Seismic Waves

Aubrey L. Kamppila
Gettysburg College

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Seismic Waves

Abstract
I was studying abroad in Florence, Italy on November 9, 2016, when I awoke to the news that Donald Trump had been elected President. To say it was a shock was an understatement, like many Americans, I had never dreamed the scenario possible. At that moment, I felt more powerless and disconnected from my country than ever before. For the next few weeks, I struggled to comprehend how I personally could combat the assault on my political views and values, what stand I could take, and what impact it might have. Finally, on one of many emotional phone calls with my father, he reminded me that positive change can happen regardless of who the President is, so long as people like me refuse to be silent on the issues that matter. When I was presented with the offer to participate in the English Honors Program, I knew I wanted to use this opportunity to understand and give voice to my unique perspective on this unprecedented political moment.

This collection of poems is titled Seismic Waves in allusion to the seemingly unending series of events that have rocked this nation since the election of Donald Trump. Travel bans, healthcare battles, the firing of James Comey, Neo-Nazis marching in the streets, the ending of DACA, an ongoing investigation into Russian collusion, the looming threat of war with North Korea – and those are just the highlights. But the waves have come from more than one side, as we bear witness to the rise of everyday revolution and resistance. Black Lives Matter, the Women's March, #MeToo, Time's Up, and #NeverAgain are just a few of the movements that have garnered unparalleled support and spurred incredible action throughout the world with their clarity of message and strength of conviction. Finally, Seismic Waves deals with my personal aftershocks, exploring the lasting ways the result of the 2016 election has altered my life and relationships, and allowed me the catharsis of working through painful memories and emotions by the age-old act of putting pen to paper.

Seismic Waves is everything that we’ve lived through since the election and everything that waits in the future. No matter what happens next, we’ll certainly feel it coming.

Keywords
Poetry, Political Poetry, American Politics, 2016 Presidential Election

Disciplines
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Comments
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Seismic Waves is everything that we’ve lived through since the election and everything that waits in the future. No matter what happens next, we’ll certainly feel it coming.
“In Plato’s Republic, there’s a reason Socrates kicked out Homer and the other poets.

You don’t banish the silent and powerless.”

-Airea D. Matthews
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The New Atlantis

We didn’t know there were fault lines there, we weren't worried about losing our grip. But we should have felt the vibrations. With every indignant stomp of the red and blue above, long, gaping cracks snaked beneath the surface, forging their way from the Atlantic to the Pacific along our two major borders, just waiting for the right moment to snap.

An earthquake shook us loose that November and we split, saltwater erupting through the cracks and dousing the crowds of distraught Mexicans and appalled Canadians who had felt the seismic waves. They could only jump back and watch in horror as the neighbor nation they had known disappeared from sight. It didn’t take us long to sink.

Down into the bitter, frigid ocean we went, the water chasing us through our streets, flooding our houses, filling our sky. It choked the voices of the rational and plugged the ears of the ignorant. The salt stung our eyes and the cold shocked us senseless. We lost our hold on reality, let fact and grotesque fiction blend. We hit the bottom of the ocean and we stayed there.

Our allies mourned us, the great nation we had been, now lost to the sea forever. They wondered where we had gone, and if we could ever be found. Rumors whispered in the streets became myth and legend, and tales were told far and wide of America: lost civilization, self-proclaimed land of freedom and truth now sunk deep in the dark clutches of alternative fact and fraud. Their divers are still searching for our remains.
We peer back up through the eddying waters, 
and watch the scanning lights 
of the search parties glide by. 
Every day we close our tired eyes 
and pray: please, don’t let us 
drag them down here 
with us.
Evolution

I.

I’m crying again. You’re in England and I’m in Italy curled up under my covers and we’re on the phone again trying not to feel the distance, and my eyes are almost swollen shut from all the saltwater that’s been washing out of them. You tell me it won’t be as bad as I think and I tell you I don’t believe you. For a moment, you accidentally rub it in that he won and it feels like my insides have been filled with lead with the way they’re dragging downward. You take it back. We’ve been saying the same things for days and we keep saying them. I’m afraid. Please don’t be. This was a horrible mistake. Please give him a chance. And we go around and around and around until the distance is gone and we’re in a bed in Paris and I beg you to understand my fear and you acquiesce that you do. And that has to be enough for now.
What Lives in a Body, Part One

Families in suburban neighborhoods are locking their doors, bringing the spare key inside from under the welcome mat, latching heavy deadbolts as they shut out the quiet street. They’ve never bothered to do that before.

Parents are keeping their children home from school until the danger passes, swaddling the unaffected youth in thick blankets and unplugging the television.

In supermarkets and department stores, people are covering their mouths and noses with their sweater sleeves, hurrying away when someone speaks too frankly about the state of our nation, desperate to avoid the contagion released swirling into the air, mingling with the dust mites. Fear is spreading, quickly. And there is little anyone can do to slow it.

Each strain begins somewhere new and circulates, infecting those that have managed to remain healthy with every passing day. Casual conversation, online debate, anchors on 24/7 news outlets desperately trying to fill time and increase ratings: there are few places the virus cannot infiltrate. For those unfortunate enough to be exposed, there is no vaccine, no herd immunity, no defense, no antidote, no precautions to take. Soon there will be no one left unharmed.
We are the hosts and fear is our parasite, 
burrowing down deep inside us 
and nourishing itself 
on that which we do not know, 
that which we cannot understand. 
What label we choose to brand 
ourselves with has no effect 
on this epidemic; we have all 
been infected, and we have all 
suffered.

We are locking ourselves away 
from the world, cowering from 
each other in an attempt 
to preserve our safety, 
but the danger lives inside us, 
in our bodies, in our fear. 
It's in our muscles, eating away 
at the soft tissue and tendons, 
keeping us from acting 
with unity and strength. 
It's in our eyes, degrading the retina 
from the inside out, preventing us 
from seeing what truly threatens us. 
It is everywhere, in our blood and bones 
and in all the flesh in between. 
We are one with the parasite now, 
engulfed entirely 
by our fear.
We are going to put up walls. Not just the wall, the great big beautiful wall. We’ll put that one up soon. Think bigger: hundreds of barriers, thousands of screens. Walls with wood and bricks and cement and steel and miles of barbed wire and maybe some sharp rocks at the bottom for good measure. You can dig those out of your garden, can’t you? Walls running through your state, cutting off freeways. Walls snaking through your town, splitting up neighbors. Walls cutting right through your house, standing between bedrooms. Mattresses ripped down the middle with the springs exposed, broken bedframes. You built the barrier yourself. Walls so tall you have to crane your neck to make out the top, and even then, its hazy. The sun gets in your eyes. Look away. Walls so long you’ll wonder if they ever end. You’ll never know. Imagine them running off the edge of the land and down into the water, dividing the light and dark fish. Make the dark fish pay for it. We just want to be safe. Seal them out. Do your part to keep us safe. Seal yourself in, put yourself first. We’re going to burn all the ladders. Watch the smoke in the air, climbing higher than any fleeing human ever will. We’re going to unravel all the rope. Fraying cotton scraps on the ground, and no more knots. We’re going to break all the shovels and bury the pieces. We’re going to be all alone.
Monster

Since that November, reading the news has become a heinous ritual, a ceremony of stress, a daily obligation that makes my stomach turn and my skin crawl.

Only after I remind myself that four years isn’t as long as it seems, can I bring myself to drag my scathing, red eyes over the day’s articles about Donald Trump—the executive orders, the wild accusations, the whines of “fake news,” the collusion denials, the tweets oh, my God the tweets—it is never-ending. With every word I can feel my hair morphing into snakes: furious, writhing, venomous; my frustration incarnated into physical forms, each one pulling the skin on my scalp in a different direction, screaming into my ears, the pain and the noise making my world go numb.

I wish it wasn’t like this. I tried to give him a chance. I don’t want to fight with my Republican parents or friends or boyfriend. I don’t want to be a sore loser or to widen the divide. But my name is Medusa, and Donald Trump is the President, and every time he opens his ignorant mouth another person’s life is damaged and I grow a new snake on my head, so yes, I think I have a right to be angry.

This is not going away. I will not hide my snakes; I will not be silent, and he cannot make me.
I am the ugliest, scariest
monster the Greeks ever saw,
and if Donald Trump thought
Hillary Clinton was a nasty woman,
he's got another thing coming.
The Facts

The reporters stood in the marble room and asked the president, “Why did you wait so long to denounce Neo-Nazis?” And with thrashing hands and an indignant air, he answered:

*I didn’t wait long. I didn’t wait long. I didn’t wait long.*
*I wanted to make sure, unlike most politicians, that what I said was correct.*
The statement I made on Saturday, the first statement, was a fine statement.
*But you don’t make statements that direct unless you know the facts.*
*It takes a little while to get the facts …*

The reporters were frenzied, buzzing like a swarm of locusts with all the questions they were raising. You couldn’t pick one voice out of the many, but it was clear what they were remembering.

The audience was the biggest ever…This crowd was massive!
(We knew it wasn’t).
*I won the popular vote if you deduct the millions of people who voted illegally* 
(We found no evidence of this).
*No administration has accomplished more in the first ninety days* 
(We’d reported on the several that have).

(Imagine how lonely a person must be to have to dream up all those people, we thought).

...I don't want to go quickly and just make a statement for the sake of making a political statement. I want to know the facts ...

I guess it was the biggest Electoral College win since Ronald Reagan 
(We were sure it wasn’t).
*I don’t believe in climate change*
(That doesn’t mean it isn’t happening).

We’re the highest taxed nation
in the world
(We know we’re not).

(We wondered why
a person so smart and so rich
didn’t seem to have access to Google).

... *When I make a statement, I like to be correct.*
*I want the facts ...*

*Terrible! Just found out Obama
had my ‘wires tapped’
in Trump Tower just before the victory.*
Nothing found. This is McCarthyism!

(We found no evidence of this).

... *Before I make a statement,*
*I need the facts ...*

*ISIS is honoring President Obama.*

He is the founder of ISIS.

He is the founder of ISIS, okay?
He is the founder.
He founded ISIS.

(We found literally zero evidence of this).

... *I don’t want to rush into a statement ...*

He doesn’t have a birth certificate,
or if he does, there’s something on that birth
certificate that is very bad for him.
(False accusation).

I would like to have him show
his birth certificate ... if he can’t,
he wasn’t born in this country.
(Another false accusation).

An ‘extremely credible source’
has called my office and told me
that Barack Obama’s birth certificate
is a fraud.
(Another false fucking accusation).

... *And honestly, if the press were not fake,*
and if it was honest,  
the press would have said what I said  
was very nice. But unlike you —  
But unlike you and unlike the media,  
before I make a statement,  
I like to know the facts ...  

I watched when the World Trade Center  
came tumbling down  

...  
And I watched in Jersey City, NJ,  
where thousands and thousands  
of people were cheering  

...  
There were people over in New Jersey,  
a heavy Arab population,  
that were cheering as the buildings came down.  

(There are no words  
we can write to combat  
such ignorance and such bigotry,  
it dawned on us).  

... In fact, everybody said, my statement  
was beautiful, if he would have made it sooner,  
that would have been good.  

The reporters are still trying  
to have their questions heard,  

I couldn't have made it sooner  
because I didn't know all of the facts.  

but to no avail.  
The President railroads them, raising  
his voice and drowning  
their pleas for answers out.  

Frankly, people still don't know all of the facts.
Evolution

II.

It’s 2 AM and I have to get up for work in four hours but we just stopped texting about Charlottesville and Nazis and “fine people on both sides” and I can’t sleep. I’m sitting on the bathroom tile rereading and rereading, wondering how one comment got so out of hand. Our opinions aren’t even that far apart, but we’ve both dug in our feet over the details. I told you Trump needed to be more careful with his language and you told me you’re reading too far into it and I told you I can’t help it because I’m an English major and words fucking matter, okay?

And you asked can we please stop talking about this and I said no and no and no and then yes when I was too sad to fight anymore. We’re both timid in the morning and you say I’m sorry, I didn’t see it from your side, and I say I’m sorry, I wasn’t trying to attack you, and we make up and move on and you retweet a black woman on twitter who explains why white pride is a farce and I hold on to that retweet and hope it has replaced your insistence that there must have been some good (not racist, not Jew-hating) people standing there, among the torches.
What Lives in a Body, Part Two

He wakes up itching like an addict, blinks hard against the sun in his eyes and reaches for the poison phone on his bedside table. Fingers twitching, he indulges. He reads and reacts to his preferred headlines in almost the same moment, spews his rhetoric into the shallows and depths of his social media, and watches as his words float into conflict. The posts percolate for a few hours, accumulating comments and likes, until he creeps down after them for his daily fix of fighting with family and friends.

The man who owns that telling red baseball cap reads Breitbart on his breaks, and shares another Tomi Lahren video every time he logs onto Facebook. He knows her infamous rants condemning those goddamn liberal snowflakes will antagonize every person who has ever scolded him for his “offensive” opinions. He craves their vitriol; wants them to feel just as attacked, just as alienated, like their bodies have been shoved down, crouched and cramping in an ideological corner, just as he has all these years. He relishes in their indignation, and delights in the feeling of stretched limbs and cracked joints as he refutes each shrill, critical comment appearing underneath the image of the shouting young blonde.

The man whose car is branded with a *Hillary for Prison* bumper sticker scoffs at the intellectual elite and their mainstream media. Who are they to tell him how to live his life? He chooses InfoWars podcasts instead, letting the unfiltered rage of Alex Jones blare through his speakers. The sputtering host stumbles through his arguments, bellows out his conspiracies, accuses the immigrants, and calls on his listeners
to protect their country from the imminent threat. The driver lets the noise fill him with an identical anger, riling him up until he is yelling at the windshield about the injustices of this forsaken world: how could anyone not want to build a wall? Even out of breath and red in the face, he feels better.

The man who has vowed to boycott the NFL until those ungrateful players show some respect, lounges in the living room while his wife prepares their dinner. He eats the chicken and doesn’t comment on how dry it is, he puts away their dishes, and he falls asleep on the couch, all while Fox News drones endlessly on in the background. He lets the talking points soothe him, the familiar words burrowing themselves into the smallest, safest corners of his brain, convincing him he has been right all along. As he dozes off, he feels warm in his heart, secure in the fact that he knows the truth. He’ll make a post about it in the morning.

I don’t know this man. But I see pieces and parts of him in family and Facebook friends and twitter followers and neighbors and old classmates and in every internet comment section I’ve ever peered into. He is everywhere. When I’m feeling intellectual I want to debate him, and when I’m feeling spiteful I want to label him ignorant and bigot and racist and sexist, and when I am faced with the chance to I usually stay silent. Should I stay something? Stand my ground?

Probably, but no one ever told me how to confront the poisoned people, those who have let the Conservative rhetoric spread like venom through their veins, curdling their blood, making them angry, so very angry, making them lash out at strangers who have no effect on their lives,
who do not cause their problems.
How do you appeal
to those who have been taught to fear
all that they do not know,
all that they cannot understand;
those who fell victim to hatred
invading their hearts, who cannot rid
themselves of it because they do not know
it lives there?

I'll let you know if I figure it out.
Example

The humming and chattering breaks and slows when the lights flick off in one of the two sorority suites housed in the basement of Ice House. Confused heads turn to the front of the room, eyes straining not towards our chapter President or our volunteer advisors, but towards a spotlight that has appeared in front of the kitchen door. A pale-yellow light stains the nervous face and wringing hands and trembling body of the small brown girl who stands in front of us, alone. She is our sister, our friend, but we do not know why she is presenting herself to us this way, so vulnerable, her face so afraid.

She opens her mouth to speak but the words don’t come at first, her eyes well and she stares at her sandaled feet, those small silver toenails instead. She doesn’t want to be political, or divisive; she’s sorry for even bringing it up. She is stalling. The steady hum of the spotlight above is all we can hear besides her quiet sniffling, we are afraid of what she will say.

Then it drops. She is a DACA recipient, and Trump has just tossed her life in the air by ending the program that has been her salvation. She tells us the truth, it spills out of her like she had sliced herself open with a gleaming knife to her stomach, her intestines sliding out onto the floor. Breathless, she reveals that she left Latin America when she was only four, that this is her home, that she could be deported in just six months, and that despite
still feeling ashamed
of who she is, she is so afraid
that she just can’t hide it from us
anymore. She asks simply for a friend.

There is a beat in which no one
moves, can only stare in shock
at the girl trapped in that spotlight,
every secret she has ever held in our full view,
the most exposed and defenseless
I have ever seen one person be.
The beat ends, and abruptly
the “we” of our sorority is split
into two groups, the us and the them.
Those who voted for Trump
and those that didn’t
(those that knew something like this would happen).
There are tears in every eye, Republican
and Democrat alike, women from both sides
going to her, hugging her, reassuring her.
“That is so sad,” one especially fervent
Trump supporter sympathizes. And as hard
as I’ve been trying to understand
why
some of my friends voted for that monster,
in this moment all I want to do
is shake them, tattoo
the image of our sister crying
on the insides of their eyelids, and shriek
in their faces, “Don’t you see
what you’ve done? Don’t you see
that you caused this? Don’t you see
that her pain and her blood
will be on your hands?”

And later, when my frenzied rage
on her behalf settles,
I am left with a twisting feeling
deep inside, a building nausea
because I realize I am relieved
this happened, that after all this time I finally
have a flesh and blood example
of the damage Trump is doing, a specimen
to put under a spotlight
and show to my peers, to make them uncomfortable,
force them to admit their regret,
a selfish act done
to validate myself, and the fact that I was right and they were wrong, with my sister, my friend, as the unwilling martyr.
Dead Weight

Dreary, dreadful flags
hang at half-mast again
on the flagpoles outside my apartment,
the Gettysburg College
and Pennsylvania state banners so heavy
in the third day of rain they do not move
from their places, wrapped
around the slick metal poles
like they’re afraid of falling
any lower. Only the stars and stripes
in the center show a bit of life,
struggling to catch the November wind,
but I can still feel the weight
of the water bearing
down on their threads.

It is the third time in a month
that the flags have hung
this low to the ground, stuck in
a treacherous cycle of hoisting and lowering.
58 dead in Las Vegas.
Each time the dead have been properly honored
and the country is told to move on,
another tragedy appears on the screen—
8 dead in New York
—and the flags are struck down,
seeming lower and lower
every day, taking any hope
of a better country with them.
26 dead in Sutherland Springs.
It does not stop.

There are some who believe
if we think and pray hard enough,
and often enough, we can will those flags
back up their poles inch
by painful inch, and lash them there,
forever preventing another national
heartache—that only positive,
supportive thoughts (and nothing else)
can stop the bullets from being bought
and loaded and fired and felt
shredding through innocent flesh;
that prayers whispered before
bed can stop madmen in cars
and trucks from barreling down
busy city sidewalks. But I know
the truth: that no number of thoughts
or prayers simply said and not clearly
acted on can bear the strain
of that heavy fabric, keep it from slipping
further and further down the flagpole.
The evidence is there: the cycle
hasn’t stopped.

As I walk below the flags each day,
I feel their weight inside, even on clear days
when the rainwater isn’t helping drag
them down. It is like I have swallowed
the wet polyester, the damp material
piled in my stomach, filling me always
with dread, with the knowledge
that this will happen again
and again and again,
though I can’t possibly know
where or when or to whom; a foreign object
making me hopelessly
ill, a constant reminder
that after all this time, nothing
has been done to keep the flags
flying high, weightless
in the gentle air.
Anchor

When Trump was elected President,
John Oliver told me to write
“This is not normal”
on a post-it note, and I did,
block letters on hot pink paper
taped above my desk. I brought it with me
when I moved into my last college apartment,
placed it in the center
of a collage of poem ideas
and pictures from abroad,
promising myself I wouldn’t forget.
I thought it would be a necessary
reminder, a diligent guard
against the complacency that always
tries to settle into American life,
something to hold the this is how it's always been’s
and the there’s nothing we can do’s
at bay.

As the time has jolted and stumbled by,
though, that note on my wall has been
less of a guard and more of an anchor:
something to grasp at when I’m shaking my head
at the headlines, pressing the heels
of my hands hard into my eye sockets,
wishing the blackness would blot away
the utter ridiculousness I’ve subjected myself
to reading. This is not normal.

I whisper it to myself when
I listen to the morning news as I shower,
imagining I can wash the bad stories
away, watching them swirl down
the drain along with the soap bubbles
and hair stubble. I use it as an exasperated
punchline when I’m arguing
about politics with my boyfriend,
trying to break the cycle of back
and forth we seem to go ‘round and round in.
It has become a mantra, a plea
to myself: please don’t stop listening,
please don’t stop hoping.
Dammit, Aubrey—
This is not normal.
From the beginning pages of an anthology of American essays, Leslie Jamison urges me to search for the political in my personal, her tone suggesting I might need a magnifying glass to go find it. There may be others who need this advice, but I am certainly not one of them. Every day, I am drowning in the political, headline after headline washing over me each morning, knocking me to my knees and besting my attempts to orient myself.

Every time my mind has forced itself into some solace, I happen upon the most important news in the most insignificant ways. A short tweet referencing the deadliest shooting massacre in our history. A passing comment from a classmate about Title IX being dismantled. A professor informing me that Trump is set to destroy Obamacare with an Executive Order, just as I have finished complaining that I’m struggling to keep up with the news.

It is endless, and I am drifting, legs kicking but weakening, struggling against the riptide of chaos that threatens to drag me under the water and hold me there. I cling to my anchor, that little pink note I wrote almost a year ago, the ink fading now.

This is not normal.
I tell myself, again. And again. I know this is not normal.

When will everything be normal?
At the Feet of the David

I press as close as the glass barrier allows
and let the yellow light
from the windowed dome above
wash over me, neck dropping back, mouth
falling open, like a baby bird
just minutes old, calling to be fed.
I wait for him to bestow upon me
the knowledge, the perspective
he has, the understanding I crave.

He is everything they said he would be.
Massive but delicate, more beautiful,
more human than stone should ever be.
I see what every art professor
has always raved about: the defined
musculature, the contrapposto
stance, the smoothness of the marble,
the steady gaze into the distance,
the legend reborn, and me, standing
here so small in his presence.

But there is more than that. The look
in his eyes and the gears turning
behind them, the rock
that hasn’t been thrown yet resting
gently on his thigh. I can see
him deliberating, planning the battle
to come: how his agile feet will spring
through the grass, how his shoulder
will drop back, how the muscles in his arm
will tense and release, the air
in his lungs forced out with a grunt
as he does so. He calculates the trajectory
of the airborne stone before he lets it fly.
He knows where it will strike.
He knows how his opponent will fall.

How is he so confident in the face of a Goliath?
How is he so assured of his victory
when so much stands in his way?
How do you beat a giant
when you’re just one woman, little
more than five feet tall,
twenty-two years old, disgusted with the world
you live in and desperate to fix it?
Throngs of tourists with their cameras and guidebooks and *Top Ten Things to do in Florence* checklists wade around me, like swells of the ocean trying to loosen my grip on the pier.
I do not let go. I cling to the David because he has the answers I need, I’m sure of it. He knows how to beat every Goliath plaguing this anguished world.
He must know. He’s survived every other Goliath he’s faced, looked Hitler and Mussolini in the eyes and watched them fall. He can tell me how to defeat the Goliaths we face today, as long as I wait here long enough to hear him speak.
Reminder

Three years. I hadn’t seen her
in three years, but I knew her voice
when I heard it, drifting softly
out of the phone in my hands and floating
through the still morning air.
I squinted through swollen
eyelids—groggy and smeared
with dark eyeliner from the night
of drinking before—at a video
of a girl with an angular face
and thin, light blonde hair peeking out
from a podium emblazoned
with the Peace Corps logo.
Lilly was standing on a stage
in South Africa, chosen to rouse
her fellow volunteers with a speech
before they were officially sworn in.
Slowly, I remembered the pictures
she had posted the day before, how official
she looked standing in front
of all the flags, how proud
her sweet parents must have been.

Though elevated by position and platform,
she still spoke the way she used to
when she would read her budding poetry
to our eager English class. A voice quiet
but jarring, dry jokes interwoven
into philosophical musings, crafting images
with such detail, it was as if she had spent hours
painting masterpieces on my eyes
themselves. And I would be left rocking
in my seat, wondering how
she could possibly find such perfect
words. Three years apart, but I knew
her skill with word and pen
and paintbrush had only strengthened.

On that stage, she spoke of disarming herself,

(I am learning how to break
down an ‘us and them’ mentality)

of realizing how inherently we ignore
those we have so clearly seen,

(When I learned that the Zulu greeting
means ‘I see you,’ I was struck)
by its humanity)

(As a Peace Corps volunteer, it is easy
to feel like the hero
of your own incredible story...

...but decentering yourself from your experience
opens up the overwhelming reality
that people are not pawns
in your latest adventure,
but main characters
in somebody else’s intricate story).

of her fear that she will cause more harm
than healing

in a place that has experienced
such profound hurting.

My already puffy eyes welled
as I listened, cradling the phone
to my ear. Selfishly I was jealous,
so jealous that she had found the perfect
words again, the words
I have been searching for
as I try to understand my privilege,
as I wrestle with what kind of role
I should play in this so wounded
world. But rippling underneath
the thin skin of jealousy, my heart
surged with pride for my friend,
who once stayed out all night
protesting deportations in her college town;
for my friend, who has never wavered
in who she is: feminist, atheist, goofball, activist;
for Lilly, who always stood up for me,
who welcomed me into her circle
with outstretched arms when I had nowhere else to be.
She said,

I don’t know what world peace looks like,
but I do know friendship. I know the kind of friendship
that moves mountains. I know the kind of friendship that reaches
out and holds your hand in the dark.

And it did. How lucky am I
to have held that hand, to have felt
that potent friendship? Oh, how proud
I feel to have returned that gift
with love and support of my own.

I wiped my eyes and commented on the video
how beautiful her speech was. Later, I wrote her lines down in my journal to ensure I would remember. That night, I went to sleep and dreamt of the classroom she’d be teaching in, the walls and ceilings and chalkboards and children brushed with layer after layer of brilliant color, her words floating above their heads, gentle and clear.
Evolution

III.

You’re sitting in your Jeep and I’m standing outside the driver’s side window and we’re in the empty parking lot of a Midas repair shop, and even though you just did me a huge favor driving me here, we’re bickering about politics again. This time it is the kneeling players of the NFL and to sum it all up I think it’s a perfectly valid peaceful protest and you think it’s completely disrespectful to veterans, but when I point out that Republicans haven’t exactly cared about the Democrats they’re offending, you do admit that they have every right to protest, even if you don’t like it. And that feels like enough, and it seems like a victory that the Midas lady didn’t notice the young couple arguing in her parking lot.
Empathy 101

I am a person surrounded
by people. I have always been aware
of this truth. I've learned
to make a habit out of trying on
other people's shoes, feeling
where the heel on their boot
has worn thin, or where their toe
has poked through the canvas.
I have a teacher for a mother but this lesson
didn't require her classroom.
She teaches second grade,
not Empathy 101.

I look around and see pupils
for that class though, people
turned inward, people who assume
only their story is worthy
of the great author's pen,
to be preserved in ink on real paper;
people who have already labelled
the rest of us minor
characters, disposable, our stories
unimportant, our suffering unseen.
They see differences as division,
variation as violence. They guard
against the other.

I imagine my mother and father
at the front of a classroom filled
with students unaware of the lesson. I see
seats emptying
when the syllabus is passed around.
I want to lock the door and force
them back to their plastic blue seats, scream
in their faces that they have to change,
make them listen to someone – anyone – else.
But a shake of my father's head
keeps me still.

My parents hold their heads high
as the numbers dwindle;
they will not force someone to hear
what they refuse to learn.
They know that you cannot make
someone understand their fellow man
or woman. You cannot teach what should be known innately. You cannot reveal that the misery in these people’s lives stems directly from their absence of kindness for others; they have to learn that for themselves. Only empathy breeds empathy.

Despite how much I dislike the lesson, I listen to my parents. I try not to hate those that don’t understand. I try to have empathy for the empathy-less. I hold my face in my hands.

There is the quiet shuffling of feet in the hallway. A red-capped head pokes back in at the door.
Doors

I want us to open the doors. Swinging on creaky hinges, throw them all open. Let the unmusty air back in. There are so many that are still closed. Bang the walls with the knobs and leave marks in the paint. Circle the marks in red pen and treat them like art, write the medium and date and artist on a card and mount it there. Sometimes the healing hurts. I want to dig out the locks and leave gaping holes and splintered wood. I don’t care if my fingers bleed. I don’t want to keep out anymore, and I don’t want to be kept out. Listen, I want to listen. The walls are muffling your voice. I don’t know fear. I want to be listened to. I know doors. I want to see. I want to be Look at our faces, see the humans laugh lines, we have them too. Why Why have we closed the golden door, tired and poor, the yearning masses? push it open. We do not need ladders down. Let us chip off the paint your words, only your anger. Your you can’t hear me either. Open the seen. Why are we allowing division? there. The wrinkles and scars and are we abandoning the helpless? the gateway that has hurried in the Why have we painted it black? Let us and rope and shovels. Let us knock it and let out the gleam underneath.
Evolution

IV.

It’s starting to rain
and I’m hurrying through the parking lot
with my roommates to go grocery shopping
and they ask how my day’s been
and I tell them how we lay in your bed
and watched a movie and talked
about the government shutdown
and DACA negotiations
and didn’t get angry. I tell them that we listened
and we questioned and we spoke
in soft voices and they smile
at me and I feel warm
under my dampening raincoat.
Before the Spark

I sit on the freshly-split wood of my funeral pyre and wonder who will light the match. I try to imagine if I’ll be there when they do.

Some days I find myself preparing for the flames, crumpling newspapers into wads and stuffing them into the spaces between the kindling. I want the words to burn with me. You must understand; haven’t you been paying attention? For who can read the news every day and not want to set themselves on fire?

Other days I stray far from the structure and exist somewhere calmer (somewhere only a person without real stakes can go). I read headlines but not articles, I smile at fundraisers but don’t reach for my wallet. I watch ally battles but do not fight in them. I do not commit to the cause.

Self-immolation: I read about it in textbooks. I study pictures of men meditating on the streets while they abandon their bodies, the inferno claiming them in a frenzied twister, reducing them to nothing but ash and memory and political power. I feel myself in my skin and try to envision flames singeing my dark arm hair, to smell the scorched gasoline, to imagine the numbness of dying nerves. I struggle to grasp how those men
stayed so still through
such intense heat.

I sit on my funeral pyre
and decide that only my feet
will burn. I am tired of martyrs.
My cause does not need suicide
on its behalf. We will act before
it gets to that. I drop the lit match
and watch the fire take hold.
I stumble over the glowing red coals
and wrap my blistered heels
and leathery toes in wet bandages.
The funeral pyre burns alone.
enough is enough is enough is enough

1. Seventeen dead in Parkland, Florida
2. and I don’t have to look at the tweets
3. to know what they said. They think
4. they can think and pray the hurt away
5. while boys with hands and feet and wallets
6. and smoke grenades and gas masks and a whole
7. goddamn arsenal walk the streets
8. and everyone thinks twice but no one stops them.
9. They look at blood on the linoleum floors,
10. blood on the chalkboards,
11. blood on hands,
12. blood on hands,
13. blood on folded, praying hands,
14. blood on stupid, tweeting hands
15. and say everything but do nothing.
16. My heart is so tired of breaking.
17. I’m so sick of your fucking praying.
#PrayForAubrey #PolicyChangeForAubrey

If the unthinkable happens – if the wrong boy gets a gun, if what we thought could never happen here happens here, if despite planning hiding places in and mapping escape routes from every classroom I enter, I am killed in a mass shooting, gunned down in a bleeding crowd of my peers – please, I have a few requests.

Don’t be kept silent by pleas to let my family grieve, they will grieve how and when they want to, and without a politician’s permission.

Don’t let my death slip by as they call for time to scatter my ashes in the air, before they let you talk about my untimely end – there is not enough time, and the countdown to the next shooting has already begun.

Don’t let them put their words under my picture. Use mine. Listen. I am tired of the right to shoot Being put above the right to not be shot at. I am tired of the curdling feeling in my chest every time I read another gun violence headline. I am tired of wrestling with the sick compulsion to know everything about the shooter and my refusal to grant him the infamy he craves. I am tired of weeping in my bed over lists of the victim’s names instead. When so many people are killed, it is such a long time to cry, and my eyes are so tired of puffing up and swelling shut.

I don’t want to suspect every stranger on the street. I don’t want the nightmares of bullets ricocheting through my mother’s classroom. I don’t want to see my baby sister tweeting at politicians that she is scared to walk her high school hallways.
I am alive now, and I want gun control *now*,
and if anyone says anything different
when I am dead,
they are lying to you.

If I am brought down by a spray of bullets
in a place that was supposed to be safe:
rub my wretched story in their faces.
Turn my face into a billboard,
my pain into a hashtag,
and my heartbeat into the rhythm
you’ll clap your hands to at the rallies.
Let the tears of my loved ones wet
the ink of new laws,
and please,
let my death make them safe.
The Nature of Poetry

Underappreciated, underestimated, understudied art form, I see you. I watch how you slink around the edges of the industry, shadowed by the moneymaking forms, the prestigious pens: unseen by many but felt by all, eventually. How you sing, art form, how your words do echo when we bother to listen for your reverberations. How you move, fluid: one moment quiet, a soft hand on my cheek, the next raging, a windstorm yanking my hair, whirling it into knots. Shapeshifter. The world may change, but you evolve—you fit like a key in its lock in every context.

Poetry, pure soul, how you can say what nothing else can, your words informing and observing, sharing and reaching. How your voice lilts and enraptures and captures my spirit. Oh, how I feel hope when I read you, how I feel powerful when I write you: my voice, entwined with yours, climbing and straining towards something with meaning, I am singing, I am screaming, I am changing, I am thinking, and for what? Something, surely. Someone, certainly. Myself, absolutely. If only to understand what I am feeling, to declare what we are enduring.
What Lives in a Body, Part Three

To be a boy is to be broken, to harbor a hurt inside. Spend your life trying to keep it from peeking out behind your eyes. Push it down and away, just out of your mind. Let it live somewhere deeper, keep it confined.

You are supposed to be strong, move on.

You feel it cutting there inside you, sharp like broken glass, the bitter feelings that you fear will rate you second class. You are not supposed to fear and you are not supposed to grieve. You are not supposed to wear your struggling heart on your sleeve. Let the pain rage within you, let it tear you to shreds, hide the bleeding from your loved ones, sew your wounds with broken threads. Other men do not struggle, and other men are not weak. Better men hold their ground when they start feeling meek.

You are supposed to be strong, move on.

Most boys will make it, learn to let the hurt out in bursts, with sports and fistfights, some harsh words interspersed. But some boys can’t take it, some boys will shatter: get angry, get a gun, blow out someone’s gray matter.

Is this what they thought of as strong? Hold on.
America’s boys are broken
and there’s no obvious fix
in our counties and cities
and divided politics.
We have boys who are bleeding,
boys long since scarred,
but we forge on uncaring
of broken boys who are armed.
We have to shift our perceptions
and our preconceived notions
to let our boys feel okay
sharing their deepest emotions.
I want us to put down the weapons
and bring out the gauze,
wrap their wounds in fresh cotton,
remind them feelings aren’t flaws.

Boys don’t have to be strong.
But everywhere, they must forge on.
Evolution

V.

We’re lying in my bed with our feet
where our heads should be
and you are holding me. I feel safe
in your arms, even if I don’t feel safe
from the guns. Parkland happened
a few weeks ago and people
are still talking about it, and of course
we are too. You tell me
that you thought you agreed with Trump,
(that we should arm the teachers)
but that you changed your mind.
That you thought of my mother
having to shoot her own student
in her classroom,
and that you just couldn’t bear
to imagine that. I nod into your chest,
and you hold me tighter and together we hope
for higher age restrictions and banned
bump stocks and better mental healthcare.
I wrap my arms around your back
and feel your warm skin through
your t-shirt and even though
you’re not sure if AR-15s
should be banned, I’m sure
that this is better than it was before.
Ode to the Parkland Activist

Too young! Too young!
They’re trying to claim,
those running out of things to say
to pivot away from the kids
who weren’t killed in the spray—
they’re just children.

Too unpracticed in guns. Too unseasoned
in politics. Too loud to be listened
to. Too crude to be heard.
Too young.
Too young to have looked down the barrel
of the murdering gun

and have the audacity to be angry
at more than just
the man holding it.

They are too young. Too young
to have spent hours hiding
in classrooms and closets, unsure
which friends lay
blown apart and bloody
outside locked doors.
Too young to have texted
their parents goodbye. Too young
to have to fear
for their lives, that day
and today and tomorrow.
They’re just children.

But too young is no label
that has ever silenced
the calls for change
from the mouths of babes
turned activists. Tell too young
to Malala and she’ll answer
with grace that she wasn’t too young
to be shot in the face.
She was just a child.

But children have voices. Children
have minds. These children
are not going to just get back in line.
Not this time.
They have bared their faces
and fury, they have spoken
their names and their pain.
They have demanded
America listen, and they're assigning
heavy badges of shame.
Cameron Kasky calls out Marco Rubio,
David Hogg the NRA,
Samuel Zeig questions the President
himself, while Emma Gonzalez,
through her tears
and without hesitation,
handles anyone left in the way.
Their eyes may be hardened
by unspeakable scenes,
their sense of safety blown
to dust. But when these children
stare at us through all those cameras,
I can't help but feel
that someday
their world will be just.

It has taken too long and so many
have died, but finally it feels
like they are a sign
of change
in this gridlocked America.
End Notes

Page 6
The title of “The New Atlantis” was inspired by Eavan Boland’s “Atlantis” in her 2007 collection, Domestic Violence.

Page 9
The series of three poems titled “What Lives in a Body” were inspired by the line “Essays take the political and make it something that lives in a body” in Leslie Jamison’s introduction to The Best American Essays 2017.

Pages 14-16
Excerpts from Donald Trump’s August 15, 2017 speech on the White Nationalist Rally in Charlottesville are represented in bold, italicized text. All other Donald Trump quotes are represented in italicized text, and were referenced from the following sources:

- Politifact, “All ‘Pants on Fire!’ statements involving Donald Trump.”
- Climate Action Reserve, “Climate Change Facts.”
- Factcheck.org, “Trump’s False Obama-ISIS Link.”

Page 26
The John Oliver reference in “Anchor” refers to a quotation from Season 3, Episode 30 of Last Week Tonight with John Oliver, which aired on November 13, 2016.

Page 27

Pages 30-31
The italicized lines in “Reminder” are from a video of a speech given by Peace Corps Volunteer, Lilly Perry, to her fellow volunteers, posted online on September 23, 2017. The speech can be viewed at this link: https://www.facebook.com/lilly.perry.90/posts/1686746038004946

Page 42
The lines “Turn my face into a billboard / my pain into a hashtag” in “#PrayForAubrey #PolicyChangeForAubrey” were inspired by the lines “replaced my friend / with a hashtag” in Danez Smith’s poem “summer, somewhere,” from his 2017 collection, Don’t Call Us Dead.

Page 45
The line “America’s boys are broken” in “What Lives in a Body, Part Three” was taken from the February 21, 2018 New York Times article, “The Boys Are Not All Right” by Michael Ian Black.