

## STEVEN LONIS-SHUMATE - CRAFT ESSAY

### THEMATIC CONCERNS

The thematic concerns in this body of work include loneliness and isolation, being stuck in your own vessel, thoughts, feelings, and fears, and how paying attention is the only way we can escape this isolation. Beginning with the first poem, “And the Rabbits Jumped Free,” the child at the center of the story is stuck, but not of his own free will. He is stuck due to his mother's fears, which she inherited from her own mother. The character in the poem wonders what the world is like and what he will become because of his imprisonment. In “More Like a Truth/More Like a Vacuum,” we see the mom and child again, the mom’s fears bleeding into the child in a scary world. The boy is paralyzed by the mother's possession, coupled with moments when he is acutely aware of his surroundings, either finding this freeing or leading him further into the isolation (and danger – a war) where the mother resides. And in “Used,” maybe the boy is a bit older, but he is in a moment of realizing the negative impact that his mom’s control has had on his life, and that in this control, he has been the one who has been taking care of his mother instead of the other way around. He is lost and lonely, remorseful for all that he lost due to his mother’s arrested development, and bitter for having to do the things for her that he himself had needed.

“Oto: Faith in Rumination” closely examines the act of paying attention and noticing, and how this, in itself, can be a way to escape the binds of generational trauma, if only for a moment. In this essay, the act of rumination is reclaimed from the dark depths of depression and anxiety, asking the reader (and the author) to have faith in this reclaimed methodology for relief. In “The Old Man Told Me Once,” there is a slight pause in the relentlessness of loneliness, isolation, and anxiety of an imperfect marriage and the surprising relief of having someone to talk to about it all. The pleas in the final pages of “Oto” to find each other are at once fulfilled, and in this interaction between the narrator and the old man, the noticing and repetition of the work it requires come in a vulnerable and sweet

challenge. This interaction leads the narrator to wonder how to end the generational trauma that has isolated him for so long, and he sees the old man's words as the solution. But as with mental health issues and trauma, nothing is a catch-all, be-all, fool-proof solution, and in “The Mechanics of Speech,” the narrator is pulled into a deep and dark episode manifesting itself as a dystopian sci-fi nightmare in a grotesque visual representation of how it feels inside one's head. Social anxiety as tears in the corner of your mouth, questioning the utility of speech in a world where no one interacts as a permanent closure of the narrator’s mouth, turning him into a giraffe that has no vocal cords and then a particular fish, also with no vocal cords, but can only make grunting sounds to communicate, which is mainly to scare off other fish.

Often, our anxieties, fears, and isolation come not only from those close to us but also from people we don’t even know. This leads the narrator to fear the thoughts, opinions, and judgments of people on the street. “Blinding Light Bellowed Over” digs into the isolation inherent in silencing your convictions. This poem grapples with the narrator’s internal and external responses to others' judgment, given that the narrator has a trans son. This again is an example of ways that the author finds his way out of isolation by being in community with someone else. In the poem, the narrator questions why dealing with judgment is so difficult.

In “He Only Wanted to Feel Liked,” we see the author’s attempt to make the drudgery of the days when you feel so alone and so sad seem funny. You see how these things affect us in the mundane. We go through a typical moment like shaving, seeing how far and deep we can go into the despair of self-doubt caused by this isolation, and just wanting to be close to someone. Needing to be close to someone. Or sometimes, just to get away. In “Penny: Flutter On,” the narrator, named Nelson, wonders what it would be like to just leave, leading readers to wonder if there is a difference between isolation and choosing to be alone. Do both result in loneliness?

In the next essay, “KONvenience or the Will to Grow Up → Buildings with No Windows,” the author attempts to address the question of whether one can alleviate feelings of isolation by noticing and pausing, but the reader encounters an unexpected barrier: the prevalence of and reliance on convenience. This essay is about just that: convenience, and how it works against us when we try to put our hearts at peace or figure out things like forgiveness, reconciliation, and family.

Another theme that runs through the portfolio is family and relationships, and figuring out when it is better for everyone to treat those relationships differently or even end them. You can see this in the convenience essay, where the character decides to separate from his family to reduce the feelings of isolation, sadness, and fear he experiences with them; however, those feelings persist in separation and take on different forms. It is also evident in the poem “Used,” about his mother: when the narrator realizes that he was treated by his mom in ways that, if you did to someone else, would not be seen as loving. So yes, these pieces are about family, but not in the typical way of seeking resolution or trying to build a closer relationship; the stories are more about what it looks like when these relationships don't get reconciled. The pieces also address the effects of acknowledging family as not a stereotypical or prototypical familial relationship, but as a human relationship, one that causes more pain than joy. Human nature is to reconcile with people. When you watch or consume any sort of art entertainment media, the focus on family sagas is on reconciliation, but there is no doubt that there are relationships that aren't worth resolving, and you can see this in the portfolio. There are relationships we are in that are unhealthy for us or that deplete rather than fill, so we leave, but there is also pain in leaving... that is also a theme in these pieces. They are also about freedom and learning to tolerate its impact; they talk about the freedom it has on people, the pain, the sadness, the loneliness, the anxiety, but also the truth, joy, and relief. Release.

And then it comes down to the fact that maybe life is selfish. You must put yourself first and do the things that keep you healthy. Whether you are a believer or not, Jesus, as a historical figure,

said something about loving your neighbor, and he also said to love your neighbor as yourself. I think that's the important part. He's telling us that we can't love our neighbors unless we love ourselves. If I feel isolated and lonely, depressed, and anxious, what does that mean in the ways that I'm supposed to love my neighbor? What, then, do I have to offer them... how can I love my neighbor in that state? So, this collection of poems, essays, and stories helps us to come to that realization. That we're supposed to be selfish, that it is an imperative to be selfish. We must put ourselves first before we can properly love others. This is what we learn through these pieces.

## STYLISTIC TECHNIQUES

One of the main stylistic techniques I used across all the genres in my portfolio was using structure to shape the pieces' tone and tempo. In referencing tone, I am mostly referring to the attitude I am trying to convey toward the many topics I have written about in the works included in this portfolio. Tone was one thing that I worked incredibly hard to improve on during my time in the MA Program, mostly for the reverence that I have for the subjects and feelings that I write about, but also because I want the reader to feel the influence that these experiences had on the work and also on me as the writer. In "And the Rabbits Jumped Free," I write, "what would have happened/if I disappeared, she knew that/she would have no one, alone/forever." It was in this moment that I most clearly articulated her motivations and moved on to the effects these choices had on me. For me, the rest of the descriptions of her and what she had kept me from are all set by the tone of this line and how it is formatted to be in the center of the poem and indented. In this particular poem, I am aware that there are indentations in each of the stanzas, but I believe that in this formatting, one can feel the difference between the descriptions in the lines not indented and the interior thoughts regarding the descriptions in the indentations. I think that once that is noticed in the pattern, it is easy to see that the indented words bring him deeper into the sadness of his childhood. The indentations also work

to slow things down a bit so the reader can dwell in these moments of illumination. In regards to the referenced line, once the writer realized the motivations were not genuine care, but the realization that she had no one else, the other lines and their tone are built on the realization that it wasn't because of me, but because there was no one else.

The other thing that I worked to develop while at Auburn was tempo, or the speed at which things take place during the pieces. Through all the reading, studying, and interpreting we did over the two years of the program, I was fascinated by the care some of the authors took with the pace of the narratives. This contrasted greatly with some of the works we read in literature classes, where the concern for tempo seemed less important than the words themselves. Often, the authors of the works we focused on in class seemed to grasp the moment and used words, sentence structures, visual tools, and sound to shift the pace at just the right time. I think one good example of pacing in my portfolio is in "Oto: Faith in Ruminations," where each section varies in length, and the threads and themes are mingled. There are sections that stick to one thread and develop it a bit, but then there are sections where many themes run right beside each other, attempting not only to relate the topics clearly but also to speed things up for the reader. Then, there is also "The Mechanics of Speed" and "He Only Wanted to Feel Liked," which are both relentless and restless due to the lack/minimal breaks and the lack of white space, and the speed never slows down. All these examples, whether at varying speeds or at relentless swiftness, show that I never want things to slow down for too long.

Visual aesthetics has always been a focus of mine in the art that I have appreciated and loved, as well as in the mundanity of my life. Foundational to my views of the world is the second creation story in Genesis, which states that God "made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food" (Genesis 2:9, NRSV). According to this passage, God created things not just for utilitarian purposes but also for hedonic reasons as well. Trees and fruit that were not only good to eat, but also beautiful to look at. Because I concentrate on creating work with visual appeal, my work over the past

two years has focused on how to use that visual aspect to add another dimension to my writing. In “More Like a Truth/More Like a Vacuum,” I utilized short, choppy stanzas to signify the intensity of the subject matter, angle brackets to represent urgent, intrusive thoughts, and, in “The Mechanics of Speech,” the packing of the page to signify the claustrophobia of being surrounded by fear and urgency, hurriedness, and anxiety. In “Penny: Flutter On,” the indented triplet, quatrain, and quintain are visually pleasing and interesting, making clear demarcations between what are two separate poems, a comparison of living a life of coveting and comparison, or living the life of the hummingbird, one of simplicity and gift. The indented stanzas also keep the poem moving, helping it not drag on in a continuous story about common destructive human patterns from which it is hard to escape.

I also use mostly third-person narrative and a lack of dialogue as deliberate stylistic choices throughout many of the pieces in the portfolio. There was an intention in this stylistic choice, wanting to add to the feelings of distance and separation already realized in the words by themselves. I think this stylistic technique allows the reader not only to feel the anxiety and isolation that inhabit all the writings in this portfolio, but also to see these themes as separate from the characters themselves. In this lack of personalization, I want there to be a sense that a character (or the reader) might be having these feelings, but that the characters are maybe just products of their environment and not flawed in and of themselves. I hope it shows the reader that there is hope of escaping overwhelming feelings and emotions. This separation between the characters' experiences and the characters themselves also adds tension (and hope in possibilities hidden in helpless situations) from the pieces' point of view. The reader is always watching instead of being in the story. This again adds to the sense of hope in dark situations: if one sees these experiences as part of them, first person, it is harder to re-author them than if we are just looking at them from the outside. This is much like narrative therapy, where you externalize your problems, to separate them as not being a part of you, sometimes even giving them their own name. For instance, in “The Mechanics of Speech,” I attempted to exaggerate the

loneliness of the first line, with the lack of mention of his name even during the scary doctor's appointment, to the isolation of waiting for his medication. Without names, there is no personalization, and he is just assigned chamber and bin numbers. The reader may feel glad they are not in this situation while wondering whether it could happen soon. As a reader, if you are watching this happen from an outsider perspective, then you are most likely to move about the world with thoughts of how you can keep this from happening to you. The use of 'the boy' in "KONvenience" enhances the feelings of isolation without the use of personalization, thus showing that there is a chance of escape with the separation. And, although there is sadness in the intro and concluding sections, I think that the turn to first person shows hope, much to the effect that "I" can escape the negative experiences that "the boy" faced.

Another thing that I have worked hard on over the past two years is voice. Prior to joining the MA program, I felt like I was afraid of my own voice, and I felt like I had to somehow 'fit in' with the authors that I read. I believe that it was midway through my first fiction workshop that I wrote the first thing that truly felt like me, where the voice in my writing matched my voice in real life. I think the piece I wrote was moody (much like other forms of art I love), witty, with touches of dark humor, filled with description, and centered on a hyperlocal setting. After that, my writing began to be more textured and layered, personal and vulnerable, detailed and, hopefully, interesting (at least to a certain demographic).

Another purposeful stylistic choice I have chosen to embrace is to include either explicit or implicit biblical references throughout many of the works in this portfolio. One of my big goals as a writer is to help people challenge the understandings they have been taught and reinforced throughout their lives. I want people to reflect on the cult of personality that much of the church has become through their leadership's opinions (while ignoring what Jesus actually taught) and to live in the tension between what they have been taught and other available interpretations. I want people to see

spirituality in the mundane. In “Oto,” there are questions of faith and a questioning of what it is that we have faith in. In “Blinding Light Bellowed Over,” the reader is asked to think about whether Jesus would have a meal with a trans person. If so moved to read the gospels through their own hearts rather than by the interpretations of church leaders, they will quickly find that the answer is a resounding yes. Finally, in “KONvenience,” readers are challenged to think about what Jesus meant by commanding people to respect their parents while abandoning his own parents when they call him crazy.

Another really important factor influencing the stylistic choices discussed earlier is the trust I have learned to place in the words in my heart (more on this in the influences section). From this realization, one of my biggest stylistic techniques is to just write and trust what comes out, including thoughts and afterthoughts. Writing everything that clouds my head in the moment that I am thinking about a subject was the process for most of these pieces. In “Used,” I write, “looking to/fro <lost>,” and “uneducated edicts <evict>/your bitter verdicts,” both of which are just stream of consciousness as I thought back to what some of those moments meant back then like being used like a tool and often times being abandoned either physically or emotionally or both.

Trust manifests in my pieces in the ways I write things that I never would have before. For me, given my history of academic publishing, I never even thought to put words on paper that did not make sense. For me, before embracing trust, I felt that everything that I put on paper should be rational and grounded in truth (as whoever defines it would decide). I have worked really hard recently to embrace absurdity, which I think has been a great addition to my writing style. For example, in “The Mechanics of Speech,” it just ends with the statement, “He was a fish. The gnashing of teeth (another biblical reference), his last chance to connect.” This, to me, shows an embrace of absurdity, not directly using metaphor (not saying like a fish), but claiming the character to be a fish. I think this

shift from metaphor to an alternate reality serves my goals for the other stylistic techniques discussed earlier, including tone, tempo, and voice.

Also stylistically, and this applies to my mention of Helen Phillips, which comes later, is that I do not like to write anything that is over 15 pages, an aesthetic formed by my experiences with my wife, who does not read that often. There are always times when I want to share something I'm reading with her, but it's hard for her to understand it out of context. So, I have always written in ways that let someone share a section of a story and still be entertaining for the person they are reading to, while also being fulfilling for the person reading the whole novel, since all the stories are intertwined. My love for this style and the choices I have made to continue this was confirmed by reading Helen Phillips' first novel/collection, *And Yet, They Were Happy*.

#### ANALYSIS OF REVISIONS ON OTO: FAITH IN RUMINATION

I chose to write about the revision process in "Oto," my braided structure essay about repetition, because it is one of my favorite things that I've ever written. I am super proud of it, and I had so much fun writing it. I wanted to write about revising something I felt extremely close to because of the difficulty I have seeing its faults. I think that for me, that was a very important lesson that I learned from being a student in this program, which is that even though you think something is perfect or you love something to an unhealthy level, it may still need to be revised, possibly over and over again. The fact is that other people don't see this thing like you do, even if they enjoy reading it, and in each reading, based on the signs of the times and the emotional and mental state of the reader, it may be a different piece each time.

Based on feedback from Justin Gardiner, I decided to combine some of my short, choppy themes (death, fables, repetition in daily life) into longer, more varied threads. For example, after this revision, the first page of the essay consisted of a single paragraph that combined all three themes listed above into a single introductory section, with no delineation between them. Now, based on

Gardiner's second round of feedback, including the need to separate the themes again, the mix of combined and separate has been more thought out, and the themes are more balanced.

The current version also has better transitions between the individual threads such as, on the second page of "Oto," I write, "...and it is a live improvisational jazz record which repeats the same bass and drum line for the entirety of it <NEW TRANSITION> reminding me of the mundane and the repetition of life and what exactly it is leading to. Is it possible that as my life progresses, I will just fold more and more loads of laundry?" which I think helps reduce the choppy nature of the original and the overmixed middle versions. I think that in the revision where I attempted to intermingle the themes, sometimes by simply removing the markers between threads, they seemed to go together less clearly. Now, with better transitions, it is easier for the reader to see why they go together and how they fit in with the larger theme. I think that a great example is on page seven of the essay: "Much of Josh Abrams' music in Natural Information Society has its roots in Gnawa music, and Bourdain spent most days of the year doing the same thing, just in different parts of the world." It is easier now to see the reason that these threads not only go together but also go along with the entire essay. So, in the revision process, I went from one-liners to long choppy paragraphs to more manageable paragraphs with better transitions.

There was early concern about the essay's pacing, with the sense that it slowed as the reader neared the end. To remedy this, I changed the form to include short, choppy sentences that quickly run through the threads and reply to the sentences above them. Here, I chose to emphasize quickness to bring all the threads together and reinforce the essay's overall point. Gardiner suggested that I separate the threads earlier on and then start merging them as we get closer to the end, which I think I have done a better job of in the version of the essay included in the portfolio. All these changes sped up the pacing in the last pages.

Also, there was concern that some threads were introduced quickly and then dropped just as quickly. The thread that this showed up on most often was the Paul Bowles thread. I added some information about his other fables and found some interesting biographical details that align with the essay's theme, so I included them to make the thread about Bowles more complete and to integrate it more evenly throughout the essay. I also discovered that Bowles loved Moroccan folk music, which tied the music sections to the Paul Bowles theme. I also removed the last reference that to another Bowles' fable because it was mentioned that it seemed to slow down the pacing there at the end of the essay.

## INFLUENCES

In 2008, I walked to a downtown Auburn cemetery and felt compelled to sit by the gravestones of a couple, Elizabeth and J.L. As I sat there, I just started writing. I don't feel like I thought about what I was writing; it felt more like I was hearing voices telling me the stories of their life. That day, I was just listening. That was the first day I realized how much I loved writing. I started writing short stories or vignettes about this couple at the cemetery over the next couple of years. In 2011, we traveled to Denver, Colorado, and I walked into Tattered Cover Bookstore, where the first thing I saw was the cover of a book entitled *And Yet They Were Happy*, by Helen Phillips (mentioned earlier). As I opened the book that I knew nothing about, I noticed that she had written the entire book in little vignettes, fables and/or short shorts. In that moment, I felt like I was given permission to be the writer that I wanted to be and that I didn't have to necessarily follow some set of rules or expectations or anything like that.

Helen Phillips writes in “Haunting #5”:

Some nights we hear a mystifying voice. It says, *There’s horses here for everyone.* This sentence fills us with a sensation we identify as nostalgia, though we’ve never in our life ridden a horse. *There’s horses here for everyone.* We can think of no words more hopeful than these.

One frigid morning, we’re awoken by an unfamiliar smell. We look out our window to the street far below. There, blocking traffic, is a herd of horses. Hundreds of them. They’re enormous, forceful. We run down, down, until we’re near them. Their rumps are strong and golden and chestnut and velveteen and powerful in the sunrise. Their hoofs make irregular tick-tock sounds on the pavement. They face west.

And in “He Only Wanted to Feel Liked,” I write:

He wiped the steam off the mirror to see how deep the cut was and thought about how disliked he would be with a Band-Aid on his lip. He thought about how his wife wouldn’t give him the obligatory goodbye kiss now because of the Band-Aid and because she hated him. He wiped the steam off the mirror, and there they were again, standing right there in the bathtub behind him. The kids that weren’t his. The kids who always showed up when he and his wife had issues. The kids who always showed up with their video monitors full of vignettes of lessons learned on the playground. The kids who always carried a dog-eared and overly highlighted copy of the Gottman’s “The 7 Principles for Making Marriage Work.”

Both stories are fantastical fables with endings (both are the endings of the stories) that leave the reader in a sense of wonder. For me, Phillips’ book of fables always left me excited to think about things like “what do the horses signify?”, or even, “does it matter that they are horses at all?”, whereas with the fable that I wrote, one wonders “why kids?” and “who are the Gottmans?” Also, with Phillips’ stories, I wanted to read them repeatedly, which is not typically my habit.

After the Elizabeth stories, I wrote here and there until I decided to attend Duke Divinity School, where I took a class in poetic theology with the poet Malcolm Guite. In that class, we read many different poets, including Roethke, Milton, Shakespeare, Guites’ own work, Seamus Heaney, and Denise Levertov. It was at this point that a couple of things happened. One, I started writing all the time, and two, I fell in love with Denise Levertov’s poems. Levertov is a huge inspiration to me,

and many of the poems I have written, including some in this portfolio, have been inspired by her words and style.

In “Pleasures,” Denise Levertov writes:

in white pulp: the bones of squid  
which I pull out and lay  
blade by blade on the draining board -

tapered as if for swiftness, to pierce  
the heart, but fragile, substance  
belying design.           Or a fruit, mamey,

cased in rough brown peel, the flesh  
rose-amber, and the seed:  
the seed a stone of wood, carved and

and in “The Goddess,” she writes:

Flung me across the room, and  
room after room (hitting the walls, re-  
bounding – to the last  
sticky wall – wrenching away from it  
pulled hair out!)  
till I lay  
outside the outer walls!

In these poems, Levertov includes the thoughts that run through her head (or maybe, if she is in the character’s head, things that run through their heads) as she is writing the poems. In “Pleasures,” Levertov seems to decide to include a description of the squid bones as an aside, interrupting her poem with the details, then continuing with the poem where she left off. And in “The Goddess,” she indicates the aside symbolically using parentheses. For me, I decided to use angle brackets in “More Like a Truth/More Like a Vacuum” to give the afterthoughts more of an emotional impact.

In, “More Like a Truth/More Like a Vacuum,” I wrote:

was it him with his stupid  
queries  
<why is it constantly burning up there>  
or her with her critical  
explorations  
<what will people think>

Another huge influence on my fiction writing is *Tinkers* by Paul Harding, my favorite book in the whole world. Although it’s not quite as clear in initial readings, how his book *Tinkers* has influenced my writing hopefully shows in the detail that I put into my stories, as well as in the relationships among the people in them. Also, his book is very character-driven rather than plot-driven. I remember Maria Kuznetsova asking me to reread *Tinkers* and find out what the plot is. There is some there, but most of the book is spent building the three characters, which is one of the things I love so much about the book. It should also be noted that when I took fiction with Anton DiSclafani, she often referred to literary fiction as not hugely plot-driven but more character-driven. I am sure that is debatable, but I feel like that is where my style is, just more in the character-driven stuff.

In *Tinkers*, Paul Harding writes:

The actual seizure was when the bolt touched flesh, and in an instant so atomic, so nearly immaterial, nearly incorporeal, that there was almost no before and after, no cause A that led to effect B, but instead simply A, simply B, with no *then* in between, and Howard became pure, unconscious energy. It was like the opposite of death, or a bit of the same thing that death was, but from a different direction: Instead of being emptied or extinguished to the point of unselfness, Howard was filled, overwhelmed to the same state. If death was to fall below some human boundary, so his seizures were to be rocketed beyond it.

and in “The Mechanics of Speech,” I write:

The mechanics of speech were sure to exacerbate the ever-growing angular cheilitis that had formed in the commissure of his mouth, which materialized in the vermilion border or the precise spot where the superior labium meets the inferior labium. A bell sounded in the waiting room, and the door that led to the collection of tiny, sterile DIAGNOSIS/PROGNOSIS/TREATMENT habitats opened. He proceeded to chamber 3.1B and sat down in the tangerine-colored

plastic chair and wondered who watered the fern that sat on a metal table in the corner. He turned towards the re-stylized Daubenev trumpet that protruded from the wall to his left and said the following (without any greeting or salutation): “I do not think that I can talk anymore. I think that I have lost the ability. I wonder if maybe I am a giraffe, equipped with superfluous vocal folds somehow ignored by natural selection, my neck serving no purpose but as a weapon.”

Finally, in terms of being able to directly see the influence of authors in the works that are included in this portfolio, I would be remiss if I did not mention Hanif Abdurraqib and Lia Purpura. Much like Helen Phillips’ work seemed to give me permission to follow my heart and write in the style that was interesting to me, Abdurraqib and Purpura seemed to confirm my stylistic and content choices as I grew into my voice as a writer during my time in the MA program.

In “Nine Considerations of Black People in Space,” Abdurraqib writes:

On the television once, a boy traced the constellation of freckles on a girl’s face then pointed at the sky, and she gasped with joy. On a walk in my real life, holding hands with someone somewhere, I pointed up at the stars and pretended to know their shapes, and said something about eyes and a promised future, and the person I was with laughed. So okay, I suppose I don’t know the stars well enough to lie about them comfortably, but I did have a telescope once, bursting out of my top-floor window during a time when I lived that got less clogged with smoky haze during its nighttime hours.

Here, the reader gets the feeling that we are just following Abdurraqib’s thought pattern, even if it wanders a bit. The joy in reading this is in the fact that you can follow right along with him and not only what he means and feels at this moment, but also how these pieces will fit in with the larger essay (and even if you don’t know yet, we at least trust that he will get us there). This process of trust and temporary confusion is even clearer (read: confusing) at times. In “Scream (Or Never Ending)”, she writes:

-a loneliness so vital it's worth celebrating, so human and achy it calls forth the drive to make something of it.

Or how about this: You've got a drill with a bad battery, a nickel-cadmium, heavy metal thing you want to recycle. Opening the drill takes a good ten minutes with tiny screwdrivers...But the battery pack costs way more than the drill, is specialized and hard to find, or doesn't even exist without the drill, so you throw the whole thing away.

Which seems to make no sense at all, but it is just for a moment. As you continue to read, the pieces of the puzzle start to come together in a way that is so expectant and so exciting. This free flowing of patchworks of themes and threads, confusing and surprising, influenced and/or confirmed these same things in my writing.

For example, in "Oto: Faith in Ruminations," I write:

Hummingbirds have a larger than average and highly developed hippocampus, which is the brain region responsible for spatial navigation and memory.... Things like the sun and wind patterns, bodies of water, and climate systems all help them to return to the same places during migration and when they return to breeding areas during the spring and the summer. I asked my wife why she seems to always think about death when we go to bed. It is her routine, her hippocampus creates a map to the bedroom, readying her for dread. We touch and can hear each other's breaths but cannot see anything but shadows. I know her brow is furrowed. She is no longer here.

I have other influences that have had a tremendous impact on my writing and many of the pieces that I have included in this portfolio, none of which are traditional or literary, but I cannot live with myself if I don't mention them. These influences are not listed in any type of order at all. Tim Smith, the original singer and songwriter for the band Midlake, taught me that art can be created through the appreciation of other art, even when it has nothing to do with it. Smith is a brilliant storyteller, which, in and of itself, is an influence, but the atmosphere he wrote into his songs has influenced many of the scenes, settings, and moods in my stories. John S. Hall and Rodney Anonymous showed me that just because something is absurd doesn't mean it isn't vital. Michael Stipe taught me that you can be the same and so different throughout a career in art. Colin Yuckman at Duke Divinity School was the only person in my life, other than my wife, to tell me I was gifted and talented. jaimie branch taught me so much through her performance and composition, and without her music and her words, I would not be where I am. The pain of missing her in this world and mourning the music she will never be able to share drives me daily to keep creating art with the same rebellious, loving spirit with which she created her music. And of course, my wife Tiffany, who has taught me the joy of freedom and how to tolerate the pain that comes with it.