and perpetrator-- master and slave-- of her own entrepreneurial endeavors, the space for narratives of the self becomes all but eradicated from the psyche and social dialogue of modern individuals.

Time becomes a tool rather than a state of existence that allows for contemplation, connection and recreation. When time cannot serve the modern individual, and more importantly modern corporations and entities, as an economic tool, it then becomes an obstacle for the modern laborer to overcome, absorb, fill or condense. The modern individual, in other words, does not "have" time, but rather utilizes the manipulation of time by filling it with endless entrepreneurial endeavors, "spending" or "saving" it through the quick-fixes of gig work and the

over-consumption of products to construct the self. Or, if the modern individual does not “save” time, she sells it for the use of larger corporations or platforms under the thinly-veiled pseudo-promise that selling her time is to her benefit.

Han asserts there is a pervasive societal illusion that every person is sustainably capable of unlimited self-production (Han, *Burnout Society* 11). In terms of the worker, this makes sense with the rise of the gig economy, the increasing opportunities for employees to work remotely, the constant connection of the individual to their work via smart phones and applications, and the evolving discourse of self-construction, representation and branding implicated and made accessible through the presence of social media. At any moment, the modern individual has not only the opportunity to participate in “earning,” but the pressure to do so, and, I would go so far as to say the inevitability of doing so, in so far as she is constantly centering herself in terms of the messages of unlimited self-production through endless advertisements implicating opportunity as well as expectation. There is never a moment the modern individual cannot market herself as a way to acquire resources. Han calls this “auto-exploitation,” where the individual is exploiting herself through a constant need to produce entertainment, information or affect— marketing the self through skills, availability, desirability, resources and the like— or condense or eliminate the inconvenience of “empty” time through the offering of the self as an expendable worker (Han, *Burnout Society* 11).

According to Han, the obedience-subject of the pre-Cold War era, as coined by Foucault, is now the achievement-subject of modern society (Han, *Burnout Society* 8). While a deviant participant in a discipline-based society would consequently be labeled as a criminal or a madman, the deviant, or under-performing participant in a present-day achievement-based society is labeled as a loser, depressive or burnout (Han, *Burnout Society* 9). As deregulation of

labor and commerce increases, so does the influx of opportunity, and therefore external and internal expectation for self-construction and self-actualization. There is now no end to what the modern individual “can” achieve, as the permission of Foucault’s discipline-based society has been replaced with a limitlessness that exerts a sort of internalized and internally inflicted violence upon the modern individual (Han, *Burnout Society* 8). The modern individual is thus stuck in a constant feedback loop.

### **The Position of Gender in a Gig Society**

Feminine-coded pronouns are used intentionally throughout this critical introduction, as the marketing of the self, as well as the ways in which the modern self is marketed to, are told with intonations of the socially-constructed feminine. Philosopher and gender studies scholar Judith Butler says gender is performative (Butler 25). It is produced by discourses. Just as gender is produced by the doing of the language given to it, the auto-consumption of the modern individual that permeates gig society today is produced by the discourses surrounding the construct of a “self” or individual, and how that self is made culturally, socially and fiscally tangible through the acting out of the discourses that give it its concreteness. Existence is not possible apart from the language it constructs and by which it simultaneously constructs itself. The modern individual becomes “real,” through the continual act of self-production and auto-consumption.

In her 2018 article “The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism,” theorist Catherine Rottenberg coins the term “neoliberal feminism,” a hyper-individualizing cultural phenomenon which Rottenberg says, “construes women not only as entrepreneurial subjects but also as individual enterprises” (Rottenberg 8). This interpretation of a feminine-coded body in modern society



shares key similarities with Han's interpretation of the modern individual: the modern individual acts, serves and interprets herself as both employer and employee, master and slave, customer and marketing campaign. Drawing from Butler, we know the modes of production and auto-construction which the modern individual experiences mirror the ways in which the feminine body and representations of the body are often purported as things which one must construct through the consumption of various products and the adornment of various attitudes, skills and external presentations. Within the context of a gig society, specifically, there seems to be an emphasis on purchasing power, consumption and value through usefulness that objectifies the modern individual inhabiting any body, just as the feminine-coded body is objectified and valued through purchasing power, consumption and value through usefulness by the patriarchal structures present in society.

The ways in which the modern individual is bound to herself by a "can" that has replaced Foucault's discipline-based "can not" or forceful "should" indicate that the external expectations of performance and service, and the value individuals give themselves as suggested by the pervasive societal norms that surround them, have become increasingly internalized in a self-flagellating manner through external validations via the consumption of goods as well as the modern individual's ability to produce (Han, *Burnout Society* 8). To paraphrase Foucault, society is constructed from lines drawn to create subgroups and categorization as a means of establishing a sense of order. Paraphrasing Derrida, we can assume that the most common way the modern individual comes to know the name of a thing— the identity of an individual or object, so to speak— is by understanding what it is not (Derrida 1117-1118). In other words, the self is built from social contrast.

The modern individual demonstrates her value through the construction of the self through purchasing power as well as her own time, attention and labor. The neoliberal, gig-permeated structure in which we operate produces in every modern individual the inherently feminine-coded characteristics of self-subjugation, people-pleasing and identity-construction, and contortion in order to gain not only societal acceptance, but to leverage social and socioeconomic power. These self-subjugating and self-constructing behaviors are exemplified in the narratives that drive the goods we purchase as well as the labor we produce.

### **Narratives that Drive Consumerism**

In this project, I look at the cultural phenomenon of auto-exploitation as it materializes in various narratives. I explore the narratives that are condensed, manipulated and eliminated through the stories we tell ourselves via the products we purchase, and in the ways we simultaneously subject ourselves to ceaseless productivity and objectify ourselves as projects in constant construction. It is, in a sense, a paradoxical effort to combat the lack of narrative made visible through the function of internet purchasing, gig-economy and instantaneous acquisition of products.

One Friday night in late September I was sitting on my front porch with a friend who told me he was having trouble sleeping. He had tried melatonin, listening to audiobooks, resisting day-time naps, and still, he would lie awake the entire night through, his mind racing and unable to drift off to sleep. As we were talking, he took out his phone and said these exact words, “I have to make an impulse purchase.” We sat quietly for less than two minutes before he said, “Okay, I just spent seventy dollars I didn’t need to spend, but it will be here Sunday.” He had

purchased Kava, a tea that acts as a muscle relaxer and can relieve stress to the point of helping a person fall asleep.

Though it is to be determined whether or not my friend's "impulse purchase" will help his sleeping habits, a synapse is created in that brief moment of purchase that provides a palatable, condensed and comforting narrative to the consumer. The majority of internet purchases can fall under one, or some combination of, four broad narratives of thinking: lack, avoidance, dissatisfaction and impulse.

Under a narrative of lack, consumers purchase to fill a void that is often brought to their attention by the image, presence or suggestion of the object itself. This centers the narrative of purchase and acquisition around the construction of the self by patching or "filling" perceived gaps, holes or deficits with purchased goods. Beyond the syllogism, "I buy; therefore, I am," the narrative of "lack" purported by consumer culture within a gig economy extends to insinuate, "I buy; therefore, I am good enough." Perhaps, to take the statement even further, once a consumer has acquired the purchase, to say, "I have; therefore, I have worth." Consumers add the things they purchase to their identities, incorporating objects into the corporeal experience of auto-consumption as a modern individual.

Consumption also springs from acts of avoidance carried out by the modern individual. This narrative can demonstrate avoidance of discomfort— be it physical, mental, emotional or interpersonal discomfort— using a variety of modes of subversion, including an excess of stimuli, numbing mechanisms, or distraction. Purchases under this narrative tend to stem from a feeling of urgency. We are a society who desperately does not want to be uncomfortable, but, as Han says, are simultaneously inflicted with mental, emotional and physical discomfort by the violence of positivity with which consumer culture within a gig society is imbued.

To provide an example, I suffer from a condition called dermatillomania, in which I pick at my skin when I feel stress, discomfort or anxiety. This action is one that provides an instant relief to the tension, need for control, and need for distraction from the tasks I am responsible for and the emotions I might feel incapable or afraid of processing. Like acts of consumerism, the act of skin-picking provides an instant rush of dopamine and release of stress. After a spell of dermatillomania, however, I have often found myself searching the internet for remedies to quickly heal my wounded skin “overnight”: ointments, oils, medicated bandages. I have scoured Amazon for the magic “fix” I could find and receive within one to two business days. This valuable act of condensing time to one to two business days seems to be the axis on which the modern world turns. Rather than invoking systems of repair or restoration, a gig-imbued society invokes cycles of instant, temporary relief begetting more instant, but temporary, relief.

Often, the modern individual is also driven toward purchase as a balm or antidote by a perception or reality of dissatisfaction. Han’s assertion of an excess of positivity leads not only to depression, burnout and symptoms of ADHD through the flood of constant choices, opportunities, information and stimuli in which the modern individual orbits, but also in the ways in which this excess shows the modern individual the infinite forms of lack that supposedly exist in their lives. In his book *Mediated*, author and scholar Thomas De Zengotita says, “mobility among the options in a virtualized environment gives to human freedom a new and ironic character. You are completely free to choose because it doesn’t matter what you choose” (De Zengotita 15). On the surface, these endless options afforded to the modern individual appear as positives—privileges of unlimited freedom to choose again and again. These endless options take up space in the mind of the modern individual and by consequence take up time spent making decisions. What initially appears to be a source of freedom quickly cultivates feelings of

obligation—one that paradoxically burdens the decision maker yet does not, in the endless stream of options, truly matter. Han summarizes the paradoxical privilege-burden of infinite options when he says, “Excessive consumption amounts to unfreedom,” (Han, *Psychopolitics* 91).

These narratives take on many forms and are indicated in an endless variety of purchases. The framework of these purchases, however, looks generally similar from purchase to purchase, consumer to consumer. The consumer perceives a state of need based in one of these four “wells” of discourse. In a sense, the solution to the perceived “problem” --that problem again being a perceived need based in a discourse-- is the thing that creates the problem to begin with. The well of discourse from which a narrative of need springs is the same discourse which purports resolution.

To illustrate using a fairly common and resonant example for the modern individual, I will use my morning coffee routine. For several years now, I’ve used a Mr. Coffee pot that was given to me by a friend after she was given a new coffee maker as a wedding gift. Initially, I was excited to receive a free coffee pot. Over the years, however, as social media influencers have featured their Keurig coffee makers or at-home espresso machines in their morning or daily routines, and as several of my friends have since purchased their own Keurigs or at-home espresso machines, I’ve grown to look less favorably at my Mr. Coffee maker, which had, up until my discovery of new narratives, served me well. While I could go to a store and peruse the aisles for a different coffee maker, I am able to reimagine my life quickly, and in an infinite variety of ways, through the portal of internet shopping. I will sometimes spend half an hour looking through coffee makers or espresso machines on Amazon, imagining and reimagining not only what an espresso machine would look like in my home, but how my home itself would

transform with the purchase. I imagine the self as a more organized version of who she is now, her life fitting more neatly into a routine box. I imagine the money I would save if I did not stop by my local coffee shop four to five times a week. I imagine the way I would sit more peacefully, poised and collected in my living room. The ideations of a new, more organized and sophisticated day-to-day are limitless, made accessible to me with the click of a button. Within a few business days, a new coffee maker could arrive on my doorstep and change my life.

The endlessness of gig economy leads the modern individual to do it all: to market the self *to* the self as the consumer, to regulate the self *through* the deregulation of time, resources and economic interference as the worker, to construct the self through the purchase and provision of goods and services, and, finally, to act as the chief proprietor and most loyal customer of the narrative she is selling back to herself.

As Derrida asserts, we can only know a thing by that which it is not. Within the scope of gig society, we can understand what narratives we lack in a gig-based society by exploring, analyzing and extrapolating the narratives we tell ourselves in the day-to-day. The narratives, when laid out in succession, can do much to reveal the gaps where narrative has, in a manipulation of time, ceased to be acknowledged, or, in extreme cases, ceased to exist. This project is an attempted diving expedition into the murkier waters of a societal reef of individuals trying to tell the stories of themselves through the things they purchase and then own: a continuation and metamorphosis of what Marx called commodity fetish. What is missing in this race against ourselves, I think, is the acknowledgement of the narratives purported by the emerging economies, such as gig-work, that remove the narratives of others and offer us a direct, over-simplified version of the acquisition of goods.

For one thing, in the complication of the self— through the misuse and overuse of finite resources such as time and attention, as well as the incessant construction of the ever-shifting image of the self through the purchases of goods and services— we reveal a lack of intimacy between the worlds we inhabit and our corporeal bodies. We are suspended, shrunk, stuck, shaved down, and quieted by the raucousness of narratives that demand through their permissiveness that we do more, own more, purchase more, aim for more, be more. They speak loudly and babble incessantly, but drown out the quiet moments where the self converges with others, with her own internal dialogue and desire, and the narratives that latently teem within the consciousness of the modern individual.

Like every other modern individual, I have felt the pull of the paradox. In every purchase I have sought a way out of myself, a way to lay the material and pathological over the naturally occurring body and embodiment and call it good, call it marketable. As we pull commodities towards ourselves, we signify that we are seeking a route of escape from the naturally occurring self, grasping for external embellishment to settle the vacuum of turbulence forced upon our interior worlds by an excess of positivity. In the excess of sameness, of opportunity and acquisition and the incessant influx of “more” or “better,” a violence against the self then occurs (Han, *Burnout Society* 9). The fiscal economy in which the modern individual is situated and constructs herself has become one that is almost entirely enmeshed with the social and emotional economies in which we issue transactions with one another and within and against ourselves.

It is further paradoxical, in a sense, because the exploration of narratives purported by the gig economy is one that is diving into the heart of the wreck that constitutes the ever-broadening landscape of neoliberalism in and of itself. Neoliberalism pioneers the assertion that sustained economic growth is the path to human progress. The self is actualized through its economic

growth and continued success. The rise of the gig economy, and the increase in the variety of platforms available and widely accessible through the gig economy, continues in the same vein with Neoliberalism's ideology of government deregulation as a path towards progress, that progress being economic and personal in the same breath.

### **Amazon Flex as a Tangible Structure**

Like the majority of modern individuals, I, too, reach for multiple opportunities to earn money in order to increase my propensity for opportunities to spend; I have been conditioned to equate purchasing power with a more securely constructed image of the self. Building off of Han, the modern individual is both subject and object, performing entrepreneurial actions of labor, efficiency and image-construction through the impositions of unlimited opportunities to increase capital gain and funnel it back into the auto-navigated but socially influenced prototype of the self.

As previously mentioned, the structure of a gig economy purports not only the deregulation of government intervention in economic progress, but intervenes in individual and collective conceptions of time. This intervention is twofold. First, the gig economy purports the idea that all time is potentially profitable. The flexibility of self-scheduling in many gig platforms, such as Amazon Flex, where workers choose the blocks of time they want to work based on their schedule and the blocks' advertised flat-rate of pay, gives individuals the notion that there should be virtually no limit to the time spent working, or, actualizing the neoliberal self through production and labor. Where the neoliberal socioeconomic framework champions the deregulation of government interference in big business, the gig economy champions the deregulation of the modern individual's potential towards labor and productivity. While it is



certainly possible to logistically manage one's time in a manner realistic enough to include multiple opportunities for multiple incomes in one's work week, the 24/7 accessibility of gig economy implies, again, to evoke Han's use of the auto-exploitative and auto-aggressive "can". This implies that since the modern individual now has the opportunity to remain in constant motion, and constant earning through that motion of labor and productivity, the modern individual "should".

As Han asserts in his book *Psychopolitics*, as we are being marketed to in order for corporations, content creators and businesses to leverage our purchasing power for their gain, we are also participating in our own collective construction of identities through both consumerism and labor, as many modern individuals participate in the delivery of these goods to our doorsteps through gig work (Han 21). Platforms for gig work, such as Amazon Flex, act as conductors for self-construction through the narratives they produce to society. In terms of consumerism, auto-consumption is the consumption— absorption, utilization, etc., -- of one's self in terms of the narrative the modern individual is marketing and selling to herself. In a neoliberal age, and, furthermore, a gig-society, the modern individual exploits and produces the self in terms of labor, attention and time in order to consume the identity she has created.

The images we see in the day-to-day are one of many avenues for narratives of auto-consumption that drive individuals to act, as Han says, both as perpetrator and victim of one's own internal violence (Han, *Burnout Society* 8). The individual sees an image, creates from the image a narrative that aligns with the immersive nature of unlimited self-production, and then aligns one's self in a manner that might replicate the purported narrative. The home page of Amazon Flex depicts a father and son reading a book together, their heads peeking out from under a blanket. There is a feeling of peace and stability. The photo "looks" correct. The father

and son are looking down at a Kindle screen. The child is grinning, his teeth on full display. The father appears attentive and at ease; he is content to be present with his son, a characteristic lacking in many modern interactions, which are commonly rooted in speed, efficiency and profit. This image reaffirms the value in the long-held concept of the nuclear family unit. It aligns with contemporary narratives that elicit and even demand the mechanization of the self as both product and consumer in order to not only reach ideals of socially-constructed “happiness” or “freedom,” but at a more critical, foundational level, a baseline corporeal existence purported by its images symbolic of a veneer of happiness present society expects to obtain as a result of properly constructing one’s “self” towards pre-portioned expectations for “success” that have been turned into stipulations for survival. The logo, white, clean font at the top of the homepage, says, “Driven by always being there for storytime,” further purporting a narrative of family ideals: being home from one’s job in time to read to the kids before bedtime.

The sub-heading below reads, “No matter what your goal is, Amazon Flex helps you get there.” This subheading achieves two things. First, it implies to the modern individual that any goal is within reach, but it is up to the individual— ignoring any other systemic factors that might impede the individual’s pursuit of goals— to achieve her goal. Additionally, there lies the implication that it is Amazon who works for the Flex driver. The statement, “Amazon Flex helps you get there,” purports the idea that the modern individual is so liberated that she can not only choose her own employer, but her employer, and the manner in which she carries out the necessary labor, will be solely to her benefit and under her control. It is a tempting offer: an ideal showing us the contentment we could have— the time we could have and spend more freely— if we would only utilize the condensed notion of time offered through gig work.

In late fall of 2022, I worked for one month as an Amazon Flex delivery driver, an experience that would be brief but revealing. Through the nearly self-employable process of signing up via the Flex app, I was able to begin earning money just days after becoming a driver. Navigating the tangible experience of its structure as a Flex driver, bridging the gap of the “last mile” in Amazon’s innovative system of logistics and delivery, gave visual scaffolding to the system in which I feel myself, a modern individual, entangled in and perpetually built, altered, shaped and reshaped.

In the brief time I worked for Amazon Flex, I experienced several afternoons and evenings where I felt the shock of absorbing excess time that seemed to slough off from the corporation. The routes for Flex drivers are provided by an app the driver downloads to her phone. Once the driver approaches the address for a delivery, the app makes available the option to scan the package and photograph the package delivered to the appropriate destination. Only then will the app allow the driver to move on to the next package along the route, as the driver must deliver packages in the order in which the app has the deliveries organized. On several occasions, I experienced a glitch or malfunction in the app: it would crash along rural routes and I would have to drive until the app regained enough service to properly work, or, the app would simply shut down despite having adequate service. Other times, the package would not scan correctly, or the app would register a house or complex next to or nearby rather than the correct address, and would not allow me to scan the package. Complications with the app created suspensions in time which I as the Flex driver consistently absorbed into my fixed rate of pay. Though the issue in these instances stemmed from Amazon, I as the worker absorbed the consequences of an inefficient tool created and provided by the corporation.

Employing over a quarter of a million Flex drivers, Amazon never suffers a lack of gig workers to traverse the “last mile” to deliver packages to customers’ doorsteps. The Flex driver, acting as both consumer and product, though an invaluable asset to the logistic and financial success of Amazon, is an employee who is easily replaceable and therefore highly expendable. Amazon Flex drivers are part of what is called the “last mile” of a delivery operation, moving goods from the “middle man” of Amazon facilities to the doors of consumers. The “last mile” worker is, in large part, what allows the Amazon customer, and more specifically the Amazon Prime member, to click a button and receive a package within one to two days of purchase. It could be considered that the Amazon customer, when choosing to purchase from Amazon, and Amazon Prime, specifically, is opting to pay for someone— in this case the Amazon Flex delivery driver, the gig worker— to capture the extra time they would have to wait for delivery. Rather than the corporation absorbing the time itself, Amazon employs Flex drivers to serve as receptacles that consume and digest excess delivery time.

The worker trades her time in exchange for fiscal currency, thus eliminating the time the consumer would otherwise have to wait to receive their package. The worker, in trading her time and reducing the consumer’s wait time, also increases Amazon's profit; the money earned by the corporation increases, while the time expended by the corporation is decreased, as it is absorbed by the Flex driver. Time spent is transferred onto the worker, who is being compensated in fiscal currency, making the transaction seem, on the surface, like a fair trade-off. However, if, within the context of a gig-saturated society, money no longer is time, but is the thing which creates and eliminates time, and if time now serves the modern individual as a tool to leverage and manipulate in order to maximize profits and actualize the self, it then becomes worthwhile to consider whether or not the Flex driver is compensated fairly in tangible money in relation to the

time she expends in the service of the customer, and, to an even larger degree, in service to the larger corporate entity of Amazon.

Amazon works by leveraging the auto-exploitation of the modern individual through the gig work of Flex drivers. In his book, *The Cost of Free Shipping: Amazon in the Global Economy*, Dr. Jake Wilson and fellow scholars state that what Amazon has done through the construction of a logistics chain of online order to doorstep delivery is a sort of operation that functions and succeeds on a currency of time. It has annihilated space by time (Wilson 24). In other words, by treating time as a malleable commodity, Amazon leverages the time of individuals through Flex delivery work to move its goods from warehouses to customers' doorsteps in just a few days, sometimes within a timeframe of just twenty-four hours from the moment the goods were purchased. At face value, Amazon Flex pays workers to deliver packages. However, the immense volume of workers Flex employs— each of whom deliver through a self-directed system via the Amazon Flex app— creates for the corporation a massive amount of leverageable time. Because of this, Flex can churn out nearly-infinite purchases 24/7, because Flex workers have provided the company with endless resources of their time.

Time is condensed and divided between the thousands of ready and willing bodies who put themselves at Amazon's disposal. Alihammond says that above all else, Amazon has created a novelty and now-replicated logistics system. In tandem, the Amazon Flex worker, similar to most gig workers across all platforms, absorbs any degree of inefficiency in the "last mile" portion of the delivery process and logistics network. At least an hour before a shift, but typically no more than two or three days before a shift, Amazon Flex workers choose a "block," a shift, if you will, to work delivering packages. This block tells the Flex worker the time the shift will start and the time the shift is projected to end. The app will also indicate how much money the

Flex worker will make, at a flat, tax-free rate, if she chooses to accept the block. If the block ends up taking the worker a lesser amount of time than what is projected, the worker still makes the same flat rate of pay as determined on the block selection. Consequently, if the block happens to take longer than the projected time, the Flex worker's rate of pay will not increase to compensate for the extra time. The fiscal value for the task is set; it is up to the Flex worker to squeeze their energy, labor, and time into the parameters set by the Flex app. Not only does the Flex worker then act a conduit or shock-absorption of the "issue" of time Amazon is faced with, but the Flex worker must manipulate the time she takes on in order to earn a value that feels comparatively "worth" the trading of her time for the absorption of a large corporation's time.

In addition to an absorption of time by the Amazon Flex worker, the Flex worker also absorbs overhead cost of equipment to get started in the process of delivering for Amazon. On the Amazon Flex website, responses to frequently asked questions indicate there are minimum Android and iPhone requirements in order to use the Flex app. The worker must have a 7.0 version or newer of an Android phone, or an iPhone 6s or newer that has been updated to the iOS 15 system. Similarly, there is no car insurance provided for Flex workers through Amazon, yet workers are required to provide their own vehicle to complete deliveries. The Amazon Flex Workers' Reddit thread is riddled with stories of workers who have gotten into car accidents, sometimes to severe detriment to their health, or have totaled their vehicles working for Flex. The worker is not protected in these instances, but instead finds herself out of work and without support from the corporation. After all, the Flex worker, like many gig workers across all platforms, is expendable, an easily-replaceable receptacle to absorb time and condense the "last mile" of Amazon's delivery system, allowing the company to increase the volume of purchases and deliveries it takes in, as well as the amount of revenue it garners.

The narrative is one that purports self-efficacy, though, insisting that the Flex worker is one who works for herself, to achieve her own goals by earning fiscal compensation through delivering packages. In its extremities, this compensation is, at most, an illusory symbol— a pat on the head or gold star implicating that the individual is serving her function in a society that has adopted the notion that the individual is both, as Han says, “master and slave” of one’s self in terms of work, production and earnings. The “easy” availability or access to work for Flex workers is a blatant example of the shift from “should” versus “can” that, according to Han, provides a discourse through which the auto-exploitation and auto-aggression of the modern individual as the worker can materialize (Han, *Burnout Society* 8). Work has shifted in terms from a “should” mentality to a perhaps doubly coercive “can” mentality. Because an individual can work, or has the opportunity to, it almost automatically implies that work is an imperative to the individual, urging the individual, through an undercurrent of societal vibrations, to fill as much of their time with work as necessary. This exchange of time under the guise of not “wasting” time or leveraging time for profit for the individual is, in part, what benefits corporations like Amazon so greatly, as they transfer the time they need eliminated in order to garner exponential profit onto the time of the worker, who is not fairly compensated for their compulsory transaction of time for fiscal earnings.

The structure of Amazon Flex and its ability to move goods from production facilities and over long distances to reach customers’ doorsteps in such a short amount of time replicates what is happening in society as a whole today. The modern individual is simultaneously victim and perpetrator of her own oppression, as exemplified in the rise of depression and burnout. There is an emphasis on doing is elevated above being. Human value, as mentioned previously, is determined by, first, buying and having goods and services in one’s possession. To have

possession of goods is to signify not only status in terms of financial wealth and a type of social connection associated with power and influence, but to also signify the power of possession. It indicates a fracture in the system that supplies its own temporary resolution. Gig economy is part of a pseudo-solution that never addresses the root issue, which is the commodification of time by the narrative of self-constructive consumerism. Instead, quick-fix gig work, that momentarily alleviates immediate socioeconomic distress, stunts our ability to imagine and experiment with new ways of living.

### **Project Origins**

This project was born out of my growing discomfort with the socioeconomic system in which I work, live and purchase. Noticing the symptoms of depression, burnout and ADHD in myself long before reading Han's work, I developed a growing fascination with the ways in which I feel time— its use, availability, excess and lack— functions as a key component in opportunities for the contentment and well-being of the modern individual. I found myself working for Amazon Flex during my first semester of graduate school: teaching general education courses, taking graduate-level classes, and trying to earn extra money on the side to pay all of my bills and have money left over for the things I felt— and still often feel— I should want, or need to have such as new clothing, a specialty coffee on my way to school, skincare products that will give me a flawless complexion, a specific brand of herbal tea that will change my life, a new computer. I filled any “free” time I had with a gig I believed could benefit me through gig-society's trademark exchange: the commodity of my time in its various manipulations and forms in exchange for fiscal currency, a tool to buy well-being and construct my identity.



I found myself making infinite lists of the limitless choices at my disposal, each one promising me a different brand of happiness in the form of more than self-improvement, but total identity-construction, a self-made but societally-imposed brand. I found myself stuck in what felt like an interminable cycle. The more time I expended to work “for myself,” the less time I had to rest, be still, enjoy the people around me and exit what feels like an echo-chamber of commerce-based achievement.

Existing in a feminine-coded body, I cannot help but notice the specific ways in which the neoliberal socioeconomic structures present in America target and form conceptions of femininity. Furthermore, over the last several years as I have been exposed to theories that examine and make sense of underlying societal structures, I have started to notice within myself the ways in which the feminine-coded mannerisms I have been conditioned to perform since birth mirror the ways in which modern individuals construct their identities as neoliberal subjects of a gig-saturated society. Over the past year, I have sought to utilize creative writing as a means to explore the ways in which femininity and identity-construction in a gig-saturated society influence the relationships we have with one another, with our work, with the things we purchase and own, and, perhaps most importantly, the ways in which we relate to and value ourselves.

The following work is a collection of poems and lyric essays, each of which examine various ways in which the commodification of time and a gig-saturated culture have influenced the ways in which we engage both internally and interpersonally. The narratives at work in each piece question what it means to exist in proximity to one another: to exist interrelationally and intrarelationally in love, lovelessness, usefulness and even, sometimes, feelings of uselessness. These pieces examine the objectification of the body, the ways in which it is leveraged, constructed and renovated in order to attempt to gain currency in the form of love, attention and

approval from others as much as from ourselves. Moving through memories from childhood into my present-day experiences, these pieces do not seek answers to issues born of a neoliberal, gig-saturated age, but instead seek to make visible the narratives through which I have experienced the emotional, mental, and socioeconomic effects of auto-exploitation in the pursuit of identity-construction. The modern individual, in a myriad of capacities, expends herself in an effort to construct herself from the low-hanging fruits of her surrounding socioeconomic structure. I am no different.

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## SUNDAY MORNING MASS

Here is the first memory. *It's March and I am washing my hands in the sink in E's bathroom. The tile beneath my feet is cold. The water is cold on my hands. An ant crawls out from behind the faucet and I stand there, eucalyptus soap between my fingers, amazed at its capacity to move despite the reluctant thaw of winter. I want to live like the ant, antennae feeling the first weeks out of February's frigid cruelty, little legs spinning out over the porcelain, still moving. Through the intemperate moods of March it is going somewhere, pressing forward in spite of the erratic frosted mornings in between the thaw, despite wearing its shell— its only protection— on the outside of its small, frail body.*

I suck hard through my teeth and assess the bruise-colored crescents beneath my eyes, which are blue, too. I bend forward over the sink, stretching the backs of my knees and remember how we had fallen asleep on the plastic-covered, camp-style couch at the cabin on the lake just two weeks earlier. I touch the pink, mottled scars on my cheeks where acne seared the edges of my confidence and think of your chest, how it felt so fragile, like the weight of my own head resting there would create hairline fractures leading to an inevitable and suffocating collapse. I fell asleep but let my head lie lightly. It felt inconsiderate, sometimes, to settle in. I reach for the hand towel, thin and damp, draped over the towel rack. “Remember,” I think, “You do not have to be beautiful all the time.”

I pat my hands dry and go back to the living room where E is writing. She doesn't look up, fixated on taking all the wrongs of her immediate world and turning them inside out into stories she can hold and share and rip apart to be mended again and again by the cyclical, reciprocal ritual of writing. I have to keep believing I am going somewhere.

I tell E that being feminine makes me feel like a Catholic school girl. You must wear the uniform, they say. Please make sure your skirts are pleated and your socks don't slip down too far around your ankles. Unspoken is the expectation to spice up the uniform, though. Not too much, not enough to be reprimanded, but just enough to stand out, slightly. I take it on and off for almost seven years, slip the garments over my hips and head, twist the bottom of my shirt into a knot to accentuate my waist, comforting men with the evidence of a place they can still grab at me.

To have and to hold, I think. I've been looked at all my life, I say to my reflection in the mirror. What I would like is for someone to see. Conditional triangles: isosceles. Men saying, "I love you," to one another through the body of a woman, socks pulled to her knees, hair high on her head. To have and to hold. I wring my hands and E passes me the bowl of apricots and mixed nuts. "You are right," she says.

She talks like this: slow and enunciated. E is comfortable taking her time. We talk for twenty minutes about the stages of grief. She looks out the window and tells me how grief feels like a gift. An ache so good that you know what was lost was at one point given, and this is what you relish. I wipe two tears from each eye, choking on caffeine and the impending reality I feel like a cold pit in my stomach and say to her, "I think, then, we should enjoy what's been given to us while it's here." As soon as the words leave my tongue, I understand that you and I are living on borrowed time. Soon the lease will be up.

Here is a present moment overtaken by a memory. *It's July now, almost August and I am sitting on the floor of the bathroom in the Sonesta Inn outside of Boston. I think on that afternoon in March, with E, trying to solve uncertainty by slurping room-temperature Americanos and*

*writing mediocre prose. You first kissed me in early August the year before. I met E two weeks later at our graduate assistant orientation.*

I check the time in Portland, Oregon. I am three hours ahead of your time zone. You used to tell me how much you hated it, when we would part ways and I would race ahead to two hours past, you lagging behind in the lengthening shadows of Pacific daylight: the mid-morning churning out slowly in the distance of my afternoon, the gloaming of dusk softening as night fell, black and opaque on the closure of my days. It's a Monday and the bar is closed. You're off work. I am glad, for once, you can't reach forward into the passing glances of these northeastern hours.

I've been on the road for three days now. I ride in the back of E's Ford Escape and doze, watch the skyline turn over and change shape: Kentucky, Maryland, New Jersey, New York City. We visit Hartford, Connecticut. I walk like an echo through the corridors of the Yale library, my steps discordant and small in the intellectual prowess of hundreds of years of old money and prestige. We don't stay long; Portland, Maine is our final destination. Everything else is a stop along the way. I buy an iced coffee at a gas station Dunkin and think they must have gotten my order wrong. The receipt corrects me; I am the one who got my order wrong.

I take my turn driving and we wind through small towns in Massachusetts: Holliston, Millford, Ashland. The houses are quaint and belong to a different life entirely. I meditate on the functions of loneliness. Neighborhood residents in athletic wear walk their dogs, go for jogs. I think of you and the day we walked by the river to see the cherry blossoms along the Tom McCall waterfront. You didn't want to look like a tourist, you said, but I wanted coffee and Stumptown was close by. You looked at everyone and I looked at you.

There must have been thousands of people on the waterfront that day, taking photos and jogging along the banks of the river. The flowers hung limp on the trees. Pretty, but they were so cold. I noticed the ground beneath their branches was muddy with the constant tread of foot traffic, the grass flattened and broken against the thawing earth.

Here is a memory in which I share a memory. *What I return to is the way the world settles into itself so late at night. I am in the window of my studio apartment on Grant Street and it is late January and we have been broken up— for the first time— for two days. I smoke cigarettes because they smell like you and let my feet dangle from the ledge, toes grazing the shingled roof below. By the third day I'll get scared and change my mind, but you met her two days earlier and she becomes the lynch-pin in the feeble liability of your already-waning certainty. I will try for three months to weave trust from truant pretenses that drag their cuticle-torn fingernails across the mental landscape of my doubts.*

I spin the story forward towards dusk when E and I sat cross-legged on the rug eating curry in late February— mine red with potatoes, hers yellow with tofu. For one hyphenated moment, things felt okay: one slow orbit of rest in the spaceship, miles above the planet we keep stumbling through like tourists in summer. “I’ll try to explain what love feels like to me,” I say to her.

I tell her I have a recurring childhood memory in every place we lived, of waking from a nap, noticing the darkened room and knowing in some subconscious space that it was light when I fell asleep; time has passed. I smell rosemary, warm herbs and chicken— or maybe salmon— in the oven. A Tracy Chapman album reverberates through the rooms from the kitchen, and these are the things that tell me my mother is cooking dinner. I feel the warmth of the bed, the heat

from the stove traveling through the house, my eyes bright in the shadowy room from necessary rest. This is something like safety for a moment in time.

Until the shuffling of the pots and pans grow louder, more pointed, swells to clanging and maybe something thrown or slammed hard enough to shake the farther rooms. I hear sharp, angry voices cut through the music and the warmth. She's arguing with someone, with whichever man lives with us at the time. I wait for her footsteps down the hall, for her to open the door to my room and say, "Pack your bags. We're leaving."

Suddenly, terror where there was safety moments before. Discordant and electrifying. I burrow deeper into the covers and squeeze my eyes shut. I ask to go back to sleep, ask something inside of myself how an evening so safe and warm can suddenly reveal so much danger, how love can feel so much like terror.

By the time I am twelve, though, I will have more or less learned to wait it out, call her bluff. We always come back. Nonetheless, the feeling lingers, and love, for me, cannot exist without evocations of fear, precariously placed on the end tables of another time.

I will double in age before I begin to understand my mother: how she wanted to leave but couldn't bring herself to move through the empty space between. How loneliness feels like a centrifugal force. How time stands stock still in undulations of fear. How men will look right through you and choose to see only your usefulness, rarely your need.

Here is a morning in Maryland with a continental breakfast calling forth another memory. *I am sunburnt from the shores of Delaware and despite a long shower last night my scalp is gritty with sand from the strong turn of the ocean's hands over my small body as I thrashed against the waves for hours the afternoon before. I am grabbing at pale yellow puffy discs of instant eggs and bacon sitting in pools of grease inside an aluminum warmer. I pour coffee into*



*a cardboard travel cup and peel back the seal of two hazelnut creamers and think of you in all the infinite forms in which you populate my memory.*

Two nights before, I grab two miniature hazelnut International Delight creamers at a Speedway outside of Knoxville, Tennessee and think of you in every still frame held in my memories of us: how we grabbed as many tiny creamers as we could from the air bnb we stayed at in Kansas City the first time you came to visit after we started dating. I had picked you up from the airport and we ordered Lulu's and ate pad thai with giddy smiles and nervous gestures. The next morning we drove back to Springfield just in time for my 11:00 a.m. class. You picked me up in my car that afternoon and we drove out to the lake, cigarettes and my Norton Anthology of poetry in tow.

We kept the creamers in a pile by the microwave at the lake house all weekend. We ruined the sheets and smoked too many cigarettes. You told me why you love cicadas and we googled their life cycle. You fixated on the kind of cicadas that spend seventeen years underground before emerging to climb to the tops of trees to lay their eggs. Later that night I found you alone on the deck, staring out across the still black water, held fast by the worry that so often yanked like a noose on your presence of mind. I held you by the shoulders and looked into your eyes. I wanted you to believe it. But more than that, I needed you, for my sake, to be it, to be good. "You are so good," I said, "So, so good." I was terrified to give you that goodness. I started climbing anyway, hoping my wings would dry before I reached the tops of the trees. I had hoped my fervency would make it all true.

Here is a confession: *And in short, I was afraid.* If love is a kitchen analogy then I am six years old again and have touched my hands to the hot pan of biscuits, missed their golden baked tops and blistered my palm on the searing aluminum. If love is a kitchen analogy then my father

is angry at the pasta my mother made for dinner and she is pouring a cup of cold milk on his head while he slams the dishes in the sink and breaks the cups and plates and bowls.

If love is a kitchen analogy then I am rushing ahead to a boil, the rice burned black to the bottom of the pot and if love is a kitchen analogy I am waking from a dream over and over again with my teeth pulled hard against the roof of my mouth like some insidious force of gravity and I keep breaking it, breaking it, breaking it over my knee like a child in the backyard with nothing to do but feel the fear and tear it all apart, over and over again.

## ASTRONAUTS

Quartered lives of unwelcomed unraveling,  
gap-toothed dispositions dampened  
by indentations of disarray, disruptions  
in the brief and fragile fabric of time.

Taller than we used to be, braver now  
because we have to be. Accustomed  
to usefulness, acquainted with private  
griefs and threads of endless trying.

No more tornadoes, just a bit of wind.  
Still, we anticipate the devastation,  
hearts and limbs doubled over  
in the bathtub of our doubts.

In between the murder of memory,  
between the love-making and the  
cigarettes and the chapped, raw  
chill of winter, we make propositions.

Kiss the throb between my shoulder blades,  
red hot where we first felt the fear.  
I'll tell you again everything will be  
okay. Maybe I'll meet you in Peru.

Time travelers, blue eyes blurred  
by the quiet commotion of pulsating  
loss and desire, alternating currents  
of imposition and want. Maybe

only for a season, but we're here now,  
sticky fingers unfolding the feeling  
with intonations of hesitancy, some  
indeterminate resolution.

Asking little of this patch of light,  
this swatch of color on patterned lives.  
Asking only blank verse and open hands,  
trying to understand the storm as it passes.

## SWIMMING LESSONS

In the short-hair summers  
of childhood sharks swam  
in the murky water, meters  
from the pulse of kicking feet.  
Thrashing arms into the waves  
you stomached the fear,  
looked to the cigarette smoke  
signals your father sent  
inadvertently from shore.  
You slipped one night,  
sliding on your belly  
in an evening bath. You were  
playing mermaid, the one  
with long red hair and the  
tiny waist you wouldn't  
learn to compare yours  
to until years later. Prince  
Eric was only an imaginary  
swim away and he would  
love you. You chipped  
your left front tooth on  
the porcelain, palimpsest  
make-believe shattering  
the adult image you would  
eventually grow into.  
Work, you tell yourself,  
is what you do to pretend  
it never mattered: that tiny,  
inconsequential piece of bone  
in the palm of your tiny hand,  
the way you stood in front  
of the mirror and cried, heart  
broken by abrupt change,  
wondering how something  
so small could shape  
the way you saw your own  
small face, wondering  
why he never dipped  
his feet in the ocean, and  
why he stood still  
at the edge of the driveway  
the day your mother  
drove you away. Sharks  
circled the shadows

of yourself. He didn't  
move his feet.

## TENDERNESS IS A WORKING TITLE

I am reading regret between the dial tone,  
between paper thin lines,  
strenuous interpretations of motion  
on the lips of strangers, lissome notions  
of tenderness litter my brain– heart  
beats like the wings of a bird.  
I come close on repeat,  
asking everyone if they're okay.

I want to give the feeling without hesitation.

I sleep

and dream in half-formed fragments  
of belonging, crude-cut urban idealizations  
like arms wrapped around me on the lawn:  
fraudulent-green caution, couples' counseling,  
paid time off. I want to stir my coffee  
in concentric circles, incorporating grief  
from the inside out.

Sipping sentiment by the sunlit window,  
streaked with winter's salt  
and grit and rage. I pay in quarters,  
trade cash for time, Truth for perspective,  
acquisition for experience.

I try on love  
in every hue, feel the fabric of its function  
and decide to wear it in until it's a habit.

## ASKING WHY ON THE WHITE RIVER

Asking why on the White River,  
you tell me about the time you tried  
to kill yourself, dropping to the side  
of a California highway.

Later that night  
I'm spitting tobacco juice down the drain,  
remembering how I laid crucifix in the grass,  
touched it with trembling hands in triumph  
at the memory of a near six-year drawl  
prophesying over me: the grass  
would never be greener.

Known only by the glow of cheap cigars  
I tell you why I won't sing hymns.  
You tell me you were in love once.  
I ask myself how to know what it feels like  
and why time is a mechanism  
of middle grade clarity.

The spin and ache of hours draws truth  
from history, admissions staining the water  
in incantations of suffering. Nicotine  
behind my eyes, beneath my tongue  
like a rudder as I say to the sky  
I never wanted the grass.

I wanted what is now in front of me:  
tall trees casting silhouettes on black water.

## **GROWN UPS**

Do you remember when you were seven years old  
and you wore the pale blue t-shirt,  
the one with the pony on it?

When you skipped arm-in-arm with your best friend  
toward the swing set while classmates pushed  
and ran and threw wood chips?

In youth's soft round whisper you held no belief of betrayal,  
sharing secrets and selves like broken halves of crayons.

Now you wear practiced smiles at the grocery store,  
at church and for the neighbors,

wanting the man that loves you in bed each night  
to hold you like a surrogate mother,  
a canary of assurance in a wound that will not heal.

When you were a child, you could catch frogs  
and release them.

Now intimacy turns blue in the grip of a white-knuckled fist  
squeezing until the body falls limp,  
lifeless in your hands.



## LIMBO IS THE LARGEST CIRCLE

According to Dante, Aristotle lives in Limbo.

Not the dancing kind, not crouching low on roller skates  
to dip each ancient vertebra  
beneath a faux bamboo pole on a Saturday night  
in a roller rink smelling of popcorn and pixie sticks,

but the eternal kind, the space between  
that smells like another coat of fresh paint  
and decaying resolve.

All my life I've felt the fear

of being bound for no specific destination, barreling  
down any four-lane highway at dusk, slumped over  
in the back of my mother's green four-runner, sticky hands  
batting at my younger sister's stretched-out feet.

I learned to live in flux, suspended  
between duplex and cul de sac, the symphonic soundlessness  
of that six-bedroom in Memphis, the pigeon-hole apartment  
of liminal space in the Midwest suburbs.

Brought up between belongings,  
I quickly learned all roller rinks look the same.

## LUCY

We're watching the storm  
late summer, that redundant trait  
of time folding over into itself:  
the color of blackberries, the sting  
of hot tea, the collective memory  
of being bent backward  
over the self; we become lovable  
by tending every other wound,  
some visage of acceptance thrust  
from the hips  
of a conditional need.

we're hopeful, even so: late-learners  
riddled with realism, rendering rituals  
of reaching for a final revolution  
of identity, soil  
turned over in the garden:  
soliciting sympathies for something  
to hold us like mothers,  
for something to pour out  
a more palatable permission to love  
than the implicit bias of enough  
as we are.

I'm telling you (one more time)  
in the navy and the tall trees and the mist  
all those parts I still can't remember:  
lightning luminescent of that depth of fear,  
that paternal ache we both know  
know so well we hardly recognize  
the way it shakes the framework  
of personhood and sky.

## SPATIAL AWARENESS

My mother taught me how to cook mushrooms.

*Don't*

*crowd them*

she would say.

It's quiet in the still frame of air-conditioned mid-July,  
in the white-washed walls that smell like fresh paint,  
in the echoed hum of five-hundred unfurnished square feet.

While you sleep on a king-sized mattress in the next room  
I lay the mushrooms carefully in a pan, two inches apart  
so that they do not cry  
and become waterlogged and gray with proximity.

They sizzle to brown crisps and I wake you gingerly with coffee.  
We eat on the floor in the pale light of afternoon.

I cook rice that evening. My mother tried to teach me  
how to make each grain full and soft and intact,  
but I never listened, rushing ahead to a boil and now  
the grains are one misshapen ball of glue, burned black in the bottom of the pan  
and in the next room there is a mattress and a cup of cold coffee.

## AMBIVALENT GESTURES

Perhaps we are always hurtling our bodies toward  
the thing that will obliterate us, begging for love  
from the speeding passing of time, and so maybe,  
like the dog obedient at my heels, we can walk together  
peacefully, at least until the next truck comes.  
--Ada Limón, "The Leash"

It was raining the day we went to the coast. Early April. I just turned twenty-five and we walked with our hands stuffed into the pockets of our windbreakers, eyes squinting against the cold wet wind. I chased the tide out as far as the ocean pulled it and ran fast, back towards shore, squealing like a child as it rushed inland, nipping at the heels of my waterlogged tennis shoes. You stayed far from the water, kept your Blundstones as dry as possible and looked ahead, down the jagged stretch of beach. Like the tide, I nipped at the heels of your attention. I tried to make metaphors from the expanse of the ocean, cliches pleading for the presence of conversation.

The night before, we sat in Mason and Ronnie's hot tub in the backyard of the little A-frame tucked back off of Broadway one block from the wine bar you managed. Rain was a cold mist that clung to our hair and cheeks and eyelashes. You drank wine. I had a beer in hand. You sat on the opposite side of the hot tub, talking solely to Mason, your feet occasionally grazing my thigh on accident. I felt like an accessory, like I couldn't complain or make too much noise, so I listened and nodded, hyper aware of the formations on my face, hoping you found me beautiful enough to keep.

Each time I visited you I felt like I stepped off the airplane at the PDX airport and straight into the path of your orbit. At night when you worked I stayed in your bedroom, reading and writing, occasionally braving the unfamiliar streets to take the bus to Alberta and visit your brother's coffee shop or peruse overpriced vintage stores for jeans I would wear once to impress, or, at the least, not embarrass you.

Once, in January, you woke the morning after a fight and got dressed in a 4 a.m. haze to go watch the Liverpool game at the supporter's bar with your brother. I pretended to be asleep. I woke again at eight and you were still gone, the two-bedroom apartment empty except for me and your brother's wife, who was working from home. I was too nervous to make coffee for myself, feeling each visit like I had been double-booked in an Airbnb with people who were more suited for the space. I sat in your room and called my mother. I asked her what was wrong with me, recounting how I had snapped at you for saying, "If you tried a little harder [to look good] that wouldn't be a bad thing," recounting how I stubbornly made a pallet on the floor and refused to sleep in the bed with you, telling you I was sick of you thinking you were better than me. I only stayed on the floor for twenty minutes, then crawled into bed beside you, angry and hurt like a wet puppy.

There were moments we opened to each other and the world opened wide to us, like the night in late January when we walked to Safeway after dark and bought cheese and basil and beer. It was my second-to-last night in Portland before going back to Missouri for the spring semester and I had started to believe again we could do it. I put a Hot Wheels toy car in the shopping cart while you decided between brands of feta. When you discovered it lodged beneath the cherry tomatoes, you smiled. I laughed and moved to put it back but you said, "No. It's yours now," and after the cashier scanned it you handed it to me with a goofy grin. We were like kids. I loved you.

There are things that don't make sense, and then, there's what does. This is the salt still lingering in the wound of it all. In October you came back to Springfield to visit friends and family but stayed each night with me in my studio on Grant Street. My mattress still lived on the floor at that point. The space was a hodgepodge of found things, books with dog-eared pages and

a dozen burning candles to mask the musty smell ground into the red-painted, peeling floorboards. We were both spending so much money on flights that neither of us could afford much else. We smoked cigarettes on the roof one night. I laughed loud and hard and long. You asked me why and I said, with trepidation and a sort of bursting joy, "It's golden," like Frost's poem. I reiterated. "Nothing really stays," I said to you, "Maybe that's what makes it all golden."

What I meant but didn't tell you is that I knew by late September we wouldn't last forever, but I desperately wanted us to. What I was trying to say was please *don't go*, because I knew, at some point, you would.

You squeezed my arm, gazing out and beyond the internet cafe that sat off the alley behind my apartment. After a minute, you crawled in the window and onto the mattress. You pulled out your phone. I thought you were texting, but you were writing. You showed me the poem. The last line read, "She tells me it's golden."

On the beach, the cliffs began to give way to a road, then a restaurant that sat over a pocket of ocean connected to a lazy stream. Everything smelled of seaweed and brine; salt licked my lips and I came close to the edge of the water that pooled off the main shore. I doubled over and peered into the dissipating waves.

"Come look," I had said, but you wanted to head back towards the car. You were cold, brimming with a subtle hesitancy, an uneasy anticipation. You, like your lips on mine, never wanted to linger long. I have always been a slow learner and hard lover: folded forward and peering into pools of possible futures, wanting to absorb each moment with an insatiable, primal ferocity of need.

Your 2003 Subaru rattled in the visitor center parking lot, heat straining through the vents to warm our stiff, wet hands and noses. You were in the driver's seat, far from me. I could

always feel it when you started to drift. You asked what I thought about the professor Mason told us about the night before, the one who wrote a book about being in love with another woman while married. He and his wife got a divorce and he published the book shortly after.

You had asked Mason, “Is he with the other woman, now?” I had asked Mason, “Are he and his wife on good terms?”

You asked me what I thought of it. Would it be okay, you wondered, to love two people at once, to love the exterior person more, even, than your partner? My heart pounded and I gave an objective response. I tried not to clamp down on how desperately I wanted to know that I was enough for you. I tried on the hypotheticals from a variety of angles. You stared out the window and tapped your index finger to the bulge your tongue made when tucked beneath your lower lip. You did this when you were thinking, when you felt the anxiety of compulsory thoughts begin to shout into the presence of a moment.

Our hair wet and tangled with rain and ocean spray, we ate at an empty diner in a shopping center in Lincoln City. You had never tried oysters before, so I ordered some. I showed you how to eat them with lemon. We laughed tensely and you decided you liked oysters. Somehow, I believed then if I could be the one you were with the first time you tried oysters, maybe I could be the one you were always with, for the new things and the redundant moments and the milestones. I crossed my fingers with you, treading water in magical thinking as a means of making you stay.

Our last night together, we brushed our teeth in monotonous isolation, bickered in bed for an hour with our tongues spiced with the aftertaste of rum. You were tired, you had said. You didn’t want to talk about this. I told you it would be better to have the conversation in person

rather than over the phone or FaceTime, rather than letting it simmer for a month and a half until I was back for the summer. I cried. You rolled over and went to sleep.

The drive to the airport was burdened with static between us. I tried to explain how I was feeling to you, but we were both short on patience and time. Long-distance breeds a particular sort of pain in this way, never knowing which morning at the airport will be your last. I would be back in May, we had decided. I would live with you in Portland for the summer, finish up my degree in Missouri in the fall, and then move to Portland permanently that winter. We hugged briefly and you kissed me with an impersonal peck on the mouth. If I had known that was the last time we would see each other, I don't know what I would have done differently, with only a few minutes to try and set things right. I think some part of me knew then that we only had so much time left. We broke up over FaceTime three weeks later, your eyes watery and red through the screen as you said to me, "I hope I'm not wrong."

Two weeks after our break up I meet someone on Tinder and find in him all the extra space to live as a child does: without restraint or the inhibitions of self-consciousness. We're both reeling from heartbreak but are bent on riding roller coasters and taking shots of fernet to subvert the ache. For the better part of May we blow bubbles in the Target parking lot late at night and I squeal with laughter. Blondie plays on repeat through the Bluetooth speaker and I sing as loudly as I want. When he hugs me, he lifts me up for a moment in time, my body suspended in the most innocent form of care. I feel it. He sets me down gently. There is no force enacted, only play. My nerve endings no longer stand on end when I wear what feels comfortable, when I say bluntly exactly what I think. A body at rest. He laughs.

We keep the same Peach Pit album on his record player for the summer. I kiss his cheeks and nose and forehead with fervor, but remember the time you visited in March and I ran around



the corner of the kitchen into my bedroom, wanting to jump up into your arms. I thought you would catch me but I had startled you and you were frustrated. I am trying, now, to never act so self-contained as I did in the days following that moment with you.

The days after losing you fall hard on the heels of my subconscious and I stay busy. I avoid the quiet spaces where memories of us swell to a symphonic loneliness. I don't want to be sad anymore. I don't want to be angry anymore. Time ticks listlessly over the blue until suddenly it is the longest day of the year. I go to the river, mid-morning. I bring coffee in an off-kilter, off-white ceramic mug and cross my legs on an old quilt I spread on the pebbled banks by the water. There are kids playing about thirty feet from where I sit. I take out a legal pad and try to write, getting as far as the date. This would mark a year of loving you. Instead, we are several months removed and I sit by the water, missing you. I think of early August, the first time you kissed me here, our mouths sticky with red wine, mulled by the heat.

I think you are superficial and selfish. You think I am people-pleasing and don't know who I am. Both can be true. I have been trying to accept that some things cannot be fixed. What I cannot seem to write with clarity are the ways you hurt me. Sometimes the dissolution of love is a subtle, pervasive pain. Not atrocities, but ambiguities.

A young girl, no more than four, is wading knee-deep in the river, clunky goggles teetering on her forehead. She slogs through the water, eyes down in concentration, moving closer to the end of the bank where I am sitting. Dozens of minnows and small fish flit around her ankles; I can see them from yards away. She grabs at them with clumsy fingers, coming up from the river with fistfuls of water. She turns and yells in the direction of her mother, "I can't find any fish in here." I write all this down on my legal pad before packing up my things and heading back toward my car.

The next morning I am in one of my regular spots, a coffee shop downtown. I input our story as I see it into ChatGPT, hoping it will give me an answer as to what went wrong, feeling like a kid cracking open a fortune cookie in the hopes its generalizations will change my life for the better. It spits out truisms like, “Miscommunication was a fundamental issue in your relationship,” and offers me ten easy steps to getting over an ex. “I don’t want your advice,” I type. “I want you to help me.”

It apologizes and spits out ten ways to get over an ex, the wording altered slightly in an attempt to appeal to my understanding. I close the tab and pull out my legal pad. I write out the name of each month and break us into palatable pieces. I take us apart only to affirm some things cannot be put back together. As I write I am tense with the repression of my own melodrama. Everyone falls in love; I know this. Everyone, like me, has their heart broken at some point. I’m writing nothing new.

Still, I remember my body, doubled over in a forward fold, peering into the water that day on the coast. I looked for what felt like a long time, hoping to catch a glimpse of something astounding. Something, I think, I could show you that would make you want to stay. We put so much weight on our lovers, believing them altars on which to splay the sacrifice of our own dull brokenness. Hoping, I think, that their touch will offer absolution. Annie Dillard says our days are gods. I think we worship being in love and being loved in return, however shallow the pool.