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There is No Substitute for a Lifetime: A Study of Metaphor and Linguistic Autonomy in the Lives and Works of Selected American Poets

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ABSTRACT

THERE IS NO SUBSTITUTE FOR A LIFETIME:
A STUDY OF METAPHOR AND LINGUISTIC
AUTONOMY IN THE LIVES AND WORKS
OF SELECTED AMERICAN POETS

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Northern Illinois University, 2024
Dr. Betty J. Birner, Director

Metaphor is not only figurative language, but also a way of understanding reality and creating truth. This study describes how selected American poets, including Tom Andrews, Patti Smith, and Natasha Trethewey, engage the concept of creation through metaphor in their poetic and autobiographical writing. Theories of signification, symbolism, and metaphor as defined by philosophers of language, including George Lakoff, Charles Sanders Peirce, and Roman Jakobson, are combined with complementary theories from philosophers of poetry, including Wallace Stevens, Jorie Graham, and Federico García Lorca, and used as a lens through which to view the agency of the language user as a creator and manipulator of meaning. Metaphor is described as a tool of linguistic autonomy within a multi-dimensional model of meaning, which is, often explicitly, used by these contemporary American poets and memoirists to present authentic literary versions of their stories. The topic is explored in three styles of writing: an academic article, a manuscript of poetry, and a collection of short essays.
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A STUDY OF METAPHOR AND LINGUISTIC
AUTONOMY IN THE LIVES AND WORKS
OF SELECTED AMERICAN POETS

BY

RICHARD TONY THOMPSON
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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
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FOR THE DEGREE
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Doctoral Director:
Dr. Betty J. Birner
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Thank you to my committee: Dr. Birner, Dr. Newman, Dr. Einboden, and Dr. Bonomo.

Thank you to my family.
DEDICATION

for Jan Marie Kuntz
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Today an ice storm! What I wouldn’t give to walk out into the glittering field below my window. Each blade of grass, I imagine, is encased in a tiny vial of ice. Each twig and stem. Even a pile of dogshit is a glittering wonder. The branches of the elm and maple trees bend and creak with the sudden weight of ice. A few are bent so far that when the wind blows they sweep the ground, clattering icy brooms. Others snap and fall with sounds like explosions. I imagine stamping across a lawn or field in the snow boots, jumping up and down, the frozen grass and leaves breaking and cracking under my feet like fine china.

Tom Andrews, *Codeine Diary* (175)

Language is a sheet of ice that covers the world and transforms it into a manageably beautiful illusion.

The above selection from Tom Andrews’s 1998 memoir, *Codeine Diary*, maintains the italicized text of the original. The speaker is under the influence of a pain killer in the controlled environment of a hospital bed as he heals from a wound sustained in a minor fall. His blood doesn’t know how to stop bleeding, so it is medically forced to clot, an intravenous intervention. Meanwhile, the manufactured numbness of that moment between painful awareness and painless ignorance is captured by Andrews’s language, which translates his experience into a linguistic substitution for the reader to process and assimilate. The italics remind us: this is not real.

What separates the natural world and the cognitive mind of the language user will appear to be invisible if you don’t know how to recognize it. Imagine looking through a pane of glass in a window frame so large you can’t see the manufactured wooden sill where glass meets trim and the illusion is broken. Imagine looking into a mirror so distant and askew you can’t see your own
reflection to understand where the light ends and its refraction begins, where there is an image of your body that both confirms and contradicts the truth of you. Perhaps intelligence is a kind of hallucination that allows you to notice the fine sheen of frozen water that separates you from the world, and your instinctual desire to test the limits of reality by breaking up that illusion is evidence of your humanity.

The imagination is proof of our linguistic autonomy within a system of language that depends on social interaction. Successful communication is illusion management, and our ability to imagine a new reality via language is often our most accessible and effective tool for self-determination within the scope of our own individual linguistic and physical abilities.

Sometimes, you gotta go Godzilla on the fragile landscape to say what you mean.

This study is concerned with describing meaning as the result of a multi-dimensional interaction between the linguistic signs we use, the concepts they reference, the language users who intermediate between signs and concepts, and the temporal nature of the process of communication and interpretation. Metaphor is highlighted as an example of figurative language, which can be used in radical ways to amend literal meaning and create new meaning. The language of selected contemporary American poets is examined through the lens of their own linguistic autonomy. They exemplify how language users create meaning via metaphor, and they represent a shared awareness of their ability to artfully amend knowledge and describe the self.

In the field of linguistics, there has traditionally been a differentiation between semantic meaning and pragmatic meaning. The divide has been described as recognizing the difference between what is considered natural and non-natural meaning; between what is said and what is implicated; what is conventional and what is conversational; what is universal and what is particular; and between what depends on the truth and what does not. In a sense, metaphor is a
way to disrupt meaning by disrupting the truth. Metaphor is a way to express the pragmatic as if it were semantic, to insist that the figurative is literal, and to crack the metaphorical layer of ice that separates individual experience from societal insistence. That disruption, at least metaphorically, is a meaningful way for a language user to be reminded of their linguistic agency within the process of meaning-making.

It is not within the scope of this study to solve the mysteries of metaphor: what it is, how it works, or why it seems to be a very basic element of language itself – that one thing can stand for and mean something it is not. Instead, this approach is granular and recursive. The focus here is on the description of a very select group of contextual linguistic gestures that are not intended to be representative of language use in general. Instead, this approach is intended to be theoretical, illustrative, and symbolic. However, the curated and limited in scope, while not scientific, is often a meaningful place to dwell, especially as it relates to the understanding and communication of a physical and cognitive human embodiment that is not strictly quantifiable.

Chapter I presents an academic approach to the subject of metaphor as both a universal and specialized tool of linguistic communication and human creativity. A selective history of the nature of symbolism within the philosophical study of language is described. Radical types of creativity in language are differentiated from the standard. And a multi-dimensional model of meaning is proposed to illustrate the liquid nature of meaning in context, where the radical use of metaphor squarely resides. Meaning, after all, does not reside within the linguistic tokens we use to communicate, but within the living and bleeding minds and cognition of their human language users. The concept that meaning resides anywhere is itself just a metaphor insisted upon by a choice of words in the last two sentences. This metaphor or residency attempts to fix the nature of meaning to one spot, to give it a home, to define it and freeze it in place. While some meaning
may appear to be frozen in place, there is also a “rather slippery type of meaning, one that isn’t found in dictionaries and which may vary from context to context” (Birner 4). That type is considered figurative or pragmatic. A careful language user is mindful of the slippery nature of that icy blanket of language that covers reality rendered linguistic.

Chapter II presents a creative approach to the subject. The chapter constitutes a manuscript of poetry, and thereby slightly deviates in formatting to maintain the integrity of each poetic form, which is not governed by the conventions of documentation styles. Overall, the project intends to be a creative exploration of the relationship between metaphor and meaning within the context of how language users represent themselves and their stories through an intentional engagement with figurative language. Both philosophers and poets are in conversation in the creation of the theory presented by these poems. There is an intentional complication between subject and lens throughout, which does not ignore the existence of the author of this dissertation as a language user implicated in the theory of metaphor and linguistic agency proposed by the overall project. Nor does it ignore the agency of the reader. Instead of merely discussing the gap between language users, the author invites the reader to participate in the process of creating meaning in a linguistic literary transaction. Traditional and non-traditional poetic forms are presented in poetry that merges with prose and creative non-fiction, all while weaving together complementary philosophical perspectives.

Chapter III presents an essayistic approach to the subject that intends to pull together threads laid out by the previous chapters. The poetry and memoir of three contemporary American writers come into focus as primary literary subjects of the project: Tom Andrews, Patti Smith, and Natasha Trethewey. Their commonalities expose a pattern within their artistic linguistic products. All use metaphor to recontextualize an individual understanding of the self
and to amend or create the story of the self. As well, all express an explicit understanding of the power of metaphor to amend old and create new meaning within the context of a world that is structured to define you before you can define yourself. The curation and culmination of language from other philosophers and poets emerges as an example of the dynamic multidimensional interaction between language, meaning, the language user, and instance of utterance. The agency of the language user, especially relative to the curation of memory, is exposed as a part of our poetic and linguistic American tradition.

Contemporary linguists and cognitive psychologists have inspired this approach to thinking about the type of symbolism we refer to as novel or poetic, even radical, metaphor in language. Primary is the work of American linguist George Lakoff. His 1980 study *Metaphors We Live By*, written with Mark Johnson, provides compelling evidence “that the human conceptual system is metaphorically structured and defined” (12). We do not speak symbolically and metaphorically in a strictly arbitrary way, but we often conceive of entire concepts in terms of other concepts and choose our words accordingly. This approach places a substantial emphasis on how cognition determines the language we use. Not much value is given to how the language we use and choose might influence our cognition. Attending to the agency of the language user, we find evidence that linguistic choice also plays a role in how we conceptualize personal experiences and share them with other people in a valuable way.

The linguists Elena Semino and Gerard Steen have written extensively on the possibility of studying metaphor in literature. They take respectful exception to the overreach of Lakoff’s theory of conceptual metaphor: “this kind of cognitive approach provides profound insights into the relationship between metaphor in literature and metaphor in everyday language, [yet] it tends to underestimate the importance of totally novel metaphors, which cannot easily be accounted for
in terms of conventional patterns” (236-37). Instead of presuming the use of metaphor as a reaction to cognition and stopping there, Semino and Steen call for further research into “distinctive, idiosyncratic metaphorical patterns in a writer’s work, a single text, or part of a text” and how they relate to “an individual’s particular cognitive habits, goals, and worldview” (244). This project grew out of an inquiry into the role that metaphor plays (both in concept and in use) within the work of poets who have also written creative non-fiction works of memoir that combine their sensibilities as language users attuned both to documentary and aesthetic truth.

As to the varied forms of writing and voice represented in this study, it seemed at first irrelevant to the author of this dissertation to justify diversity of form within academic inquiry, especially considering the diverse tradition of American literature, philosophy, and the broader humanities. However, the writer Marilynne Robinson said the following of her own work in an interview with The New York Times, which was published within mere hours of the composition of the introductory remarks you are reading now. The timeliness of her words suggest that perhaps it does not go without saying that working slightly against the grain is enviable and meaningful scholarly and creative work, which is complementary to the thesis herein:

I think that my career has been against the grain. I have not chosen subjects or styles or anything that are characteristic of my generation of writers, and whatever else that does, it makes the point that you don’t have to go with the grain. People are much freer than they imagine. They will find much more latitude if they just use it. Talking to young writers, . . . what they have to realize is that they have a perspective that is theirs and need not be in some coercive relationship with what they take to be cultural expectation. (Robinson, qtd. in Marchese.)

Even a decision to speak from a coldly distant third-person point of view is a linguistic choice symbolic of the agency of the language user as carpenter working against the grain in a way to both meet and challenge the dynamic of the medium of presentation: the coercive relationship between oak tree and crosscut resulting in 2x4, crucifix, chair.
CHAPTER I

RADICAL METAPHOR, MULTI-DIMENSIONAL MEANING,
AND LINGUISTIC AUTONOMY

It seems a strange thing, when one comes to ponder over it, that a sign should leave its interpreter to supply a part of its meaning; but the explanation of the phenomenon lies in the fact that the entire universe,—not merely the universe of existents, but all that wider universe, embracing the universe of existents as a part, the universe which we are all accustomed to refer to as “the truth,”—that all this universe is perfused with signs, if it is not composed exclusively of signs.

Charles Sanders Peirce (Essential 394)

Introduction

The cognitive linguistics approach to metaphor as advanced by George Lakoff, et al., at the turn of the twenty-first century foregrounds how language is structured to relate entire concepts to each other metaphorically. This approach, however, disregards the agency of the language user. Whether they express it in thought, through standard communication, or within a composed linguistic gesture, language users can manage and express how they perceive of the world and their experiences. They are also able to express truth symbolically, to lie artfully, and to make authentic linguistic choices when translating experience into language.

This chapter describes some ways that metaphor fits within the symbolic nature of language, not as a specialized type of symbolism, but as the norm. All language is symbolic. All language is metaphoric. However, dynamically radical deviations from the norm are useful ways
to challenge accepted signification and create new meaning. What follows is a brief description of metaphor as it fits within the philosophical history of signification; normal metaphor is differentiated from radical metaphor; and a multi-dimensional model of meaning is proposed. That model is applied to the interpretation of sample metaphors to illustrate the agency of the language user, and to observe how metaphor is a tool of linguistic, therefore cognitive, creation.

Metaphor

Late in November 2020, Ocean Vuong, contemporary writer of poetry, fiction, and non-fiction, responded to a seemingly innocuous question from a follower on Instagram while self-reportedly walking to get a haircut. The question: “How do you make sure your metaphors have real depth?” His response started an adorably brief internet controversy amongst poets that lasted a few days; adorable, because how delightful is it that in the middle of an angst-ridden global pandemic, the literary world would find joy in nitpicking the idiosyncrasies of a poet’s off-the-cuff definition of a little understood yet omni-present rhetorical device?

Presented as white text against a gradient gray background, the post reads like a mildly punctuated poem itself: “metaphors should have two things: // sensory (visual, texture, sound, etc) connector / between origin image and the transforming / image // as well as // a clear logical connector between both images // if you have only one of either, best to forgoe [sic] the / metaphor. otherwise it will seem forced or read / like ‘writing’ if that makes sense.” A descriptive linguist might have kindly cautioned Vuong against his use of the word should and saved him a bit of a headache. Yet it was not only the prescriptivist nature of his proposal that set the internet atwitter.

When followers asked for examples, Vuong provided four instances of metaphor that all
use the word *like* to explicitly draw a connection between what he calls the “origin image” and the “transforming image.” Vuong offered “The road curves like a cat’s tail” as an example of “weak metaphor,” and countered with “Moss intensifies up the tree, like applause” as a “very ambitious metaphor.” Many people thought it wise to remind this award-winning writer and University of Massachusetts professor of the difference between simile and metaphor. Tradition presumes that a simile employs the word *like* or *as* to note a similarity between things, while a metaphor enforces a more exacting and existential *A is B* relationship of equivalency between things. Conventionally, a metaphor presumes not that *A* is separate but similar to *B*, as in a simile, but that the *A* thing is exactly *B* and, therefore, may be considered a symbol of and substitute for the *B* thing. The difference is that a simile is a marked version of this type of symbolism because the likeness is made explicit, while a metaphor suggests a more implicit likeness that borders on substitution or definition.

Other critics more carefully take issue with Vuong’s oversimplification of what a “deep”

1 The weak example is uncredited, a presumed straw man simile plucked from the ether by Vuong. The ambitious example, however, is credited to the poet Eduardo C. Corral. Vuong slightly misquotes the actual line, which reads exactly “moss on the trunk intensifies like applause” from Corral’s poem “Poem after Frida Kahlo’s *The Broken Column*” in his book *Slow Lightning* (24).

2 At the time of the kerfuffle Vuong was faculty at University of Massachusetts, but he joined New York University as tenured faculty in the Creative Writing Program in September of 2022. Regardless, he received a 2019 MacArthur “Genius” Grant; therefore, his Insta-bona-fides are well endowed (NYU).
metaphor should be. In an essay published online by *Oxford Review of Books*, Henry Woodland, a graduate student in literature at Oxford University, articulates what many poets were bothered by, which is that metaphor is a rhetorical device that resists simple definition; therefore, the should of it all is as troubling as the enumeration of two strict criteria for metaphorical goodness. Woodland wonders, though Voung’s “examples prove that some impactful metaphors track along a sensory-logical taxonomy, isn’t it equally possible for a poet to engage us with a comparison precisely because it defies a sense of order?” The suggestion is that a metaphor which draws a seemingly illogical likeness between disparate entities, whether a sensory image is engaged or not, might be considered significantly deep, i.e., meaningful, depending on the poet and the reader. Especially as metaphor is used to express personal truth, or to question the status quo, the rhetorical abandonment of sense and logic can be quite valuable, perhaps essential. Language that challenges the sense and logic of the language user is often a valuable way to encourage or demand a different point of view.

Woodland also questions the validity of the prescriptivist approach taken by Voung, especially considering his employment as a creative writing teacher at such an advanced level. “If the teaching of creative writing embodies a series of industry standards for the use of poetic techniques,” Woodland writes, “there would seem to be a grave risk of literary homogenisation.”³ To a linguist, the solution to this poetic kerfuffle is clear. Instead of asking

³ Speaking of *homogenisation*, Microsoft Word suggests correcting Woodland’s original British spelling with an *S* to the computer program’s American standardization of *homogenization* with a *Z*. To Woodland’s point, prescriptivist influences are real and relevant to all language users, not merely poets in expensive New England poetry classes.
how metaphors should be, simply ask how metaphors should be. Descriptive linguistic study is, of course, separate from the notion of two scholars debating the elements of metaphor that lead to notions of personal preference, which can then be equated with judgments like good or bad as they metaphorically align to notions of depth. As we will see, depth does not naturally signify quality. Linguists and poets have much in common in this respect: a desire to describe something as it is despite that something’s insistence that it is something else. Poets innovate and linguists accommodate, and so too do you. All language users innovate and accommodate.

Perhaps the question proposed might have been as simple as ‘What is metaphor?’ instead of the minefield that is “How do you make sure your metaphors have real depth?” This is a trap of an unanswerable question. So, what is a metaphor? Yes, a simple question philosophers and linguists and laypeople have been answering since the miraculous appearance of the Kubrickian-Barbie monolith (or insert another metaphor for the beginning of language). The Oxford English Dictionary [OED] provides the following etymology, which is a relevant way to understand what a word might mean by understanding what a word and its components have meant. The word metaphor comes to English as partially borrowed from both French and Latin, as derived from the Greek μετα-, or meta-, which is a prefix denoting change, transformation, permutation, or substitution, plus the word φορά, or phora, which has meant to carry, bring, or transport. The

4 Take denominalization, more casually known as verbing, for example, which is the phenomenon of nouns being used as verbs. It is not how a word has been used that unilaterally determines its meaning – or part of speech, for that matter – it is how a word is being used in its context that matters. In the sentence He enfant terrible’d gracefully, for example, the noun verbs quite easily (Clark 767).
gestalt of this derivation might be the idea of carrying, or containing, a change or transformation.

The OED definition of metaphor is provided as: “A figure of speech in which a name or descriptive word or phrase is transferred to an object or action different from, but analogous to, that to which it is literally applicable.” It is interesting to note that the OED foregrounds the idea of metaphor as a concept realized linguistically via language as a speech act, whether written, uttered, or simply thought. One linguistic sign is used for another sign, but the connection between the two appears murky as the OED notes the relationship is both differing and analogous. It is then inherent to the concept of metaphor that there exists a tension between the similarity and dissimilarity of the linguistic signs selected for comparison, and yet it is not only the signs themselves that are being compared and negotiated. The last bit of the OED definition gestures to the semantic content, or meaning, of the individual sign as “that to which it is literally applicable.” This bit is important because figurative language, as opposed to literal language, is not simply the substitution of one linguistic sign for another. It is not enough to pluck out one word or phrase and simply replace it with another at random. There must be a struggle or tension between the similarity and dissimilarity of meaning between the origin image and the transforming image. Note how the use of the word must in the preceding sentence illustrates how easy it is to become problematically prescriptivist while negotiating the meaning of metaphor. Too little tension would elicit conventional meaning, and too much tension would border on meaningless abstraction.

If we take Oxford’s authoritative word for it and conceive of metaphor as linguistic in nature, it is interesting to see how linguists have defined the term. The Oxford Concise Dictionary of Linguistics, compiled by Cambridge University linguistics professor emeritus P. H. Matthews, not surprisingly paraphrases the OED definition: “Figure of speech in which a word
or expression normally used of one kind of object, action, etc. is extended to another” (242).

Matthews’s simplified explanation makes two notable amendments to the OED definition. First, he more clearly marks the difference between a “word or expression” and its “object, action, etc.” The words, or linguistic signs, used to refer to objects are not the same as the objects themselves. The terms words and objects here are themselves helpful simplifications. One might think of metaphor as a helpful complication.

Symbolism

Linguistic symbolism and substitution are not limited to individual words and sensory objects within the world. Parts of words, entire phrases and clauses, or abstract guttural utterances and gestures to which we assign meaning, are constantly used to reference objects both physical and conceptual that may or may not exist in the real world itself or only within the discourse model of language users. “A discourse model,” as described by Johnson-Laird and Garnham, “is a mental object that constitutes an individual’s knowledge of a discourse” (371). A linguistic sign might reference an object in the real world, but it will always also reference an object in the discourse model, which makes the literality of a real-world object irrelevant.

The second notable amendment in Matthews’s definition is the deletion of literality, which is necessary when distinguishing between the linguistic sign and the object, whether concrete or conceptual, which it denotes. It is the absence of literality that makes metaphor possible. Literal meaning is a myth easily demystified by the simplest occurrence of figurative meaning; not all meaning is literal. More damning to the concept of literality is semantic change, or changes of meaning over time, often attributed to things like “figurative changes which involve a metaphor” (Matthews 359) and documented in linguistic scholarship reportedly dating
back to German philologist Karl Reisig’s lectures on semasiology published in 1839 (“Semantic Change”). It might be understood non-controversially that literal meanings change over time, but everything is controversial – precisely because meaning is evolutionary.

The philosophical linguistic theorizing of Ferdinand de Saussure, working at the turn of the 20th century, provides a useful illustration for how linguistic symbols are conventionally associated with the concepts they denote but not naturally, or literally, associated with them. First published three years after his death in 1913, Saussure’s *Cours de linguistique générale* interprets the relationship between the lexicon and conceptualized meaning. He describes the overall relationship between concept and “sound pattern,” a spoken or written lexical representation of that concept, as a “linguistic sign” that is made up of a signifier, the sound pattern or written form, and the signified, the concept represented (Saussure 66-67). The whole interaction is signification: a linguistic sign consists of the signification between the signifier and the signified. Saussure gives the example of the non-linguistic concept of what constitutes a tree in the human mind, i.e., the discourse model, and its relationship to the lexical unit *tree*. There is the word *tree*, and there is separately a cognitive iteration of the concept *tree*. Signification is bi-directional in that the concept of a tree signifies, for the native English speaker, the word *tree* just as much as the word *tree* signifies, or calls to mind, the concept of a tree.

Every linguistic sign, for Saussure, has two fundamental characteristics. First, “[t]he link between signal and signification is arbitrary” (67). The concept and the word are not inextricably linked in a natural way. While language is innate, the signifiers we use are often fungible, and perhaps arbitrary happenstance; they are social agreements between people that X (signifier) means Y (signified). Second, “the linguistic signal . . . has a temporal aspect” (69). While the signified concept exists as accessible as a construct within the discourse model, the signifier
exists within space and time as a spoken utterance or written word: “presented one after another; they form a chain” (70). Saussure’s idea of a temporal aspect might be better understood as the linear nature of spoken or written language, not to be confused with the time and place of utterance. Once uttered or written, signifiers present themselves in lines which constitute the context of compounded meaning. Theoretically, signifiers do not meaningfully exist within the process of signification absent of context. Literal meaning is, therefore, a non-natural social and mental construct that is open to interpretation and manipulation⁵.

Word and meaning are not the same entity. The signifier and the signified are not the same entity. Saussure’s work here presages a couple of significant theories relevant to meaning and metaphor that would emerge within the middle and late twentieth century. H. P. Grice takes pains to distinguish between what he terms “natural” and “nonnatural” meaning in his 1957 publication simply titled “Meaning.” In short, Grice differentiates meaning that can be understood as “natural” or factual in a way that is separate from the language used to express or understand the entity or concept a sign may signify. A basic example offered by Grice is that red spots on the skin mean, or signify, measles. The red bumps themselves are not measles, but a naturally occurring sign, or indication, of the fact that measles may be present. Even in this example of “natural” signification, the sign itself is not the same entity as what it signifies, but the correlation is naturally occurring outside of human language as a mediator of meaning (379).

⁵ The signifiers we use are fungible within reason. While meaning tends to evolve over time, it is not within reason to think that a word like moss will suddenly or even eventually come to mean something unrelated like applause. Linguistic substitution, however, is allowed within the rules of language, as if there is a grammatical rule that allows for metaphor.
In essence, Grice is separating linguistic meaning from non-linguistic meaning, which is part of why the differentiation makes sense but does not come without pain and nuance.

Grice briefly suggests that words are not signs because words are nonnatural. He writes, “some things which can mean\textsubscript{nn} something are not signs (e.g., words are not)” (379).\(^6\) His argument seems to be that words are not naturally occurring signs, but they can act as signs in a nonnatural kind of way. It’s a confusing argument because it slightly contradicts his nuanced understanding that even naturally occurring signs are not unequivocally equivalent\(^7\) to that which they signify. Remember in the example, red bumps are a natural sign for measles, but red bumps are not unequivocally equivalent to measles. Conceptualizing words as nonnatural "signs" can hold.

About a decade later, Grice published his seminal paper “Logic and Conversation,” which would greatly influence the linguistic study of meaning as it develops along a continuum of semantic and pragmatic understanding, which is epitomized by his ebullient differentiation between conventional and non-conventional meaning. Signification can be understood as natural and nonnatural, with linguistic signification as a subtype of the nonnatural. Grice helpfully conceptualizes what we mean when we differentiate between the literal and the non-literal. What we say and what we mean may be two different things entirely. The conventional meaning of an utterance may align with its “literal” meaning, but conventionality should not be misconstrued as a naturally occurring correlation. Grice’s Cooperative Principle, namely “Make your

\[\text{\textsubscript{nn}}\]

\(^6\) Grice uses the subscript “nn” at the end of the word mean to signal when he is referring to nonnatural meaning (“Meaning,” 378). It is his own nonnatural sign, one might say.

\(^7\) Consider the nuance of “not unequivocally equivalent.” Game on, Grice. Game – on.
conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged,” situates the interpretation of nonnatural meaning within a conversational discourse that is dynamic and relies only partially on the concept of literal-leaning or semantic signification (307). Dynamic discourse, whether conversational or literary, relies, often heavily, on the concept of figurative-leaning or pragmatic signification.

Saussure’s differentiation between the signifier (sign) and the signified (concept) foreshadows the theory of metaphor that would come to dominate the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Returning to the concept of defining metaphor, we see the influence of the idea of concept versus sign in a definition provided by the linguist David Crystal in his reference book *A Dictionary of Language*. He describes metaphor as a “semantic mapping from one conceptual domain to another, often using anomalous or deviant language” (215). Crystal’s definition is interesting not because it provides an encompassing and simplified account of metaphor, but because it so wholeheartedly relies on the idea of conceptual metaphor proposed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their 1980 book *Metaphors We Live By*.

In this highly influential book, Lakoff and Johnson claim “that metaphor is not just a matter of language” but “that the human conceptual system is metaphorically structured and defined” (12). It is an interdisciplinary way to think of metaphor as a conceptual process of cognition instead of simply as a rhetorical flourish of poetic language. They are not concerned with an occasional occurrence of an individual contextual metaphor, but instead with how entire concepts are expressed linguistically in terms of other concepts. Their argument is that metaphor exists independent of language; it is a process of the cognitive mind that permeates understanding in all ways. When they claim, “The essence of metaphor is understanding and
experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another,” they intentionally emphasize the process of the mind over the language used to represent that process (11). Instead, they theorize language use is guided by the conceptual metaphors we use to understand one thing in terms of another. Metaphor is directed from thought to language. They refer to the process of language being guided by conceptual metaphors as “the systematicity of metaphorical concepts.” “Because the metaphorical concept is systematic,” they propose, “the language we use to talk about that aspect of the concept is systematic” (7). That one-off metaphor you use to understand an emotion, for example, or explain an abstract concept, is a byproduct of the systemic process of language under the influence of cognition.

This is not to suggest Lakoff and Johnson are saying language use does not inspire understanding through metaphor, but instead to note they foreground the idea that “[t]he metaphorical structuring of concepts . . . is reflected in the lexicon of the language” (53). Specifically, as everyday use is concerned, it is easy to accept the idea that our lexical choices are guided by the shared conceptual understanding of an individual language, its culture, and even the immediate environment of speakers engaged in successful linguistic communication. As linguists and philosophers, Lakoff and Johnson seek to objectively describe language as it is used. As cognitive scientists, they seek to illustrate the link between the intrinsic processes of the mind and the arbitrary lexical tools humans employ in the extrinsic process of communication. A cognitive system that relies on metaphor requires the type of language Crystal referred to as anomalous or deviant; deviation is the standard means of communication. If deviation is standard, then the differentiation between literal meaning and figurative meaning is less important than we conventionally think it is. The difference between the literal and the figurative is helpful, to be sure, but, like the concept of literal truth, it is not necessarily vital to
understanding the nature of meaning.

Despite the perhaps outsized influence of conceptual metaphor as a way to conceive of symbolic representation as intrinsic to language, Lakoff and Johnson are far from alone in theorizing that linguistic signs are in part determined by cognitive processes that restrain the arbitrary nature of language. Linguists, psychologists, and philosophers of language like Grice, Johnson-Laird, and Saussure have been gesturing toward metaphors being directed from thought to language as a key component of communication for eons. Writing well before Lakoff and Johnson, John Searle proposes what he calls a “principle of expressibility” in his book *Speech Acts*; it is not a proposal of conceptual metaphor, but an illustration of directionality from thought to language. Searle suggests “that whatever can be meant can be said” (19). In other words, that which can be thought can be expressed in words. It is a simple idea to which Searle provides a couple of caveats. He clarifies that this “does not imply that it is always possible to find or invent a form of expression that will produce all the effects in hearers that one means to produce,” and also that this “does not imply that whatever can be said can be understood by others” (20). These two speaker-focused caveats effectively eliminate the hearer from the equation such that Searle nearly presents a one-dimensional schism of the transformation of thought into language. What this principle illustrates, however, is that speakers do possess the linguistic autonomy to compose language in whatever way it takes to say what is meant.

The utterance as symbolic representation of thought on the part of the speaker, in this framework, exists without regard for the language community. Interestingly, Searle also appears to discard (or maybe just elide) the importance of nonliteral meaning to language as a consequence of the principle of expressibility. He states that it “has the consequence that cases where the speaker does not say exactly what he means . . . are not theoretically essential to
linguistic communication” (20). Aesthetic philosopher Timothy Binkley takes Searle to task in a searing academic paper that responds to this apparent dismissal of the value of non-literal linguistic expression. In summary, Binkley argues “that the subordinate role given to various nonliteral types of expression cannot be defended without neglecting important and essential complexities of language as it is spoken and written today” (307). This may be a slight overreaction to Searle’s simple proposal that conventional meaning is always possible, accessible, and accomplishable (expressible!) despite the possibility of non-conventional meaning. Because of the thin wall that exists between the literal and the figurative, the differentiation might be valid but often irrelevant.

Dynamic Symbolism

A more multi-dimensional approach, a two-dimensional “bipolar” approach, to the correlation between thought and literal versus figurative types of language is presented by the great linguist and theorist Roman Jakobson in his 1956 paper “The Metaphoric and Metonymic Poles.” Jakobson cites a study of aphasia, speech disorders caused by brain damage, as evidence of the “bipolar structure of language” (44). To summarize, the brain processes linguistic terms that are contiguous (naturally correlated) in a different part of the brain than it processes terms that are noncontiguous; therefore, humans process metaphoric language in a physically different way than metonymic language. Jakobson theoretically links poetry to metaphor and prose to metonymy (41-47). This is another way to think about the idea of literal conventional meaning in contrast to non-literal unconventional meaning. While we may conceive of all language as symbolic, there is evidence to suggest, as Jakobson does, that the brain is naturally structured to process literal and figurative types of symbolic representation differently.
Like Lakoff and Johnson, Jakobson’s theory illustrates the importance of the cognitive processing of linguistic data as a vital part of the interpretation of linguistic meaning. Jakobson’s theory, however, does not rely as heavily on directionality as that of Lakoff and Johnson, who propose that metaphors “as linguistic expressions are possible precisely because there are metaphors in a person’s conceptual system” (12). The Lakoff camp says we can speak metaphorically because we conceive metaphorically, and that our words can be metaphorical because our minds are metaphorical. For Jakobson, the directionality or input versus output of linguistic data doesn’t necessarily matter. Input that is understood to be metonymic or contiguous will be interpreted literally, and output that is understood to be metonymic will be expressed literally. Input that is presumed metaphoric or noncontiguous will be interpreted figuratively, and output that is presumed metaphoric will be expressed figuratively. Exactly how or why we differentiate between contiguous and non-contiguous language is not Jakobson’s concern; his observation is that the brain differentiates and functions accordingly. There is a beautiful harmony to Jakobson’s theory, especially as it aligns to a bipolar understanding of the world: what you are as differentiated from what you are not. The fact that the theory of metaphoric and metonymic poles is supported by Jakobson’s scientific evidence is blissfully inspirational.

An emerging philosophy of the early twenty-first century is the enlightened realization that the seductive power of bipolar thinking is not to be trusted, or at least to be skeptically kept at arms-length lest we submit to its romantic dominion. Jakobson is onto something, but it doesn’t explain everything. Semantic change elicited by metaphor, for example, illustrates that there must be a continuum between the cognitive poles of metaphor and metonymy. Literary scholar Denis Donoghue published a virtuoso history of metaphor in 2014, which amounts to a veritable love letter to figurative language and begins with a summary of another scholar’s
influential thoughts on metaphor as a rhetorical device, especially as it relates to literature. The literary critic I. A. Richards, a champion for the close textual analysis of literature, writing in 1929, proposes a definition of metaphor as “a shift, a carrying over of a word from its normal use to a new one,” which complements definitions we have already examined (qtd. in Donoghue 1). This contribution to the definition of metaphor highlights the continuum between the literal and the figurative.

Richards provides useful terms of classification for the elements of a metaphorical proposition. Donoghue summarizes that a metaphor uses an unexpected word or concept, called the vehicle, in place of an expected word or concept, called the tenor: the “metaphor is the whole episode, tenor and vehicle together, the relation between the two” (1). Richards’s conceptualization of metaphor conveniently parallels Saussure's theory of signification. A metaphor proposes that one word, the tenor, can be understood in terms of another word, the unrelated vehicle. This classification of elements aligns nicely with Vuong’s casually referenced origin image [tenor] and transforming image [vehicle]. Don’t be misled by the use of the word word in this taxonomy of metaphor. As Lakoff and Johnson have shown, the size and definition of the linguistic entity is irrelevant to the phenomenon that is metaphor. Their theory is concerned broadly with swaths of language, while Richards seems more concerned with notable linguistic iterations of metaphor in discourse like literature. Lexical units come in all shapes and sizes.

Even though they are more concerned with the conceptual than the lexical, Lakoff and Johnson offer a similarly "bipedal” classification system for understanding metaphor. For example, the conceptual metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR is thought to be composed of two elements: the concept of war, the source domain, is used to understand the concept of argument,
the target domain (Lakoff 11, 221). To clarify, conceptual metaphor is more two-footed than it is two-poled. Lakoff and Johnson do not suggest that the source domain and target domain exist as opposing ends of a continuum. The source and target domains are more like the two elements that hold up the metaphor and allow it to walk about. Source and target domain engaged in metaphoric symbolism are always working together in all ways.

In light of the contrast between Richards’s focus on the linguistic signifier and Lakoff/Johnson’s focus on the conceptually signified, it is possible to see these two theories as subtypes of Gottlob Frege’s differentiation between sense and reference. Frege proposes that there are two ways a linguistic sign has meaning, which will seem quite familiar at this point of our discourse. In one way, a sign’s meaning might be “that to which the sign refers, which may be called the referent of the sign” (210). Frege connects the concept of a referent to the entity, whether tactile or theoretical, that would give a sign its truth-value. In another way, a sign’s meaning might be “the thought” or conceptualization of the sign. Because different signs with the same referent cannot be substituted without changing the sense of the meaning, Frege proposes that “the thought, accordingly, cannot be the referent of the sentence, but must rather be considered its sense” (215). What a sign refers to can at once be its reference, its sense, one or the other, or both. The relationship between the signifier and the signified is suddenly dynamic and anything but two-dimensional. Frege reminds us that there is more to meaning than just sign and referent, word and concept, name and thing. There is the lexical unit, the cognition of the language user, and the (whether tangible or conceptual or both) entity itself.

Often overlooked when contemplating ideas of linguistic symbolism and signification is the work of Charles Sanders Peirce, a philosopher and mathematician most well-known for explicating the concept of abductive reasoning, or “conjectures made on the basis of sufficient
similarity,” when most logical inquiry was primarily focused on deductive and inductive reasoning (Burch). Donoghue only makes cursory reference to the contributions of Peirce to semiotics and symbolism as they relate to metaphor, whereas Lakoff and Johnson do not mention him at all. Perhaps it is because Peirce is more associated with mathematics and logic than with linguistics proper; however, his theory of signs is as dynamic as that of Saussure and Frege, and it is just as relevant to how we conceptualize the symbolic nature of language.

Peirce’s theory of signs is tracked in detail by the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy [SEP] as in development from 1867 to 1910 (Atkin). Though he was working independently from Frege, there are many commonalities between the two theories. Stanford quotes Peirce as writing, “I define a sign as anything which is so determined by something else, called its Object, and so determines an effect upon a person, which effect I call its Interpretant, that the later is thereby mediately determined by the former.” The sign, the object, and the interpretant effect align near-harmoniously with Fregian notions of sign, reference, and sense; and also with Saussurian notions of sign, signifier, and signified. As Atkin notes for SEP, Peirce’s notable contribution is the idea “that signification is not a simple dyadic relationship between sign and object: a sign signifies only in being interpreted.” Language as a process, after all, does not exist outside of the mediation of the language user. Peirce's thesis provides a perfect set-up for the many theories linguists will formulate in the following century. He gestures toward a more dynamic model for conceptualized meaning, which is relevant to our discussion of defining and better understanding the dynamic (certainly not bipolar, bipedal, or dyadic) nature of what metaphor (a symbolic, figurative, nonliteral, nonconventional linguistic, maybe cognitive,
device) may be.

Radical Creativity

Let’s temporarily abandon dynamic models of linguistic meaning to contemplate two relevant and fascinatingly dyadic ways to consider metaphor as a linguistic phenomenon discussed by two of the most well-known and public-facing theoretical linguists working (as of this writing) around the turn of the twenty-first century. Noam Chomsky and Steven Pinker participated in individual discussions with Columbia University physics and mathematics professor Brian Green for his organization World Science Festival in September 2021. The topic of the discussion was “Thought, Metaphor, and Imagination,” and it was made available to the

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8 Peirce as quoted by the SEP in 2013 (Atkin) is cited verbatim; however, the SEP’s 1998 source from Indiana UP provides a slightly different spelling for the word latter and capitalization for the words Sign and Interpretant (Peirce, Essential 478). Upon further investigation, the SEP appears to be the outlier. A 1953 publication associated with Yale, which proclaims in an “Introductory Note” that “Peirce’s letters are published here without grammatical correction” matches the 1998 publication exactly (Lieb 29). However, whereas Yale has published Peirce’s letters unabridged, Indiana UP appears to have abridged the content. A copy of Peirce’s original letter to Lady Welby dated 23 December 1908 was not available for reference.

9 It is perhaps a dubious assumption that being alive with the ability to think equates to “working” when one’s area of specialization is theorizing. Consider this a less dense interpretation of what it means “to work.” It is a metaphoric manipulation, an extension of meaning: symbolic manipulation at work.
public free of charge on the festival’s website and uploaded to YouTube for public access, which is a refreshingly democratic way to amplify scholarly thought. This conversational and public mode of delivery may not yet be perceived to be as reputable as, say, an academic publication, but the content is nonetheless robust. Broadly, Chomsky and Greene discuss Chomsky’s notion that while language is a tool used for communication, language is primarily the instrument of human thought. Chomsky says that language is the root of human intelligence such that human intelligence and language are inextricable. Not everyone agrees with this theory. Greene subsequently interviews a linguist, Daniel Dor, and a cognitive scientist, Evelina Fedorenko, who collectively dismiss Chomsky’s proposal that human thought does not exist outside of our ability to understand and reason those thoughts in language (“Mind Your Language”).

The foundation of Chomsky’s theory of generative grammar is exemplified by his theory on human creativity, as alluded to in his early work from 1957. His book *Syntactic Structures* highlights the generative, i.e., creative, process of human language: “A finite state grammar is the simplest type of grammar which, with a finite amount of apparatus, can generate an infinite number of sentences” (24). A finite device, like an alphabet or vocal articulation system, can have infinite scope; it can generate an infinite number of sentences or utterances with an infinite amount of representative meanings. For Chomsky, language is the basis for human creativity, and he differentiates between two types. First, there is normal creativity, which is what we do every moment of our lives. All speech, whether externalized (in writing, vocalization, or a

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10 The medium of the message is noted here for the sake of solidifying its relevance as a subject of academic inquiry, which perhaps is not something that needs solidifying but makes an interesting point in its doing, the participation of Chomsky and Pinker notwithstanding.
language of signs) or internalized (as unspoken reasoned thought), is evidence of normal linguistic creativity. Linguistic innovation is unbounded despite a finite means of articulation, and as native speakers we engage this type of normal creativity without even thinking about it. Second, there is *radical creativity*, which is more intentional and to which we assign aesthetic value. These are the types of linguistic expression, like metaphor, that provide new insight into the nature of the world. Chomsky states we can only gesture at this type of creativity because we know virtually nothing about why or how it works.

Chomsky’s dyad of normal and radical creativity conveniently aligns to other bivalent notions of symbolic linguistic meaning, not limited to those mentioned here. Normal creativity is unmarked, subconscious, default, fixed, contiguous, relatively natural, prosaic, metonymic, mimetic. Radical creativity is marked, conscious, special, fluid, non-contiguous, defiantly non-natural, poetic, metaphoric, diegetic. Consider the contortions we go through as literary scholars, as writers, and as readers to differentiate between prose and poetry as if they do not exist on a continuum of linguistic artistry while also being entirely separate in terms of smell test and vibe check. How, then, to negotiate a more multi-dimensional theory of a system that produces so much evidence for its bipolar nature? Is there a continuum between the poles, or are the poles distinct?

Steven Pinker, in discussion with Greene, leans into a metaphor for metaphor that he explores in depth in his accessible tome on semantics, *The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window into Human Nature*. The metaphor for metaphor that Pinker hangs his hat on is the concept that a metaphor is a living entity, which means it can die. In conversation with Greene,

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11 *Wherefore art thou Beowulf?* Obviously, the issue is more complex than poetry vs. prose.
Pinker claims to disagree with Chomsky’s notion that language is the tool of thought; however, in his book’s chapter on metaphor, titled “The Metaphor Metaphor,” Pinker champions the idea of a Lakoff-inspired conceptual metaphor, which he calls the metaphor metaphor: “TO THINK IS TO GRASP A METAPHOR” (238)\(^\text{12}\).

Conceiving of all language as metaphorical and highlighting the symbolic relationship between metaphor and thought suggests that Pinker may agree with Chomsky more than he is willing to admit. The difference though is that Chomsky’s idea of normal creativity being in polar distinction to radical creativity allows for a continuum to exist between the two, while Pinker’s idea of the life and death of a metaphor does not allow for such a theoretical spectrum. There is no middle point between life and death, there is only life or death. Once not alive, a dead metaphor is dead; therefore, is it no longer a metaphor? This proposition is antithetical to the idea that all language is metaphorical. Pinker’s metaphor metaphor (all thought is metaphor) and his preferred metaphor for metaphor (most metaphors are dead) are slightly contradictory.

Even the review of Pinker’s book in The New York Times critiques how Pinker dwells on duality in The Stuff of Thought. The reviewer, William Saletan, writes, “There are two ways to look at anything. That’s what I learned from reading Steven Pinker. . . . That’s what makes him so edifying and infuriating to read: he sees duality everywhere.”

Linguists and philosophers, psychologists and scientists, those who conceive of

\(^{12}\) While Pinker’s dead metaphor is criticized here, there is much to recommend in The Stuff of Thought, not limited to his contemplation of literary metaphor as a semantic comparison that employs syntactic structures to exploit the incongruity and emotional layover from source to target (Pinker 261-64). I can’t help but wonder if Vuong is a fan of emotional syntax.
symbolism as a complex negotiation between word, concept, and meaning are certainly onto something, at least as far as appeasing those of us who prefer ontological models that resist binary either/or thinking. Encouraged by Peirce’s inspired – though slightly strange – concept of the interpretant effect as a dynamic model of symbolic interpretation, it is intriguing to ponder how an additional dimension of semantic modeling might alter how we perceive of metaphor as the locus of language and thought. The lifespan theory of metaphor should be abandoned as non-representative of how linguistic signs (whether at the morpheme, word, or phrase level) evolve.

The relationship between signifier and signified, reference and sense, might be modeled as a theoretical object with density, like a cloud or a Hoberman sphere. The more conventional or literal the relationship between word and concept is perceived to be by the language user (whether speaker or hearer), the denser the object, or meaning, may appear. The more unconventional or figurative the relationship between word and concept is perceived to be by the language user, the less dense the meaning may appear.

Density of meaning may be understood to either encourage or discourage symbolic interpretation. Denser, less open, meaning might encourage the literal and discourage the figurative, while less dense, more open, meaning might encourage the figurative and discourage the literal. The harmony of this configuration, however, falls into the same trap of the limiting two-dimensions of duality that quickly becomes a sticky wicket when confronted with the harsh reality of language in use. Interpretants – language users – are not static entities. A language user might be understood to stand in relationship to the object that is symbolic linguistic representation, but we cannot all be known to stand in the same place at the same time. What may be denser meaning for one language user might be less dense for another; therefore, what one sees as literal and conventional might be seen as figurative and non-conventional by another.
To borrow from Chomsky, let’s consider more dense and more fixed (not dead) meaning to be communicated by the normal type of creative language we engage subconsciously. And let’s consider less dense and less fixed (not living) meaning to be communicated by the radical type of creative meaning we engage intentionally. This model resists the idea that symbolic meaning can be easily divided into literal and figurative poles, and it highlights the agency of the language user to activate creative meaning through the intentional use of radical language.

Multi-Dimensional Meaning

The word, the concept, and the language user offer a three-dimensional way to conceptualize meaning as distinct and determined by instances of the three dimensions. But what about a fourth dimension, which might be a representation of time? Language, especially linguistic meaning, whether semantic or pragmatic, is itself not static. Conceptions of words change over time just as words for conceptions change over time, so the dense object of meaning may be understood to expand and contract over time. To say that language users are not static not only suggests that language users are different from each other, but also suggests that individual language users change over time. What a word or a concept means to an individual user may be different from one moment to the next. So just as the dense object of meaning might expand and contract over time, the position of the language user in relationship to the object may become more and less distant over time. If we consider linguistic symbolism to evolve over time concurrently with the evolution of language users over time, we may be on the cusp of a multi-dimensional understanding of meaning. Metaphor might be defined as $\text{Not } A = A, \text{ but } A = B$ and $A \neq B$. Metaphor is symbolic representation where the symbol does not represent itself but something else that it is not, for now.
Saussure’s definition of a sign as a means of linguistic signification is taken up by both Frege and Peirce, so the word *sign* is a useful representation of the lexical unit as a linguistic symbol in its varied manifestations. Lakoff and Johnson have successfully collapsed Frege’s differentiation between *sense* and *reference* into that thing, whether tactile or not, referred to as the cognitive concept. The word *concept* can be used to represent the entity in the discourse model to which the sign refers. Peirce’s *interpretant* makes explicit the contribution of the language user to both the composition and interpretation of language, and the word *language user* avoids unnecessarily differentiating between production and consumption. A fourth contributory factor of time might be represented as an instance of language use, whether that be utterance or reception, so the word *instance* might be a useful differentiation between an utterance yesterday, today, or tomorrow; at my place, your place, or at any other place. The purpose of this multi-dimensional model of meaning is to consider that any *instance* of language use determines meaning as much as the *language user*, the *sign*, and the *concept*.

Any linguistic token, especially those memorialized in writing, in aural and visual media, or simply in the mind . . . *any* linguistic token might represent multiple relevant *instances* of language use in one utterance. Consider the example of metaphor provided by Vuong from the poet Eduardo Corral: “moss on the trunk intensifies like applause” (Corral 25). The metaphor itself, MOSS IS APPLAUSE\(^\text{13}\), passes an unscientific smell test (and a quick Google search) for cliché, so it can easily be attributed to Corral as a creative iteration significantly unique to his

\(^{13}\) The visual likeness of the word *applause* to the word *applesauce* makes the metaphor even more mysterious and vexing. Malapropism be damned, *moss on the trunk intensifies like applesauce* is a compelling metaphor with an annoyingly pleasing rhyme.
poem. The instance of Corral’s utterance connotes an intention on his part to convey some essence of meaning to the reader and/or to himself. The elements of the metaphor, the tenor MOSS, and the vehicle APPLAUSE, as signs themselves each represent (are open to) multiple instances of language use for the speaker and the recipient. Those instances might include what each language user understands to be the literal definition of the sign, as well as instances of experience with each sign, whether accessible or not, to each user.

Lakoff and Johnson’s model for conceptual metaphor asks that we question whether the concept of MOSS overlaps with the concept of APPLAUSE. As of this writing, it is safe to say that their domains do not overlap significantly. Perhaps at some other time, or instance, of the metaphor, people will speak of MOSS as APPLAUSE with aplomb but now, no. This is a radical metaphor. Its meaning is not dense. It is a Hoberman sphere stretched out, a cloud presenting itself to the atmosphere, welcoming to birds and airplanes and transformation. So, what is the purpose of the radical metaphor? What does it mean? Theoretically, the purpose of a radical metaphor might be that it can have many different meanings; not that it necessarily has even one. A radical metaphor might be meaningful or feel appropriate to the poet as language user, and the reader might be able to contextualize it within the discourse of the poem or within the context of that language user’s experience, but neither instance is necessarily literal or accessible or falsifiable or relevant. Symbolic language that challenges the literal meaning of a sign or a concept due to the agency of the language user is an instance of a radical metaphor. Beware, however, of thinking that radical metaphor is a different phenomenon than literal symbolic meaning. Time waits for no metaphor.

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Radical Metaphor

Outside of the context of Corral’s poem, “moss on the trunk intensifies like applause” is a relatively simple example of metaphor, or simile if you must. Let’s consider a more complex example of radical metaphor and explore how it engages multiple instances of meaning to communicate itself. Winner of the Iowa Poetry Prize, and published in 1994, Tom Andrews’s book *The Hemophiliac’s Motorcycle* contains a 4-line, 31-word (not including the title) Ars Poetica poem, which is titled “Ars Poetica.” The Poetry Foundation defines an Ars Poetica type of poem as one “that explains the ‘art of poetry,’ or a meditation on poetry using the form and techniques of a poem.” It is, often but not always, a poem that speaks to a particular poet’s personal style and theory of poetry, whether it does so explicitly or only figuratively. In the modern tradition, simply titling a poem “Ars Poetica” is the only hint a poet will give that they are writing broadly about the idea of poetry even in the most abstract or metaphorical way.

The first line of Andrews’s poem reads: “The dead drag a grappling hook for the living” (14). It is a simple declarative sentence presented in canonical Subject-Verb-Object word order for Modern English. The subject noun phrase, *the dead*, acts out the verb phrase, *drag*, upon the direct object noun phrase, *a grappling hook*, for the indirect object noun phrase, *the living*. The dead do not drag anything, let alone whatever “a grappling hook” is, so the usage is radical and perhaps metaphorical. Andrews does not provide an easily defined structure to the metaphor. Each lexical unit, or sign, within the clause might be a tenor without a vehicle, a source domain without a target. That does not make the metaphor any less meaningful, but it is perhaps a bit more radical. Let’s take Andrews at his word and assume he is speaking of the relationship between the dead and the living. To a contemporary reader, the concept of people who are living
or dead may be considered as easy to comprehend within the poetic realm as the simple act of
dragging something. The dead dragging something for the living is interesting but perhaps not
much of a poetic stretch.

Considering Andrews was a young American poet of the very late twentieth century,
what stands out in this first line is his agency as a poet, his authorly choice of the term grappling
hook. The metaphor seems to be GRAPPLING HOOK IS X. Often a fruitless and besides-the-
point endeavor: solve for X. An investigation into instances of the word’s meaning, history, and
usage may provide nominal insight into the literary effect caused by Andrews’s mildly
anachronistic choice; however, such an investigation also curiously illustrates how attention to
instance of use exposes the multi-dimensional nature of meaning.

A quick search for grappling hook in the online Oxford English Dictionary [OED]
immediately redirects to the entry for the noun grappling, which is defined as the action of the
verb grapple. Instead of following that additional redirect, the term grappling hook can be found
under grappling as a compound noun that is noted as the equivalent of the noun grapnel. How
quickly a dip into the OED makes the seemingly anachronistic even more so. A definition for
grappling hook is not given outside of its equivalency to grapnel, but two literary examples from
the 1600’s are provided as allusion to the historical use of grappling hook.

A historian of language and literature, Charlotte Brewer details the history of the use of
literary quotations in the OED in a fascinating article for The Review of English Studies. She
details how the lexicographer Samuel Johnson used literary examples in his 1755 A Dictionary of
the English Language, which predates the OED. Brewer notes how “this might tempt a
linguistically inclined reader\textsuperscript{14} to assume that Johnson was seeking empirical evidence of usage in order to justify his inferences of what a word meant” but they “would be (at least in part) mistaken.” Instead, Johnson is documented to have claimed the literary examples would not only illustrate the usage of a word, but also “provide aesthetic pleasure on the one hand, and moral, political and religious instruction on the other” (Brewer 97). Was Johnson’s purpose definition or some spiritual \textit{Ars Poetica} of his own?

The first-edition OED lexicographers maintain the tradition but profess a more scientific explanation for why, which should come as no surprise from that post-enlightenment bunch of blokes. According to Brewer, they claimed that “their quotations were the primary linguistic data, or ‘raw material’ . . . for their dictionary” (101). Brewer’s investigation is vast, and these details are mentioned here both for their historical importance, but also because gleaning meaning from a subset of literary samples, or instances of use, should be approached with an appropriate amount of skepticism mixed with intrigue. The context in which a word has been used may at once allude to and also have nothing to do with the context in which it is being used; however, the process of meaning-making through radical creativity requires additional intellectual effort. As well, an examination of literary and linguistic tradition is an interpretive substitute, but not a replacement, for the intentions of Andrews or the experience of his reader. As Rihanna sings for DJ Calvin Harris, “Baby, this is what you came for” (Harris)\textsuperscript{15}.

\textsuperscript{14} Ahem.

\textsuperscript{15} What you came for is an explication of the belabored process of illustrating how symbolic meaning activates and allows for the varied possibilities initiated by the linguistic choices of the
The OED references a line written by the poet Michael Drayton in 1622: “In Hulkes with grappling hooks, to hunt the dreadfull Whall.” The context here suggests a *grappling hook* is a tool used for hunting “Whall.” The word *whall* is presumably an equivalent of *whale*, but that trivia does not detract from the notion that a *grappling hook* has been meant as a tool for the hunt. In this sense, Andrews’s dead are hunting the living. **GRAPPLING HOOK IS A TOOL FOR HUNTING**. The second literary reference provided is to a line written by “Church of England clergyman and historian” Peter Heylyn in 1625: “We are indebted..for grappling-hookes to Anacharsis.” This literary example is profoundly unhelpful to the layman who does not click through to learn more on the author and the text. The most useful textual clue here may be that “grappling-hookes” were a thing of value, something to be grateful for. Andrews’s dead are hunting the living with a valued tool. Note also, there is minimal complementary moral, political, and religious instruction; this is “raw material,” after all. Following the OED’s guidance to the equivalent entry for *grapnel* is necessary for more definition, history, and context.

As a synonym for *grappling hook*, the OED provides more substantial details for the *grapnel* entry. Three non-obsolete definitions are provided for *grapnel*. In summary: “An instrument with iron claws intended to be thrown by a rope for the purpose of seizing and language user. The Rihanna lyric is an example of language that does not actively engage metaphor on first sight, which is not so say it is not symbolic. The word *baby* is open to metaphorical signification; it’s most likely not literal, but there is not enough information in the context. The demonstrative word *this* and the pronoun *you* require context for meaning. As an example of metaphor, the lyric lacks the density required for satisfying interpretation.

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16 Symbolic, but not conceptual and not radical.
holding an object;” “A small anchor with three or more flukes, used esp. for boats, and for securing a balloon on its descent;” and “A name for various implements for grasping or clutching.” The third definition is the most generic but gives the broadest sense of what a grappling hook, or grapnel, does; it grasps, clutches. GRAPPLING HOOK IS A VALUABLE TOOL FOR CLUTCHING. The second definition provides more context for use in that the grapnel is meant as the anchor for a boat, for example. In this context, the grapnel is not so much a tool of the hunt as it is a tool of affixation. An anchor secures and figuratively grounds the boat at sea. Could Andrews’s dead be anchoring or securing the living in some way? The first, assumed to be the most relevant, definition for grapnel returns the tool to the hunt as a means of capturing something desired. This grapnel has claws that are extended beyond the body’s ability with a rope for the purpose of seizure, holding. Andrews’s dead are reaching out beyond their intimate ability and capturing the living in some way.

The etymology for the English grapnel provided by the OED is from “Anglo-Norman *grapenel, diminutive of grapon, of the same meaning; compare modern French grapin, grappin.” This suggests that the English word derived from the Anglo-Norman word, and that it is a relative of but not derived from the French. In The Origins and Development of the English Language, Algeo and Butcher document the connection between the language of the Normans, or “Northmen” of Denmark, Norway, and Iceland, and the languages of England and France during the Middle English period. In 1066, “[t]he Normans conquered England, replacing the native English nobility with Anglo-Normans and introducing Norman French as the language of government in England” (121). They note that it was the “Norman French dialect spoken by the invaders” that “developed in England into Anglo-Norman” (123).

When the OED states that grapnel derived from the Anglo-Norman word *grapenel, it is
as if the men of the North brought their linguistic grappling hooks figuratively with them on their invading ships, but also quite possibly literally. It is easy to imagine that the word presented as *grapnel* would eventually become pronounced as */grapnəl/* and spelled as *grapnel* through the process of elision, which is the “loss of sounds . . . due to lack of stress” (32). Even without direct knowledge of how native Anglo-Norman speakers would have pronounced the word *grapnel*, it is understandable to deduce that the now-missing second vowel, the first *e* in the word, was an unstressed vowel. What meandering hath Andrews wrought? There is a sense of evolution and journey that the dead must endure with their dragging whatsits for the living.

Notable literary examples provided by the OED for *grapnel* in lieu of *grappling hook* include a line from Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Legend Good Women*, written circa 1385 and well within Anglo-Norman influence: “In goth the grapnel so ful of crokes.” This context suggests perhaps the efficacy of the *grapnel* as a tool. Andrews’s dead might be quite successful at capturing the living due to the ability of the grappling hook to produce a desired result. One particularly poetic example, noted by the OED as “figurative and in extended use,” is from a literary work composed well after an immediate Anglo-Norman influence, and yet well within its seafaring sway. In 1851’s *Moby-Dick*, Herman Melville writes: “With anxious grapnels I had sounded my pocket.” In this context, the hand of the speaker becomes a metaphorical grappling hook within the speaker’s pocket. Outside of the context provided by the OED, and within the context of *Moby-Dick*, “Chapter 2,” Melville elaborates that the metaphorical hand-grapnel of Ishmael is, in fact, ineffective: “With anxious grapnels I had sounded my pocket, and only brought up a few pieces of silver.” Melville’s word *only* by analogy inhibits Andrews’s dead in the translation of meaning from *grapnel* to *grappling hook*. Perhaps that is why the dead “drag” the grapnel instead of throwing it; they are mournfully poor at catching the living (Melville). Or, perhaps,
GRAPPLING HOOK IS A HAND. As in, take my hand and I’ll show you the way.

The most recent, 5th edition, of *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* from 2018 – consulted in print form – provides no entry, not even a redirect, for the term *grappling hook*. There is however, adorned with a full-color marginal illustration, a definition with etymology for *grapnel*: “A small anchor with three or more flukes, especially one used for anchoring a small vessel.” What is a fluke? Without going down an OED rabbit hole, *flukes* are most certainly iron claws, or a poor man’s fingers. Either way. What is interesting here is that the American Heritage definition does not expose the reader to the possibility of the grapnel as a tool or a weapon. GRAPPLING HOOK IS AN ANCHOR. Andrews’s dead are weighed down, anchored for the living. The dead are moored and dragging this weight for (the benefit of?) the living. The living should be thankful for the dead’s steadfastness, patience, and endurance. The small, small vessel that is “the dead.”

This has been an extended illustration of the complicated nature of radical metaphor, and how it requires the language user to consider more than one instance of signification. The meaning of Andrews’s line “The dead drag a grappling hook for the living” with its metaphor *GRAPPLING HOOK IS X* is not accessible in a dictionary, and it certainly cannot be mapped from one domain to another. Instead, it is an example of the agency that symbolism, even in its most basic form, grants to the language user as a tool for accessing, amending, and creating meaning.

Conclusion

As it pertains to our understanding of metaphor, this model of multi-dimensional meaning is intended only to highlight the contribution of the language user to a cognitive system
that has been illustrated as metaphorically structured. Lakoff and Johnson’s idea of conceptual metaphor determining language choice can withstand, and perhaps be complemented by, the idea that language users have the autonomy to amend cognitive thought by using language like radical metaphor. Our ability to metaphor radically is evidence of our linguistic agency over meaning. Linguistic agency might be restricted by the conceptual metaphors that guide normal creativity, but radical creativity ensures that literal meaning is never unalterably fixed, or dead, or literal. The status quo of conceptual metaphor must accommodate the instance of a radical minded language user’s ability to craft language using signs that challenge even the most literal concept.
CHAPTER II

SUBSTITUTE FOR A LIFETIME

POEMS
PART I

MEANING

By dint of constructing, . . . I truly believe that I have constructed myself. . . . To construct oneself, to know oneself—are these two distinct acts or not?

Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous*
Reading Wallace Stevens for Meaning

I

When suddenly that modern poet is on a new stage in a strange theater with lines not yet memorized, the quickest way to comfort may be the familiar syntax of the dialogue, the way new words take the shape of old words in the mouth and make sounds sufficient for an audience willing to work in direct proportion to the price of admission.

II

In the best light, we are strangers able to make a connection without touching. In the worst, it is a darkness that forces an actor to reach forward with arms and legs bent like a tall newborn creature learning to walk even before it knows the word mother or the meaning of love. When the curtain falls we are new beasts applauding.

III

When the world doesn’t make sense, it’s a comfort to recite language you know, to feel protected by the old songs you rehearsed. But to make a new world requires attempts and failures with new words to make the audience lean in as if understanding a whisper from the darkest corner of the stage means a new life.
Reading Tom Andrews for Meaning

I

The sweet juice of a Braeburn apple
mixes with the salty pink blood
on young Ferdinand de Saussure’s lip
as he confuses the tree
he’s falling from
    with the word *mother*.

As her voice reaches his ear,
a holler from the porch,
he wonders how she ran so fast,
the green ruffles of her apron
slapping against her arms – broken
    at the elbow and shoulder.

Maybe it was a Harrow Sweet pear.
I should have said that. Braeburn means
harm. Harrow Sweet makes the blood
taste like mischief
    instead of eternity.

II

What does it mean that this poem is about a poet many people have not heard of? We played the *Family Feud* board game after Thanksgiving dinner last year. “Name a famous American Poet.”
Top 5 answers on the board: Poe, Angelou, Frost, Whitman, Seuss (not Diane).

The poetry of Tom Andrews is a bridge between some twentieth century modern American
confessional poets and other postmodern poets of the twenty-first century who value authenticity
of voice and identity unveiled. I do not know which to prefer, but Andrews kind of did both in
his work. His writing also carries on the tradition of a poetic concern with language that explores
the gap between our words and the world without hiring a contractor to fill it with cement.

III

Wallace Stevens leaves a jar
under an apple or pear tree
in Geneva,
and the meaning of *mother*
    bends a wounded branch.
Reading Patti Smith for Meaning

I

Celebrity is a one-way mirror. You can witness her but she can’t see you. The body ages in private, its image in stasis between mirror and window. The performance of life double-bound; one song on this side, another on that.

There is the natural world, and there is the non-natural world. Save her a seat next to Sarah Jessica Parker at the Met Gala; comp her a Fendi bag. That lipstick is a symbol of her dire upbringing; that red means mother.

II

This world is man-made. Where has the natural world gone? Natural signification is an endangered species, and endangered species is a poetic cliché so why bother with the metaphor? She’s endangered and it makes her feel non-conventional tonight. Torn coat, gown by Christian Siriano, the concrete under her old boots, a wild west punk rock headstone that un-tells these lies and mocks this fakery. Or used to—before the cowgirls left us.

III

A dead linguist like Grice in a poem says, ‘throwing bottles at the band means disrespect but they can take it.’
Reading Natasha Trethewey for Meaning

I

After 5 seconds you can skip the ad
that plays before the YouTube video
Anne Sexton reads “The Truth The Dead Know”—
Tonight, it is an ad for a pop rock band
touring this summer.

There is no ad
that plays before the YouTube video
Anne Sexton reading her poem “The Truth The Dead Know”—
Tonight, there is an ad for an online
bookstore immediately after the word
knucklebone.

You can skip it after 4 seconds.
Already the words are changing.

II

The human conceptual system is metaphorically structured and defined,
according to a couple of American philosophers in the 1980’s.

The evidence suggests that we understand entire concepts metaphorically
in terms of other concepts and use language according to those metaphors.

And yet, I can think of life and death in terms of Anne Sexton
just walking the fuck away from a funeral to have sex immediately.

III

Sexton did not idolize the dead,
and yet her death is idolized.
Conceptual metaphor binds us.

Trauma is a wound
we are not bound by.
The living are wounded by the dead.

And the living poets all around us, all around us,
remove the dressing, undo that metaphor,
and speak a healing the words are already changing.
Reading *The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Poetry* for Meaning

“If the referent of a sign is an object perceivable by the sense, my conception of it is an internal image, arising from memories of sense impressions which I have had and activities, both internal and external, which I have performed.”

Gottlob Frege, *Sense and Reference*

Dark I

Darkness can be seen but not touched.
You know it’s there. You close your eyes and see its reflection. You know that darkness will slowly reveal an image of the world you remember: a photograph of the life a biological reaction in your brain insists is real. *In a dark time, the eye begins to see.*

Dark II

*Pain comes from the darkness / And we call it wisdom. It is pain.* We have no choice but to map the dark corners of the world with the words we have. My blind grandmother had her house memorized, so she walked every step twice. Her physical body was with us as she navigated rooms in her wisdom.

Dark III

And yet, the stillness of the darkness itself is a comfort, you remember its quiet hand carrying the weight of your luggage. You remember *stasis in darkness* but not what it means. You remember the colors that come, and the light. There is a movement, louder and louder. It might be the world is not there.

You know it is not the darkness that binds you, but the name you give it out of context.
Marginal Notes for *Codeine Diary* (I)

Resist the urge to read meaning into things that relate to you. Are varied iterations of the same incident one thing or two? Endurance is melody: music, song, verse, lyric, life. The self is separate from the world.

Mystery is essential to metaphor, poetry, meaning, and life. Meaning requires context, reflection, and symbolism. Metaphor doesn’t last or it stops being metaphor. Memory seeks identity, an authentic double.

Linguistic transformation is substitution and identity. Does memoir mythologize or demythologize? Incongruity challenges meaning. Identity is a choice.

A poem can be a clarification, an anti-abstraction. Language is a transformation of the real. Can quiet be understood? Meaning is a pattern.

On wordlessness: language is a sin. Echo is another version of X. Pain changes time. Pain is faith.

Name things to understand them. Identity is a part of the whole. To witness is to tell a story. Awe is meaningful.

Meaningful grunts and groans. Transubstantiation. Wounds. Ha!
Marginal Notes for *Codeine Diary* (II)

The world is too big.
   A list of words is not a poem but a poem is a list of words.
   Language outlives us.
   X = escape.

Seeing (noun) patterns (verb).
   Are thoughts knowledge?
   Are thoughts language?
   X blurs into Y, the art of dying.

Asynchrony.
   Pain questions reality.
   Documented memory.
   Repetition is pain.

We speak because living is not enough.
   Truth and belief come from practice.
   Death is absence from presence.
   Vertigo.

Reality is silent, and truth is spoken.
   Are there words for things we can’t explain?
   Unalterable reality and alterable truth.
   Why explain when you can describe?

Pattern of life.
   Patterns of randomness.
   Likeness where there should be none.
   Metaphor is intentional defiance.

God is jealous.
God is only God.
Jesus is Jesus and God.
Unification.
Marginal Notes for *Just Kids* (I)

Questions

Is androgyny beauty?
Is being seen being touched?
Is criminality freedom?
Is death a transformation?
Is evolution revolution?
Is familiarity a pattern?
Is graffiti desecration or remembrance?
Is hustling for pleasure still hustling?
Is imagination access to heaven?
Is Jesus a metaphor?
Is *kid* a metaphor?
Is life a labyrinth, an odyssey, or an epic?
Is memory a linguistic choice?
Is no apology no sorrow?
Is one the other?
Is poetry performance?
Is questioning rebellion?
Is re-binding the unbound a transformation?
Is sex an art or a currency or both?
Is time alone freedom?
Is universal language music?
Is vagabond an identity?
Is writing a place of religious ritual?
Is X escape?
Is youth a nakedness?
Is zero an absence or a presence?
Marginal Notes for *Just Kids* (II)

Answers

Art means burden and transcendence.
Body means truth and canvas.
Cowboy means mouth and law pretending to be outlaw.
Duality means Woodstock and Manson.
External means internal and reflection.
Fusion means lyrical and musical.
Gay means grand, masculine, and noble.
Home means haven and prison.
Idealism means inaction.
Just means only, barely, recently, exactly, and moral.
Kid means you.
Language means survival.
Musician means fugitive, animal, savior, storyteller, poet, and artist.
No . . . means accepting change.
One means together.
Pretending means being.
Quiet means bondage, binding, and bound.
Rimbaud means language can be a mystery without a solution.
Symmetry means comfort.
Tears mean apocalypse.
Union means eternal and not eternal.
Volume means existence.
Warhol means art and commerce; and elusive creature.
X means escape.
Yes . . . means surrender.
Zero means the presence of absence.
Marginal Notes for *Memorial Drive*

1

Language preserves and curates memory.
*Language limits and assigns meaning.*

Language is a rehearsal.
*Language is an actuality.*

Language alters reality.
*Language is real.*

Language defines and constrains.
*Language outlines and suggests.*

Language transforms knowledge.
*Language represents knowledge transformed.*

Language is a choice, and memory is a choice.
*Language is a burden, and memory is a burden.*

A story is a memory in language.
*A story is a new instance of language.*

2

Memory is a mythology in words.

Memory is a darkness.

Memory is a loop.

Memory is a story of truth.

Memory is the rehearsal of a story.

Memory becomes story becomes knowledge.

Memory (noun) documents (verb).
Search for meaning,
find meaning
in dissimilarity, and defy meaning.
Even irrational meaning
is meaningful,
precision is meaningful,
and getting it right is meaningful.
Silence means
something is unknown and the unknown is meaningful.
Meaning
is power. Personal meaning
is personal power. Meaning
changes. Look for meaning
in the meaningless
and give it meaning.

Choose to recontextualize and amend.

It is before, inside, after, and looking back.
It is making one thing more than one.
It is a method of understanding.
It is running away and toward.
It is being two things at once.
It is a way to make meaning.
It is remembering in writing.
It is a document of the self.
It is a way of knowing.
It is a second naming.

It is controlling your readability.
There might have been an air conditioning unit built into the wall of the apartment, but it wouldn’t have been turned on. We had never been trained to control our environment. Years later, when I had my own apartment with an A/C unit, I never turned it on. I just assumed it would make the electric bill too expensive, but also, I just didn’t really care. I wasn’t home that much, and I knew how to run a fan.

I remember there were tall pine trees across the front lawn, so the sun wasn’t a problem. The sliding glass door was probably open, and a window cranked a few inches out in the large bedroom, but I don’t know about a breeze. It was a small place. Maybe the air was sticky, but it didn’t matter. It was Sunday. My sister had a baby at the beginning of July, and I would be back at school in a couple of weeks, so I went to stay with her for the weekend. She had MTV, so we could watch the Woodstock ’94 coverage. I don’t think there was MTV at my mom’s apartment. Maybe there was. Anyway, I could maybe watch the baby while she napped, and we could play Yahtzee or something. I wish I remembered what we ate for dinner, or if she smiled much that day. I hated that she moved out of the house to live with her goofy husband, but I couldn’t blame her because I kind of wanted to leave too. My home kept changing. But whatever.

In August of ’94, I was 16 and she was 21.
I can’t remember how I bought CDs when I was a teenager. I didn’t have a
job, and I don’t think I stole them. I’d probably remember that. Stores
were serious about music security in the mid-’90s, so that wasn’t it.
Wikipedia tells me that A&M put out the 2-disc Woodstock 94 album on
November 8, 1994. I don’t know why they didn’t put an apostrophe in the
title. Probably didn’t matter. Must have been a Christmas present.

Disc 2 didn’t get played much over the next couple of years, I know that.
I probably listened to Metallica, might have played the Sheryl Crow song.
The Violent Femmes song has the word ‘motherfucker’ in it, so I’m sure I
tried it. My sister liked Peter Gabriel, but I really didn’t care. I skipped the
rest of them. Never really understood Bob Dylan. Still don’t. But he’s
done some really cool paintings of films that make the gallery rounds.
There’s one from the Wong Kar Wai movie Happy Together I like: Leslie
Cheung smoking a cigarette in a small apartment watching a little TV. My
son and I watched every Wong Kar Wai movie in order one summer.
That’s a good memory. Anyway, I know I would listen to the Collective
Soul song. Rollins Band scared me off. I spent a long morning and
afternoon one day as a teenager reading Henry Rollins books for free at a
bookstore. We drove into the suburbs. That guy has too much energy.

My sister had died of a heart attack on August 28, 1994.
I listened to disc 1 more, and maybe recorded songs onto a mixtape so I could listen driving to school in my mom’s old car. It only had a tape deck, and it was a long drive through the soybean and cornfields.

Disc 1 opens with the band Live playing “Selling the Drama.” I was a dramatic kid, so it’s stupid but the theatricality of Live appealed to me. I’d listen to Madonna and Alanis and all my angsty gay ’90s teenager music, but it makes sense because Ed Kowalczyk’s voice is pretty Broadway on *Throwing Copper*. He just doesn’t have a cool name like Vedder. Maybe it’s the hair. Anyway, most of disc 1 is like a documentary of a weekend spent watching MTV at the time. It’s mostly pop-rock with a good amount of *120 Minutes* and a little *Headbangers Ball*. There’s Salt-n-Peppa but should probably be more hip-hop. Guess that wasn’t a Woodstock thing. I still wish Stone Temple Pilots had been there, not that I was there, but they would have made the CD and I might have watched them with my sister. I listed to the *Purple* album a bunch after she died. Not right away. It took me awhile to get angry. It’s not an angry album, but you can feel Scott Weiland’s darkness in there, which ended him. My family has some history with heart disease and alcoholism. Heart attacks and substance abuse are popular records at this disco.

Track 8 on disc 1 is the Green Day song “When I Come Around.”
It must have been around 1986 or 7 when my sister and I gave up finding ways to annoy and fight with each other. I remember some kind of screaming match that feels humorous thinking about it now. I feel like I probably said something mean and went to my room. I knew she was crying for a long time. If I was 9 she was just 13 or 14. She had trouble with kids being assholes to her because she was kind of overweight and shy and sensitive, and we were poor enough not to do sports or wear nice clothes. The way she was crying that day knocked me the fuck over, and we never had another fight. Empathy button activated. She kind of became my best friend. We both had real friends, but our single mom was working so we were on our own most of the time. We just like watched movies and laughed a lot. I wish I had kept track of the stupid things. I wish I could Google them or find them on a VHS tape in a box I forgot about. Anyway, Green Day at Woodstock ’94 on Sunday, August 14.

What little gay punk didn’t like Green Day? So, I paid attention when MTV aired their set that weekend two weeks before my sister died. The guitar riff is the best part of “When I Come Around.” Otherwise, it’s kind of just a repetitive trance. Good lyrics, but I liked more drama. Singing live on the muddy stage, Billy Joe Armstrong improvises the lyric:

‘How now brown cow’ instead of ‘When I come around’ at the end.
Meaning can be drastically unrelated to the language you attach to it. Meaning can be so personal you feel you can’t even really explain what something means to someone who wasn’t there with you in the August afternoon heat, tickling a new-born baby, wondering if there was something better to watch on Nickelodeon or Comedy Central when the Woodstock coverage got boring, worrying about going back to school and dealing with assholes of your own, thinking it was cool that your sister was growing up but you missed having her around while you were growing up – because it was all happening so slow and so fast – but really you just kind of wondered if she was okay now, and you wanted to make her laugh somehow so she wouldn’t still be sad sometimes, and then you hear stupid Green Day sing ‘How now brown cow’ and you look at each other like what the hell and it’s funny and you both know that means things are okay.

Over the years it was nice to put on disc 1 and listen to track 8 and laugh a little at 2 minutes and 32 seconds. I don’t listen to CDs much anymore. I even thought I lost or sold that one, but I found it a few days ago and listened to it again. Still means something to me. I wish I could remember more about that last weekend together, but there’s that.

Anyway, she died on the 24th. We buried her on the 28th. I got that wrong.
PART II

METAPHOR

I believe that there is no single principle on which metaphor works.

John Searle, *Expression and Meaning*

Sally is a bonfire.

Ibid.
Aristotle Sits for Mapplethorpe, *Untitled, 1970 (1)*

The Greeks loved the Polaroid camera, marble bust statue 2.0, volumes of naked philosophers, God knows what. Aristotle treats metaphor as a juiced up knowledge, an improper naming. Boy, take off your robe and relax awhile. “Metaphor is the application of an alien name by transference,” is his early definition of calling a thing by something other than its name. “By deviating in exceptional cases from the normal idiom, the language will gain distinction,” he winks. Transfer of meaning by deviation.
Aristotle Sits for Mapplethorpe, *Untitled, 1970 (II)*

There is an early collage by Robert Mapplethorpe no different than an adolescent art project composed of glitter and stickers and self-obsession. It spans two pages of a book. On the right, a black and white self-portrait sitting, all angles and depth of shadows, as if chiseled from the slab. Pasted between eccentrically glittered columns, his torso appears perched on a purple atmosphere that is dense between his legs and fades away above his head, his limbs gently spreading into black columns that draw the eye toward his body, censored by red stickers over his nipples and genitals. Below his bare feet, a small tear-off calendar: January 1970. On the opposite page, black strips of tape affix a shiny silver material that creates the illusion of reflection. It appears to be metal or glass, though it can’t be. A ghostly double of the paper doll cutout appears only in outline, as if his soul has escaped his body, trapped beneath the tape, a red sticker in the shape of a star covers only the apparition’s absent face, its body uncensored but invisible. The individual letters of his name along the bottom of the shining paper where the calendar would be, the double of the double is named the name of the original, the artist, not pictured. Is *Robert* his alien name or his proper name? The ghost a deviation of the young man.
J. L. Austin Sits for Mapplethorpe, *Banana & Keys*, 1973 (I)

A word’s meaning is a metaphor for the word. Austin disagrees, and assumes ordinary language to have analytic, though sensitive to change, meaning:

“Ordinary language breaks down in extraordinary cases.” “Ordinary language blinkers … the imagination.” “Ordinary language will often have become infected with the jargon of extinct theories, and our own prejudices.” “Hence, it is necessary first to be careful with, but also to be brutal with, to torture, to fake, and to override, ordinary language.” Ouch.
In 1990, the year following Mapplethorpe’s death, the Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center was sued for displaying obscene material after exhibiting his infamous *X Portfolio*, a collection of black and white photographs taken around 1978. Not a part of the controversy, there is a deceptively innocent photograph taken by Mapplethorpe dated 1973 called *Banana & Keys*. The Getty Museum, affiliated with the owner of a substantial portion of his work, describes it as, “A photograph of a banana suspended on a wall with a set of keys wrapped around and dangling from it, framed within a U-shaped window.” The banana is ripe though not pristine. Slight discoloration betrays its depth and texture. A shadow from an overhead light exaggerates its girth, and the black and white color of the photograph strips it of its yellow nature. Positioned horizontally but upside down, what might be considered the bottom of the banana—when held to be eaten—protrudes straight out to the left, and the top half curves downward suggestively to the right. It is bound around the middle by the leather strap of the keychain, impaled with what must be a utilitarian metal stud that holds the keychain in place, which is weighed down by an orgy of keys like limp bodies being lifted away or dragged toward danger. X = torture, brutal, fake.
No one wants to be a populist now. 
We are all elite; therefore, none elite. 
Lakoff and Johnson define metaphor 
in the realm of cognition, their canvas 

broad. Entire “human thought processes are 
largely metaphorical” and the way 
we speak is governed by conceptual 
authoritarian metaphor. O!—

Collective cognition, ordinary 
language and literal meaning, is as 
useful as a picket fence. It keeps the 
dog in the yard most of the time. Human 
speech is not like a Greek chorus. We have 
agency, autonomy, and ego.


Muse as a metaphor for artistic inspiration can be an archaic simplification of the relationship between the artist and the muse as subject. Whether that subject appears in the frame or is visible in the artistic gesture some other symbolic way, a muse personified often lacks the agency of the creator. The artist as God and the model as muse are examples of conceptual metaphors that make it easy to meaningfully understand a dynamic between people, assuming we participate in a language system that accommodates and values the God/muse metaphor. There is a photograph of Mapplethorpe’s friend Patti Smith that is one of his most well-known and commercially successful commodities. She is captured—one must pin down a muse like the specimen of an elusive creature—in black and white. Standing against the fresh canvas of a blank wall, she is visible down to the hip. Her gaze is an expression of our ordinary language as she looks straight ahead to the viewer, yet her body angles slightly away with arms casually but actively placed in front of her chest. She holds a black jacket tossed over the shoulder of a white oxford shirt. The masculine wardrobe betrays the softness of her slight femininity, but that is not any more correct than it is to say the artist captured his muse. Smith’s power is androgynously both and neither.
Roman Jakobson Sits for Mapplethorpe, *Flower*, 1985 (I)

Anna Karenina’s little red bag is both a symbol of her life and her death. Jakobson tells us the brain has a place for poetry and another for prose, but not quite. Instead, it’s bipolar. Language perceived as literal over here, and as figurative over there. Bags to the left, and bodies to the right.

Anna’s bag is an extension of her body, a metonymic symbol of her life. Though red, the bag is not akin to her death. Thrown aside, away from her self, the bag becomes a metaphor for her death. The brain just knows the difference.
Roman Jakobson Sits for Mapplethorpe, *Flower, 1985* (II)

There is a late photo of a flower taken only 15 years after the childishly profane yet relatively tame arts and crafts collage a youthful artist carefully created with the tools available to him in the environment of his rundown long-term room at the storied Chelsea Hotel in the analog days of a matte and disillusioned New York City haunted in the night by the blissed-out hope-fueled transient children of an American society delicately transitioning into their own autonomy like petty criminals testing the patience and strength of a lock on a door in a doorway that hasn’t been transgressed probably because it was forgotten or abandoned by a son or a daughter who never returned or a parent who never recovered and now that lock on the threshold of what might be possible is broken off by the obsessive evening experimentation of a poet transforming into a mildly punk rock poetess and the movements in and out of the shadows of a soft and hard feminine man experimenting with stealing moments of masculinity and redefining what it means to be more than a kid and more than a man and a brother and a son and a friend and the kind of artist who captures moments that are multi-dimensional explosions of many and various times and places that mean exactly what their contradiction creates and defines. It’s a lovely flower.
Wallace Stevens Sits for Mapplethorpe, *Self Portrait, 1988* (I)

Stevens on Metaphor cannot be locked within the Polaroid cage of Sonnet. This from *Opus Posthumous*: “Metaphor creates a new reality from which the original appears to be un— real.” And these lines from *Transport to Summer*: “You like it under the trees in autumn, / Because everything is half dead.” Our human realities are multiple. Language is the false idol we worship by necessity to communicate the image of the world we know as true.

Our light of intelligence is powered by the half-dead bodies we think are real.

The black turtleneck sweater photographed against the black backdrop with manipulated lighting and strategic exposure can only also be read simultaneously as the unknowable nothingness and that dark somethingness of the reality our language cannot describe. The image is of a man both living and dead. The photograph was taken of a living man, but it is not the photograph of a living man. It is a photograph, a symbol of— not a substitute for—the life of the man whose image eternally stares back at the viewer. Of course, the eternity of the viewer is overstated. One of the great values of literature and art is the opportunity to experience and come to understand the self in terms of the likeness of someone you are not. As artistic representations of life go, there is a difference between the original and the copy. The original of anything or anyone cannot be fully defined or known or understood, and empathy is relatively the most basic consideration we owe to each other as originals, as individuals. Yet true empathy is a difficult state of mind to maintain in a world designed to prioritize ego above all. But a copy of the original benefits from the limitations of the constraints placed upon it by its medium. Stevens: “A poem need not have a meaning and like most things in nature often does not have.”
Federico García Lorca and the Wound of Coherence

To say what feels unsayable in words that can be said requires a struggle not unlike Lorca’s dance with the duende, a devil that wounds the artist with each step. Words we have are enough, but to create something new requires we try to heal the fresh wounds of our insufficient language.

The truth of a new belief can be tested by looking for a similarity or connection between that belief and a separate truth already known. The new belief must reflect some other known truth to a degree of satisfaction that waylays doubt and coheres with a functional model of the world. Patti Smith describes the dance between Robert Mapplethorpe and his Polaroid camera: “The physical act, a jerk of the wrist. The snapping sound when pulling the shot and the anticipation, sixty seconds to see what he got.” Each photograph attempts to express the truth of the artist, but never quite succeeds. Wounded, the artist takes another photograph and receives another cut.
Charles Sanders Peirce and the Wound of Pragmatism

Language must be just on this side of death, a crown on the head of a living Christ. It’s easier to speak true of the dead than the living, for the dead are fixed. To speak requires life, and the truth of life resists the finality of naming. Language must express but not kill the truth.

The truth of a belief is decided by how successfully it navigates experience in the real world. Charles Sanders Peirce on truth vs. reality: “The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate, is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in this opinion is the real.” The Chelsea Hotel of the early 1970s is a story in a book, a wound healed over, almost a cliché, a myth, a romanticized belief that those specific artists in that place and time were dancing so ignorantly close to death their art transcends the reality of its making. The myth is true, told and re-told, a story known and re-known. Its artifacts, as real as death, cohere.
**Reginald Shepherd and the Wound of Art**

Art does not always flirt with death, rarely attempts. The utility of art has profound value. What living thing has not abandoned eternity for a fix of necessity? The same tools that write sonnets order dinner for the hungry. The mortal outnumber the immortal.

The truth of a belief based in opinion is a squirrely creature to catch. Opinions achieve truth over time through assimilation, corroboration, validation. Some creative language enters the canon with a whisper, some screams and it’s gone. Mortal artists outnumber the immortal. There are so many poets like Reginald Shepherd who seek immortality through transcendental artistry, and that type of lifespan does not come from the pizza delivery guy. Shepherd: “I write because I would like to live forever. The fact of my death offends me.” and “That the people and things I love will die wounds me.” Oh, that this writing askew will mythify and heal the wound of life.
Jesus Christ and the Wound of Ethics

Jesus as a metaphor is not dead yet. “Christ was a man worthy to rebel against, for he was rebellion itself.”

-- Patti Smith on the line from her poem
_Oath_, which opens her cover of the song
_Gloria_, first recorded by Them, sans Jesus, with lyrics by Van Morrison.

The truth of an ethical belief can be tested by the practice of an individual within a society that does or does not share that belief. There is a difference between a prescribed ethic and a practiced ethic; it is the difference between what we should be and what we are. The consequence of a substitution like figurative language is that it confuses the copy with the original. This is problematic for some of us human critics who forget that the metaphor of Jesus is not Jesus. Note: the Jesus in this poem is a metaphor for symbolism. Smith sings, “Jesus died for somebody’s sins but not mine.” Language offers an ego the radical authority to opt out.
**Untitled Crown**

transfer of meaning by deviation
creates the illusion of reflection
a word’s meaning is a metaphor for
being lifted away or dragged toward

agency autonomy and ego
an expression of our ordinary
language perceived as literal over
experimentation of [redacted]

creates a new reality from which
opportunity to experience
fresh wounds of our insufficient language
dancing so ignorantly close to death

creative language enters the canon
the consequence of a substitution
PART III

POETRY

I hear you say: “All that is not fact; it is poetry.” Nonsense! Bad poetry is false, I grant; but nothing is truer than true poetry. And let me tell the scientific men that the artists are much finer and more accurate observers than they are, except of the special minutiae that the scientific man is looking for.

Charles Sanders Peirce, Lectures on Pragmatism
Ezra Pound Line in a Tom Andrews Poem

There is no religion about me for lack of language.
I do not speak to God and God does not speak to me.
We are incommunicado but for the words between us.

The mùan-bpö between Ezra Pound and me
is of a distance and a density I cannot remedy:
too far, too heavy, too vast, too dark, too much.

And yet there is a translation, a reflection of meaning,
in the words at the end of a poem about some other life,
some other man’s dark luggage I can carry for a bit.

Ezra Pound writes about “The meaning of the Emperor,”
and Jesus substitutes his life for your salvation. Sure, Jan.
The hand of God is a linguistic choice; the son, a substitution.

Necessary to the likeness between religion and poetry
is the uncanny unlikeness of meaning, of substitution,
the mirror that is a window, the dark luggage of peace.

I think one needs words to resurrect the self as an idea,
a substitute for a lifetime. The streets of heaven are paved
with pretendings of gold, gestures of temporary reference.

Outside now
streets of concrete.
There is a window at the end of
“Reading Frank O’Hara in the Hospital”
and it could be interior or exterior.

Would the contractor have questioned
its placement above the gift shop,
or followed the blueprint thinking of lunch?

There is a world at the end of
“Reading Frank O’Hara in the Hospital”
and it could be interior or exterior.

Would the poet have questioned
its placement in my memory,
what the world means to that window?

The utility of the window means
it doesn’t care about the meaning
of the world. It just windows.

There was the day O’Hara wrote
“and look out the window.”
There was the day Andrews read

“and look out the window.”
There was the day Andrews wrote
“narrrows to this window above.”

There was the day I read
“narrrows to this window above”
but had not read
“and look out the window.”

The noiseless snow fell inside that day all around me, a widening
of the world outside and the fall of what was meant to be within.
Christopher Smart Epigraph in a Tom Andrews Poem

*For the sin against the holy ghost is ingratitude.*
For the curse of repetition, we are grateful,
for the ability to see our reflection in others,
for the burden of communication, for a way to
understand, and move on not with but from
the pain of the sin of being ungrateful, for
it is no sin at all, the unlikeness that you
stow away in the luggage of your body,
a valise of your intellect and not your soul.

*May the Lord Jesus Christ bless the hemophiliac’s motorcycle,*
and may the motorcycle bless its gasoline and the beating heart
for which it stands, combustion, the blood pulsing through
the veins of a young boy just trying not to embarrass himself,
or worse, crash through the mud of the field and into the unknown
meaning of it all. May the equivalent of your Lord Jesus Christ
not prevent you from experiencing your burden and joy in terms
of this boy’s motorcycle and ironic illness like the one you carry
around your own recursive track of dirt, and oil, and humility.

*I remember one of the first things I remember.*
I remember The Love Boat was on TV in 1980
the day my father died, but I was 2 years old and
could not have known what any of it meant. I
remember remembering that memory and thinking,
‘could it be true or is it something I was told and
I remember now on my own?’ I remember understand-
ning knowledge as something true or not. I
remember the day I read a poem that changed me.

Eat songs like bread, drink words like wine, touch the soul
by touching dirt, the ungrateful sin of mud, the life you are.
Charles Wright October in a Tom Andrews Poem

Leaves do not disappear into the grass,
this American tradition of the page
as a symbol of the natural world,
     independent as raindrops.

One word at a time, the storm
proceeds across the yard
     eagerly but orderly:
     a cool wind as if the breath of the moon,

     itself a dead star no longer visible
     in the October dusk,
     the season of the tree
     seeding its meaning for Spring.

As night falls, a hair from your arm
descending from the bedsheets . . .
     the natural world,
     a memory of our touch, a complete sentence.

Leaves gather above us;
the future is speaking our name, a time, a place . . .
     thunder.
Robert Lowell Ghost in a Tom Andrews Poem

The audacity of the autobiographical fragment interrupting poetry with its history and prose; the unformed blasphemous mound of clay with which we fall in love and mangle syntax.

Life is a series of wrecks and reckonings, and to fail to see the reckoned in the wreck is a matter of survival when the words are confusing, disorderly, and sound the same.

Between these men and their lives, the memory, enunciation, enumeration, and exaltation of self, a woman whose name does not appear speaks: “The words are purposes. / The words are maps.”

After all of that, we are left with only linguistic traces of those lives, roadmaps for where they have been, where it is safe to venture, a guide in free verse, innocent joy, beautiful pain, and the ghost of the life you will leave behind, the imprint of your hand on the page, a reflection.
Frank O’Hara Never Read a Richie Hofmann Poem

There is an oil on canvas painting of Frank O’Hara by the artist Larry Rivers from 1954 that depicts the poet nude but wearing boots. It measures just over 8 feet tall and 4 feet wide, and it is called “O’Hara Nude with Boots.” His arms are raised above his head with his hands resting together on the top of his head, the tuft of a widow’s peak visible above the calm expression that betrays the vulnerability of his nudity. One boot is planted securely on the floor while the other boot is elevated, resting on a cinder block or stool that forces his left leg into a slightly obtuse angle. The hair of his armpits is exposed to the viewer, his chest is splotched between the nipples with the painter’s delicate linework, an impression of the wispy fuzz that protects his body and falls into a softness around his navel before gathering into a swirling darkness around his protruding white cock. The room is muted and unknowable, but O’Hara’s eye is fixed intently on the viewer. There is an emotional resonance to his stare that presumes mutual recognition. He knows he is being seen. Perhaps somewhere out of frame, a pale brushstroke of the t-shirt that carries his smell. It is 70 years since that painting was done; another God and his muse in the canon of American literature. Eyeroll, and yet, the impulse to document the undocumented.

To sinfully lust for the under-anthologized, the never made public, the un-objectified, and to yearn to be seen in the poetry of their privacy.
Jesus Christ Never Sang a Patti Smith Song

Words are just rules and regulations, and language is governed by rules, but meaning is free, so light a fire and tell a story to live ungoverned. The punks and poets in hell all scream “Words are just rules and regulations!” while some devil sings karaoke and chokes on the songs of the fallen, a weak imitation of moaning. Like free verse, the light, the fire of life is not bound by the threat of mortal sin. The mark of the beast is a symbol, a word with made-up rules and regulations; it constrains and binds our sins to eternal definition, an order to the chaos that means it is not free. Startled by a fire in damp kindling, this devil, embarrassed to sing, forgets the words to the song.

Words are not rules and regulations, a pose which means we’re free for now from fire.
Ezra Pound Never Read a Tom Andrews Poem

Being at peace with the quiet of your life,
why should you be bothered by the ghost
of the man who first spoke panic—

    for they were surely a man
    irresponsible with the wildness of their tongue
    as it spat hair out of their mouth,
    a stinking gunmetal beard
    assembling around their tiny body
    like an armory of anger
    as they chiseled away
    at the language you love

―as he circles your house
collecting mud at the base of his bedsheets,
his mouth now unarmed
by the loss of the life he left
    somewhere,
not there under that embarrassing collection of threads
where only the memory of that italicized word
is hidden like the jumble of wire hangers
your mother paid you an allowance to separate,

just a bunch of letters written
over and over themselves,
as much a picnic as anything else, and yet

    some imaginings mean so much they won’t die,
    and you feel the cool brush of the woosh
    of that blanket of meaning,
    those words that aren’t yours
    as they settle over you
    and take your shape
    and you become that muddy ghost.

You realize you have been dressed in the wrong
substitute for a lifetime, but still won’t allow the word God in this poem.
O but this childish boy means to escape
in the flamboyant disguise of a man!
Dope hat, combat boots—the drip, O the drape—
The very exasperation of this!

A quick ride from the airport in a car
that mild September evening of the 12th
was both confession and denial. The bar
is low for sexy men of health and wealth.

Come instead into corrupting embrace!
As we stretch our primal boundaries now,
yes, the greedy pleasure upon our face!
The great likeness of holier-than-thou.

Translated from the French, the rhyme is lost
and the poet transforms into his fa—
Wallace Stevens Never Read a Mary Oliver Poem

A bridge between literature and life, what connects language to the body? Probably nothing; they’re both so temporary. But which makes fertile compost? Maybe language outlives the body—because if you write your story it threatens the real possibility of outlasting you.

And yet when you run your hands over your bare skin and describe your sadness as an old farmer being pulled into the soil as the sun arrives, is there more temporality to your words or body? You can find a pen if one exists and write it down and you will share it with a neighbor in rushed breaths and you must tell it to the robot and make it repeat the words until the future proves communication irrelevant—but the, but the meaning is already gone. And gone already as you sit in the silence of your silly death and remember the words and feel the dirty emptiness of that lost moment.

The words remain, but their meaning is not fixed to the moment any more than the body. This is a lifetime of linguistic death. What did you say? What did I say? What did we mean by all that? After death there is the question of meaning. An idea is not a thing—or it is just what’s left because it persists. And your knowledge almost helps with the loneliness. The illusion of literal meaning on such a stupid afternoon.
The Best American Poem of 1969

1

The 1969 Pulitzer Prize for poetry was awarded to George Oppen for his book *Of Being Numerous*, published in 1968. The title poem begins: “There are things / We live among ‘and to see them / Is to know ourselves’.” In another poem: “Clarity, clarity, surely clarity is the most beautiful / thing in the world, / A limited, limiting clarity // I have not and never did have any motive of poetry / But to achieve clarity.”

2

A face in the mirror
is not to scale.

A better reflection
of a life
is the knowledge of
where it has been
and the intimacy
of its image
traced
with eyes closed
under loving hands.

3

The fact of
the meaning of a word
—its lifetime, the immortal collection
of what it has meant, means, will mean—
is present in every
instance
every utterance,
though unspoken.

Listen to the
truth of the silence
of the world
and its words.

“Clarity in the sense of silence.”
The body of language is a window, and each breath that compels it to go on . . . a progression in stillness . . .

is knowledge for every body, a translatable word. Truth is not a reflection, but a double of reality.

“The mind works such that we see and perceive new things always through the lens of what we have already seen. . . . What matters is the transformative power of metaphor and the stories we tell ourselves about the arc and meaning of our lives.”

Natasha Trethewey, Memorial Drive (2020)

Most of the world is beyond our control, but some is not, language is not.

Metaphor is meaning. Meaning is metaphor.
The Best American Poem of 1970 (1)

“Adam placed no hex on me / I embrace Eve / and take full responsibility”

_Patti Smith, “Oath” (1970)_

What can you do with the image you were created in, and what do you know about who told you that story?

For the record, there is no true full-color fold-out centerfold of the moment you arrived, no tableau in sepia tone of the birth of the current idea of you, no photograph in black and white of the final form you will take, for the idea of you is as man-made as the alphabet.

The truth of you is as real as the record that scratched when you died, as quiet as the water that shifts in your wake, and as mythic as the stories we will tell when you’re gone, until we’re gone, and it’s all gone, and even then there was only ever the silence you filled.

There is no true best, no true American, no true poem, no true 1970. There is only a responsibility to what is, what was, and what will be.
The Best American Poem of 1970 (II)

I am thinking of the meaning of a silence, and the long tradition of unspoken speech, how it can be both a confession and denial.

Robert Lowell’s translation of *Prometheus Bound* is published in 1969. Power speaks: “We’ve reached the end of the road, the top—

—most stone on the rooftop of the world.”

And at the Stonewall Inn, a brick is thrown through a window, breaking a queer silence.

Is this not speech? The power of Zeus can—

—not be eternal. Can it? And yet within the silence of the aftermath, somewhere afire

is the voice of Prometheus: “Oh Earth, my holy Mother, look, you will see us suffer.”

Imagine the screaming silence of 1970.

Four years after his Gothically violent and Romantically queer death on Fire Island in 1966, Frank O’Hara’s poem with a title


I am thinking of the meaning of the silence:

I might have glanced at that poem almost 30 years later, and, passing, would not have said ‘This is my reflection in the page.’ In 1999,

it took a substitution, a poet with a likeness and an unlikeness, to inspire a quiet yes.
The Best American Poem of 1986

I bear zero preciousness when it comes to what is selected for these annual greatest hits collections, although I do find them, like any anthology, fun and fascinating. I'm old enough to understand any institution with giants stalking about may endure a bit of fee, fie, foetry, and fun now and again. Especially where an under-anthologized poet like Tom Andrews is concerned.

What I'm more interested in is that Charles Wright selected Andrews’s poem “Evening Song” for inclusion in his guest-edited (a one-time opportunity) edition of The Best American Poetry of 2008. Because the series publishes authors alphabetically by last name, Andrews's poem opens the collection. Lucky thing Dick Allen didn't sneak in alphabetically before Andrews that year like he did in 1994. I was aware of the connections between Wright and Andrews: academic and professional. Thank goodness Andrews found a champion in Wright, who writes the introduction to Andrews's collected works, Random Symmetries, in which he notes speaking at his funeral and goes on to express further quiet reverence, the best kind.

What I've discovered, which is perhaps no discovery at all, is Wright flouting conventions for the sake of a quiet tribute to the life and work of Andrews. I know “Evening Song” from The Hemophiliac's Motorcycle, published by Iowa in 1994. The acknowledgements section of that book attributes the poem to its original publication in The Antioch Review. I found a copy of that publication in their archives. The original publication date of “Evening Song” there was Autumn 1986. In this best collection for 2008, Wright includes a poem originally published 22 years earlier, republished and awarded 14 years earlier, written by a poet who has been dead some 7 years. Minor reference is given to it having been published by something called Rivendell in 2008. I was able to track down reference to Rivendell in a couple of those ‘directory of literary journals and magazines’ guides ranging from 2007 to 2010, so it appears it did exist, but I can't find any sort of archive for Rivendell for the context of publication. I found a very defunct snapshot of the website for the journal, which makes it seem like a small regional journal in North Carolina that blipped and vanished “like the quick wake of a water mite.”

You should read Wright's whimsy of an introduction to his edition of TBAP. It does not play by the rules. Of that contemporary American poetry of 2008, Wright comments: “There are very few bad poems being published, very few. On the other hand, there are very few really good ones, either, ones that make you want to stick your fingers in the Cuisinart, saying, Take me now, Lord, take me now.” A madman like this, God bless, immediately presents a poem from the mid-1980’s as the best of 2008—because time be damned—the elation of the experience, to Wright, perhaps, of “Evening Song” was there with him in 2008 just as it is here with us now.
The Best American Poem of 1994


Literature does not have agency, readers and writers do.

There is a question that connects two stanzas in the middle of the first section of the poem:

“When comfort arrives, how will you see it, //
by what dark luggage?”

This is an upsetting proposition that implies
(1) there is discomfort, and
(2) there will be darkness before there is comfort.

The very last line of the poem is taken directly from Ezra Pound’s “Canto 98” (XCVIII if you insist) but recontextualized:

“‘There is no substitute for a lifetime.’

Between the call and the response, there is
a journey through nature,
a progression,
a wondering,
a life lived among the dead and the living,
the natural and the celestial,
the imprisonments and freedoms of the awkwardness of life.

When comfort arrived, it was a knowledge and an acknowledgement veiled not so much by darkness, but by a delicate blink, an awareness that the only substitute for a lifetime is itself.

And I heard a true sort of silence, and that was that.
NOTES ON THE TEXT (LIFETIMES)

**Part II: Metaphor** Wallace Stevens (1879-1955) is an American poet.

**Reading Wallace Stevens for Meaning** The metaphor of the theater is inspired by Stevens’s poem “Of Modern Poetry.”

**Reading Tom Andrews for Meaning** Tom Andrews (1961-2001) is an American poet. Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) is a philosopher of language known for his work on signification and meaning. The line ‘Name a famous poet’ is from the *Family Feud Retro-Edition* board game. Poets referenced in section two are all American poets: Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), Maya Angelou (1928-2014), Robert Frost (1874-1963), Walt Whitman (1819-1892), Theodor Geisel aka Dr. Seuss (1904-1991), and Diane Seuss (1956-). Section three is inspired by Wallace Stevens’s poem “Anecdote of the Jar.”

**Reading Patti Smith for Meaning** Patti Smith (1946-) is an American poet and singer. Sarah Jessica Parker (1974-) is an American actress and celebrity. The Met Gala is an annual fundraising event to benefit the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. Fendi is a luxury Italian fashion brand. Christian Siriano (1985-) is an American fashion designer. H. P. Grice (1913-1988) is a British philosopher known for his work on language and meaning.

**Reading Natasha Trethewey for Meaning** Natasha Trethewey (1966-) is an American poet. Anne Sexton (1928-1974) is an American poet. YouTube is an online video platform. The unnamed philosophers are American cognitive linguists George Lakoff (1941-) and Mark Johnson (1949-). Unnamed, Federico García Lorca (1898-1936) is a Spanish poet. The metaphor
of the wound, as described in Lorca’s essay “Play and Theory of the Duende,” is referenced here as interpreted in Trethewey’s memoir *Memorial Drive*. The line ‘Already the words are changing’ is from Trethewey’s poem “My Mother Dreams Another Country,” which appears in her book *Native Guard*.

**Reading The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Poetry for Meaning**

Gottlob Frege (1848-1925) is a German philosopher known for his work on language, mathematics, and logic. The line ‘In a dark time, the eye begins to see’ is from Theodore Roethke’s poem “In a Dark Time.” The lines ‘Pain comes from the darkness / And we call it wisdom. It is pain.’ is from Randall Jarrell’s poem “90 North.” The line ‘stasis in darkness’ is from Sylvia Plath’s poem “Ariel.” Roethke (1908-1963), Jarrell (1914-1965), and Plath (1932-1963) are American poets.

**Marginal Notes for Codeine Diary (I)**

*Codeine Diary* is a memoir by Tom Andrews.

**Marginal Notes for Just Kids (I)**

*Just Kids* is a memoir by Patti Smith.

**Marginal Notes for Memorial Drive**

*Memorial Drive* is Trethewey’s memoir.

**Woodstock ’94**

*Woodstock ’94* is a music festival that was held in 1994 to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the original *Woodstock* music festival. MTV is a television station that originally specialized in short-form music videos and other music-related programming. Yahtzee is a dice game. Wikipedia is an online open-source encyclopedia. A&M Records went out of business in 1999. Metallica, Sheryl Crow, The Violent Femmes, Peter Gabriel, Bob Dylan, Collective Soul, Rollins Band, Henry Rollins, Live, Madonna, Alanis Morissette, Ed Kowalczyk, Eddie Vedder, Salt-n-Peppa, Stone Temple Pilots, Scott Weiland, Green Day, and Billy Joe Armstrong are musical acts from in and around the mid-1990s setting of the poem. Wong Kar-wai (1958-) is a Hong Kong filmmaker. Leslie Cheung (1956-2003) is a Hong Kong actor. Their
film *Happy Together* is from 1997. Archival footage of the MTV broadcast, including the Green Day set, is widely available on sites like YouTube and the Internet Archive.

**Part II: Metaphor** John Searle (1932-) is an American philosopher and linguist most well-known for his contributions to the philosophy of language.

*Aristotle Sits for Mapplethorpe, Untitled, 1970 (I)* Aristotle (384 – 322) is a Greek philosopher known for thinking things other people would later re-think. Robert Mapplethorpe (1946-1989) is an American artist known for his photographs. The quotations are taken from Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Mapplethorpe’s *Untitled* (1970) is a mixed-media artwork.

**J. L. Austin Sits for Mapplethorpe, Banana & Keys, 1973 (I)** J. L. Austin (1911-1960) is a British philosopher and linguist known for his speech act theory. The quotations are from Austin’s “The Meaning of a Word.” Mapplethorpe’s *Banana & Keys* (1973) is a photograph of mixed-media artwork.

**J. L. Austin Sits for Mapplethorpe, Banana & Keys, 1973 (II)** The quotation is from The Getty Museum’s website. The Getty Museum is in California. The Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center is a museum in Ohio. Mapplethorpe’s *X Portfolio* is a collection of his photographs.

**Lakoff & Johnson Sit for Mapplethorpe, Album cover for Patti Smith, Horses (I)** The quotation is from Lakoff and Johnson’s *Metaphors We Live By*. Smith’s album *Horses* was released in 1975, and Mapplethorpe took the cover photo.

**Roman Jakobson Sits for Mapplethorpe, Flower, 1985 (I)** Roman Jakobson (1896-1982) is a Russian linguist. The metaphor of Anna Karenina’s bag is used by Jakobson in “On Realism in Art,” and his theory of the bipolar structure of language in the brain is from “The Metaphoric and Metonymic Poles.” Mapplethorpe’s *Flower* (1985) is a photograph.

**Roman Jakobson Sits for Mapplethorpe, Flower, 1985 (II)** The sense of the Chelsea
Hotel, a building located in Manhattan, depicted here is inspired by events detailed in Smith’s memoir *Just Kids*.

**Wallace Stevens Sits for Mapplethorpe, Self Portrait, 1988 (I)** The quotation from *Opus Posthumous* is specifically from “from Adagia.” The line from *Transport to Summer* is specifically from Stevens’s poem “The Motive for Metaphor.” Mapplethorpe’s *Self Portrait* (1988) is a photograph.

**Wallace Stevens Sits for Mapplethorpe, Self Portrait, 1988 (II)** The quotation is from “from *Adagia*” in *Opus Posthumous*.

**Federico García Lorca and the Wound of Coherence** Lorca explains the concept of *duende* in “Play and Theory of the Duende.” The quotation is from Smith’s *Just Kids*. Theories of truth referenced in the four “—and the Wound of—” poems are inspired by Simon Blackburn’s discussion in his book *On Truth*.

**Charles Sanders Peirce and the Wound of Pragmatism** Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) is an American philosopher and mathematician most well-known for his work in logic. The quotation is from Peirce’s “How to Make Our Ideas Clear.”

**Reginald Shepherd and the Wound of Art** Reginald Shepherd (1963-2008) is an American poet. The quotations are from Shepherd’s “Why I Write.”

**Jesus Christ and the Wound of Ethics** Jesus Christ is just too much to explain. The quotation is from Smith’s *Just Kids*. The lyric is from Smith’s version of the song “Gloria,” adapted from her poem “Oath.” Them is a Northern Ireland musical group active in the 1960s and ’70s; member Van Morrison (1945-) wrote the original lyrics for the song “Gloria.”

**Ezra Pound Line in a Tom Andrews Poem** Ezra Pound (1885-1972) is an American poet. Pound references ‘mùan-bpö’ in “Canto XCVIII” in *The Cantos*. The phrase ‘dark luggage’
is from Andrews’s poem “When Comfort Arrives.” The phrase ‘substitute for a lifetime’ appears in both. ‘Sure, Jan’ is from the TV show *The Brady Bunch*.

**Frank O’Hara Window in a Tom Andrews Poem** Frank O’Hara (1926-1966) is an American poet. The line ‘and look out the window’ is from O’Hara’s poem “Morning.” The line ‘narrows to the window above’ is from Andrew’s poem “Reading Frank O’Hara in the Hospital.”

**Christopher Smart Epigraph in a Tom Andrews Poem** Christopher Smart (1722-1771) is an English poet. The line ‘For the sin against the holy ghost is ingratitude’ is from Smart’s poem “Jubilate Agno.” The line ‘May the Lord Jesus Christ bless the hemophiliac’s motorcycle’ is from Andrews’s poem “The Hemophiliac’s Motorcycle.” The line ‘I remember one of the first things I remember’ is from Joe Brainard’s memoir *I Remember*. Brainard (1942-1994) is an American writer. *The Love Boat* is a TV show.

**Charles Wright October in a Tom Andrews Poem** Charles Wright (1935-) is an American poet. Inspiration is taken from Wright’s poem “October” and Andrews’s poem “At Burt Lake.”

**Robert Lowell Ghost in a Tom Andrews Poem** Robert Lowell (1917-1977) is an American poet. Inspiration is taken from Lowell’s prose section “91 Revere Street” in *Life Studies* and Andrews’s poem “Codeine Diary.” The unnamed woman is the American poet Adrienne Rich (1929-2012), and the quotation is from her poem “Diving into the Wreck.”

**Frank O’Hara Never Read a Richie Hofmann Poem** Richie Hoffmann (1987-) is an American poet. Larry Rivers (1923-2002) is an American artist. Rivers’s “O’Hara Nude with Boots” is a painting. The line ‘the t-shirt that carries his smell’ is from Hofmann’s poem “Coquelicot.”

**Jesus Christ Never Sang a Patti Smith Song** The line ‘words are just rules and
regulations’ is from the song “Gloria.”

**Ezra Pound Never Read a Tom Andrews Poem** Inspired by Pound in general and Andrew’s poem “When Comfort Arrives.”

**Arthur Rimbaud Never Read a Robert Lowell Poem** Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891) is a French poet. Inspiration is taken from Rimbaud in general and Lowell’s book *Imitations*. The line ‘Dope hat, combat boots’ is from the En Vogue song “Hip Hop Lover,” which appears on the album *Funky Divas*.

**Wallace Stevens Never Read a Mary Oliver Poem** Mary Oliver (1935-2019) is an American poet. Inspiration is taken from Oliver’s poem “The Summer Day” and Stevens’s poem “Hibiscus on the Sleeping Shores,” where the phrase ‘stupid afternoon’ appears. And inspired by their work in general.

**The Best American Poem of 1969** George Oppen (1908-1984) is an American poet. The quotations in section 1 are from Oppen’s poems “Of Being Numerous” and “Route.” The quotation in section 3 is from “Route.” It should be noted that series editor, David Lehman, did not begin the annual ‘Best American Poetry’ anthology until its first publication in 1988 by the Macmillan Publishing Company.

**The Best American Poem of 1970 (II)** The Stonewall Inn is a building and gay bar which has become symbolic of the gay liberation movement. *Prometheus Bound* is a Greek tragedy. Fire Island is located off Long Island in New York. *Poetry* is a literary magazine.

**The Best American Poem of 1986** Dick Allen (1939-2017) is an American poet. *The Antioch Review* and *Rivendell* are literary magazines. The text is adapted from an email to Amy Newman while researching this project. Newman [redacted] is an American poet. The line ‘like the quick wake of a water mite’ is from Andrews’s poem “Evening Song.” Cuisinart, etc.
CHAPTER III
ON DESCRIPTION, DESCRIPTIONS, AND ANECDOTES

On Description

We normally—and justly—speak of metaphor as an irruption of desire, specifically the desire to transform life by reinterpreting it, giving it a different story.

Denis Donoghue, *Metaphor* (134)

There is a lecture I watched on YouTube given by the poet Jorie Graham while I was reading and studying her book of poems called *The End of Beauty* a couple of years ago. The video is titled “Jorie Graham On Description” and was uploaded by the user @english283a6 on the 24th of June in 2014. It is their only upload. The video quality appears pre-digital, and Graham references the camera at one point because, she says, the recording may be used by students in the classroom. It appears her talk might be an address for the public, as it doesn’t seem to be a traditional classroom setting. It is obviously a public space, but maybe not specifically for this type of speaker. At one point, the sound of an ambulance or some other fire and police vehicle briefly interrupts her, and you can see a reflection of red siren lights through the windows in the background. She ignores this temporary notification of someone else’s drama, and she continues on with her own life.

*The End of Beauty* is a book of poems Graham originally published in 1987. Thomas Gardner, a scholar of contemporary American poetry who has written extensively on Graham’s
work, describes these poems as “a meditation on the moment just before an idea or shape crystallizes. Graham thinks of this as the moment when the mind, absorbed in ‘process,’ is most fully alive and engaged” (Gardner 338). This ‘moment’ of somethingness that is the smallest amount of time away from being named and stripped of its un-say-ability by being said, or thought, or recognized, is a type of moment that can only be represented by language and not actually achieved in language. This is because language, itself, is the speaking, thinking, and recognizing that ends the elusive ‘moment’ right before creation, knowledge, or meaning. The idea is that language closes the gap in which the moment exists – outside of perception – because language assigns meaning.

In his analysis of Graham’s work, Gardner suggests part of her thesis, which he relates to the poetry of some modern American poets, is that those moments represent a kind of truth that language cannot achieve. He writes that, unable to capture that moment of truth, a poem “then proceeds to chart the way language, chasing that truth, takes on a life of its own” (341-42). Graham’s poems in The End of Beauty find ways to illustrate those moments by dwelling in them and allowing them to linger for the reader, precisely because Graham fills those moments with words, images, and metaphors. For example, this section at the end of the poem “Vertigo” in The End of Beauty uses the moment of transition from life to death as a metaphor for the moment between creation and knowledge:

How close can the two worlds get, the movement from one to the other being death? She tried to remember from the other life the passage of the rising notes off the violin into the air, thin air, chopping their way in, wanting to live forever—marrying, marrying—yet still free of the orchestral swelling (66)
Graham’s poem is metaphorical in two ways. First, as noted, she presents the transition between life and death as a metaphor for the transition between the known and unknown, the named and unnamed. Second, she extends that moment by filling its imperceptible gap with language: the memory of a sound, the movement of that sound filling and taking up space, a yearning for eternity within a moment that has already ended, recursion insisted upon and the gap extended by simply repeating the word *marrying* within emdashes, and the swelling of the invisible remnants of an orchestra; all of these images provided by the poet extend the moment and fill the gap with language as its metaphor so we can dwell there even if it is only an extended convolution of language holding us there in a poetic sentence and a mediated form that captures the reader as long as they are willing to keep reading and dwelling and connecting.

In an interview with Gardner published on Graham’s personal and professional website, Graham admits that her poems do not successfully transcend the closure that meaning and language bring to those moments of undefinable reality, which we can only sense but never observe in the act of creation. As their exchange appears on joriegraham.com:

> TG [Thomas Gardner]: Does *The End of Beauty* feel like it’s simply suspending closure or does it feel like it’s doing something else?
> JG [Jorie Graham]: No, I wouldn’t way [sic] it’s managing to suspend closure. It might be trying to. But what I discovered in trying to write those poems was that the suction of closure was enormous – the desire to wrap it up into the ownable meaning – and that doing away with it wasn’t as easy as I had imagined.  
> (“Jorie Graham & Thomas Gardner in Conversation”)

The interview was conducted in 1987, the same year that *The End of Beauty* was published. That interview was then published in a monograph compiled by Gardner called *Regions of Unlikeness, Explaining Contemporary Poetry* in 1999. Whether an explanation of contemporary poetry is possible might be where Gardner and I disagree; however, he does signal explanation as a process in his title. On the other side of the closure that meaning provides is language’s ability to
create an opening for new knowledge. That new knowledge is the result of our ability to manipulate and amend meaning with the language we choose. Let me explain . . .

There are two things I remember about Graham’s now-YouTube lecture as I think of it from time to time, and they are surprisingly both complementary and contradictory depending on how I think about them. Thinking of metaphor: to dwell in moments of surprising similarity and dissimilarity is something figurative language both allows and demands a language user to do.

The first thing I have remembered when given a distance from watching the video itself: she speaks of the *at-onceness* a poem might encourage a reader to both recognize and experience while reading a poem. She speaks of how that *at-onceness* works against the instincts we bring to a poem as readers of other types of literature, as the users of other types of language.

After explaining, in her delightfully serpentine way, the everyday task of being both thinking and feeling creatures who separate and compartmentalize the many contradictory complexities and intricacies we face as human beings, she says: “One of the functions of poetry is to do everything that I’ve been describing in a way at once. To break down the sense that one can’t be all those parts of one’s sensibility at once. And that at-onceness of one’s being in the world is a very complicated experience, but one in which both the poet and the reader engage in a successful lyric poem.”

Poetry, here, is an example of a type of language that leans into uncertainty, a type of language in-use that anticipates and rewards linguistic structures that successfully strain the limits of knowledge and meaning. The sweet spot for this type of lyric poetry is somewhere in between the literal and the abstract. That sweet spot is often the figurative: the moment where likeness and unlikeness exist in a successful, though momentary, union that makes some kind of
sense for the language user. Metaphor is an example of figurative language used to achieve moments of unified likeness and unlikeness.

Graham’s comments on *at-onceness* as quoted above are, of course, not a memory at all, but a transcription of a few sentences at the beginning of a lecture that progresses for almost an hour and a half. You can check the video and read the closed captioning yourself. The video, which appears to have been recorded on tape, is not date-stamped, or given a context in its description for the reason of its existence. Yet it exists and is, as of this writing, accessible to be experienced by anyone with access to the internet. It is also here: represented in the context of these analytical remarks, which is itself a new iteration of Graham’s linguistic act that evening at the lectern in her black jacket, her long hair falling in auburn to blonde ombre whisps downward over her shoulders, in front of that putty-colored curtain and tall stretch of white-framed windows or doors. Graham’s youthful appearance, the video static, and the dated decor of warmth in that public space provides the timestamp on this analog record of her lecture.

Language itself provides the opportunity, if one is attuned to such things, for the language user to dwell in the multiplicity of possible and potential meanings accessible in each linguistic moment. Possible, because not every conceivable meaning can be accessed or experienced at once. Potential, because meaning changes and evolves such that what one thing means in any given moment might mean something very different in the next moment, and then another thing in later potential moments. This is the nature of the symbolic structure of language. The words we use often conventionally mean things that make communication easy, but those same words can be used in different ways to mean different things. The process of dwelling in *possible* and *potential* meanings as a language user, however, takes effort and requires agency, especially given what Graham refers to as “the suction of closure” that is inherent to naming and defining
concepts (“Jorie Graham On Description”). Once a concept is linked to a linguistic representation, it requires effort to amend or disconnect that association.

The second thing I have remembered: Graham spends an exhausting amount of time doing what she calls a sort of “method acting” performance by slowly walking through the multiple sensibilities activated by a couple of lines she culls from the canon of modern American lyric poetry:

1. “The sniff of green leaves and dry leaves” (Whitman 30), and
2. “in autumn, when the grapes / Made sharp air sharper by their smell” (Stevens,“A Postcard from the Volcano”).

Graham’s process of describing the multiplicity of senses activated by just these two lines of poetry is an apt illustration of how even the simplest use of language to describe the world – not even really the most radical or lyrical use of language when taken out of context – can call on the many sensibilities we engage with as humans who experience the world and translate it into knowledge through language. This is, perhaps, a more lyrical use of language than normal. It is a type of linguistic act that resists the inherent temporality of ‘this word and then another word and then another word.’ This kind of strange expression is used for the purpose of capturing, in language, moments and sensibilities that exist in our experience outside of language. Is this, to Graham, and to you and me here, the purpose of figurative speech like metaphor? Is poetic language a symbolic way for a language user to say something that cannot otherwise be said or adequately summarized in the same way?

It is, I should say. My thesis is that it is. Tokens of language that resist definition by suggesting meaning that is radically contrary to what is expected and accepted is a useful way to represent the perceived world and render the mystery of the self authentically in language.
Metaphor is a *way* to represent what seems unrepresentable in the world because metaphor requires the agency of the language user in its creation, and because metaphor requires an active accommodation by another language user to attain the common ground necessary for successful linguistic communication. A metaphor I might use requires you to live in the moment of my metaphor and attempt to understand the incorrect but correct meaning I propose.

Further, Graham models a way of interacting with literature that is undervalued as an academic endeavor, which is description over explanation. What she refers to as a type of *method acting*, a methodical interaction with the poem word-by-word, might be more helpfully described as: a reaction in a specific place and time from a reader living in the reality of experiencing the poem and describing those experiences. This active engagement is an illustration of the poem’s meaning for that specific reader in that exact moment, which is a valid and authentic representation of a version of the poem’s ‘meaning.’ It is, I would argue, at least as valid and authentic as an academic endeavor or intellectual engagement with a poem that seeks to explain the intentions or meaning of the poet and their work outside of the context of the reader. Both are valid, and perhaps complementary to each other, in a robust reading of a poem.

Having studied language and meaning from the linguistic perspective, as detailed in chapter one of this study, I am inclined to take poetic metaphor as an example of a type of linguistic symbolism that exists in more aspects of language than poetry alone. Metaphor is not relegated to poetry and the arts, after all. This, perhaps, is a fact well-illustrated by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s work on conceptual metaphor. As influential as it has been over the past four decades, their work in the book *Metaphors We Live By* does not express any sort of falsifiable truth about the nature of language. Instead, it shows through a preponderance of
evidence that metaphor is everywhere in language use, whether we call it poetic or not, whether we are attuned to its poetry or not. Lakoff and Johnson’s work is descriptive and not explanatory.

One might look at the daytime sky and see clouds there now. One might have seen clouds at distances ten miles away and ten years ago, and one may see them at any number of miles away in the days ahead. One might then look at the nighttime sky and see stars here, and there, and maybe everywhere. This collection of experience does not explain the clouds or stars, but describes the consistent appearance of clouds and stars, and that is a pretty useful place to start. Information must be gathered to observe a pattern in the randomness of the world being described. The description of a pattern often leads to a visualization of the order of things, which then often leads to a different understanding of things.

My collection of three essays in this chapter seeks to engage with text in a methodical yet associative way to describe instantiations of meaning in context, and thereby illustrate the phenomenon of meaning as an inherently mutable and multi-dimensional entity, a winding path with many connections, that exists fleetingly from moment to moment and is thereby never as fixed or as caught and trapped by language as Graham seems to suggest within the poems of The End of Beauty, though those poems will no longer be discussed here. That’s a shame.

The point of view to be expressed here is my own, and it is intended to be presented in the format of a group of scholarly personal essays, including this one, to highlight and illustrate the creation of meaning as an act of the language user actively engaged with language. In the way that chapter two’s collection of poems attempts to capture an all-at-onceness of the phenomenon of metaphor as a tool of autonomy for the language user, this chapter is intended to illustrate the act of description as method acting as a valid form of academic inquiry within the realm of language and literature.
In her lecture, Graham calls this type of engagement with language “reading below the threshold of interpretation,” which suggests the importance of a type of meaning that is not yet quite fully understood but somehow in the process of forming because of an interaction with language that would be otherwise meaningful when wielded in another context in another way. She compares this type of reading to John Keats’s (much ballyhooed and usefully recontextualized and imbued with all sorts of extratextual meaning) idea of negative capability, as expressed in a letter to his “brothers” George and Thomas Keats, dated December 22, 1817. This state of being is “when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (Keats 277). It is a posture of accepting that while something might not be easily explained through fact and reason, it might be more accurately described and understood in another way, through the experience and acceptance of uncertainty. Symbolic language like metaphor is often used in poetry, but, as Lakoff and Johnson have shown, metaphor is inextricable from common language use. Metaphor everywhere entices us into moments of doubt, as Keats might call them, but there is a difference between the common mystery of language we ignore and the uncommon mystery of radical language we cannot ignore.

I don’t find it useful to say that Graham is precisely referring to the confusion a metaphor creates by expressing one thing in terms of another, or by defining one thing as another thing it is not, when she speaks of “reading below the threshold of interpretation.” However, I do think that the effect of metaphor, the uncertain meaning of two disparate entities held in unison forcefully by the agency of a language user, creates a gap in meaning that symbolizes a space just outside of the reach of interpretation’s concern. It is, of course, the working out of the metaphor, the ah-ha! moment of recognizing a discernable meaning in the metaphor that closes the gap and
collapses the metaphor’s uncertainty into describable meaning. Hypothetically, desirable meaning is a type of meaning that could be outlined in a student’s paper as proof of doing the reading, or it could be felt in the embrace of a loved one (or a stranger) who decides to stop debating you because a metaphor has allowed them to understand your intentions in a different way. Obviously, desirable meaning is useful.

Keats’s negative capability, therefore, might be interpreted as our human ability to amend the known by allowing the unknown to linger long enough for a change to occur. In the context of Keats’s letter, however, he is not referring to every human. For him, it is not a general human ability, but the ability of “a Man of Achievement” like William Shakespeare or “a great poet” like Samuel Taylor Coleridge. He specifically states in his letter that the “quality” of a person able to achieve negative capability is often expressed “especially in Literature” (277). He is explicit, in his concern, that this is a linguistic ability. I am guilty of perverting Keats and extending this type of linguistic agency to anyone and not just the great poets and men of achievement he prefers. I have a feeling Graham would take me to school on this point of being generous with Keats’s negative capability and her reading below the threshold of understanding. I don’t know for sure, but it’s a strong feeling she may not be as generous. Perhaps not all language users are ‘achieved’ poets or intuitive readers, but I think considering a language user to be a sometimes-poet is a useful metaphor.

Regardless, Graham’s focus is on the reader, in this case, instead of the writer. Remember, Keats is more invested in the genius of the writer. Graham wants a perceptive reader. Both writer and reader (speaker and hearer) are vital to the effect of metaphor. Communication is a cycle. Even self-talk is a kind of ouroboros of communication. What is the purpose of a writer able to achieve negative capability if a reader is not willing or able to engage below that
interpretive threshold? Keats and Graham are complementary in this regard. Metaphor is a compelling tool for both sides of the poetic transaction precisely because it demands at least an attempt at surrendering to a moment of transformation. Graham likens this to T. S. Eliot’s metaphor of the burial of the dead in “The Waste Land.” Eliot’s speaker cries, “‘That corpse you planted last year in your garden, / ‘Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?[’]” (Eliot 55). The burial of the dead is a metaphor in Graham’s reading for the supplication of the self to the actualization of a new way of thinking, and being, and knowing through a kind of transformation like death and re-birth.

In “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Eliot’s sort of poetic doctrine of modern poetry, he similarly calls for the death of the poet for the sake of the poem. Not literal death, of course, although perhaps yes. Death is a fate that awaits us all, especially given the context of tradition in which Eliot places this call for the surrendering of the self of the poet such that poetry may arise. Eliot’s focus here, like Keats, is on the poet as a language user who produces a specialized type of language. Whichever way you attack it, what Graham is getting at (via Keats and Eliot) is what Eliot gestures at about “the metaphysical theory of the substantial unity of the soul,” that a poet’s job is not to communicate the self, which is incommunicable, but to communicate a medium separate from the self that is a thing unto itself (Eliot 32). Graham’s reader should attack the medium from the other side of the conversation as interpreter. Graham herself similarly calls for the difficult abandonment of the personality of the reader for the sake of reading the peculiarity of the message as something separate from either the poet or the reader. She wants the reader’s sensibilities to read the poem, and not necessarily the reader’s personality. The personality, after all, may be out of touch with the sensibility.
I am mixing metaphors here (attack and abandon), or maybe I’m simply not being clear with them. My point is to suggest that the interaction between the poet, the poem as medium, and the reader is an apt metaphor for symbolic language that amends and challenges meaning in radical ways, not for the sake of obscurity, but for the sake of successful linguistic communication. To make this analogy more explicit: a poem is to mediating knowledge between poet and reader, as a metaphor is to mediating meaning between old knowledge and new. Even Graham’s poems in *The End of Beauty* seek to communicate something. That something may be the existence of an inexpressible nothingness, but that’s still something: that a beauty exists outside of – and is ended by – language. The medium is the message, and on this I think Graham and I agree. Sometimes, a successful metaphor is the medium and the message at once.

Enough theory, let me turn to a couple of the examples Graham engages as an illustration of reading below the threshold of interpretation, one good and one bad. However, my aim is not simply to imitate or recite Graham. Please watch her lecture on YouTube, if you have the stomach for stream of consciousness, and witness her description of the experience of reading these lines of poetry. Like I have done with Eliot and Keats, instead, I’d like to recontextualize and worry these examples to illustrate my own thesis about how linguistic meaning is less fixed when engaged with in a radical and intentional way.

This is not to say that the net equity of metaphorical play is an intentional result. It is more quasi-intentional. Often, meaningful uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts are the result of an intention to play, seek, and discover instead of a calculated agenda toward a specific goal. The meaningfulness of a mystery often lies in the acceptance of its inability to be solved with the tools of language and human knowledge. A mystery is not always meaningful because it has one specific solution or exact meaning. Even in games and stories, it is precisely the moment of
solution and naming that ends the mystery altogether. The point is sometimes not the meaning arrived at but language’s willingness to bend at the agency of the language user, especially when approached with a sensibility of one’s own linguistic agency.

Graham wrestles with half a line of Walt Whitman out of context from “Song of Myself” in *Leaves of Grass*: “The sniff of green leaves and dry leaves” (30). This is her bad example because it requires or perhaps allows the reader to do too much sensory work not guided by the language of the poet. I’m not sure I exactly get Graham’s point, but I think it might be that the mystery is too large. The leaves of a tree are described only as green and dry. To make sense of this, you must fill in the blank space of what type of tree it could be. Because I am being asked to smell the leaves, I think of pine because I associate pine with a scent of greenness as it relates to trees, but I also reject pine or some type of evergreen because I don’t think of them as having leaves. They have needles. I think of the trees of my childhood in the rural Midwest, the maple and oak and walnut trees of a small town in the middle of the Northern part of Illinois. I think of an assignment in the second or third grade where we collected fallen leaves in autumn and did something with them in Dawn liquid soap to make their colors, not green but red, and yellow, and orange, bleed onto paper that we dried and decorated for our mothers as some sort of greeting card or seasonal gift.

Again, I have wandered and am smelling liquid soap, but also the antiseptic yet dusty hallway of that grammar school, the remnants of cigarette smoke on my K-mart shirt and ill-fit jeans. Moreso, it is the combination of green *and* dry that suggests a time of transition within the air, like autumn, which fits precisely into the context of Whitman’s poetic exaltation [note to self to google Eliot’s thoughts on Whitman’s ‘personality’] but that would require placing Whitman’s line back in context. For obvious reasons, I place green leaves above me and dry leaves below
me, so this is really a combination of smells, two variations of a theme, two seasons of the life of
a single entity. Green leaves smell like the summer you’re leaving behind, and dry leaves smell
like the winter you’re taking ahead (that’s not right). Suddenly there is the sense of this being a
place in time that is between two times. “The sniff of green leaves and dry leaves” is one new
smell created by the combination of two smells meeting at one moment in my sense as a reader
standing in the place of Whitman’s speaker. I am smelling an at-onceness. Probably because
Graham suggested I might. The smell is suddenly a metaphor for at-onceness because I have
made it so explicitly in language just now, but not really. I’ve only said I have. Graham, I think,
is suggesting the strangeness is only there for the briefest moment. And perhaps that’s the end of
that mystery.

Graham turns to another smell of autumn in the Wallace Stevens poem “A Postcard from
the Volcano.” It is the better example, she says. A line and a half from Stevens: “in autumn,
when the grapes / Made sharp air sharper by their smell.” Stevens cheats a bit by making autumn
explicit in the fourth line of the overall poem. Whitman doesn’t mention “autumn” until the end
of “Song of Myself” in section 49 of 52 (87). Whitman’s sniff was way back in section 2. I’m not
going to count the lines, it’s too many. Stevens’s postcard is much smaller than Whitman’s tome
of leaves, so all is forgiven. We are in autumn and there are grapes. The air is already sharp,
which to me speaks of temperature. I think of sharp air as having a coldness noticeably below the
comfort of my body temperature, such that once it’s taken into the body and internalized there is
an incongruity that stabs or stings like a knife or sickness. I have not spent much time around
grapes in the outdoors, so I lack the olfactory experience to immediately do this work for
Stevens. I encounter grapes in plastic bunches at the grocery story, or else in small doses while
standing at the open refrigerator door. A grape in my sensibility does not exist in the wild, and it
certainly never makes it onto a plate by my doing. Maybe a bowl. I don’t know that I smell grapes. It is more of a taste for me, so my sense of the sharp smell of a grape is signified by the sharp taste of a grape. It likely has that same coolness (it has been in the refrigerator) that complements the contrast of its sweetness or sourness that is a smell caught in translation between my tongue and my nose. Given the interaction between my teeth and the grape, this is also a smell of the vulnerability of the flesh. I picture fallen grapes that have been trampled on by some grape-farmer (why not?) or child, as there is a child in the Stevens poem picking up bones, unaware of the flesh of the grape that was there some prior season contributing its sharply odorous transition into nothingness to the smell of autumn air. Is the smell of this autumn somethingness a metaphor for the unavoidable nothingness that the absence of the grapes in the reality of the child suggests? I’m not sure I care.

Whitman’s leaves and Stevens’s grapes represent a meaning in my reading that may or may not be relevant to the poet’s intention or another person’s reading. Eliot might like me to abandon my personality as a reader, and Graham may want me to read below the threshold of that personality, and yet I can’t escape my experience: the yellow ghost of a leaf bleached onto construction paper, the taste of autumn at the refrigerator door. Should I sing myself like Whitman or bury myself like Eliot? Let’s do both. But that is another perversion, as there is a reading in which we all agree. I have referred to this as an instance of multi-dimensional meaning that relies on both the literal and the figurative, the known and unknown. For Eliot, it is the tradition that the individual talent is behooved to acknowledge. For Whitman, it is the atoms we share, and for Graham it is a knowledge arrived at through the engagement of our sensibilities beyond language. For my secular brother Stevens, it is the song of the mind after the song is sung. I simply wish to extend this poetic gesture to more aspects of meaning within
language, to do away with the concept of the literal, not because the literal does not exist, but simply because ignoring it is a useful illusion. To say that X means X is meaningless, because it is tautological and provides no new information. To say that X means Y is meaningful, because it provides a duplicate that is different enough to contrast with the original, and that making out of the difference provides meaning for both. Inherent to this type of “meaning” is the simple observation that X only means Y because X is not exactly Y. This is metaphor; therefore, metaphor is meaning. Meaning is a substitution open to substitution.

For evidence of this simply ask yourself or someone you love if a taco is a sandwich, open any dictionary and witness a web of self-referential definitions that bounce back and forth between meanings, or attempt to describe a sensation like pain or love in language that someone else will understand exactly as you do. When we ask, ‘what does X mean?’ we are asking ‘what can we replace X with?’ Metaphor replaces the X with the unexpected, which is only unexpected until it is not, at which point the metaphor breaks down and becomes literal or meaningless (in that its meaning is itself). Many artists, perhaps Stevens among that number, say that sometimes a piece of art is its own meaning, which I interpret to be an artistic gesture of its own. I don’t believe those artists who say that.

Robert Frost gives an example of how metaphor breaks down in a speech he delivered at Amherst College on November 15, 1930. How unfortunate that YouTube was not present at those remarks! (I know that’s not how YouTube works. This is a meager attempt at comedy. Witness the exclamation point. Plus, this joke draws a metaphorical line directly from Frost to Graham, so it’s utilitarian and meaningful scholarship. You’re welcome.) An eventual text version of the speech was published shortly thereafter and titled “Education by Poetry;” thereby, I can quote him directly without having to pause and interpret a computer-generated transcript.
Frost summarizes a hypothetical conversation between himself and an unnamed ‘somebody’ in which the universe is thought of as being a machine. The universe is a machine. Frost questions this strawman ‘somebody’s’ metaphor by pointing out that the universe does not have “a pedal for the foot, or a lever for the hand, or a button for the finger” (723). Of course not. Understandably frustrated, this somebody gives up the metaphor, and Mr. Literal, the poet Robert Frost, emerges triumphant as the breaker of metaphors.

Frost’s point is more efficiently, and less dickishly, expressed in his explanatory paragraph that follows: “All metaphor breaks down somewhere. That is the beauty of it. It is touch and go with the metaphor, and until you have lived with it long enough you don’t know when it is going. You don’t know how much you can get out of it and when it will cease to yield. It is a very living thing. It is as life itself” (723). If a metaphor did not break down at some point, it would not be a metaphor. To follow Frost’s metaphor in the above quotation, if life did not eventually succumb to death, what would the meaning of life be? Metaphor, like life, like meaning, is temporary.

Anyway, Frost’s success with “Education by Poetry” allowed him to tour and speak about the importance of metaphor to the purpose of education. “We seldom tell [students that thinking] is just putting this and that together,” Frost says, “it is just saying one thing in terms of another. To tell them is to set their feet on the first rung of a ladder the top of which sticks through the sky” (723). His speaking engagements took him to Yale University that spring. An hour and a half trip south is not so far to go, sure, but it’s 1931 and a poet is touring like a rock star; this is exciting. Yale News was there: “Robert Frost’s main contention during the course of the speech . . . was that modern critics are too prone to read into poetry what is not there. Symbolism, according to Frost, often overshadows truth, and the reader is likely to interpret
almost anything” (“Robert” 1). I suppose this is the dark side of our ability to speak about one thing in terms of another, but just as death is the cost of life, misinterpretation is the cost of symbolic communication. Frost does not make this argument reported by the newspaper in “Education by Poetry,” but I can see how he might easily lean into the preciousness of the work of the poet, for it is the same preciousness with which we protect meaning in the medium of standard communication.

Michael J. Reddy’s 1979 essay “The Conduit Metaphor—A Case of Frame Conflict in Our Language about Language” is famous among linguists for pointing out how one of the conceptual metaphors we use about language leads to a misguided attitude toward meaning, especially when it comes to miscommunications and misinterpretations of individual truths. We speak of communication as if our words are conduits of the meaning we put into and take out of them. Reddy says this way of thinking “suggests that communication transfers thought processes somehow bodily” (286). If I put meaning and intention into a chunk of language and pass it over to you, it can be spectacularly annoying when you don’t take my exact meaning and intention out of that communication chunk I gave you. Yale News says Robert Frost was extra cranky about this on Friday, March 13, 1931. Who would blame him for being a little surly that readers are free to interpret whatever they want to? Someone might have delicately reminded Frost of his own idea that education teaches us how to think and not what to think. You can’t have it both ways, can you? Reddy reminds us that meaning is subjective and not objective. So, let there be justice for the taste of grapes at my open refrigerator as a metaphor for Stevens’s smell of autumn, both of which those children picking up bones are embarrassingly ignorant of. Teach the children, Robert Frost.
A better metaphor for language, according to Reddy, would acknowledge the “radical subjectivity” of language users, as if they are each isolated in individual environments (292). Language is more like a blueprint of instructions for how to assemble meaning, which we each can only interpret given what we have access to in our individual environments. As Reddy writes, “Language seems rather to help one person to construct out of his own stock of mental stuff something like a replica, or copy, of someone else’s thoughts – a replica which can be more or less accurate, depending on many factors” (287). What I understand X to mean in this paradigm can only ever be a substitution for what you understand X to mean in your paradigm. The theory is that if we both understand language as a blueprint instead of a conduit, we might be more inclined to forgive miscommunication and, thereby, be more flexible with meaning. We may even put forth more effort into both understanding and being understood.

It is because of our radical subjectivity as individuals that we must at times engage our talents to correct tradition when it gets our story wrong. The symbolic nature of language allows room for the language user to construct their own environment of meaning, and, given the utility of metaphor, communicate that radical individuality to someone in an entirely different environment in a meaningful way. As the literary scholar Denis Donoghue says in his book on the philosophical history of metaphor, “We normally—and justly—speak of metaphor as an irruption of desire, specifically the desire to transform life by reinterpreting it, giving it a different story” (Donoghue 134). What makes metaphor so useful as a tool of language is that it can be used in more than one way, for more than one purpose. In “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Eliot expresses a seemingly contradictory sentiment: “Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from
personality” (33). I see the difference between Donoghue and Eliot as a duality instead of a contradiction.

Metaphor can communicate both radical individuality and communal unification. Language, especially the kind we might be lucky enough to encounter in whatever it is we call poetry, shows us a reflection of ourselves while simultaneously allowing us to see the selves we are not. Radical metaphors are both mirrors and windows. All we must do is temporarily abandon what we think we already know to be true. Then we might describe and experience our worlds and ourselves with all our sensibilities engaged.

* * *

Descriptions

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists.

T. S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (49)

Tom Andrews was an American writer born in 1961. His first book of poetry, The Brother’s Country, was selected for The National Poetry Series by the poet Charles Wright and published by Persea Books in 1990. Wright would be named Poet Laureate of the United States in 2014. Andrews’s second book of poetry, The Hemophiliac’s Motorcycle, won the 1993 Iowa Poetry Prize and was published by University of Iowa Press in 1994. That book is divided into three sections, the third of which, titled “Codeine Diary,” is a short memoir in a form that combines prose and poetry with short lines of text that resemble proverbs, or aphorisms, and describe simple images from his memory. Andrews adapted that long poetic sequence into a full-
length book of prose titled *Codeine Diary: A Memoir* that was published by Little, Brown in 1998. The memoir details his personal experiences dealing with hemophilia as he comes of age alongside his brother, John, who lives with a serious kidney disease. John died in 1980. In 2001, Andrews was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, but in July of that year he also died unexpectedly of a rare disease unrelated to his own hemophilia. His collected works, *Random Symmetries*, which includes previously unpublished material, was published posthumously and is available from Oberlin College Press. Including early publications in academic and literary journals, Andrews’s work as a poet, literary scholar, and memoirist spans from the 1980’s through his death just after the turn of the century and millennium.

The poet Jack Ridl, a mentor to whom Andrews dedicated his first book, wrote a short essay for a memorial reading held at Hope College, where Andrews discovered that his talents as a writer might be exercised in the medium of poetry. Ridl recalls telling Andrews he should consider writing poems: “I told him that over the summer he should take an anthology of contemporary American poets and choose 25-30 of them and write a poem in the manner of each. . . .That fall when he showed them to me, I was dumbfounded. It was as if each of these poets he’d selected had written their next poem” (Ridl). Indeed, one of the themes that runs through Andrews’s work is an unabashed acknowledgment of and playful reverence for the poets, philosophers, and scholars who influenced his own life and writing. Andrews is not shy with epigraphs, positioning his own work next to words of inspiration from Samuel Beckett, Gottfried Wilhelm Liebniz, George Bernanos, George Oppen, Christopher Smart, Thomas De Quincey, Constantin Righas, and Shakespeare, to name a few. In his two published books of poetry, Andrews invokes the names of writers like Samuel Pepys, Saint Augustine, Paul Celan, Johannes Bobrowski, Wallace Stevens, Günter Eich, George Herbert, and Frank O’Hara in the
poem titles alone. Within the work itself, Andrews engages the likes of Joan Didion, William Butler Yeates, Arthur Rimbaud, William Stafford, Sylvia Plath, Charles Wright, Joan Rivers, Emily Dickinson, Oliver Sacks, John Ashbury, Ezra Pound, Joe Brainard, Paul Valéry, and Monty Python. Add to that many other painters, filmmakers, mathematicians, and more; this list is anything but comprehensive.

T. S. Eliot reminds us that the appreciation of an artist is also the appreciation of the artists who have influenced them. Andrews doesn’t shy away from influence, he names it, and welcomes the chorus of voices in his intellect to permeate and enrich his own art. Harold Bloom, that most omnipotent and oppressive Scooby-Doo ghost of an American literary critic, fashioned a career out of naming the struggle writers have with their forebearers. Bloom says, “This anxiety, this mode of melancholy, is the anxiety of influence, the dark and daemonic ground upon which we now enter” and proceeds to explain that modern writers are troubled to the point of submission by the tradition Eliot was so intent on reminding poets to acknowledge (Bloom 25). The most prone to this anxiety, for Bloom, are the modern and postmodern poets unable to live up to the quality of work exemplified by our literary traditions. “The death of poetry,” Bloom mumbles behind his old-timey gentleman mask, “will not be hastened by any reader’s broodings, yet it seems just to assume that poetry in our tradition, when it dies, will be self-slain, murdered by its own past strength” (10). Why even write a poem, Bloom seems to wonder, when all the good ones have already been written? It’s a good thing Jack Ridl didn’t subscribe to such literary buffoonery when he advised young Tom Andrews to give it a shot.

Andrews’s work embraces influence in a way that acknowledges to the reader that the speaker’s voice does not speak alone, as if to say: ‘This new poetic language is made of an intelligence processed through old poetic language. Now I share it with you so that you might
assimilate and make something with it, this malleable tradition that’s meant to be shared, neither old nor new.’ Despite whatever anxiety Andrews the man might have felt, the work does not, to this reader, bear wounds of anxiety. For example, Andrews’s poem “Thinking of Wallace Stevens” ends with lines that both imitate and honor Stevens’s poetry, while playfully drawing a vulnerable image of the poet himself:

> The wind in Asia is and is not the wind
> in Hartford, he says. The tongue
> is an eye. The eye is an element . . .
>
> Be with us, old, fancy man. (47)

Andrews turns influence into a solid foundation upon which to build a poetic home. A weak house on a strong foundation will not stand, so it’s fair to say that poets both living and dead must hold up their end of the construction. Another effect of this gesture of naming one’s influences is the canonization of their name and their work, as if to keep the memory of something alive by speaking its name. Language itself is the result of a web of influence at every utterance. This is an influence from which language users cannot escape, and for which they should harbor no anxiety. Even Bloom recognizes this after he engages a strangely homoerotic metaphor about poets developing their talents like Adam and Satan coming into their prime:

> “The intensification and the self-realization [of poets] alike are accomplished only through language, and no poet since Adam and Satan speaks a language free of the one wrought by his precursors.” Bloom acknowledges that this is not merely a poetic phenomenon, but the nature of language by invoking, but not quoting, Noam Chomsky’s theory of language acquisition: “when one speaks a language, one knows a great deal that was never learned” (Bloom 25).

The poetic manuscript that constitutes chapter two of this study begins with an epigraph that is taken from Opus Posthumous, a collection of writing by the poet Wallace Stevens.
gathered and published after his death by another poet and scholar, Samuel French Morse. As Charles Poore explained in *The New York Times* upon the collection’s publication in the ‘50s, it is “an extraordinarily interesting archaeological collection of his prose and verse. Some of it has not been published before. . . . All of it illuminates his development and his achievement” (Poore). The writer as archaeologist is an apt metaphor for the creation of a literary work in many ways. In constructing a memoir like *Codeine Diary* or a book of poetry like *The Hemophiliac’s Motorcycle*, Andrews as author takes care to curate the collection of details from his life. He composes his style of writing and his register of voice for each piece. He curates all of this in his work as a writer to tell his story and constitute the body of his poetic creation. The key to a successfully artistic linguistic gesture is the curation that goes into the composition, and the same can be said for successful linguistic communication. The words we choose, the details we leave out, and the way we speak all contribute to the message we convey. As the linguist H. P. Grice notes in the first maxim of his theory of cooperation in communication: “Make your contribution as informative as is required . . . Do not make your contribution more informative than is required” (Grice, “Logic” 308). This is curation.

The history of language, like the history of poetry, is so vast that no one piece of language or literature can encapsulate all of that history, nor does it need to. To use Jorie Graham’s metaphor, much of the work of meaning is done below the threshold of interpretation. In a sense, the bones that a language user as archaeologist excavates to represent versions of unknown creatures are pieces of curation. Curation is analogous to the construction of the self that Wallace Stevens references in the quote I have excavated from his ephemeral writing in *Opus Posthumous*. It is a quotation taken out of context from a collection of quotations taken out of context and reconstructed into a literary representation of a person and his knowledge. I am
speaking here comprehensively of Stevens’s gesture, Morse’s gesture, Andrews’s gesture, and my gesture, both in chapter two and here. The Stevens epigraph itself represents the multi-dimensional aspects of meaning represented by Stevens’s idea of the knowledge and sense of self being a linguistic construction. There is the sign: “By dint of constructing, . . . I truly believe that I have constructed myself. . . . To construct oneself, to know oneself—are these two distinct acts or not?” (882). There is the concept: this question and theory of self-definition, the meaning of which might be conveyed through summary or substitution of the elements of the sign itself.

There is the language user invoked: Stevens, Morse, me, and you, the current reader, for example. And there is the instance of utterance represented: as you’re reading it, as I wrote it, when we think of this tomorrow, when Morse encountered it, and when Stevens wrote it, for example. What it all collectively means is some combination of all aspects available, but they can’t all exist in the moment of the mind at once. One must curate.

Steven’s poem “Of Modern Poetry” begins with these lines:

The poem of the mind in the act of finding
What will suffice. It has not always had
To find: the scene was set; it repeated what
Was in the script.

Then the theatre was changed
To something else. Its past was a souvenir. (218)

Is “The poem of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice” not a metaphor for curation and the construction of the self and one’s knowledge? The word poem in the first line might maintain its standard meaning and be literally a reference to a poem, but because it is “of the mind” the concept of a thought or a form of knowledge fits as an appropriate substitution for the concept of poem. The words scene, and script, and theatre introduce a metaphor that the reader of the poem must work out. What does this mean? Well, what can the words and concepts be
substituted with? The scene might be any location, any event, or – given that we are now in the realm of poetry and of the mind – it might be any poem or other representation of knowledge. The script correlates to the memorized words that actors speak during a scene. Under the title “Of Modern Poetry,” Stevens, his speaker, or the reader might wonder if he means language that has been repeated, types of poems that have been canonized, and ways of understanding the world that have been sufficient. But what good is an old script when an actor is suddenly in a new scene at a new theater?

A new theater, a new poem with new words, a new place and time, a new way of understanding the world; metaphor allows the substitution of any or all of these. I wonder if Graham would like Stevens to be more specific, or less? I don’t know; there’s always something to complain about. Would Eliot love it? Who cares. Do you? The sixth line introduces another metaphor that complicates and enriches the text further: the past is a souvenir. We can’t access Stevens’s mind when he wrote this; if only. But we (well, I’ll do it for both of us) can access the mammoth 5th edition of The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language I bought myself for Christmas a few years ago. Page 1676 defines souvenir as “a token of remembrance; a memento” and explains its origins as coming from the Old French meaning “to recall, memory” and Latin meaning “to come to mind.” No mention of ‘random junk you bought on vacation.’ So is the past a memory, an old poem in the mind, itself a representation of the scene, and the script, and the theater that used to be? And if so, the new poem of the mind must also be nothing more than a representation of now. Theoretically, the same can be said of the relationship between language and meaning; theaters, actors, and scripts constantly change; the poem, like meaning, is an act in perpetual motion.
Ferdinand de Saussure’s work on signification within the field of linguistics similarly illustrates meaning as an active interaction between the signs we use to mean things and those things that are meant. He differentiates between the *signifier*, a “sound pattern” or its correspondent linguistic token, and the *signified*, the concept the token represents; the interaction between both constitute a “linguistic sign” in the process of *signification* (66-67). Let me direct your attention to the words *interaction* and *process* in this theory. There is movement, change, and perpetual motion; concepts familiar to the Stevens poem we just discussed. Saussure’s theory becomes even more dynamic when he suggests understanding linguistic signs as having the fundamental characteristics of arbitrariness and temporality (67-69). Concepts and the language used to express them are not inextricably linked. Different language can be used for the same concept, and the same language can be used to express different concepts. Within reason, words and concepts are interchangeable with other words and concepts. Linguistic tokens and meaning can be manipulated and substituted in dynamic, creative, and radical ways. Even more thrilling, language is a linear means of representing nonlinear concepts; therefore, context is vital to signification, as meaning demands consideration of the temporal. Sign, concept, language user, and instance of utterance all determine meaning.

The act, or process, of meaning confirms that there is a cause-and-effect relationship between what is said and what is meant, but not necessarily in that order. If you fall out of a tree, branches may get broken, you may get broken, and your mother’s heart may get broken. The curation of words by a language user is of vital significance to meaning. The natural world (the tree) reacts to the force of the unnatural world (the body falling through it). I’ll let you work out which one is language, and which one is meaning in that metaphor. Wallace Stevens’s poem “Anecdote of the Jar” is from his first book of poetry, *Harmonium*, published in 1923. The poet
Edward Hirsch describes a reading of that poem as a symbol of the idea that “the imagination acts as a way to organize the constantly changing and chaotic world.” In the action of the poem, the speaker places a jar into an American wilderness, and the wildness of nature is in some way tamed and organized by the mere presence of the speaker’s agency. Hirsch explains that the jar, “the human artifact, emblem of the imagination, structures everything around it,” but reminds us that the jar of the poem is just the word *jar*. It is not the jar, but the “mind [that] transforms the place, creating order out of wilderness” (Hirsch 74). Even the most seemingly innocuous linguistic token has an incalculable effect upon the imagination’s perception of reality; so, I contend we extrapolate that theory to the placement of a radical token within the wilderness of the cognitive system and hypothesize that the conceptual metaphors that govern our language may break, or at least bend a bit.

The agency of the language user is representative of one of the inherent freedoms that native language use affords us as sentient beings with free-within-reason will. Despite the souvenirs of the past that weigh down our pockets, and the myriad of societal constraints placed upon our individual bodies, minds, and abilities, we do still – thanks to the generative grammar of our language system – possess the unique ability to speak at will. Patti Smith, the multi-hyphenate singer, writer, and cultural icon, rose to fame in the 1970s as a sort of punk rock poet celebrity hybrid force of nature. She won the 2010 National Book Award for Nonfiction for her memoir *Just Kids*, and she was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2007. Her one-line introduction on the Rock Hall website is: “The high priestess of punk-poetry” (“Patti Smith”). Born in 1946, and as active as ever at the age of 77, Smith should consider herself officially canonized within the annals of American literature, but she crosses so many genres it’s hard to pin her down. That’s probably what she’s going for, and her demand for independence is
probably why people refer to her as the “godmother of punk,” a label she tried to peel off in a 2015 interview with music journalist Greg Kot. He explains that “because the arrival of *Horses,*” Smith’s breakout debut album, “coincided with the first sparks of punk in New York City, Smith was labelled by critics and fans” with that “misnomer she’s still trying to dismiss” (Kot).

The language used to describe Smith was a product of her environment, but she also changed that environment with her sharp insistence of independence and self-actualization while inviting the gaze of the camera as a developing rock and roll celebrity. Her career and the public persona she developed is a metaphor for the type of linguistic agency and power of the imagination I’m placing under discussion. The problem with language (and the imagination, for that matter) is that it’s prone to the threat of debilitating stasis. Linguistic and social prescriptivists try to inhibit what can and cannot be said, what words can and cannot mean, and what the imagination should and should not propose. They can pretend that language, concepts, and language users are metaphorically immovable forces, yet all are constantly in a state of flux. Smith, in my reading, symbolizes the flux of recontextualization.

In *Just Kids,* Smith describes a young version of herself writing poetry every day, unable because unwilling to hold down a steady job. She is at the point of trying to understand herself as an artist who is a poet but begins to look outside of her expectations for inspiration. One night, she sees The Doors in concert and explains, “I had a strange reaction watching Jim Morrison. Everyone around me was transfixed, but I observed his every move in a state of cold hyperawareness. . . . I felt, watching Jim Morrison, that I could do that” (Smith 59). Something about even the visualization of herself as Jim Morrison changes the version of Patti Smith we see presented in the recollection of her story. And the real Patti Smith – well, the one in my mind –
actualizes that and the wilderness surrounds her like nature’s custom gown. And still the word punk will appear on her headstone. Here lies the godmother of punk.

Lakoff and Johnson itemize no less than four sets of conceptual metaphors for life and death in *Metaphors We Live By*: LIFE IS UP and DEATH IS DOWN; LIFE IS ARRIVAL and DEATH IS DEPARTURE; LIFE IS LIGHT and DEATH IS DARKNESS; and LIFE IS HEAT and DEATH IS COLD (15, 215). There are other examples given for life in its totality, like LIFE IS A STORY, but they leave it to the reader to determine which part of the story death is (173). There is no shortage of poetry written about death, of which chapter two of this study is evidence, but death is just such a useful metaphor. Even existential-dread Barbie is thinking about it these days. Of course, a metaphor is only a metaphor until it symbolizes itself exactly instead of symbolizing something else, like a train leaving the station. Death is not a metaphor for death. Anne Sexton’s poem “The Truth the Dead Know” includes a dedication after the title and before the poem: “for my mother, born March 1902, died March 1959 / and my father, born February 1900, died June 1959.” Notable is that her parents, born two years apart, died two months apart. In the first stanza of the poem, Sexton’s speaker both employs language and completes an action: “Gone, I say and walk from church, / refusing the stiff procession to the grave, / letting the dead ride alone in the hearse” (306). It is June, and death is not a departure, life is. The speaker is alive, and she is gone.

But then again, reading below the threshold of interpretation, I bend toward Sexton’s oblique suggestion that life and death are the same, which both exemplifies the conceptual metaphors of arrival and departure in the same instant it contradicts it. The dead father is departing in his direction, and the living-dead speaker is departing in her own direction. The title of the poem makes me wonder about the “truth” at which the dead arrive in the poem. The father,
departing toward his unknown destination, knows a truth that the speaker cannot know. The speaker, departing toward her erotic destination—read the poem to find out more—manifests a knowable truth for herself. All that’s happening here is that I’m changing around the words for you, dear reader, and the meaning is changing. I am manifesting a truth of our own. The poet Leslie Ullman complicates this reading by adding biographical knowledge of Sexton’s life in an essay about the confessional poets of the 1960s. She writes that Sexton “longed for death and eventually took her own life, but . . . [it] did not override other elements of her sensibility, such as a sometimes deadly wit and an ability to celebrate her body, her children, and the fiercely joyous side of a turbulent emotional life” (Ullman 197). The aesthetic truth expressed in Sexton’s poem resists categorization, definition, and certainty of meaning; and yet, it rings true.

At the end of the second stanza of Sexton’s poem, the speaker insists, “In another country people die” (Sexton 306). Her separation from death is so strong it demands another, this time geographical, metaphor. The poet Natasha Trethewey uses a similar metaphor in her poem “My Mother Dreams Another Country” in her collection Native Guard, which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 2006. Trethewey was named Poet Laureate of the United States in 2012 by the Library of Congress and served for two terms during the administration of President Barack Obama. Selected subject matter from Native Guard addressing Trethewey’s personal history, specifically the murder of her mother, are retold in her 2020 memoir, Memorial Drive. There is a striking similarity in the metaphor of ‘another country’ as it is used in both poems; it is a delineation between life and death haunted by the knowledge that there is ultimately no such delineation. The border between life and death is as significant as the line on a map that separates one country from another. In Trethewey’s poem, that other country exists only in the “dream” of the title, but also it is the world into which her unborn child both racially black and racially
white, not yet Natasha, will be born into. It is America; it is her mother’s country, but also not. There is an arrival in *Native Guard* that is also a departure. There are many. Trethewey begins the poem with the words, “Already the words are changing,” as a symbol of the changing country her mother’s daughter will arrive to and depart from (37). It should be noted that Trethewey uses *words* as a metaphor here. She does not say that the words’ referents are changing, just that the words themselves are changing. Often, it is only the words that change.

Gottlob Frege is the philosopher we credit with differentiating between *sense* and *reference*, which explains some of what Trethewey is doing in “My Mother Dreams Another Country.” To summarize, Frege explains that signs like words have meaning in two distinct ways. First, signs mean “that to which the sign refers,” and that thing may exist as an entity in the world of our shared experience, or simply as a conceptual thought. Either way, this is the *reference*, or referent, of the sign. Second, Frege makes a distinction about the difference between disparate signs with the same reference. He calls this “the *sense* of the sign, wherein the mode of presentation is contained.” To illustrate, he presents variables with a striking resemblance to the algebraic representation it is easy to make out of metaphor: “the cognitive value of $a=a$ becomes essentially equal to that of $a=b$, provided $a=b$ is true” (Frege 210). The truth of the proposition is not in question. What arises is the difference between $a$ and $b$ when the mode of presentation varies. For example, $1+1=2$ has the same truth value as $4/2=2$ such that one could truthfully say that $1+1=4/2$. The problem is that there is a difference in what Frege would call the *sense* of each side of the equation. In the first example, two whole entities are bought together [$1+1$]. In the second example, some whole entity is split in half [$4/2$]. We sense a difference between two whole cheeseburgers and four halves of four cheeseburgers, even though they’re logically equal.
Let us return to the darkness, and how, like a Polaroid photograph, we understand it to slowly transition from a nothingness into a reflection of the world we perceive: like life and death, lightness and darkness are understood in terms of each other. They even share likenesses as linguistic tokens with their /l/ and their /d/. Theodore Roethke’s poem “In a Dark Time” begins with the line “In a dark time, the eye begins to see” (46). The darkness here is a description of a section of time, but time itself is not conventionally thought of in terms of the light or the dark. I can think of time as a currency, which you waste or spend, but not as having a relationship to light or its absence. A portion of the expanse of time, however, might be considered light or dark, so it needs to be understood what that section of time might symbolize. What is happening during this unit of time? Given only the first line, there is a transition between blindness and sight, an eye’s ability to express its function by seeing in an environment (a section of time) that inhibits its nature. I think of how the eyes adjust to darkness over time as the pupils adapt themselves to allow more light in so the environment can be deciphered. In a commentary on his own poem, Roethke states that the progression from light to darkness is precisely the intended meaning: “It is important to remember that the eye only begins to see: this is only a state in a long process” (Roethke, “On” 50). It is rare that a poet provides specific commentary, so the relevance of his own analysis should be taken with a grain of salt. Fortunately, in regular conversation we can ask people what they mean.

Another sense of darkness is conveyed in Randall Jarrell’s poem “90 North,” but instead of a beginning, it is an ending. Here is the last line and a half: “Pain comes from the darkness / And we call it wisdom. It is pain” (57). Without consulting commentary from Jarell, I sense a recognition of the language user’s ability to determine between symbolism they wish to accept and symbolism they wish to reject. Darkness here is symbolized as a source of pain, whatever
that pain may be. It is the metaphor of pain as wisdom that the speaker rejects by insisting that pain not be renamed but called by its more-true name. The rejection of a metaphor, like the selection of a metaphor, is also an example of the agency of the language user. Whatever this darkness stands for, the speaker will not accept its effect to be perverted into something that does not align with the truth of their personal experience. I, of course, have brought the concept of personal experience into the discussion. It is not there in the poem. So, this may alternately be a simple, yet meaningful, illustration of how a true metaphor is cancelable. The equation expressed by a statement like ‘pain is pain,’ for example, cannot be cancelled by saying ‘pain is not pain.’

Sheer will can neither negate nor create a tautology that exists outside of language, but it can negate or create a symbolic reference. Pain is wisdom can easily be cancelled by negating one side of the equation. To negate or accept a metaphor is at the whim of the language user. Jarrell says ‘no’ to the metaphor of PAIN IS WISDOM.

The first line of Sylvia Plath’s poem “Ariel” presents an image of darkness that represents a state of being the rest of the poem actively contradicts. It is an image that at first reading seems verbless: “Stasis in darkness.” However, just as darkness might be a perceived absence of light, stasis might be a perceived absence of movement, which itself could be read as an active choice. Like Jarrell’s speaker saying ‘no’ to the metaphor of pain as wisdom, Plath’s speaker seems to be negating this initial image of darkness as stillness. The rest of the poem is full of movement, and color, and light. If the reader refuses to move on from that first line, the meaning will not congeal into the poetic strangeness that Plath achieves. The second line of the poem, “Then the substanceless blue,” does not completely replace the darkness. The word then suggests a mere temporality or progression. The darkness may very well still be there, but now there is also something else there to recontextualize and amend the darkness. And this is
precisely what language users can accomplish through figurative speech and linguistic agency. Proclaiming that one thing is another does not deny literal meaning its long-earned place at the front of the line in the dictionary of social communication. Metaphor knows that meaning changes over time, like darkness to enlightenment; that meaning can be negated when things do not equate, like the gaslighting of pain; and that meaning can be recontextualized at will, like a pinprick of immobility surrounded by a cacophony of movement.

There is a scene in Tom Andrews’s memoir *Codeine Diary* where Tom is in the hospital recovering from a bleed. The poor guy’s voice seems to emanate from the hospital throughout the book; some people are just prone to fall. Leave it to the hemophiliac. In the scene, his nurse Ellen sees that he is writing something, so she asks what it is. He says, “I’m just trying to clarify some things. For myself, I mean. I was thinking of writing a poem.” Ellen responds with a sense of understanding, and says, “I’ve worked with patients who write as a way of coping. I bet poetry’s like therapy for you.” She offers him a perfectly acceptable, even kind, metaphor of writing, in this case poetry, as therapy. Tom is not unkind, but he rejects the metaphor and explains that, to him, “writing is therapeutic, but poetry is something you *make* out of your writing. . . . Most of the time you’re just working in the dark trying to find a pattern that will unlock meaning – or unlock the process of making meaning” (92-94). Darkness here seems to represent a space where meaning is not yet formed, a place where all the elements you need to make something meaningful exist but have not yet been put into an order of significance, as if it is a representation of the space knowledge takes up before it is known. In that case, I agree with Tom. Therapy is more of an expression than a creation; the meaning you make out of that expression is something different entirely.
In an interview for *Cold Mountain Review* in 1999, Andrews amends, or expands, his thoughts on writing as therapy from the point of view of Andrews as poet instead of Andrews as a version of himself represented in the memoir. When asked if writing deepens his understanding of a difficult subject like his brother’s death, Andrews responds: “I find that it’s exponentially more helpful to take that writing and make a piece of art out of it. It no longer becomes therapy, but an ordering process. Treating the subject like a lump of clay and trying to make something beautiful out of it. That is even more therapeutic . . .” Writing as therapy might then be transformed into poetry as a constructed work of art, which is a therapeutic process, but not itself therapy. He explains, “you’re giving up the intention of the writing being therapeutic. And that, paradoxically, is the most therapeutic part of the whole thing” (Tabor 63). To me, this entire gesture speaks to the transformative power of metaphor. A traumatic experience, as an example of any experience, may be processed in a transformative way that transcends our inability to amend the traumatic experience itself. The experience of the death of a close sibling at a young age, for example, once done cannot be undone. However, a linguistic representation of that experience can be described and then organized into an artistic expression that amends the meaning of the description of the experience but not the experience itself. That process of meaning-making by way of creating a poem or experimenting with metaphor can help us understand and express versions of the realities that we cannot change.

Toward the end of *Codeine Diary*, Andrews includes, in toto, the text of his poem “Dr. Farnsworth, a Chiropodist, Lived in Ohio, Where He Wrote Only the First Lines of Poems.” It was originally included in his debut collection, *The Brother’s Country*. He explains in the memoir, it’s “a poem I’d written out of a Monty Python poetic” (205). It is a 12-line poem with
each line separated and numbered. It is clearly a list of some of Dr. Farnsworth’s first lines of poetry:

1  The Moon smells like a fishbone. The cow

2  Plotinus, Porphory, strolling the lake’s

3  1925. Mountain, Table, Anchors, Navel

4  The smell of God in wood.

5  “She came to him, nuzzling his chest.”

6  Choas in ochre. Time in the physical. Light

7  Past the barn, past the worm-ridden apple trees

8  Organ swell. Cadance. Swedenborg with a walking stick,

9  The sun, lost

10  I have never dreamed of water.

11  Will God work only in Geometry, Emerson

12  Say of me that I am living still. (Codeine 205-06)

Most of the lines are believable poetic openings out of context, like “Past the barn, past the worm-ridden apple trees” and “The sun, lost.” Others are knowingly comedic and playful, like “The smell of God in wood.” [Can you imagine?] and “‘She came to him, nuzzling his chest.’”
[In quotation marks!]. The twelfth line is a poetic whisper that knocked the wind out of me when I first read it: “Say of me that I am living still.” When I first read that line, Andrews was living still, I can say that much. But I knew from his work that his brother wasn’t, and I felt a likeness in his expression, via Dr. Farnsworth, to the sudden and unexpected death of my own close sibling when we were both very young adults. I imagine Eliot being smugly unimpressed with the poetic likeness of this reading experience, for it depends too greatly on the personalities of both the poet and his reader. I don’t disagree, but my thesis here is not about preserving the sanctity of poetic tradition. The line “Say of me that I am living still” is symbolic of our linguistic agency to stand in place as a language user in a moment in time and willfully engage signs to express meaningfully authentic concepts that have very little to do with the truth or conventions of the literal. ‘That you are living still’ is something that can be said, and meant, and true. It is a poetic expression, a radical metaphoric gesture, and it is emblematic of a meaningful linguistic truth that transcends dependence on the interpretable knowledge of reality.

Patti Smith’s memoir *Just Kids* primarily recounts the story of her relationship with the artist Robert Mapplethorpe as they grew into adulthood and individual celebrity in their version of New York City in the 1960s and ’70s. Mapplethorpe was born in 1946, so he grew up in the middle of the twentieth century. He developed and matured alongside America after the Second World War, both Mapplethorpe and America adorned with a protective veil of presumed innocence that would be metaphorically ripped off the virginal bride’s head by the societal change of the late ’60s. Perhaps that tired metaphor itself is an irresponsible simplification, but Mapplethorpe was in his very early twenties during the time remembered by Smith: innocence is relative. He would achieve success both critically and commercially as a photographer known for arresting black and white Polaroid portraits that present voyeuristic, often homoerotic, subject
matter in precise and deifying compositions. In a brief note before the Forward of her memoir, Smith writes, “Much will be said about Robert, and more will be added. . . . In the end, truth will be found in his work, the corporeal body of the artist. It will not fall away. Man cannot judge it. For art sings of God, and ultimately belongs to him” (Smith ix). That little $h$ in the word *him* at the end of her note reads an ambiguity between the artist and the godliness. I am resistant to use the capital-$G$ term there because I don’t think that’s Smith’s point, or at least it reads as irrelevant whether she means *god* or *God*. Every other singular, masculine, accusative pronoun in that small square of text refers to Mapplethorpe, the antecedent, as an artist. The only reference to big-$G$ is as the object of the song of art. As object, it seems that God does not have agency over the art; therefore, the truth of an artistic creation ultimately belongs to the artist who created it. Mapplethorpe died in 1989 from an HIV/AIDS related illness.

Towards the end of the memoir, Smith describes sitting with Mapplethorpe during his illness and right before his death. He falls asleep next to her with his head on her shoulder. “The light poured through the windows upon his photographs,” she writes, “and the poem of us sitting together a last time. Robert dying: creating silence. Myself, destined to live, listening closely to a silence that would take a lifetime to express” (276). What is the meaning of the word *lifetime* at the end of that passage? If it is a metaphor, what can we substitute for *lifetime*? Let me describe the imagery of this quiet tableau of death, which contains not darkness but light and silence. There is no darkness because the writer doesn’t put it there. She chooses different metaphors. First, the threshold of the window is transgressed by an illumination that seems alive, its verb *pouring* is reminiscent of actively flowing water or the progression of a crowd, which is a stark contrast to the stillness of the artistry it illuminates. The image of Robert’s photographs, his artwork, is captured by the light, as if in a photograph of its own created by the language of the
memoirist. Smith’s writerly hand moves the light to the image of Patti and Robert as they sit together in the quiet reality of their moment. It is the light that illuminates their poetry, not the light that may or may not have shown that day, but the word light on page 276 of Smith’s book.

In their stillness, Smith still shows us the artist at work: Robert’s dying is a creation. He is manifesting the presence of his absence. Patti, the reader of his artistic expression, receives his message and holds onto it so that she may, one day, be able to translate Robert’s lifetime of silence in that moment into a new work of art.

While researching this project on April 15, 2022, I ordered a plastic Hoberman Expanding Mini Sphere Toy from Amazon for $19.17. I was thinking about meaning as an entity with conceptual density, and I thought the visual representation would help. I can forcefully expand it into a largeish round ball with nothing but air in the middle and many openings all around the outside of the structure. Collapsed, it is an annoyingly spikey creature that I couldn’t get a pinky finger comfortably through. If you toss it into the air with a bit of a spin, it will expand into its open form while air-bound and collapse into an unmoving shyness when you catch it. I was thinking about meaning as the conceptual part of the relationship between linguistic signs and language users. Depending on who you are, what you say, and where and when you’re at, what is meant might be understood as literal and impenetrable (the closed sphere in its rigidly dense state) or as figurative and permeable (the open sphere is its metaphorically less dense state). My issue with this metaphor, like there’s a little Robert Frost on my shoulder whispering sweet repudiations, is that the toy’s density doesn’t change whether open or closed. Its plastic bits and bobs are all the same. It just changes form, but it’s the same toy. It’s not lighter one way and heavier a different way. Its value is that it transforms at all, which has me thinking about the struggle, the movement of the sphere from one shape to another, the pouring
of the light through Smith’s window, the flowing of blood through the hemophiliac's veins, the transformation of language into meaning.

At the end of Memorial Drive, Trethewey invokes Federico García Lorca’s “Play and Theory of the Duende.” Throughout the essay, Lorca roundly defines the concept of duende as a “mysterious power which everyone senses and no philosopher explains;” it is “a power, not a work. It is a struggle, not a thought;” it is “not a question of ability, but of true, living style” (Lorca 49). It is a noun that, like life, possesses the properties of a verb. “With idea, sound, or gesture, the duende enjoys fighting the creator,” Lorca explains, “. . . the duende wounds. In the healing of that wound, which never closes, lie the strange, invented qualities of a man’s work” (58). Translations vary. Trethewey describes “Lorca’s idea of duende” as “a demon that drives the artist, causing trouble or pain and an acute awareness of death.” Her translation of Lorca reads: “‘In trying to heal the wound that never heals lies the strangeness’” (Trethewey, Memorial 209). Trethewey’s poetry in Native Guard and her memoir in Memorial Drive are descriptions of her struggle to form language representative of her memories into a metaphorical piece of art that represents and transcends her own knowledge and understanding of the pain and joy of living. On the surface, the subject of the struggle, the wound that needs healing might be the absence left by her mother’s murder; under the surface, it may be a wound for which we have no name, and yet her struggle creates a figurative and malleable double. Trethewey instructs her reader: “What matters is the transformative power of metaphor and the stories we tell ourselves about the art and meaning of our lives” (207-08).

Trethewey’s instructions are a reminder of the difference between the reality of the lives we live and the truth of how we understand and express those lives in language. What links the selected modern and contemporary American poets and writers of this study is not a special style
of metaphor, or the observation that they engage metaphor in their writing; instead, what links them often is an awareness of the difference between the reality of experience and the language we use to understand and express that reality. Trethewey refers to this type of language use as the *stories we tell ourselves*. Figurative types of language, which we sometimes refer to as stories and poetry, are categorized as fictional, artificial, and manufactured. More literal types of language, which we might refer to as journalism or history, are categorized as nonfiction, factual, and of-record. However, both figurative, and literal meaning are subject to the gap that exists between the reality of the world and the language we use to describe it.

Linguistic meaning does not exist outside of the context of utterance. When there is no sign, no concept, no language user, and no instance of utterance, there is no meaning. This is not to suggest there is no reality or signification outside of language, quite the opposite. Grice’s differentiation between natural and nonnatural signs in his 1957 paper “Meaning” suggests that linguistic meaning represented by human language is only nonnatural. This is precisely the difference between a life and the story of a life, for example. Metaphorically, a life might be understood to represent reality, while the story of a life might be understood to represent that reality expressed in language. Think of it as the difference between your body and a photograph of your body, your voice and a recording of your voice, your lifetime and a substitute for your lifetime. It’s not that there is no substitute for a lifetime, it’s just that the substitution is never the same thing. Language is not reality, but because language is such a significant medium for the representation of reality, we think they’re the same. Andrews, Smith, and Trethewey exhibit personal storytelling that understands a storyteller’s agency over language as a meaningful substitution for agency over reality.
Anecdotes

My poems seem so natural to me that I am never able to understand how they may seem otherwise to anyone else. They are not intended to be either deep, dark or mysterious. Whatever can be expressed can be expressed clearly. Épater les savants is as trifling as épater les bourgeois. But one cannot always say a thing clearly and retain the poetry of what one is saying.

Wallace Stevens, Letter to Mrs. Henderson dated March 27, 1922 (Collected 937)

Anecdote I

There is a recording of the poet Tom Andrews giving a poetry reading at The Chicago Poetry Center on October 15, 1997. It is available on the center’s website (“Andrews”). The well-meaning host introduces Andrews and alludes to his forthcoming book, Codeine Diary, but he mispronounces the word codeine as codeline and continues with his very polite and concise introduction. The error is just lingering in the atmosphere of the moment, but the book has not yet been published. Even Andrews’s acquaintances in the room might not have known the difference and taken it as fact. I find it humorous and noteworthy because the mispronunciation is on the record and available in the archive. You just know the poet likely heard it and may have cringed somewhere inside, resisting an urge to correct the host as he approached the podium. To me, this insignificant little glitch in the matrix is symbolic of the fallibility of language and a reminder that humility over preciousness is a virtue. Many poets and linguists share the trait of taking language to be a very serious matter of the utmost importance to both knowledge and what it means to embody nothing more than ‘one little anecdote’ in the innumerable volumes of
history. The best poets and linguists, in my opinion, take that seriousness with a grain of salt the size of which would make your momma blush. Without those moments of strangeness in our arts and ways of representing our lives, we might begin to believe that we live in a reality of autotuned synchronicity and there would be no wounds for us to heal, no demons for us to dance with.

Anecdote II

Regarding metaphor as a specialized area of linguistic study relevant to literature, I would caution myself away from Lakoff and Johnson’s *Metaphors We Live By* as inspiration for further research here. Its theory is specific, and its scope is limited, which is intended as a great compliment and not a subtle slight. It explains one aspect of the concept of metaphor, that of conventional metaphors inherent within our cognitive systems that help make common ‘every day’ linguistic use less of a struggle. I’ll invoke the conceptual metaphor of UNKNOWN IS UP and KNOWN IS DOWN to say that Lakoff and Johnson’s theory describes how language users rely on common ground for the kind of successful communication that relies on subconscious knowledge (8). That way we can chew and walk gum at the same time without worrying about the errors we might have made along the way. For a more general and, I think, inspirational description of metaphor relevant to language and literature, I might recommend John R. Searle’s book *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts*, which collects some of his work in the field of pragmatics, studies of meaning dependent upon context of utterance as much as, if not more than, upon the linguistic tokens curated into utterance. Included is his paper “Indirect Speech Acts,” which helps explain why a phrase like ‘Netflix and chill’ does not mean you want to literally watch Netflix and relax at the end of a long day with a friend. It has some
other meaning not immediately calculable from the semantic definitions of its individual
components. The example is mine and not Searle’s.

In the chapter titled “Literal Meaning,” Searle challenges the relevance of literality to
meaning in a way that at least acknowledges that even literal meaning depends on context, which
includes how perceptions and beliefs inherent to language articulation and interpretation demand
context. He argues “that for a large class of sentences there is no such thing as the zero or null
context for the interpretation of sentences, and that as far as our semantic competence is
concerned we understand the meaning of such sentences only against a set of background
assumptions about the context in which the sentence could be appropriately uttered” (117). You
and I might come to an agreement about what a word, phrase, or sentence might mean out of
context based on our experience with its individual parts, but even the most literal signs and
concepts depend on the language user and instance of utterance for interpretation of meaning.
Searle says this almost exactly. Notice what I consider to be a significantly tongue in cheek
gesture when he uses the word pleonastic in the following sentence as a nod to the inherent
strangeness and redundancy of language: “Strictly speaking, the expression ‘literal’ in the phrase
‘literal meaning of the sentence’ is pleonastic since all these other sorts of meaning – ironical
meaning, metaphorical meaning, indirect speech acts and conversational implicatures – are not
properties of sentences at all, but rather of speakers, utterances of sentences” (118). Meaning
requires a process of mediation between sign, concept, language user, and instance of utterance.
Without that dynamic negotiation, which is in perpetual motion, there is no meaning, literal,
figurative, or . . . whatever we agree to call it.

Searle’s essay on “Metaphor” provides as useful a description of metaphor as I have
come across. He writes, “I believe that there is no single principle on which metaphor works,”
and that “metaphors are both restricted and systematic; restricted in the sense that not every way that one thing can remind us of something else will provide a basis for metaphor, and systematic in the sense that metaphors must be communicable from speaker to hearer in virtue of a shared system of principles” (104). I’m probably partial to this dynamic theory of metaphor because my own thesis takes it for granted that metaphor is just a specialized type of the same symbolism and signification that we use in the language we do not consider metaphorical. Also, Searle’s definition relies upon the existence of a specific speaker and a specific hearer. The words speaker and hearer are even used in his explanation; language users are so important to the equation of metaphor that they are not taken for granted and merely presumed to exist.

Consider this description of metaphor, which includes a differentiation between ‘sense metaphors’ and ‘emotive metaphors,’ as provided by the literary critic I. A. Richards: “A metaphor is a shift, a carrying over of a word from its normal use to a new use. In a sense metaphor the shift of the word is occasioned and justified by a similarity or analogy between the object it is usually applied to and the new object. In an emotive metaphor the shift occurs through some similarity between the feelings the new situation and the normal situation arouse” (Richards 221). Obviously, language users are presumed by Richards but they sure aren’t mentioned. The linguistic signs that construct a representation of metaphor in language are foregrounded, and the conceptual feelings to which those linguistic signs refer are highlighted; the language user is simply presupposed.

Searle’s description, instead, highlights that, like language in general, metaphor is a system of signification bound by certain restrictions, which language users manipulate to communicate. Manipulate to communicate? That’s a tale as old as time. Expressed three-hundred and fifty years before the common era, Aristotle describes metaphor as “the application of an
alien name by transference,” and explains that “by deviating in exceptional cases from the normal idiom, the language will gain distinction; while at the same time, the partial conformity with usage will give perspicuity” (Aristotle). He is saying that metaphor as a specialized type of language is particularly positioned to communicate new information in a given environment because it is meaningfully distinct while maintaining an essence of conformity. When poets like Andrews and Trethewey explain how poetry and metaphor are ways to create and make new meaning, they are doing precisely what Aristotle described; they are giving old, or incorrect, or not yet spoken information a new name of their choosing so that their own language might gain distinction in a clear, lucid, and easily understood manner. Aristotle goes on to say, “The critics, therefore, are in error who censure these licenses of speech, and hold the author up to ridicule,” and that “the greatest thing by far is to have a command of metaphor . . . it is the mark of genius for to make good metaphors implies an eye for resemblances” (Aristotle). Looks like Robert Frost cribbed some thoughts on education by poetry right from Aristotle, didn’t he? Good for those philosophers and poets encouraging linguistic evolution and variety of expression.

Anecdote III

Speaking of dead philosophers with interesting theories about literal and figurative meaning, J. L. Austin proposes doing away with the concept of “the meaning of a word” entirely in his paper “The Meaning of a Word.” Well, do away with is a bit hyperbolic, but he does challenge the idea that any word or phrase has a strictly analytic meaning that is not vulnerable to synthetic meaning brought about by its environment of utterance. To summarize, Austin’s argument is that words do not have precise and ideal meanings because “an ideal language would not break down, whatever happened.” But we know that meanings change, and that
language breaks down all the time. For example, we often have to ask, ‘What do you mean by that?’ in order for communication to be successful. We can say X but mean Y. And we can be entirely oblivious to the fact that we have miscommunicated or been misunderstood. As Austin notes, “words fail us.” He writes: “Ordinary language breaks down in extraordinary cases” and “Ordinary language blinkers the already feeble imagination” (36). In another paper, “A Plea for Excuses,” he picks up the cause of banishing ordinary language when it does not fit extraordinary situations, like physics, psychology, and law. He doesn’t, but I would apply this to poetics with the caveat that the ordinary can be expressed in extraordinary ways. Austin says that what he calls ordinary language should never have the last word; “Hence it is necessary first to be careful with, but also to be brutal with, to torture, to fake and to override, ordinary language” (133-34). Austin is a character. His writing portrays the essence of a merciless judge, a vengeful god; quite entertaining.

Anecdote IV

Not because it naturally correlates, but because I have been studying meaning in the context of memoirs written by some American poets over the past 25 years, the necessity to challenge ordinary language makes me think of Robert Mapplethorpe’s artistic gesture as described by Patti Smith in Just Kids. Though Mapplethorpe did not work in a linguistic medium, his art challenges the status quo in a way analogous to that of radical or poetic metaphor. Of the ‘obscene’ nature of some of Mapplethorpe’s work, Smith writes, “Robert took areas of dark human consent and made them into art. He worked without apology, investing the homosexual with grandeur, masculinity, and enviable nobility.” Her opinion seems to be that his work challenged the ordinary, but not for the sake of the challenge, per se. She says, “He was not
looking to make a political statement.” She says, “He was presenting something new, something not seen or explored as he explored it. . . . As Cocteau said of a Genet poem, ‘His obscenity is never obscene’” (198). Because this is a study of language expressed in poetry and prose, I have been discussing the way language is used to symbolize the real. I guide your attention toward the work of Mapplethorpe as theoretical, not empirical, evidence that the real is often of a mind to symbolize with language. This suggestion itself is a metaphor, of course, as the real cannot be of a mind to do anything; however, the agency of a language user allows for the metaphor to reflect in both directions, as much a window as a mirror. It may not be ordinary, or truthful, to suggest that the world orders itself according to “The blackbird whistling,” as Stevens might write it, but it is expressible (Stevens 75).

The relationship between language and reality (as in, the world as we can experience it first-hand with our individual senses guiding our cognitive sensibilities) has at least one advantage I can name over the relationship between language and cognition, and that is the fact we can embrace and photograph ourselves, our companions, and our artifacts in a way we cannot bodily experience or capture our ways of thinking, knowing, and being. In a paper on aesthetic truth from 1990, the philosopher Kenneth Dorter writes that “in terms of the elusive foundations of reality, or at least our experience of reality, art furnishes as important a mode of cognition as does philosophy” (48). I’m conflicted about whether Lakoff and Johnson’s theory of conceptual metaphor supports or contradicts Dorter’s hypothesis. In one sense, if I were to consider metaphor to be an art or a philosophy, I would claim that they agree. On the other hand, if I were to consider metaphor to be the status quo as far as how the system of language functions, I would claim that they disagree. My thesis argues both that metaphor is the universal setting, and that metaphor can be a particular setting. I suppose this contradiction does not completely invalidate
the hypothesis; a marked version of an unmarked entity is often a meaningful deviation. For example, language users may always metaphor, but, when necessary, they can really metaphor.

“Cognitively,” Dorter concludes, “the discontinuity between particular and universal in metaphors enables art to serve as rhetoric, camouflaging ignorance and error in seductive guises” (49). Because humans are cognitive creatures constantly looking for symbolic meaning, they are also prone to applying metaphoric meaning in ignorant and erroneous ways, and they are vulnerable to the manipulative use of metaphor against them. I guess this problem won’t be solved today. Reality really is a narcissistic lover as far as language and cognition are concerned.

Anecdote V

In “Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances,” Roman Jakobson describes in detail how a study of people with brain injuries led to the discovery that the brain processes language differently in different parts of the brain. Fine, but linguists and literary scholars alike took notice because Jakobson claims the study proves that the brain processes metaphoric language, which he likens to poetry, in one part of the brain, while it processes metonymic language, which he likens to prose, in another part of the brain. He refers to this as the “bipolar structure of language” (131).

For those of us without debilitating aphasic brain disorders, this means that as the brain is in the act of processing language it is constantly having to determine whether that language represents meaning that is based on a natural contiguity (metonymy) or if it is based merely on an expressed similarity (metaphor). The brain will react accordingly—beep, boop, bop—and you’ll think, oh that’s normal, or, oh that’s strange. The less abstract language seems, the more normal you’ll perceive it to be. The more abstract language seems, the less normal you’ll
perceive it to be. Ambiguous language that rides that wave right down the middle will require the brain to activate both areas. It will make a choice and let the surfer ride, or it will break and throw them off the board. Jakobson focuses primarily on language, even referencing literature like *Anna Karenina,* but he extrapolates, “The alternative predominance of one or the other of these two processes is by no means confined to verbal art. The same oscillation occurs in sign systems other than language.” He suggests that the brain processes other “semiotic systems,” like paintings, theater, and motion pictures in the same way (Jakobson 130).

One might consider a good metaphor to activate both parts of the brain for as long as possible, holding onto likeness and unlikeness until it gives in and the metaphor falls apart, or metaphorically dies, as we like to say. It’s hard to say exactly what Wallace Stevens meant when he wrote “A poem need not have a meaning and like most things in nature often does not have” in his notebook full of unwritten poems so long ago (Stevens, *Collected* 914). It’s an anecdote that lacks significant context, but in proximity to his other works, and even in proximity to this study, we might be compelled to interpret the reflection of an unnamed language user there, the observer of the poem, the reader of nature.

Anecdote V \(\frac{1}{2}\)

A poem itself need not have meaning, and nature need not have meaning, Stevens says. I wonder if he is hedging a bit and might have meant *a poem itself does not have meaning* and *nature does not have meaning,* but I don’t think that’s quite right either. I used to say that my favorite poem was Stevens’s “Peter Quince at the Clavier.” I liked that it was very much not an anecdote and required me to hold many images and metaphors together at once in my feeble interpretation. To this day, I don’t think I’d be able to summarize what it means in my own pithy
suction of closure; however, there is an image in the poem that I find relevant to this discussion of meaning and linguistic agency. The poem uses the story of Susanna and the Elders from the Book of Daniel, summarily de-canonized to the Apocrypha, to express the effect of beauty upon its beholder. I might say it means something about how our perception of the world outlives the world itself, such that the world’s beauty is not in the world but in one’s knowledge and memory of it.

Poems do not mean. Photographs do not mean. Lifetimes do not mean. Stevens’s speaker in “Peter Quince at the Clavier” utters these words for the reader:

> Beauty is momentary in the mind—
> The fitful tracing of a portal;
> But in the flesh it is immortal

> The body dies; the body’s beauty lives. (74)

Beauty as the perception of a moment in time persists after the moment has passed, just as meaning lingers in the mind long after language is expressed. Moments in a life happen so fast. The mind must trace the outlines of a memory so quickly that an attempt to capture it, the flash of the bulb and the snap of the shutter, seems like an uncontrollable chaos.

That word flesh is so tricky, Wallace Stevens, how dare you. The beauty and the body in that briefest moment of flesh are as one. The bipolar brain is activated, and then it is only the beauty that remains. Beauty is not in the body, and it never was. It was only in the mind of the reader, just as the meaning of a word is not to be found in the word, but in the ecstatic process of meaning-making in the moment. And still, I can think of so many moments and people, so many realities, I’d rather have back in place of a memory.

But also, not.

No.
The Last Anecdote

Briefly on truth, and then an ending:

Charles Sanders Peirce makes the concept of truth seem inevitable and impossible all at the same time, which is probably why he’s so frequently quoted. The simultaneous feeling of ‘We’ll get there, but we’ll never get there.’ is a universal emotion. I don’t mean discomfort, but I bet you can think of a situation in your life that feels exactly like the existential drama of inevitability’s grasp on impossibility. There should be a word for X when X is both inevitable and impossible.

That word is truth. In Peirce’s definition, “The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate, is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in this opinion is the real. That is the way I explain reality” (273). Sir, an opinion that is agreed to by all who investigate is anything but fated, never mind true.

I can barely agree with anyone on the truth of what to get for lunch, let alone whether metaphor is a particular or universal type of symbolic language created via the dynamic interaction between a sign, its concept, a language user (or two), and an instance (or multitudes) of utterance expanding and contracting like a plastic toy sphere, sir, all in the flash of a Polaroid camera, and then forever in the mind of a poet sipping lemonade on the porch of the Canoe Club in the Hartford of my memory.
CONCLUSION

There is a poem called “Untitled Crown” in Chapter II of this study that mimics the form of the last fourteen lines in a heroic crown of sonnets. You’ll notice that Part II of that poetry manuscript is neither entirely heroic nor entirely crowned. I have not taken the care to perfect the form because I am not that good a poet, but also because I find its playful chaos more apt to this project and the nature of meaning. I mention this not to explain that poem or any other part of this study any further than it has already been described. Instead, I bring it up as a metaphor for the importance of curation to language and meaning. Each line of that final sonnet is taken, in order, from a line of the previous fourteen sonnets that precede it. The result is not an anecdote, or any other poetic gesture of truth. It’s certainly not an empirical argument or falsifiable claim. It’s a bit of a mess with moments of recognition, which is about all that one can hope for.

Language and meaning work in a similar way, and curation is a vital component for how successfully we communicate basic information, not to mention complex knowledge like humor, and emotion, or truth. Our ability to curate is evidence of our agency as language users to choose metaphors for how we want to understand the world, and how we would like to express that understanding to others. If we buy into any of this, we also choose metaphors to curate our lives.

Note: There should be a citation at the end of the “The Last Anecdote” in Chapter III. It should appear right after the word memory: (Stevens, Collected 995). Images in that last sentence are interpolated from a letter Wallace Stevens wrote one month before his death.

The citation in its correct place would be factual, but it would spoil the—
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