

To the Beloved:

On the Romantic Poetics of Rebecca Lindenberg, Sandra Lim, and

Tina Chang

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Abstract

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In navigating the torrid and varied terrain of love poetry, my thesis close-reads three poems by contemporary poets: “Litany” by Rebecca Lindenberg, “Something Something Something Grand” by Sandra Lim, and “Love” by Tina Chang. I examine how these poets portray the self in relation to the beloved within the intimate landscapes and internal confines of poetry. These three poems deepen, elevate, and complicate the extremities of love poetry, encompassing thematic concerns such as elegy, prayer, embodiment, memory, and family. Through my readings, I will explore how the poetics of romance can offer a doorway to the lyric self, a self that is as artificial as it is confessional.

Introduction

While the words ‘love poetry’ may raise expectations of swooning praise for the beloved, I am most moved by poems that use romance to expand upon underlying differences and losses and frustrations. Rebecca Lindenberg, Sandra Lim, and Tina Chang each lean into the things that remain unsaid and build their poems around the tension of those potential misunderstandings, contending with decisions and urges that may be frowned upon by elusive gods, disapproving parents, or baffled audiences.

My interest in love poetry stems from the growing realization that my poems are interested in exploring how the speaker feels in relation to the beloved, each grappling with the push and pull of perception. I have written many poems dedicated to my past partners as well as my friends, all of which I regard as love poems on equal footing. They take on a range of tones from hurt to grief to nostalgia to giddiness, but no matter the mood, I am often hesitant to share or explain my poems to my loved ones. What if we have fundamentally separate perspectives of the same memory? What if I accidentally reveal too much of my judgment or my softness? Or most embarrassingly: what if I am not loved in the same measure? My affectionate analysis of these three poems embolden me to keep risking sentimentality in order to look at my fears about being seen in the eye.

In defining the essence of a love poem, I keep returning to an observation that Beth Bachmann makes in her joint interview with Nick Flynn in “In Between Words: A Conversation on the Extreme.” The three words that lie at the heart of the love poem are inescapable, where the act of “saying *I love you* for the first time, sometimes, is the height of speech at its threshold. For all the talk of extremities, in the end, they are connected to the core, the body, the torso, the chest. The body is a border, one liminal space you can enter. But so is the heart” (Bachmann 8).

The love poem uses language to sweep the reader into the earthly form of the body, overcoming borders between separate selves for the sake of a shared experience, a state of consciousness magnified when pushed against the shape of another. Each of these poems portray the gap that exists between addresser and addressee, the risky yet gratifying treatment of romance as a generative poetic encounter.

I. Prayer and Elegy: “Litany” by Rebecca Lindenberg

O you gods, you long-limbed animals, you
 astride the sea and you unhammocked
 in the cyprus grove and you with your hair
 full of horses, please. My thoughts have turned
 from the savor of plums to the merits
 of pity—touch and interrupt me,
 chasten me with waking, humble me
 for wonder again. Seed god and husk god,
 god of the open palm, you know me, you
 know my mettle. See, my wrists are small.
 you, with glass-colored wind at your call
 and you, whose voice is soft as a turned page,
 whose voice unrolls paper, whose voice returns
 air to its forms, send me a word for faith
 that also means his thrum, his coax and surge
 and her soft hollow, please—friend gods, lend me
 a word that means what I would ask him for
 so when he says: You give it all away,
 I can say: I am not sorry. I sing.

(Lindenberg 1–19)

“Litany” by Rebecca Lindenberg appears in her first poetry collection, *Love, An Index* (McSweeney’s, 2012). The poems in this collection deal with the passing of Craig Arnold, Lindenberg’s partner, who died in 2009 while hiking the small volcanic island of Kuchinoerabujima in Japan. The poems touch on Lindenberg’s history with Arnold and her altered life in the aftermath of his death.

According to Lindenberg, she began writing the poems of *Love, An Index* when Craig Arnold, his son Robin, and Lindenberg were living together in Rome: “It was a book about our unconventional little family, about love and its many complications. I always intended it to converse as well with a long tradition of poems about love, from Sappho to Frank Stanford.” I love this collection for its use of indexing as a way of processing death and organizing memories; additionally, I appreciate Lindenberg’s craft in reinventing the ancient elegiac form through fragments steeped in ever-present love and loss. The poems are far-ranging in form and tone, but “Litany” in particular feels epic in scope for such a concise poem.

As a testament to the extremities of romance, Rebecca Lindenberg’s maximalist poetics shapes the love felt in this poem. On the subject of maximalism, she states: “I’m trying to be faithful to the occasion and nature of the poem or, better yet, to the world that occasioned it. If I could write a map of the world the size of the world, I would feel great about it.” In the occasion of “Litany,” we see an inhabited world rendered through the speaker’s invocation of the gods that, behind this prayer, is an elegiac call for the beloved. The speaker positions herself as a smaller being in relation to her gods, but the urgent directness of her address is a way of wielding agency over her longing.

Opening the poem, the speaker addresses the gods as “O, you gods, you long-limbed animals.” This address is fondly familiar yet desperate with intent, and from the very beginning gives the reader a glimpse into the speaker’s sincere capacity for larger-than-life language. In referring directly to these nameless gods, the speaker appeals to their wildness; the kind of wildness that the poem insists can be reasoned with via devotional apostrophe. The forms of gods are entwined with this poem’s fantastical grasp of reality, from how they “unhammocked in the cyprus grove” to their “hair full of horses” (3-4). These images are a form of mythmaking,

gesturing toward a sacred grove where gods freely indulge themselves. The horses, reminiscent of mythological images such as the Trojan Horse, is a significant symbol of deceit and sacrifice that is casually employed in this context as a casual accessory of the gods.

This is a speaker who is on the brink of desperation: “My thoughts have turned / from the savor of plums to the merits / of pity” (5-6). These metonymies imply a past abundance that once savored the flesh of fruit, and which has now given way into pitiful disappointment. I love the sonic suggestions of this line, as if the pit of the plum has been revealed to bear pity after she sucked off the juicy flesh.

She emphasizes both the slightness and the significance of her appetite for more in these instances of lyrical assertion: “touch and interrupt me, / chasten me with waking, humble me / for wonder again” (7-8). I think these desires are both childlike and adult, expressing a deep wanting for sensuality while appealing to the gods’ mercy. In this address to the gods, the speaker is pleading to be moved and surprised again. The diction of “chasten” and “humble” stand out to me as a sign that she wants to return to an earlier innocence, an impulse that puts the speaker at the command of others. She puts herself entirely at the mercy of these gods without a hint of irony or bitterness.

As true to its title, the poem is invested in listing as a literary form that generates meaning. Notably, there is no hierarchy of altars: “Seed god and husk god / god of the open palm, you know me, you / know my mettle” (9-10). She unites these entities in the same breath, creating companions that bear equal weight in their effect. She associates their might with agricultural fragments: a seed being an origin which can be reaped and sown across time and space, a husk being a protective shell or layer. You can’t have one without the other. The image of the open palm finishes the action of planting and harvesting the fruits of the earth, a difficult

and patient process of attentive labor. This metaphor carries the idea of love as a humbling effort that requires equal participation, and connecting agriculture to prayer might be a way of elevating human achievements in day-to-day survival to the functions of gods. This plea also affirms the speaker's own strength ("you know me, you know my mettle"), making a case for her credibility. The confession of "my wrists are small" is an honest admission that still reaches out for connection with the gods.

"O you, with glass-colored wind at your call" (11) is a curious image; glass and wind are both transparent images, even if one is solid and one is permeable. These associations merge to create a backdrop where the gods are everywhere, capable of bending and warping distance with invisible deftness. The contrast of wind with the previous references to agriculture fleshes out the expansive yet succinct landscape of the poem, where the speaker is aware that the gods can defy laws of nature in ways that humans can't see. It may also be crucial to point out that there are no recognizable or mundane places in this poem; no mentions of a domestic place that the speaker wishes to return to. I can't imagine this speaker going to a grocery store or a dentist's office. In fact, she is situated in a liminal threshold of fantasy and reinvention; the landscape in this poem is too charged with mythic motives for it to feel familiar.

The gods "whose voice is soft as a turned page, / whose voice unrolls paper" (13) are agents of transformation for other beings, but are not themselves subjects of metamorphosis since they don't want for anything; humans, on the other hand, have to do the work of prayer. The unrolling of paper refers to poetry generated in the name of gods, which the speaker contributes to in prayer, though she does not claim her own labor as part of that production. The idea of existential returns is inched further by the statement of "whose voice returns / air to its forms" (14), playing with the concept of creation, as the gods possess the ability to reverse form

and therefore the physical conditions in which the speaker's body inhabits. This is a poem that sticks to its own logic about how the world works: a lover that colors the air around her with prayers and attributes the underlying workings of nature with the whims of gods. To believe in the sincerity of her devotion, the reader must accept this commitment to extremities and recognize the honesty that comes with hyperbole.

The poem reveals its erotic self in the imperative: "send me a word for faith / that also means his thrum, his coax and surge / and her soft hollow, please—" (15-16). This fragmentary syntax celebrates pleasure, conjuring a rich past through intimate glimpses between the lovers. The poem doesn't give us details about their bodies as much as what they do with them; the pronouns create a gendered boundary between their sensual actions, but also shows how they are equals in the pursuit of pleasure. The sense of touch in the poem succeeds in pulling the reader into this private moment, where the physical actions of "his thrum, his coax and surge" become as divine as "a word for faith."

And what about that ending? After reading this poem so many times, I still get chills: "friend gods, lend me a word that means what I would ask him for / so when he says: You give it all away, / I can say: I am not sorry. I sing" (16-19). This interaction between the lovers deals with the cost of speech; throughout this poem, she has been wielding words of offering that she hopes might do justice to her desires. She then ties in the idea of sacrifice for the sake of the beloved in the act of "giving it all away." The final address to the gods as her "friend" establishes a higher level of familiarity, in a tone of desperation and fondness, that enables the speaker to declare her right to sing; in other words, to tell the story. So much of this poem is about speech: the speaker begs for a word to give to her lover so he may understand her better, and while she is yet to receive that word, she ends the poem on her own action.

II. Grotesqueness and Seduction: Something Something Something Grand by Sandra

Lim

I adore you: you're a harrowing event.
 I like you very ugly, condensed to one
 deep green pang. You cannot ask the simplest
 question, your hold is all clutch and sinker.

Cannibal old me,

with my heart up my throat, blasting on all sides
 with my hundred red states. Hidden little striver.
 How not to know it, the waist-deep trance of you,
 the cursing, coursing say of you. Embarrassing today.

Curiouser and curiouser,

your body is a mouth, is a night of travel, your body
 is tripling the sideways insouciance. The muscle
 in you knows gorgeous, in you knows tornadoes.
 In an instant's compass, your blood flees you like a cry.

You put on my heat,

(that's the way you work) I'm a bandit gripping
 hard on the steal. The substitutions come swiftly,
 hungering down the valley, no one question to cover
 all of living. I arrange myself in the order of my use.

You're wrong and right

at the same time, a breathless deluxe and a devouring
 chopping down the back door. You slap my attention
 all over the dark. What's in me like a chime?
 Sometimes, sometimes, I come to you for the surprise.

(Lim 1–24)

“Something Something Something Grand” by Sandra Lim appears in Lim’s debut poetry collection, *Loveliest Grotesque* (Kore Press, 2006). Lim’s poetry is full of charged and energetic language that thrums with sensorial momentum, knocking the reader off their axis with each line. This poem features the carnivalesque seductions that are present throughout *Loveliest Grotesque*, using the energy of intense, large-scale images to portray the private effects of the beloved. There is a feverish and shapeshifting urgency in this poem that demonstrates the acceleration of lust that the speaker experiences. This love poem renders the internal world into an active

landscape that enacts upon the senses, using the idea of the grotesque as a framework for seduction.

In *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity*, Mary Russo writes about the spectacle of the female grotesque, which provides me with further understanding of this poem: “A spectacle, by definition, requires sight lines and distance. Audiences do not meet up face to face or mask to mask with the spectacle of freaks. Freaks are, by definition, apart, as beings to be viewed. In the traditional sideshow, they are often caged and most often they are silent while a barker narrates their exotic lives” (Russo 79-80). In Lim’s poem, the mask of the grotesque is subverted as the speaker swears on being devoured by the image of the beloved, who is furthest from being stuck in a silent cage. This romance is a show of sensual movements, but not for the benefit of gawking audiences: this is still a private encounter.

“Something Something Something Grand” is a poem of startling and immediate extremities. The speaker openly confesses their desire from the first line: “I adore you” (1). In the same vein as “Litany,” this adoration opens up possibilities of language, morphing the beloved into a needed subject of far-ranging turns of expression. The subject is described as a “harrowing event” (1), a disruptive force that cannonballs into the speaker’s life. The word *event* is unusual, creating a temporal urgency that clues us into the speaker’s frenzied state of mind. The rest of the poem unfolds frantically, conjuring images with dreamlike logic in an all-knowing tone that leaves no room for ambivalence.

Much like Lindenberg’s poem, the speaker is obsessively thinking about another person who presents a vivid contrast to perhaps an otherwise sedate existence, a charged perception that is reflected in the syntax of the poem. As someone who has failed to reach feminine beauty standards, I’m enthralled by Sandra Lim’s distortion of beauty, in the way the speaker embraces

unsettling and unconventional expressions of attraction. They like their beloved “very ugly, condensed to one deep green pang” (2-3), where the striking bluntness of *ugly* is balanced by the lovely abstraction of *green*. This is a poem that delights in the audacious faults of its subject: “you cannot ask the simplest / question, your hold is all clutch and sinker” (3-4). The seduction in this poem leans toward the extreme, “clutch” and “sinker” being words of unavoidable friction.

In the second stanza, there is more language centered around consumption. I’m curious about the indentation of “Cannibal old me” (5) because that phrase alone is so open about the speaker’s own strangeness. In referring to the act of consuming another human being, this poem uses the grotesque metaphors of cannibalism to grapple with the speaker’s insatiable appetite, playfully minimizing the speaker (“old”) to draw attention to the hungering nature of their wants. I love the lyrical declaration of: “with my heart up my throat, blasting on all sides / with my hundred red states” (6-7). The speaker can’t seem to escape desire because it’s everywhere in her body, and because it is so privately felt, the experience of inhabiting a human form can only be described by surreal language that tries to warp nature beyond that form.

The wording of “hundred red states” contrasts the “deep one deep green pang” of the beloved, where the details of the lover are condensed into one image but the mortal machinery of the speaker is expanded upon by urgent whims. The inequality of selfhood between addressor and addressee is not an apparent source of contention between them, but rather a relation that needs to be unraveled further to be understood as a whole.

The beloved is then referred to as “hidden little striver” (7), which mirrors “cannibal old me” descriptor by its short and blunt descriptive phrasing, both of them functioning as titles that test the reader’s trust in hyperbole. This description is further explained by the poetic argument:

“How not to know it, the waist-deep trance of you, / the cursing, coursing say of you” (8). The embodiment of the beloved is stretched to become the landscape of the poem. The “cursing, coursing say of you” is gently iambic, building a rhythmic argument of this attraction. Those words also imply both sensual and intellectual powers that may not be approved of by others but are moving for the speaker.

There is an illicit danger in how attraction is described here, and Lim lowers the grandiosity of these statements with an unapologetic: “Embarrassing today” (9). This assertion makes me wonder whether the speaker is attempting to sound self-aware about their lack of control, or stating that although the lack of control may be embarrassing today, it won’t be as the obsession grows. Before this moment, the poem seems absorbed by its own adoring gravitas.

The imagery is quite grotesque on purpose, and their pleasure comes from exposing a throbbing vein beneath the veneer of civility: “Curiouser and curiouser, / your body is a mouth, is a night of travel, your body / is tripling the sideways insouciance” (10-12). The poem is dramatic without being sentimental, and uses the diction of movement to push the poem to its syntactical limits. In this line, the beloved’s body becomes a site of distracting sexual escapades (“is a mouth, is a night of travel”) for the speaker. I also like how the word “insouciance” seems to depart from the tide of heightened compliments, offering the reader a glimpse of their lover’s flaws. Similar to “Litany,” the vagueness of “tripling the sideways” captures the beloved’s form; we are not in any named external location, so we only experience the environment around the speaker and subject through the increased span of their movements. There is a mythic quality about this setup, reminiscent of Cupid and Psyche, in the evasion of direct sight in fear of breaking the shared illusion. Part of the romance comes from the mystery surrounding these

encounters, since following the beloved takes the speaker to a new terrain that they need to craft novel language to understand.

Lim mixes abstract and concrete concepts: “The muscle / in you knows gorgeous, in you knows tornadoes. / In an instant’s compass, your blood flees you like a cry” (12-14). There is some violence in this description; sensorial details that reveal the speaker’s close understanding of their muse. I’m interested in the distance between the source and the effect of this image: Lim doesn’t say that the muscle itself is gorgeous, but that the muscle “knows gorgeous,” a subtle degree of distance that asserts the speaker’s familiarity. The mention of “tornadoes” denotes qualities of wildness and unpredictability, mixing sense of scenery with sensuality. “In an instant’s compass, your blood flees you like a cry” (14) fleshes out the body as a fierce yet vulnerable site, prone to going over the limit of what it can handle. The mention of blood reminds the reader that they are capable of being weakened, but even this weakness is a sign of fierceness because the possibility of blood comes at a surprise. The blood is also the first explicit sign of violence in this love poem, which subverts my expectations of its tenderness. I’m fascinated by the speaker’s attitude toward violence since they don’t seem protective, but rather authoritative about it.

The next stanza takes us to the ultimate erotic point: “You put on my heat, / (that’s the way you work) I’m a bandit gripping / hard on the steal” (15-17). By prolonging this authoritative tone, the speaker wields the power of articulation even while in a state of sexual unraveling. The risky nature of their relationship is further evoked through the speaker calling herself “bandit,” as if a theft of some kind has taken place in this encounter. The language around the speaker’s own body is lustful: the “heat” that is ignited through touch is put on as if she is a physical object. There is, in fact, nothing *insouciant* about this encounter, but the speaker

doesn't appear surprised by the force in it: after all, "that's the way you work." The poem casually places both amazement and familiarity in the same line. I also find it remarkable that physical touch is earned and experienced in this relationship, but the description of it is shrouded in fantasy.

This fantasy is further elaborated on: "The substitutions come swiftly, / hungering down the valley, no one question to cover / all of living" (17-19). The logic in this phrase is initially puzzling, but the idea of "substitutions" is broad enough for the reader to insert their own assumptions about what distractions the speaker is referring to. My interpretation is that the substitutions are a shorthand for images and sensations that may not be grounded in lived-in reality, but are imagined through the sheer intensity of this adoration. The mythic construction of this relationship continues with the setup of "the valley," where we see there are no adequate substitutions to the real thing. There is "no one question to cover all of living," an existential confession that the speaker upholds with confidence. This is also a poem that doesn't delay the pace of revelations, folding time into confession: "I arrange myself in the order of my use."

This is followed by a disarmingly simple statement that revels in contradiction: "You're wrong and right / at the same time, a breathless deluxe and a devouring / chopping down the back door" (22-22). The dual and dramatic nature of these images create an authentic truth. As readers, we can detect the teasing artifice of the horror that is "chopping down the back door," but there is catharsis in the confession that justifies the image; at this point, the reader has learned the speaker is excited by the grotesque possibility of violence. At the end, I admire that Lim's speaker conveys that the friction of this relationship goes both ways: "You slap my attention / all over the dark. What's in me like a chime? / Sometimes, sometimes, I come to you for the surprise" (22-24).

III. Memory and Inheritance: “Love” by Tina Chang

I am haunted by how much our mothers do not know.
 How a republic falls because of its backhanded deals,
 stairwell secrets. My mother does not know I am lying
 with a man who is darker than me, that we do not
 have names for how we truly treat our bodies.
 What we do with them. The other possesses me.
 Without him the perception of me fails to exist.
 My mother now is taking her sheers and cutting
 through live shrimp. When I was a child she peeled
 each flushed grape until only the pale fleshy bead
 remained. She placed them onto a plate in one shining
 mound, deseeded, in front of me. How I sucked and bled
 the fruit of all their juice, hypnotized in front of the buzz
 of television in each version of my childhood. I am
 her daughter. This is certain. I am lying down with a man
 who is darker than me and maybe this poem is my
 real republic, my face is my face, or is it stolen from
 my mother and hung over mine? If I were a dream
 you could say my countenance was a string of flickering lights
 made of teeth or an expression unraveling like a carpet
 into a narrow river of another life. Does truth matter
 when it's floating face up or face down?
 The answer to this makes all the difference.

(Chang 1-23)

A poem that lives up to its title, “Love” by Tina Chang appears in *Of Gods & Strangers* (Four Way Books, 2011), her second collection. In Chang’s own words from an interview with the *Lantern Review*: “I am seeking to tell the universal story of our collective hurt, damage, and resilience while employing the personal first person. This type of internal negotiation feels at the heart of my process of writing *Of Gods & Strangers*.” While the situations described in this poem are characterized as personal memory, the political implications of the relationships presented are universal.

In “Love,” the conflicted speaker addresses her separate loyalties to her mother and her lover. This poem wrestles with the unending trial of wearing different faces for different people when those faces cannot be safely reconciled; in the speaker’s case, she is in an interracial

relationship with a Black man and has not yet disclosed his existence to her mother. This secretive love does not exist in a vacuum, separate from society; in fact, it is because of societal risks—the betrayal of her mother’s judgment—that the relationship is kept secret. The physical experiences in this poem are all related to the effects of consumption in both conceptual and literal terms, projecting the speaker’s thoughts into the exterior world, flicking between past childhood memories and the current reality of lying next to her beloved as an adult.

From the very first line, the speaker presents herself in contrast to the presence of “our mothers,” whose ignorance over what they do not know bothers the speaker. The establishment of a maternal presence introduces ideas of inheritance right at the beginning. The setting of the poem is sketched out through its secretive recesses: “How a republic falls because of its backhanded deals, / stairwell secrets” (1-2). There is a contrast between the large-scale stakes of a republic and the intimate sphere of the lovers: “My mother does not know I am lying / with a man who is darker than me, that we do not / have names for how we truly treat our bodies” (3-5). The poem introduces the beloved with an element of risk: the mother who is ignorant of their relationship, who the speaker suspects will be resistant to it if she were to know. There is clever wordplay in “My mother does not know I am lying,” where the body is as complicit as the mind in its omission. There is an element of mystery in this connection too, in the way they do not “have names for how [they] truly treat [their] bodies.” This love eludes the clarity of language, and establishes kinship between the speaker and subject: their bodies are experiencing the same sensations, and therefore the same stakes. In this instance, the race of the man is referenced in relation to the speaker, setting these figures apart from each other through the distinction of race.

The next two lines are quite paratactic in their clear-eyed concision: “What we do with them. The other possesses me. / Without him the perception of me fails to exist” (6-7). The

speaker's perception of herself is relayed through her own perception of her lover, who is phrased as "the other." The tone here is absolute, leaving little room for counterargument about the necessity of their bond. It also shows that the speaker does not perceive an inward difference between them; at this point, they are united in their knowledge about each other, and this knowledge feels dangerous.

The poem then makes a return toward the mother, who is "taking her shears and cutting / through live shrimp" (8-9). The act of preparing food is also an act of killing: in order to feed her daughter, she has to undertake the mess of killing. This line unfolds as an example for the speaker to notice an essential detail about an act of love, given to her by her mother. The diction here is direct and plain; the proactive practicality and the active present participle of *taking* the shears and *cutting* the shrimp set in contrast with the speaker's inward way of thinking. As an outsider to the speaker's narrative, I'm drawn to her trying to excavate the present moment to arrive at a clearer understanding of the mother.

When I was a child she peeled
each flushed grape until only the pale fleshy bead
remained. She placed them onto a plate in one shining
mound, deseeded, in front of me. How I sucked and bled
the fruit of all their juice, hypnotized in front of the buzz
of television in each version of my childhood.

The lineation directs the reader's attention to each motion between mother and daughter. She takes us back to the realm of childhood; in the way that childhood memories go, this section is anchored by little visual details that culminate in a lived-in world of hidden meanings. The mother takes on the authoritative role again through the process of food, peeling grapes "until the only pale fleshy bead remained" (10). The fleshy bead continues the theme of bodily sensations that the speaker experiences, so the metaphor takes on a real significance behind the offering of

the image alone. After peeling all layers of concealment, the mother offers the core of the real thing on a plate for the speaker to take in, “in one shining / mound, deseeded” (11-12). The poem also dwells in the desperate and all-consuming manner of eating the grapes: “How I sucked and bled / the fruit of all their juice” (12-13). This metaphor reflects the movements within their relationship, a revelation of violence that coexists with nourishment. There is also a speculative element in the following section of the description: “hypnotized in front of the buzz / of television in each version of my childhood” (13-14). I’m fascinated by this shift to television, which is a departure from the set of earthly images we have come to expect from this poem. I think it offers us a sense of escapism that the speaker tries to latch onto, both as an adult looking back to the elusive past and as a child within that memory.

I am

her daughter. This is certain. I am lying down with a man
 who is darker than me and maybe this poem is my
 real republic, my face is my face, or is it stolen from
 my mother and hung over mine?

The lineation guides the meanings of the poem: the “I am” (14) ends, enjambling into the position of “her daughter” (15) in the following line: a connected but separate line of thought. The splinter of this declaration imbues the voice with some uncertainty, especially as the word “daughter” carries with it many societally demanding expectations. What does it mean to be a daughter, to wear a daughter’s face as opposed to other faces? This is a poem that grapples with the question of love in both filial and romantic forms, and how those pieces of herself come into conflict in the presence of truth. The poem repeats itself, an “I am” statement focused on continuous action rather than a contained noun: “I am lying down with a man / who is darker than me” (15-16). This is the irrevocable fact of the poem, which demands grappling with in

order for the two selves of the speaker—the one seen through her mother’s eyes and the one seen through her lover’s eyes—to be reconciled.

This mental struggle is embedded in the question of the speaker’s poetic and existential identity: “maybe this poem is my / real republic, my face is my face, or is it stolen from / my mother and hung over mine?” (16-18). The voice presents us with a dichotomy of selfhood and inheritance: whether the speaker is capable of inventing her own republic through poetry, where the self is liberated to act independently, or if the mother is haunting her decisions. The “real republic” of the poem is the daughter’s reclamation of selfhood, but there is no true reclamation. The present tense keeps the speaker’s concern in the here and now, as deeply felt as the body that she occupies. The word “stolen” denotes the idea of theft, which raises the question of why seeing her mother in herself feels wrong. The sense of wrongness is calcified by all the things her mother does not know about her, including her relationship.

If I were a dream
 you could say my countenance was a string of flickering lights
 made of teeth or an expression unraveling like a carpet
 into a narrow river of another life. Does truth matter
 when it's floating face up or face down?
 The answer to this makes all the difference.

The turn towards the speculative dream changes the image of the speaker to “a string of flickering lights / made of teeth” (19-20). Inside such a dream, her body is transformed beyond human recognition, reversed from the physical hauntings of the mother. The teeth image fleshes out the theme of hunger and feeding from earlier lines, but in this instance becomes a gateway into the “narrow river of another life” (21). The speaker’s devotion to her mother is a burden from which she imagines an escape. I love the assonant qualities in “a narrow river of another

life” because I get the sense that the faraway surrealism of this other existence is locked into motion by the rhythmic emphasis of vowels. In the turn of the poem, the speaker does not directly include the beloved in her invocation of another life, drawing the attention of the poem back to her.

The question “Does truth matter / when it’s floating face up or face down?” (21-22). leads us to the end of the poem, though without much decisive closure. The presentation of the question alters lived-in reality into an ongoing metaphorical battle of wills, condensing all the layered negotiations of the self into two imagistic choices: face up or face down, where “the answer to this makes all the difference” (23). *Facing up* implies a confrontation of fears, a disclosure of the past for the sake of an arrival at a vaster future, whereas *facing down* settles into secrecy and evasion. In this instance, the poem does not ask for the truth (as readers, we are made privy to the truth of the speaker’s secret intimacies), but it asks whether what happens with the truth matters—which the last line declares it does.

In his essay, “In Praise of Poems That End with Questions,” Nick Ripatrazone reflects that ending the poem with a question leaves the reader contending with the realization that “we don’t have the answer. A poem that ends with a question might leave us without satisfaction—but what do we desire, exactly, at the end of a poem” (Ripatrazone)? Furthering this argument, Ripatrazone brings up several examples of poems with resonant final questions, such as Analicia Sotelo’s “Ariadne at the Naxos Apartment Complex, 10am” from *Virgin*, in which the speaker describes a garden: “A/C units dripping green-black rivers, // the residue of last night’s rain / sitting in a cheap cherub’s eye.” She ends in ambiguity: “Except the light is blind this morning / like a child at a funeral // asking, What are we all standing here for?” The question given at the

end of Sotelo's poem casts what comes before in its fragile light, and makes the reader reconsider the significance of the garden.

In Lawrence Raab's essay, "Uncertain Clarity: Some Ways Poems End," Raab observes of Robert Frost's "For Once, Then, Something": "The poem offers a choice but doesn't make one" (Raab). Chang's poem does not convince the reader that it has come to an absolute end—after all, the speaker is still caught in the onslaught of her entangled identities—but the question marks the end because it compels the reader to look back on the entire poem with an altered kind of lucidity. There is an uncertain quality in this love poem that evades easy conclusions, where the final act of posing a question to the reader is a helpless—yet profound—act of meaning-making, a gesture of uniting both her lover and mother in the same breath.

In my poetry, I want to form a multilayered sense of discovery that persuades the reader to return to the poem at hand, tracing each line with the central question in mind without feeling the need to excavate my words for a final answer. In the age-old questioning of *Who do I write for?* I have arrived at some sort of answer, both true and unwieldy: my own self, and whatever shape the beloved takes.

Conclusion

In my close reading of these three poems, I see my own poetic concerns reflected back at me, moving me to think about how the love poem forms a foundational part of my poetic and personal ethos. I am interested in romance as a force of calamity and solidarity between speaker and subject, which is quite reflective of how I approach my relationships. The eros is a transformative reckoning that challenges the speaker to overcome their own limitations or imagine possibilities against real-world barriers, even if their efforts may become futile.

The intimate tenor of these poems give us a closer look at the complexities of the figures within the poem. Rebecca Lindenberg's "Litany" demonstrates a contrast in power between the human speaker and the gods, but the enormity of longing fills in the distance. Conjuring grotesque images of the lover in "Something Something Something Grand," Sandra Lim uses the spectacle of language as a vehicle for seduction. Tina Chang's "Love" is a dual kind of love poem, characterized by a structural interruption of the mother that reflects the gap between filial and romantic confessions. These poets use the beloved as a force to propel the poem forward, but the love that permeates each line frames the speaker as an agentic source of love as well.

The extremities of love poetry help me explore the ways in which poetry may resist societal powers by exercising bodily and mental agency, however personal that mode of resistance may be. In the past, I have felt that my desires were too queer to be expressed openly, so reading poems about the embrace of one's hunger and the toll of secrecy has given me a sense of companionship. In each of these poems, the speakers are multifaceted and persuasive in their arguments, showing a keen understanding of their internal worlds despite (and because of) the physical realities they have to navigate. Within the landscape of the love poem, I as the poet—and the speaker—have to contend with the self through processing what I mean to others.

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