Qualified Ghost:
Iambic Pentameter in Contemporary American Prosody

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A Dissertation presented to the Graduate Faculty
of the University of Virginia in Candidacy for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English

University of Virginia
May 2025

Abstract

"Qualified Ghost" asks why poets writing after the dawn of the so-called "free verse revolution" cannot relinquish iambic pentameter. Though non-metrical poetry is now the norm and poets are reluctant to claim any affiliation with a form increasingly associated with elitism and obscurity, poets and theorists since Eliot have imagined spectral pentameters lurking in every corner of their verse. Rather than determining whether meter deserves exorcism or invites séance, this dissertation develops a rich metrical vocabulary with which to articulate how, in ostensibly unmetered poetry, iambic pentameter haunts both the line and the syntactic unit, indexing poets' unfolding thoughts and deepening their affective performances. With close attention to the ways that forms can carry or suppress the baggage of the irrepressible past, "Qualified Ghost" contributes to a wider conversation about what kind of cultural formation poetry is and to what extent meter—even in its absence—continues to shape understandings of what poetry can do.

The first chapter, "'You don't seem too haunted, but you haunted': The Specter of Iambic Pentameter in Contemporary African American Sonnet Sequences," explores why and how sonneteers tackling psycho-cultural terrain like the legacy of slavery invoke but sidestep meter the way they do. The chapter traces two dominant strains of ghost meter: enclosing metapentameters that sit at thresholds, in doorways, and across gates or fences in the work of Rita Dove, Kiki Petrosino, and Kevin Young; and iambic cudgels that, through figures for meter as a bodily beating, link patterns of violence and the violence of patterns in the work of Wanda Coleman, Honorée Fanonne Jeffers, and Tyehimba Jess. That chapter concludes with a reading of Terrance Hayes's *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin*, which combines the two strains. My second chapter, "'And then his mother wouldn't recognize him': Allen Ginsberg, Elizabeth Bishop, and Prosodies of Loss," shows how, in two poems of mourning from the 1960s, the use of mixed rhythmic codes affords moments of uncanny recognition. These codes include "embedded pentameters" in the long lines of "Kaddish" and loose "freed verse" stanzas in "Crusoe in England." Engaging the ghost meter metaphor in its confrontation with two distinct approaches to elegy, this chapter explores the affordances of prosodies that involve compulsive revenance and palpable presence-in-absence. My third chapter, "'He held his arms out and embraced the air': Expressive Spaces in the Post-Confessional Prosodies of Kay Ryan and Shane McCrae," connects the impulse to cleave and puncture units of iambic pentameter through innovative lineation and spatial play to two popular poets' efforts to work through idiosyncratic thought-feelings in the wake of post-confessionalism. Kay Ryan's mid-meter enjambments generate rather than disrupt units of iambic pentameter, and her motifs of textured edges, revealing dislocations, and asymptotic arrivals reflect and deepen this prosody of ambivalent self-disclosure, in which "split pentameter" plays a vital role. In relation to the motifs of memory holes, aerated spaces, and temporary dismemberment that suffuse Shane McCrae's oeuvre, meanwhile, his visual caesurae, which correspond spatially to the audible syllable counts of each line, offer a certain uncertainty that reflects his interrelated theories of trauma and holiness; I call this prosody "porous pentameter."

Throughout, these readings aim not merely to practice the mimesis-informed kinds of interpretation that inhere in such motifs, but also to elucidate the diffuser ways that phantom pentameters alter the pace, structure, voice, and tone of poems to make them what they are. "Qualified Ghost" lavishes attention on the ghostly presence of this one meaning-laden metrical form, iambic pentameter, in order to study and celebrate the poems in which it appears, in all their cultural, political, emotional, and formal complexity.

Acknowledgements

To my parents, the Loebs of Wallingford: for listening to my monologues in the car, for embodying two joyous models for a life of teaching, for beating me at Bananagrams, for introducing me to the WNBA right when I needed it, and for giving me a family life that furnishes almost no material for confessional verse…thank you. Thanks to my dad, David Loeb, for teaching me how to write and edit, for reading *this entire dissertation* aloud to me over Facetime (and singing "in other words" in the accent of Adelaide from *Guys and Dolls* every time it appeared), and for driving to Virginia with me when the school year was starting again. Thanks to my mother, Lisa Loeb, for mailing me the sock I forgot, for inspiring me with your determination to make your vision for a school community a reality, and for showing me what preparation and enthusiasm look like in the very best of worlds.

Thanks to my dissertation committee: Jahan Ramazani, Rebecca Rush, Kiki Petrosino, and Jack Chen. To Rebecca and Kiki: thank you for the patient conferences, kind emails, dissertation-transforming recommendations, and exhilarating demonstrations of erudition and taste. To my chair, Jahan Ramazani: thank you for your profound courtesy; for your wry commiserations regarding the state of the profession and the finite nature of the day and year; for your practical and sound approach to revision; for the way you advocate for your students within the university; and for the truly "global" expansiveness of your intellect, which spurs your many acolytes, of whom I am lucky to count myself one, on to more ambitious forms of knowing and wondering.

Thanks to UVA's English department—especially Vicki Olwell, John O'Brien, Kate Kostelnik, Anastatia Curley, and Victor Luftig—for giving me the opportunity to feel like a colleague among my much, much betters. Vicki, to have lunched with you in Marylebone is more than I deserve. And thanks to the mentors who have encouraged, challenged, and inspired me throughout my life, especially Maria Cataldo, Michelle Crosbie, and Louise Glück.

Special thanks to everyone who dog sat for me; to the students of my ENWR 1510 and ENGL 2506 classes, for humoring me and for getting to know one another amid pandemic; to the editors and anonymous readers at *Style* and *Contemporary Literature* for your feedback on the Ginsberg and Bishop portions of my second chapter; to my radiant gynecologist Kerry Hendrix and my several therapists, especially the supportive Katherine Albach and the imaginative Baozhen Xie; to all the nurses at Student Health; to the very clutch Sherri Brown, UVA English librarian extraordinaire; to my valiant undergraduate research collaborator, Jefferson Scholar Caitlin Shifflett; and to everyone who bought me the treats I couldn't afford.

Finally, I dedicate this dissertation to *friends*, without whom I would be a puddle on the side of 64: Annie Persons, Emmett Buckley, Emma Steinkraus, Mary Ruth Robinson, Nina Gagnon, Katherine James, Matt Martello, Rachel Retica, Henrietta Hadley, Eyal Handelsman-Katz, Adnan Zarif, Katherine Churchill, Tarushi Sonthalia, Richard Milby, Chris Schlegel, Andy Axel, Jesi Egan, Mary Kleshefsky, Liz Peters. Let's hang soon.

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Introduction

"Pairs of arms rose to make the wave":
Ghost Pentameter in Contemporary Prosodic Discourse

In 1999, Benny Agbayani hit .286 with fourteen home runs. A quarter century later, in 2024, the Academy of American poets disseminated Oliver de la Paz's poem "When Benny Agbayani Became a Met" to its Poem-a-Day subscribers. The poem is haunted by ghosts both familial and formal. Throughout these twenty-six couplets, which celebrate a Filipino American left fielder by imagining his (and the poet's) ancestors uniting across time and space to urge on their native son as he steps up to the plate, de la Paz conveys the presence-in-absence of diaspora while also courting a famous poetic form as if it were a (dis)embodied spirit. Here's how it begins:

> When Benny Agbayani Became a Met
>
> my ancestors rose and cheered.
> From their ancient graves,
>
> pairs of arms rose to make the wave.
> Every burial site, a stadium and,
>
> for every one of his at-bats
> Mayon Volcano spat a puff of smoke
>
> visible for miles… (de la Paz)

For some readers, the title may ring a ghostly bell: except for an anapestic substitution in the fourth foot, it scans as a line of iambic pentameter. The first image in the poem, of the risen ancestor-fans, dispenses with that pattern: "my **an**cestors **rose** and **cheered**" (de la Paz, my boldings), but it comes back in the very next couplet. Picking up on the poem's title, the almost-perfect rhyme of "graves" and "wave" may invite a reader to hear those lines with meter in mind: "From their ancient graves // **pairs** of **arms rose** to **make** the **wave**." This is not a perfect line of

iambic pentameter, but it is five stresses, including two final iambs. The morbidly playful image of the ancestors' zombie arms rising in synchronized exuberance (and in iamb-like pairs!) to "make the wave"—that cheesy gesture of communal joy familiar from bleachers and stadiums—starts to seem like a self-conscious commentary on the absurdity of rhythmic coordination between the quick and the dead, as well as the difficulty of halting a repetitive, collective motion once it starts.

De la Paz's poem makes of the ballpark a boisterous "burial site." It thematizes the processes by which rhythms from different cultural spaces, representing different kinds of embodiment, can overlap, generating conditions of encouragement and even delight while also engaging the spectral past. The poem's imagery evokes this coincidence of meter's knocking physicality with the diffuse balms and sorrows of diaspora: children clang metal pans in celebration as Agbayani's cleats kick up the dirt of the batter's box, making Filipinos sneeze—and then bless one another—thousands of miles away. As he imagines these kinship incidents, de la Paz combines lines of loose pentameter like "**May**on Vol**ca**no **spat** a **puff** of **smoke**" and "**Tens** of **thou**sands of **nurs**es **held** their **breaths**" with lines embodying other rhythms, as when fans in Shea Stadium parody Elton John, singing, "B-B-B-Benny and the Mets" (de la Paz).

De la Paz's pentameters don't always coincide with the line. The title reappears twice, with the word "became" replaced by the single-syllable "was" to cement its iambic bent: once, ironically broken across a stanza divide as it evokes reunified families ("...staring down the pitcher. When **Ben**ny **Ag**ba**ya**ni // **was** a **Met**, whole families, once torn apart / by distance held each other close") and once contained inside a longer line ("When **Ben**ny **Ag**ba**ya**ni **was** a **Met** we thought / the organ's roar was for us…"). This is a poem about baseball and the Filipino diaspora, and de la Paz's author's note at the bottom of the Poem-a-Day email states as much—

and no more.[1] Still, "When Benny Agbayani Became a Met" makes meaning *as a poem* in part through the prosody I have described, a prosody which mixes lines of iambic pentameter with other recognizable rhythms, breaks established units of meter across lines, engulfs those units inside longer lines, interrogates their rhythmic force through images of battery, and reifies their spectral ephemerality through the language of ancestral presence-in-absence.

De la Paz's relationship with that poetic form—approaching it and retreating from it, ignoring it but conjuring it—is emblematic of the contemporary uses of and attitudes towards iambic pentameter that animate the present dissertation. In the coming chapters, I propose and enact a prosodic practice that foregrounds meter's self-consciously spectral presence in supposedly non-metrical poetry, acknowledging and even harnessing the skein of anxiously skeptical affects that tend to accompany such a methodology. Many of the prosodic maneuvers that characterize de la Paz's poem, such as the mixing of rhythmic codes and the breaking of units of meter, will resurface in fuller form in the work of other American poets ranging from the late 1960s to the present moment, from Allen Ginsberg to Honorée Fanonne Jeffers. I attempt to demonstrate how readings that are aware of these seemingly minor metrical forms—as well as of the ghost meter metaphor itself, inherited from T.S. Eliot's "Reflections on *Vers Libre*" (1917)—can help to describe the pleasures poems offer and the imaginative achievements they represent.

Eliot claims that "the ghost of some simple metre should lurk behind the arras in even the 'freest' verse; to advance menacingly as we doze, and withdraw as we rouse" ("Reflections" 518). Contemporary prosodic theorists like Annie Finch, Ben Glaser, Meredith Martin, and

[1] It reads: "Growing up in eastern Oregon, I never saw any Filipinos around, so when Benny Agbayani played for the Mets, it was my first glimpse of what was possible for Filipinos. Of course, I was lousy at baseball and had no chance in the big leagues, but it was certainly something that inspired me. I make mention of a few points regarding the Filipino Diaspora, namely the line about nurses, and it's important to assert that they were heavily impacted by the pandemic as frontline medical workers. That was weighing on my mind when I wrote the poem. Also, the National Baseball Poetry Festival had its inaugural launch in 2023, in Worcester, Massachusetts, and the impetus to write about baseball was inspired by the event" (de la Paz).

Jonathan Culler have engaged this influential formulation, invoking Derridean hauntology to ask what twentieth century prosodies say about poetry's relationship with the past.[2] This dissertation extends that critical conversation to a contemporary archive and supplies terms that describe how the interrelationship among meter, syntax, and lineation can simulate meaningful and specific affective stances like ambivalent grief or the desire to seem cool. Finally, it stretches beyond the specters of historical memory, asking how, through form, poets invite readers to believe in the fake for the sake of the séance: to play along.

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To explain why the present dissertation summons and communes with the ghost of iambic pentameter rather than of some other metrical vestige or rhythmic remnant is both to understand iambic pentameter as a ready figure for metricality—and indeed poeticity—more generally, but also to dwell on the accidents of mathematics, somatics, and culture that have made this form such a revenant. Amid a profusion of prosodic metaphors and joyously passive-aggressive affects, Paul Fussell declares of the inevitability of the iamb in *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form* (1965): "Those who speak of the 'tyranny' of the iambic foot might speak just as well of the tyranny of friction which enables us to run, or the tyranny of gravity which permits dancing and high-jumping to differ beautifully from walking" (Fussell 180). In *The Rhythms of English Poetry* (1982), Derek Attridge provides a more explicit explanation for how the "alternating tendency in the [English] language" (Attridge 71) makes duple meters more lasting than triple ones. He also accounts for the staying power of rising rhythms over falling ones: "...unstressed words are more frequently linked to what follows than to what precedes them, [so]

[2] For a clarifying sketch of what makes hauntology Derridean, see Katy Shaw's *Hauntology: The Presence of the Past in Twenty-First Century English Literature* (2018).

if one stress is subordinated to another, it will usually be to a later one" (113). Though he doesn't call them by that name, Attridge, too, sees iambs as inevitable.

While, for Attridge, the four-beat rhythm is "the most fundamental rhythmic form in verse" (Attridge 76), the five-beat line has its own paradoxical inescapability as the best available sidestepping of that fundamental form. Attridge writes that iambic pentameter "is the only simple metrical form of manageable length which escapes the elementary four-beat rhythm" (124). Similarly, in *The Art of Syntax* (2009), Ellen Bryant Voigt conceptualizes the "longevity" (Voigt 24) of this form in relation to the brain's capacity to process sentences through "chunking" (9): "Because a decasyllabic line is longer than most of the individual units of syntax that constitute adult sentences, it can more easily participate in large-scale musical phrasing, providing the poet opportunities to combine 'bite-size chunks' for new emphasis or nuance" (24). Voigt's sense that pentameter is the right length in relation to syntactic units to allow for uneven alignments and the ensuing tensions plays out in the succeeding readings. Whenever poets use sentences and sentence-based structures to make meaning, ghostly units of pentameter may help them reapportion language in relation to the line.

Does that make their use of those units "intentional"? In its approach to intention, this dissertation builds on Michael D. Hurley's "The Pragmatics of Prosody" (2007) and Don Paterson's *The Poem: Lyric, Sign, Metre* (2018), both of which draw on principles of linguistics to cast prosodic perception as mutual and collaborative. Hurley distinguishes between intention (J. L. Austin's illocution; the poet's *design in* writing) and motives (Austin's perlocution; the poet's *reasons for* writing), emphasizing the importance of a text's "categorical intention": "that it be appreciated as literary and, moreover, as literature in a particular genre such that the relevant expectations may be deployed by the reader" (Hurley 66). In other words, though Louise

Glück may not specifically intend for future readers to scan "To hear / an echo like the voice /of god?" (*The Wild Iris* 14) or "the hawthorn hiding / balanced trays of pearls" (21) as split units of iambic pentameter in *The Wild Iris* (1992), a book of decidedly free verse, she certainly intends for readers to interact with these poems closely and carefully, placing them both in and out of multiple traditions—in other words, to read them *as* poetry.

Furthermore, Paterson points out the potential mistakenness of every agent involved in such readings:

> Poets are fallible, and—as readers of their own lines—just as capable of erroneous projection as readers are, which affects the reliability of their calculations and claims. Similarly, readers are capable of remarkable acts of "willed metricality", where subtle and unconscious shifts of emphasis can result in the perfect lining-up of speech rhythm and metre in a way that appears wholly deliberate on the poet's part, but is often nothing of the sort. (This is the bane of most prosodic theories; indeed, theorists are perhaps the readers *least* exempt from this bad habit.) (Paterson 383-384)

Paterson's warning against "willed metricality" among theorists is well-taken—especially in the context of a dissertation project in which academic and professional progress has seemed, at times, to depend on presence of pentameters in non-metrical texts—yet so is his sense of the inevitability of blunders on both sides. I proceed on the understanding that, if "subtle and unconscious shifts of emphasis" (Paterson 383) are even plausible in a line to the extent that it could embody a metrical form, then a metrical reading may in fact be generative, clarifying, or enlivening. The coming chapters analyze numerous examples of supposedly non-metrical poetry haunted by the ghost of iambic pentameter in ongoing, iterative, patterned, and even stable ways (see, in particular, my readings of Bishop's freed verse, the enclosing metapentameters of Rita

Dove and Kevin Young, and the split pentameters of Kay Ryan), but it also celebrates and leans into metrical one-offs, accidents, mishaps, and coincidences. As Gordon Burns Cooper acknowledges in his encyclopedia entry on free verse, "In some free-verse poems such [sound-patterning] effects are woven densely throughout, while in other poems, they are occasional ornaments" (Cooper 524).

This dissertation proceeds from the intuition that, while some meters tend towards "self-perpetuation" (Attridge 78), others, like iambic pentameter, actually thrive as "occasional ornaments" (Cooper 524). Paterson insists that "*no one line can confirm the presence of a metrical template*" (Paterson 384, his italics), but he also parenthetically concedes, "(However, some frames—common metre and i.p., for example—are so strong and culturally ingrained that the reader can often project the metre with near-certainty from a single instantiation)" (384). The cultural entrenchment of iambic pentameter means that, in a way, it always has access to the "momentum" that Attridge describes, wherein "the producer of a rhythm will be inclined to impose it on further material, and the perceiver will be inclined to go on hearing it if it is possible for him to do so" (Attridge 78). The metaphor of "inclination," with its competing connotations of geologic angles but also personal whims, encapsulates the ambiguous intentionality of the ghost of iambic pentameter.[3] And Attridge's explanation of how iambic pentameter evades the "doubling tendency" of four-beat verse goes further in accounting for the capacity of iambic pentameter to appear but not to linger: "the five-beat line has an independence as a rhythmic unit which makes it the ideal medium for the poet who wishes to avoid the stops and starts of stanza forms" (126). The single instances of iambic pentameter that this project locates in supposedly

[3] Fussell, too, is ready to accept that iambic pentameter can function as a kind of rhetorical device: "Many free-verse poems [...] establish a non- or anti-metrical verbal continuum as a grid against which *occasional metrical moments* are perceived as especially forceful" (Fussell 84, my emphasis).

non-metrical environments are not individual at all, since they are part of the broader cultural repository of iambic pentameter, yet they are also meaningfully singular—not to mention numerically odd.

Furthermore, as many of the theorists whose work buttresses this project attest—with varying degrees of self-consciousness, humor, skepticism, frustration, and wonder—iambic pentameter is spectral in other respects than in its haunting of free verse, and that spectrality implies a certain unawareness on the part of those amid whose free verse it appears. Fussell considers the spectrality of pentameters that contain the "faint echo" (Fussell 64) of the four-stress line from Old English verse. Quoting Josef Malof, he contends with the possibility that iambic pentameter has a tendency "'to lead a double life'" (65). In particular, Fussell exposes how promotion can help a line of iambic pentameter exist in two worlds at once (the past and the present?), holographically flickering between them based on the reader's perception of the degree of stress of a single syllable.

Attridge and Hollander both dwell on the hovering effects specific to iambic pentameter, casting it as semi-embodied and present-but-absent—two spectral characteristics that will surface again and again in the coming readings. Relatedly, Attridge describes "times when the indefiniteness of a stress in a minor category word allows two possible metrical scansions, and the line hovers between them, blurring the metrical pattern" (Attridge 222); he allows for situations in which the smart metrist will identify an area of several syllables in which a stress will occur, leaving it up to the individual performance to make the stress "real" by locating it in a single syllable. In his reading of Milton's enjambments in *Vision and Resonance* (1975), meanwhile, John Hollander describes how some line breaks make possible simultaneous readings that "flicker on and off, within the transparency of the line of text" (Hollander 104). He

continues, “Milton was to see that the *simultaneous* variousness of the drawing-out of sense from one verse to another could produce such hovering effects, which would vanish in the paraphrase of prose as totally as those of their Latin counterparts would do in translation” (116). These “hovering effects” are evanescent meanings that will not remain unless prosodic conditions are just right; they depend, as we will see later in this introduction, on the co-presence of meter, line, and syntax.

Because of its inherent ghostliness, iambic pentameter is also an evocative way of exploring other kinds of ghostliness that critics attribute to meter—which inform their conceptions of who or what makes meter mean.[4] Culler sometimes conceptualizes the experience of writing in meter as a possession by a supernatural force, even a kind of hypnosis. He quotes Valéry on the topic of the physical loss of control that can occur during such encounters: “‘I was suddenly *seized* by a rhythm that imposed itself on me, and that soon gave me the impression of an outside force, as if someone else were using my living machine’’” (Culler 136, Valéry’s italics). This strain of spectral metaphors parses intentionality in clarifying ways, implying that poets writing in meter are aware but not in control. Similarly, in “Meter and Meaning” in *Meter Matters: Verse Cultures of the Long Nineteenth Century* (2011), Isobel Armstrong describes how even the memory of a meter can rob her of a sense of control. Her essay opens with a description of trying to remember a line of poetry when all she can remember is the metrical pattern: “This pulse was something you cannot Google, for a start. Halfway between a sound and a pressure, it was not a notation, a code or a trace, not music or song either. It was not a sign, not a system

[4] Christina Pugh lists some of these ghostly strains in the introduction to *Ghosts and the Overplus: Reading Poetry in the Twenty-First Century* (2024): “a ghost of a particular poet or poets, the ghost of poetic form (T.S. Eliot’s ‘ghost of meter’), the ghost of tradition, the ghost of unspoken or silenced voices, or the ghost of refrain in its many guises” (Pugh 2). The “overplus” of her title, which she draws from Herrick’s plea to his dead friend Jonson, refers to “the extra-ordinary, supernatural (more-than-natural) life and afterlife of lyric language” (1): the way “lyric language” lingers long after its inciting circumstances have faded.

requiring translation, not a residue—it asked for words but was independent of them and of semantic meaning. It was a ghostly paradigm without obvious cognitive content" (Armstrong 26-27). This "ghostly paradigm," unGoogleable and contentless, disturbs and obsesses her with its demand for words.

That ghostly metrical paradigm is also semi-embodied: neither sound nor pressure, it is a "pulse"—a word that Voigt uses, as part of a reading of "For the Suicides" by Donald Justice, to describe a rhythmic remnant via musical analogy: "A great jazz musician needs a group, a trio, a partner instrument to maintain the ghost of the pulse against which the idiosyncratic improvisations can occur" (Voigt 120). The spectral pulse is just embodied enough to give the soloist something to rub up against but just insubstantial enough to fade into the background when the improvisations demand, allowing for productive tension. Similarly, in a discussion of Charles Wright in *Forms of Poetic Attention* (2020), Lucy Alford writes, "Wright describes his metrics as a stretching and contracting of an 'iambic base,' a flexing of the core meter inspired by Eliot's 'freed verse:' [...] These elastic, odd-syllabled lines [...] 'have the iambic ghost tapping behind them all the way through,' combining 'the felicities of the metric line, and the possibilities of the free line'" (Alford 206). The ghost is "tapping": not just approaching and retreating, as it does in Eliot's formulation, but making a small, physical noise by lightly knocking or touching some solid surface. The tapping implies a level of embodiedness both for the ghost and for the thing the ghost touches.

Paradoxically, many theorists who have engaged the ghost meter metaphor have done so precisely because of the kind of materiality it communicates. Michael Davidson's *Ghostlier Demarcations: Modern Poetry and the Material World* (1997) explores "the relationship between two forms of materiality, social and aesthetic, manifested in a figure like the

phantasmagoria and embodied in modern American poetry" (Davidson 4). Davidson coins the term "palimtext" for poetry's "intertextual and material character, its graphic rendering of multiple layers of signification" (9); for him, the semi-materiality of poetry is how it makes meaning. And that is certainly the case in ghost metrical readings of specific poets that have surfaced in recent decades, from *The Rise and Fall of Meter: Poetry and English National Culture, 1860-1930* (2012), in which Meredith Martin argues that critics have not focused enough on "the material form of Hopkins's metrical marks" (Martin 52), to *Haunted Heaney: Spectres and the Poetry* (2022), in which Ian Hickey casts Heaney's bog poems as spectral in the Derridean sense but also as physical repositories of the disintegrating past. Specific readings in the coming chapters, such as the one concerning the semi-spiritual "porous pentameters" of Shane McCrae, will engage the compromised materiality that the ghost of iambic pentameter introduces into texts.

Even more fundamental to this project's aims than the specific sense of (dis)embodiment that the ghost meter metaphor communicates for poets and critics, however, are the affects of disbelief, skepticism, and denial—for poets, readers, teachers, or students—that the ghost meter metaphor carries with it. The elucidation of these affects offers a way of contending with the question of intention in a project like this one, and it originates in the similarity between questions like "Do you believe in iambic pentameter?" and ones like "Do you believe in ghosts?": in this analysis, the skepticism and disdain that poetry as an art form inspires in would-be readers find their more concentrated form in the affective stances with which would-be prosodists react to the notion of meter's presence in the poems they encounter. Often, they refuse to be the kooky, credulous fools taken in by this nonsense, and they take pleasure in dismissing those who, for reasons ideological or dispositional, still subscribe to it. Critics like Antony

Easthope and Virginia Jackson have advanced influential arguments about the ideological baggage (class- or race-based, respectively) that iambic pentameter carries, and Gillian White's *Lyric Shame* (2014) has extrapolated from the shifting sands of poetic politics to make a claim about the embarrassment that people feel in relation to lyric poetry, though she does not address iambic pentameter specifically. Versions of all these dynamics infiltrate the poems in this project and inform poets' productively defensive stances and technical equivocations. I argue that the dynamics of skepticism and disdain permeate prosodic discourse in particular, especially in texts that directly engage the ghost meter metaphor.[5]

Eliot expresses skepticism and disdain at the notion that poetry could or would exorcize the metrical ghosts that haunt it: "It is assumed that *vers libre* exists. [...] Yet *vers libre* does not exist, and it is time that this preposterous fiction followed the *élan vital* and the eighty thousand Russians into oblivion" ("Reflections" 518). Conversely, many modern and contemporary prosodists express skepticism that meter is in any sense real. In *Free Verse: An Essay on Prosody* (1980), Charles O. Hartman denies the actuality of prosody, declaring, "Prosody is not a fact that 'really happens'[...], and this is especially clear when we are considering a long-established meter" (Hartman 39). There is also a robust tradition of denying the existence of the poetic foot; Attridge warns against "allowing ourselves to be awed by its classical pedigree" (Attridge 9) and complains of its tendency to trick the rational but trusting into passive belief. Taking the more self-conscious stance that a discursive inheritance characterized by Attridge

[5] Prosodic discourse is rife with other metaphors, too: Glaser calls meter or metrical discourse a metronome, a battleground, a scar, and a vestigial organ; Wesling calls it scissors; Voigt calls it a Halloween costume and a game of racquetball; Attridge compares the perceiver of stress to someone watching a pole vaulter; Longenbach calls lines flirty; Caplan compares poets to aliens; Culler calls meter a machine, and Hollander warns against slipshod musical metaphors. Prosodic metaphorization is its own art.

might encourage, Martin's book begins, "I don't believe in iambs. I am keenly interested in why people do or do not believe in iambs" (Martin 1).

I am, too. Like Glaser, I posit that the iamb is a boogeyman that helps poet-critics handle the stress of dedicating their lives to a cultural formation with no juice, few advocates, and an uncertain future. Thence the strain of mockery and scorn that runs through the prosodic literature: Gay Wilson Allen's *American Prosody* (1978) begins by bemoaning how "only too often the author of a book on versification seems to take the attitude that no other author of a similar book is quite sane" (Allen *xix*), while Donald Wesling's preface to *The Scissors of Meter* calls conjectures about meter "sometimes loony" and the refutations "nearly always savage" (Wesling *viii*). Prosodists reserve even more contempt for those who attempt to subject free verse to metrical scansion: Paterson calls the practice "absurd" (Paterson 497) and compares it to "scoring a boxer on the aesthetic quality of his footwork" (497-498), while, as I explain in my third chapter, Alan Holder's *Rethinking Meter: A New Approach to the Verse Line* (1995) positively indicts the "metrical coerciveness" (Holder 115) of Hartman's attempts to acknowledge the ghost of meter in Eliot. Taking all this in, Glaser refers broadly to "centuries of irritation" about the discipline of prosody (*Metronome* 10), and he identifies instances of metrical mockery throughout his period, showing how these affects of skepticism, denial, and scorn show up in the metrical maneuvers of poets as well as in the critical discourse surrounding their work. There is, in other words, a feedback loop: meter's meaning-making capacity generates a prosodic discourse that resurfaces in the poetry, achieving a spectral pattern of return.

The overlapping patterns of that feedback loop mean that how or what meter—specifically, iambic pentameter—signifies in the context of any given poem is hard to pin down. To that end, Glaser writes, "The complexity of these returns shows why it is a mistake to

understand modernism's widespread investments in meter as conservative; they do not signify a desire to return to the past values or functions of poetry but the will to understand what happened to its public form" (*Metronome* 29). A poem that manifests the ghostly return of iambic pentameter is not necessarily expressing a reactionary, "Make Poetry Great Again"-like sensibility; rather, it is incorporating what Glaser would call the "metrical vestige" (27) in order to test its power, suss out its affordances, and enlist both in the imaginative project of the poem at hand, including the politics informing that project.[6] For this reason, the present dissertation does not accept a one-to-one correspondence between poetic forms and political implications, but it does contend that politics—especially racial politics—inheres in prosody much as other aspects of the poem's meaning do.[7] Furthermore, I agree with Cooper that the meaning of meter's absence is just as malleable as that of its presence; in his entry on free verse, Cooper lists all the different political engagements of free verse—"from Fascist sympathies to conservative Anglicanism to mild populism to open hedonism to mystical spiritualism to New Left activism to anarchism" (Cooper 523)—and asserts that each is elsewhere associated with metrical verse.

Kamau Brathwaite's famous rejection of the colonial literary inheritance foisted upon Caribbean poets, as represented by iambic pentameter, stands: for him, its failure to capture the roar of the hurricane—"The hurricane does not roar in pentameter" (Brathwaite 265)—is a metaphor for the obstruction to liberated *poiesis* that received "perceptual models" (263) present.

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[6] This dissertation borrows Caroline Levine's useful term "affordances," which she borrows in turn from design studies, to describe what forms can carry from one context into another.

[7] In this respect, as I will explain further in Chapter 1, the project adheres to a brand of formalism much like the "historicist formalism" for which Miller advocates or the "situated formalism" of Ishmael Reed in *Freedom Time* (2014). It also draws on Cushman's broader kind of formalism, which is predicated on the assumption that "the more American poets concentrate on form, in both theory and practice, the more meaning accrues to whatever it is they are evading by means of form" (*Fictions of Form* 7). It eschews, on the other hand, the self-abnegating formalism of Glaser's recent article "White Things: Form, Formalization, and the Use of Prosody" (2024), which worries that "Formalism's hidden logic of racial self-fashioning assumes all nonwhite poets make their decisions because of commitment and race consciousness" ("White Things" 1565).

Although, in asking "how [to] get a rhythm that approximates the natural experience, the environmental experience" (265), Brathwaite writes as if he thinks of the power of meter in terms of what Attridge calls "imitative form" (Attridge 287), his elucidation of "nation language" (Brathwaite 265) suggests a sensitivity to the (less mimetic) "sound explosion" (266) that an authentic prosody can facilitate. In reading Brathwaite this way, I take certain cues from "(Indian) Verse and the Question of Aesthetics" (2019), in which, in the face of postcolonial criticism that "hastens to identify [...] the formal enactment of subversion through appropriation of canonical forms," Vidyan Ravinthiran recommends critical readings that instead "impel social complexities toward a contemplativeness which inheres in poetic style" (Ravinthiran 666). Ravinthiran thinks it "a failure of respect" when postcolonial poets "aren't read as poets" (648); though this dissertation focuses on an American archive (excepting the Canadian upbringing of Elizabeth Bishop), it takes his warning to heart, treating poets with other marginalized identities (my first chapter is about the work of seven African American poets of the contemporary period) as able and ready to use any device that will serve their ends. These readings stay open to the possibility that any poet can wield multiple attitudes towards and find multiple uses for the ghost of iambic pentameter, always attending to the political implications of those attitudes and the affordances of those uses.

At the most basic level, my analysis proceeds by examining meter, line, and syntax in triangulated tension with one another, in poems that most readers would identify—either actively or passively—as free verse. Popular poet-prosodists like James Longenbach and Ellen Bryant Voigt agree that, in non-metrical poetry, it is the interaction between two of those three elements, line and syntax, that generates meaning. In *The Art of the Poetic Line* (2008), Longenbach

defines poetry as "the sound of language organized in lines" (*Poetic Line xi*) and emphasizes "the relationship of the line to the poem's syntax—to the unfolding structure of the poem's sentence" (4-5). In *The Art of Syntax* (2009), Voigt offers syntax as a kind of relief from the overwrought analysis that totalizing focus on lineation can engender: "For the past one hundred years, poets have been [...] fretting about the poetic line, what it might be, what it can do, when released from a priori metric patterns. It is useful to remember that we write in sentences too" (Voigt 20-21). In the following chapters, I celebrate the analytical affordances of the line ending and the clause boundary, while proposing and demonstrating that the metrical unit deserves equal regard.

Attridge addresses the role of all three elements—meter, line, and syntax—in five-beat verse. He contrasts the relative unimportance of the line ending in four-beat verse, which has an "underlying rhythmic structure" (Attridge 83), with the manifold powers of enjambment in five-beat verse (105). Similarly, he regards tension between meter and syntax as untenable in four-beat verse (107) but fitting in its five-beat counterpart, in which "the syntax has a more powerful voice" (133). Furthermore, while Attridge contends that the five-beat line does not "break naturally into two" (127), he also rightly notes that five-beat lines are "often divided internally by syntactic breaks" (128). He later admits that he sees how syntax can function like a line break in the middle of five-beat verse: "in some styles of pentameter—notably in dramatic verse—a strong internal pause can function like a line-ending in allowing the promotion of a nonstress" (259). Line endings affect word function and degree of stress; syntactic breaks, sometimes the result of shifts in speaker, can do the same, allowing for mid-line breaks.

The present dissertation builds on Attridge's sense of the interdependence of line, syntax, and meter, as well as on those prosodists who tend to focus on two of those three elements at a

time, but it does so while self-consciously applying the language of poetic feet ("iambic pentameter" rather than "five-beat verse") to ostensibly non-metrical poetry. In this, I seek to join those who break down the distinction between metrical and non-metrical poetry, and I also stake a particular kind of claim for the use of a term like "iambic pentameter"—one based not in its objective accuracy or even in its capacity to consistently evoke the complexity of stress contours, but in its tendency to carry with it a set of affective tendencies (skepticism, disdain, anxiety) that permeate and deepen the poems in which these prosodic patterns are at work. I stake this claim in the face of the assumption that iambic pentameter simply doesn't matter in contemporary poetry—an assumption so ubiquitous as to seem invisible, but evident in every craft interview in which meter goes unmentioned, every (otherwise thorough) dissertation that sidesteps prosody, and every syllabus that makes meter an extra credit opportunity, at most. The coming chapters, and in particular the coda, will substantiate this assumption more concretely through meta-analysis of the critical discourses surrounding certain poets. This rest of this introduction will lay the groundwork for those efforts by outlining some of the theoretical, literary-historical, and rhetorical implications of the break-down of the category of non-metrical verse. Finally, it will attend to different conceptions of meter's meaning-making capacity and carve out its own model, unfolding some of the valences of "affect" that, in the readings to come, will illuminate how poems' formal characteristics make possible their tonal and imaginative maneuvers.

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Eliot contends that "the most interesting verse [...] has been done either by taking a very simple form, like the iambic pentameter, and constantly withdrawing from it, or taking no form at all, and constantly approximating a very simple one" ("Reflections" 518). Attridge, too,

acknowledges the basic premise that good poetry lies somewhere near "the borders of metricality—or, rather, [...] in the no-man's-land around its edges" (Attridge 204). This early twentieth century martial metaphor for ambiguous metricality locates the approaching-and-retreating motion that Eliot attributes to free verse within the realm of the metrical, describing an "onward movement which at times approaches a marked regularity and at times departs from it" (17-18). Attridge's final chapter, in which he demonstrates some scansion-driven readings using the methodology he has proposed, even begins with a non-metrical example: Geoffrey Hill's prose-poetic *Mercian Hymns* (1971), in which "scansion in terms of beats and offbeats is not altogether misleading" (318). That hesitant double negative exemplifies Attridge's attitude towards the question of the feasibility of metrical analysis of non-metrical poetry. With everything he has argued about four-beat verse as a continuous, recognizable, even inevitable mode, it is difficult for a theorist in Attridge's position to contend with the fragmented, residual, contingent nature of what other prosodists more readily recognize as the ghost of iambic pentameter.

While some are even less willing to inhabit that no man's land of metricality than Attridge is—in *Theory of the Lyric*, Culler defines deviation from norms as the province of rhythm rather than of meter (Culler 144-5)—others explore it with various degrees of curiosity. Though the structure of his book concedes Culler's distinction by separating precise meter from more diffuse form, Fussell considers the possibility that "free verse is a matter of degree," on a spectrum with accentual verse, accentual-syllabic verse, and even "rhythmical prose" (Fussell 76). Cooper goes further, stating that "free verse may include extensive sound patterning on an unpredictable basis" (Cooper 524) and delineating the two kinds of presence-in-absence that meter can achieve: first, *à la* Fussell, accentual meter with counted stresses but any number of

syllables, and second, "recognizable metrical lines or line fragments [that] occur prominently in some free verse," which "remains free verse because these sequences are not consistent or predictable" (524). Wesling focuses on the latter of those types; he believes that prose poems and free verse "require ad hoc recognitions of form" (Wesling 84). This dissertation will concern itself with both these categories: with ongoing meters so loose in terms of substitutions or spatial arrangement that they barely qualify as meter, as well as with individual instances or units of meter that surface, almost incognito, amid markedly non-metrical environments.

Although this dissertation is not a work of historical poetics, the conceptual willingness to inhabit and explore the metrical no-man's land has meaningful implications for those contemporary critics—like Meredith Martin, Margaret Ronda, and Ben Glaser—who are explicitly interested in revising the periodization of poetic forms. Martin's *The Rise and Fall of Meter* (2012) tracks the flourishing of metrical discourse in the late nineteenth century and into the twentieth, questioning the received narrative of modernism and tracing misconceptions about accounts of meter in English poetry back to her period, 1860-1930. In an eco-critical vein, Ronda's *Remainders: American Poetry at Nature's End* (2018) suggests "a critical counternarrative" to the "'innovation paradigm'" (Ronda 15) associated with conventional understandings of form, including iambic pentameter. Using the figure of the metronome as a "modernist foil," Glaser, too, contends that there is no making anything new—and that there never has been. Citing Cary Nelson's poststructuralist *Repression and Recovery* (1989), Glaser calls the toppling of meter and advent of free verse one of the "addictive narratives that keep us from 'know[ing] the history of the poetry of the first half of this century'" (*Metronome* 2). Citing Max Cavitch's "Slavery and its Metrics" (2011), he continues, "The 'non-event' of meter's breaking [...] deafens us to the work of meter" (2). In these passages, the metaphors of addiction

and deafness indicate Glaser's desire to diagnose and cure a kind of discursive illness or disability. Ultimately, his work offers a profusion of critically self-conscious historicism and richly evocative metaphors, making it generative for any work determined to apply the deconstructed formal/anti-formal binary, with all its historical implications, to dedicated, appreciative readings of poems.

For both Martin and Glaser, uncovering the constructedness of the narratives of meter's breaking means psychologizing those who propagate those narratives. Martin exposes "the ways in which 'meter' extends beyond the poem itself and into the public domain of national salvation and the very private domain of spiritual identity" (Martin 76). For the figures and publics Martin studies, meter stands for a host of cultural hopes and worries related to "class mobility, imperialism, masculinity, labor, education, the role of classical and philological institutions, freedom, patriotism, national identification, and high art versus low art" (4), and its fate stands in for their fates. In her reading of Hopkins, she connects that poet's anxious need to use metrical marks with his precarious belief in the unseen. Whereas, for Martin, waning hope for metrical reading strategies stands in for waning hope for the nation and its souls, for Glaser, who studies the early twentieth century, that anxious relationship is more layered, even characterized by repression: "This book diagnoses the disavowal of meter as a cover for modern poetry's nostalgia for earlier metrical culture, anxiety about its marginality and limited readership, and dependence on literary criticism" (*Metronome* 1). The disavowal of meter is a "cover" for a desire for circumstances in which it would not need to be disavowed at all. The figures and publics that Glaser studies trash meter (or, at least, parody it) in order to distance themselves from it, even as they experiment with ways of reclaiming it or changing its signification. In particular, Glaser is drawn to poets whose work bears evidence of their distrust of readers, poets

who "recoil from readerships" (27). The present dissertation recognizes that both models of literary anxiety, Martin's and Glaser's, persist and overlap today, affecting strategies for writing as well as reading.[8]

How much training does a reader need in order to know when they are witnessing a pentametrical visitation? Attridge insists that, if there are native speakers of English, then there must be an equivalent kind of competence among metricists (Attridge 153); however, he also argues that perceiving iambic pentameter takes more training than perceiving four-beat verse (124). I avoid implying or stating that the perception of any metrical unit is ever a natural event. There is more than one kind of legitimate training in poetic meter, and all those kinds of training are culturally and ideologically complex—yet readers can also take those tools and apply them, piecemeal, to texts they encounter. Attridge gives a sense of scansion as a holistic system of perceptual and critical practices acquired through un-self-conscious exposure, like language fluency. I contend that metrical training is sometimes dispensed with altogether, but also sometimes in progress, sometimes partial, often conscious, and often anxious.

Glaser approaches the question of training from another point of view: that of the poet.[9] He imagines poets plagued by "a deep anxiety about whether and how well readers could recognize prosodic form and, in extremis, poetry as a distinct and valuable genre" (*Metronome* 8). The slices of poetic discourse that Glaser highlights show it to be tense and self-conscious,

[8] Peter Miller's contention in his UVA dissertation (2019) that "prosody persists in seeming something of a throwback, a charming emblem of a time before mass electrification, automobiles, and world wars" (Miller 2) is the tip of the iceberg, if the iceberg is the anxious tangle of structural feelings about elitism, training, and perception that accompany every contemporary act of scansion.

[9] For a take on prosodic competence that balances the perspectives of the reader and the writer, see Hurley's "The Pragmatics of Prosody" (2007). Hurley writes that, in linguistic pragmatics, "Illocutionary force is not mortgaged exclusively to the opinion of the interpreter. It is instead a matter of there being judged to be reasonable conditions for what Austin called 'uptake': the responsibility for interpretation is a shared one, between *auctor* and *lector*; both must possess sufficient 'pragmatic competence'" (Hurley 55). Hurley also emphasizes that there are "degrees of competence" (57), something both Attridge and Glaser sometimes overlook.

marginal but high stakes. In the present dissertation, the primary object of study is poetry, not prosodic discourse; nevertheless, as part of their descriptions of poems, the succeeding chapters often turn to the letters, lectures, interviews, and essays in which poets articulate their prosodic theories. Stephen Cushman's *Fictions of Form in American Poetry* (1993) contends that the "figurative discourse" of such theories "relates to the poem as a patient's associations in therapy about a dream relate to the dream itself" (*Fictions of Form* 6). Cushman attends to differences between women poets like Dickinson and Bishop, "whose formalism avoids public debate," and men like Pound and Ammons, "whose formalism engages in it" (24), as well as between the formalisms of poets who teach and of those who don't. The poets featured in the coming chapters weave their prosodic discourse through their poetry and their prose for reasons spanning the stylistic, the personal, the identitarian, and the arbitrary. That discourse may flesh out the portraits of each poet-as-prosodist, and it may also deepen, ironize, undermine, or bolster the metrical experiments of the poems themselves.

How *does* meter mean in the present dissertation? In the "meter" entry in the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, Rhian Winslow draws on Fussell and others to list its meaning-making functions: "Meter signals genre, elicits the pleasures of musicality in expectation and surprise, imitates meaning in the content [...], contributes to tone (e.g. ironic, satiric, oracular, conversational), and bears social and cultural meanings" (Winslow 875). Winslow indicates which of these functions have been studied and which neglected: "The first three [...] were much studied by New Criticism and structuralism [...]. The last two [...] have been most neglected despite their analytic potential with respect to critical and cultural studies" (875). This dissertation addresses all of Winslow's functions but takes particular interest in the

two she selects as undertheorized or underused in criticism: how meter contributes to tone and how it bears social and cultural meanings. In this way, these readings do not confine themselves to either semantic or non-semantic functions of meter (Attridge 286); they understand meter as "operat[ing] within the same space as the meanings of the poem's words" as well as "contributing to the total working of the poem" (286), and they understand that, because poems take place in a world in which other poems exist, those two functions are not distinct.

Indeed, while the coming readings tend to treat meter as a way of proceeding that makes poets' distinctive tonal stances, consequential voicing decisions, and specific affective outputs possible, they are also replete with references to what Attridge calls the "iconic" functions of meter, such as "imitative form" (Attridge 287). The section of my first chapter about "iambic cudgels" argues that, in ostensibly non-metrical sonnet sequences, the beat of meter can resemble—or at least suggest—a physical beating. Attridge critiques such readings, warning against the danger of "metaphorical slippage" (289) in which, as in an example from Dr. Johnson, hard syllables stand in for hard fortune. Critics who attempt to make interpretive hay out of imitative form rely, he feels, on readers' "lazy assent" (287).

Attridge is right about the needy willfulness of some criticism and right that there exist readings of meter based on its iconic functions that stretch plausibility past breaking point; others may determine if any such readings are contained in the coming pages. Still, is it so wrong for criticism of poetry to integrate its inherited terminology into the literary texts it seeks to appreciate, finding ways that those two registers of language reflect and deepen one another? Furthermore, isn't it problematic to imply that there's a difference in *kind* between readings guilty of this "metaphorical slippage" and other kinds of readings, ones with pristine terminologies that never touch interpretation directly? Shelley's "Defence of Poetry" teaches us

that metaphorical slippage fundamentally shapes our "apprehension" (Shelley 511) in gradually shifting ways that, in time, constitute the commonplaces of human thought and experience. The inheritances of feminist theory teach us that there are no sterile or innocent implements that critics can use to dissect poems but that do not infect the poems at hand with their histories, their ideologies, or their cultural baggage; so, I say, use the tools at hand…and pay close attention to what happens next.

Many prosodists engage with relish in such readings. In his enumeration of different classes of spondaic substitution, Fussell identifies the "blood spondee," wherein poets "suggest the presumably slowed circulation of chilled, thickened, or perhaps even 'tired' blood by recourse to spondaic substitution" (Fussell 43). The concept of the "blood spondee" does not merely illuminate *Romeo and Juliet,* "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," and "In Memoriam," as it does in Fussell's reading; in its sinister evocativeness, it spills over into other readings, onto other spondees. Pedagogues sometimes say syllabi should be works of art in themselves, inviting students to engage through their sheer artfulness; so should metrical schema. When the coming readings wield the iambic cudgel or get sucked into the porous pentameter, they do so with an understanding of the limits of the objective truth-capacity of such terms and in the hope that their liveliness will encourage future readings attentive to sound patterns.

Criticism that foregrounds meter's affective functions is harder to scorn but also harder to define. Persuasively, Attridge writes that rhythm is "an *index* of extraverbal reality, rather than an icon; that is, it signifies something other than itself not because it resembles that other thing, but because it is a direct product of it" (Attridge 295, his italics). Rhythm can mark, stand for, coincide with, or emerge from "energy conditions" (296) that may involve but are not limited to human emotions. The "affects" that this dissertation reads as emerging from poets' uses of ghost

meter are like emotions, but they exist in conjunction with social or cultural forces. To that end, in his definition of "affect" in the *Princeton Encyclopedia*, Jonathan Elmer extrapolates from Eliot's distinction between emotions and feelings, concluding that an affect is like an Eliotic feeling: "a more free-floating, and more subtly differentiated, realm of response" (Elmer 12) than emotion. Elmer also cites Massumi on the "autonomy of affect" in relation to emotions (12). Significantly, Elmer points out that, unlike the meaning of affect in Wimsatt and Beardsley's "The Affective Fallacy," emotion for Eliot "is the property of psychological individuals, while 'floating feelings' are what are catalyzed in poems and belong no longer to either author or reader" (Elmer 11). This introduction has already explained how the perception of the ghost of iambic pentameter is co-created by author and reader, rather than intended by one or interpreted into existence by the other; so, too, are its affective upshots. In that respect, these spectral affects resonate with the field of "literary pragmatics" as Hurley defines it, wherein "the intonational contour" of language influences its meaning, so that stress and rhythm "inflect emphasis, irony, surprise, an imperative, an interrogative, and so forth" (Hurley 61). By showing precisely how the presence-in-absence of iambic pentameter inflects a range of curious and urgent affects, this dissertation takes seriously Hurley's challenge to literary theorists to apply these linguistic principles to prosody.

The range of those affects, as well as their particularity, prompts my own use of the term "affect"—and the concomitant profusion of terms for metrical devices with affective affordances. Elmer's definition of "affect" points out the term's history of abundant, even excessive taxonomizing, including Tomkins's delineation of primary affects; Altieri's subdividing of affect into "feelings, emotions, passions, and moods" (Elmer 12); and the work of theorists like Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai, who unfurl seemingly minor affects like

"zaniness" into broader "aesthetic categories" that can "index" contemporary social and cultural conditions (Ngai 1). Part of the pleasure of reading work like Ngai's is the sense that what at first seems narrow, frivolous, or niche turns out to be a key to understanding a broader cultural trend. Perhaps these elucidations of "embedded pentameter," "split pentameter," "freed verse," and other ghost metrical forms can offer similar pleasures in the realm of prosody.

Annie Finch's *The Ghost of Meter: Culture and Prosody in American Free Verse* (1993) supplies the present dissertation with half of its six working terms: enclosing metapentameters, embedded pentameters, and split pentameters all come from her analyses of the ghost of meter in nineteenth and early twentieth century American poetry. Drawing on Barthes and Easthope, Finch uses these terms as part of an explanation of her theory of the metrical code, wherein metrical patterns carry cultural and ideological baggage, haunting the poems in which they covertly appear (Finch 3). In this respect, her way of making meter mean is most in line with Attridge's "associative functions" (Attridge 300). Finch's reading of metapentameters in Whitman—in which they are linked to "literary self-assertions" and "evocation[s] of the theme of 'poetry,'" as in his invitation to the Muse to come to America in "Song of the Exposition" (Finch 45)—hinges on such associative functions. Finch's work is an important precursor to this project, but, especially in the case of spectrally present meters in supposedly non-metrical environments, both the iconic and associative functions of meter are ultimately secondary to its affective functions, which are most closely linked with the poems' imaginative achievements.

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In order to articulate precisely how these stylistically diverse poets make their ostensibly non-metrical lines seem to be haunted by the ghost of iambic pentameter, then, this dissertation provides a fleshed-out glossary of descriptive terms, identifying particular ways that meter,

syntax, and lineation interact to simulate or reflect complex affective stances like grumpiness or ambivalent grief. As part of that investigation into how prosody and affect intersect, it widens the scope of hauntological implication beyond the specters of historical memory, incorporating curiosity about how, through form, poets dare readers to grant the existence of something they believe to be imaginary. This second redirection allows "Qualified Ghost" to speak to the problem of poetry's uncertain status as a contemporary cultural formation—its reputation as elitist, alienating, and obscure—even while working to equip readers who see themselves as metrical know-nothings with a robust vocabulary with which to describe prosody's manifold effects.

Edward Brunner has argued that contemporary African American sonnet sequences confront multiple fading hegemonies at once: the metrical ones supposedly toppled by Pound's famous first heave, and the free-verse ones supposedly erected in their stead and cemented by the orthodoxies of the Black Arts movement (Brunner 73). Building on that tension, the first chapter examines two strains of metrical caginess in the work of contemporary Black sonneteers, showing how poets harness what they know may seem like self-consciousness about racialized form to develop prosodies that deepen their poems' affective dynamics. I identify two major strains of ghost meter. In the first, inaugurated by the "double / glass doors" and "chicken-wire gate" of Rita Dove's *Mother Love*, poets use iambic pentameter as an enclosing mechanism, linking shifts in scene, speaker, and tone to lineal and stanzaic structures, and thereby exposing the porous quality of cultural, institutional, and ontological boundaries. These "enclosing metapentameters" (Finch's term) can provide rhetorical cushioning in the tradition of nineteenth century Black praise sonnets, as in the case of Kiki Petrosino's "We **think** / & **think**. We **think** & **think** & **think**" (*White Blood* 21), or they can thematize retroactive anxiety about inclusivity

and identity-formation, as in Kevin Young's trochaic "**E**very **par**ty / **was** an **af**ter-**par**ty" (*Brown* 112). These poets' prosodies, which involve units of iambic pentameter strung across lines and clauses and delineating the spatio-temporal edges on which poems turn, seem bereft: struck through by loss as a foregone conclusion, marked by expectation perpetually unfulfilled.

The second strain of ghost meter that this first chapter examines wears its pain more ostentatiously, self-metaphorizing not as a fence or frame but as a bodily beating. Beginning with Wanda Coleman's "griot bag" full of bricks "with **which** to **ei**ther **re**con**struct** / the **past** or **de**con**struct** a **head**" (Coleman 135) and continuing with the dancing Revolutionary-era bullets in the work of Honorée Fanonne Jeffers and a precocious, head-bashing baby slave in the work of Tyehimba Jess, these "iambic cudgels" link patterns of violence with the violence of patterns. The chapter ends with a reading of Terrance Hayes's *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin*, which combines enclosing metapentameters with iambic cudgels, especially in his ambivalent elegy for "the white boy we once beat like a drum" (Hayes 74). Whereas Virginia Jackson has semi-ironically claimed that forms like iambic pentameter are ideologically toxic—"White people were not committing genocide on the prairies in 1832; blank verse was" (Jackson 184)—I follow Hayes, who writes, with characteristic ambivalence, "I am old enough now to know the drum, though beaten, / Is not an instrument of violence" (Hayes 74).

Rather than elucidating the way meter can haunt a poetic form like the sonnet sequence, the second chapter explores the presence-in-absence of iambic pentameter in the more explicitly spectral poetic genre of elegy. This chapter centers on readings of two 1960s poems of mourning: Allen Ginsberg's "Kaddish" and Elizabeth Bishop's "Crusoe in England." "Kaddish" is a keening lamentation that remembers the chaotic interiority and all-too-real embodiment of Ginsberg's late mother Naomi. Ginsberg expressed disdain for received poetic forms but

conceived of his long lines as spaces in which to mix rhythmic codes. Borrowing the term "embedded pentameter" from Finch, I locate units of iambic pentameter, distinguished by syntax, inside of Ginsberg's long lines. Showing how this rhythmic mixing allows Ginsberg to express numerous shades of grief, this analysis links ghostly recognition with formal recognition in moments like "Na**o**mi **star**ed—and I **gaspt**—She'd **had** a **stroke**—" (*Kaddish* 29) and traces the recursive, revenant motions of sorrow and repetitive form in lines like "What **came** is **gone** fo**rev**er **ev**ery **time**" (*Kaddish* 9). In my reading of "Crusoe on England," on the other hand, the formal unit that loosely contains segments of iambic pentameter is not the line but the verse paragraph. Redefining Easthope's term "freed verse," which comes from the early twentieth century distinction between *vers libre* and *vers libéré*, I name Bishop's tendency to mix lines of loose iambic pentameter with lines of many other lengths, creating an effect of approaching and retreating that is essential to her tidal depiction of loss. Like Ginsberg, Bishop is obsessed with the problem of recognition as it relates both to death and to poetic form; both poets design and masterfully enact prosodies that enable them to play with readerly experiences of flickering recognition and ghostly returns.

The third chapter brings the triangulated tension among ghost meter, lineation, and syntax even more directly to the fore by elucidating two final prosodic terms, "split pentameter" and "porous pentameter," which describe units of iambic pentameter that surface not loosely contained within larger formal structures, as in the case of embedded pentameters and freed verse, but punctured and riven. Though Kay Ryan is known for her lyric compression, the fragmented units of iambic pentameter scattered through her work actually suggest that she prefers short lines because they create opportunities to expose lines' edges—an impulse that resonates in ambiguous ways with Ryan's stated aversion to the exposure-oriented confessional

mode. Still, her use of meter, especially in poems evoking revealing dislocations and asymptotic approaches, is more than mimetic; it is phenomenological, collapsing the self/other distinctions necessary to conventional confessional verse while still achieving psychological immediacy and tonal complexity.

The second half of the final chapter asks why Shane McCrae, another popular and prolific poet known for his unmistakable style, would adhere so assiduously to a prosody in which gaps interrupt units of iambic pentameter at spatial points that correspond to their locations in the syllable count of each line. These visual caesurae, which resonate with the concept of the "memory hole" as McCrae defines it in his recent memoir, constitute an experimental visual prosody that engages trauma theory discourse and allows McCrae to wrestle with his own relationship to the confessional mode—towards which McCrae's devotional impulses often draw him, but which he has said is unavailable to poets of color. Motifs of ventilation, dismemberment, misalignment, and unequal halving through his oeuvre deepen these multivalent prosodic assays, informing McCrae's unforgettable explorations of divorce, biracial identity, and alienation from the holy.

Finally: how do working poets, whose livelihoods so often depend on careers as teachers, navigate the structural and affective tensions that these chapters describe? The coda to this dissertation uses Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan's *The Teaching Archive* (2021), Kimberly Quiogue Andrews's *The Academic Avant-Garde* (2023), and Merve Emre's *Paraliterary* (2017) to frame short readings of the ghost of iambic pentameter in four contemporary books of formally experimental poetry—Diana Khoi Nguyen's *Ghost of* (2018), Victoria Chang's *Obit* (2020), Robyn Schiff's *A Woman of Property* (2016), and Sara Deniz Akant's *Babette* (2015)—in the context of their authors' teaching materials, philosophies, and

experiences. This coda poses open-ended questions about how the interstices of the teaching year and school day may inform prosodic patterns of approach-and-retreat, how the iterability and demonstrability of tattered metrical grids may lend themselves to poems that work like worksheets or tests, and how different poets may draw to different extents upon their identities as teachers when, per Cushman, they articulate their "fictions of form."

In every chapter, this project demonstrates the affordances and, indeed, the pleasures of a scansion-forward approach to purportedly meter-less poetry. Haunted by meter but also by the ghost meter metaphor, it explores how a single, influential conceptualization of poetic form can draw poets towards particular, and particularly nuanced, affective stances with respect to history, violence, grief, repression, and their own minds. Like the baseball fan zombies in de la Paz's "When Benny Agbayani Became a Met," the prosodists—living and dead—marshalled into (dis)order in this introduction may now begin to raise their pairs of arms to make a wave. The game is about to begin.

Chapter 1

"You don't seem too haunted, but you haunted": The Specter of Iambic Pentameter in Contemporary African American Sonnet Sequences

1. Introduction

On July 16, 2020, less than two months after a Minneapolis police officer murdered George Floyd by kneeling on his neck for over nine minutes, prompting a national reckoning with the white supremacist structures embedded in contemporary American life, poet Patricia Smith published a heroic crown of sonnets called "Salutations In Search Of" in *Literary Hub*. The sequence moves chronologically through African American history, imagining the Middle Passage, the auction block, the experience of a runaway slave, a lynching, the Harlem Renaissance, the Great Migration, Chicago factory labor, police violence, a mother's grief at losing her son, the pain of internalized racism, and the terrible banality of internet culture in the wake of these phenomena.[10] The sequence is ambitious both in terms of its breadth and in terms of its formal features: the sonnets observe a strict Shakespearean rhyme scheme, as well as the convention of iambic pentameter. In the stunning ninth sonnet, Smith shows her formal chops as she chants the names of 61 Black Americans killed by the police:

> Dear George, Trayvon, Breonna, Bree, Tamir,
> Alatiana, Dominque, Jamel,
> Antonio, DeAngelo Romir,
> Ashanti, Botham, Terence, John, Chanel,
> Stephon, Philando, Kentry, Bee, Layleen,
> Romelo, Emmett, Eleanor, Montay,
> Jenisha, Kiki, Alton, Mack, Francine,
> Tenisha, Eric, Dominick, Renee,
> Michelle, Elijah, Nia, Amadou,
> Akai, Monina, Cortez, Kentry, Sean,

[10] My use of the phrase "in the wake" refers to Christina Sharpe's influential *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016). Sharpe explains that "wake" conjures the funeral service, alert consciousness, and the rippling ocean during the Middle Passage, and her concept of "wake work" entails an imaginative simultaneity, a perpetual immersion in the procession of iconic images that organizes Smith's sequence.

Alberta, Michael, Gabriella, Lou,
Natasha, Brooklyn, Walter, Lee, Laquan,
Ahmaud, Mohamed, Elray, Aura, Shane
Rayshard, Denali, Sandra, Oscar, Blane. ("Salutations" 9)

The iambic pentameter in this sonnet is relentlessly pristine. The meter teaches the reader how to pronounce the enumerated names, and vice versa: the names, which we may recognize from headlines, can cue the learning ear to hear the meter right.[11] In lines like "Na**tash**a, **Brook**lyn, **Wal**ter, **Lee**, La**quan**," Smith balances the stress cues of polysyllabic names with the emphatic impact of monosyllabic ones. In that line in particular, she moves progressively closer to name-iamb coincidence until she achieves it with "La**quan**"—and thereby celebrates the blooming sonic variation among the names themselves, which, stretching from "Denali" to "DeAngelo Romir" to "Ahmaud," gesture towards the cultural and linguistic diversity of the Black diaspora. Like so many of the constructions in this sequence, the sonnet begins with "Dear"—the only non-name word in the whole sonnet, and the one which enables Smith to start with "George" without dropping an unstressed syllable. Like Yeats's "Easter, 1916," this sonnet is a brutal love letter to the names of the dead, and the meter embodies Smith's poetic caress.[12]

It's an ambivalent caress: on the one hand, Smith's performance of prosodic prowess is a ritual tribute, a demonstration of her willingness to go way out of her way—to stretch herself imaginatively—in order to honor the dead and protest the injustice that "pinn[ed them] against the past" ("Salutations" 8). On the other hand, the perfect meter in this sonnet is a bitter

[11] Martin describes "the use of versification to teach history" (Martin 19) in nineteenth-century Britain, when metered enumerations of the names of kings united "a particular idea about English meter with a particular idea of English national culture—orderly and falling into a natural line that should be easy to remember" (20). Smith's use of meter to make memorable the names of Black Americans killed by the police is a dark rendition of this application.

[12] Yeats's paratactic and trimetrical "MacDonagh and MacBride / And Connolly and Pearse" (Yeats 180) immortalized the names of the Irish Republican revolutionaries involved in the ill-fated Easter Rebellion. The absence of the coordinating conjunction from Smith's list of the dead makes it even starker and speaks to the sheer abundance of names.

demonstration of the shocking ease of finding names that fit the form; there are so many names, she seems to suggest, that anyone who chose to try could successfully fit them into a Shakespearean sonnet in unmarred iambic pentameter. Indeed, in a 2021 interview with poet Saeed Jones, Smith explicitly asserts the accessibility of poetic form, saying, "I want people to realize that, in a way, I'm not doing anything they can't do. That's of utmost importance: not to say I am poet, you are audience, blah, blah, blah" (Jones). A champion slam poet, Smith insists that poetic form is democratic, non-hierarchical, unpretentious—just something with which any industrious poet will equip herself if she wants to be ready to handle whatever history throws at her.

And yet, though its author insists that form is democratic and available, "Salutations In Search Of" dwells on the "mute contrivance" ("Salutations" 3) of form, engaging a motif of mouths half-stopped with distressed or impossible speech. Over the course of the sequence, mouths "still bulging with Atlantic" (1) gradually find "the tongue through tumult" (2), only to be suffocated by police brutality, warned against "talk[ing] too loud" lest they make "white folk [...] tired" (11), and forced to try to ignore the "Rebel yell" (12) of the internet. In this sonnet sequence, speech and song are hard won, a quality which makes the overabundance of linguistic ornamentation seem both especially miraculous and possibly suspect, representative simultaneously of oppression and of the will to overcome.[13] The labored transition from the penultimate to the final sonnet, in which Smith's speaker "rip[s] another page in half" and tries twice to begin again—"Dear— / / Dear—" (13)—before actually managing it, indicates that, in the aftermath of the realization that "Your child will keep on dying" (12), the pre-loaded inevitability of the "master" sonnet is agonizing.

[13] See Andrea Brady's *Poetry and Bondage* (2021) for an articulation of how these two implications can and do coexist throughout poetic history.

Smith does acknowledge that poetic form can be difficult, dangerous, and costly, as well as accessible, democratic, and unpretentious. During a Q&A after reading "Salutations In Search Of" aloud for the *Sonnets from the American* symposium on October 3, 2020, Smith described her quest "not to make [her verse] sound stilted" in terms of rhyme or meter, contrasting "...when you first start writing iambic and you're hitting those words really hard" with her current, paradoxical focus both on "flow" and on "blowing it up" (*Sonnets*). For Smith, a poet's engagement with iambs can improve over time.[14] In that same Q&A, she explicitly compared poetic form to letting a bomb go off in a room and deciding whether to do it with the doors open or closed; she prefers to keep the doors closed. The metaphor implies that, for Smith, tightening the form paradoxically increases the destructive power of the poem. It casts *poiesis* as a tense, high-stakes moment of decision-making—an unusual implication, though not surprising considering the imaginative burdens that Black American poets bore in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder. In the moment of collective grief during which Smith composed the poem, she reached for form not as a way of controlling emotion but as a way of channeling its power to make a pointed cry, a willful wail.

Smith's metrically regular, explosively impactful sonnet sequence is atypical.[15] Other Black American sonneteers of the contemporary period—of which there are many, seven of whom I'll treat in this chapter—often obscure their relationships to iambic pentameter, using shifts in lineation and syntax to keep meter present and palpable without identifying with it

[14] Smith also said, "I will teach my students, who can't seem to get iambic—I'll have them write in syllabics, and then they just stumble onto the iambic." Here, she depicts iambic meter as both tricky and inevitable—a challenge for students but also something into which they can "stumble" (*Sonnets*). My brief treatment of Sara Deniz Akant in the coda will further explore this kind of qualification regarding metrical pedagogy.

[15] But it is not, of course, unique; Marilyn Nelson's "A Wreath for Emmett Till" (2005) is also metrically regular, and so is John Murillo's "A Refusal to Mourn the Deaths, by Gunfire, of Three Men in Brooklyn" (2019). Moreover, as Hollis Robbins's *Forms of Contention* (2020) affirms, these contemporary versifiers build on a long tradition of African American sonnets in iambic pentameter, from Paul Lawrence Dunbar to Claude McKay.

unequivocally. Why is this so? In *Forms of Contention* (2020), Hollis Robbins has shown that the sonnet form, though once arguably white-coded, is now decidedly Black: "If the sonnet was ever considered white property, it is not anymore" (Robbins 19). Robbins's focus on the concept of a built tradition allows her to attribute race to form without implying anything overly essentialized; indeed, she seems to doubt that form is marked by identity when she asks, "Where exactly, in fourteen lines of iambic pentameter, would privilege, class, and culture reside?" (21). If we accept Robbins's contention that sonnets have nevertheless become Black-coded, should we then attribute contemporary Black sonneteers' caginess about meter to the intuition that no such transformation has occurred with iambic pentameter? In other words, do the seven poets in this chapter obscure their relationships with meter because, even within the space of the Black sonnet tradition, iambic pentameter remains a white form, one which could seem to undermine the revolutionary politics that the poets both want and need to embody? When we scan these poems, will we discover a bashful prosody, a prosody suffused with shame?

Virginia Jackson's *Before Modernism* (2023), which traces the twinned processes of racialization and lyricization in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, might support such a conjecture. Jackson claims that "prosodic forms racialize the poems they seem to merely structure" (Jackson 149) and argues, for example, that the whiteness of the speaker of certain William Cullen Bryant poems is "guaranteed by the iambs" (Jackson 61) and other metrical feet he employs. Indeed, in her reading of Bryant's "The Prairies," she goes so far as to semi-ironically claim, "White people were not committing genocide on the prairies in 1832; blank verse was" (184). Jackson indicts meter, which "stages the abstraction of genre into form" (7), as guilty of the very violence at the heart of enslavement, a process that, in her reading, ran parallel to lyricization, such that genres of poems were replaced by genres of persons.

Jackson bases her argument on Lisa Getelman's concept of genre as a mode of recognition instantiated in discourse (Jackson 6). Jackson explains that the difficulty, for example, with Phillis Wheatley's use of the Popean couplet is that "the discourse that makes it recognizable as a genre also makes the person who wrote it unrecognizable" (7). However, unlike Wheatley, contemporary Black sonneteers aren't invisible to the discourses that make their poetic forms or genres recognizable. In fact, just the opposite seems to be the case: Black poets of the twenty-first century can often be hyper-visible in the academic spaces where they work. Emerging from those spaces, the discourse that makes sonnets and iambic pentameter recognizable asks Black poet-academics not to be nothing, but to be everything—tenure-track but also revolutionary, demonstrating erudition but also unintimidating and accessible.

Composing sonnet sequences may allow poets to neutralize or at least to process some of these paradoxical demands. This chapter will show that some Black poets gravitate towards a ghostly version of iambic pentameter within their sonnet sequences not because pentameter is white and they're embarrassed, and not because it isn't and they're proving it, but because tentatively engaging with the spectral power of the discourses that make iambic pentameter recognizable, to the extent that it *is* recognizable, enables an attractively ambiguous semi-visibility, a sense of partial presence that in turn makes a whole host of tones, stances, and gestures possible. Especially in the contemporary manifestations that this chapter will examine, iambic pentameter can be slippery, hard to pin down; this quality makes it supple, something poets can play with in the shadows of their own verse.

The poets in this chapter simultaneously betray and harness what they know may seem like self-consciousness about racialized form to develop prosodies that deepen their poems' affective dynamics. Smith's metacommentary about her use of meter, wherein she insists that

anyone can deploy it but declines to discuss her own techniques for doing so, may be partially in line with these equivocations, but her actual sonnets are distinctly, searingly direct.[16] These other contemporary Black sonneteers, meanwhile, capitalize on the ambiguous affective and formal dynamics surrounding meter in order to inject their confrontations with the brutal past of enslavement with a mysterious and appealing indirectness. Acknowledging what regular meter can accomplish in the third decade of the twenty-first century, this chapter explains why and how poets tackling similar psychological and cultural terrain as Smith (the legacy of slavery, Black American culture, systemic racism, and the specters of historical memory) invoke but sidestep meter the way they do.

Edward Brunner's "Inventing an Ancestor: The Scholar-Poet and the Sonnet" (2013) provides useful literary-historical context for this sidestepping. Brunner shows that the sub-genre with which this chapter is concerned confronts multiple fading hegemonies at once: the metrical ones supposedly toppled by Pound's famous first heave, and the free-verse ones supposedly erected in their stead and cemented, especially for these Black poets, by the orthodoxies of the Black Arts movement.[17] In response to these sometimes contradictory impulses, the sequences that this chapter examines maintain uneven, fractured relationships with history, synthesizing politics and prosody in unpredictable, uncomfortable, expressive ways. Indeed, the sub-genre that Brunner identifies often traces "a historical narrative marred by gaps" and "haunted by

[16] In "Motown Crown," a heroic crown published a decade before "Salutations," Smith expresses ambivalence about the cultural impact of Motown music, celebrating its ecstasies but also questioning its gender politics, its sadistic tendencies, and its superficiality. These Petrarchan sonnets are also metrically regular but not as exact as the ones in "Salutations." "Salutations" is less self-conscious, more ready to capitalize on the affordances of the crown form—and all its subsidiary forms, including iambic pentameter—in order to register its protest with maximum impact.

[17] In "Canto LXXXI" (1948), Pound writes, "(To break the pentameter, that was the first heave)" (Norton 381). Meanwhile, Evie Shockley's *Renegade Poetics* (2011) challenges the caricature of BAM-era aesthetics, showing how the much-maligned second heave was more multiple and contingent than critics like Gates and Baker understood.

silenced voices" (Brunner 71). Because there is no single narrative of prosodic agonism that can determine a stable relation to meter, these poets exercise erudition with respect both to history and to prosody. While Brunner cites Stephanie Burt and David Mikics's comment in *The Art of the Sonnet* that "[the sonnet] is the form that we recognize 'now—faster than we recognize any other form'" (Brunner 76), he also hints that this ease of recognition does not, in the contemporary period, carry with it any firm expectations about meter. As Jess Cotton writes, the contemporary sonnet is simply "poetic form qua poetic form" (Cotton 544): a poem's poem, a space in which the entire history of poetry is buzzing and present but also optional and hazy. These spectral qualities of the sonnet make it a rich ground in which to ghost-hunt for iambic pentameter. This chapter is interested in caginess—but not the caginess of someone guiltily evading a stricture, nor that of someone guiltily obeying one. Rather, it locates in these sonnets the caginess of someone who doesn't quite believe in ghosts, slyly summoning or merely sensing one in the room.

Other contemporary theorists and historians of the sonnet articulate this sense of simultaneous certainty about the sonnet's persistence and uncertainty about what it signifies or demands from poet or reader, and they sometimes implicitly and sometimes explicitly connect this affective paradox to the contemporary sonnet's relationship to meter.[18] David Caplan's *Questions of Possibility: Contemporary Poetry & Poetic Form* (2005) takes as its premise that "the contemporary era features no obligatory verse form, no structure that any respectable poet 'must' write" (Caplan 6), inviting the critic-reader-poet to ask: when a poet chooses to write a sonnet, is it a way to invite an obligation, a way to defiantly invoke this zero-expectation

[18] In "Self-Metaphorizing 'American' Sonnets," Jahan Ramazani writes that meter is one of the form's "global inheritances" that poets "invoke" even as they "domesticate or reject" it ("Self-Metaphorizing" 136). In "Whose Sonnet? (A Transgression)," Carl Phillips describes the sonnet as "a form that has disruption built into it from the start" (Phillips 204).

dynamic, or something else entirely? Like Timo Müller in *The African-American Sonnet: A Literary History* (2018), Caplan essentially recommends a version of what Anthony Reed would later term "situated formalism," which "examines the formal strategies poets developed to engage the cultural and historical circumstances they negotiate in their texts" (Müller 10). But what happens to situated formalism when, as in the sonnet sequences in this chapter, the past and present are perpetually, simultaneously recurring? Where and when is such a formalism "situated"? What formal demands take precedence in a world of living ghosts? How, in particular, does iambic pentameter show up in the contemporary African American sonnet sequence?

This chapter posits two related kinds of answers to these questions. First, using Annie Finch's concept of enclosing metapentameters—which appear at the beginnings and ends of poems and which, Finch argues, for Whitman at least, are linked to "literary self-assertions" and "evocation[s] of the theme of 'poetry'" (Finch 45)—it locates units of iambic pentameter, often knowingly strung across lines and/or richly enmeshed with syntactic coilings and crumplings, at the literal and figurative edges, thresholds, doorways, gates, and fences that frame, curb, and buttress these poets' ambitious sonnet sequences. Citing Rita Dove's *Mother Love* (1995) as the ur-text of this strain, it finds the spectral haunting of iambic pentameter among the edges and margins of "Happine*ſ*s" from Kiki Petrosino's *White Blood: A Lyric of Virginia* (2020) and "De La Soul is Dead" from Kevin Young's *Brown* (2018).

Second, returning to the ambiguity in contemporary sonnet scholarship surrounding the engine and origin of the metrical impulse, especially in this particular sub-genre (is meter a form of resistance, acquiescence, or inventiveness, and does it come from the poet or from the form?), this chapter examines passages in which the ghostliness of the metrical presence comes up

against figures for meter as a bodily beating, linking patterns of violence and the violence of patterns. Citing Wanda Coleman's protracted series of "American Sonnets" as the ur-text for this strain, the second half of the chapter traces poets' ambivalence about the palpability of meter—about whether it *is* palpable, and about what that quality might let them uncover about the obscured or hidden violence of the past—and the puncturings and self-batteries that they perform as they test meter's power within the spaces delineated by those enclosing metapentameters. The second section examines "Catalogue: Revolution" from Honorée Fanonne Jeffers's *The Age of Phillis* (2020) and "Sonnet Crown for Blind Tom" from Tyehimba Jess's *Olio* (2016). It asks: what deformities and swellings result from the metrical beatings that these sonnets record, and what affects do the poets perform with respect to their own prosodic disfigurements? Furthermore, what can be the enabling affordances of the ghost of iambic pentameter when poets engage it through such disturbing tropes as these?

Finally, the chapter will turn to Terrance Hayes's enormously popular and influential *American Sonnets for My Past & Future Assassin* (2018), which participates in both these strains, putting the topos of the enclosing metapentameter as the sonnet's gate or door in conversation with that of the spectral meter as sinisterly embodied and, possibly, rhythmically violent. Amid such intercourse, what kinds of metrical approaches gain traction, and what affects do they make possible? How do these two strains of metaphor combine to produce an understanding of the relationship between the ghostly form of iambic pentameter and the ever-present form of the sonnet, wherein the former fortifies the latter even as it fades from view? What can these contemporary Black sonnet sequences teach us about how meter makes meaning in ostensibly non-metrical contemporary poetry?

2. Enclosing Metapentameters as Doorways & Borders

Let's enter the chapter, then, through the front door: "An Intact World," the preface to Rita Dove's *Mother Love* (1995), hinges on the metaphorical "gate" and "fence" that the sonnet uses to defend itself against the "chaos [that is] lurking outside" (Dove xi). For Dove, these enclosing partitions both smother and enable, deaden and delight.[19] *Mother Love*'s sonnets are replete with echoes of that gate and fence. In "Exit," for example, thresholds hog the speaker's attention to such an extent that the emotional stakes of the poem are sublimated to the drama of mere entrances and exits. Dove's assertion that "The door opens onto a street like in the movies" (Dove 49) conflates inside and outside with its evocation of a movie set, casting the door's action as a performance. When she writes, "The windows you have closed behind / you are turning pink, doing what they do / every dawn" (49), Dove aligns the position of the closed window with the opening of the day, attributing to the window a self-sufficiency to which the addressee, who balks at "what it [takes] to be a woman in this life" (49), can only aspire. Indeed, the poem ends with an analogy: the blushing windshield recalls the speaker's reaction when her mother tells her about the difficulties of her gender. Dawning access leads to a realization of closure, a limitation of possibilities.[20]

The two major set-pieces of *Mother Love*, the five-sonnet sequence "The Bistro Styx" and the eleven-sonnet sequence "Her Island," pick up this motif, deepen it, and proffer it as a figure for Dove's prosody—in particular, for her use of iambic pentameter as an enclosing mechanism that links the sequences' shifts in scene, speaker, and tone to their stanzaic structures

[19] Ironically, Dove's so-called "Intact World" is doubly allusive, drawing on the African American sonnet tropes of enslavement, bondage, and the caged bird that themselves signify on Petrarch, Dante, Sidney, Wordsworth, and others. For a thorough elucidation, see Ch. 2 of *Forms of Contention*.

[20] In "Partial Horror: Fragmentation and Healing in Rita Dove's *Mother Love*" (1996), Lotta Lofgren writes about Demeter's ecstatic awareness of Persephone's proximity to a major threshold, but she also describes how Dove collapses the boundaries between the characters' psychologies: "In several poems, their paths have come so close to merging that we no longer know whose experiences the poem describes" (Lofgren 138).

and lineation. It's an innovation that, as this chapter will show, recurs in some of the contemporary sonnet sequences that would be published in the decades to come, including Petrosino's "Happine/s" and Young's "De La Soul Is Dead." In "The Bistro Styx," Dove plants the mother-daughter pair from the Demeter-Persephone myth in Paris, recasting the underworld as the artistic demimonde: Hades as a painter, Persephone as his live-in lover, and Demeter as the visiting mother buying lunch. The poems dip into free indirect discourse filtered through the mother's consciousness as she observes her daughter, and the lines are usually between four and six stresses but vary in rhythm and length to such an extent that they can't be called metered. The poem begins with the daughter's entrance into the cafe through "double / glass doors":

> She was thinner, with a mannered gauntness
> as she paused just inside the double
> glass doors to survey the room, silvery cape
> billowing dramatically behind her. *What's this*,
>
> I thought…" (Dove 40)

The enjambment of the phrase "double / glass doors" dramatizes Persephone's pause, her lingering on the threshold before entering the space of the cafe. The doors are transparent, the mere form of doors; they mark a boundary without impeding sight. Likewise, the first quatrain ends with the mother's italicized thoughts but suspends the attribution of those thoughts until the beginning of the next quatrain. The stanza break works a little like those glass doors, occasioning a pause that suspends understanding without interrupting observation. As we will see, Dove's enclosing metapentameters function in a similar way.

In the second sonnet, the mother ventures a worried query about the financial health of her daughter's boyfriend's art shop, and an enclosing metapentameter surfaces at the boundary between the said and the unsaid:

> "How's business?" I asked, and hazarded

a motherly smile to keep from crying out:
Are you content to conduct your life
as a cliché… (Dove 40)

Here, as elsewhere in the sequence, Dove places a line of iambic pentameter—"a **mo**therly **smile** to **keep** from **cry**ing **out**:"—between two four-stress lines and directly before a colon, separating what the mother actually says from what she wants to say. With only one substitution (an anapest in the second foot), the line scans easily. The double M and C/K sounds (mother/smile, keep/crying) effectively create a caesura, dividing the line between the smile and the impulse to cry, between the exhibited emotion and the hidden one. The uncertain attempt at a motherly smile—an awkward gesture, in this context, and a performance of a conventional role in which this Demeter isn't totally comfortable—coincides with the colon-adjacent unit of iambic pentameter, inviting a comparison between motherhood and meter as two troublesome forms.[21]

Then, during the transition from the second to the third sonnet, the steak that the women have ordered arrives at their table, and Dove uses meter to navigate borders (between poems, between courses) in a different but related way. The last line of the second sonnet is split visually and syntactically in two, so that the poem break is enjambed, with iambic pentameter stretching to fill the gulf:

"Tourists love us. The Parisians, of course" —
she blushed— "are amused, though not without
a certain admiration…"
The Chateaubriand

arrived on a bone-white plate, smug and absolute

[21] In "And the Dove Returned" (1996), Cushman draws out the connections between the kinds of counting associated with meter and those associated with motherhood: "...the fourteeners of *Mother Love* prove appropriate for the mother-daughter myth not because they chain but because they count, number, tally, reckon, and because they reward those of us who depend on doing the same. [...] Although our unexamined caricatures of the sexes habitually associate numbers and counting with a masculine sweet tooth for empiricism, the fact is that, from adolescence on, metrical counting and prediction—based on the number 28—have much more to do with being a potential mother than father. Etymology bears out this claim, showing us that 'menstrual' and 'menopause' are linguistic cousins of 'meter'" ("And the Dove" 133-134).

in its fragrant crust… (Dove 41)

In this passage, the daughter responds to her mother's worried query about business at her boyfriend's art shop. The iambic bent of "though **not** with**out**," with its dogged, self-defensive tone, is palpable before the unit of five emerges ("though **not** with**out** / a **cer**tain **ad**mi**ra**tion"). The reader's ear is tempted by variously sized and shaped metrical units, and the reader's eye sees a border between sonnets that's troubled by the arrival of the steak in the middle of the daughter's nervous monologue. Scanning the polysyllabic French word "Chateaubriand," transplanted from a non-accentual source language into an accentual English environment, requires a moment's pause that echoes the pause in conversation. Ultimately, a little listening backwards lets the French word combine with "a **cer**tain **ad**mi**ra**tion" to create a unit of five stresses: "a **cer**tain **ad**mi**at**ion…' / The **Chat**eaubri**and**."[22] This enclosing metapentameter (which may seem like an opening one, since it marks the arrival of the entrees) is actually a literally imprisoning one, since, in the myth of Persephone, eating food (pomegranate seeds, not steak, but still!) actually means you can't leave. Unsurprisingly, then, the steak is "smug and absolute / in its fragrant crust, a black plug steaming / like the heart plucked from the chest of a worthy enemy" (41). The steak is an enclosed form, smug because it is self-sufficient and crusted around (encrusting metapentameter?), but it's also a transplanted form, having been "plucked," violently and maybe mercilessly, from the chest of an enemy.

The transition from the third to the fourth sonnet in "The Bistro Styx," which records an exchange in which the mother asks to visit the art studio while her daughter equivocates, also

[22] Something similar happens with "Camembert" in the last sonnet in the sequence: "I **stuck** with **ca**fe **creme**. 'This **Cam**em**bert'**s / so **ripe**,' she **joked**, 'it's **prac**tically **grown hair**'" (Dove 42). Two lines of iambic pentameter start this last sonnet in the sequence; they are reinforced by c-alliteration and AA rhyme, and they override other kinds of borders (quoted text, line breaks). The ripeness of the French, stress-fluid Camembert receives a puberty metaphor, and the succeeding lines evince Demeter's disgust and awe at the "**gol**den **glob** com**plete** with **par**sley **sprig**" (note the p- and g-alliteration) that Persephone stuffs into her mouth.

juggles the boundary between poems, the boundary of quoted speech, a colon, and competing scansions that tug at syntax and lineation. Dove writes:

> …"I'd like to come by
> The studio," I ventured, "and see the new stuff."
> "Yes, if you wish…" A delicate rebuff
>
> before the warning: "He dresses all
> in black now. Me, he drapes in blues and carmine—
> And even though I think it's kinda cute,
> in company I tend toward more muted shades." (Dove 41)

In this passage, the colon doesn't coincide with the end of a line, but it still is preceded by a "line" of iambic pentameter set apart by syntax ("A **de**lic**ate** re**buff** / be**fore** the **warn**ing"), and that metrical unit stretches not just across a line break and a stanza break but also across a poem break, accentuating the sense of drama as the mother waits for the other shoe to drop. The stuff/rebuff rhyme that ends the third sonnet is the first and only ending rhyming couplet in the sequence, and Dove undermines its sense of closure through lineation, syntax, and meter. As the daughter warns her mother about her boyfriend's pretentious personality, the pair negotiates a delicate moment of welcome and warning, a boundary-setting interaction in which the edges of "the studio" are being established. When and under what conditions may the mother enter the studio? The passage of more regular iambic pentameter into which the daughter launches, as she expands on her description of her boyfriend's eccentricities ("in **black** now. **Me**, he **drapes** in **blues** and **car**mine— / And **e**ven **though** I **think** it's **kind**a **cute**, / in **com**pany I **tend** to**ward** more **mut**ed **shades**."), bolsters Dove's association of iambic pentameter with edges and borders. "The Bistro Styx" uses that association to unpack the pregnant interstices of this mother-daughter interaction, proffering its own prosodic negotiations as a figure for the give-and-take between these archetypal but also deeply specific characters.

"Her Island," an eleven-sonnet sequence about a mixed-race couple on a Mediterranean vacation in Sicily (the birthplace of the sonnet and the supposed locus of Hades's abduction of Persephone), deepens Dove's exploration of the relationship between gates and the units of enclosing metapentameter that mark, initiate, and imitate them. When the poem's tourists finally find the "chthonic grotto" for which they've been searching, it's "closed for the season behind a chicken-wire gate," and they are "too well trained to trespass" (Dove 68): the "we" of the poem obediently respects boundaries, even if they are merely chicken-wire. Still, a "funny man in [their] path" offers to let them into the site anyway and, at the end of the second sonnet, in a line of iambic tetrameter as sudden and rote as the man's response, "he **shu**ffles **off** to **find** the **key**" (68). At the beginning of the second stanza of the third sonnet, Dove describes the moment when the old, Charon-like man gains access, on behalf of the travelers, to the historic site: "An et**er**nity **at** the **rust**ed **lock**, then **down**. It's **noon**: / we **must** be **mad**der than the English with their dogs. Look at his shoes…" (69). The moment of lock-and-key business gets pretty iambic; arguably, it's a unit of iambic pentameter separated by syntax ("An et**er**nity **at** the **rust**ed **lock**, then **down**"), then a sixth foot finishing out the line with a characteristic colon. Dove goes out of her way to extend that line past the fifth foot, past the period, all the way to the colon; the well-behaved line of pentameter can't quite gain access to the grotto and has to push past its natural conclusion, broadening the scope of its observation and awareness even as it acknowledges that this moment of metrical and touristic trespass is indeed "madder than the English with their dogs" (69).

Later in the sequence, the tourists visit a racetrack, and Dove indulges in a sonnet written from the point of view of a racecar driver, in which she further explores the extent to which supposedly enclosing metapentameters can actually enable boundary-crossing, edge-extending

visions. The sonnet ends: “Aim for the tape, aim *through* it. / Then rip the helmet off and poke your head / through sunlight, into flowers” (Dove 76). It’s another image of crossing a threshold, this time the tape that marks the finish line of the race; the advice, filtered in second person through the consciousness of the driver, is to aim *through* the tape, to shoot for or orient towards a space beyond the border, and thereby to reach the edge, to cross over. Ramazani notes how this dynamic relates to the form of the poem: “At the book’s end [Dove] hurtles toward a finish line that is at the same time a point of return” (“Self-Metaphorizing” 137). Metrically, the passage does something similar, hurtling past the conventional concluding gesture into stranger territory. The decisive verb “rip” inaugurates, in the penultimate line, a perfect unit of iambic pentameter: “Then **rip** the **hel**met **off** and **poke** your **head**” (76).

Syntactically, though, that line is missing the final prepositional phrase that will explain *where* the driver’s head should poke, clarifying what lies beyond the predetermined experience of winning the race: “through **sun**light, **in**to **flow**ers.” This final line of iambic trimeter can combine with the last two stresses of the previous line to create a unit of pentameter that describes everything the driver does *after* finishing the race, and the tension between these two scansions arguably defines the reader’s experience of the pacing of the end of this poem. It’s as though, in order to achieve the poem, Dove chooses, like the racecar driver, to aim past the enclosing mechanism (the tape, the line of meter) and into the beyond. Indeed, this ecstatic poem is not the last but the second-to-last in both the sequence and the book; the last poem comes back to the theme of a mother who loses her daughter, declaring “no story’s ever finished” (Dove 77) and returning, as Ramazani notes, to the “evocative self-referential figure” of the blazed stones and closed ground with which Dove bookends her crown (“Self-Metaphorizing” 137). On the level of the line, the sonnet, the sequence, and the collection, Dove has aimed past the edge,

coasting to a fuller finish than she ever could have achieved without this boundary tension that characterizes her forms, her prosody, her motifs, and her approach to the mythic and cultural material that suffuses the book.

Müller's reading of *Mother Love* foregrounds how Dove's work exposes the "porous quality of national and cultural boundaries" (Müller 120), connecting that quality to his claims about how the history of the Black sonnet both involves and thematizes constant boundary negotiation.[23] Müller asserts that, in Dove's work, the sonnet's boundaries "come to represent the cultural and epistemological boundaries of Western foundational myths" (121). He focuses on how the "interstices" of the crown structure "reveal the underworlds on which the structure rests, and which it seeks to conceal" (122) and acknowledges the extent to which, like "The Bistro Styx," "Her Island" "trouble[s] both the spatial boundaries and the temporal progression implied by the form" (121). Müller's reading of *Mother Love* highlights the extent to which Dove uses the spatial edges of her sonnets to explore how time works, on both the interpersonal and the mythic scales.

Furthermore, Müller's broader narrative, which includes claims about how Black sonnets "epitomized [the] boundary-crossing impulse [of Pan-Africanism]" in the 1930s (Müller 70) and served as "enclave[s] of individuality" (95) over and against the "bounded discursive space" (93) of Black cultural nationalism during the 1960s, implicitly connects this move to the more overtly stylistic and structural framing tendencies that have been part of Black sonnets' "situated formalism" practically from the beginning. In his description of praise sonnets at the end of the nineteenth century, Müller writes:

[23] See, also, Therese Steffen's "Beyond Ethnic Margin and Cultural Center: Rita Dove's "Empire" of *Mother Love*" (1997).

> The racial or political message of these sonnets is always framed by at least four lines of abstract, idealist apostrophe at the beginning of the poem and several lines of serene glorification at the end. The composition of these sonnets mirrors the publication strategies of many contemporary collections of poetry: potentially controversial statements are couched in thick layers of innocuous gentility. (Müller 30-31)

Müller shows how the tendency to frame politically ambitious sonnets and sonnet sequences with lines of abstract fluff was a protective rhetorical strategy for Black poets writing in hostile environments, and he connects this use of the edges of sonnets with Dove's foregrounding of formal and cultural boundaries. This chapter, by contrast, moves from Dove's "porous" edges to an even more contemporary poet's use of enclosing metapentameters as defense mechanisms within the hostile environment of an academic institution, mechanisms that both fence in and afford a passageway out. It also shows how that poet's approach to the triangulated tension among lineation, syntax, and meter, in combination with her engagement with the door/gate motif, builds on Dove's innovations, thereby participating in the first of the two strains of contemporary African American sonnet sequences that this chapter traces. In her supposedly non-metrical sonnet sequence, this poet invites the ghost of meter sometimes to reinforce and sometimes to expand Müller's "bounded discursive space," bespeaking a similarly expanded understanding of what boundaries make possible in African American sonnet sequences more generally.

The poet in question is, of course, Dove's colleague in the creative writing department at the University of Virginia, Kiki Petrosino, whose autobiographical crown "Happine/s" remembers the poet's time as a biracial, scholarship-receiving, part-time job-working, reading and growing and writing undergraduate at UVA. The sequence also explores Petrosino's

memories of her grandfather's suicide and funeral, as well as her subsequent experiences mourning him as she haunted the already-haunted 'Grounds' designed and founded by a notorious slaveholder—a campus where enslaved people lived and worked for the first fifty years of the university's existence. The sonnets in this crown are much more explicitly non-metrical than those of Dove, with short lines of three or four stresses in highly irregular patterns dominating the first seven sonnets, giving way to longer, prolixer, more anaphoric lines at the beginning of the second half of the crown, and landing on an average of those modes as the crown aims past the finish line and reaches its close. Petrosino uses iambic pentameter strung across lines and syntactic units at the edges of her sonnets to negotiate the pressures that she remembers experiencing as she penetrated the recesses of an academy defined by white supremacy.

In the very first sonnet, Petrosino begins with the crossing of a boundary, both into the poem and into the institution of the university:

> *In.* I got in. That is, inland
> to the inmost place, my University
> blue ink on the letterhead
> orange slit in my thumb… (*White Blood* 19)

The first syllable of the whole sonnet sequence is unequivocally stressed, and, in case that isn't clear from the cadence, Petrosino italicizes it. This eight-syllable first line, featuring two spondees ("**got in**" and "**inland**") and five total stresses, derives its rhythmic authority from the supremacy of the sonnet's keyword, "in," which invests all the opening lines with sonic density ("in," "inland," "ink," "innards," "indwelling," etc.) and suggests the inwardness of the sonnet itself. While each of the first five lines sidesteps iambs, waiting until the fifth ("so **deep**, you **could** not **prize** me") to open iambically, the second line of the sonnet does scan loosely as iambic pentameter: "to the **in**most **place**, my **U**ni**ver**si**ty**." Thus, mere syllables after the speaker

gets *in*, she slips *in*to the meter associated both with higher education and with the form in which she's writing—though not, as we have seen, with that form's whole history. In this poem about the poet's relationship to the academy, she remembers her first moment of indoctrination, her first moment of feeling even partially welcomed by an institution of learning with a white supremacist history (and present).

Though the following lines resist the pull of iambic pentameter, preferring a largely trimetrical rhythm propelled by periodic syntax and list-like reiterations ("**blue ink** on the **lett**erhead / **or**ange **slit** in my **thumb**," "how / I **prized** the **lett**er they **let** me / **in** with, **in**to that **in**dwelling **spot**"), the poem is suffused with a sense of inevitability, metrical and otherwise. The poet's claim that she already bleeds UVA orange and blue, which invests the whole sonnet with the conviction that she must and will betray herself and her origins, showing her true colors (in terms of race, in terms of institutional pride, and in terms of prosody), plays out in its final five lines. This first sonnet's volta is marked by a syntactical shift (the "where" beginning a complex subordinate clause that puts an end to the looser listing of the previous nine lines), a shift in register (via the explicit use of an analogy, "like a braid in bad light," where looser metaphor had sufficed), and more conspicuously artificial constructions like "in some bind" or decorative ones like "honors of Honor." This shift culminates in the last complete syntactic unit of the sonnet, which occupies its final line and half and is also a five-stress unit: "**C**i**r**clet of **tor**ches / **bloom**ing **on** the **hill**." This relatively smooth scansion relies on the stresses in visually striking nouns like "**cir**clet," "**tor**ches" and "**hill**." The sinister, shape-inflected ritual it describes connotes the literal and figurative crowns of the poet laureate, as well as graduation ceremonies, fraternity initiations, and cross burnings (indeed, it is a direct reference to the tiki torches of the 2017 anti-Black, antisemitic Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville). This five-stress unit

encloses the first sonnet with an image of enclosure and, in the manner of most sonnet crowns, inaugurates the beginning of the next sonnet with the blooming image that will serve as its driving metaphor and keyword.

Throughout the sequence that follows, Petrosino uses prosodic echoes of that circlet of torches to enclose individual poems but also to open up the interstices of the sequence. The second sonnet's last line, though conspicuously in a triple meter, nevertheless seals itself shut with the anapestic rhythm of "blade upon blade upon blade" (*White Blood* 20), thereby introducing the hybrid, botanical-martial metaphor that will drive the following sonnet. That third sonnet, likewise, ends with rhythmic repetition. Remembering her early confrontations with the "White heart / of the page, where distinguished men / appear in battalions of charm" (21) and her uncertainty about how to locate her discourse community as a young, mixed-race woman, Petrosino writes:

> They will not speak to thee. *How*
> *To write, with only thick white ink*
> *& not be thought a cheat?* We think
> & think. We think & think & think. (*White Blood* 21)

In this almost uniformly monosyllabic passage, the stresses fall mostly on key verbs like "speak," "write," and "think" (as well as on "thick," "ink," "thought," and "cheat," nouns and adjectives with direct sonic/thematic engagement with those central verbs), so the meter is palpable: "They **will** not **speak** to **thee**. ***How*** / *To* ***write****, with* ***only*** ***thick white ink*** / *&* ***not*** *be* ***thought*** *a* ***cheat****?*" (21). The only polysyllabic word is "only," which shrinks the line just enough to contain the spondaic "white ink" while maintaining the feel of perfect iambs. The way Petrosino sonically contorts to make space for "thick white ink" is richly symbolic in a passage about the difficulty of writing as a mixed-race college student.

Petrosino immediately seems to belie the initial, ironically archaic pronouncement that "They will not speak to thee" with the movement into italicized speech—but it turns out that the italics mark her own thoughts, not imagined discourse with white literary forefathers.[24] The first part of the question she asks herself, "***How*** */ To* ***write*** *with* ***on****ly* ***thick*** *white* ***ink***," can scan as iambic pentameter…but then it turns out that the sense of completeness that this unit implies is misleading, because that isn't the question she's asking at all. She may know perfectly well how to write with thick white ink, but she isn't so sure she can do so without being "thought a cheat." The addition of the second half of the question mars the meter, deepening the poet's investigation into writing as a kind of sleeper cell in a hostile discourse community. Thus, the line breaks and syntax work together to suspend the achievement of a discrete unit of iambic pentameter. In particular, the last two grammatical sentences—"We **think** / & **think**. We **think** & **think** & **think**"—form a split pentameter in which the only stressed syllable is the word "think." The repetition fills out the line and the meter even as the enjambments and syntax undermine that sense of completeness; this prosody bespeaks and performs deep ambivalence: is she in or out, seeking ingress or egress? Indeed, that circlet of light bulbs in the mind, which encloses the third sonnet with a vacuous assertion of deep thought, begins the next sonnet with

[24] On the other hand, this passage, which seems to head-fake its way out of discourse with literary forefathers, also—even more ironically—alludes to the anxious denizen of "rats' alley" in Eliot's *The Waste Land.* Eliot writes:

> 'My nerves are bad tonight. Yes, bad. Stay with me.
> Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak.
> What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?
> I never know what you are thinking. Think.' (*The Waste Land* 9)

Eliot's repetition of "think" is distinct from Petrosino's parataxis in the way he mixes gerunds with imperatives, the interrogative and the indicative. Ultimately, though, both poets harness the dulling power of the pentameter about which they are so ambivalent in order to make the reader think about how hard thinking is the more you think about it—especially in the presence of other thinking minds.

an ironic exclamation of open consideration: "To think! Of those white kids / whose turn (some said) I took" (22).

Petrosino's many enclosing metapentameters—which also include the last line of the ninth sonnet, "**Words** & **blood**, **words** & **blood,** *ha* ***ha***!" (*White Blood* 27), and of the thirteenth, "**How** was ***I*** the **dream**, the **hope**, of the **slave**?" (31)—may to some extent be said to mimic what Müller identifies as the rhetorical cushioning of nineteenth century Black praise sonnets in acknowledgement of a potentially hostile readership, since they engage with a related problem and frame Petrosino's metrically jagged sonnets with recognizable rhythms.[25] However, these four examples make clear that Petrosino's enclosing pentameters can be enraged, desperate, cutting, and even sinister in tone and in affect; far from cushioning the edges of these sonnets, they sharpen them.[26] The one explicit image of a doorway that Petrosino invokes in this sequence, the doorway in which her grandfather hangs himself, is a sublimely forbidding, dangerous space. In the last four lines of the sixth sonnet, right after painfully recording the particulars of his suicide, Petrosino asks:

> …What happens when
> the beloved body hangs up
> its flowers? Every flower falls
> over the top of the door. (*White Blood* 24)

Taking the body's flowers as a figure for its materiality, and thereby replacing the simple binary of body and spirit with the more ambiguous distinction between a body and "its flowers,"

[25] In his 2020 review of *White Blood*, Jason Harris applies this framing image to the speaker's position in the academy, writing that her freedom is "bookended by whiteness." (Harris).

[26] In a blog post called "Notes on the State of Virginia: Journey to the Center of an American Document, Queries VII, VIII, and IX," Petrosino describes meter-like seasonality with comparable disgust—"Like the syllables of a metrical poem, the seasons conform to their rightful places in the calendar"—then asks, "Am I the only one who finds this aesthetic kind of terrifying, though?" ("Notes on the State"). On the other hand, earlier in the post, she semi-ironically celebrates the pedagogical possibilities of scansion, slyly choosing Jefferson himself as her test case: "One of my favorite teaching activities is to have students scan their own names to find the metrical music in them. Thomas, for example, is a *trochee*" ("Notes on the State").

Petrosino reimagines suicide by hanging as a kind of decorative act. This act involves arrangement as well as relinquishment, aesthetic creation as well as surrender. The metaphor allows her to answer a question that would otherwise feel unanswerable: Petrosino proposes that, when the beloved body hangs up its flowers, "Every flower falls / over the top of the door."

The final line and a half of the sonnet imagines the passage from life into death as falling over the top of a door—slipping, perhaps, through the interstice between the actual door and its frame. The flowers find a different way in because the door is closed, and the body won't carry them anymore. Here, again, is that inevitability of entry from the very first sonnet in the sequence, in which Petrosino remembers her accession *in*to the academy…but it's barely recognizable because of the heightened emotional stakes. Though the rhythm of this six-stress syntactic unit is decidedly (and appropriately) *falling*—"**Ev**ery **flow**er **falls** / **ov**er the **top** of the **door**"—the placement of the floral door image at the end of the sonnet engages Dove's association of life's fundamental boundaries with the "pretty fence" (Dove xii) of the sonnet form.

And, indeed, in the twelfth sonnet, Petrosino's description of her own effort to pass over the threshold of that door echoes Dove's conflation of formal boundaries with those that lie between the living and the dead: "When I return to his room / trying to cross—that door— / I'm permitted only clouds / of dark leaves…" (*White Blood* 30). The long dashes on the either side of "that door" make it syntactically as well as ontologically inaccessible, while the "clouds / of dark leaves" seem like the lifeless replacement for the living flowers that the dying hang. The sonnet ends with Petrosino's assertion that, though the actual doorway is impassable, the doorways of the sonnet, famously constraining, actually enforce exit: "*O* knowledge, shivering by / my little votive in this stanza where / Grandpa will not stay, or let me, either—" (30). With the fourteenth

line approaching, her grandfather's ghost flees the room and forces her to do the same. In a sonnet in which iambic pentameter in any arrangement with respect to line and syntax is otherwise conspicuously absent, the penultimate line takes up the rhythm that Petrosino has used as a frame for earlier sonnets, enforcing the rule of early exit—"my **li**ttle **vo**tive **in** this **stan**za **where**"—and inviting the reader to read the final line with iambic pentameter in mind. In that final line, which also has five stresses, there's a tension between the trochaic pattern that its first word inaugurates—"**Grand**pa **will** not **stay**, or **let** me, **eit**her—"—and the more speech-like scansion in which trochees and iambs trade off: "**Grand**pa will **not stay**, or let **me**, **eit**her—." Crucially, either way, the line ends on an unstressed syllable and with a long dash: there's no easy way to exit this "stanza," but exit is nevertheless mandatory. The puzzle that the poet faces when attempting a crown of sonnets becomes a figure for the puzzle of grief (no way out, no way in). Within the context of that puzzle, enclosing metapentameters become a key insight and a figurative key, not merely a way to echo or reinforce the sonnet's formal and ideological boundaries, but also, more profoundly, a way to manage and even dwell in the difficulty of entrances and exits.

Like "Happine∱s," Kevin Young's 24-sonnet sequence "De La Soul Is Dead," which appeared in *Brown* (2018), is an autobiographical look at the poet's younger self. In its evocations of youthful scrapes, intimacies, and festivities, "De La Soul Is Dead" deals with the intermeshing of nostalgia and pop culture, exploring how lyrics and sounds can be linked to memories. Some of the poems are explicitly elegiac for lost peers or friends, and some wrestle with shifting conceptions of Black identity. However, unlike "Happine∱s," which remembers its speaker's younger self fighting for writerly authority and a sense of autonomy amid the white-coded academic institution, "De La Soul Is Dead" locates these memories in specifically Black

social and cultural spaces—spaces defined by the sounds of 80's and 90's R&B and hip hop, in which the rare white roommate stands out like a sore thumb. Like Petrosino's, Young's lines are relatively short, tending toward three or four stresses; but, also like Petrosino's, these lines lengthen somewhat as the sequence goes on, and palpable pentametrical rhythms often define their edges, especially in association with explorations of other kinds of spatial and temporal boundaries.

Young always presents his sonnets as three quatrains and a couplet, and he often loosely rhymes them according to the Shakespearean scheme, especially seeking out final, sometimes iambic couplets like "& **that** was **just** the **boys**. / Our **fav**orite **song** was **noise**" (*Brown* 91) and "not **what** you **did**. Or **who**. / And the **night** was **black too**" (94). How do such enclosing rhythms function in the context of a sonnet sequence in which every poem shares the title of a song by Prince, Digital Underground, or LL Cool J—a sequence written by a poet who is currently the director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture and who has published academic work about the blues and modernism?[27] Whereas Petrosino introduces enclosing metapentameters into a highly rich and inventive but discernibly free verse rhythmic environment, Young introduces them into a rhythmic environment already saturated with other culturally meaningful sounds and patterns. Many of these sonnets quote lyrics directly, incorporating rap's cadences—"...*Mista Dobalina,* / *Mista Bob Dobalina—glorahallastupid—*" (*Brown* 91)—into the historically white-coded but also (sometimes) Black space of the sonnet, thereby both ceding and re-asserting metrical authority. Indeed, Young's palpable conviction that rhythms are racially marked may explain his tendency to disguise iambic pentameter, when it

[27] Young's conceptualization of the blues form in "It Don't Mean A Thing: The Blues Mask of Modernism" (2011)—as a mask that's both metaphorical and functional, both limiting and generative—applies to the ghostly presence of iambic pentameter in his poems, too.

appears in this sequence, by breaking it across lines—in a performance of the insidiousness of white-coded rhythms in supposedly Black spaces, perhaps, or in a more sincerely agonistic struggle with a feeling of shame or disgust at his poetic inheritance. Reading Young's engagement with iambic pentameter in relation to Petrosino's can reveal and clarify the meaning-making capacities of the strain of ghost meter-inflected sonnet sequences that Dove inaugurates with *Mother Love*.

Notably, Young's use of titles, as well as his partial adherence to the repeating line convention from sonnet crowns, makes the act of framing these poems at least somewhat redundant. Yet the title of the very first sonnet, "A Roller Skating Jam Named Saturdays," a 1991 song by De La Soul, is itself a line of iambic pentameter: "A **Roll**er **Skat**ing **Jam** Named **Sat**ur**days**"—or, at least, "A **Roll**er **Skat**ing **Jam Named Sat**urdays," which is closer to spoken rhythm and still has five stresses. It's a double title (the title of the song and of the poem) and a meta-title, since it ironically and joyfully identifies "Saturdays" as the name for "A Roller Skating Jam," implying that custom has made the two synonymous to such an extent that they may as well share a moniker. Even though that first sonnet revels in the rhythms of the collective chant "*The roof! The roof! The roof / is on fire! We don't need no water…*" (*Brown* 90) from the 1984 song "The Roof Is on Fire" by Rock Master Scott & The Dynamic Three, as well as in the terse trimeters of its final couplet ("just ***Al****right* ***then***, or ***Bet****.* / **No** one was **dead yet**." (90)), its title invites the reader's ear to hear a split unit of iambic pentameter. As Young lists the lingo that defined the era he's remembering, he writes, "We said ***word*** **/** & ***def*****,** said ***dang*** & ***down*** & ***fly****—"* (90). Like Petrosino's "We **think** / & **think**. We **think** & **think** & **think**" (*White Blood* 21), this line's monosyllables and ampersands—as well, in this case, as its d-alliteration—make scansion easy. Simply by choosing five examples of slang syllables rather than four or six,

Young invites the ghost of iambic pentameter into a poem that is itself marked by the retrospective premonition that some of these revelers will eventually be—though are not yet—dead. We're left to imagine, for now at least, what might have killed them; the specter of white supremacist violence haunts the imaginative and metrical margins of this opening sonnet. Iambic pentameter's invisible but audible presence signals the unthinkability at the heart of the sequence's elegiac project, and part of the effect of Young's decision to hide iambic pentameter in plain sight the way he does involves this sense of unarticulated horror: we have yet to face directly the losses for which these hybrid rhythms set the scene.

The third poem in the sequence, "Jungle Boogie [24-7 Spyz]," is the first time Young frames a sonnet with an unbroken and therefore more obvious pentameter as its last line, introducing the possibility of revising that line into a different metrical identity at the beginning of the next sonnet. The poem ends, "...tonight, play / Jungle Boogie, hoping someone will stay" (*Brown* 92). That last line scans as four trochees and an iamb—"**Jun**gle **Boo**gie, **hop**ing **some**one will **stay**"—and the substitutions within the line reflect the sonnet's overall tendency to delay metrical satisfaction until the last second. This delay mirrors the sonnet's broader preoccupation with the contrast between over- and under-stimulation: the "we" of the sonnet turns up the volume on the Public Enemy song "past 10" (92) but is tentative as a potential lover, merely "hoping someone will stay"—as if all the "hype" (92) of the night could only lead to something conventional: a line of pentameter, a nervous teen. Young enlists the bashful pubescent affect as an implicit explanation for his tendency to disguise iambic pentameter: this line—and the sentiment it expresses—doesn't feel nearly *cool* enough for the larger sequence in which it appears.[28] This mood of anxiously horny adolescents dominates the next sonnet, too, in

[28] For more on coolness and race in American culture, see Dinerstein; for more on coolness as an affect in American poetry, see Alford. Alford's discussion of O'Hara in relation to idleness as a mode of poetic attention explores how

which the speaker's friends "duck" (93) those whom they kissed the night before; likewise, the first line of the fourth sonnet "duck[s]" the pentameter in its reiteration of its predecessor's final line: "Hoping someone would stay, / we readied tape decks…" (93). "Jungle Boogie" is missing from the line, leaving it at only three stresses—the very kind of diminished, quieter, morning-after reiteration that Young uses to cast the boundaries between sonnets as temporal as well as formal.

Indeed, in "The Last Day of Our Acquaintance," a sonnet of nostalgia for the late nights and early mornings of youthful partying, Young invokes the imagery of a punk aubade with lines like "Sometimes the morn was met // less alone, her beauty & scent, / her buzzed head numbing your arm" (*Brown* 112). Young's axiom "Every party / was an after-party" (112) comprises a split line of iambic pentameter: "**Ev**ery **par**ty / **was** an **af**ter-**par**ty." A reference to Paul Muldoon's aphoristic sonnet sequence "The Old Country" from *Horse Latitudes*—"Where every town was a tidy town / and every garden a hanging garden…" (Muldoon 38)—the couplet promotes the word "was" to a stressed syllable by placing it at the beginning of a line. Paradoxically, then, the line break that disrupts the pentameter also bolsters it. Most importantly, the line thematizes the troubling of party borders that is central to this poem's inquiry: where and when do parties start and end? How can you be sure you're properly reading the rhythms of a social interaction, both on the small and the large scales? How can you tell when a party is over?

"Soul Flower [Brand New Heavies]," which appears earlier in the sequence, asks similar questions but with starker stakes. The poem is an elegy for a dead friend. In the transition between the first two quatrains, Young is contemplating "the sun coming up now // between the buildings—" (*Brown* 102) and the ambiguity of the light at dawn in the present moment, when

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the emerging aesthetic of cool combined with changes in the culture of attention to produce O'Hara's style, his "irreverent, curious, off-handed modality" (Alford 233). What makes Young's sonnet sequence cool?

he interrupts himself with a memory: “we hated / leaving any party early” (102). It’s a split pentameter, set apart by syntax (it’s a simple sentence) and punctuation (comma, period): “we **hat**ed / **leav**ing **an**y **par**ty **ear**ly.” And it isn’t really an interruption at all, because dawn is a time when someone might leave a party, as well as an “early” time in relation to the day. The transition to the next sentence, “I hate / having to write what / can never capture how thin / everything was then” (102), also masquerades as a non-sequitur connected only by anaphoric sentence beginnings (“we hated” / “I hate”) but similarly draws an implicit parallel between the writer and those who leave parties early: observers, outsiders. Except for the enjambed beginning of the next sentence, “I hate,” the split pentameter sits right at the end of the octave, before the volta. It acts as the hinge between the first part of the poem (the memory) and the second part (the bemoaning of the job of the elegist). It explores the capacity of a recognizable rhythm to serve as a framing mechanism for life and death as well as for night and day.

Whereas Petrosino concretizes her use of enclosing metapentameters in the vertical image of the doorway that she connects to her grandfather’s death, Young finds the physical instantiation of these temporal uncertainties in the horizontal image of a twin bed. In “Fast Car [Tracy Chapman],” the speaker remembers a college girlfriend whom he’d take home with him over winter break, picturing the way she’d sing for him “naked behind her guitar” (*Brown* 104). The poem ends with the counter-intuitive assertion that the relationship “wouldn’t survive the thaw” (104)—as if they were only together for warmth and, once the spring came, would grow apart. The poem upends the pastoral association of spring with the growth of love and, in a Picasso-like move, replaces the image of the body of the beloved with the curvy guitar—thus containing her both in time and in space. More importantly, the poem features two images of compression reminiscent of Wordsworth’s “Nuns fret not”: “twin bed her smallest stage” and

"bedframe / narrow as a grave" (104). The bed is both a stage and a grave, and, in either case, it's constrictingly small. As a place in which to sing, to sleep, to have sex, and to die, its narrowness is its defining quality. It brings the couple artificially close together, making all the performances that occur in it more intimate. Indeed, Young is concerned, throughout this sequence, with the artificial intimacies of youth. He accompanies this set of images and their associations with three split pentameters, which take up the entirety of the first quatrain:

> **Tak**ing her **home** those **weeks**
> of **win**ter **break**, **dorm** snowed **in**, **no** one
> a**round** but **us**, I'd **ask**
> her, **late**, to **sing** to **me** a**lone**. (*Brown* 104)

This passage decouples sentence structure and the line, letting syntax mark the edges of the pentameters as lineation undermines scansion. Young goes out of his way to re-lineate and enjamb these lines so that the pentameters hide in plain sight, creating four lines where there are only three: much like the lovers' nascent and doomed relationship, the stanza makes more of what there is than is really authentic.

The doorway and twin bed images in the work of Petrosino and Young recall Dove's double glass doors, as well as the gate and pretty fence of her preface, inviting an association between conceptualizations of the Black sonnet as marking contained, interior spaces and the supposed discursive interiority of the units of iambic pentameter that often frame those spaces. Ramazani, in the first instance, cites the sonnet-as-prison trope—on top of sonnet-as-prayer, -garland, -river, -nation, and -pathogen—as one of its main strands of self-metaphorization ("Self-Metaphorizing" 133), connecting Hayes's prison and "panic closet" to Wordsworth's nun's "narrow room." Culler, in the second instance, cites Antony Easthope's argument that iambic pentameter's "sense of an abstract metrical norm with individual variation—hence a reinforcement of individualism" stands in contrast with the "communal chanting" (Culler 158) of

four-stress meters.[29] Culler continues, "Easthope is right to link iambic pentameter to the idea of representing the speaking subject as individual—to hearing a voice—and to associate tetrameter with a position of enunciation not marked as that of an individual subject" (158). The sonnet form and the form of iambic pentameter are both commonly associated with individual interiority, with the bounds of selfhood that unlock through restriction. It's puzzling to discover that poets—in this case, Black poets working in the contemporary period—are using the latter form to frame and delimn the former. How can one container contain another container? What is it about the role that iambic pentameter plays in the contemporary African American sonnet sequence that allows it both to signal and to participate in, both to evoke and to demarcate, interiority? The examples from Dove, Petrosino and Young show that this meter's capacity to interact with lineation and syntax on the exteriors, in the interiors, and along the spatial and temporal edges of sonnets in sequence, enables—and makes profound—this use.

In *The Black Interior* (2004), Elizabeth Alexander explores the motif of Black living rooms in contemporary art as well as in the sonnets of Gwendolyn Brooks. She understands the living room as "a presentational space but at the same time, a private one" (Alexander 9). Like the sonnet's, the living room's containment makes it public-facing as well as inwardly-oriented, a device for self-representation as well as for self-discovery. Alexander draws a parallel between the work of artists like Adia Millett, who "makes child-sized dollhouses with very grown-up interiors that must be viewed by peeping in the doll-sized windows" (11)—"You have to walk up to the dollhouse and approach it on its own terms, stoop and squint into the windows to take in detail after detail" (11)—and that of Gwendolyn Brooks, whose sonnets "portray the interior living spaces of the 'kitchenette apartments' of the Black metropolis of Chicago's South Side"

[29] For the most influential articulation of this take on four-beat verse, see Attridge; my introduction engages more directly with this idea.

(15). Alexander writes that, in "kitchenette building," Brooks "gives us a poem that is a square window or doorway, a look suddenly in, and then deeply in, beyond 'garbage and fried potatoes ripening in the hall' to the 'white and violet' of dreams" (16). The device of the window or doorway initiates a movement inward that doesn't stop, pushing beyond initial spatial penetration towards intimacy and insight. Thus, poets like Petrosino and Young, whose sonnet sequences build both on Dove's association of the gate/fence motif with the meter-troubled edges of the worlds they imagine and remember, as well as on the histories and trends that Alexander traces, use iambic pentameter as the "doll-sized windows" into the "child-sized houses" of their sonnets. The "squint[ing]" posture that readers are compelled to assume involves the attunement of the mind's ear to units of iambic pentameter in and around those edges.

By the time Dora Malech and Laura Smith compiled *The American Sonnet: An Anthology of Poems and Essays* (2023), and due in part to the elegiac stances and spectral imaginaries of practitioners like Petrosino and Young, those architectural elements had taken on the air of the dilapidated. Stephen Regan's "Broken Hearts and Broken Homes: The Desolation of the American Sonnet" shows that these windows, doorways, and rooms don't have to be in good condition to be meaningful; in fact, it's their deterioration that makes them imaginatively inviting to poets.[30] Looking at the motif of windows and doorways in the poetry of white poets like Lowell, Merrill, Millay and Plath, he writes:

> ...one of the distinguishing features of the American sonnet is its radical destabilization of the familiar structural equation between the sonnet form and the house / the home / the room, so that what emerges is a distinct preference, not for the well-furnished house of

[30] In her essay "Disruption, Hesitation, Silence," Louise Glück memorably explains how poetry gains traction the way architectural ruins do: "Such works inevitably allude to larger contexts; they haunt because they are not whole, though wholeness is implied" (*Proofs & Theories* 74).

> life or the pretty room, but for the deserted building and the sorrowful home. (Regan 313-4)

Dove's pretty fence and double glass doors; Petrosino's Jeffersonian architecture and haunted, beflowered doorway; and Young's late night/early morning parties and rickety twin bed each hint at the "radical destabilization" of home, house, and room to which Regan refers. The fractured mother-daughter unit at the heart of *Mother Love*, the speaker torn from yet thrown back into her family and history in *White Blood*, and the doomed friend groups and broken intimacies of *Brown* gesture toward "the deserted building and the sorrowful home" that, according to Regan, characterize the "American" sonnet in particular. In the context of the expectations of the sonnet sequence form, these poets' free verse prosodies, which involve units of iambic pentameter strung across lines and clauses and delineating the spatial and temporal edges on which the poems turn, seem themselves to be bereft: struck through by loss as a foregone conclusion, marked by expectation perpetually established and unfulfilled. The presence of the meter makes its absence felt. The little rooms of the sonnets, as well as the houses they form in sequence, are never entirely free of the structuring element of meter, though seemingly degraded almost beyond recognition.

3. Iambic Cudgels & Metrical Battery

The second strain of African American sonnet sequences that this chapter examines, the strain in which ghost meter surfaces not as a doorway, fence, or framing device but as a bodily beating, thwacking, or hammering—with the attendant incapacitation—contends with that degradation by exaggerating it. These poets perform their rejections of, or agonistic dances with, meter, and then, according to their own figurations, they permit it to pummel them into feigned submission before displaying their scars and swollen lips with perverse pride. In Wanda

Coleman's protracted "American Sonnet" sequence, stretching from *African Sleeping Sickness* (1990) through *Mercurochrome* (2001); Honorée Fanonne Jeffers's "Catalogue: Revolution" from *The Age of Phillis* (2020); and Tyehimba Jess's "Sonnet Crown for Blind Tom" from *Olio* (2016), this dynamic invites a challenging association between disfigurement and poetic form. Just as Dove's use of ghost meter sets up the prosodic richness of Petrosino and Young, Coleman paves the way for Jeffers and Jess.[31]

Thanks in part to Terrance Hayes—whose poetry, as we will see in the final section of this chapter, combines these two strains, and who published and introduced a selection of Coleman's work in *Wicked Enchantment: Selected Poems* (2020)—Coleman's sonnets, arguably underappreciated during her heyday, are enjoying a resurgence of influence and popularity. Indeed, in that introduction, Hayes writes that a teaching exercise he designed based on those sonnets was the inspiration for his own *American Sonnets for my Past & Future Assassin* (2018) (Coleman xii). Hayes's take on Coleman in that volume invites an engagement with the formal brutality that suffuses her sonnets and her oeuvre at large. He dwells, in his introduction, on Coleman's size and destructive power, both literally and metaphorically. Remembering "her towering hair and bangles, her patterned fabrics and big glasses and big wicked laugh" (Coleman xi), Hayes depicts Coleman as a larger-than-life figure composed of jewelry, textiles, and noise, joyfully intimidating in her willingness to take up space with her own self-adornments. In his description of an early interaction with her, he remembers her as similarly beyond-human: "Upon our first real conversation, on a panel at an L.A. book festival the next year, Wanda 'tore me a new one,' as they say. She was a grenade of brilliance, boasts, and braggadocio. She burned

[31] For another discussion of beating and poetry from a parallel discursive field, see Eve Sedgwick's Freud-informed essay about her childhood memories of being spanked and reciting verse: "When I was a little child the two most rhythmic things that happened to me were spanking and poetry" (Sedgwick 114).

and shredded all my platitudes about whatever poetry topic was at hand" (xi). Hayes conflates Coleman's linguistic power with her physical power, letting the b-alliteration of "brilliance, boasts, and braggadocio," as well as "book" and "burned," concretize her mind-opening critique and compelling dismissal of cliché. For Hayes and his contemporary sonneteers, Coleman is a "grenade": a weapon lobbed at one moment in time and then exploding, but only after a delay.

Though some may question Hayes's decision, as a Black male poet, to describe a Black woman poet in such terms, there's no denying that he's getting it straight from Coleman's own prose and poetry, which draws much of its power from her idiosyncratic melding of the impulse to demean oneself with the impulse to boast or swagger. Hayes quotes Coleman in "Looking for It: An Interview": "My anger knows no bounds—it's unlimited. I'm a big lady, I can stand up in front of almost any man and cuss him out and have no fear—you know what I'm sayin? Because I will go to blows" (Coleman xv). Here, she executes a similar conflation of the size of her anger with the size of her body. Yet Coleman also describes herself as powerless in the face of structural inequality: "Here I am. I prize myself greatly I want the world to enjoy me and my art but something's undeniably wrong, I've come to regard myself as a living, breathing statistic governed not by my individual will but by forces outside myself" (xiv). She's confident that she and her art are worthy of universal enjoyment, but she also acknowledges not just that these "forces outside [her]self" are constraining her but also that they have come to determine how she can "regard [her]self."

Poems like "I Ain't Yo Earthmama 3" from *Mercurochrome*—not a sonnet, but a good example of this affective cocktail—perform a similar balancing act. Participating in Coleman's long-standing motif of fatness, the poem expands (pun intended) on the global metaphor, describing the difficulty of movement that the Earthmama speaker, who is "so big [she] can

barely walk" (Coleman 209), experiences: "i wear / tent dresses for coolness and comfort" (209) and "when i walk too much too slow, i sweat head-to-toe / my heart thumps in my neck, my arches / threaten to fall. i gasp" (209). Yet, as an allegorical figure, this Earthmama is not easily legible. She's suffering but self-satisfied, pointed but blunt, vulnerable but indestructible. The last line of the poem—"when i stomp my foot, the ducks take ground"—is proudly threatening, and also arguably five stresses ("**when** i **stomp** my **foot**, the **ducks** take **ground**" or, more naturally, "when i **stomp** my **foot**, the **ducks take ground**"): an enclosing pentameter, secured by monosyllables and enriched by a foot pun.[32] Her walking rhythm scares animals; she isn't as "one with nature" as one might expect of an Earthmama, but she's owning the sometimes destructive, culturally informed rhythms that her body produces.[33]

Let's take a look, then, at how iambic pentameter shows up in Coleman's sonnets, the formal context in which she most explicitly dares readers to listen for it. Coleman's inaugural "American Sonnet" starts with the image of ballooning fatness, a counterintuitive way to begin a form associated with lyric compactness:

> the lurid confessions of an ex-cake junky: 'i blew it
> all. blimped. i was really stupid. i waited
> until i was forty to get hooked on white flour
> and powdered sugar…(Coleman 68)

These lines are pointedly unmetered, and the voice is indulgent, making space for the slightly embarrassing, "lurid confessions" of the former sugar addict. Though the first line before the colon has five stresses in a manner somewhat reminiscent of Dove, Coleman's wildly

[32] Coleman's engagement with the metrical foot pun is sustained and significant. In the long poem "Salvation Wax," Coleman depicts rhythmic tyranny as a car-napping, in which the thief "rides phantom foot glued to the / accelerator" (151): the foot is a ghost, but it's also fatally weighted, powerful to a fault.

[33] Coleman is ahead of her time in her nuanced approach to body neutrality/fat positivity, an aspect of her work that deserves further attention. In "Wanda Why Aren't You Dead," her polyvocal screed against herself, Coleman asks, "why don't you lose weight / wanda why are you so angry" (Coleman 53) and ends by asking "why ain't you dead" (53), implying that to ask her why she doesn't lose weight is ultimately to ask her why she has to exist at all.

inconsistent stress patterns resist all efforts at scansion ("the **lur**id con**fess**ions of an **ex-cake junk**y: 'i **blew** it / **all. blimped**. i was **reall**y **stu**pid. i **wait**ed / unt**il** i was **for**ty to get **hooked** on **white flour**…"). This may be a sonnet, but it is more concerned with the Eliotic negotiation of polyvocality and collage than it is with language's capacity to incorporate patterned rhythm. After all, the poem quotes the "ex-cake junky" in the first stanza, includes a multiplication equation with fractions made of language, introduces an "i" inside a parenthetical in the penultimate line, and addresses a "you" in a final line quoted from the blues standard "Sweet Home Chicago."

Swollen spondees like "ex-cake," "all. blimped," and "white flour" banish anything remotely resembling alternating stresses to the part of the poem that most distances itself from poetry by mimicking sociological jargon in a multiple-choice format:

> increased racial tension/polarization
> increased criminal activity
> sporadic eruptions manifest as mass killings
> collapses of longstanding social institutions
> the n*****ization of the middle class (Coleman 68)

Of these five possible answers to the multiplication problem posed in the line preceding this passage, four have five stresses and one ("in**creased cri**minal ac**tiv**ity") has three or four. The two that arguably scan most easily trouble that ease with a slash mark (does one read it aloud?) and the neologistic reconfiguration of a violent slur: "in**creased rac**ial **ten**sion/**po**lari**zat**ion" and "the **n*****i**zat**ion **of** the **mi**ddle **class**." The very notion of completing a math problem in the middle of reading a sonnet satirizes scansion, an activity that forces the reader to count when they should be thinking. Furthermore, the passage, which is basically a list of different causes or manifestations of systemic racism, equates those forms of structural violence with the metrical rhythms with which it so darkly flirts, challenging the reader to consider the parallels between

patterns of violence and the violence of patterns. Coleman arguably imposes these patterns onto the passage in order to occasion a display of her struggle against them.

That first "American Sonnet," which appears in *African Sleeping Sickness* (1990), is a tough read, densely packed with ideas for unsonneting the sonnet and a little manic in its formal resistance to poem-ness and commitment to impersonal dictions. The sonnets that appear in *Bathwater Wine* (1998) are more open to language's rhythms, allowing iambic pentameter to inhabit their lines and syntactic units even as they depict it as a bodily beating that leaves them—and their speakers—damaged and swollen. At the opening of "American Sonnet 43," which functions as an *ars poetica* for the sequence at large, Coleman writes:

> i am listening for your footfalls, life!
> i am here. waiting with my ancient hammer, a
> hangman's rope and a butcher's knife. i shall
> pound your head as you ease through the door. (Coleman 129)

When the speaker says that she is listening for life's footfalls, she casts the poet as someone listening for, rather than creating or inventing, metrical rhythm. The passage also implies that the speaker is listening for a sign of life so that she can commit murder at the right moment. As a poet-criminal invested with dangerous magic, she is waiting for evidence of vitality so that she can steal and use it for her own purposes. The explicitly archaic "ancient hammer," "hangman's rope" and "butcher's knife" with which she aims to accomplish this heinous purpose are figures for the devices of the poetic toolbox; the hammer in particular is a ready symbol for meter's beatings, and it's easy to imagine that the rope and the knife can stand for the stringing of syntax and the cutting of the line, respectively. In an image that prefigures Dove's doorway motif and its ilk, the speaker imagines "pound[ing]" life's head as it "ease[s] through the door," so that meter forces life to fit the uncomfortable architectural space of the poem, both welcoming and mutilating it at once.

While the violent enjambment of "a / hangman's rope" discourages a pentametrical reading of the second line of this passage, and its other lines tend towards four stresses ("**pound** your **head** as you **ease** through the **door**"), the sonnet's last four lines are an indented quatrain that ends with a split pentameter:

> the lotus moon is a lover's wound
> it frees the red/ my bloodjoy
> runs running running
> soaks the earth (Coleman 129)

The three stresses of "**runs runn**ing **runn**ing" combine with the two of "**soaks** the **earth**" to mark the return—or, rather, the ultimate achievement or conjuring—of life's footfalls. The scansion involves two initial feet that are just single stressed syllables, then three iambs, the second of which is split across the line break. The poet must wait until the end of the poem but eventually does hear those long-awaited footfalls…and she pounces. The image is gruesome, melodramatic, and even gothic: a bloody moon soaking the earth in the aftermath of the apparition of life's pentameter. Tonally, the sonnet is playful but also threatening. When the speaker declares that she'll "steal your laughter and drink your pain," the reader, suspecting that there's a horror-like glee afoot, is left to decide whether to root for this speaker or to be spooked by her. Partly because of the split pentameter, that final image of the "bloodjoy" covering the globe is harder to read in terms of tone. How threatening does Coleman really want to be, and to whom?

Coleman's later sonnets add bricks, fists, and feet to an arsenal of prosodic weapons that already includes the hammer, the rope, and the knife. These sonnets also engage more explicitly with the painful aftermaths and recoveries to which such acts of violence must lead, complicating even further the tonal dynamic that surrounds Coleman's use of disembodied ghost

meter as a figuratively concrete cudgel. In "American Sonnet 61," Coleman describes fishing around in her "griot bag / of womanish wisdom and wily / social commentary":

> …i come up with bricks
> with which to either reconstruct
> the past or deconstruct a head. Dolor
> robs me of art's coin… (Coleman 135)

The speaker reaches into her "griot bag," an eccentric, exoticized source of poetic inspiration, and comes up with bricks: heavy, dense building blocks that readily represent iambs or even whole sonnets. These bricks are blunt objects that can be used to rebuild old structures or bash someone's head in; like iambs for this Black woman poet in the 90's, they are at once creative and destructive. The bricks' entry into the poem coincides with a sudden, undeniably iambic bent ("i come **up** with **bricks** / with **which** to **ei**ther **re**con**struct** / the **past** or **de**con**struct** a **head**"), inviting an analogy between the prepare-and-strike pattern of an actual beating and the beating thesis/arsis of Greek prosody. The iambic beating only ends when dolor "robs" Coleman's speaker of "art's coin" and she feels once again disenfranchised, exiled, impoverished. Though the lines in this passage are shorter than five stresses, the syntactic unit "with **which** to **ei**ther **re**con**struct** / the **past**"—a prepositional phrase with an infinitive as the object of the preposition—sits at the center of the iambic section. That rhythmic organization invites the reader to hear an invisible line break before "or deconstruct a head," even though it actually occurs mid-line, and the ghost enjambment plays into the tonal complexity of the passage. Coleman presents the quasi-zeugmatic capacity of the bricks to literally "deconstruct" a head as both funny and scary. Later in the sonnet, Coleman contrasts what those bricks can build/destroy with "the infinite alphabet of afroblues / intertwinings" that allows her to "articulate [her] voyage beyond that / point where self disappears"; here, she presents the white-coded iamb in opposition to the rhythmically various "alphabet of afroblues." Indeed, in the last line, she calls these poems

"my slave songs," an appositive phrase as blunt as the poem's bricks. Her argument is that the slave song alphabet is so much subtler, so much more articulate, so much more complex, than what the bricks can build; however, there's no question that, in Coleman's hands, a brick's skull-splitting blow is revelatory as well as painful.

In the more autobiographical "American Sonnet 70," Coleman further explores the potential of rhythmic beatings to yield terrible eloquence. She writes, "my father took his murder with grace they beat his / head for decades from 1914 to 1991 they beat him until / a tumor rose from the wound…" (Coleman 137). This passage describes a sustained pummeling, implying that oppression has a literal rhythm with physical consequences. Coleman connects the suffering her father experienced at the hands of the "they"—whom she later defines as "the famous tyrannical they the / they who control production and distribution the greedy / they who always go around shitting perfumed shit" (137)—to the cancer that killed him, showing how beatings can reverberate in the body long after bruises have healed. The sonnet, which is divided into stanzas of six, five, and three lines with a concluding monostick, turns iambic as it enters the tercet:

…they

raise their killer fists and beat me simple they raise their
killer fists beating and beating until they are certain
no one raps back from the other side of the tombstone (Coleman 137)

Just as Coleman's escalating description of the crimes of this "tyrannical they" culminates with the assertion that they are beating her as well as her entire family, she uses iambs to represent a kind of beating designed to drown out all other rhythms, to make impossible any kind of aesthetic response from the beaten. The lines are six stresses apiece, but the syntactic units—in this case, complete sentences, which run together without so much as a comma to separate

them—generally contain five stresses. For example, “they // **raise** their **kill**er **fists** and **beat** me **sim**ple” scans almost perfectly, with only one unstressed syllable hanging off the end of the imaginary line, and “they **raise** their / **kill**er **fists beat**ing and **beat**ing” has the same extra eleventh syllable, as well as a trochaic substitution in the fourth foot.

The turn towards a trochee followed by a spondee in the penultimate line of the poem—“**no** one **raps back**”—firmly excludes the possibility of rhythmic response. Like all oppressors, the “they” is afraid of the vengeful dead accessing their anger, in this case via rhythm, and this fear drives them to channel metrical obliteration in the form of iambic pentameter. But Coleman’s final monostick overcomes the tercet, crying, as if “from the other side of the tombstone,” “god. in my smoke i call you” (Coleman 137). This three-stress line, which functions like an Austinian speech act, sears through the terrifying velocity of the tercet and ends the poem on a sparer, rather visionary note. In “The Transformative Poetics of Wanda Coleman’s *American Sonnets*,” Jennifer Ryan enumerates the various manifestations of this poet’s tendency to “pay[] homage” (Ryan 415), including “ironic reversals” (421), “critique” (417), poems that are “after” some forebear (420), and, in Harryette Mullen’s terms, poems that “talk back” (417). “American Sonnet 70” talks back not to Milton or to Baraka, as elsewhere, but to meter itself, recording its violent beating and then speaking into the stunned silence of its aftermath.

Finally, “American Sonnet 85” dwells even more cruelly on the consequences of that beating, connecting Coleman’s metrical agonism with her preoccupation with physical swelling. The sonnet is addressed to the speaker’s “jailer,” whom she treats like a lover: “jailer, will you still love me when i’m flit? / will you pay to hear my angst of sob and bathe in it?” (Coleman 142). The flit/it rhyme engages the reader’s ear, and the first line of the sonnet does scan as a line of iambic pentameter with an initial trochaic substitution (“**jail**er, will **you** still **love** me **when**

i'm **flit**?"), while the second is iambic hexameter with an initial anapestic substitution ("will you **pay** to **hear** my **angst** of **sob** and **bathe** in **it**?"). From within her confinement, the speaker preemptively, semi-ironically reminisces about the "cuffs so dear" that both she and her jailer will miss once she is "flit"—or, has fled from the jail.[34] Rhyme signals the presence of iambic pentameter later in the poem, too, when Coleman writes, "jailer! This **con**tra**band** is **such** i **can't** con**ceal** / **wears** my **lips** and **shreds** um**bi**lical **zeal**" (142). Here, excluding the initial vocative, the first line of the stanza scans as perfect iambic pentameter, while the second scans almost as well, only missing its initial unstressed syllable and featuring an anapestic substitution in the fifth foot. What is the contraband to which the speaker refers? It's something she can't hide. Maybe it's her face, which "wears" her lips, or maybe it's a baby, whose lips resemble hers and whose being involves the "shredding" of the "umbilical zeal" that connects mother and child. Indeed, with another line of iambic pentameter, the sonnet's speaker goes on to assert that "the **chan**cre **bloss**om **of** our **forced** em**brace** / will **ne**ver **heal**" (142): the syphilitic sore that is the result of the jailer's rape of her—which could be a literal sore on her face, or a child—will be around forever.

The sore could also be an iamb, a little blemish in the mouth of the poet that mars her speech and deforms her self-presentation. In that case, it resembles the distended feet in "American Sonnet 34": "my feet fail me. now. so edematous / i can't force them into my Tiffany slippers" (Coleman 127). The feet, both literal and metrical, are so swollen with fluid that, like the feet of Cinderella's stepsisters, they don't fit into the luxury shoes they try on. The image bespeaks rhythmic deformity, as well as the gendered unfitness, including fatness, that pervades Coleman's work. The sore could also be the sonnet, the swollen byproduct of the Black woman

[34] I'm indebted to Mary Ruth Robinson for this gloss of "flit."

poet's interaction with an aesthetic informed by patriarchal, white supremacist power. Either way, the next line ("jailer, why so quiet?") is a taunt, a subtle victory dance in which Coleman rejoices in her own ability to silence her antagonistic interlocutor through her willingness to dance to the oppressive rhythms that could otherwise obliterate her poem—her willingness to flirt with the "jailer" whose presence threatens her safety and autonomy.

Some theorists of the contemporary sonnet depict it as a form that lends itself to martial metaphors and conceptualizes itself as a battlefield. Müller begins his study of the form by close reading the first published sonnet by an African American writer, Albery Allson Whitman's 1877 "Sonnet: The Montenegrin," in which the form "becomes a space that the Black poet, like the Montenegrins, occupies in 'defence' against the oppressor." (Muller 4). Likewise, in "Caged Birds: Race and Gender in the Sonnet," Marcellus Blount depicts the sonnet as "contested ground" (Blount 227) and an "appropriate battlefield" (235) on which a poet like Claude McKay can negotiate the bounds of his gentlemanly masculinity. This reading of metrical battery in Wanda Coleman's poetry connects political battles to more personal brawls, proffering the iamb as the cudgel wielded by combatants fighting for their lives and freedoms amid systemic oppression. Honorée Fanonne Jeffers and Tyehimba Jess, who take up Coleman's trope of metrical beatings and rhythmic contusions and locate it in the historical past, are concerned with exploring those political valences as they manifest on/in the bodies of their speakers and characters. Their uses of iambic pentameter in their supposedly non-metrical poems show these poets exploring questions about the engine or source of metrical violence. They are curious about how far back they need to read or count in order to hear meter—about how the interaction of ghost meter, syntax, and the line can speak to complex forms of guilt and complicity amid starker, more cut-and-dry struggles for freedom and human rights.

"Catalogue: Revolution" is a free verse heroic crown that constitutes one section of *The Age of Phillis* (2020), Jeffers's book-length project in which she semi-chronologically imagines the life experiences of enslaved poet Phillis Wheatley. This section of the book deals with the Revolutionary War, and it broadens the book's scope to include white and Black men involved in the resistance, as well as historical figures like George Washington, Abigail Adams, Lemuel Haynes (a Black minister who joined the Minutemen), Salem Poor (a Black man who became a Revolutionary War hero after buying his own freedom), and others. Jeffers's prosody lies somewhere between Dove's and Coleman's in terms of proximity to iambic pentameter, and she uses both enclosing metapentameters in the style of Dove and iambic cudgels in the style of Coleman.

In a 2020 blog post for *Poetry Foundation*, Jeffers makes an overt and revealing statement about her prosodic relationship to inherited forms. She cites the Adinkra symbol *Sankofa*, "which means 'go back and fetch it,'" declaring, "…I am taking the symbol as a critical metaphor, one that can be applied to poetry produced by writers throughout the African diaspora: I will call this Sankofa poetics" ("Go Back"). Jeffers goes on to define Sankofa poetics:

> …the poet must be concerned with innovation or improvisation, such as the use of blues, jazz, unique page aesthetics, new approaches to European forms, or a new approach to lyricism. (This is by no means an exhaustive list.) If one looks at, say, a jazz performance of a well-known song that (as we used to say in the 1980s) "freaks it," we can see both the musician's respect for the original song and a pulling away. ("Go Back")

In this sequence, as we will see, Jeffers certainly "freaks" both the sonnet and iambic pentameter, and her prosody bespeaks both a "respect" and a "pulling away." Though she doesn't mention iambic pentameter or sonnets specifically in this list, she places the idea of "new approaches to

European forms" side-by-side with the engagement with traditionally Black forms like blues and jazz, intimating that, in all cases, rhythm is a revenant, the agent of a spectral return and therefore a hybrid of the past and the present, rather than an essentialized outpouring of any single, stable identity.

The reference to jazz in Jeffers's elucidation of Sankofa poetics is both an allusion to and a revision of Langston Hughes's "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926), in which Hughes recommends turning to oral and musical folk forms like jazz and the blues, which he argues can provide an inexhaustible subject matter, a source of resistance, and a reflection of collective experience for Black Americans. Hughes writes that jazz is "one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America, the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul—the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world, a world of subway trains, and work, work, work" (Hughes 967). Hughes casts jazz as a fundamental form, both "inherent" and "eternal," rather than partial, dependent, or revisionary: a quintessentially Black rhythm that contains in its very DNA a "revolt" against all the manifestations of whiteness's toxic power, including the exhaustion of labor and the inequities of infrastructure. In practice, Hughes drew extensively on supposedly white lyric practices as well, including in a 1937 sonnet called "Search," in which Hollis Robbins insists that he "can be seen in conversation with his fellow poets" (Robbins 166) and thereby participating in "the building of a tradition" (166)—but his theoretical stance in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" is firm. Jeffers, on the other hand, theorizes jazz as one of several frameworks or methods for rewriting "well-known" music so that it is new, defamiliarized, rejuvenated, appropriated and re-contextualized.

Jeffers's definition of Sankofa poetics, then, is an example of a contemporary Black American poet not just reconsidering the ideological baggage of white-coded poetic forms, but

also reevaluating canonical articulations of how Black artists should navigate or even avoid those forms. Indeed, she revises not just Hughes but also Amiri Baraka, whose "The Myth of a Negro Literature" (1966) argues, bitterly and emphatically, that Black art has failed because it insists on imitating whiteness. Baraka, a founder of the Black Arts movement, dwells more explicitly than Hughes on the danger of Black poetry that echoes white poetic forms—which Baraka dismisses as mediocre, barren, emotionally abstract, and pretentious. He writes:

> ...there are would-be Negro poets who reject the gaudy excellence of 20th century American poetry in favor of disembowelled Academic models of second-rate English poetry, with the notion that somehow it is the only way poetry should be written. It would be better if such a poet listened to Bessie Smith sing Gimme A Pigfoot, or listened to the tragic verse of a Billie Holiday, than be content to imperfectly imitate the bad poetry of the ruined minds of Europe. [...] For an American, black or white, to say that some hideous imitation of Alexander Pope means more to him, emotionally, than the blues of Ray Charles or Lightnin' Hopkins, it would be required for him to have completely disappeared into the American Academy's vision of a Europeanized and colonial American culture, or to be lying. (Baraka 170)

Here, Baraka conflates Britishness with whiteness, dismissing as tired and defunct all poetic forms tainted by either. He also critiques the ill-conceived imitations of those forms as themselves poorly executed, excoriating all parties at once. Robbins points out that Baraka did publish at least two sonnets, "The Turncoat" and "Epistrophe (for yodo)," and she notes the hypocrisy of his refusal to "see a kinship" (Robbins 174) with the early formalism of Gwendolyn Brooks by "claim[ing] his own verse as sonnets" (174). Capturing Baraka's combination of theoretical dogmatism and practical ambivalence, Robbins quotes Baraka's "How You Sound?"

(1960): "'I'm not interested in writing sonnets, sestinas or anything…only poems, [but] if the poem has got to be a sonnet (unlikely tho) or whatever, it'll certainly let me know'" (Robbins 172). Jeffers's book, by contrast, celebrates Phillis Wheatley, whose verses Baraka derides as "ludicrous departures from the huge black voices that splintered southern nights with their *hollers, chants, arwhoolies,* and *ballits*" (Baraka 166), and Jeffers unabashedly delves into the intersection of British and American cultures by writing American sonnets about the Revolutionary War. How does Sankofa poetics—the fetching, the freaking—manifest in Jeffers's prosody, a prosody suffused with the barely post-BAM Coleman's iambic cudgels but also informed by these tensions with Hughes and Baraka? What images and sonic innovations does Jeffers proffer that would account for her particular position in the history of Black formalism, her particular take on the ambiguously racialized status both of sonnets and of the meter most associated with them?

The first poem, "(Original) Black Lives Matter: Irony," which observes a Shakespearean rhyme scheme but has no regular meter, ends by recounting how Africans "are ignored as white men don paper chains, / the language of wounded throats, chattel claims" (*Phillis* 133). Here, the slant-rhyming final couplet engages the reader's ear, and both lines resolve into five stresses, with a couple of anapestic substitutions ("are ig**nored**" and "-guage of **wound**-") and a couple of dropped unstressed syllables ("**don pa**per" and "**throats chatt**el"): "are ig**nored** as **white** men **don pa**per **chains**, / the **lan**guage of **wound**ed **throats**, **chatt**el **claims**." The passage describes the hypocrisy of the white revolutionaries who borrow the metaphor of slavery to describe their own oppression at the hands of the British, even as they ignore the suffering of the Black men around them. The "paper chains" are an inversion of the "golden links of love" that, according to Elizabeth Winkler in *The New Yorker,* are supposed, by the biased biographies of Wheatley that

have dominated cultural conceptions of her, to have linked Phillis Wheatley to her enslavers (Winkler). It is in opposition to these biographical misunderstandings that, in her prose end-note, Jeffers positions her whole sequence. Appearing in the first sonnet of this conspicuously formal crown, the paper chains are also a ready figure for poetic form in the contemporary period: easily broken and easily ignored, more of a symbol than a real constraint. Meter is a paper chain, a metaphor that poets can "don" to make a point. However, Jeffers implies, poets should be careful of paper chains, which can make them look foolishly myopic or self-aggrandizing, when there are real chains out there with which others must contend.

Later in the sequence, in "Lord Dunmore Decides to Offer Freedom to Slaves to Fight in Support of His Majesty, King George III" and "General George Washington Allows the Enlistment of Free (Though Not Enslaved) Negroes in the Continental Army," Jeffers doffs the paper chain metaphor and explores meter's more consequential forms of violence. As in "(Original) Black Lives Matter: Irony," she employs rhyming final couplets that seal shut her free verse sonnets, but this time they appear in association with an image that invites the reader to consider the source or engine of meter's barbarous beatings, rather than its questionable binding power. Jeffers positions these poems from the points of view of two white generals in the Revolutionary War, the colonial governor Lord Dunmore (who, in the famous "Dunmore's Proclamation" of Nov. 7, 1775, promised freedom to enslaved people who fought for the British) and George Washington, who invited already non-enslaved Black men to fight for the colonies. In "Lord Dunmore Decides to Offer Freedom to Slaves to Fight in Support of His Majesty, King George III," the speaker sees the question of the white rebels as a "tedious matter" (*Phillis* 140), and his sense of boredom manifests in a relatively regular, lilting iambic pentameter that surfaces several times throughout the poem—and increasingly towards the end, when he imagines

addressing Black men about their own uncertain political status in that historical moment. Here are the final three couplets of that poem, which is entirely in couplets:

> It might as well be you on Glory's knee.
> It might as well be you who I call free.
>
> You can't win against the rock of power—
> break it to gravel: now it is a mountain.
>
> It might as well be you who takes this chance.
> It might as well be you making bullets dance. (*Phillis* 140)

The iambic and anaphoric "It **might** as **well** be **you**" that begins four of these six lines builds on the perfect rhymes of knee/free and chance/dance to make scansion almost too easy, here: "It **might** as **well** be **you** on **Glor**y's **knee**. / It **might** as **well** be **you** who **I** call **free**." The first and third couplets of the final sestet are distinctly iambic, while the middle couplet freaks the meter and "break[s] it to gravel," playing with the possibility of attempting to dismantle forms of power…and succeeding metrically where (it contends) it would fail politically. The first line of that middle couplet has four trochaic substitutions, in its second through fifth feet—"You **can't win** a**gainst** the **rock** of **pow**er—"—and the second has an initial trochee and a hanging final unstressed syllable—"**break** it to **gra**vel: **now** it **is** a **moun**tain." In the first and third couplets in that passage, Dunmore is rationalizing his decision to use Black men as soldiers in his fight against the white rebels. The "it might as well be you" gesture attempts this justification from his own perspective: if someone must suffer, let it be those already suffering or those already deemed inhuman. It's addressed to the "you" of the enslaved men but ultimately serves as internal monologue, something Dunmore is saying mainly for his own benefit.

The middle couplet attempts this rationalization according to a logic that Dunmore might actually present to his imagined interlocutors: since power is inevitable, submit to it and thereby gain your (contingent) freedom. This reading lends itself to metrical allegory. If you must submit

to a power, Dunmore argues, you may as well submit to this one, since it can grant you a temporary kind of liberation within its bounds. Meter's ghost may proffer a similar deal-with-the-devil to Jeffers's prosodic imagination: your poem must submit to some power, so submit to this one. It might as well be you, poet, making bullets dance. But the poem's driving image, the sinister one of the bodies of the Black soldiers "making bullets dance," shows the great cost that such a choice incurs. In this iteration of the image, which recurs with very different valences in the following sonnet, the body is a target for bullets, a motivating presence that spurs bullets—or those who shoot them—to patterned movement. The bullets *in* bodies get to do a kind of death dance, a less linear form of movement to which they do not have access without their hosts, who give their lives so that the bullets can experience this moment of aesthetic ecstasy. The last line of this sonnet arguably has six stresses, not five, unless you demote the first syllable of "making": "It **might** as **well** be **you mak**ing **bull**ets **dance**." In the context of the sentiment Dunmore is expressing, the extra stress sounds sinister. Dunmore commands his addressee to keep dancing, even after the line is dead. Are iambs bullets, weapons that make a body seem alive even after it is not? Jeffers's bullets may be the inheritors to Coleman's hammer and bricks, the iambic cudgels she uses to explore the aesthetic ethics of participating in "someone else's war" that is actually very much her own.

The next sonnet, "General George Washington Allows the Enlistment of Free (Though Not Enslaved) Negroes in the Continental Army," is also a dramatic monologue in which a white general justifies his decision to enlist Black men as soldiers in his army. This time, though, the Black men are already free (so Washington isn't offering freedom in exchange for service), and the phrase "making bullets dance" has a different meaning. The poem begins:

> What madness, ni****s making bullets dance!
> In my life, I have never heard of such,

and I have traveled wide through this land,
butchered Indians in Ohio, throats cut." (*Phillis* 141)

Jeffers uses iambic pentameter as a framing device, both opening and closing the poem with it but loosening her metrical grip in its middle couplets. The first and last lines of the poem, which are identical except in terms of punctuation, scan perfectly ("What **mad**ness, **ni******s **mak**ing **bull**ets **dance**!"), while the other lines in this opening quatrain suggest both five and four stresses (as with the question of whether to promote "through" in the third line, "and **I** have **tra**veled **wide through** this **land**") and explore more irregular stress patterns (as with the spondaic "**throats cut**" in the fourth). The sinister "It might as well be you making bullets dance" from the Dunmore poem turns to the toxic third person with Washington's use of the *n*-word where Dunmore prefers feigned direct address. As in Coleman's first "American Sonnet," Jeffers's use of the *n*-word in a conspicuously metrical context involves a close interaction with the sound of a slur that many readers would otherwise avoid; the line's palpable meter invites this kind of proximity to the word, forcing the reader to contend with its presence. Dunmore and Washington are both making rationalizations, making arguments that help their actions fit their world views; metrically, too, there is the sense that the least musical of words is being made to fit into an environment in which language is musical.[35]

Washington is wrestling with cognitive dissonance. He has never seen Black men holding guns, and the idea of Black men with agency over weapons disturbs and delights him in a perverse way ("In my life, I have never heard of such"). The "making bullets dance," which in the previous sonnet means serving as target for those bullets, here means firing them. In the

[35] In *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin*, Hayes describes how "Even the most kindhearted white woman" may " begin, almost / Carelessly, to breathe *n*-words" (Hayes 15). The poem semi-sarcastically contends that the word makes the woman pronounce it: she "may find her tongue curls inward [...] When she drives alone" (15). The slur possesses her like a ghost.

tension between these two sonnets, Jeffers problematizes this action of "making dance." What makes something dance, she asks, the physical environment in which it lands or the instrument from which it is propelled? Especially in the context of the iambic pentameter that haunts the edges of these sonnets, these are prosodic questions. Does iambic pentameter come from the poet or from the language, from the poem or from the form? This poem defamiliarizes meter in a manner consistent with Jeffers's definition of Sankofa poetics, freaking it in order to find it anew. It also asks white readers—as well, perhaps, as contemporary stand-ins for Hughes and Baraka—to self-reflect about the extent to which reading a Black poet's poem that manipulates meter might trigger (so to speak) an analogous reaction in them, an amused dismissal of an anomalous performance of prowess difficult to account for in the context of their preconceptions about meter and Black poetics.

Tyehimba Jess's "Sonnet Crown for Blind Tom," which appears in *Olio* (2016) among a slew of other riffs on the sonnet sequence form, asks similar questions about the role of the voyeuristic white reader in a Black artist's performance of prowess, but his prosody differs rather dramatically from Jeffers's. Jess originally published the sequence in the *Nashville Review* in 2010, as a basic crown of seven sonnets about a historical personage named Tom Wiggins who, as the introductory note explains, was an "*autistic savant born into slavery*" who had "*formidable skill on the piano [and] became an international attraction*" ("Blind Tom"). In *Olio*, Jess breaks the sequence up with some of his signature "syncopated sonnets," such as "Millie McKoy & Christine McKoy Recall Meeting Blind Tom, 1877," in which the reader may choose in what order to read a sonnet split into two columns of text associated with two different speakers.[36] The columns periodically merge into a single line that applies to both streams of

[36] In "Defying Gravity: Tyehimba Jess's Syncopated Sonnets" (2019), Brian Reed clarifies Jess's use of this term: "Jess's sonnets are not literally syncopated [...]. Rather, he is using syncopation in the extended meaning that the

language, thereby both crudely and profoundly mimicking the semi-individualized embodiment of its speakers, a famous pair of conjoined twins who were also enslaved (*Olio* 20).[37] Jess's depiction of Tom is part of his larger exploration of physically othered and artistically visionary enslaved people. As he explained in one interview, the aesthetic conditions of minstrelsy, in which "the white audience has its vast sense of superiority reinforced—at the expense of any black members of the audience that were offended or denigrated by that same performance," are part of the set-up of his poems (Rasmussen).

Despite their heavy formal and historical baggage, in the context of the poems discussed in this chapter as well as the context of the poems that surround them in *Olio*, the sonnets in "Sonnet Crown for Blind Tom" itself are relatively convention-conversant. They observe loose Shakespearean rhyme schemes and are basically in "freed verse" as I'll define it in relation to the work of Elizabeth Bishop in Chapter 2: they constantly approach and retreat from iambic pentameter, never staying in it for long but never staying away from it for long, either. Of the ninety-eight lines in the whole sequence, forty-two definitely have five stresses and twenty-one definitely have four stresses, while twenty-three more hover between five stresses and some other number (four, six, or seven) and smaller numbers of lines have three, six, or seven stresses. Brian Reed's explanation of the "olio" conceit at the heart of this book shows that this mixing together of different stress counts is central to Jess's engagement with minstrelsy:

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poet Fred Moten has identified: the term is shorthand for 'the anarchic organization of phonic substance' that 'delineate[s] an ontological field wherein black radicalism is set to work'" (Reed 85). It's curious that Jess manipulates recognizable rhythm so consistently throughout his sonnets and uses a musical term for that practice but insists that the term is merely metaphorical.

[37] In an interview, Jess described the freeing proliferation of ways of reading the "contrapuntal form" of these syncopated sonnets, but he also explained his desire to control how the reader interacts with his multifarious form: "Ideally, I'd like the reader to walk away from the poem having read it in the same way that I would read it, and having them hear it in their mind the same way I envision seeing it" (Alleyne).

> The word comes from the Spanish olla, which refers to an earthenware pot or jar used for cooking, and by extension to the stew of meat and vegetables conventionally prepared in such a vessel. [...] It is a "hotchpotch" and a "miscellany" that "jumbles" together text and image, verse and prose, and multiple genres [...] As a variety act, it recalls and reinvents one aspect of a racist theatrical tradition. The olio was the second part of a minstrel show in 19th century America, a black-face spectacle in which performers sang, danced, put on skits, and delivered comic orations. (Reed 28-29)

Jess invites us to read *Olio* as a stew of speakers and forms, and it's also a metrical stew. It's a variety act-style spectacle performed both for and despite its audience, which we understand to possess a racist desire to belittle the power of Black artistic achievement by owning and re-contextualizing it. This sonnet sequence is preoccupied with questions about the relationship between art, power, and form—questions about what kinds of artistic forms emerge from conditions of art-making in which power is contested, questions about whether received poetic and musical forms can replicate those conditions in order to examine them, and questions about what role artistic agency can play in these dynamics. Jess's ambivalent, shifting prosody is a manifestation of these lines of inquiry.

Indeed, when the poet Lauren Alleyne asked Jess in an interview about what he tries to give students who don't know anything about poetry, as well as what he tries to give students who want to be poets, Jess's response touched directly on meter and gave voice to this pushy refusal to push, this passive force: "People encounter poetry in elementary school, and somebody's telling them something has to be iambic and blah blah blah. And you know I don't fully dismiss the idea of meter, etc. But I don't emphasize it" (Alleyne). Here, Jess conceptualizes meter as something forced on students in school and doesn't choose to

"emphasize" it as a teacher, but he negotiates with it constantly as a poet, never "fully dismiss[ing]" it in either context, and allowing its powerful yet negligible institutional presence to stay in the room, making its demands—which he may or may not ignore.[38]

The first sonnet of "Sonnet Crown for Blind Tom" imagines a scene that reflects Jess's prosodic balancing act. Jess describes Tom performing for a congregation of confederate soldiers: "The slave's hands dance free, unfettered, flying / across ivory, feet stomping toward / a crescendo that fills the forest pine…" (*Olio* 15). The first line of the poem is difficult to scan because, although it has exactly ten syllables, the second, third, fourth, and fifth monosyllabic words all invite stress—"The **slave's hands dance free**, un**fett**ered, **fly**ing"—so that the line is over-dense, packed with possible points of emphasis (maybe "dance" gets demoted so that there can be five stresses, maybe not). The freely dancing hands of the slave, a conspicuously paradoxical image to begin with, are even more difficult to reckon with because they are both constrained by the metrical grid and bursting out of it—bursting, it would seem, because of it. The f-alliteration in this passage simplifies the reader's job somewhat by giving them something else to focus on other than metrical ambiguity, but it also accentuates the line's sonically overstuffed nature. The whole sequence engages with artistic situations that seem both obvious and enigmatic, blunt and blurry: the "slave song at a master's bidding" to which Tom's mother dances while she's pregnant with him (17), Tom "sp[inning] wild round the room" to "Nervous laughter" during one performance "for a packed house" (19), the tempestuous statement of Tom's artistic mission in "What the Wind, Rain, and Thunder Said to Tom" (21), etc. Jess hits us

[38] In the interview with Alleyne, Jess also said, "My rule is if I'm having fun then you're probably having fun. So you know, to have fun, crack a few jokes, share a few poems, and to have them enjoy the act of writing poems without fear of *Oh, this an A poem, this is an F poem* etc" (Alleyne). Here, Jess conflates metered verse with *graded* verse—as if to mention meter is to invite assessment. The coda to this dissertation will take up similar conflations in more detail.

over the head with his paradoxes and contortions, but then we see stars. As in the case of jazz, the blatant quality of these formal experiments proves mysterious and difficult to describe, and the sonnets are full of lines that seem metrical but are hard to scan.

The kicker in this first sonnet is the "new trick" that Tom demonstrates for this audience: he plays the piano backwards, with his hands behind him. It may seem somewhat redundant because he is blind, but it is nevertheless an engaging performance of prowess. He "hitches fingertips to keys, hauls Dixie / slowly out of the battered upright's teeth / like a worksong dragged across cotton fields…" (*Olio* 15). The musician, the instrument, the song, and the audience are locked – "hitch[ed]" – in a forced embrace here, no single entity fully controlling the act of *poiesis* at hand (so to speak), but no single entity submitting entirely to it either. The hitched fingertips seem attached to the keys so that the keys drag them, but then the player "hauls Dixie" out of the mouth of the piano, an act which Jess compares to the dragging of a worksong across cotton fields. The player, the form, the song, and the instrument all seem to be getting "dragged" but also to be doing the dragging. Is Tom performing his power or his powerlessness? In a metrical environment that refuses to resolve into five-stress lines or to avoid them entirely, a similar question surfaces about Jess and his prosody: who is driving, who is struggling, who is being dragged? Is Jess performing his power or his powerlessness?

The sixth sonnet, "General Bethune on Blind Tom," introduces into this already over-saturated prosodic environment a memorable image in line with Coleman's iambic cudgel and Jeffers's dancing bullets: Tom, as a baby, bashing his head against his crib. In this poem, the speaker is Tom's bemused enslaver, who "had no idea Tom would make [him] rich" (*Olio* 25). General Bethune remembers of Tom's infancy that "he'd sing bluebird songs in perfect pitch, / then bash his head against the wooden box / crib…" (25). The second line of this passage is a

perfect line of iambic pentameter—"then **bash** his **head** a**gainst** the **wood**en **box**"—that is reminiscent of Coleman's doubly resonant beatings. Jess implicitly likens the easily scannable rhythm to the bashing of a baby's head against a wooden box, the enjambment of "box / crib" allowing Jess to play with the familiar trope of the sonnet as the little room/grave/coffin. Here, Jess suggests the needless violence of imposed form, but also its self-inflicted nature. General Bethune finds humorous the contrast between the baby's early signs of musical genius ("sing[ing] bluebird songs in perfect pitch") and his tendency toward nonsensical self-harm (the bashing)—but, by this point in the sequence, the reader knows to reject the false binaries (of art and pain, perfect and imperfect, purposeful and purposeless) that the scenario implies. Bethune describes the day Tom hears piano for the first time in sinister terms accentuated by a melodramatic enjambment—"It was like a weight / fell upon him – a labor to make him whole" (25)—that show that artistic vision can feel like a burden, not an unshackling, as it both contributes to and delays more concrete unshacklings.

General Bethune looks right past the moment of impact, the blow that the falling weight of genius inflicts on Tom, but this second strain of African American sonnet sequences, with its figuration of ghost meter's paradoxically physical capacity to pummel and pound an array of bodies and forms, directs our attention right to it. Like Coleman and Jeffers, Jess displays the bruise that the falling weight leaves, showing how it figures and disfigures his forms and his speakers. Bashing his head against the wooden box crib of the sonnet, Jess dares the reader to pathologize him; his prosody, which mimics the olio-like amalgamation at the heart of this volume and wrestles unendingly with iambic pentameter rhythms rather than either defeating them or letting them win, makes that bashing the driving principle of his language, his lines, and his sentences.

4. Conclusion

In this selection of ostensibly non-metrical contemporary African American sonnet sequences, we see poets using enclosing metapentameters to mark and also to trouble spatial and temporal edges and borders, both for rhetorical purposes and for aesthetic/spiritual purposes. They aim past Dove's tape, past Petrosino's beflowered doorway, and past Young's twin bed dawn, toward kinds of interiority—or other stances, yielding other insights—that might otherwise be difficult to access. Iambic pentameter stretches across lines and syntactic units to revamp the pacing of the beginnings and endings of these sonnets, spaces already saturated with meaning because of the repeated line convention of crowns. This stretching often occurs in conjunction with images of doorways, fences, gates, frames, and windows, a motif that pairs with the sonnet's well-documented room/grave/prison trope to make of it a rich rhetorical device. However, this understanding of iambic pentameter's affordances in these sequences is rather iamb-blind, and also rather pentameter-blind; it isn't specific to the characteristics of the device at hand, doesn't involve the particular alternating stress pattern or tendency to count to five to which the mind's ear, reading these and other sonnets, becomes attuned.

The second strain of sonnet sequences, the ones that both use and metaphorize iambic pentameter as a bodily beating that causes incapacitation and disfigurement, is arguably more particular to the form at hand—or, in this case, the form *in* hand. Coleman's iambic hammer/brick and swelling feet, Jeffers's five bullets that dance in the body (or make the body dance), and Jess's baby-head banging against a wooden box crib each let iambic pentameter's alternating pattern evoke actual violence. They also variously figure that metrical form as a rhythmically wielded cudgel—a weapon that, having been shaped by the world, shapes the world in return. When these poets display the contusions that their speakers have sustained in their

violent confrontations with pattern, they invite questions about the power dynamic between a poem and its form, thereby rationalizing or justifying their own complicity in the pattern of violence by which iambic pentameter persists in their own imaginations. Together, the two strains speak to the ambiguous status of iambic pentameter as a contemporary form: the first uses it as a discrete unit that can trouble the edges of the firmer sonnet form, exposing socio-cultural fault lines, and the second contends with and distorts the smaller units that comprise it, occasioning perverse performances of self-destruction that ultimately reinforce the paradoxical sense of the form's lasting but ineffectual hegemony. The fencing and the bashing seem to evince opposing tendencies—formalist and anti-formalist, say—but actually, especially when read side-by-side, reveal that contemporary poetics tends move in both directions at once, fortifying and dismantling, both pointedly and offhandedly, as the circumstances of each text demand.

The poet who participates most palpably in both these strains is Terrance Hayes, whose *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin* (2018) uses enclosing metapentameters to dole out lumps of time in the panic of the Trump era but also casts its own iambic pentameter as a "sound-bite [that] leaves a mark" (Hayes 23), letting the instantiations of that metrical form tangle with images of wounds and beatings as he evokes an American society in which he has to be constantly on the alert for insidious and possibly fatal forms of violence. Hayes's iambic pentameter refrains—most notably "The names alive are like the names / In graves" (9)—combine these two kinds of affordances. Even though few reviewers or critics have acknowledged Hayes's brushes with meter as a central part of his innovation in this influential volume, in the context of these readings of Smith, Dove, Petrosino, Young, Coleman, Jeffers,

and Jess, it's clear that *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin* derives at least some of its power from its profound engagement with these two strains of ghost meter.

Both reviewers and the poet himself acknowledge that Hayes chose the sonnet sequence form for this book because of anxieties about measuring and delimiting future time; enclosing metapentameters are also suited to addressing that anxiety. Dan Chiasson recounts how Hayes wrote the first of the sonnets in this book the day after Trump was elected in 2016:

> Time had been altered in some baleful and uncertain way; the sonnet offered an alternative unit of measurement, at once ancient, its basic features unchanged for centuries, and urgent, its fourteen lines passing at a brutal clip. These crisis conditions suit Hayes. A former college basketball star, he treats poetry like a timed game, a theatre for dramatic last-minute outcomes. ("Politics and Play")

Chiasson sees the simultaneous historicity and efficiency of the sonnet as "crisis conditions" that are generative for a literally and figuratively athletic poet who likes to work under the clock, who prefers to feel the pressure of an encroaching ending. The "brutal clip" at which the sonnet's fourteen lines pass isn't supposed to feel *good*; it's supposed to cut you off, making you get better at starting and stopping on a dime. And Hayes, in an interview with Jeffrey J. Williams for *The Iowa Review*, confirmed this interpretation: "The joke in my classes and in my household is that I am always timing and measuring everything. [...] At some point I realized, even more than fatherhood, even more than parents, even more than race, the thing I'm really obsessed with is measuring time" (Williams).[39] Hayes's sonnet is a stopwatch, and the ticking numbers reflect his engagement with meter, which helps him measure time.

[39] In the same interview, Hayes specified that, as in his literally timed, *pecha kucha*-style poems in *Lighthead* (2010), he is usually thinking about time and not meter—but this analysis will show that, in his *American Sonnets*, the two aren't so easily extricable.

The very first sonnet in the first section of book, the one Hayes wrote the day after Trump was first elected, begins with an attempt at (re)periodization, at measuring time differently: "The black poet would love to say his century began / With Hughes or God forbid, Wheatley, but actually / It began with all the poetry weirdos and worriers…" (Hayes 5). This first sonnet, with its lines of six or seven unevenly spaced stresses apiece, hinges on the awkwardness and misunderstandings inherent to poetry (e.g., Eurydice misreading the X in the note Orpheus sends her), claiming the "poetry weirdos & worriers" as its founding fathers and beginning, officially, with a worrying of the location of an origin point. Similarly, the first sonnet in the second section of the book takes on endings as well as beginnings and middles—of poems, of lines in poems, of lifespans, and of movies. It's about what happens at the edges of things and what happens in the middle.

It begins with the observation that lots of poems end with a statement about "life," and then it ends—ironically, defiantly—with its own "life" statement: "...I live a life / That burns a hole through life, that leaves a scar for life, / That makes me weep for another life. Define life" (37). After a meta mid-poem about how racist violence can break out in the middles of things (an episode of TV, a parking lot, a museum), the I enters the sonnet in these final lines, and so does the I-amb. One whole, l-alliterative, monosyllabic syntactic unit separates out the first set of five stresses—"...I **live** a **life** / That **burns** a **hole** through **life**"—but the final movement of the poem runs out of time and fails to resolve into whole units of pentameter. When Hayes imagines a life "that **leaves** a **scar** for **life**, / That **makes** me **weep** for a**noth**er **life**" and then commands the reader to "De**fine life**," there's only one anapestic substitution and one missing unstressed syllable, but the lines have six stresses. The anaphoric pair of subordinate clauses ("that **leaves** a **scar** for **life**, / That **makes** me **weep**") comprises five stresses cut across the line break, but the

desire “for another life” fittingly prolongs the second clause, making the counting-to-five more difficult. The life Hayes is describing is so intense that it’s outside of life. That’s the paradox of vivification under the threat of violence: the harder you cling to life, the less you live. The final imperative to “define life” asks the reader to set its limits, its edges. The prosodic contortions at the edge of the poem, which mimic existential contortions at what the speaker fears could be the edge of his own life, get traction from the hovering possibility of iambic pentameter. Rather than providing a formal lifeline to which Hayes can cling, the metrical ghost serves as a ticking *memento mori*, an infusion of confused urgency—is this the end of a line or the beginning of one, and how much time does the speaker have left?—into every syllable.

In another poem, Hayes makes an actual door of this anxiety, thereby participating in the Dove-ian strain of sonnet sequences that metaphorize their enclosing pentameters. He writes, “It was discovered the best way to combat / Sadness was to make your sadness a door” (Hayes 75). Like the volume’s most quoted sonnet, which begins “I lock you in an American sonnet that is part prison / Part panic closet” (11), this poem proceeds to drown its reader in possible metaphors for the poetic technique it has suggested: “Or make it an envelope of wireless chatter / Or wires pulled from the radio tape recorder…” (75). The thought of turning the substance of loss into an edge and therefore a portal makes Hayes think about making it into a container (an envelope) and then a connector (wires), probing its formal capacities. In the sixth line, recalling Coleman’s “ancient hammer” (Coleman 129), he avers, “If you think a hammer is the only way to hammer / A nail, you ain’t thought of the nail correctly” (Hayes 75). Here, the form becomes the cudgel, but then the cudgeled thing suggests itself as a possible tool.

As in the “burn a hole through life” poem above, embedded pentameter surfaces soon after the I enters the poem: “My problem was I’d decided to make myself / A poem. It made me

sweat in private selfishly. / It made me bleed, bleep & weep for health" (Hayes 75). The first unit of iambic pentameter—"It **made** me **sweat** in **pri**vate **self**ish**ly**."—scans perfectly with the promotion of the final syllable and coincides with the sentence, not the line. The next one—"It **made** me **bleed**, **bleep** & **weep** for **health**"—is only missing one unstressed syllable in the third foot and coincides with both the syntactic unit and the line. In Hayes's prosody, as in so much supposedly non-metrical prosody of the contemporary period, one form of coincidence (meter/syntax) often gives way to the other (meter/line), so that iambic pentameter takes on a kind of gravitational pull or inevitability. With its bleed/bleep alliteration, bleep/weep internal rhyme, and sweat/selfishly/health assonance, this passage is sonically dense, reflecting the feeling of claustrophobia that the speaker is describing, as he becomes aware of himself as a poem and cherishes himself so much that he destroys himself. It's clear that, even in the passages that seem most explicitly to engage the door/frame/gate/fence strain of sonnet sequences, Hayes's persona and affective tendencies usher self-harm and self-battery into the room. These are stressed edges—loci less of cultural transcendence, as in Dove, than of self-destructive transformation.

Since the book's publication, critics have delighted in describing its capacities for performing both violence and victimhood. Jess Cotton congratulates Hayes's "you" for delivering "a whiplash to white liberalism (Cotton 546); Ramazani describes Hayes's puns as "rapid-fire" ("Self-Metaphorizing" 140). These critics depict Hayes's persona and rhetoric as weapon-like. On the other hand, Chiasson calls the repetitive titling in the collection "superstitious, a tribute paid to the imagined assassin, as if the poems can buy back time in fourteen-line reprieves" ("Politics and Play"), casting Hayes as desperate, bargaining, paranoid, and at the mercy of a ghostly power. In *Lyric as Comedy: The Poetics of Abjection in Postwar*

America (2020), Calista McRae remembers Hayes's speech at the 2016 National Book Awards ceremony—only one week after that fateful election—in which he attempted to describe his experience as a Black poet in the U.S. by "quoting Elizabeth Bishop's definition of poetry as 'a way of thinking with one's feelings' and Lucille Clifton's recognition 'that every day / something has tried to kill me / and has failed'" (McRae 115). She writes, "he asked his audience to 'imagine twenty years of thinking with [your] feelings while someone is trying to kill you.' That image articulates an acute strain: one is compelled to be alert both to bluntly murderous forces, and to fluctuating emotional responses on a minute scale" (115). Somewhat like Chiasson, McRae diagnoses Hayes with a fatal weakness borne of the impressive but foolhardy attempt to sustain too many kinds of attention at once: those associated with art and those associated with danger. His prosody, which is marked by the kinds of attention associated with free verse and also the kinds associated with meter, reflects this trauma-riddled state of mind, a poet whose imagination is in fight-or-flight mode but is also able to fiddle, attempting to do at once what Gwendolyn Brooks famously commands politically-engaged artists to do in succession (Brooks).

Hayes dots his collection with images of wounds and scars in conjunction with embedded pentameters; the aphoristic "The **deep**er the **wound** the **more** he**ro**ic / The **heal**ing" (Hayes 45), for example, is split across a line break but distinguished as a complete sentence. In the sonnet in which the speaker brags about knowing how to cut his own hair, the trimming serving as a figure for sonnet-making, suicidal ideation crowds out the initially confident affect, and iambic pentameter rushes in to fill the void:

> I could **off**er a **poem** for **each clip**pered **hair**
> And the **mole** be**hind** my **ear** & the **line** I **fear**
> A**bove** my **nape**, the **rope burn there**, the **wish**
> To **snip** the **jug**u**lar** is **sim**ple **fear**, I **wish** to re**main**

Here… (Hayes 64)

The passage's sonic density involving hair/hear/fear/there/here internal rhymes and the p-alliteration of poem/clippered/nape/rope/snip clues the reader to listen for meter, and it's right there, coinciding at first with both the line and syntax as the violent fantasy begins to unfold but then decoupling when the speaker cuts himself off (so to speak). The reminder he issues to himself that he does indeed "wish to remain / Here" extends the (life-)line beyond five stresses. The "rope burn" spondee—mimetic and rich like the double stress of "sound-bite" (23)—is an image of painful sonic/textural impact that stretches the line to six stresses but arguably stays within the five-stress matrix. The iambs are the unnamed but present scissors, efficiently snipping to create an attractive edge that frames the speaker's face…and always threatening to snip his life short, even though he's the one wielding them. As Hayes plays with the five-stress and six-stress possibilities of this passage, the question of where and how evenly to cut the line is reflected in the image of the self-administered haircut.

The violence of rhythm is even more explicit in Hayes's ambivalent elegy for "the white boy we once beat like a drum" who "Died after crashing his Camaro around a bend / Off Shop Road" (Hayes 74). This poem examines the array of manifestations of violence blooming outward from the death of that "white boy": the boy's own history of bullying "baby / Black boys," the drum-like beating of that boy, the act of attending a school called Robert E. Lee Middle School as a Black student, the defiant defacing of the Lee statue, the murders of Emmett Till and Martin Luther King Jr., even the speaker's missing of the funeral. Toward the end of the poem, Hayes writes, "I am old enough now to know the drum, though beaten, / Is not an instrument of violence" (74). Much like Jeffers's dancing bullets image, the drum metaphor is Hayes's way of understanding the boy's complicated complicity in white supremacy: he is

beaten but not an instrument, the thing that makes the noise and the thing with which someone else makes the noise. Hayes' drum image also refers to the banning of drums in plantations to prevent communication, resistance, and revolt—suggesting that this ambiguous instrument is also liable to empowering appropriation, threatening even to those who beat it in the name of oppression.

Furthermore, like Jeffers's bullets, the drum suggests itself as a figure for Hayes's prosody. The meter, he implies, isn't to blame, but it is both used to beat and beaten itself, a weapon and a victim of that weapon. The last line of the sonnet enacts these complexities in its incorporation of an embedded line of iambic pentameter that coincides with a complete sentence but not a complete line: "Nor is a banjo / Or whistle. I'm **so**rry I **missed** the **white** boy's **fu**ner**al**" (Hayes 74). The final articulation of regret scans as iambic pentameter, with an anapestic substitution in the second foot and a promotion of the final syllable (or, in a more natural-speech scansion, a fourth foot that's just one stressed syllable, followed by a final dactyl: "I'm **so**rry I **missed** the **white boy's fu**neral"). After insisting that the drum of meter "Is not an instrument of violence," it seals the elegy shut with one last metrical whack, one final addition to the litany of brutalities. Hayes's enclosing metapentameter is a "sound-bite" that "leaves a mark" (23): a recognizable tidbit extracted from some other context, but also a sound that has teeth and can hurt—a toothy, chewy sound that manipulates the mouth and can pose a threat through the very device with which it is articulated.

In what is arguably the most metrically regular poem in *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin*, the speaker performs a dance of denial and insistence that resembles Young's interwoven cadences combining rap with iambs as well as Petrosino's anaphoric, key-word-driven rhythms—all while invoking the ghost meter metaphor through a kind of sly

accident of language that permits Hayes to wink as we scan. The poem proves that, while some of the power of Hayes's work in this volume certainly comes from his engagement with the two strains that this chapter has elucidated —the Dovean doorway and the Colemanian brick— iambic pentameter's affordances in the contemporary African American sonnet sequence are broad-ranging and, happily, impossible to circumscribe:

> You don't seem to want it, but you wanted it.
> You don't seem to want it, but you won't admit it.
> You don't seem to want admittance.
> You don't seem to want admission.
> You don't seem to want it, but you haunt it.
> You don't seem too haunted, but you haunted.
> You don't seem to get it, but you got it.
> You don't seem to care, but you care.
> You don't seem to buy it, but you sell it.
> You don't seem to want it, but you wanted it.
> You don't seem to prey, but you prey.
> You don't seem to pray but you full of prayers,
> You don't seem to want it, but you wanted it.
> You don't seem too haunted, but you haunted. (Hayes 13)

Like Hamlet, the spectrally challenged speaker of this poem is preoccupied with the disjunction between seeming and being. The first line ("**You** don't **seem** to **want** it, **but** you **wan**ted it") scans as trochaic pentameter with a final dactylic substitution, and it gives way to a metrical backlash in the second through fourth lines, which, as the speaker accuses the addressee of pretending not to want *in* (in Petrosino's sense of *in*stitutional acceptance), have six, four, and four stresses apiece. But then, when the want/haunt rhyme enters the poem, pentameter takes over almost for good, and the affective possibilities proliferate: resentful, unimpressed, fond, awed, dismissive, helpless, forceful. The diction-shifting grammatical trick whereby, in the context of AAE, "you haunted" means "you are haunted" is also a metrical trick, allowing that last line to keep five stresses but to say more, making its claims faster and more efficiently as it runs out of time. Hayes may well be addressing contemporary American poetics quite generally,

here, with his fond insistence that “you haunted” even if you don’t seem “too haunted.” That insistence, which scans as perfect trochaic pentameter, is its own proof, of course: it’s the haunted house version of the metrical form that, as we will continue to see in the coming chapters, tugs at poets’ lines and syntaxes in ways that are profounder and more generative than they may “seem.”

Chapter 2

"And then his mother wouldn't recognize him": Allen Ginsberg, Elizabeth Bishop, and Prosodies of Loss

Chapter 1 examined a series of supposedly non-metrical sonnet sequences by Black poets. That's a genre doubly suffused with self-contradictory formal expectation, since sonnets in English are 'supposed' to feature iambic pentameter, while *those* sonnets (perhaps because they are contemporary, have Black authors, seem experimental, or proclaim radical or at least progressive politics) are 'supposed' to buck that convention. Thence the ghost of meter: a present absence representing an ongoing negotiation with ambivalent embodiment and the traumatic past. Still, from Rita Dove to Terrance Hayes, each poet in Chapter 1 seems to get more than mere compromise out of that negotiation. The decisions that these sonneteers make regarding the spectral hauntings of iambic pentameter in their work—decisions about where to place metrical units within the spaces of the sonnets (in the case of enclosing metapentameters) or about how much symbolic power to grant each syllable (in the case of iambic cudgels)—become the foundation for the affective stances and imaginative leaps that make their poems what they are.

Chapter 2 arguably makes a like discovery amid different terrain: that two poets of the 1960s, operating in the aftermath of the supposed free verse revolution, discover that contending with the ghost of iambic pentameter within their long lines and loose verse paragraphs induces an elegiac mode wherein the presence-in-absence of meter stands in for lost beloveds, helping them mourn. Once again, however, ghost meters shape poems' trajectories and discoveries in broad and profound ways, so that they include but also transcend generic concerns. Thus, though this chapter takes as its subject two elegies, and though its mimetic close readings find parallel after parallel between the processes of mourning that the poems track and their treatments of

spectral metrical forms, the purpose of those parallels is not to make new a claim about elegy per se but, rather, to illuminate the prosodies of loss in the poems at hand by attending to their imaginative orientations and paratexts as well as their syntaxes, lineations, and syllable counts. Chapters 1 and 2 use sonnet sequences and elegies, respectively, as proving grounds in which to observe iambic pentameter's ghostly power.

1. Embedded Pentameters in Allen Ginsberg's "Kaddish"

After the screaming, weeping, hallucinating, sweating, and vomiting that suffuse the first two sections of "Kaddish," Allen Ginsberg's elegy for his mother, the revelation of her death seems understated: "Returning from San Francisco one night, Orlovsky in my room, Whalen in his peaceful chair—a telegram from Gene, Naomi dead— / Outside I bent my head to the ground under the bushes near the garage—knew she was better— / at last not left to look on Earth alone…" (*Kaddish* 19). Whereas much of the poem sags under the weight of an unbearable intimacy with Naomi's mind and body (her paranoia, her abortion scars), this passage is light on its feet, liberated by the continent-sized distance between mother and son. Ginsberg revels in the idyllic tableau of gay poets, chosen family members to whom he refers by their last names—as opposed to the burdensome blood relatives whose first names pervade this poem's long lines, signaling its Cold War confessional mode.[40] The segment of the line that directly contains the news of Naomi's passing—"a telegram from Gene, Naomi dead"—has traveled a long way and is a rare instance of the conveyance of second-hand information in a poem rife with personal recollection.

It's also, arguably, a line of iambic pentameter: "a **tele**g**ram** from **Gene**, Na**o**mi **dead**." This scansion, which involves the mild promotion of the fourth syllable ("gram") but no foot

[40] For more on how this mode connects the two poets featured in this chapter, see Axelrod.

substitutions, is supported by the ear-perking rhyme with the three-foot iambic phrase that, in a move reminiscent of Milton's "Lycidas," begins the next line—"Out**side** I **bent** my **head**"—as well as by the iambic pentameter echo that begins the line that follows. That next line constitutes a gesture of elegiac consolation and, in the manner of Old/Middle English alliterative meter as well as Hopkins's sprung rhythm, employs alliteration only on stressed syllables: Ginsberg concludes that his mother is "at **last** not **left** to **look** on **Earth** a**lone**." Thus, in "a telegram from Gene, Naomi dead" and the surrounding passage, forms are 'received' in multiple, mutually resonant ways: as names that Ginsberg transfers straight from his family tree and address book into his poetic diction, as technological forms like the telegram that are literally sent/received, and as inherited poetic forms like iambic pentameter.

Throughout his career as a writer, Ginsberg expressed suspicion and disdain toward received forms. In his essay "'When the Mode of the Music Changes, the Walls of the City Shake,'" published in 1961 (the same year as *Kaddish and Other Poems*), he calls conventional poetic form "too symmetrical, geometrical, numbered and pre-fixed—unlike to my own mind which has no beginning and end, nor fixed measure of thought (or speech—or writing) other than its own cornerless mystery…" (*Deliberate Prose* 247). Ginsberg associates poetic convention with institutional inefficiency, likening it to "a bureaucratic form" (*Spontaneous Mind* 107), and he mercilessly mocks his own "early training in versification" that led to "overwritten coy stanzas permuting abstract concepts derived secondhand from Silver Poets" (*Deliberate Prose* 258), implying that poetic form is inorganic, derivative, and insincere.

In a 1965 interview, American poet Tom Clark asked Ginsberg to respond to Diana Trilling's contention that his poetry, like all poetry, tends towards iambic pentameter "when

taking on a serious subject."[41] Performing both ignorance and erudition, Ginsberg acts wounded by the assumption that his work would have truck with anything so pedestrian as the iamb:

> Well, it isn't really an accurate thing, I don't think. I've never actually sat down and made a technical analysis of the rhythms that I write. They're probably more near choriambic—Greek meters, dithyrambic meters—and tending toward [...] dactylic, probably. [...] So, actually, it's probably not technically correct, what she said. But—and that applies to certain poems, like certain passages of "Howl" and certain passages of "Kaddish"—there are definite rhythms which could be analyzed as corresponding to classical rhythms, though not necessarily English classical rhythms [...] I think [Trilling] felt very comfy, to think that that would be so. I really felt quite hurt about that, because it seemed to me that she ignored the main prosodic technical achievements that I had proffered forth to the academy, and they didn't even recognize it. I mean not that I want to stick her with being the academy. (*Spontaneous Mind* 18-19)

This passage is revealing. Ginsberg prefers to characterize his meters as Greek rather than English, and he revels in the esoteric names for feet like the epitritus and the choriamb—even as he implies that to associate someone with "the academy" would be too low a blow even for a critic as woefully off-base as Trilling. He claims never to have analyzed his own rhythms, but he is able to guess that they might be "more near choriambic."[42] While certain passages of "Kaddish" are undeniably choriambic, especially those propelled by praise phrases like "**Bless**ed be **He**" and "**Bless**ed be **you**" (*Kaddish* 32), it is clear that Ginsberg is intent on rhetorically

[41] For more on the theory of propriety (that some meters inherently suit certain themes), see Finch.

[42] Before introducing the Greek names for metrical feet to his Basic Poetics students at Naropa, Ginsberg said, "I'll read you the names of them because they're so beautiful." In one transcription from the same lecture, he ironically referred to the dochmiac foot as the "amniotic foot," implying a likeness between metrical and anatomical jargon—as if a poetry student needed a medical license just to attempt a scansion ("Basic Poetics").

resisting the baggage of the iamb and the way of thinking about poetic form that Trilling espouses.

Indeed, his recorded lectures prove that Ginsberg preferred to think about metrical feet as nonce descriptors for individual phrases, eccentric tricks with which the playful poet might experiment, and ways of evoking the idiosyncrasies of spoken language, rather than as recurring patterns with cultural weight, a gravitational pull, and the capacity to achieve presence-in-absence. His response to Clark's question about the presence of iambic pentameter in his own avowedly non-metrical poetry ends defensively, with the claim that those who scan his lines ignore and even suppress his true contribution as a poet. Still, Ginsberg's true contribution as a poet isn't to eschew received forms altogether, nor is it to write lines that seem non-metrical but are actually strictly metrical; it is to remix, interweave, and overlap the rhythms of spoken dialects, the Bible, popular and folk music, narrative prose, and English poetry by experimenting with the composite structure of very long lines.

Nevertheless, as with Whitman, on whom Ginsberg modeled those long lines, critics seem largely to have taken Ginsberg at his word with respect to his relationship to received form.[43] Responses to "Kaddish" often focus on its linkage to Ginsberg's more notorious chant, "Howl"; its status as modern elegy; its cultural/spiritual syncretism (especially with respect to Ginsberg's identity as a Buddhist Jew); its consciousness-widening aims; or its (for some) all-too-confessional mode…rather than on its prosody (see, e.g., Ramazani, Vendler, Trigilio, Svonkin, and Perloff).

[43] In *American Prosody*, Gay Wilson Allen argues that Whitman's rhythms were neither new nor free, despite what he said and despite the public's general conception of his poetics. Allen writes, "It even seems at times that Walt Whitman deliberately attempted to conceal the specific principles of his prosody" (218).

According to Marjorie Perloff, it is "the charge of formlessness"—rather than that of hidden or surreptitious form—that has dogged "Kaddish." In her 1985 review of Ginsberg's collected poems, she writes, "The charge of formlessness, of poetry as mere rant, will no doubt continue to haunt Ginsberg, but the publication of his *Collected Poems* should do much to dispel it" (Perloff 35). Perloff's use of the haunting metaphor (with publication as exorcism!) implies that, while a poet is living, formlessness can haunt him; however, "Kaddish" itself suggests that, once death has entered the room, form becomes the ghost. Though pentameters do surface in "Howl," especially in passages that describe loud noises—"and the **Stat**en **Is**land **fe**rry **al**so **wailed**…" ("Howl" 13), "the **mad**man **bum** and **an**gel **beat** in **Time**" (21)—or proudly declare ostensible obscenities—"**al**co**hol** and **cock** and **end**less **balls**" (10), "The **tongue** and **cock** and **hand** and **ass**hole **ho**ly!" (27)—it is Ginsberg's use of embedded pentameter in an elegy, "Kaddish," which most embodies the spectral recognitions and revenant motions so central to that poem.

This reading of ghost meter in "Kaddish" will use that term, "embedded pentameter," repeatedly. Along with the enclosing metapentameters and iambic cudgels discussed in the previous chapter, as well as Elizabeth Bishop's freed verse, which is the subject of the second part of this chapter, "embedded pentameter" refers to one of the many ways that iambic pentameter can be said to haunt the free verse line—one of the many ways that meter can participate in the triangulated tension with line and syntax that, I argue, constitutes the action and determines the affective range of modern and contemporary free verse. What is embedded pentameter, and what are its affordances? In her chapter about Whitman in *The Ghost of Meter*, Finch defines embedded pentameter as "a scannable pentameter forming the beginning or end of a longer line" (Finch 43). This argument will broaden that definition to include scannable lines of

pentameter that appear mid-line and are set apart by syntax and punctuation, usually, but also by tone, perspective, sound, or narrative technique; it will also emphasize that embedded pentameters occur not against a homogeneously "free verse" backdrop but within in a context of various, intermingled metrical patterns.

Citing lines like Whitman's "O magnet-South! O glistening perfumed South—my South!" (Finch 43), Finch argues, according to her concept of the metrical code, that Whitman "tends to fall back on the authority of the pentameter as reassurance of the ego's power and autonomy" (32). She concludes that Whitman associates iambic pentameter with traditional European culture; awareness of future readers; tradition and convention (cleanliness, daily labor, community); aristocratic decay; war and pain; imprisonment and defeat; and—quite broadly—the revolt against any of all of these (49-50): he can "evoke the power only for it to be rejected" (51). While Finch usefully equates the appearance of the meter with certain ideological baggage, I emphasize how different instances of embedded pentameter, especially in their interrelation with line and syntax, can reveal a poet's psychological conundrums and make personality possible and even palpable on the page. My use of "embedded pentameter" is based on Finch's; this analysis will take her lead in examining the interaction of iambic and non-iambic passages. Without ascribing static associations to any metrical tendency, it will suggest that Ginsberg's use of this device is tied to his elegiac aims and depiction of grief.

Finally, the concept of embedded pentameter is inextricably related to long lines—lines longer than ten or twelve syllables, longer than the page is wide, longer than the breath can speak or hold, longer than a well-formed grammatical sentence. Ginsberg has written and said a lot about his long lines, and these statements provide for the possibility that, though he denounced iambic pentameter as a received form and did not acknowledge it in his poetry, he did see his

lines as capable of incorporating distinct elements with various provenances, including meters. In "Notes Written on Finally Recording *Howl*" (1959), he describes the well-sustained long line as "disparate thinks put down together…" (*Deliberate Prose* 229). Ginsberg insists that his long line is a single unit and an organic structure, even as he explains that it's a composite, something that one can "*build up*" (*Deliberate Prose* 230, his emphasis). Remembering the opening section of "Kaddish," he evokes "the long line breaking up within itself into short staccato breath units—notations of one spontaneous phrase after another linked within the line by dashes mostly: the long line now perhaps a variable stanzaic unit, measuring groups of ideas, grouping them—a method of notation" (231). The phrase "short staccato breath units" hints that he employs lineation as rhythmic, and the idea of the long line as "a variable stanzaic unit" provides for the possibility of forming that unit out of what would, in other metrical contexts, be recognized as individual, stand-alone lines.

Indeed, in a 1979 seminar at Naropa College, Ginsberg tried to scan a line from the "Moloch" section of "Howl" for his partner Peter Orlovsky, who said he didn't hear it; Ginsberg replied that a single meter "doesn't hold throughout any single line, but the lines are built up of varieties of these kinds of meters" (Lectures on Blake). Though Ginsberg displays pedantic confidence and eagerness for consensus in pedagogical interactions about meter, he also sees length and distance as ways of getting lost. In "How Kaddish Happened" (1966), describing the ups and downs of his revision process, he writes, "Defeat like that is good for poetry—you go so far out you don't know what you're doing, you lose touch with what's been done before by anyone, you wind up creating a new poetry-universe" (*Deliberate Prose* 234). The embedded pentameter of "De**feat** like **that** is **good** for **po**e**try**" notwithstanding, Ginsberg clearly sees the

long line as a place to go to forget convention, but also to forget one's poetic priorities and principles, even those that involve the bucking of convention.

How and when does Ginsberg get lost enough in his long lines that he lands in an embedded pentameter, and what attitudes and discoveries about the loss and memory of his mother do these prosodic moments enable? The poem arguably contains over one hundred embedded pentameters—often clustered together in proximity to iambic passages, distinguished by syntax (especially using long dashes), marked by one- to three-foot substitutions, and coinciding with the beginnings and ends of lines. Here's the first line of "Kaddish": "Strange now to think of you, gone without corsets & eyes, while I walk on the sunny pavement of Greenwich Village" (*Kaddish* 7). The poem begins with the thought of the dead *as* dead, rather than the memory of her when she was alive; those thoughts will come soon enough, in abundance. In death, though, Naomi is "without corsets and eyes"—without the machinery of feminine subjection that would make her body presentable to the male gaze, and, like the pearl-eyed dead of Shakespeare's "Full Fathom Five," without the organ that would do the gazing on her own behalf. Despite the tactile-visual image of the sunny pavement, Naomi's eyelessness prefigures Ginsberg "listening to Ray Charles blues shout *blind* on the phonograph" (my emphasis) in the next line; the opening of "Kaddish" chooses hearing over seeing, the ear over the eye, a choice that's appropriate for a poem named after a prayer.[44]

Ginsberg continues, "the rhythm the rhythm—and your memory in my head three years after—And read Adonais' last triumphant stanzas aloud—wept, realizing how we suffer—" (*Kaddish* 7). The poem thus begins with an acknowledgement that rhythm is both in Ginsberg's head and spoken aloud, an intellectual abstraction and a physical reality—and that mourning will

[44] For a foundational take on the poetics of the ear and eye, see Hollander.

occur in the spaces opened up by these paradoxes. The allusion to Shelley's iambic pentameter elegy for Keats, set alongside the other references in this opening, indicates that the rhythm of this grief is culturally as well as sensorily hybrid: English, bluesy, Hebrew, Buddhist. Indeed, the first line is comprised of a catalectic dactylic pentameter ("**Strange** now to **think** of you, **gone** without **cor**sets & **eyes**") and then, after the caesura, something a little closer to iambic pentameter, with anapests in the first, second, and fourth positions and iambs in the third and fifth, plus a dangling unstressed syllable hanging off the end ("while I **walk** on the **sun**ny **pave**ment of **Green**wich **Vil**lage"). Because so many of the individual words in the second half of the line have falling rhythms ("**sun**ny," "**pave**ment," "**Green**wich," and "**vill**age"), this scansion is largely dependent on the first foot, "while I **walk**," which, in contrast to "**Strange** now to," establishes a rising rhythm—over and against the implications of foot/word coincidence. It's also possible to scan the first half of that line as hexametrical—as two trimeter segments ("**Strange now** to **think** of you, **gone** without **cor**sets & **eyes**")—so that it's the mixing of meters that sets up the iambic pentameter, rather than simply the movement from triple to duple or falling to rising feet. Either way, the first line of "Kaddish" is divided between metrical impulses, as well as between the dead and the living.

This metrical split serves as Ginsberg's rendition of the elegiac distich, the Greek metrical form that ultimately "came to be associated" with poems of mourning, setting the stage for more contemporary "fixation[s] of meter to genre" (Brogan 396). According to T.V.F. Brogan and S.F. Fogle in the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, the elegiac distich is "a hexameter followed by an asynartete combination of two end-shortened dactylic tripodies[:] a species of epode" (396): a couplet, basically, in which the first line is longer than and metrically distinct from the second. For the purposes of this argument, it's useful to observe that the genre

of elegy originally emerged from a tradition of mixed meters. Furthermore, while the entry on elegy in that encyclopedia cites speech acts of lament, the lyric mode, markers of genre like pastoral topoi and allusion, and certain "indigenous moods" like sorrow and shock as definitional to elegy (Braden and Fowler 398), it does not achieve the "composite understanding" (398) that would reintegrate its past as a metrical mode with its present as a genre of loss. This discussion of that genre hints at such a composite understanding, suggesting that, in the modern American elegy, iambic pentameter is uniquely positioned to effect an integration of meter with mourning. There is no question that, by stringing together two metrically distinct pentameters, and by making reference to Shelley, Ginsberg primes the reader to listen for specifically elegiac iambs, preparing us to hear the voices that no one else can hear—like Naomi, whose schizophrenic hallucinations fill this poem with voices that belong neither to her nor to her son, the author of her elegy.

When embedded iambic pentameters do begin to appear with more frequency in "Kaddish," the act of acknowledgement that the reader performs resurfaces in the text through the persistent motif of recognition. Recognition is a central aspect of the field of hauntology, since it's hard to be haunted unless you can tell you're being haunted; Katy Shaw writes, "Haunting is conditional upon being noticed—recognition is a key source of agency for the specter and central to the success of the act of the return" (Shaw 108). She emphasizes that, as in the case of textual motifs, repetition plays a crucial role in spectrality: "The significance of the specter lies in a recognition of this repetition, of a return that appears in changed contexts and times" (8). Recognition is also critical to any examination of the functioning of ghost meter, since prosodic theorists from Charles O. Hartman to Stephanie Burt acknowledge that, without it, poetic forms cannot travel from one context to another. In his reading of Eliot's piecemeal

metrical recreations, Hartman writes, "Our recognition depends on the (for the most part implicitly) systematic conventions of meter. Yet Eliot manipulates the recognition without adopting the system itself. His fundamental technique is to use recognizable *parts* of familiar 'alternate patterns.'" (Hartman 119). Hartman diagrams lines from "The Hollow Men" and shows how they correspond to *pieces* of conventional variations of iambic pentameter, engaging the reader's ability to recognize and play upon that faculty in an inherently rhythmic way, working towards a kind of meta-prosody. Meanwhile, in "Postcolonial Poetry and Form," Burt emphasizes the importance of recognition in culturally hybrid formal maneuvers like those of Black British poet Patience Agbabi, who adapts the sestina for performance, or Jamaican poet John Figueroa, whose "distinctive subgenre of West Indian complaint" is set "against and across the 'English' meter" (Burt 141): "To make one's own form, by bringing together recognizable forms (and it does matter that some readers can recognize them), is to solve [...] the trap by which the postcolonial subject finds herself either accused of mimicry (trying to live a form not her own) or condemned to write only within the bounds of a supposedly 'native,' or national, form" (142). Both of these prosodists show that it is the manipulation of acts of recognition that allows poets to make form work for them, rather than the other way around.

Ginsberg's written and transcribed statements on poetics exhibit a similar concern with recognition, in his articulations both of the stakes of "Kaddish" and of his understanding of the possible advantages of transferrable form. In "How *Kaddish* Happened," Ginsberg explains his rationalizations regarding the discomfort that the poem's intimate disclosures might bring to readers outside his immediate family: "I realized that it would seem odd to others, but *family* odd, that is to say, familiar…" (*Deliberate Prose* 233). He broadly anticipates readerly experiences of recognition even with the elements of the poem's narrative and emotional content

that seem most freakish or perverse. Indeed, he sees the aberrant as the necessary ground of self-recognition; in "'When the Mode of the Music Changes, the Walls of the City Shake,'" Ginsberg asserts that one must write toward "shame and embarrassment, that very area of personal self-recognition (detailed individual is universal remember) which formal conventions, internalized, keep us from discovering in ourselves and others…" (*Deliberate Prose* 248). Here, he opposes formal convention to self-recognition, implying that the former stunts rather than echoes the latter; however, in "Whitman's Influence: A Mountain Too Vast to Be Seen" (1992), Ginsberg links acts of admirably debasing self-portraiture with poetic influence. He praises Whitman's "marvelous short poems of old age," wherein he "describ[es] with equanimity the 'querilities…constipation…whimpering ennui' of body and mind approaching death, signaling farewell, waving goodbye, 'garrulous to the very last.'" Ginsberg continues, "Such poems serve as candid models for my own verse to this day" (*Deliberate Prose* 333).

Though the aging Naomi in "Kaddish" is certainly not "garrulous to the very last," Ginsberg is clearly attracted to the notion of including something as recognizably human as constipation in his elegy for his mother. In fact, he enjoyed incorporating the recognizably human even into his discussions of poetic meter. While teaching Basic Poetics at Naropa, he was casting around for an example of an epitritus secondus (— ∪ — —), and, since he had already proffered ""Go-fuck-your-self!", "Go-fuck-your-self!", Go-fuck-your-self!, Go-fuck-your-self!, Go-fuck your-self!" for epitritus primus (∪ — — —), a student suggested "Wan-na-get-high." Ginsberg replied:

> Wan-na-get-high?, Wan-na-get-high?—Sure, Wanna-get-high?, Wanna-get…You know, they're actually…See, what I'm trying to say, these cadences are natural. We do have them in the speech, we do have them in our speech. It's a question of recognizing them,

> fixing, recognizing them, making them conscious, and then you can use them in poetry consciously and you can make all sorts of interesting things (like "Come and get high"—that's perfect). (Basic Poetics)

In this moment of active instruction, the delight of accepting and incorporating a student's life-drawn, deliberately naughty example into his explanation of the epitritus seems to cause Ginsberg—who was, to be sure, in middle-age rather than the 30-year-old who had just written "Kaddish" and defiantly defended its formless honor in essays like "How *Kaddish* Happened"—to articulate an understanding of formal recognition that is consonant with, rather than in tension with, his attitude towards recognition of familiar human experiences more generally.

Recognition is central to "Kaddish" because of climactic moments of reunion when mother and son acknowledge each other (or fail to) after a long separation; because of filial conflations manifest in Ginsberg's tendency to write in his mother's voice and Naomi's tendency to see her own mother in strangers; because of bodies changed beyond recognition by aging, illness, and death, or, conversely, bodies made particularly identifiable by scars; and because of the role of self-recognition in the feelings of shame, humiliation, and embarrassment that are so central to the affective performance of this poem. Two passages in particular exemplify the way this motif functions in "Kaddish," and each features telling instances of embedded pentameter. In the first, describing an early journey to the asylum with his mother, Ginsberg writes:

> 'Allen, you don't understand—it's—ever since those 3 big sticks up my back—they did something to me in Hospital, they poisoned me, they want to see me dead—3 big sticks, 3 big sticks—
> 'The Bitch! Old Grandma! Last week I saw her, dressed in pants like an old man, with a sack on her back, climbing up the brick side of the apartment
> 'On the fire escape, with poison germs, to throw on me—at night—maybe Louis is helping her—he's under her power—
> 'I'm your mother, take me to Lakewood' (near where Graf Zeppelin had crashed before, all Hitler in Explosion) 'where I can hide.' (*Kaddish* 14)

This passage builds up to palpable embedded pentameters using the speech rhythms of exclamation, repetition, and interruption. Naomi describes the sensation of having been made unrecognizable to herself in a surgical operation she can't remember; desperate to be taken seriously, she arrives at the embedded pentameter "they **pois**oned **me**, they **want** to **see** me **dead**" by restating and expanding upon her initial, more rhythmically ambiguous claim that "they did something to me in Hospital" —a simple sentence with only four clearly stressed syllables ("did" "some-," "me" and "Hos-") and ending with two unstressed syllables ("**Hos**pital"). The embedded pentameter, "they **pois**oned **me**, they **want** to **see** me **dead**," gives way to the even more obviously rhythmic chant "3 big sticks, 3 big sticks—," until Ginsberg cuts his mother off with a new line, a new memory, a new train of thought, a new piece of quoted text.

In the lines that follow, Naomi recounts (mistakenly) recognizing her own mother in the guise of an old man "climbing up the brick side of the apartment" like a devious spider; on behalf of her son (who is really writing on *her* behalf), she empties the mother role of its gendered and human qualities, recasting herself as withered but also a threat. These lines move from staccato exclamation ("The Bitch! Old Grandma!"), through prosaic storytelling ("Last week I saw her, dressed in pants like an old man"), to escalation via stacked prepositional phrases ("like an old man, with a sack on her back, climbing up the brick side of the apartment / 'On the fire escape"). This dark, syntactically intensifying fantasy culminates with the thought of the possibility of being poisoned, couched in what could be read as another embedded pentameter ("with **pois**on **germs**, to **throw** on **me**—at **night**—"), which she interrupts with the theory that her estranged husband could be in on the plot. Finally, as if she suspects that her son can't recognize her, Naomi reminds him, "I'm your mother, take me to Lakewood[...] where I

can hide!": she needs him to recognize her so that she can go somewhere where no one else will. Naomi's paranoid jumpiness, as well as the uncanny sense that a dead person is speaking through the poet, reinforces the reader's experience of spectral recognition amid these embedded pentameters.

The second passage in "Kaddish" that includes iambic pentameters embedded in a scene of ghastly recognition occurs when Ginsberg remembers visiting his mother in the asylum, after he has been traveling in Mexico and hasn't seen her for two years. He writes:

> Asylum spreads out giant wings above the path to a minute black hole—the door—entrance thru crotch—
> I went in—smelt funny—the halls again—up elevator—to a glass door on a Women's Ward—to Naomi—Two nurses buxom white—They led her out, Naomi stared—and I gaspt—She'd had a stroke—
> Too thin, shrunk on her bones—age come to Naomi—now broken into white hair—loose dress on her skeleton—face sunk, old! withered—cheek of crone—
> One hand stiff—heaviness of forties & menopause reduced by one heart stroke, lame now—wrinkles—a scar on her head, the lobotomy—ruin, the hand dipping downwards to death— (*Kaddish* 29)

In this passage, the moment of mutual recognition—when mother and son see one another for the first time in years—is marked by two "lines" of iambic pentameter that are almost perfect, barring one anapestic substitution in the third foot of the second one: "Two **nur**ses **bux**om **white**—They **led** her **out**," and "Na**o**mi **star**ed—and I **gaspt**—She'd **had** a **stroke**—." The doubleness of that moment manifests in two lines of meter, two nurses, two years of separation, and two gazes (son to mother and mother to son). The break between the two lines of embedded pentameter occurs when they actually see one another: the first line is the approach, and the second is the reaction, while the moment itself is unspeakable, obscure, nestled in the interstice. Indeed, Ginsberg achieves the syntactic-metrical dynamic of slackening and tightening that characterizes these lines and so much of "Kaddish" using the interstices that long dashes create. Piecing together two consecutive lines of iambic pentameter amid the onward rush of memory,

Ginsberg temporarily overrides the pentameters' distinctive, odd-number asymmetry, attaining a momentary sense of arrival.

But, of course, just as Ginsberg remembers coming back to see his mother in a gesture he likens with heavy-handed resignation to a return to the womb ("entrance thru crotch" that "smelt funny"), he circles back and tries again to describe the moment of recognition: Naomi looks so different—smaller, older, thinner, wrinkled, ruined; she has none of the too much-ness that Ginsberg has used to make her body identifiable to us up to this point. The moment occasions one of Ginsberg's most conspicuous embedded pentameters in all of "Kaddish": "O **glo**rious **muse** that **bore** me **from** the **womb**" (29)—a line that features uncharacteristically elevated diction and stands in stark contrast to the rollicking, keening gutter plunge that constitutes so much of the rest of the poem. This line launches a short but relatively intense contemplation of origins, of "Death which is the mother of the universe!" (29); in other words, the conspicuousness of the embedded pentameter, both in terms of diction and in terms of rhythm, affects the flow of Ginsberg's thought, as if the presence of the conventional meter makes him self-conscious about poetic origins more generally.

Another self-consciously reverberating line of embedded pentameter that warps the course of the speaker's chanted thought occurs much earlier in the poem, when Ginsberg arrives at an insight into loss and lands in an embedded pentameter that causes him to lose his grip on some fleeting understanding. He writes, "Tho you're not old now, that's left here with me— / Myself, anyhow, maybe as old as the universe—and I guess that dies with us—enough to cancel all that comes—What **came** is **gone** for**ev**er **ev**ery **time**— / That's good! That leaves it open for no regret—no fear radiators, lacklove, torture even toothache in the end—" (*Kaddish* 8-9). Ginsberg imagines that, in death, his mother sheds the years that she accumulated in life, leaving

them behind with the family members who survive her…and thereby aging them. With this thought, he feels "old as the universe," but he finds comfort in the notion that the living will be able to discard the burdens of age when they themselves die. He concludes aphoristically, "What **came** is **gone** for**ev**er **ev**ery **time**"—and then, as if he hears the iambic pentameter and loves how it sounds, he exclaims, "That's good! That leaves it open for no regret…" (9). "That's good!" can function not just as a pronouncement of metrical self-approval but also as a more literal act of benediction: God-like, Ginsberg hears the pentameter he has created and declares it good. Though he reaches again for the iambic mode in the Christ-like lines that follow, with "the **lamb**, the **soul**, in **us**, al**as**, offering itself…" (9), enumeration, which has its own, often spondaic rhythm, ultimately takes over with "the roar of bonepain, skull bare, break rib, rot-skin, braintricked Implacability" (9). The tension between these rhythmic impulses leaves Ginsberg crying, "Ai! ai! we do worse! We are in a fix!" (9): it's an outburst both desperate and calculated, both non-verbal and, in its reference to the words of grief on the petals of the hyacinth, allusive.

The recursive motions that these individual lines of embedded pentameter both invite and compel are also an important part of Ginsberg's poetic process more generally. For Ginsberg, the path towards the poem's truest self involves backwards motion. In "How *Kaddish* Happened," he describes the compulsive but painful need to go back to his drafts and continue them, add to them, finish them, read them, change them: "But then I realized I hadn't gone back and told the whole secret family-self tale…" (*Deliberate Prose* 233) and "I got the last detail recorded including my mother's death-telegram. I could go back later and clean it up" (234). Likewise, in Bill Morgan's afterword to *Kaddish and Other Poems*, Morgan describes the geographical returns that punctuated Ginsberg's experience of his mother's burial as well as the composition of the poem. Because Ginsberg couldn't return from California to the East Coast in time for his

mother's burial, there weren't enough men present for a *minyan*. "As a result," Morgan states, "the traditional Jewish prayer for the dead, the Mourners' Kaddish, could not be recited." (*Kaddish* 101-102). So, the poem is itself a return to the funeral, another attempt at reciting the Kaddish.

Backward movements in "Kaddish" surface in connection with imagined returns to the womb, lonely journeys home on buses and subway cars, the backwards glances of the dead, the mind moving backwards in the act of remembering, and the backwards orientation of a recursive writing process. Turns of phrase on the very first page of the poem, such as "Dreaming back thru life, Your time—and mine accelerating toward Apocalypse" (*Kaddish* 7) and "like a poem in the dark—escaped back to Oblivion" (7), evoke the simultaneity of forwards and backwards movements in this work. This gesture belies Ginsberg's sense of mid-twentieth century poetry's futurity, experimentation, and novelty, casting it as a backwards-oriented genre.[45] In lines like "Done with yourself at last—Pure—Back to the Babe dark before your Father, before us all—before the world—" (*Kaddish* 9) and "...Would she were safe in her coffin— / Or back at Normal School in Newark" (15), Ginsberg aligns backwards movement with safety but wrestles with whether, for his mother at least, such movement signals a drift toward the truest self or away from it.

After all, Naomi's madness is something she has lived with for a long time, but it's also perpetually strange to her—and to her son. In Section III of "Kaddish," Ginsberg uses embedded pentameters to explore the paradoxical longevity of the strange voices that speak through his

[45] Ginsberg often articulates a sense of the simultaneous development and degeneration of poetry from age to age. For instance, in "Some Metamorphoses of Personal Prosody" (1966), he writes, "This new ear is not dead because it's not only for eye-page, it's connected with a voice improvising, with hesitancies aloud, a living musician's ear. The old library poets had lost their voices; natural voice was rediscovered; and now natural song for physical voice. Oddly this fits Pound's paradigm tracing the degeneration of poesy from the Greek dance-foot chorus thru minstrel song thru 1900 abstract voiceless page" (*Deliberate Prose* 259).

mother, the contradictory experience of returning again and again to something unfamiliar. Though Section III is as anaphoric as its choriambic predecessor "HYMMNN," replacing "Blessed be" with "Only to have," it's much more iambic. For instance, when Ginsberg writes of "the **voi**ces **in** the **cei**ling **shriek**ing **out** her **ug**ly **ear**ly **lays** for **thir**ty **years**" (*Kaddish* 33), he constructs a single long line out of two conjoined pentameters—much like the very first line of the poem, but without the dactylic opening. The line is sonically dense, with "ceiling" and "shrieking" almost rhyming, as do "ugly," "early" and "thirty." The word "lays," which the presence of shrieking voices indicates refers primarily to songs, also hints at less archaic meanings: birthing (as when a bird lays an egg) and sex (as in one memorable and much-debated Oedipal passage, in which Ginsberg writes, "One time I thought she was trying to make me come *lay* her" [24, my emphasis]).

The "ugly early lays" passage refers to voices that speak through Naomi, that make her speak in ways she can't anticipate; in this respect, it treats Ginsberg's experience of embedded pentameter as a kind of psychosis. It also recalls Naomi's last words to her son in the note she left him before dying: "The **key** is **in** the **sun**light **at** the **win**dow **in** the **bars** the **key** is **in** the **sun**light" (*Kaddish* 33). It's another double embedded pentameter, and, though it is repetitive in itself, Ginsberg continues to dwell on this final message from his mother, turning it over in his mind's mouth as if he's trying to figure out what it means, what consolation it offers:

> ...no tears for this Vision—
> But that the key should be left behind—at the window—the key in the sunlight—to the living—that can take
> that **slice** of **light** in **hand**—and **turn** the **door**—and look back see
> Cre**a**tion **glis**tening **back**wards to the **same grave**, size of universe,
> size of the tick of the hospital's clock on the archway over the white door— (*Kaddish* 33)

In Ginsberg's imagination, his mother believes that she has left behind for her son, somewhere where he can find it easily—where it is visible and accessible, swathed in holy light but also

inhabiting a quotidian domestic space—something extremely valuable: a key. This key will unlock (or, rather, "turn") a door for him so that he, too, as a representative of "the living," can "look back see / Cre**a**tion **glis**tening **back**wards to the **same grav**e." Though this second example barely qualifies as iambic pentameter, the conventional elision of the gerund "glistening" into two syllables arguably grants it three initial iambs—and the final spondee "**same grave**" adds two more stresses to make five.[46] The verse-patterning here is both loose and precise; these two consecutive lines both begin with discrete syntactic units comprising five stresses apiece, and then they both append to those five-stress units certain ecstatic afterthoughts made possible by these key-like meters: "and look back see" (the moment of apprehension of creation) and "size of universe" (the expansion of the grave-epiphany to encompass all of existence). The actual key to which Ginsberg refers in the passage is now *made of* light rather than covered in it, a "slice of light" that's "in hand" both because it's useful and because it poses a threat to that fleshy appendage, which it could "slice." A suicide is in the offing, of course, but there's no hurry, because the key has been left behind and is therefore available. The backwards movement in this passage is a "glistening," but, even though Ginsberg likens the destination to the hospital architecture, which is womb-like in an earlier passage, it's explicitly a grave now; to move backwards towards the grave implies that he was once already in the grave and that existence is circular rather than linear. There's no hurry to follow Naomi into death.

Considering these embedded pentameters, Ginsberg's "key in the sunlight in the window" could be a figure for what Ben Glaser, in his reappraisal of the ghost meter metaphor in *Modernism's Metronome*, calls the "metrical vestige" (*Metronome* 1). Citing Raymond Williams's notion of residual form, Glaser casts meter as something left behind to be picked up

[46] In "Constancy to an Ideal Object," Coleridge makes exactly this elision of "glistening" visually explicit: "The viewless snow-mist weaves a *glist'ning* haze" (Coleridge, my italics).

by poets needy in their nostalgia and anxiety, useful because it's there anyway. But Ginsberg's key could also be a figure for another concept that Glaser proffers in place of mere ghost meter: "Meter turns out to be neither 'missing' nor a 'ghost' but the phantom limb of a genre uncertain about its mediation and purpose in a fragmentary literary and auditory culture" (5). Glaser's contention that meter's phantom limb status means that it is "neither 'missing' nor a 'ghost'" is misleading, though, since a phantom limb is something that feels like it is there because it was *once* there but isn't there anymore. In order to function, in order to be considered sane, someone with a phantom limb is required to teach themself about their bodily reality: to learn their loss. Ginsberg's key in the window was once there in that his mother was once alive, and she thought it was there. It is a refinement that allows him to repress or evade "The Horror" of her bodily existence yet retain something of her tutelage. "Kaddish," in all the anguish of its metrical hybridity, is Ginsberg's attempt to learn this loss, to make something out of the key but also out of its lack.

Part of the power of "Kaddish" is its palpable sense of presence-in-absence, its reimagining of elegy through its tendency to conjure unbearable intimacy with the departed so that the reader feels about Naomi the way the reader feels about themself: that they can't imagine living or thinking or having a body without her—so that, by not existing, she becomes a model for existence. This chapter draws a parallel between that depiction of loss and the presence-in-absence of iambic pentameter, especially in its spectral haunting of Ginsberg's avowedly non-metrical lines. In their performance of strained recognition and compulsive recursiveness, the embedded pentameters in this poem reflect and heighten the grief at its core.

Another part of the power of "Kaddish" is its use of the long line to explore the way grief can intermesh and intermingle thought-feelings with markedly divergent rhythms in a single

space or breath, making room because it must for sets of five iambs alongside Melvillean-Hebraic chants, recognition alongside alienation, and forward movement alongside backwards retreat. In this respect, the prosodic innovation of embedded pentameter, especially as Ginsberg uses it, is tied to though independent from the mixed metrical tradition of the classical elegiac genre. Part of Ginsberg's action as a poet is to listen for lines so long that they can contain multiple meters and their attendant moods: the "long black beard around the vagina" (*Kaddish* 34) as well as the molossus-like roar of "Lord Lord Lord Caw Caw Caw" (36) with which, after all the screaming, weeping, hallucinating, sweating, and vomiting, "Kaddish" finally ceases.

2. Freed Verse in Bishop's "Crusoe in England"

Elizabeth Bishop's "Crusoe in England," composed about a decade after "Kaddish," is in many ways its elegiac antithesis. Circumspect in tone and diction and hinging on an ironic literary allusion, the poem reveals itself as an elegy—for Friday, Crusoe's island companion, who "was nice" (*Complete* 165)—more than three quarters of the way in, and it never quite reveals what many critics agree is its obscurer purpose as an elegy for Lota de Macedo Soares, Bishop's long-time partner who died, possibly by suicide, about two years before Bishop wrote the poem. Sidestepping Ginsbergian exposure, the confessional-curious Bishop couches her loss inside another loss, and critics have evoked this self-revealing/self-concealing dynamic as part of a range of arguments about Bishop's poetics, especially with respect to persona and genre (see, e.g., Doreski, Lombardi, and Vendler).

Bishop's handling of iambic pentameter in this poem—a subject that receives much less attention than do her uses of persona and genre—plays into that dynamic of circumspection. Whereas Ginsberg's metrical reticence is at odds with his affective, syntactic, and lineational

abandon, Bishop's prosodic prudence dovetails with her own affects, syntaxes, and lines, and the effect is a chilling delicacy:

> And I had waterspouts. Oh,
> half a dozen at a time, far out,
> they'd come and go, advancing and retreating,
> their heads in cloud, their feet in moving patches
> of scuffed-up white.
> Glass chimneys, flexible, attenuated,
> sacerdotal beings of glass...I watched
> the water spiral up in them like smoke.
> Beautiful, yes, but not much company. (*Complete* 163)

In the two longish verse paragraphs leading to this passage, Bishop's Crusoe—writing from the supposedly safe distance of "another island" (166), England—has been semi-nostalgically recounting all that he had on the (last) island where he was marooned: "fifty-two / miserable, small volcanoes" (162), "All the hemisphere's / left-over clouds" (162), innumerable turtles "hissing like teakettles" (163)...and, in the distance, waterspouts, those rotating gyre-columns that can occur between clouds and the ocean. The waterspouts, which are "advancing and retreating," presumably getting closer to and farther from the shore from which Crusoe is watching them, embody the self-revealing/self-concealing dynamic and are ready figures for Bishop's handling of meter in "Crusoe in England."

The lines in this passage range from two stresses ("of **scuffed** up **white**") to five stresses ("**sa**cer**do**tal **be**ings of **glass**…I **watched**"); they are perpetually approaching and withdrawing from pentameter. The lines also evince a loose iambic tendency. Compare "they'd **come** and **go**, ad**van**cing **and** re**treat**ing," which is an almost-perfect line of iambic pentameter (with an extra unstressed syllable hanging off the final foot and a promotion of the second syllable of "ad**van**cing" to achieve the third stress), with "**sa**cer**do**tal **be**ings of **glass**…I **watched,**" which begins in trochees but resolves into two consecutive iambs. Or compare it with "**Glass chim**neys,

flexible, at**ten**u**at**ed," in which the diminished force of those paradoxically transparent chimneys manifests in the stress desert between the dactylic third foot and the iambic fourth, as well as in the half-heartedly promoted final stress ("attenu**at**ed"). Bishop's lines approach and retreat both from iambs and from pentameter, sometimes at the same time, sometimes separately—like the "half a dozen at a time" waterspouts, all individually moving back and forth near the shore of Crusoe's island.

The passage concludes that the waterspouts ("beautiful, yes, but not much company") are attractive forms that ultimately leave the observer isolated. These priestly, lonely, gauzy "beings," who alternate between proximity and distance from one another and from the island, place their "feet" (an obvious metrical pun) not on the terra firma of a metronomic or even a consistent meter but on "moving patches / of scuffed up white": a rhythmic foundation characterized by dilapidated inconsistency, much like the moth-eaten "shedding goatskin trousers" (*Complete* 166) and withered parasol that, it transpires, Crusoe has left to the local museum. Like the famously itinerant Bishop, and perhaps like iambic pentameter in "Crusoe in England," these fundamentally homeless waterspouts must keep moving to keep existing, and their constant movement involves both intimacy and detachment. While Ginsberg's embedded pentameters often emerge from or themselves instigate expressions of heightened emotion, the affective pattern of Bishop's freed verse is harder to pin down; it's an ongoing process, a way of proceeding—rather than, say, a rhetorical device. Her individual lines of pentameter may not carry more weight or do more work than the mostly three- and four-stress lines that surround them, but the constant movement to and fro evokes a restless, probing state of mind, and it keeps open a range of possibilities for articulation as she solves the puzzle that each fresh verse paragraph presents.

Bishop's life involved perpetual travel, too, most notably between Nova Scotia and Massachusetts as a functionally orphaned child brought up by two sets of grandparents, and between the homes she shared with Macedo Soares in Brazil and various teaching and reading gigs across the United States.[47] In particular, Bishop's letters describing the traumatic events before and after her partner's death bespeak a palpable sense of the necessity and inevitability of back-and-forth movement. In a September 1, 1966, letter from Rio to her doctor, Dr. Anny Baumann, while Macedo Soares was still alive, Bishop wrote, "I was hoping things would be better when I came back [to Brazil]—and after all, I came back because I *wanted* to. I had offers of other jobs, and could even go on a reading tour—6 weeks—for $12,000 (believe it or not)—and turned all this down because I wanted to come back to live with Lota" (*One Art* 449, her emphasis). In this letter, Bishop seems keenly aware of the financial and emotional costs of back-and-forth movement. As in "Kaddish," her experience of co-existing with her struggling loved one in the years leading to her death involved many such movements. Reading her letters, one can track the shifting conception of where home is and where away is, where here is and where there is: she returns to the U.S., then she returns to Macedo Soares in Brazil.

In these letters, Bishop also associates back-and-forth movement with epiphanies, particularly with sudden insights into an otherwise increasingly elusive loved one. In a January 20, 1967, letter to Dr. Baumann, after Macedo Soares's suicide attempt but before her death, Bishop wrote:

[47] Lombardi describes how Bishop's supposed salvation, when she was fetched from Canada to live with relatives in Massachusetts, may have felt to her more like being stranded and isolated: "Bishop was given the impression that her New England relatives were 'saving' her from a life of poverty and provincialism in Canada. She was brought to a 'gloomy house' where even the pet Boston terrier had a 'peculiar Bostonian sense of guilt.' Feeling like a 'guest' in this airless atmosphere, expected to somehow intuit an 'unknown past' that no one ever directly explained to her and held to the strict discipline of behaving as a 'little girl' should, Bishop's body rebelled" (Lombardi 51). This oft-told Bishop origin story is particularly relevant to "Crusoe in England," wherein Crusoe has ostensibly been saved but actually feels more forsaken than ever.

> I was so used to Lota and saw her so constantly that it didn't hit me, really, I think, until we got to London—when I rushed her back as fast as I could. [...] She then went back to the hospital for insulin shock treatments [...] The hospital was so awful, I thought it would kill her if nothing else did—so we tried Samambaia for Christmas, had to come right back, and now she is in the apartment with a nurse. (*One Art* 457)

Each movement in this series of expensive, exhausting journeys occasioned or was occasioned by a further realization of how dire the situation was; excursions to London and Samambaia demanded immediate backwards motions, but so did the retreat to the hospital. After Macedo Soares's death, Bishop wrote in a September 25, 1967, letter to two friends, "Tuesday was taken up with all the arrangements necessary for sending a 'body' (oh god) home to a foreign country" (*One Art* 469). Here, even the thought of a backwards journey inspires fresh insight; the parenthetical "(oh god)," which predicts the famous "(*Write it!*)" that would appear almost a decade later in "One Art," surfaces at the moment when Bishop imagines the return of Macedo Soares's body to Brazil.

Indeed, in a short essay about Gerard Manley Hopkins, Bishop elucidates her conception of poetry as perpetual, countervailing motion, likening good poetic timing to an acrobat "falling through the air gracefully to snatch his partner's ankles [who] can yet, within the fall, afford an extra turn and flourish, in safety, without spoiling the form of his flight" (*Prose* 470). With its sense that poetry is an aerial duet with a mysterious partner; with its implication that there is a gravity-like force that can overwhelm human ingenuity and doom every poetic venture; and with its awareness of a finite window into which the artist may fit some number of flourishes, depending on her bravery or taste, this passage is revealing. It focuses our attention on the precious, momentary interstices that exist within the structure of a tidal movement—the minute

opportunities to perform countervailing motions or execute balancing maneuvers. In this way, it suggests the power of metrical foot substitutions more than it suggests the broader technique of approaching and retreating from iambic pentameter over the course of "Crusoe in England."[48]

In the context of critical discussions of Bishop's role as "protagonist" in what Longenbach calls the "dialectical story about the relationship of modern and postmodern poetry" ("Story of Postmodernism" 470), the acrobat-as-poet figure arguably represents Bishop's unique ability to prioritize motion over and against the freedom-constraint binary at the root of oversimplified literary-historical narratives. Longenbach describes Bishop's long-standing insight that "poems that seemed in motion rather than closed . . . did not necessarily mandate the rejection of what she once called poetry's 'ancient, honorable rules'" (476). Longenbach aims to "find a way of appreciating postmodern poetry that doesn't depend on a caricature of modernism" (470).[49] Over thirty years later, this argument offers a theory of one of Bishop's dominant prosodic modes that makes not just literary-historical but also specifically interpretive meaning of her tendency toward constant movement.

Indeed, Bishop's letters reveal that she saw mixed meters more generally as a way of creating dynamic poems that reflected her life of perpetual travel with all its attendant difficulties and insights. In a November 20, 1933, letter to poet and editor Donald E. Stanford, Bishop enclosed a copy of the first few pages of her in-progress translation of Aristophanes's *The Birds* and described her process of "using different kinds of meter for the different parts" (*One Art* 11). She declared, "I can write in iambics if I want to—but just now I don't know my own mind quite

[48] Of course, those two techniques differ in degree rather than in kind, since an overwhelming number of foot substitutions can shift a line's metrical identity.

[49] In his effort to show that, for Bishop, Eliot was never the "caricature" of modernist antimetrical orthodoxy that he seemed to embody for Lowell, Longenbach tells the story of a 1933 exchange between Eliot and Bishop, when Bishop interviewed him for the *Vassar Miscellany News*: Eliot called *The Waste Land* "just a piece of rhythmical grumbling" ("Story of Postmodernism" 474).

well enough to say what I want to in them. [...] However, I think that an equally great 'cumulative effect' might be built up by a series of irregularities" (11). Bishop tried to make it clear to her fellow poet, for whose poems it's obvious from the rest of the letter that she had a certain amount of disdain, that she was *choosing* to evade iambic feet. The letter acknowledges that this "'cumulative effect'" will involve sustained commitment to shifting meters, rather than the invocation of iambic pentameter as a one-off trick in an otherwise non-metrical environment.

By the 1960s, when she wrote "Crusoe in England," Bishop's attitude towards meter had shifted somewhat but still evinced the conviction that it must be both digested and dodged. In a February 22, 1966, letter to James Merrill about her difficulties teaching poetry, Bishop wrote, "The problem all along has been iambic pentameter—and I think I have mastered that at last by way of the BLUES. I even sang [to the students] the last two lines of some of Shakespeare's sonnets. But tomorrow I'll see if their 10 lines of iambic pentameter scan at last" (*One Art* 445). Here's evidence that, like Ginsberg, Bishop the poetry teacher talked explicitly about meter, even assigning iambic pentameter exercises, and was frustrated by her students' verse, which did not always scan. Her use of the blues as a teaching tool for iambic pentameter is puzzling, since the blues's association with hymn meter suggests four- and three-beat rather than five-beat lines. She may have invoked the blues merely as an example of a regular meter, hoping that, if her students could accept the concept generally, they could shift the stress count as needed. Still, as Stephen E. Henderson points out, the blues is a "durable, elastic artform" more closely tied to a three-line progression (thought, variation, contrast/extension) and the presence of "blue notes" (flattened thirds and sevenths) than to any particular meter (Henderson). Ultimately, Bishop's invocation of the blues hints at her belief, which she put into practice in "Crusoe in England," that, in service of voice, meters can and should slip into one another—and that poets should let meters like

iambic pentameter "lurk behind the arras in even the 'freest' verse; to advance menacingly as we doze, and withdraw as we rouse" ("Reflections" 519).

Eliot's "Reflections on *Vers Libre*" (1917) offers a remarkably clear articulation of the dynamic prosody that Bishop's advancing-and-retreating waterspouts embody and that Bishop explicitly defends in her letters. This passage, which I also quote in the introduction as part of a discussion of the no-man's land between metrical and non-metrical verse, takes on fresh resonance in the context of "Crusoe in England":

> The most interesting verse which has yet been written in our language has been done either by taking a very simple form, like the iambic pentameter, and constantly withdrawing from it, or taking no form at all, and constantly approximating a very simple one. It is this contrast between fixity and flux, this unperceived evasion of monotony, which is the very life of verse. ("Reflections" 518-519)

Eliot recommends "the constant suggestion and the skilful evasion of iambic pentameter" (519); he insists that the poet's relationship to such a form should involve continual rather than decisive motion, like the semi-threatening waterspouts that, in Bishop's poem, spin and whirl at the edge of Crusoe's world. As numerous prosodic theorists have noted, Eliot's influential formulation of *vers libre* is ambivalent, advocating not for a wholesale rejection of meter but for an openness to being haunted by it (see, e.g., Steele, Glaser, Hartman, and Finch). This chapter demonstrates that, despite publishing relatively few explicit statements on poetics in her lifetime, Bishop does in fact have a distinct, meaningful prosodic theory—one that adopts and deepens the ambivalence of "Reflections on Vers Libre."

Hartman's direct retheorization of Eliot's prosodic theory in *Free Verse* (1980) probes the experiential dimensions of such dynamic metrical mixing. He argues that the concept of

"discovered form" can help readers see the connections between meter and free verse: "[the poet] knows the traditional meter, but knows it from outside; he accepts it, but provisionally; he retreats from it, though he can never quite turn his back" (Hartman 111). Hartman writes that Eliot "manipulates the recognition without adopting the system itself. His fundamental technique is to use recognizable *parts* of familiar 'alternate patterns'" (119, Hartman's emphasis). Hartman acknowledges that poetry that approaches and retreats from meter is manipulating not just the form but also the reader's experience of the form, slicing and dicing the acts of attention and recognition that go into perceiving units of metered language in the first place.

However, when it comes to naming this prosody, Hartman balks. He acknowledges the distinction between *vers libre* and *vers libéré* (one is born free, the other is not) but insists that *vers libéré* "is not in itself a prosody" (Hartman 129). Of the prosody of precise approximations that he has so compellingly evoked, Hartman writes, "The fluctuating experience of recognition and half-recognition [...] is too absolutely inseparable from the poem itself to be identified by an isolating name" (129). Though Hartman is right that metrical waterspouts will approach and retreat from every island differently, this project is motivated by the conviction that naming the ways that iambic pentameter can haunt the ostensibly non-metrical or free verse line can be generative and clarifying for poets, critics, and teachers. The prosody in question mixes whole lines of loose iambic pentameter with lines of other lengths, often also loosely iambic, with such freedom that the poem would conventionally be identified as free verse even though it's obviously highly rhythmic: in deference to *vers libéré*, and so as to emphasize its relatively close ties to meter, let's call it "freed verse."

The term isn't original. As Timothy Steele explains, the French version of the term was used by the Symbolists and "indicate[d] verses that—though 'liberated' from certain classical

conventions of French poetry [...] — were still rhymed and syllabically correspondent" (Steele 18). Moreover, Easthope uses the English version of the term: "…far from being a new rhythm, the typical line of the thirties poets is the compromise of 'freed verse' in which the iambic norm, constantly departed from is by that token constantly invoked and so never displaced" (Easthope 333). Frustrated with what he sees as the aesthetic and political failures of poets of the 1930s, Easthope critiques this prosody as insufficiently radical. My use is descriptive rather than prescriptive, though perhaps rather celebratory in mood and meant to imply that metered verse constitutes constraints, not shackles. Of enclosing metapentameters, iambic cudgels, embedded pentameters, split pentameter, and porous pentameter—all the varieties of ghost iambic meter that this project will name and analyze—freed verse is the most consistently metrical, the one closest to actual, regular, identifiable meter. Poems in freed verse both enact and thematize approaches and retreats, recognitions and evasions. Strewn as they are with individual lines of iambic pentameter, they also wrestle with a sense of vestigiality, contemplating relics and leftovers (both metrical and otherwise) with particular urgency.

It's hard to imagine a poem that fulfills Eliot's and Hartman's ideals or engages with the inevitable thematic concerns of freed verse more assiduously or profoundly than "Crusoe in England." Of the 182 lines in this poem, only between seventy-four and eighty-five have five stresses (seventy-four of those are pretty much unambiguous, while the other eleven also suggest alternate scansions of four or six stresses), and those lines are dispersed widely but unevenly among its twelve verse paragraphs ranging from one to twenty-nine lines in length and two to five stresses per line. For instance, in the ten-line first verse paragraph, all but two lines, both trimeters, are pentameters, and the pentameters appear in sets of four consecutive lines; in the second, eighteen-line verse paragraph, meanwhile, only five to seven lines have five stresses, and

only two of them occur consecutively. In some passages, as at the end of the third verse paragraph, pentameters give rise to other pentameters; in others, they're one-offs amid short passages dominated by trimeter or tetrameter. The scarcity of dimeter (only around 11 lines in the whole poem) means that only once in "Crusoe in England" do lines of dimeter and trimeter occur consecutively, sounding like a split pentameter in the mind's ear (for more on this effect, see Chapter 3); so, when pentameters occur in this poem, they are almost always consonant with lineation, visible as well as audible. It seems that Bishop goes out of her way to avoid this meter but also to avoid avoiding it.[50] Whereas in "Kaddish" lines of embedded pentameter are in themselves indicative of heightened emotions, in "Crusoe in England" it is the movement towards or away from iambic pentameter that is expressive; arrivals and departures make metrical meaning for Bishop the poet, just as, in travel poems like "Arrival at Santos," they make experiential meaning for Bishop the tourist.

Thus "Crusoe in England" proffers images of back-and-forth movements that emulate the poet's motions as she composes its freed verse; it also fixates on scenes of (mis)recognition that reflect the reader's experience of a fluctuating, flickering form. In this respect, "Crusoe in England" resembles "Kaddish"; however, as we will see, freed verse, which contains lines of iambic pentameter inside of whole verse paragraphs rather than inside of longer lines, demands a different kind of attention. For example, when Bishop writes, "The folds of lava, running out to

[50] The same could be said for *Geography III* at large: of the nine poems in the book, four—"Crusoe in England," "Poem," "The End of March," and "Five Flights Up"—are in verse paragraphs of various lengths with lines ranging from two to seven stresses, arguably approaching and retreating from iambic pentameter, though "Crusoe in England" has the largest proportion of pentameter of those four ("Poem" is closer to half pentameter, "The End of March" closer to a third with approximately equal parts pentameter and tetrameter, and "Five Flights Up" between a half and a third but is ultimately more of a true free verse poem). *Geography III* also includes two poems in trimeter (one in sestets and one stichic), a poem in ballad meter, a villanelle, and a prose poem. Its manically interrogatory epigraph, which asks "*In what direction is the Volcano? The Cape? The Bay? The Lake? The Strait? The Mountains? The Isthmus?*" (*Complete* 157), manifests in a metrical omnivorousness, a compulsion to rove from place to place and view to view in language as well as in geography.

sea / would hiss. I'd turn. And then they'd prove / to be more turtles" (*Complete* 163), she likens lava to the ocean's waves and connects this littoral backwards turn to Crusoe's act of remembering as well as to the "turn" he performs when he faces the shore and realizes that the hissing thing isn't lava *or* waves but "more turtles." The backwards motion occasions the apprehension and correction of a mistaken impression: Crusoe realizes that he is both more and less alone than he had imagined. The initial line of iambic pentameter ("The **folds** of **la**va, **run**ning **out** to **sea**") shortens to tetrameter ("would **hiss**. I'd **turn**. And **then** they'd **prove**"). Syntax accentuates the shortening; all three of the stresses in that second line are monosyllabic verbs, two of which are followed by periods, contrasting with the "running," liquid present participle of the previous line. At the moment of realization, the tetrameter shortens even more dramatically, landing on a rare line of dimeter, a phrase that reads naturally as an anapest and a trochee ("to be **more tur**tles") but is subject to a strong iambic current because of the preceding two lines—so that the turtles, even once they are acknowledged, continue to behave a little like lava, a little like waves.

That initial scene of (mis)recognition presages several others throughout "Crusoe in England"; in each, the rhythms of freed verse both invite and suspend interlocking kinds of identification and acknowledgment, tracing the correction of errors of perception even as the mind circles back to repeat those errors. In the first scene, Bishop's Crusoe recounts a disturbing island episode:

> I got so tired of the very colors!
> One day I dyed a baby goat bright red
> with my red berries, just to see
> something a little different.
> And then his mother wouldn't recognize him. (*Complete* 165)

Crusoe's desperate effort at relief from monotony has disastrous consequences: the baby goat's life is endangered because, now that he looks different, his mother won't acknowledge or, presumably, care for him. The capacity to be reliably identified as oneself turns out to be both more tenuous and more vital than Crusoe realized, and Bishop seems to remind herself that making a change merely for the sake of a change is foolish. The passage retreats from the sinisterly cheerful pentameter of "One **day** I **dyed** a **ba**by **goat** bright **red**"—which begins to decelerate with the suggestion of a spondee in its final foot ("**bright red**")—to the slightly defensive tetrameter of "with my **red ber**ries, **just** to **see**." Then the move from the sheepishly falling trimeter of "**some**thing a **lit**tle **dif**ferent" (a dactyl and two trochees) to the eleven-syllable iambic pentameter of "And **then** his **mo**ther **would**n't **re**cog**nize** him" constitutes a last-second turn *toward* recognizable form at the moment of its loss, mimicking Crusoe's dawning appreciation for things as they once were. In this passage, Bishop steers perilously close to autobiography (since her own mother, institutionalized when Bishop was five, would not recognize her as an adult) but lets the movement of the freed verse stand in for harrowing approaches and painful retreats.[51]

For Bishop, poetry is also the locus of amusing failures of recognition, and she delights in the misunderstandings that can blossom at the prose/verse sea-line. In a January 15, 1948, letter to Robert Lowell, Bishop corrected an earlier comment she had made about his poem "Falling Asleep over the Aeneid," in which she wondered whether the epigraph would be "better in prose"—not realizing that it *was* in prose. She wrote:

[51] Renée R. Curry posits that, when Bishop goes on to recount a dream in which Crusoe slits a baby's throat, "mistaking it / for a baby goat" (*Complete* 165), she "invites interrogation into who (mis)took de Macedo Soares's life, her 'identity'" because she "harbored violent pangs of guilt regarding the suicide" (Curry 86). In these passages, Bishop's freed verse exposes how the correction of errors of perception and the recursive repetition of those errors can be a painfully revealing process.

> In the copy you sent me the first three lines of explanation all began with capitals so of course I managed to make them scan. It reminds me of the story about the Harvard professor whose pupil brought him a paper in blank verse and the professor said he must remind him that in writing prose it wasn't customary to begin each line with a capital… (*One Art* 153)

Bishop clearly likes to imagine that prose was mistaken for verse because it scanned or that verse was mistaken for prose because it scanned badly.[52] Her setup ("It reminds me of the story about the Harvard professor…") sounds like a joke, and it sort of is one. For Bishop, the frisson of recognition—whether stimulated by the approaching retreats of freed verse, profound autobiographical resonance, or a silly mistake—is a portal to a sense of meaning in the offing and a surprisingly broad range of affects.

Indeed, not all instances of (mis)recognition in "Crusoe in England" lead to pathos-inducing tragedy or chuckle-inducing mix-ups. In the penultimate verse paragraph, Bishop writes:

> The knife there on the shelf—
> it reeked of meaning, like a crucifix.
> It lived. How many years did I
> beg it, implore it, not to break?
> I knew each nick and scratch by heart,
> the bluish blade, the broken tip,
> the lines of wood-grain on the handle...
> Now it won't look at me at all.
> The living soul has dribbled away.
> My eyes rest on it and pass on. (*Complete* 166)

[52] For more on the prose/verse boundary in Bishop, see Joelle Bielle's analysis of Bishop's use of sections in her stories as if they're line breaks (Bielle 74). Bielle reads Bishop's story "In the Village" as a prose poem, asserting that the first paragraph "could easily be broken into a rough pentameter" (74). Notably, Bielle writes, "...paragraphing continued to *haunt* the process of publication of 'In the Village'" (78, my emphasis). For more on the prose/verse boundary at the inception of free verse, see Steele, who describes how modern poets "were forced to compare their art, which was metrical and which appeared to be in a state of decline, with an ascendant form of fiction produced without meter" (Steele 95). He lists principles of free verse that are also classical principles of prose, including "the principle of suggesting meter, while at the same time avoiding it" (97-98), which strongly hints at the movement of freed verse.

Like the baby goat's mother, the knife will no longer recognize Crusoe. Bishop elegizes the knife as having a "living soul [that] has dribbled away," but the memory of how well she once knew the knife reminds her of the extent to which she herself is diminished in the loss. Arguably, Bishop has reversed the power dynamic of recognition from the goat episode: the form retains a ghostly power, while the human morphs and fades until he is no longer fit to put the form to use. Appropriately, the only unequivocal line of iambic pentameter in this passage is "it **reeked** of **mean**ing, **like** a **cru**ci**fix**," in which the "reeked"/"meaning" assonance—as well as the polysyllabic (and melodramatic!) "crucifix"—locks in the meter in the mind's ear. The excess of symbolic weight that the knife once held for Crusoe manifests in the momentary extravagance of a line of pentameter in an otherwise highly tetrametrical verse paragraph, as well as in the miniature breath at the end of the line.[53] Crusoe can no longer conjure pentameters, and he can no longer summon the sense of the knife's living power. The meter reflects the complex of tones that Bishop associates with that psychological conundrum: nostalgic or wistful, self-consciously forced or even self-mocking, ironically bitter or distantly proud.

The only other line of close-to-perfect iambic pentameter in that whole verse paragraph is the second line of its opening couplet: "Now I live here, another island, / that **does**n't **seem** like **one**, but **who** de**cid**es?" (*Complete* 166). In this passage, which also deals with an instance of strained recognition (things that *are* islands now are hard to *recognize* as such), the pentameter stands out as discursive, self-doubting, and verbose, in contrast to the pat, epilogue-like tetrameters that surround it. The extra syllables in that line allow Crusoe the space he needs to gesture toward the relative, subjective status of the "island" identity that, inexplicably, some

[53] It is a pause that—some prosodists speculate—readers who are used to singing in 4/4 time may pose at the end of five-beat lines, in unconscious deference to the three rests their ears want to hear. See, in particular, Attridge.

places have and others don't. That relative status makes it difficult for Crusoe to adopt mindsets appropriate to the varying levels of isolation he experiences throughout his existence. How, Bishop wonders, can one learn when to brace for solitude?

In all these passages, Bishop's obvious preoccupation with advancing and retreating movements, tidal revenance, and eerie (mis)recognitions helps her process loneliness and loss. In this respect, "Crusoe in England" is a metrically irregular, littoral elegy in the tradition of Milton's "Lycidas," but the "Genius of the shore" is more literal: Bishop elegizes the shore itself, the lost island as well as the lost lover. In *Elizabeth Bishop: Her Poetics of Loss* (1994), Susan McCabe describes Bishop's poetics as "hinging upon the active experience of loss, which does not disappear with the writing of it" (McCabe 21). With Peter Sacks, who is himself drawing on Freud's definitional work in "Mourning & Melancholia," McCabe defines mourning as involving the withdrawal of affection and reattachment to a substitute (7). She invokes Freud's "rule of 'fort-da' (gone/there)," a game of "disappearance and return" that functions as a symbolic enactment of the anxiety-inducing thought of the mother's departure, and she notes that "loss [...] marks entry into language, as language marks entry into the awareness of the presence of absence" (McCabe 28). McCabe writes that poetry can use figures like refrain to imitate "the experience of fort-da" (28). "One Art"—a villanelle that appears later in *Geography III*, and that is another kind of non-elegy elegy—quite obviously uses refrain to bring back certain sounds and phrases so that the ear must lose them all over again. It's a performance of presence-in-absence. But refrain is not the only form through which Bishop can rehearse loss; in fact, as this analysis shows, the existence of a form like iambic pentameter—ubiquitous but elusive, stilted but talky, reproducible but continually recreated—permits a particular kind of mastery of losing that more self-evident kinds of linguistic return can't provide.

This mastery involves contending, in both image and form, with the residual materials of lost life worlds as well as with different ways that language itself can be present and absent at once. In the final verse paragraphs of "Crusoe in England," Crusoe relies on souvenirs from life's islanded experiences to measure and contextualize his feelings now that he has supposedly been rescued. The tea, lumber, knife, flute, shoes, trousers, and parasol are embodiments of a concern with vestigiality that permeates "Crusoe in England," especially in its use of freed verse. Of the parasol that "took [him] such a time / remembering the way the ribs should go," Bishop writes, "It still will work but, folded up, / looks like a plucked and skinny fowl" (*Complete* 166). On the island, Crusoe creates the parasol based on the memory of a form, and he must fiddle with it to get it to function properly; now that he is in England, Crusoe can barely recognize the parasol he once designed. The fact that it has come to resemble a featherless bird incapable of flight emphasizes the form's seeming uselessness, despite its return to the society and climate in which its ilk have thrived.

Like the parasol, lines of iambic pentameter in a freed verse environment recall an intent, a use, and a context, and they partially recreate those elements merely through their existence…but not entirely. The two lines in this passage that are in iambic pentameter occur back-to-back: "the **par**a**sol** that **took** me **such** a **time** / re**mem**ber**ing** the **way** the **ribs** should **go**" (*Complete* 166). As Crusoe remembers remembering, he slips into pentameter, but, when he returns to a contemplation of the object as it exists now, only an anticlimactic, slightly embarrassing tetrameter will do: "It still will work but, folded up, / looks like a plucked and skinny fowl" (166). The l-alliteration, combined with the collapsed, compound syntax in which the second subject of the verb is elided, contributes to this shrinking effect. The relics that Bishop contemplates are both invested with and emptied of value. Like the lines of pentameter

that wash up periodically among the other lines of "Crusoe in England," they are meaningful reminders of the vestige's limited but significant ability to connect people to the past.

While the end of the poem meditates on the leftovers from Crusoe's time on the island, casting England as a place filled with the dregs of other locales, an early passage depicts the island itself as overrun with remains:

> My island seemed to be
> a sort of cloud-dump. All the hemisphere's
> left-over clouds arrived and hung
> above the craters—their parched throats
> were hot to touch. (*Complete* 162)

Though clouds are conventionally associated with moisture, the leftover clouds that have come to Crusoe's island dry out the anthropomorphized throats of the craters, making it hard for them to speak. At the very least, it's clear that the clouds don't provide the hydrating relief that one might expect from them. Here, then, the presence of relics can stop the throat. The cloud-dump line is in pentameter ("a **sort** of **cloud**-dump. **All** the **hem**is**phere's**"—or, alternatively, respecting the spondee and de-promoting the last syllable, "a **sort** of **cloud-dump**. **All** the **hem**isphere's"), but the other lines have two, three, or four stresses. The short last line in the passage, the dimeter "were **hot** to **touch**," evinces a reluctance to place sustained pressure on the surface of language, as if it, too, is "hot to touch." Lingering could be dangerous. Like Ginsberg in his consideration of the ominous allure of the key that his mother has left behind for him "in the sunlight at the window in the bars" (*Kaddish* 33), Bishop is concerned with the existential and imaginative trade-offs of living among leftovers, iambic pentameter among them.

Bishop's letters show that she was aware of the high stakes of dwelling among relics, of the demands that such an existence makes on the imagination, and of the dangers of handling

things that have been handled many times before. In a September 11, 1940, letter to Marianne Moore, Bishop wrote:

> ...I have that continuous uncomfortable feeling of 'things' in the head, like icebergs or rocks or awkwardly placed pieces of furniture. It's as if all the nouns were there but the verbs were lacking—if you know what I mean. And I can't help having the theory that if they are joggled around hard enough and long enough some kind of electricity will occur, just by friction, that will arrange everything. (*One Art* 94)

Bishop's imagination is an admirable collector, but the attic of her brain seems like an unsafe place to spend time; one is liable to stub one's toe on an awkwardly placed armchair—or, as the metaphor waxes oceanic, to crash into an iceberg and perish. Bishop conceptualizes her predicament as a grammatical one in which a preponderance of nouns lacks the necessary verbal connecting material that would activate or energize them.[54] The "joggling" that constitutes at least part of her poetic process shares the looseness of freed verse; it is based on the conviction that simply mixing different things together will create "some kind of electricity."

Indeed, in another letter, Bishop made a similar comment about the composition of "Crusoe in England" itself. In an April 27, 1978, response to author Jerome Mazzaro regarding his recent article about her poetry, Bishop explained that she hadn't re-read *Robinson Crusoe* in at least twenty years when she wrote the poem.[55] She wrote, "Well, it takes an infinite number of things coming together, forgotten, or almost forgotten, books, last night's dream, experiences

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[54] This passage recalls the much-quoted line from "Over 200 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance": "Everything only connected by 'and' and 'and.'" (*Complete* 58).

[55] As her notebook archived at Vassar College attests, Bishop's engagement with Defoe's novel—though sporadic—dates to her stay on Cuttyhunk Island, Massachusetts, in the 1930s (Notebook). Laura Sloan Patterson argues that the Cuttyhunk notebooks exemplify spectrality not metrically but archivally, with the palimpsestic practice of "ghostwriting" new notes on top of faint, preexisting text (Patterson 295). Thanks to research librarian Sherri Brown for this reference.

past and present—to make a poem" (*One Art* 621). In this passage, she appears to feel less intimidated by the thought of her mind's assemblage than she does in the previous one. Surely a poet's career involves moments when the accumulation weighs on her and other moments when it beckons. And, of course, it can do both at once; for Bishop, some relics, including metrical ones, are intriguing precisely because they are daunting. In a March 1, 1961, letter to Lowell about his book of French translations, including one of Racine's *Phèdre*, Bishop wrote that Macedo Soares "was amazed by the way [Lowell] managed the famous lines and the famous meter…" (*One Art* 394). This comment assumes that a meter—not a poem or an instantiation of a meter but the abstract grid itself, the set of expectations—can be "famous" and therefore merit special handling. Chiasson's reading of Robinson Crusoe as just such a figure, one so famous as to inspire "ennui" ("One Kind" 233), hints at the costs of exhausting over-exposure; Bishop's treatment of the famous meter purports to protect it from such a fate.

Without mentioning meter directly, much critical writing about "Crusoe in England" attempts to assess the affective implications of the presence of such tired relics; this analysis makes the prosodic resonances of those arguments explicit. Thomas Travisano, C.K. Doreski, and Susan McCabe each read Crusoe's worn-out artifacts as embodiments of some attitude Bishop holds towards loss, tapping into the dynamics that this dissertation associates with ghost-pentametric visitations. Travisano notes Bishop's wry fondness for "vulgar-looking souvenirs" (Travisano 122) that, like iambic pentameter, inspire both disgust and affection; McCabe limns a "poetics of the homemade" (McCabe 194) that's inextricably tied to absence; and Doreski raises the stakes, writing that Crusoe's knife "testifies only to his former existence, as if an artifact that proves that he had lived at one time also proves he no longer does" (Doreski 145). For Doreski, the knife inspires comfort and grief; lines of iambic pentameter in freed verse—ostensibly more

of a sublimely neutral affair than Ginsberg's turbulent embedded pentameters—accomplish something analogous in Bishop's poem. Like Bishop's preoccupation with advancing/retreating motions and her fascination with moments of (mis)recognition, the poetic practice of recovering and reusing in order to process loss finds its metrical instantiation in freed verse, which scatters the page with fragments of a supposedly outdated metrical form.[56]

From the outset, Bishop's Crusoe calls his old island "un-rediscovered, un-renamable" (*Complete* 162). Those "un-" and "re-" prefixes perform the linguistic acrobatics of presence-in-absence. The neologistic terms they form are like the new islands "being born" before our very eyes earlier in that same verse paragraph; these islands and their descriptors are, in Hartman's terms, "discovered form[s]." To that end, they are also metrically challenging, forcing (or, at least, forcefully inviting) spondaic double stresses on the consecutive prefixes that would push the line to six stresses ("**un**-**re**dis**cov**ered, **un**-**renam**able"), even as a pentametrical scansion, which is undeniably plausible for a ten-syllable line like this one, would stress the "re-" of the first term and the "un-" of the second, promoting the final "-ble" into a fifth stress ("un-**re**dis**cov**ered, **un**-re**nam**a**ble**"). The island is "un-rediscovered" because no one has gone back to it, identifying it as the place where Crusoe lived; in that respect, the thought of the island annihilates the thought of the time Crusoe spent there. Now that Crusoe is in England, the thought of the island is a thought of his own absence from the island. On the other hand, it's "un-

[56] Angela Leighton asserts that, for a certain lineage of woman poets, form is fundamentally elegiac in that it commemorates losses which also cannot be forgotten, evincing regret for what is gone—"both gone from and gone into a poem" (Leighton 247). For a definition of the genre of "'person empty' elegies" (*Poetry of Mourning* 19), mirroring a trend in highly impersonal obituaries, see Ramazani. Also: for Bishop's prose articulation of presence-in-absence, see her short essay "Writing poetry is an unnatural act…": "My maternal grandmother had a glass eye. [...] The situation of my grandmother strikes me as rather like the situation of the poet: the difficulty of combining the real with the decidedly un-real; the natural with the unnatural; the curious effect a poem produces of being as normal as *sight* and yet as synthetic, as artificial, as a *glass eye*" (*Prose* 331).

renamable" because, never having been named, it logically can't be renamed and thereby erased; its absence from the historical record secures its specificity in Crusoe's memory. The metrical tension inherent in the line dramatizes these contradictions. Moreover, in calling the place "my poor island," Crusoe displaces the pity he feels for himself onto his island, conflating the two; he admits, later, "I often gave way to self-pity" (163). The last line of the verse paragraph, "None of the books has ever got it right," confirms the conflation: books have been wrong about Crusoe, too. Because he has been written about before, he barely exists—or, doesn't exist independently—in Bishop's imaginative universe. Still, the stakes of this passage feel relatively low; it's clever, playful, allusive, whiny.

Bishop raises the stakes of presence-in-absence, both metrical and otherwise, when she writes about Friday's arrival:

> Just when I thought I couldn't stand it
> another minute longer, Friday came.
> (Accounts of that have everything all wrong.)
> Friday was nice.
> Friday was nice, and we were friends.
> If only he had been a woman!
> I wanted to propagate my kind,
> and so did he, I think, poor boy.
> He'd pet the baby goats sometimes,
> and race with them, or carry one around.
> —Pretty to watch; he had a pretty body.
>
> And then one day they came and took us off. (*Complete* 165-166)

The relief of Friday's arrival, which assuages Crusoe's loneliness, manifests as a unit of iambic pentameter that coincides with the end of a sentence as well as the end of a line: "...a**no**ther **min**ute **long**er, **Fri**day **came**." Indeed, this whole passage is devoid of violent enjambments and tricky line breaks, an uncharacteristic approach to lineation that reflects a performative super-

simplicity that surfaces in the diction, too.[57] "Friday was nice. / Friday was nice, and we were friends" and "—Pretty to watch; he had a pretty body" are repetitive and childish, and "And then one day they came and took us off" mimics the helplessness of being saved with dazed monosyllables and redundant coordinating conjunctions. Indeed, the other lines of loose iambic pentameter in the verse paragraph—"(Ac**counts** of **that** have **ev**erything **all wrong**.)" and "…and **race** with **them**, or **car**ry **one** a**round**. / —**Pre**tty to **watch**; he **had** a **pre**tty **bod**y."—bespeak the nervous cheer of someone stunned by the long-awaited presence of an absent beloved, one for whom he has yearned.

Though his arrival is a relief, Friday's presence ultimately amounts to a sexual and romantic absence; according to Crusoe, he cannot serve as a true partner because he cannot help him reproduce. In the passages describing Friday, the male gender, symbolically rendered as presence (with female as absence) in culturally pervasive concepts like Freudian *Penisneid*, is transformed into a figure for absence, where a female could have signified presence ("Three Essays"). The initial trochaic substitution in "—**Pre**tty to **watch**; he **had** a **pre**tty **bod**y" in particular—with the way the later feet reestablish the iambic norm after the initial trochee—shows Crusoe stumbling to articulate and correct his remembered impressions of Friday in metrically acceptable ways even as he relies on the constriction of meter as cover for his bumbling homoerotic admissions (which are in turn cover for Bishop's own, even cagier homoerotic admissions). Other critics have remarked that Friday's presence empties Crusoe's language of content, thinning it and leaving it as a kind of void, a filler language reminiscent of the "blanks" (*Complete* 164) in Crusoe's memory of Greek drama and Wordsworth poems. Bishop's use of freed verse, with the opportunities it presents for enacting presence-in-absence,

[57] For more on Bishop's (and other poets') pointed enjambments, see Hollander, who cites Bishop's notorious "Glens Fall / s New York" line break in "Arrival at Santos."

occasions the most ecstatically revealing moments of this part of the monologue, showing how the elegiac dimensions of her prosody intersect with her navigation of gender and sexuality.[58]

After Bishop's Crusoe has contemplated his relics, his still-present objects that denote absence, the last two lines of the poem return to the thought of Friday, an absence that feels ever-present: "And Friday, my dear Friday, died of measles / seventeen years ago come March" (*Complete* 166). Metrically and thematically, these lines achieve pathos by way of the motif of presence-in-absence, since Crusoe reintroduces Friday into the final verse paragraph only to dwell on the fact that he isn't there. The couplet begins with a line of iambic pentameter ("And **Fri**day, my **dear Fri**day, **died** of **meas**les") that is almost completely devoid of iambs, as all but the first foot have been replaced by an anapest or trochees. It's arguably the most directly elegiac line in the poem, but its expression of grief consists, like so much of Bishop's own mourning in the weeks after Macedo Soares's death, mostly or merely of repeated facts, of basic information—plus one conventional endearment. The next line, the final line of the poem, is harder to scan: "Seventeen years ago come March" could be between three and five stresses, depending on whether "-teen," "-go," and "come" receive promotions. It's very talky; the polysyllabic but pedestrian "seventeen," half of the rapid double-dactyl "seventeen years ago," encourages hurried pronunciation, so that the reader has finished reading the last line rather sooner than expected. While the penultimate line uses the repetitive appositive phrase "my dear Friday" to fill out the pentameter, the last line is suffused with a sense of let-down that is

[58] Helen Vendler observes that Friday's arrival leaves Crusoe pretty speechless, able to utter only the most "vacant" of descriptors ("Domestication" 26) because "he is reduced to gesture and sketch before the reality of domesticity" (27). Vendler explicitly connects this dynamic to presence-in-absence, writing that domestication involves the "conferral of meaning" and the domestic the "loss of meaning" (27). In her figuration, domestication is presence, and domesticity is absence.

simultaneously a feeling of heartbreak, evincing a resigned refusal to fill space with consolation, celebration, or remembrance. The speaker isn't comfortable filling space, but he isn't comfortable not filling space, either; that's a contradiction endemic to grief…and one befitting the dancing compromises of freed verse.[59]

The second chapter of *Modernism's Metronome*, in which Glaser assesses Eliot's shifting attitudes towards regular meter as a gendered phenomenon, casts a similar concern with filler language as central to the set of anxieties that gave rise to free verse. "Crusoe in England" makes it clear that what Glaser sees as an affective dimension of non-metrical poetry is also—or, is *really*—an affective dimension of freed verse, maybe even a definitional one. Glaser tracks Eliot's use of "rhythmic scuttle[s]" (*Metronome* 61)—"crass refrain[s]" (61) that, like the "pair of ragged claws" that Prufrock says he "should have been," or like the Prufrockian refrain "In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo" (quoted at *Metronome* 61), threaten the mind's wakefulness by filling space with rhythmic language. Glaser writes:

> The metronomic form of the chatting women insinuates itself into Prufrock's repetitive language and rhythm. His words are full of iambic, metricized phrases, frequently formed around a rhetorically fruitless 'and,' which tend to double or triple themselves: 'a toast and tea,' 'tea and cakes and ices,' 'visions and revisions,' 'decisions and revisions,' 'works and days,' 'days and ways.' These sterile doublings rhetorically and prosodically express Prufrock's emasculation. (*Metronome* 61)

[59] Bishop's letters recount a fascinating and germane memory of a trip to France with college friends during which the painter Margaret Miller lost an arm in a car accident. In "The Closet of Breath: Elizabeth Bishop, Her Body and Her Art," Lombardi writes that Bishop's imagination was "understandably *haunted* by the maiming of her intimate friend and fellow artist" (Lombardi 46, my emphasis). In this context, the anecdote and Lombardi's use of it suggest Glaser's phantom limb metaphor for the spectral presence of meter in modernist free verse. Barbara Page goes further, asserting of Bishop's relationship to poets in Auden's circle, "By now, Bishop was beginning to turn her experience of being cut off—like the severed arm—from continuity and preestablished order into a principle of new composition that would inform her own practice as a poet of discontinuities, cultural incongruities, and dilapidated things" (Page 201).

Glaser's collection of needlessly paratactic groupings recalls Bishop's "Everything only connected by 'and' and 'and'" (*Complete* 58), her Eliotic tendency to offer her speakers opportunities to waste the reader's time. For example, describing daily life on Crusoe's island, she writes:

> The sun set in the sea; the same odd sun
> rose from the sea,
> and there was one of it and one of me.
> The island had one kind of everything… (*Complete* 163)

Redundancy, repetition, and blankness pervade this passage. The s-alliteration (of "sun," "set," "sea," "same," "sun," "rose," and "sea") and rare end rhyme (between "sea" and "me") made over-sonorous by the short dimeter ("**rose** from the **sea**") accentuate those qualities, making the passage of time seem both banal and surreal—Bishop's sweet spot. The island has "one kind of everything," which could imply that it is a well-appointed island, lacking no types or species, but is "one" enough? Isn't there loneliness in mere sufficiency and, conversely, a beauty in filling space for the sake of filling space?

Bishop really isn't sure. Crusoe's "nightmares of other islands / stretching away from [his], infinities / of islands, islands spawning islands" (*Complete* 165), with its exaggerated repetition, shows that he is deeply anxious about the need to fill space—to spend all his time filling many individual spaces with his self. The passage in which he remembers the repetitive noises of the island animals inverts this anxiety and transfers it to the realm of sound, inviting comparisons to the threatening inexorability of the poetic (i.e. metered) as well as the animal voice: "*Baa, baa, baa* and *shriek, shriek, shriek,* / *baa ... shriek ... baa ...* I still can't shake / them from my ears; they're hurting now" (164). Bishop's anxiety about filling space with meaningless noise manifests in the curious metrical maneuver whereby she moves from stressing every *other* "baa" or "shriek" in the first line, leading to a line of iambic tetrameter with a clipped first foot

("***Baa**, baa, **baa*** and ***shriek**, shriek, **shriek***"), to what is arguably a line of iambic pentameter in which the first three feet are just single stresses ("***baa*** ... ***shriek*** ... ***baa*** ... I **still** can't **shake**")—almost as if the conductor is switching to half-time.[60] The ellipses (as opposed to the commas) hint at a different rhythm, ironically making space for silence in a passage that describes (and, with the "shriek"/"shake" off-rhyme, arguably continues to produce) a relentlessly noisy experience. The baas and shrieks assert their independence from meter, their right to be stressed, and, in doing so, they allow the line to achieve five stresses. Renée R. Curry writes that these animals "speak incessantly in a language that outsiders cannot penetrate, in a language painful, or at least foreign, to the outsider" (Curry 85), and she connects that frustratingly inaccessible form of speech to Adrienne Rich's concept of compulsory heterosexuality. In this context, the idea of noises that can be uncomfortable to hear but have staying power also suggests lines of iambic pentameter; they are ringing in Crusoe's ears even in the present moment of the poem.[61]

Two strange letters that Bishop wrote, one to Marianne Moore on December 5, 1936, and the other to her friend Carley Dawson on November 10, 1948, make explicit the connection between animal noises and metrical anxiety, a connection that is implicit in this passage about bleating and shrieking in "Crusoe in England." In the first letter, Bishop wrote, regarding Wallace Stevens's poem "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue": "I dislike the way he occasionally seems to make blank verse *moo*" (*One Art* 48, her emphasis). The remark may simply refer to the monotonous noise of what she deems an overly regular meter, or it might imply that Stevens

[60] Isobel Armstrong's close reading of Tennyson's "Break, Break, Break" wrestles with a related but inverted metrical phenomenon, wherein the "crushing monosyllables" (Armstrong 38) of the first line must fracture into "the cresting lilt of these triple feet" (38) that dominate much of the rest of the poem. Arguably, the off-rhyme of "shriek" and "shake" with "break" pulls the Tennyson passage all the way into the margin of "Crusoe in England."

[61] Notably, Doreski has a different take on the baas and shrieks, interpreting these noises as the antithesis of meter: "The cacophony of baa, shriek, hiss reiterates the unimportance of embellished utterance. On this island, necessity dictates: The gut speaks" (Doreski 132). This reading overlooks the metrical contortions the lines achieve—and what those contortions imply.

treats his verse like cattle (herding it around, demanding milk, insisting on domestication). In the second letter, Bishop described a panel discussion among poets at Bard College:

> ...in which ALL THE POETS were dragged up from around a table and you know *made points* and dragged in dynamos and for some reason the rhythm of milking a cow seemed to figure quite a lot, too—amounting in all to no more than each one's elucidating his own style, but all very well received & everyone kept saying it was the best thing that had ever happened at Bard. (*One Art* 174)

Here, too, Bishop associates meter with cows—this time, with the repetitive motion of milking them. She holds the actual discussion of prosody at arm's length, mocking and dismissing it as self-serving babble and inviting the intimation that the debating prosodists themselves (not to mention the too-easily-wowed crowd) sounded like cattle, lowing loudly at one another.[62] Thus, "Crusoe in England" conflates the loneliness and loss at the heart of all uses of present-but-absent filler language with species alienation in addition to sexual alienation, using passages of flickering meter to hint at Crusoe's struggle to grapple with the compounding losses of home, companion, material possessions, identity, and purpose.

These associations are not a mere accident of the subject matter of "Crusoe in England." *Geography III* is rife with evidence of Bishop's anxiety about useless noisemaking as a human, sometimes gendered, sometimes familial phenomenon. In "In the Waiting Room," Aunt

[62] Bishop's preoccupation with animal noises within human discursive spaces shows up elsewhere. In a February 4, 1937, letter to Moore, Bishop described a trip to Fort Myers, FL to see herpetologist Ross Allen "wrestle with his alligator" (*One Art* 59) and lecture on snakes, and she devoted a lot of her letter to describing Allen's classification of and passion for animal noises. She wrote, "The part of the show devoted to the alligator was memorable chiefly because Mr. Allen wanted to creep up on it (in a big swimming pool) unnoticed, and yet go on with the lecture. So he slid into the water, and went right on talking. It was quite a sight to see his large, solemn baby face apparently floating bodiless on the surface of the water, while from it came his imitations of the alligator's calls: the 'bellow,' the love call, the warning, and the social call" (58). Later in the letter, Bishop described going to dinner with a group of people including the herpetologist after the show. She wrote that his "table conversation consist[ed] of imitations of animals and birds. 'Now this,' he would say, 'can be heard for seven miles,' and we would all murmur, 'Pretty'" (58).

Consuelo's "*oh!* of pain" makes her seem, to the speaker, like "a foolish, timid woman" (*Complete* 160) and makes the speaker self-conscious about the "family voice" (161) she feels in her throat. In "The Moose," Bishop glosses idle small-town gossip with some memorably/forgettably repetitive lines about major life events: "deaths, deaths and sicknesses; / the year he remarried; / the year (something) happened" (171-172). The parenthetical "(something)" stands in for a significant incident but declines to name it, maybe because the overheard speech is muffled, or because Bishop can't summon enough enthusiasm to record it in detail. The chatty relative in "Poem"—"*Your Uncle George, no, mine, my Uncle George, / he'd be your great-uncle…*" (177)—fills out a line of pentameter in another freed verse poem of familial gibberish, the temporary misidentification of Uncle George occasioning the correction that fills the hovering metrical grid, if only for a moment.

Marilyn May Lombardi explores the idea of the female-inflected "family voice" in Bishop's poetics more generally, writing, "In the 'family voice'—strongly associated with the garrulousness and duplicity culturally ascribed to women—Bishop finds the tendency towards 'morbidity' that she would later attribute to confessional poets (especially women writers like Elizabeth Bowen)" (Lombardi 52). These proto-confessional figures talk too much; their incessant noisemaking is indiscreet. For Bishop, there's danger in succumbing to any rhythm that might induce the poet to speak or write just for the sake of filling space: she might find herself saying so much about herself that her voice is compromised, or she might find herself speaking as part of a collective and losing her identity altogether. Lombardi continues, "[Bishop's speaker in "In the Waiting Room"] feels herself caught in an enmeshed community, a whole 'skein' of female voices – voices that seem to rise up out of the pages of the National Geographic and shoot

straight through her own body" (54). Lombardi connects the space-filling function of these female voices with the central Bishopian, piscine image of the net or skein.

Likewise, Helen Vendler identifies the signature Bishop style as a "combination of somber matter with a manner net-like, mesh-like, airy, reticulated to let in light" (*The Music* 299), and, in an analysis of "Cape Breton," she explicitly connects this image to Bishop's approach to meter:

> The 'fine, torn fish-nets' that catch the song at Cape Breton are those matrices of English verse that Bishop still uses, though in the torn form she has learned from Spender, among others; her rhymes are often slant, her rhythms irregular, her stanzas disproportionate, her comedy often a violation of genre, her allusions oblique; but we see in these rents in the mesh her intimate knowledge of the fabric she works in. (*The Music* 292)

Vendler's broad characterization of this "torn form" suggests the mottled effects of Shane McCrae's porous pentameter, which I will elucidate in Chapter 3; at the current juncture, this characterization is helpful for any reader interested in apprehending the provenance and significance of Bishop's freed verse in "Crusoe in England." Vendler ultimately asserts that the "rents in the mesh" serve to reaffirm Bishop's mastery of "the fabric she works in," but freed verse perpetually weighs the pros and cons of filling a line of pentameter all the way to the end (299). It also explores the vocal and tonal opportunities that refusing to fill space can provide—especially when a poem's speaker, or the poet herself, is in a psychological or emotional predicament like grief, which draws attention to lacunae and places particular pressure on the need to fill space.

In letters written in the weeks after Macedo Soares's death, Bishop remarked repeatedly that, with her partner gone, she didn't know how to fill the spaces of her life: "[I] can't imagine

what I am going to do with my life now" (*One Art* 472), "I really don't know what my plans are now" (474). However, certain passages in those letters fill space with abandon, sounding a little like the unhinged and wailing Ginsberg: "Oh WHY WHY WHY didn't she wait a few days? Why did I sleep so soundly?—why why why—I can't help thinking I might have saved her somehow—go over and over that Sunday afternoon but honestly can't think of anything I did especially wrong—except that I have done many things wrong in my life" (470). This digressive, self-interrupting syntax littered with long dashes, this repetition of "WHY" until it sounds more like a noise than a word, this emphasis on a compulsion to return to the scene of loss, to try to understand it—these elements are reminiscent of Ginsberg's poetics, especially as it relates to his use of embedded pentameter, which, as we saw in the first section of this chapter, hinges on returns and recognitions as well. "Kaddish" and "Crusoe in England" may seem to be contemporaneous poems operating within distinct traditions; however, reading their prosodies in relation to one another—and with the ghost of iambic pentameter in mind—reveals the emotional undercurrents they hold in common, as well as the fundamental kinship between two post-post-metrical prosodies in which units of iambic pentameter are encompassed or included among other line lengths, syllable counts, or rhythms.

Thus, this chapter has brought together two elegies written in the 1960s, half a century after the beginning of the supposed free verse revolution and the inception of the ghost meter metaphor, in which the spectral presence of iambic pentameter, achieved through triangulated tension with line and syntax, configures each poet's relationship to loss. In "Kaddish," lines of iambic pentameter surface in connection with moments of ghastly (mis)recognition or compulsory backwards movement, semi-self-conscious rhythmic eddies amid the onward stream of Ginsberg's hybrid, cathartic chant. Freed verse lets Bishop rehearse—not only in her imagery,

use of persona, and tonal play but also in her manipulation of received form—expressions of grief that honor its much-theorized tendency to come and go in waves, causing experiences of panicked (mis)recognition that make the beloved seem present and absent at once. This prosody involves constant rather than intermittent interaction with the possibility of iambic pentameter, either approaching it or retreating from it, or both, in every line of the poem. Ultimately, "Crusoe in England" shies away from unmitigated experiences or depictions of recognition, return, and residue.[63] The motions of freed verse, on top of Bishop's equivocal relationship to openly elegiac gestures, generate a poem that achieves intimacy through refusal—a poem that, like Crusoe's knife, "won't look at me at all" (*Complete* 166). The way that misgivings about intimate disclosure can manifest in meter will figure heavily in the next and final chapter in this dissertation, which turns to certain prosodic afterlives of the confessional.

[63] Notably, Berger points out that Bishop may not have planned to maintain this posture forever: "In her letter of application to the Guggenheim Foundation, Bishop proposed a second new project, a book--length elegy for her partner Lota de Macedo Soares, who had committed suicide in September 1967, almost exactly a decade earlier. Her working title for the volume was, simply enough, 'Elegy'" (Berger 52). Nevertheless, in the absence of a full draft of that poem, readers invested in Bishop's grief after Macedo Soares's death are left to grapple with the metrical, generic, and emotional equivocations of "Crusoe in England."

Chapter 3

"He held his arms out and embraced the air": Expressive Spaces in the Post-Confessional Prosodies of Kay Ryan and Shane McCrae

The previous chapter offered "embedded pentameter" and "freed verse" as subcategories of ghost meter linked to the ghostly recognitions and spectral returns of elegy, exploring how two canonical mid-century poets, Allen Ginsberg and Elizabeth Bishop, mourn personal losses in and through their specifically post-post-metrical prosodic maneuvers. This chapter contends that two popular and prolific contemporary poets, Kay Ryan and Shane McCrae, use "split pentameter" and "porous pentameter," respectively, to contend with the legacies of the confessional mode, fracturing and dividing units of meter across and within lines in order to make space for tonal disjunctions and unexpected utterances, especially those relaying delayed (or even extratemporal) understanding. Although it would seem that line breaks or in-line gaps in the middles of metrical units would diminish these two poets' abilities to leverage iambic pentameter as a form, the reverse is true; the breaks and gaps create syntactic opportunities (for repetition, for recursion) that secure that meter's presence in these poems. Indeed, all the non-metrical features that surface in the subsequent analyses, from internal rhymes to chant-like repetitions to networks of prosodically resonant imagery, ultimately serve to cement the ghostly metrical patternings I describe. At crucial points in these poems, both Ryan and McCrae seem to let meter take the wheel, leading them towards concluding gestures, affective resolutions, or spiritual insights—be they joyful, wry, sorrowful, or something else entirely—that might otherwise remain elusive.

1. Kay Ryan's Split Pentameters

In "Half a Loaf" from *Flamingo Watching* (1994), Ryan contemplates the unknowability of the inside of unsliced bread:

The whole loaf's loft

is halved in profile,
like the standing side
of a bombed cathedral.

The cut face
of half a loaf
puckers a little.

The bread cells
are open and brittle
like touching coral.

It is nothing like the middle
of an uncut loaf,
nothing like a conceptual half
which stays moist.

I say do not adjust to half
unless you must. (*Flamingo* 39)

Once the loaf is halved, Ryan argues with semi-ironic urgency, its inside becomes an outside and is transformed—as in Derrida's "invagination," wherein a boundary becomes "an internal pocket" (Derrida 55). The tactile image of the "brittle" bread cells makes the elusiveness of their inward counterparts more pronounced: to know sliced bread is to wonder about the character of unsliced bread. The poem seems to proffer the "conceptual half" as the ideal object for this curiosity. The conceptual half—either the mere thought of the halved bread or the mereological impulse divorced from the world—"stays moist," a practice of evergreen readiness with an array of associations that Ryan invokes with understated glee.

Stylistically, however, Ryan's sympathies lie with the "open and brittle" face, the textured edge, rather than with the moister middle. Short lines are a vital aspect of her poetic signature, which she is sharpening in *Flamingo Watching* but which is unmissable from *Elephant Rocks* (1996) to *Erratic Facts* (2016). Critics have registered Ryan's preference for short lines as a tendency towards compression (see, for example, Gioia and Enszer), but the imagery of "Half a

Loaf," not to mention scores of other Ryan lyrics that thematize the edge (e.g. "Tenderness and Rot" or "Leaving Space") suggests that Ryan's preference for short lines may have more to do with the desire to maximize surface area than with the impulse to make small poems. Ryan stated as much in her 2008 *Paris Review* interview: "Edges are the most powerful parts of the poem. The more edges you have the more power you have. They make the poem more permeable, more exposed" (Fay).

Ryan is a largely anti-confessional poet who, apart from dedicating all her books to her partner Carol, leaves her life out of her work and advocates against poets keeping journals—or even too many memories (*Gravity* 95). It is surprising, therefore, that she articulates the power of edges in terms of their capacity to "make the poem more permeable, more exposed." However, in her short essay "The Poet Takes a Walk," Ryan shows that she conceives of the imaginative process of making a poem as analogous to that of searching for exposed edges among trash shards glimpsed during a stroll. In that essay, she delineates the two kinds of pleasure that such a practice furnishes:

> Whereas the first pleasure was instantaneous, the mind effortlessly constructing the whole beer bottle around the little trapezoid [...] In this second type, as I walk along I notice that some second scrap is the color of something I saw earlier, a ways back, and has a *matching edge* [...] Which is to say, the brain anticipates significance; it doesn't know which edge may in fifty yards knit to which other edge, so everything is held, charged with a subliminal glitter along its raw sides. (*Gravity* 297, my emphasis)

The shard's inner edge invokes some other, absent shape. It catches Ryan's eye with the "subliminal glitter along its raw sides" and is memorable enough that, before she even knows what it's the edge *of*, she stores its shape in her imagination for future use. Without exposure, the

edge could never participate in Ryan's game of assemblage, the pleasure of which inheres not in the act of matching piece to piece but in the anticipation of such matching, the sense of possibility in each edge's particular texture.

Because the conceit of "Half a Loaf" involves drawing closer to that edge, the poem's final command not to "adjust to half / unless you must" is unconvincing. This enjambment enacts the ambivalent warning it describes: by declining to break after "adjust," which would allow it to resolve into two rhyming lines of iambic trimeter ("I **say** do **not** ad**just** / to **half** un**less** you **must**" as opposed to "I say do not adjust to half / unless you must"), it refuses to split this final syntactic unit into perfect halves, choosing instead to expose an uneven edge and thereby to allow certain suspended off-rhymes—between "half" and "loaf" as well as "must" and "moist"—to resonate, relegating the more perfect rhyme to internal status. Formally speaking, Ryan may be demonstrating the advantages of internal rhymes, which make it possible for her to expose what would normally be line middles to their ends and vice versa—so that non-rhyme words can get a little brittle through contact with the airy margin while rhyme words moisten in the wetter middles. It's possible, in other words, to read "Half a Loaf" as a defense of Ryan's much-discussed practice of "recombinant rhyme," which involves "stash[ing her] rhymes at the wrong ends of lines and in the middles" (Fay).

However, the poem's broader prosody belies this interpretation. The final enjambment may constitute a mimetic rejection of the perfect half and a case for the affordances of messier slicing styles, but it is itself rather neat. Within the context of Ryan's oeuvre, "Half a Loaf" is relatively non-propulsive. Metrically, there's a contrast between the puttering two-stress lines of the middle tercets ("The **cut face** / of **half** a **loaf** / **puck**ers a **litt**le") and the quatrains, which alternate between loosely three- and two-stress lines ("It is **noth**ing **like** the **midd**le / of an **un**cut

loaf'), setting up the pointed asymmetry of the final couplet. It's unusual for Ryan's poems to have any kind of stanzaic organization; of the 48 poems in *Flamingo Watching,* only four have stanza breaks. "Half a Loaf" may indulge in a moment's fantasy of brittle edges hiding moist interiors, but it shies away from enacting those textural dynamics at the level of prosody, and the speaker warns—as if trying to convince herself—against getting used to the thrill of exposure: "I say do not adjust to half / unless you must." However, as we will see, Ryan "must."

"Repulsive Theory," from *The Niagara River* (2005), exemplifies Ryan's prosody of the edge. The poem is an encomium to an abstract tendency that Ryan, with characteristic broadness, locates at every possible scale and in every possible context: that of repulsion. She writes:

> Little has been made
> of the soft, skirting action
> of magnets reversed,
> while much has been
> made of attraction.
> But is it not this pillowy
> principle of repulsion
> that produces the
> doily edges of oceans
> or the arabesques of thought?
> And do these cutout coasts
> and incurved rhetorical beaches
> not baffle the onslaught
> of the sea or objectionable people
> and give private life
> what small protection it's got?
> Praise then the oiled motions
> of avoidance, the pearly
> convolutions of all that
> slides off or takes a
> wide berth; praise every
> eddying vacancy of Earth,
> all the dimpled depths
> of pooling space, the whole
> swirl set up by fending-off—
> extending far beyond the personal,
> I'm convinced—
> immense and good

in a cosmological sense:
unpressing us against
each other, lending
the necessary *never*
to never-ending. (*Niagara* 32-33)

As in "Half a Loaf," Ryan seems bewitched by the textural possibilities of edges. Instead of brittle coral and moist dough, we get "the / doily edges of oceans" and the "dimpled depths / of pooling space": these textures are ornamental and represent the shape of *thought*, which, apparently, curls at its edges as well. To an even greater extent than "Half a Loaf," "Repulsive Theory" conflates its attraction to those "cutout coasts / and incurved rhetorical beaches" with its fascination with the more infinite "vacancies" that such edges protect, so that seeming opposites make contact.

Syntactically, discursively, and prosodically, the loaf of "Repulsive Theory" has been sliced into two very different halves: the first, which introduces the topic and stakes out a position, is made up of one short sentence followed by two rhetorical questions, while the second, which seems to follow logically from the first ("Praise, then…"), is one seemingly "never-ending" paratactic sentence punctuated with asides ("extending far beyond the personal, / I'm convinced—"). In the first half, end-rhymes dominate: "action" with "attraction," "thought" with "onslaught" and "got." In the second, amid that edge/vacancy conflation, the rhymes turn recombinant, with the mid-line phrase "wide berth" predicting the end-word "Earth" and one hyphenated phrase, "fending-off," setting up, eight lines later, the final emphasis on the "never-ending."

Arguably the sharpest enjambment in the poem occurs early in that second half, when Ryan praises "the pearly / convolutions of all that / slides off or takes a / wide berth." The line break after "that" momentarily allows that word, especially in its assonant resonance with

"baffle," to serve as a demonstrative pronoun rather than a relative pronoun—in other words, to gesture broadly and idiomatically towards "all that," rather than to limit its object merely to "all" those things that tend to glide on surfaces or elude contact altogether. Paterson has noted that "the last word in [a] line reverberates briefly in its silence" (Paterson 419); at the end of a line, a word like "that" is more likely to receive stress. With "that" stressed, the syntactic unit leading up to the line break scans as a broken-up unit of iambic pentameter: "the **pearl**y / **con**vo**lu**tions **of** all **that**" (or, instead of promoting "of," and letting the idiomatic "all that" take the spondee it arguably merits, " "the **pearl**y / **con**vo**lu**tions of **all that**"). In the wake of that lineal slippage and the ambiguity it has generated, the rest of that syntactic unit (ending in "wide berth" and a semicolon) holographically flickers between different stress patterns—between an answering, spondee-heavy pentameter (as in "**slides off** or **takes** a **/ wide berth**") and a more triple-meter-like "**slides** off or **takes** a / wide **berth**." The way this phrase sounds depends on whether or not the reader's mind's ear goes back to correct how it heard the preceding syntactic unit, once Ryan has revealed the trick of the enjambment. It also depends on the extent to which the placement of "wide" at the beginning of the line, even amid such fluid lineation, cues the ear to hear it as stressed.[64]

Either way, the succeeding syntactic unit—which ends in the rhyming word "Earth" and lands with a sonic thud, and which marks the poem's ascendance to an even more elevated, self-conscious mode of praise—certainly scans as iambic pentameter: "praise **ev**ery / **edd**ying **va**can**cy** of **Earth**." Because "praise" repeats from the previous sentence, it doesn't receive stress, even though, as the first word in the line and a one-syllable imperative verb, it otherwise might. The collapsing of the three syllables of "eddying" into two is conventional, as is the

[64] On the questionable power of line beginnings to confer stress, see Cushman's *William Carlos Williams and the Meanings of Measure*, as well as Paterson.

promotion of the last syllable of "vacancy" in the fourth foot.[65] In other words, this syntactic unit doesn't just scan; it sounds like meter. And that sound pattern dominates the rest of the poem, which is filled almost to the brim with units of iambic pentameter that correspond with syntax but not lineation, including "**all** the **dim**pled **depths /** of **pool**ing **space**," "the **whole** / **swirl** set **up** by **fend**ing **off**," and "the **ne**cess**ar**y ***ne**ver* / to n**e**ver-**end**ing." There's even one pentameter that corresponds both to syntax and the line: "ex**tend**ing **far** be**yond** the **per**so**nal**." In that case, in the context of Ryan's shorter lines, the five-stress unit carries the sense of "extending far beyond," and the connection between the short line and "the personal" affirms Ryan's association of line edges with her own understated method of self-exposure.

Thus, although it would seem that line breaks in the middles of metrical units undermine the poem's engagement with iambic pentameter as a form, it is an enjambment ("all that / slides off")—and the phrasal exigencies it carries, the way it shifts the sounds of the succeeding lines—that enlivens Ryan, in the second half of "Repulsive Theory," to the possibilities of alineal meter. Ryan's ambivalent poetics of the edge, wherein she conflates her delight in brittle or ornate outsides with her fascination with the depths they hide, plays out in and indeed originates in her prosody, which leverages the ambiguous energy of enjambments to access the discursive propulsion of iambic pentameter—and determines, in turn, the nature and character of the poem's discoveries.

The first half of this final chapter explores how, in poems that thematize textured edges, revealing dislocations, and asymptotic arrivals, Kay Ryan's mid-meter enjambments generate rather than disrupt units of iambic pentameter. Throughout, I will use the term "split pentameter" to describe metrical forms strung across lines and often distinguished by syntax and/or

[65] See Robert Bridges' categories of Miltonic elision.

internal/recombinant rhyme. Like "enclosing metapentameter" and "embedded pentameter" (operative terms from my first and second chapters, referring to metrical units bookending non-metrical poems and metrical units contained inside longer lines, respectively), the term "split pentameter" comes from Finch, who claims that Dickinson's relationship with iambic pentameter reflects her relationship with "patriarchal poetic tradition": she "resists the meter, approaches it with tentative ambivalence, and sometimes gains power from it" (Finch 14). Finch draws on Gilbert and Gubar's Bloomian concept of anxiety of authorship to explain "why Dickinson chose to gnaw at iambic pentameter mostly from a strict metrical framework [...] rather than radically loosening meter as did her contemporary, Whitman" (Finch 18). In Finch's explanation of Dickinson's use of split pentameter, the splitting is a subtly rebellious tactic, a way of undermining one device's patriarchal power without losing all connection with poetic form.[66]

Although Finch's choice of the word "split" implies a break-down of meter, the prosodic processes she traces in Dickinson are useful forerunners for the patterns of revealing dislocation and incomplete approach that I observe in Ryan's work. In Finch's reading of Dickinson's "On my volcano grows the Grass," for example, she describes a two-foot line "joining with" the three-foot line before it "to form a single 'split' iambic pentameter line" (Finch 23). She goes on to explain how that combination sets the stage for the complete line of iambic pentameter that follows. She writes, "the phrase 'Did I disclose' serves as both a syntactic and a metrical hinge" (23), continuing, "When the final, full pentameter line appears in the poem, it has been anticipated, gradually brought to the reader's consciousness, and to some extent forestalled or held off by the split-pentameter tactic" (23). Dickinson's split-pentameter hinges swing the door of form open and closed at once, affording glimpses of the affects it would make possible while

[66] For a more explicitly feminist use of the ghost meter framework than in Finch, see Gilbert's "Glass Joints: A Meditation on the Line."

also holding them at bay. Unobstructed glimpses of iambic pentameter coincident with the line occur even less frequently in Ryan's work than they do in Dickinson's ("Snake Charm" and "Living With Stripes" offer two rare examples), and the anticipation that Finch describes functions differently in this analysis. In both cases, a reading that leverages split pentameters shows how more broadly recognized aspects of these poets' work—compression, elision, short lines, sonic density—are features of metrical experimentation.

Prosodic approaches involving hypothetical relineations and outright decouplings of the metrical unit from the line have received a certain amount of opprobrium. In *Rethinking Meter: A New Approach to the Verse Line* (1995), Alan Holder indicts what he sees as the "metrical coerciveness" of Hartman's readings of Eliot, which I cite at greater length in the previous chapter. Holder argues that Hartman is guilty of "a forced attempt to make the short lines of 'The Hollow Men' echo the longer lines of the form in question" (Holder 115). Holder similarly critiques Finch for being "bound and determined to find feet in what appears to be nonmetrical poetry, and [...] to maximize their import" (118). Holder finds ridiculous all such willful scansions, and his incredulous reaction to the "prosodists who have recently begun to take liberties with the free-verse texts, actually rearranging the lines so as to 'show' us the metrical ghost behind the arras" (120) is a reminder that, even mid-repudiation of the very notion of meter's presence-in-absence, poetics theorists often reach for and make use of the metaphor of haunting that lies at the center of this project. In fact, Holder's broader critique of what he calls "prosodic foot fetishism" (29) and "the curious sport of foot-spotting" (112) participates in the spectral dynamics of disdain and disbelief that, as I argue in the introduction, render the language of the occult so relevant to contemporary metrical discourse. In his attempts to dismiss the ghost of meter, Holder fuels its dubious returns.

Holder's skepticism about the possibility of split pentameters is spirited and adversarial; entertaining his objections offers an opportunity to deepen the definition of the term. For instance, in response to Gilbert's reading of Plath, Holder rejects the possibility of a critical relineation that omits a phrase in order to secure a scansion, so that "the original is seen to contain something brilliantly significant, something apparently not discernible in the complete arrangement of lines as they first stood" (Holder 125). On the one hand, this sounds like a reasonable objection. If a critic isn't going to maintain the coincidence of the metrical unit with the line, shouldn't they at least read the poem as the poet wrote it and listen for hidden pentameters in that text and that text only? If an argument about a poem's prosody ignores both its lines and its syntax, doesn't it ignore the poem altogether? First of all, as my opening analyses of "Half a Loaf" and "Repulsive Theory" show, identifying split pentameters does not mean ignoring lineation; rather, it means elevating the line, as a formal device, such that it can work in tension with, rather than merely in service to, metrical patterns. Second, if it is indeed the triangulated tension among meter, line, and syntax that generates affective possibilities in contemporary poetry, then syntax should be as important, as meaning-making, as meter and the line. Shouldn't a reading take seriously its ability to exempt and subordinate certain phrases, to create a structure of thought that asks the reader to listen to some of the poem's language separately, at least to some extent, from the rest of its language?

The work of several modern and contemporary poetics theorists makes it clear that my commitment to empowering the line and the clause in relation to meter—thus, paradoxically, enabling them to bring meter into relief when it might otherwise seem absent or inactive—is only one of many rationales for staying open to the possibility of split pentameters or of split metrical units more generally. In *William Carlos Williams and the Meanings of Measure* (1985),

Stephen Cushman explores the history of verse paragraph indentations that reflect content and undermine meter, drawing the connection between Elizabethan dramatists' tendency to "chang[e] speakers in the middle of a pentameter line" and the Romantics' "twist" of verse paragraphs in which "indentation may occur within a line rather than between lines" (*Meanings of Measure* 57). He writes, "The full pentameter is now broken into two parts, the last line of the old paragraph and the first line of the new. Each part is partially framed by blank space" (57). Cushman shows how considerations of voice and subject matter can override meter's coincidence with the line without obliterating its presence. In *Radium of the Word: A Poetics of Materiality* (2020), Craig Dworkin looks even further backwards, historicizing the decoupling of the line and the metrical unit by pointing out, as part of the set-up to an argument about prose being meaningfully lineated, that "only in modern times has Anglo-Saxon poetry been printed so that its metrical units correspond with a line" (Dworkin 22).

In *Forms of Poetic Attention* (2020), Lucy Alford allows for the possibility of split metrical units not as part of an effort to historicize forms of spatial experimentation but as part of an argument that poetic language is an instrument for tuning and refining the attentive capacities. She cites an instance of metrical/lineal decoupling as part of her discussion of Mallarmé's *Un Coup de dés*: "One of the formal features that contributes to the precarious, hovering quality of attention required and performed by this text is the emergence of perfect and quasi-Alexandrine lines. We find Alexandrines that are broken and scattered, only brought together by the act of pinning lines together: 'd'un **bât**i**ment** / pen**ché** de **l'un** ou **l'au**tre **bord**'..." (Alford 186, my bolding). Alford's prosodic observation, which depends on her willingness to hear metrical units that do not correspond with single, visible lines, is central to her claim about how *Un Coup de dés* "require[s] a process of multidirectional scanning" (186) on the part of the reader—and, thus,

how it "cultivates multidirectional and multisensory vigilance without rewarding this attention" (189).

Alford's argument is an illuminating reminder that the act of "scanning" poetry, metrically and otherwise, can amount to an anxious, ultimately unsatisfying process of checking and rechecking. However, as we will see, such decoupling does not have to come hand-in-hand with refusals to reward readerly attention; broken metrical forms aren't all about frustration. In poems that thematize revealing dislocations, Kay Ryan invites a "process of multidirectional scanning" that, despite recursiveness and fracture, still can offer a sense of arrival. As in the case of her poetics of the textured edge, this subcategory of Ryan's split pentametrical prosody involves a keen sense of how surfaces interact with depths; it, too, has manifold affective and tonal capacities that play out differently depending on how the poem's formal relationships unfold. In other words, while it is clearly expressive, Ryan's meter is not merely mimetic; it determines, in its tension with line and syntax, the feelings that the poems give.

Let's take a look at two poems, both dealing with inside spaces and revealing dislocations, in which Ryan demonstrates the illuminating power of multidirectional, line-conscious but line-independent scanning. In "The Light of Interiors," from *The Niagara River* (2005), Ryan imagines the quality of light in inside spaces as the effect of an immeasurably intricate series of surface irregularities and pinballing refractions:

> The light of interiors
> is the admixture
> of who knows how many
> doors ajar, windows
> casually curtained,
> unblinded or opened,
> oculi set into ceilings,
> wells, ports, shafts,
> loose fits, leaks,
> and other breaches

of surface. But, in
any case, the light,
once in, bounces
toward the interior,
glancing off glassy
enamels and polishes,
softened by the scuffed
and often-handled, muffled
in carpet and toweling,
buffeted down hallways,
baffled equally
by scatter and order
to an ideal and now
sourceless texture which,
when mixed with silence,
makes of a simple
table with flowers
an island. (*Niagara* 38-9)

Initially, Ryan seems to throw up her hands at the very thought of attempting to describe all the elements that contribute to this domestic sanctum's particular glow; it's too complex! There are "who knows how many" slivers between curtains, oddly shaped window fixtures, and "other breaches of surface" that let light into this space. Furthermore, once admitted, that light interacts with a line-up of almost absurdly various textures, ranging from the "scuffed" to the "buffeted," that, in a virtually unrepeatable series of events, both dampen and reflect it.

Yet the poem's sonic patterns also belie that sense of impossibility, demonstrating how slippages among seeming banalities can open onto precious singularities; that the slippages are sonic and the singularities visual is proof of Ryan's synesthetically imaginative prosody. The poem moves from its titular opening to the "surface" that ends the first of its two sentences by way of a string of sonic likenesses: "admixture" becomes "casually" via assonance, which alliteratively pairs with "curtained," which becomes "surface" by way of an off-rhyme. Once Ryan has (b)reached the surface, the poem's longer, second sentence moves back "toward the interior," picking up steam with the alliterative "glancing off the glassy / enamels and polishes,"

which chiastically off-rhymes with "often-handled"—a phrase that, in turn, launches the joyous, f-alliterated sequence that moves from the literally "scuffed" all the way to the more figuratively "baffled" and initiates the action of the poem's ending.[67]

It is at this late point that syntax assumes command of the poem. Ryan has already graduated from the fundamentally enumerative syntax that led her to list the "ceilings, / wells, ports, shafts, / loose fits, leaks, / and other breaches of surface" to the higher-order series of past participles linked to prepositional phrases ("softened…", "muffled…", "buffeted…", "baffled…"); after the parallelism that "baffled equally" sets up ("scatter" is to "love" as "order" is to "failure," right?), the preposition "to" calls all the way back to the verb "bounces." The light bounces "toward the interior"...*and* "to an ideal and now / sourceless texture." Here, enjambment also plays a vital role, with the break after "now" allowing "ideal" to function temporarily as a noun before we discover that it is just one of two adjectives modifying the verb "texture." The light has bounced to an ideal texture.

Despite her protestations of hopelessness, Ryan has demonstrated how poetic language can evoke the elusive "light of interiors": not by miraculously finding the perfect words with which to describe that light, but by playfully showing how language can embody a process in which varied and repeated refractions give way to a sense of inimitable texture. In that *Paris Review* interview, Ryan conceptualized recombinant rhyme as metaphorically radiant, saying, "It's like how they add a snip of the jellyfish's glow-in-the-dark gene to bunnies and make them glow green; by snipping up pieces of sound and redistributing them throughout a poem I found I could get the poem to go a little bit luminescent" (Fay). To Ryan, sound is a neon, transferable

[67] For the definitive move "toward the interior," see Bishop's "Arrival at Santos": "We leave Santos at once; / we are driving to the interior" (*Complete* 90).

gene that can make even "bunnies" uncanny. In this comment, unlike in "The Light of Interiors"—in which she insists that the light's complexity makes it "sourceless" and refuses to choose whether it emanates originally from a door left ajar, a half-curtained window, or an oculus—Ryan indulges in the fantasy of an ultimate sonic source material, a piece of radiant linguistic DNA that, when "snipped" and "redistribut[ed]," can lend its power to an entire poem, making it "go a little bit luminescent." The reader, too, may feel herself luminesce with the power and pleasure of accessing the poem's sonic and conceptual secrets through its prosody. Is it possible that the light in "The Light of Interiors" is not as dispersed and untraceable as it seems?

The ending of the poem may suggest, indeed, that it is not. That ending posits a Ryan-esque recipe for *hygge* and a painterly still-life: the aforementioned light, collected in all its complexity, is "mixed with silence" and, finally, "makes of a simple / table with flowers / an island." The off-rhyme between "silence" and "island," on top of the parallel m/s pattern of "mixed with silence" and "makes of a simple," cues the reader's ear to hear the final three lines as one unit. It's a unit with five stresses: "**makes** of a **sim**ple / **tab**le with **flow**ers / an **is**land." These are falling-stress feet, alternating between triple and duple meter: dactyls, perhaps, in the first, third, and fourth feet, and trochees in the second and fifth. It isn't iambic pentameter, but it is a split pentameter, one that coincides with and even produces the sense of arrival in these final lines. Thanks to the "certain Slant of light" (Dickinson 142) that has ricocheted from surface to surface to land in this room, these everyday objects have been transformed in scale (the table is land, the flowers are trees) and transported to a far-flung, if still domestic, locale.

Since islands can conventionally symbolize loneliness, there's a danger that these levels of light merely serve to separate this interior space (and she who occupies it) from the rest of the

world. But, as Ryan remarked to *The Paris Review*, poetry actually "makes us less lonely by one." Invoking a spatial conceit like the one in "The Light of Interiors," she continued, "It makes us have more room inside ourselves" (Fay). Ryan tends to see interior spaces like this one—spaces carved out by poetry's sonic dislocations—as "balms" (Fay). And there's no question that this table with flowers occupies rarified air. Whereas poems like "Repulsive Theory" are littered with split pentameters, this poem largely withholds that sound pattern until the very end. Except in the mostly trochaic end of the first sentence "**loose** fits, **leaks**, / and **oth**er **breach**es / of **sur**face" and in one or two other five-stress phrases held together by syntax and sound play (i.e. "**soft**ened **by** the **scuffed** / and **of**ten-**han**dled"), Ryan relies on vowel and consonant echoes, as well as the structure of lists of increasing complexity, to drive the syntax and rhythm of this poem. Partially because the third-to-last and second-to-last lines have the same rhythmic pattern set over almost the same word divisions ("**makes** of a **sim**ple" and "**ta**ble with **flow**ers"), it's easy to let the last line, which is made up mostly of unstressed syllables—"an **is**land"—float by as if on water, completing the metrical unit even as it declines to linger. The arrival of this final, five-stress verb phrase feels serene, exceptional, gently epiphanic, but one has the sense that it could have gone either way; Ryan lets prosody determine not just the tones but also the takes in her poems. Treating her prosody like James Merrill's Ouija board, she asks it a question or poses before it a hypothetical, and she lets the tension among meter, line, syntax, and, in her case, sound lead her towards some concluding gesture, some unexpected emotional resolution—in this case, joy.

To that end, the more densely pentametrical but equally dislocated prosody of "Corners," from *Say Uncle* (1991), casts the spatial slippages whereby an imagined speaker accesses some interior space as sinister, even painful. Ryan writes:

All but saints
and hermits
mean to paint
themselves
toward an exit

leaving a
pleasant ocean
of azure or jonquil
ending neatly
at the doorsill.

But sometimes
something happens:

a minor dislocation
by which the doors
and windows
undergo a
small rotation
to the left a little
—but repeatedly.
It isn't
obvious immediately.

Only toward evening
and from the
farthest corners
of the houses
of the painters

comes a chorus
of individual keening
as of kenneled dogs
someone is mistreating. (*Say Uncle* 2-3)

The first two stanzas of "Corners" revise Wordsworth's sonnet "Nuns Fret Not at Their Convent's Narrow Room" to make a claim about human nature: most people ("All," at least, "but saints / and hermits") try not to get trapped. According to Ryan (who likes to throw these kinds of generalizations at the wall to see what sticks), most people take steps to ensure that their machinations—their efforts at home-improvement, say—do not leave them isolated, immobile,

or imprisoned. Paradoxically, this effort to keep containment at bay seems to necessitate "neat[ness]": organization, orientation, order. Formally, these two stanzas reflect the will to order that they evoke. Matching cinquains, separated by syntax (the first a simple sentence, the second a modifying phrase) and unified by internal rhyme ("saints" with "paint" and, more joyously, "jonquil" with "doorsill"), show a poet writing herself towards the exit. Ryan also keeps her eye on the door throughout the opening movement by subverting rhythmic patterns; because of the syntactic simplicity, combined with the awkwardness of consecutive stresses in "**paint** / them**selves** / **toward** an **ex**it" and lumbering trochees like "**end**ing **neat**ly /**at** the **door**sill," these one- and two-stress lines never accumulate into anything with much force of its own.

After the explicitly volta-like "But sometimes / something happens," however, Ryan launches into two stanzas in which she imagines eerily losing sight of an exit and getting lost in a finite interior space. The prosody of these stanzas first reflects and then generates the poem's insight into isolation. The "minor dislocation" and "small rotation" seem like the painter's nightmarish hallucinations as the room's fixtures shift slightly to the left, over and over, preventing her from orienting herself. The sly, elision-dependent, feminine rhyme between "repeatedly" and "immediately," the most extravagant sound effect so far in the poem, cues the reader's ear to listen backwards, and, as in so many parallel passages throughout Ryan's body of work, the phrase leading up to the second rhyming word scans as a split iambic pentameter: "It **is**n't / **ob**vi**ous** im**med**iate**ly**." As the trapped painter looks around in curiosity or horror, estimating her new location in relation to how far each doorknob and window has moved, so, too, does the reader listen back to the stanza she has just read and hear in it, in relation to its final sentence, more split pentameters: "to the **left** a **litt**le / —**but** re**peat**ed**ly**" unfolds into "a **mi**nor **dis**lo**cat**ion / by **which** the **doors** / and **win**dows / **un**der**go** a / **small** ro**ta**tion," a double split

pentameter distinguished by lineation and sonic pattern (the d-alliteration of "dislocation" and "doors" and the assonance of "windows," "undergo," and "rotation") but unified within one noun phrase. The rhyme between "dislocation" and "rotation" doesn't quite match the ends of the units of split pentameter, so that the rhyming pair that ends the stanza rings like the culmination of all its "minor dislocation[s]."

In the final movement of the poem, Ryan pursues the split pentametrical pattern she has established but also stuffs it, stretches it, strains it—and, in doing so, imaginatively exits the room in which her painter is trapped in order to understand that predicament as if from the outside. The first two lines of the final stanza, "**comes** a **chor**us / of **in**di**vi**dual **keen**ing," have five stresses but also, towards the end of the phrase, an overabundance of unstressed syllables—as if the speaker gets overwhelmed by the thought of all these separate, individual lonelinesses combining their voices into one existential ensemble. The final two lines, "as of kenneled dogs / someone is mistreating" are metrically ambiguous, with possible scansions ranging from two stresses apiece to three: "as of **kenn**eled **dogs** / **some**one is mis**treat**ing" to "**as** of **kenn**eled **dogs** / **some**one **is** mis**treat**ing." Meanwhile, the triple, quasi-feminine, slant rhyme among "evening," "keening," and "mistreating" occasions the most shocking perspectival, metaphorical, and tonal leaps of the poem: "evening" jumps forward in time and magically switches perspectives, "keening" introduces the dog metaphor both through the sound and through the k-alliteration that will conjure kennels, and "mistreating" confirms the reader's growing conviction that there is a cruelty hidden somewhere.

Where does that cruelty come from? Didn't this begin as a poem about a mistake anyone could make—the mistake of focusing so hard that one gets disoriented and ends up isolated in an interior space? The second section of the poem, in which Ryan wonders how such a thing could

happen, makes this unexpected jump by way of its prosody; her practice of letting meter, line, syntax, and sound tug at one another leads her to the poem's final, irrational, formidable image—and to the attitude of sourceless dread that it reflects. If we are the kenneled dogs, who is mistreating us, and what can we do about it? As in "The Light of Interiors," Ryan has offered a sense of arrival, a reward for the "process of multidirectional scanning" (Alford 186) she invites—but, in this case, the destination is dire rather than delightful. Split pentameters, iambic and otherwise, clearly are not Ryan's only formal tool in achieving these pronounced effects, but any attempt to describe those effects that doesn't mention meter would ignore the particular nature of her short lines, her varied syntaxes, and her recombinant rhymes.

In two final poems, Ryan conjures the possibility of arrival only to dismiss it—and, through the same gestures, reimagines her prosody of the edge as a prosody of the almost-attained precipice, the asymptotic approach. In both poems, the thought of the hovering spectrality of the meter conjures other ghosts. Here is "This Life," from *Flamingo Watching*:

> It's a pickle, this life.
> Even shut down to a trickle
> it carries every kind of particle
> that causes strife on a grander scale:
> to be miniature is to be swallowed
> by a miniature whale. Zeno knew
> the law that we know: no matter
> how carefully diminished, a race
> can only be *half* finished with success;
> then comes the endless halving of the rest –
> the ribbon's stalled approach, the helpless
> red-faced urgings of the coach. (*Flamingo* 10)

In what she presents as a paraphrase of Zeno's paradox regarding the simultaneous divisibility and indivisibility of discrete objects, Ryan observes that "a race / can only be *half* finished with success; / then comes the endless halving of the rest." Ironically (considering that the lines describe an infinite process of division), the off-rhyming "success" and "the rest" occur at the

ends of two (rare!) un-split lines of iambic pentameter: "a race / can **on**ly **be** *half* **fin**ished **with** su**ccess**; / then **comes** the **end**less **halv**ing **of** the **rest**."[68] However, when Ryan ends the poem with a two-line sports metaphor for that "endless halving," the coincidence of meter and line falls apart, and, in relation to those two lines of iambic pentameter, the final two lines say something both pretty funny and pretty sad about "This Life." When Ryan imagines "the ribbon's stalled approach, the helpless / red-faced urgings of the coach," the rhyme between "approach" and "coach" cues the reader's ear to hear the noun phrase following "approach" as a single unit, although it doesn't coincide with the line. Naturally, it's a split pentameter: "the **help**less / **red**-faced **urg**ings **of** the **coach**" (or, to demote the preposition and acknowledge the straining spondee just before the poem's finish line, "the **help**less / **red-faced urg**ings of the **coach**").

So what do we do about "the ribbon's stalled approach," both metrically and existentially? Without it, the coach's gestures, which lend the scene its vivid humanity, don't coalesce into a complete unit like the two in the preceding lines; with it, the language seems designed to trick the ear, approaching and retreating like the waterspouts in Bishop's "Crusoe in England."[69] With the inclusion of "the ribbon's stalled approach," the coach is doomed to cut a tragi-comically ineffective figure—like Beckett's Pozzo, a boisterous, absurd, pseudo-authoritative character out of step with the structure of the world in which he exists. Indeed, on the one hand, Ryan makes it seem clumsy to be unaware of how close one is to the finish line. This implication is consistent with her often-articulated sense of poetry as a magic trick or clown performance. In the *Paris Review* interview, for example, she explained her conviction that, in

[68] The italicization of "half" confirms my scansion; Ryan knows it must be italicized because the meter wouldn't naturally stress it.

[69] In Chapter 2, I argue that these waterspouts embody Bishop's self-revealing/self-concealing, semi-threatening, and always dynamic prosody in "Crusoe in England"—the "freed verse" that permits her to rehearse and explore loss.

Fay's words, "a poem should act like an empty suitcase," saying, "It's a clown suitcase: the clown flips open the suitcase and pulls out a ton of stuff. A poem is an empty suitcase that you can never quit emptying" (Fay). These never-arriving lines, and the coach they describe, are zany to the extent that the effort they index is enthusiastic but useless.[70]

On the other hand, Ryan makes it seem both lonely and frightening not to know if or when things are going to end. This implication is consistent with the way she described, in response to questions about her family, her father's death. After recounting a happy memory of collecting rocks with him, the kind of tale she might avoid in her anti-confessional verse, she said:

> The story has a sad ending though. We brought the rocks home, piled them in the yard, and my father went back to work. By this time he was down in Redondo Beach, working for wages for someone else again. The sewer and septic thing had gone belly-up as everything always did. But he had a truck—sometimes he didn't even have a truck—and he was staying in a motel. He was sitting and eating a carton of ice cream and reading a get-rich-quick book and—you know what's coming—he dropped over dead. [...] Reading a get-rich-quick book and eating ice cream. I mean that's a good death—a little premature—he was fifty-five—but good. (Fay)

But, of course, it wasn't just "a little premature"; it was devastating. In her telling, Ryan's father was always just recovering from or just embarking on some ill-fated venture. That sense of predictability ("as everything always did") made his sudden death even more surprising. However, when Ryan says "you know what's coming," it isn't obvious that the listener or reader

[70] For this use of "zany" and its manifold implications, see Ngai.

does know; she seems, rather, to be attempting to warn Fay, her interlocutor, of danger ahead—in the form of a self-conscious, even ironic acknowledgement of predictability.

In her essay "A Consideration of Poetry," Ryan cites a "sense of imminence" (*Gravity* 24) and the "frustration of ordinary expectations" (29) as two of the elements that animate all poetry, and both are present in Ryan's recounting of her father's death. Perhaps it is "a good death" in that it meets these two criteria; ice cream, truck ownership, and dreams of future wealth aside, it doesn't seem like a good death in any other way. Perhaps the coach in "This Life," whom both the "sense of imminence" and the "frustration of ordinary expectations" arguably animate as he cheers near that almost-but-never-reached finish line, is, in a sense, both Ryan's father and a good poem—one glowing on the verge of some longed-for victory, one for whom the unexpected is necessarily coming and therefore (paradoxically) expected. Indeed, it is curious that the middle lines of "This Life" gloss the Greek philosopher Zeno—attributing to him "the law that we know" (of the perpetually "half-finished" race)—while Ryan also mentions Zeno in "the first poem she ever wrote," "After Zeno," which is an explicit elegy for her father (Chelgren). In the citation for Ryan's 2012 medal, the National Endowment for the Humanities calls "After Zeno" "an unsentimental meditation on lives that overlap until the day when suddenly, they no longer do" ("National"). Although "This Life" doesn't mention her father explicitly, the Zeno connection implies that, when Ryan thinks about losing her father, she thinks about those famous paradoxes. As we have seen, the metrical-lineal coincidence in the third-to-last and second-to-last lines gives way to the asymptotic frustrations of the poem's end, so that the prosody of "This Life" reflects a preoccupation with things that overlap until they don't—like the lives of that daughter and her father.

The ghost of meter finds its most explicit (dis)embodiment in Ryan's poem "Tracers," from *Erratic Facts* (2016). Like "This Life," "Tracers" turns on a sports metaphor (baseball instead of track & field) and establishes a pentametrical pattern only to frustrate it, creating a sense of fulfillment that's just out of reach. In "Tracers," though, the units of iambic pentameter are split from the beginning, and the movement out of them and into the poem's final lines shows precisely how Ryan's prosody makes possible her imaginative leaps and tonal transitions, rather than merely reflecting them:

> The mid-air ball
> follows its arc
> to the glove
> in the left outfield
> of the park.
> There are rules.
> Motion generates
> projection. You
> are not a fool
> to believe it will
> happen. Things
> set a course and
> follow it. The air
> is full of places
> where it works:
> a girl and cat have
> just assumed their
> marks. Leading us
> to think about
> the dead and all
> the shimmering
> dots like tracers
> hanging in the air
> unclaimed. How
> the dead can't finish
> the simplest thing. (*Erratic* 42)

All the elements of Ryan's mature style are in play, so to speak, in this poem: lines of one to three stresses, precipitous enjambments, a metaphorical conceit assiduously set up only to be recklessly abandoned. Ryan dwells so repetitively and with such tremulous certainty on the

reliability of rules, on the guarantee that the ball will follow a particular arc towards that waiting glove, that the reader begins to wonder if they should expect foiled expectations. The short sentence "There are rules," which coincides with a line and sets up the end-rhyme with "fool," feels too easy, and the "it" of "it will / happen"—which seems as if it should refer to the ball landing in the glove—begins to detach from circumstance, as if it's just a question of waiting for *something* to happen.

When the "it" returns in the next sentence, Ryan confirms this suspicion and delivers the poem's first split pentameter: "The **air** / is **full** of **plac**es / **where** it **works**." Like so many similar prosodic maneuvers throughout Ryan's oeuvre, this nonlinear unit of meter is distinguished by syntax, strung across multiple lines, unified by sound play (the assonance of "air" and "where," as well as w-alliteration of "where" and "works"), and cemented by a slant rhyme with the end of the following sentence, which is also a (differently) split pentameter: "a **girl** and **cat** have / **just** a**ssumed** their / **marks**." The air is full of places where *what* works, precisely? The special trick of things happening the way they seem like they will? And whence this girl, this cat, both cast, perhaps, in a drama for which they must hit "their / marks"? A girl could catch a baseball, but a cat couldn't, so we know they are getting into place in order to receive something other than a pop fly. Indeed, Ryan seems, at this moment of subterranean metrical regularity, to zoom out to evoke a world in which every element and every syllable has moved into ready position and is prepared to leap into assured, if still mysterious, action. In the context of the poem, it turns out that that action involves "**Lead**ing **us** / to **think** a**bout** / the **dead**," another split pentameter, though missing its first, unstressed syllable and divided across the line breaks differently from the previous two. How does this human-animal pair serve as *memento mori* amid what was, syllables previously, just a baseball game? Is the speaker

attributing the motions of a wandering mind to the nearest (seeming) agents or symbols, or are those symbols "leading" her?

Notably, the last two sentences in "Tracers" are actually sentence fragments: the "leading" isn't directly syntactically connected to that girl or that cat and so could be performed not by them but by all the language that precedes it—by the series of split pentameters that create the pattern by/through which Ryan's speaker arrives at this thought of "the dead." In other words, it is the prosody that is "leading"—and, in fact, it is already getting ahead of itself. In the wake of that thought, the iambs roll on until the next period, but there are eight, overwhelming the pattern in their luminescent profusion: "and **all** / the **shimm**ering / **dots** like **tra**cers / **hang**ing **in** the **air** / un**claimed**." These dots seem like stars, which conventionally represent the triumphant dead, but are "unclaimed" and so, perhaps, unmourned.[71] The titular tracers analogy also suggests impending violence, as if missiles are about to land on the peaceful park scene. These conflicting connotations contribute to the ambiguity of the final sentence fragment, which, with the line break after its first word (securing, some would argue, its stress), could scan as a split pentameter—"**How** / the **dead** can't **fin**ish / the **simp**lest **thing**"—but might, to other ears, sound more like four stresses, alternating between anapestic and iambic modes: "How / the **dead** can't **fin**ish / the **simp**lest **thing**." There, as in other Ryan poems, we see the line break that supposedly disrupts the unit of pentameter actually allowing for its apprehension by suggesting an otherwise uncertain stress. With its hyperbolic superlative, this final phrase seems to assume the stance of one grouchily complaining about the ineptitudes of the dead, but it isn't clear what that "simplest thing" is, what it is that they can't quite finish.

[71] Juliet: "Give me my Romeo; and, when he shall die, / Take him and cut him out in little stars" (*Romeo and Juliet* III.ii, 23-24).

Is the speaker frustrated that the dead cannot seem to finish the process of departing, or that they are not successfully completing the act of return? Or is "the simplest thing" the poem, and the speaker is frustrated that this thought of the dead has not turned out to be a viable way of finishing this ditty about a baseball falling towards, though never into, a glove? Whatever interpretation one prefers, there's no question that Ryan's escalating split pentameters lend the poem's conclusion a sense of bemused insight into the finicky dead. There is mystery here, but there is also mundanity. Like the particular texture of light at which Ryan arrives at the end of "The Light of Interiors," the mood of the end of "Tracers" is the result of a series of unfolding statements, the rhythm of each influencing the articulation of the next; the poem, which takes inevitability as its premise and incorporates split pentameters as part of its exploration of that premise, ends up with a prosody that both "set[s] a course and / follow[s] it" and "hang[s] in the air / unclaimed."

Describing the "immediate power" of short-line enjambments, Cushman writes, "This prosody is neither temporal nor accentual. For lack of a more precise terminology I will call it 'phenomenological'" (*Meanings of Measure* 22). Ryan's prosody of asymptotic approaches, as exemplified in "This Life" and "Tracers," is phenomenological in Cushman's sense, in that it allows individual line breaks to catapult passages into alineal pentameters that ultimately determine the affective stances that the poems assume; however, I would argue that, through tensions with line and syntax, time and accent are elements of, rather than exceptions to, that machinery. These readings have been replete with instances in which line, syntax, and sound have adjusted the pace and stress of Ryan's language, altering in turn the possibilities for measurement and scansion and, consequently, the poems' tonal trajectories. The three prosodic motifs that these readings have tracked—the textured edge, the revealing dislocation, and the

asymptotic arrival—each reflect some aspect of the split pentametrical underpinnings of Ryan's short lines, which make her poems as surprising and strange as they are. Choppy line breaks animate end words, creating possibilities for hidden scansions; dislocated line-syntax-meter coincidence opens up bright vistas and dark sanctums that otherwise might have remained inaccessible; and the tension between the ends of poems and the athletic arrivals they refuse to depict draws into the edge of the imagination other elusive presences—the absent, revenant thoughts and beings that haunt the poet's consciousness.

In one essay, Ryan admits that these lurking dead are her intended readers:

> When I am writing, I feel that I have insinuated myself at the long, long desk of the gods of literature—more like a trestle table, actually—so long that the gods (who are also eating, disputing, and whatnot, as well as writing) fade away in the distance according to the laws of Renaissance perspective. I am at the table of the gods and I want them to like me. There, I've said it. I want the great masters to enjoy what I write. The noble dead are my readers, and if what I wrote might jostle them a little, if there were a tiny bit of scooting and shifting along the benches, this would be my thrill. (*Gravity* 273)

In this wry passage, Ryan conceptualizes the effect of her work on these ghostly readers as "jostl[ing] them a little bit" and "a tiny bit of scooting and shifting along the benches." On the one hand, this image reflects a meager gesture towards humility amid an otherwise grandiose fantasy; she is only asking for a *little* space along the bench seating of the poetic pantheon! On the other hand, the jostling and shifting could refer not to the statuses of Dickinson, Frost, Larkin, Moore, William Bronk, and Stevie Smith (Ryan's oft-cited greats), but to the syntactic, lineal, and metrical units of her poems, which, with edge-conscious precision, keep nudging one another a little over, and then a little more, until, as in the case of the "minor dislocation" in

"Corners," some unexpected feeling emerges—some terrible "keening," some dawning sense of the "immense and good," or maybe some "table with flowers" that turns out to be "an island."

2. Shane McCrae's Porous Pentameters

While Kay Ryan's split pentameters demonstrate the varying affordances of metrical units that are cut across short, often enjambed lines and distinguished by syntax and recombinant rhyme patterns (the exposed edges, revealing dislocations, and asymptotic arrivals that I explored in the first part of this chapter), Shane McCrae's *Mule* (2011) explores other expressive ways of locating divisions within audible metrical units. After Patricia Smith, whose pristinely metrical sonnet sequence "Salutations In Search Of" serves to expose by contrast the metrical caginess of the seven contemporary Black American sonneteers I study in Chapter 1, McCrae is perhaps the most consistently and self-consciously metrical poet in the present dissertation. In one interview, McCrae said, "I don't write free verse poems—mostly because I can't. But I am interested in the musical effects achievable with free verse" (Gromadski). His poetry is rife with iambic pentameter and even tetrameter, often (though not always) coinciding with the line; furthermore, he both speaks and writes about metrical form as central to his work, while undermining the metrical/non-metrical binary that constrains so many poet-prosodists.

Unlike in the case of, say, Ginsberg, whose use of embedded pentameters seems to stand in tension with his proclaimed poetics (so I argue in Chapter 2), McCrae's extra-poetic discourse invites close attention to how meter works throughout his growing body of work. That attention will reveal something essential about "ghost meter" as this project defines it: that, as a prosodic phenomenon, it is not limited to cases in which the poet is unaware of or in denial about the presence of meter in their lines. From their compromised embodiment to their tendency to channel absent voices to their capacity to transmute trauma, McCrae's meters are self-

consciously spectral. Indeed, his poetry is only "ostensibly non-metrical" to the extent that criticism so rarely attends to that aspect of it. While some critics and reviewers have taken stabs at describing McCrae's formal innovations, there exists no full account of the metrical maneuvers by which McCrae—a relatively popular, lauded, and prolific poet—makes meter not just mean but, in its ghostly way, *matter* in the contemporary moment.[72]

In the hopes of making it possible for the discourse surrounding McCrae's work to account more precisely for the interrelation between his emotional insights and his formal innovations, the second half of this chapter will name—and demonstrate both the affordances and the resonances of—his primary formal innovation: "porous pentameter." In order to introduce this, the last in the series of terms that this dissertation has suggested for ways that iambic pentameter can seem (though split, engulfed, disfigured, disguised, or stuttered) to haunt the line in contemporary poetry, let's take a look at the last poem of the second section of *Mule*, "[We married on a speeding train]." This poem demonstrates just a few of the numerous, interrelated ways that porous pentameter helps McCrae make meaning:

> We married on a speeding train the roof
> Fighting with knives a speeding train we were
> Fighting each other stabbing through the roof
> The windows but where were the passengers
> Stabbing each other full of holes but no
> Blood and no bones the knives slipped through our bod-
> ies and we didn't lose our balance though
> We lunged and we were stabbed and we were not dead

[72] For a sampling of critics describing McCrae's formal innovations, see Bateman, Gray, and Turner. For a sense of how McCrae's public persona is indivisible from his prosody, see his *Poetry Foundation* bio.

But we were dying though we lunged and we

Were stabbed and didn't bleed and fought on the roof

And didn't fall we fought and didn't see

It was what was really killing us and if

We had we wouldn't *even if* have stopped

Stabbing each other half of love is hope (*Mule* 22)

To marry on a speeding train is to begin a life partnership with nothing settled and yet with a destination almost forcibly pre-determined. The train isn't just moving but moving too fast, as if "we" are action heroes hanging on for dear life in high winds. Iambic pentameter is, at least at first, this Shakespearean sonnet's most stable element. It is the modular, train car-like structure upon and inside of which all the lunging and stabbing and bleeding occur. In a poem about the dissolution of a marriage, McCrae's iambic pentameter also seems like an analogue to the institution itself, an inherited structure that permits but also constrains expression. This poem adopts the form and positionality of the partnership it sees destroyed; McCrae has spoken about his decision to write break-up poems in the first-person plural, telling the story of the unraveling of a "we" even as he continues to conjugate verbs from that point of view (Lycurgus).[73] Although the couple is, from beginning to end, "stabbing each other," this poem goes out of its way to ascribe blame to the environment rather than to the actors. And with knife wounds occurring in all directions and from all sources (through the roof and windows, out as well as in), the disaster really does seem impossibly diffuse.

[73] From one interview: "*Mule* arrived in the wake of a lot of wounded, angry, accusatory break-up poems, none of which made it into the book. And in the poems in *Mule*, I used 'we' in an effort to empathize with my ex—I was trying to acknowledge that both of us had been in the marriage, and both of us had ended it" (Lycurgus).

Despite—or perhaps because of—their mysterious disembodiment, those wounds soon register in the fabric of McCrae's pentameter: "Fighting each other stabbing through the roof | The windows but where were the passengers | Stabbing each other full of holes but no."[74] Like the gashes they describe, these visual caesurae bespeak violent impulses but are also eerily ineffectual. There is "no | Blood and no bones," and "the knives slipped through our bod- | ies"; indeed, amid all the stabbing, the speakers don't even "lose [their] balance," and no one is physically hurt. Similarly, despite the spaces opening up inside of them, the lines maintain their firm grip on the accentual-syllabic patterns of iambic pentameter. Aside from initial trochaic substitutions in the lines that begin with present participles ("**Fight**ing each **oth**er…" and "**Stabb**ing each **oth**er…"), they scan almost perfectly. Furthermore, McCrae reliably places a space that appears halfway through the third foot "(**Fight**ing each **oth**er **stabb**ing") a tiny bit to the right of a space that appears directly after the second ("The **win**dows **but** **where** were…"). As in the case of every single mid-pentameter visual caesura throughout McCrae's oeuvre, these holes are located at precise spatial points corresponding to the audible syllable counts of each line: even though they do not replace or elide syllables, they are situated, in relation to one another, based on where they fall amidst those syllables.

Why, here and elsewhere, would McCrae adhere so assiduously to a prosody in which he punctures his pentameters at points in their visual space that correspond to their syllable counts? What, more broadly, are the affordances and resonances of a prosody in which iambic pentameter is audible but visually altered, marred, punctured, or aerated? The rest of this chapter

[74] In the second half of this chapter, I will use vertical lines, rather than slash marks, to mark line breaks in quoted text. McCrae often uses diagonal slash marks in his own poems. This practice means that it would be confusing for a McCrae critic quoting large swaths of his work to use the slash for her own purposes. In order to stay consistent throughout this section of the chapter, I will use the vertical lines even when an individual poem does not make use of the slash device.

uncovers a host of such affordances and resonances, ranging from memory gaps to holy aeration to dismemberment to racial division. In the case of "[We married on a speeding train]," the final lines assert that, though the "we" doesn't know it, and though the wounds don't immediately cause any visible bleeding, the stabbing is what is "really killing" the couple. McCrae may be implying that the seeming disembodiment of the train can't protect its structure or its passengers from the psychic effects of harboring violent intention, or he may simply be hinting that the stab wounds are present after all—and that their seeming absence is an illusion or subject to a kind of delay wherein, as in the case of emotional wounds, the extent of the damage isn't visible until later. Each of these implications has rich prosodic analogues (in the first case, a concession to the inevitability of hegemonic forms, and, in the second, an insistence on the inevitable demise of such forms, no matter how loud the echoes); ultimately, though, the poem is not an *ars poetica*. McCrae is primarily concerned with using the prosodic forms he has devised in order to ask the hard questions he can't ask in any other way: Whose fault is the end of this marriage? What caused it to crumble? Were they trying to hurt each other, and did they?

McCrae concludes, "and if | We had we wouldn't *even if* have stopped | Stabbing each other half of love is hope." The three final visual caesurae in this poem exemplify the expressive potential of that device as it plays out in syntax. The first occasions the insertion of an italicized interrupter; the second seems like a pause as, in the wake of those emphatic italics, the speaker is struck by the disturbing truth he is articulating; and the third, in a formal move reminiscent of the final couplet in a traditional Shakespearean sonnet, separates the final, devastating aphorism, "half of love is hope," from the rest of the poem. With the poem's only double perforation occurring in its thirteenth line, the frequency of the prosodic stabbings increases at the poem's end, as if to underscore the couple's determination to keep on jabbing

over and against any realizations that it is hurting them. Conversely, even though the syllable counts indicate that they are decidedly spatial and not temporal, visible and not audible, the holes in McCrae's iambic pentameter do at least gesture towards slowing the train's inexorable journey to its unbearable emotional destination. In this respect, they resemble line breaks. There's something both mechanical and improvised about this prosody: a simultaneous certainty that holes will keep appearing according to a particular pattern and uncertainty about when and where that patterning impulse will shed its latency and make itself felt in the fabric of the poem.

McCrae's visual caesurae are polyvalent, achieving different affective effects and implying different philosophical stances in different contexts; indeed, they are polyvalent to such an extent that they constitute McCrae's most distinctive and meaning-laden visual trope, as well as his most vital prosodic technique. The subsequent analyses will trace how these visual caesurae evoke trauma-induced holes in memory, voices speaking from wounds, hands mistakenly clasping air, unbearable bodily dismemberment, divided racial identity, and holy aeration suffused with the voice of God. These interpretations are not always compatible with one another, and they are sometimes more obviously activated than at other times. Furthermore, these gaps are evocative not *in themselves* but *in relation* to the metrical grid that McCrae establishes and returns to over and over in his verse. It is the gaps' interpolation within ten-count chants of syllables, their tension with the other kinds of fissures (syntactic, lineal) that animate those metrical forms, and their performed non-relationship to the implied passage of time that let them mean so many things so central to McCrae's project. That is why this chapter focuses not only on visual caesurae but also on porous pentameter, a metrical form defined by the way its inaudible lacunae locate themselves within its temporal structure. McCrae's meter is not ghostly in the way the other metrical modes in this dissertation are ghostly, though it sometimes does

approach and retreat in a manner reminiscent of Bishop's freed verse, and though it does proceed by way of fracture in a way reminiscent of Ryan's split pentameters. It is present but fading, positively asserted by the poems but undermined, tattered, piebald—not to mention under-recognized and under-theorized.

First and foremost, McCrae's visual caesurae resonate with the concept of the memory hole as he defines it in *Pulling the Chariot of the Sun: A Memoir of a Kidnapping* (2023). This memoir describes McCrae's dawning understanding, throughout his childhood and adolescence, that his white maternal grandparents had both violently and mendaciously contrived to prevent him from knowing or even harboring feelings of love towards his father, who was Black. There are holes at multiple levels of this telling: the hole in the narrative his grandparents spun for him of his family history; the hole in his father's eventual explanation of what was missing from his grandparents' version; the blanks and chronological inconsistencies in his childhood memories surfacing in and around moments of physical abuse; the "shallow" (*Chariot* 78) slices of no-time into which the self seems to disappear; and even the "house-sized" (86) hole that bitter grief leaves in McCrae's present-tense conceptualization of his existence, which is "like being a plant with roots that don't touch anything" (86).

By dramatizing the struggle to tell a story he can't ever really know, and indeed by acknowledging early on that "a kidnapping can be a hole in the middle of the story of itself" (*Chariot* 27), McCrae thematizes the very condition of *going missing*. He questions the existential status of each blank, calling one "a slice of reality, or a slice of time, or both" (74). As in the case of the visual caesurae that puncture his prosody, these gaps hold unstable relationships to the passage of time. In many cases, McCrae also acknowledges the sinister power of each hole, which calls out to be filled even as it menaces: "the hole where the memory

was or might have been becomes itself an occasion of terror, but slower than the original occasion, and longer than the original occasion, boundaryless, unending" (115). This description, which toggles between the temporal "slower" and the spatial "longer," implies that the holes exist both in and out of time—and that this quality makes them even more formidable than the traumatic memories they "might" replace. Are these "tangible lacunae" (186) protective strategies for which to be grateful or psychological impulses that McCrae must overcome in order to come to terms with his past? Are holes—in memory or in meter—the exception or the rule, the disease or the cure?

That McCrae's work impels its reader to ask such questions is proof of his engagement with the discourse of trauma theory, which directly informs the affordances of a prosody visibly marked by gaps that bear uncertain relationships to time, stress, and sense. According to Shoshanna Felman, filmic accounts of the Holocaust force viewers to look *through* porous surfaces like fences, screens, and trees in order to show how the traumatic event is itself "a historical assault on seeing" (Felman 300). In particular, she analyzes how, in Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, the act of witnessing is both erased and fractured, creating a witness-less event "both because it precludes seeing and because it precludes the possibility of a *community of seeing*…" (301, her italics). Likewise, the holes in McCrae's prose telling of his childhood kidnapping are mainly gaps in memory, but they are also spaces in which someone who could have helped him might have stood, ruptures that signal the failure of a second voice to speak or a second body to intervene. For example, in his fractured account of an altercation between himself and his abusive grandfather, he writes, "Whatever happened in the week or so immediately after I stood up and stepped toward my grandfather—the only description I can give of which I am certain is a description of the space between us as I approached him, it was empty

and looked like any empty space, my grandmother not standing in it…" (*Chariot* 146). McCrae can't describe what happened; he can only remember the space between the bodies—and, crucially, that it is a space devoid of his grandmother's protection. Likewise, as we will see, the open spaces in McCrae's meter register the non-entry of other speaking voices into his poems.

Cathy Caruth invests even more meaning, and even a kind of paradoxical agency, in such spaces than Felman does, redefining Freud's notion of traumatic neurosis through a focus on wounds that speak both in and outside of time; McCrae's testimony in *Pulling the Chariot of the Sun*, as well as his use of porous pentameter in *Mule* and elsewhere, corresponds with and bears out her theories. In Caruth's reinterpretation, after Freud, of Tasso's tale of Tancred, who unwittingly kills his lover Clorinda in a duel—and then injures her again by stabbing the tree where her soul is hiding, which shrieks and bleeds—she pushes past Freud's emphasis on "repetition compulsion" and focuses instead on the voice that emerges from the gash in the tree: "For what seems to me particularly striking in the example of Tasso is not just the unconscious act of the infliction of the injury and its inadvertent and unwished-for repetition, but the moving and sorrowful *voice* that cries out, a voice that is paradoxically released *through the wound*" (Caruth 2, her italics). While acknowledging that much of the pathos and curiosity of this tale emerges from the tension between knowing and not knowing, Caruth expresses fascination with the enigmatic otherness of this voice (3).

Over and over, McCrae, too, turns away from the core tragedy of knowing and not knowing that arguably defines his memoir and wonders instead about the emergence of voices—his own and others'—that seem inextricably but mysteriously linked with the gaps and holes that populate his internal and external worlds. For instance, he remembers that, after a car accident, his grandmother "started flipping off other drivers, and she would do so by raising her hand as if

she were about to ask a question, but with the back of her hand to the other driver, and shouting, 'Read between the lines!'" (*Chariot* 70-71). For a poet with a signature style that features double-spaced lines, this image resonates: McCrae is drawn to the memory of his grandmother's shouting voice, which directs drivers' attention not simply to an upraised middle finger but to the space between two other fingers, where that gesture might be contained. Her command to "read between the lines" also seems like something McCrae wants to yell at his younger self—in the hopes of forcing him to see the truth about his supposed caretakers—and at his future readers, whom he invites to dwell in the gaps and spaces of his poetry. By introducing this memory as part of the aftermath of a car accident, McCrae makes of his grandmother a foil for himself, another theorist of the screaming hole.

Crucially, Caruth casts the speaking wound as "unassimilated" into time (Caruth 4). As in the case of McCrae's childhood kidnapping, the traumatic event is "experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known" and therefore must return "to haunt the survivor later on" (4). This arrangement reflects what Caruth calls a "breach in the mind" (62): "a shock that appears to work very much like a bodily threat but is in fact a break in the mind's experience of time" (61). My reading of "[We married on a speeding train]" establishes that one characteristic of porous pentameter is that its holes are spaced in reference to temporal order but do not affect the chronological arrangement or number of stresses in McCrae's propulsive, if visually marred, meter; in other words, they occur inside of time but without the capacity to make time pass. Nevertheless, they interact with the images and tones in the lines that *do* impact sequential time, spectrally affecting their depictions of (dis)continuous embodiment, safety and danger, belonging and isolation. For a poet writing in response to trauma, porous pentameter creates opportunities to hear language—even just the silent parts, even just hypothetically—outside of time.

Conversely, it also presents opportunities to experience meter, which is one way poetry interacts with the passage of time, through extratemporal sensations. In its method of proceeding, porous pentameter loosens and rearranges a poet's relationship to time—an effect that a poet processing trauma might seek or appreciate, but also one with manifold other affordances that might be activated by different psychological or imaginative contexts.

Clearly, then, porous pentameter is a kind of "visual prosody" (Perloff 97). In that respect, it is as old as the ghost meter metaphor, dating to the ruptures of modernism. In her reading of Pound's *Cantos*, Marjorie Perloff describes how, in "The Coming of War: Actaeon," visual prosody "mime[s] the poet's (and the reader's) process of discovery": "we see things, one at a time, just as the poem's narrator comes across them. The technique is film-like: first there are fields (the line is set to the right, the intervening space providing a pause while our eye adjusts to the image), next we learn that these fields are 'Full of faint light'" (97). For Perloff, visual prosody harnesses the bespoke-but-modular spatial controls of one writing technology (the typewriter) in order to guide the reader's eye through space and time, creating meaning through mimesis.

For the most part, Craig Dworkin applies a similar sense of visual prosody to the mid-century avant-garde, making much of the "glyphs spaced in deliberate but enigmatic arrangements across the page" in Russell Atkins's "Spyrytual": "Taking precedence over any grammatical coherence, those nonlexical marks invite visually iconic or pictorial readings" (Dworkin 103). Like Pound and Atkins, McCrae uses space and nonlexical markings—visual caesurae, his personal convention of double-spacing, and those slash marks—to make meaning; unlike those poets, he limits his pictorial vocabulary to empty space and a single nonlexical

mark, eschewing conventional punctuation (not to mention the Chinese characters and raindrop-like hashes that populate the work of Pound and Atkins, respectively).[75]

Cushman provides an even more relevant antecedent for this elucidation of porous pentameter than these mimesis-oriented examples of visual prosody. His prosodic theories explore how experimental yet convention-driven uses of space can hold uncertain relationships to voice and to the passage of time. In his account, first referenced in the first part of this chapter, of Elizabethan-inspired verse paragraph indentations that enable "changing speakers in the middle of a pentameter line," he writes, "The radical indentations let space into the verse column at irregular intervals, signaling the abrupt discontinuities and shifts associated with the Romantic ode" (*Meanings of Measure* 57). As we will see, while those mid-pentameter spaces indicate actual speaker changes, McCrae's spaces often indicate changes within a single speaker, changes that channel "the abrupt discontinuities and shifts" in his post-Romantic idiom. Cushman also provides a temporal insight that is essential to understanding the function of porous pentameter for McCrae: "Rather than say a space equals a rest in an abstract temporal scheme, Williams might have said that typographic spacing gives a sense of rest within a visual field" (69). What does it mean for spacing to provide "a sense of rest" rather than an actual rest? Through explorations of motifs with a range of metaphorical meanings, the succeeding readings will attempt to answer that seemingly musical (or at least sonic) question.

In doing so, they will draw on answers that other critics have given: on Lucy Alford's evocation of Dickinsonian gaps as manifesting the form of desirous attention (Alford 81), on Stephen H. Henderson's elucidation of the African American sonnet tradition of "worrying the line" through "ornamentation often associated with melismatic singing" (Henderson 69), on

[75] Describing his decision to "abandon punctuation," McCrae has said, "I don't think of the slash as punctuation, although I know other people do, and I imagine it, strictly speaking, probably *is* punctuation" (Lycurgus).

Isobel Armstrong's sense of the extra-metrical and "post-Christian" caesura as "an empty break, a non-meaning-making element, a mere space" (Armstrong 35), on Dworkin's metaphor of "ventilated texts" (Dworkin 149) in the work of N.H. Pritchard, on Don Paterson's break-down of how gaps' "proximity to silence" can "produce expectations of significant information" (Paterson 422), and on Thomas J. Otten's distinction between "word-length segments denoting language's absence" and "extra-wide spaces between words" in the work of Jorie Graham (Otten 239). They also draw on the thin-but-growing tradition of critical reactions to McCrae's work specifically, including Caitlin Doyle's understanding of McCrae's "lacunae" as essential to a style that is both "propulsive" and "halt[ing]" (Doyle), Micah Bateman's contention that McCrae's "intralineal divisions made by backslashes and white space create simultaneous lyrical enunciations by creating multiple units of utterance…" (Bateman), and Derek Gromadski's fascination with "the choked, tussive lacks of breath" that "show up not as elisions to mark where words falter, stuck in the throat, but as pauses imposed to reveal a speech tempo caught falling behind itself trying to reconcile the unreal reality of the words its [sic] meting out" (Gromadski). In other words, critics both within and outside of McCrae's orbit see in visual caesurae possibilities for expression related to desire and loss, racial identity, discernment and meaning-making, and—in all its embodied but secular holiness, all its ability to carry the voice on its back—the breath. Many of these critics wrestle with the visual caesura's ambiguous relationship to the passage of time; however, even though McCrae has openly declared himself an anti-free verse poet, few mention meter specifically. And none explain how the visual caesurae located within his syllable counts (but not counting as syllables) affect the reader's experience of that meter—especially in relation to the salient motifs of memory holes, aerated spaces, and temporary dismemberment that suffuse his entire oeuvre.

To trace that correspondence is not merely to uncover the connections between an inventive prosody, precisely described, and an idiosyncratic network of images, assiduously collected—though such a pursuit does, I believe, constitute a celebration of a poet's style and, in that way, meet what I take to be the worthiest brief of literary criticism more generally. That tracing also has implications for the framework in and through which McCrae finds it possible and desirable to write poetry in the first place. McCrae has often said that the confessional mode is unavailable to poets of color, but he has also attached himself to that mode, both through his rhetoric of devotion and through his tendency towards personal disclosure. For instance, in one interview, he said:

> I think the devotional is inextricably confessional, but that is partly because I believe in a God who made and maintains the universe and every being in it, and any measure of mortal devotion to that God must necessarily confess the separation of the self *from* that God. But I do not think the confessional is always devotional. Now, specifically with regard to confessional poetry: As a person of color living in the United States of America, I have a complicated relationship with confessional poetry. I do not think it is possible, strictly speaking, for a person of color to *be* a confessional poet in America. The condition of the confessional poet assumes a fall from grace, but only whites occupy the initial position vis-à-vis grace from which the confessional poet must fall—people of color are always already (ugh—I hate that formulation) fallen. But I also love a lot of confessional poems and poets, and sometimes I wish I could write as they wrote. (Lycurgus)

For McCrae, the positionality of the poet of color means that grieving a fall from grace can feel redundant. Conscious of that problem, he devises a prosody that, by balancing the regularity of

meter with the interpolation of precisely timed but unpredictable lacunae that register the unsaid while leaving no real space in which it can be articulated, makes of redundancy an incantation. For McCrae, the addressee of the confessional mode is often the God from whom the self is separated, so he speckles his metrical grids with reminders of that separation—reminders that seem to make no difference while also determining, through seeming accidents of pace and spacing, his poems' affective ranges and imaginative leaps. The porousness of McCrae's pentameter permits him to sound the way he wants to sound as he struggles to make sense of a traumatic past such that he can write with grace about how living in the present feels.

If the holes in McCrae's verse are speaking wounds that reorient the poet in time through their non-isochrony, and if this prosody is McCrae's response to the voicing predicaments faced by the would-be devotional-confessional Black American poet, then it remains to be seen how the two primary strains of metrically resonant images that accompany and interact with these visual caesurae—namely, ventilation and dismemberment, air and injury—inform the poems' sense of closeness with anything holy, anything to which it would be worth confessing. In "Some Heavens Are All Silence," the first poem in *Cain Named the Animal* (2022), McCrae addresses this question head-on:

> Listen to my last breath you'll hear each breath I've drawn
> Since my voice changed and the sound got
> Deeper bow your head pull down a shroud from the heaven white
> Folks get peace privacy from pull one down
>
> To cover us I know you got a ladder or a string
> A ladder in your pocket straight
> And tall a white string made of white strings twisted tight

Together and it hangs

Above your head you pull and

A ladder rolls down from that heaven

White folks pull grave by grave to Earth

I know y'all got a heaven just for y'all and

A God who don't speak or don't make y'all listen listen

Bow your head that is the voice of God that breath (*Cain* 3)

By placing the first visual caesura directly after the initial command to "Listen to my last breath," McCrae associates the space with the breath. Next, he complicates that association by promising that, contained within that breath, the listener can find "each breath I've drawn | Since my voice changed." Rather than letting the visual space find its exact temporal equivalent in the single breath it marks, McCrae implies that many breaths, stretching back into the past some undefined distance, can be heard within one. The second two visual caesurae in this poem effect a similar maneuver, implying at first that the space after the command "Bow your head" allows the reader time to obey…but then shifting that implication with the space after "pull down," which may seem at first to allow for obeisance in a similar fashion but actually separates the verb-adverb pair from the noun phrase that is its direct object. The latter caesura turns out to be a mid-command delay—and one with an important tonal function, since it sets the stage for the "shroud" that comes after.

Unlike the poems in *Mule*, "Some Heavens Are All Silence" doesn't feature strict correspondence between units of iambic pentameter and lines, but the atemporal breath-breaks—gaps that gesture towards the temporality of reading without affecting it, gaps through which

readers pass but in which they also may linger—tend to function as opportunities for McCrae to inch a little close to that form, even as he holds it at arm's length. In this respect, they resemble Ryan's enjambments more than they do musical rests. In the second stanza, for instance, McCrae obscures the first unit of iambic pentameter through lineation and spacing: "I **know** you **got** a **la**dder **or** a **string**" shares a line with the end of the previous sentence and contains a visual caesura after its second foot, as if the speaker is fishing around for the kinds of implements the addressee might have.

Next, as he riffs appositively on that ladder and that string, McCrae transitions to a Ryan-esque split pentameter—"A **la**dder **in** your **po**cket **straight** | And **tall**"—before landing on "a **white** string **made** of **white** strings **twis**ted **tight**." That phrase shares the beginning of the line with "And tall," but it corresponds with the end of the line and is devoid of visual caesurae, making it arguably the most palpable unit of iambic pentameter in the poem. Combined with the techniques associated with split and embedded pentameters, the visual caesurae in the first two quatrains of this sonnet-length poem deconstruct a sense of correspondence with the passage of time, even as they build the poet toward units of iambic pentameter.

The image of "a **white** string **made** of **white** strings **twis**ted **tight**" embodies McCrae's conception of iambic pentameter: its density and effortfulness, its ideological association with whiteness, and its twisted nature (i.e. patterned but also depraved). McCrae wonders whether, within the context of devotional-confessional poetry, meter *is* the special ladder that "white | Folks" can use to access their half of the segregated Heaven he imagines with such bitter humor and ambiguous irony. After all, the tugging motion of this prosody mimics the gradual, callous effort by which white people pull their Heaven "grave by grave to Earth." On the other hand, the breaths built into that prosody, which are foundational to that effort, also make space within it for

the voice of God. McCrae's curiosity about the affordances of that "white string" is central to this poem's broader, semi-satirical, semi-didactic project, which emerges in its final two tercets: to "make y'all listen" in a way that the unspeaking God of the whites-only Heaven never would. Paradoxically, he makes the reader listen using a prosodic tool that, while shaping the configuration of sounds around it, makes no sound at all.

McCrae's embrace of the absent instrument, so blatant yet abstract in "Some Heavens Are All Silence," finds its origins in *Mule*, in which its imagery is more literal, its function more explicitly confessional. In "[We married in the front yard]," the last poem of the part of *Mule* that deals with the speaker's autistic son and crumbling marriage, McCrae's use of porous pentameter facilitates his exploration of familial loss through the image of the ball that his son cannot catch. McCrae writes:

> We married in the front yard watch-
> ing our son disappear our two-year-old
> Son Nicholas we watched him disappear
> Gesture by gesture word by word his au-
> tism slowly erasing him he couldn't catch
> A ball he could have caught the ball before
> Forgot the word for ball we didn't know
> Which mattered more the action or the word
> Which disappearing part was more impor-
> tant more our son which part to hold and which
> Part to let go we said the word and rolled
> The ball again we said the word and rolled

The ball we rolled the ball and we said *catch*

He held his arms out and embraced the air (*Mule* 34)

The holes, here, are myriad: the hole where the ball should be, the hole where the word "ball" should be, the hole where the son should be, and the holes within the articulations of these losses—though, in the last case, it isn't clear what "should be" in those spaces, if anything. Indeed, while the speaker remarks upon how autism is "erasing" their son, the meter assures us that the line is, despite these erasures, in some sense complete. In a way, this is a more terrifying kind of loss, in that it is harder to measure and so carries the threat of future suffering; "its very unassimilated nature—the way it [is] precisely not known in the first instance" means that it may "haunt the survivor later on" (Caruth 4).

As in "Some Heavens Are All Silence," the holes get less and less mimetic as "[We married in the front yard]" goes on: less linked to direct effects and more indicative of uncertain sorrows to come. For instance, while the caesura after "disappear" in the second line immediately enacts that disappearance (and the one after "forgot" in the seventh line achieves a similar effect for memory), the caesura that intervenes between the fourth and fifth feet of the line "Which **di**sa**ppear**ing **part** was **more** im**por-**" works mostly to set the word fragment "impor-" apart from the rest of the line. Arguably, that visual caesura softens the mid-word enjambment (or at least decenters it by surrounding it with other, equally pronounced stylistic maneuvers) while foregrounding the sound play (p-alliteration, or-assonance) that intensifies the sense of panic heading into the succeeding line(s): "tant more our son which part to hold and which | Part to let go."

Visually, in relation to the double caesurae that mark the line underneath it, that hole also contributes to the sense of things almost but not quite lining up with one another—a feeling that

suffuses this perpetually tabbed prosody and defines the air-embrace gesture at the center of this poem. The second caesura in the next line comes after the third foot ("tant **more** our **son** which **part** to **hold** and **which**") but stretches towards alignment with the one above it because of the extra space after the first foot. This failure to line up may indicate a kind of ineptitude, an inability to perform the simple act of catching a ball; through his idiosyncratic prosody, however, McCrae turns it into a performance of prowess, a high-wire act in which the tension of misalignment must resolve in some way at the end of the poem—even if just through a punctured line of iambic pentameter that sensitively articulates the very act of ineptitude it describes. When McCrae writes, "He **held** his **arms** out **and** em**brac**ed the **air**," (or, more naturally, "He **held** his **arms out** and em**brac**ed the **air**"), that gesture, technically a mistake, registers as beautiful. It's a mistake that allows Nicholas to express a kind of love for the world in which balls exist, rather than merely for balls themselves. In other words, it is a form of praise, even of prayer—a willingness to embrace even the insubstantial air. McCrae's aerated prosody helps him understand his son's failure to catch the ball as a holy act outside of time, not just because of its mimetic symbolism but also because of the way it allows him to think. Indeed, McCrae has spoken publicly about his association between God and blank space, claiming that "positing God as the object of one's thought clears an infinite space before one" (Doyle).

The second strain of metrically resonant images that McCrae puts in conversation with his visual caesurae, that of bodily dismemberment (and, in some circumstances, reattachment), is not totally discrete from the holy aeration of poems like "Some Heavens Are All Silence" and "[We married in the front yard]." In "The Reformation," a dream-sequence towards the end of *Cain Named the Animal*, McCrae indulges in a fantasy of a body that rapidly explodes into

clumped particles and just as quickly re-forms, though with differences that make all the difference. The speaker remembers how, while falling through an abyss alongside the "robot bird" who serves as his ill-mannered Virgil, a cord separates his legs from the rest of him. He flips upside-down in the air to catch the legs and reattach them to his body, his hands sticky with blood; amid these catastrophic contortions, he is consumed by a relatively minor worry about whether he has successfully lined up his buttons with his zipper. The first section of the poem ends with the speaker "straining | To get a good look shiver- | ing shouting down to the robot | *Buttons* screaming *Zipper*" (*Cain* 61, McCrae's italics). In the end, all he can do is scream the names of the elements he hopes are lining up, going on faith that the robot bird will understand his query. As in the case of the almost-lining-up visual caesurae in "[We married in the front yard]," which enact the son's effort to catch the ball, the visual caesurae in this passage, which do not stack up vertically, suggest this doomed effort to get organized in the air—or even to cogently articulate such organization as an objective.

By the end of the poem, the re-alignment that the speaker achieves reveals itself as the source both of visionary insight and of unbearable agony:

> …as I watched my
> Femurs re-enter me through the holes in
> My chest they had made exiting
>
> The coming back together was
> Agony greater than the flying
> Apart had been… (*Cain* 63)

Especially because the poem ends with an emphasis on "the *sound* | Of my body reforming" (64, my emphasis), these holes resemble Caruthian speaking wounds; however, without the opportunity to interact directly with the spectral presence of iambic pentameter, a characteristic of so much of McCrae's other work, they do not have the chance to establish themselves as

existing outside of sequential time—and are, therefore, incomplete examples of porous pentameter as a prosodic mode. In *Mule*, however, McCrae invents images of bodily dismemberment and reattachment that prefigure the severed legs of "The Reformation" while also, in their interaction with units of iambic pentameter strung across visual caesurae, exploring "the reality of the way that [an experience of] violence has not yet been fully known" (Caruth 6)—and thereby making space for the possibility of true confessional utterance.

In "In the Garden of the Ghosts of the Garden," an early poem from the first section of *Mule*, McCrae uses porous pentameter for precisely this purpose. He writes:

> And we divorced in the water in a gar-
> den in the pond in the garden in the pond
> Up to our ankles in the mud and neck-
> deep in the water and we stood in the water
> We held our arms above our heads for for-
> ty days supported by the water and
> Weighed down by the water and we didn't drink
> For fear that we would leave ourselves no water
> To stand in and we didn't piss for fear that
> We would pollute the water and have no
> Water to drink stood forty days in the pond
> Nothing was left of the garden but the pond
> No house no flowers no fence no bushes no
> Road to where a house would be the garden
> And you and me we felt our bones disin-

tegrating in the sun and freezing back

Together wrong in the night and the night sky

Was one-half solid white and one-half sol-

id black and gave no light and we each morn-

ing woke to different bodies frozen back

Together wrong inside for forty days

We stood in the water in the mud in the hole

In the garden of the ghosts of the garden wait-

ing to be exiled from the garden as

Even the water disappeared the last

Trace of the garden and by the forty-first

Day it was gone still hands in the air we wait-

ed there for anyone to punish us (*Mule* 12-13)

The poem takes place in an allegorical scene that evokes the psychological predicament of divorce: the "we" is suffering together but separately, paralyzed by the sense that life's necessities are going unattended-to but unable to take action until their even more urgent needs are met. With the layered, nesting prepositional phrases of the first four lines, that "we" seems entrenched—in danger of drowning not just in muddy water but also in syntax. The repeated part-lines give this whole poem an overwhelming, chant-like quality, yet it also evokes dearth; unable to drink or urinate and mysteriously abandoned by infrastructure (no fence, no road), the "we" is left to conjure comforting forms out of whatever sickly elements of life are left to them.

From the outset, McCrae manipulates the units of iambic pentameter in each line in accordance with these problems, securing five-stress scansions through contrived, mid-word

enjambments that thematize the discomfort of the split—and often using alternating stress patterns to distinguish hopelessly among repeated prepositions: "And **we** di**vorced** in the **wa**ter **in** a **gar**- | den **in** the **pond** in the **gar**den **in** the **pond**." The first few visual caesurae in this poem embody the struggle to breathe, the simultaneous lightness of floating and heaviness of sinking that the "we" is feeling. Both "**deep** in the **wa**ter **and** we **stood** in the **wa**ter" and "**Weighed down** by the **wa**ter and we **did**n't **drink**" feature visual caesurae right after the word "water," though at slightly different places in the sequence of these loosely scanning lines; the spaces signal the effort to breathe. Most of the poem describes a state of affairs that persists for forty straight days, unchanging except to the extent that it gets less bearable because of its tendency to continue. These early gaps may mark breaths, but they cannot extract the "we" from the temporal frame in which that continual suffering occurs.

As McCrae describes the accumulating bodily consequences of these circumstances, the frequency of visual caesurae spikes. Over and against any sense of aerated or ventilated verse, the passage beginning with the line "And **you** and **me** we **felt** our **bones** dis**in**-" demonstrates how porous pentameter can evoke dismemberment (and imperfect reattachment) in order to enact a speaker's struggle to imagine an intelligible self with the capacity to testify to his own suffering. In that enjambment, the fragment "disin" looks for a moment as if it means "design," implying that disintegration and design are both things bones can do for a body—that a structure can hover on the verge of integration before collapsing into chaos. When McCrae describes the feeling of the bones that have disintegrated in the night "freezing back | Together wrong," anapestic, pyrrhic, and spondaic substitutions dominate the line, signaling its quality of having been assembled in error: "To**ge**ther **wrong** in the **night** and the **night sky**."

Amid these prosodic evocations of bodily dismemberment and mis-assembly, McCrae describes the Heavens themselves as split in half: "and the night sky | Was one-half solid white and one-half sol- | id black and gave no light" (*Mule* 13). The white/light, back/black, and sun/one rhymes in this passage, which do not occur at the ends of lines, suggest alternate lineations, implying that these lines have themselves been frozen together wrong. In particular, "and freezing back / Together wrong in the night and the night sky **|** Was one-half solid white" (12-13) could be re-lineated so that the rhyming words fall at the ends of lines, without losing the pentametrical flow: "and freezing back Together wrong in the night | and the night sky Was one-half solid white." In this re-lineation, which would horrify Alan Holder, the vestigial capital letters mark the scars where lines have been reattached.

Furthermore, at the same time that it sounds almost biblical, this image clearly symbolizes the biracial identity at the heart of *Mule*; the setting of that errant re-freezing is the world vision of the biracial speaker, who, based on his experiences being raised by abusive white grandparents, cannot see how two such different halves should fit together or blend. So, even while the visual caesurae enact the emotional predicament of divorce, which involves a split "we," they also attend to the book's central questions about halved racial identities, which involve a split "I." That these visual caesurae occur right after the words "white" and "black" draws an implicit parallel between McCrae's use of the word "water" earlier in the poem and his invocation of race, as if whiteness and blackness are part of the muddy water in which the divorcing couple is stuck "up to [their] ankles." Here, as elsewhere (and as in Ryan's split pentameters), McCrae engages these lines of inquiry by undermining the formal possibility of neat and equal halves; his reiterative syntax forces this sentence over the line break, splitting the word "solid" into unequal halves (three letters and two: sol + id), just as the visual caesura splits

the line into unequal halves (three stresses and two: "Was **one**-half **sol**id **white** and **one**-half **sol**-").

This unequal halving sets up McCrae's even more experimental use of porous pentameter to explore unresolved splits in poems like "That's Entertainment" (39) and "Mulatto" (41), which appear later in the volume. At the opening of "That's Entertainment," when he writes, "White half the white half mule the black half black / But more | pleasing to either eye…" (*Mule* 39), McCrae heightens the tension between the actual line break and the one he marks with a slash, showing how units (and people) can break in multiple ways. Intensifying its spondaic ambiguity, he gives different stress patterns to the phrase "white half" at different points in the line—"White **half** the **white** half **mule** the **black** half **black**…"—as if to demonstrate how one half can take precedence over its counterpart for temporary, circumstantial, even dubious reasons.

Throughout *Mule*, possibilities for unstable bisection proliferate. McCrae goes on to contend that there is a "bigger half" and a "smaller half" (McCrae 39), as well as halves split into halves ("which half half human being" (39)); in "Mulatto," he even posits the notion of "three halves" (41). Necessarily, a visual caesura in a line of iambic pentameter will break that unit of five into unequal halves, but McCrae's prosodic insights go rather deeper, making of this mathematical accident an opportunity to explore the formal connections between the psychological predicament of divorce (a typical topic for confessional verse, as in Sexton's "Break Away" or Lowell's "To Speak of Woe That Is in Marriage" ("Poems for Breakups")) and that of being biracial in the U.S. (according to McCrae, an impossible positionality from which to write such verse).

To that end, "In the Garden of the Ghosts of the Garden" concludes with the image of the couple standing where the pond used to be, holding their hands in the air: "we wait- | ed there for anyone to punish us" (*Mule* 13). This final posture implies a silent or absent God, a God unavailable to hear their confession or to mete out their penalty for failing in their marriage; the last visual caesura mimetically enacts that waiting. Yet, in its atemporality, its inability to affect the scansion of the last line ("ed **there** for **an**y**one** to **pun**ish **us**"), it also implies that the waiting is illusory. Indeed, the irony of this ending image inheres in the sense that the punishment is all around them and has been for forty-one days. The punishment *is* the dismemberment, the drowning, the splitting, the physical suffering, and the waiting in uncertainty. Thus, the voice of God seems to answer this "we" from out of the hole in the verse, the speaking wound that tells them that their punishment is always already upon them—and that they have survived it and are going to be okay.

Other critics have noted these themes and remarked upon this prosodic complexity. Turner writes, "While *Mule* is prosodically rich, it also explores personal history, race, and religion at length, as well as giving new versions of confessional and devotional poetry" (Turner). This analysis concurs with both clauses in that claim but dismisses the conjunction that connects them; *Mule*'s prosodic richness is precisely *how* McCrae explores personal history, race, and religion, finding new confessional and devotional modes. Indeed, McCrae's visual caesurae create opportunities for his speaker to conceptualize the abstractions and emotions that rend him while also stepping outside of sequential time to listen for other, more ephemeral voices. As McCrae explores the affordances of this prosody over the course of *Mule*, he gradually discovers that its capacity to evoke dismemberment and misalignment can also

translate into an ability to put pieces together, to collect fragments and shore them, so to speak, against his ruin.

For instance, "Mosaic" describes a memorial display for a female family member in which many small photographs collectively comprise one large image of the face of the deceased. The speaker wonders what this family member—his mother, perhaps—would have thought about this method of representation. With heart-breaking neutrality, he considers the possibility that he simply would not figure in her reflection at all: "would **she** | Have **thought** I **do** not **no**tice **him**" (*Mule* 62).[76] Here, in a move typical of Ryan's split-pentametric mode, McCrae breaks a syntactic unit of iambic pentameter across a line even as he musses up his syntax in order to maintain the appearance of line-meter coincidence. When he writes, "Some are diagonal what would she have thought | Though most are vertical or horizontal" (61) and "sometimes her hair is black | And sometimes red but not the way it in real | Life not ever red not ever black…" (61), McCrae marvels at how fragments that don't seem to fit together in terms of color or orientation—fragments that are inconsistent with one another in terms of their internal logics and relationships to verisimilitude—can nevertheless (in fact, through their very discontinuities and distortions) contribute to a unified representation of someone—someone otherwise, in the case of this family member, unknowable, unreachable, unmentionable. The smashed-together syntax mimics the mode of representation it describes, while the meter forces the jarring elements into a kind of organization and the visual caesurae make space for blurring, conflation, and tonal shifts within that matrix. Because of the implicit parallels between this method of representation and McCrae's formal fragmentation through visual caesurae and in-line

[76] Chiasson captures this peculiar neutrality of tone when he writes, "McCrae often treats his autobiography like just another transcript, with a judicial coolness that makes the details all the more devastating" ("Poems to America").

slash marks, the poem's curiosity about this mosaic offers a way of exploring what this relative would have thought about McCrae's own art, which also pieces things together in shifting reference to internal logics and to reality—and which also might fail register with this relative, who seems not to have loved him the way he needed to be loved.

Indeed, in a rare move within the context of his porous pentameter, McCrae arranges things so that, late in "Mosaic," two of the visual caesurae line up on a vertical axis:

…or could

I not have come being too young before

She died if she had lived she might have no-

ticed me I would have been a child if she

Had lived a few more years… (*Mule* 62)

The spaces after "died" and "me" both occur directly after the first foot of the iambic pentameter in their respective lines. Among other contortions, McCrae must split the word "noticed" in half to achieve this alignment, as if he is warning himself not to go on ("no—") and also fracturing the act of noticing into two unequal halves: one half imaginatively affirmed, the other lost to impossibility. After all, he was probably too young to be present at this funeral, and she, crucially, was dead, so neither was available to convene over this clarifying depiction of her face. The two absences line up, match, and meet in space the way their corresponding presences never can; this poem indulges in a fantasy of alignment even as it confronts the misalignment of its central characters, the impossibility of communication or understanding blossoming between them.[77]

[77] For another McCrae poem that explores the mosaic method's affordances in terms of memorialization and trauma-processing, see "Asked About *The Banjo Man* and Its Sequels Banjo Yes Tells a Journalist Something About Himself" in *In the Language of my Captor* (2017).

By the end of *Mule*, this piecing-together gesture, which inheres in both the temporal action and the visual impression of McCrae's porous pentameter, culminates in an insight into God's capacity to gather. Thanks to the machinations of this prosody, the devotional address of "In the Garden of the Ghosts of the Garden" has morphed in tone so that, by "[Lord God Lord Basket Lord]," the final poem in the book, the God is not a punisher but a collector: a basket-carrying deity with the power to bring all of the speaker's family members together, despite their moral failings. In a holy/hole-y sonnet in which nine of the fourteen lines feature at least one gap, the speaker's request for God to "gather them in" (*Mule* 84) enables metrical wholeness; whenever the command to gather appears, it either occurs inside of an unbroken line or precipitates one. For instance, when McCrae writes, "Lord **God** Lord **Bas**ket **Lord** **gath**er them **in** | My **sis**ters **bro**thers **fa**ther **mo**ther **her** | **Mo**ther who **died**…" (84), he obeys his own command by gathering all of the living family members into one line, with the deceased grandmother enjambed onto the next—though still connected to the living through the provisionally stressed possessive adjective "her."

This poem hinges on the tension between the speaker's universal faith and his personal anxiety. Its practice of lineal gathering evinces confidence in the willingness of this deity to assemble and embrace all these people, even though they do not always love him "well." On the other hand, McCrae's recursive syntax, a manifestation of a tendency to rehash and restate grounded in Black poetics traditions traced by Henderson and others, fills out lines of meter and leads the speaker to posit, for instance, that he may not be among the list of the loved in this family: "gather them Lord al- | so **those** they **love** who **may**be are **not me**" (*Mule* 84). The decision to metaphorize this gathering God as a "migrant worker" who must "pick" these people and put them in his basket implies both a magnanimous inclination to draw that beleaguered

cultural archetype into proximity with holiness in the imagination of the reader, and a more spiteful impulse to outsource the gathering of these family members, some of whom are "criminals" and "liars," to someone else—someone without a direct stake in who gets gathered and who doesn't. Is this a specific gesture of forgiveness or an abstracted plea for protection?

Because of these ambiguities, "[Lord God Lord Basket Lord]" exists in the liminal space between the devotional and the confessional. The way McCrae manipulates its porous pentameters, especially in relation to his uses of that prosody earlier in *Mule*, heightens that tension, making it possible for this poet to speak into and through his personal wounds while also, amid and amongst those utterances, carving out blanks in which the holy can abide. That these visual caesurae can house divine presence, while their ilk represent speaking wounds or broken bones or severed identities, testifies to the power of this prosody, which, like ghost meter more broadly, does not mean or do only one thing.

Thus, even though McCrae's style is obviously distinct from Ryan's (distinguishable on sight, rarely overlapping in diction, and explicit about politics and history in ways that would be anathema to her), these two popular and prolific contemporary poets are kin. Each relies on the discursive, expressive capacities of iambic pentameter but declines to let that poetic form occupy their lines undisturbed. The visual, spatial disturbances that each poet introduces into—or, rather, uses to generate—their audible units of meter (the line breaks, the visual caesurae) coincide with their explorations of prosodically resonant motifs like the exposed edge, the uneven half, the assembled shard, and the speaking wound, so that they seem to be metaphorizing their prosodic assays even as they refuse mere mimesis. Ultimately, both poets focus their imaginative energies on the telling gaps and alluring misalignments that these formal devices make possible.

For Ryan and McCrae, to explore the ghostly effects of torn, split, and punctured units of meter on poems' senses of time and space is to negotiate and finesse a workable relationship with the confessional impulse and a proximity to holiness. In these poems, the voices that speak (or don't speak) from gaps, the mysteries that seep from the loci of misalignment, permit each poet to assume stances of vulnerable self-exposure and awed curiosity while honoring their stylistic and philosophical principles regarding the impossibility and intolerability of such approaches. Each poet is known for their unmistakable style, but critics rarely acknowledge or describe the role that prosody plays in that style. If they do, they do not trace the connection between that prosody and the poets' imaginative achievements—the habits and gestures of mind that, to the delight and fascination of readers, their poems demonstrate and enact. To read the work of Ryan and McCrae with the ghost of iambic pentameter in mind is to appreciate the power of a broken form to shape a mature, dynamic, fully expressive poetic voice: it is, adapting McCrae, to hold one's arms out and embrace the air.

Coda

"A veil across / the face of the one you blame": Ghost Pentameter in the Teaching Archive

This dissertation has demonstrated the capacity of meter-oriented readings of supposedly non-metrical modern and contemporary poetry to deepen understanding of and furnish delight in certain poets' imaginative achievements. It has explored the ways that iambic pentameter's variously constructed spectralities invest the works in which they covertly appear with a range of highly specific poetic affects, from the anxious to the grudging to the disdainful. Each chosen poet (Dove, Petrosino, Young, Coleman, Jeffers, Jess, Ginsberg, Bishop, Ryan, and McCrae) has exemplified some subset of ghost iambic pentameter, some specific way that that metrical form can achieve presence-in-absence in relation to poetry's other formal features, including the line, the syntactic unit, space on the page, the stanzaic form, and rhyme. Sometimes building on Finch and Easthope and sometimes inventing new terms, I have named these varieties of ghost meter (enclosing metapentameters, iambic cudgels, embedded pentameters, freed verse, split pentameters, and porous pentameters) and shown how they are linked to recurring motifs that reflect their meanings: the gate or fence for the perspectival portal of enclosing metapentameters, the approaching-and-retreating tides for freed verse. The readings in the preceding chapters focus their energies not merely on these mimesis-marked kinds of meaning making, but also on the crucial ways that phantom pentameters nudge the pacing, organization, voicing, and tone of poems to make them distinctly themselves.

Picking up on my introduction's engagement with critic-poets' anxieties about readers' metrical training, one source of the punning "Qualified" in the "Qualified Ghost" of this dissertation's title (Glaser, Martin), this coda will consider four poets' engagements with the ghost of iambic pentameter in the context of their identities as teachers. Inspired by the

methodologies laid out in Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan's *The Teaching Archive*—and engaging Kimberly Quiogue Andrews's theory of the academic avant-garde as well as Merve Emre's concept of the paraliterary reader—I will begin to explore how poets' syllabi, lesson plans, memories of classroom experiences and student interactions, teaching philosophies, and histories of institutional affiliation can both affirm and complicate the presence-in-absence of iambic pentameter's ghost (and many of its attendant affects, especially the anxious ones) in the educational spaces that support and surround their creative efforts.

Buurma and Heffernan's book serves as a reminder to honor the work of literary criticism as it occurs in classrooms; Emre's breaks down the binary of good and bad readers in relation to powerful institutions; and Andrews's traces an "interdependence" (Andrews 2) among literary scholarship, creative writing, and teaching such that formal innovations seem to make meaning precisely within that context, rather than in ignorance or denial of it. Even though meter is a quintessentially pedagogical poetic device (taught in school, crystalized by esoteric terminology, associated with erudition or rote memorization, and shrugged at as one might shrug at one's fading memory of the quadratic formula), none of these critics has specifically asked how meter makes bad readers (Emre), helps teaching poets experiment meaningfully in the face of institutional pressure (Andrews), or haunts the teaching archive (Buurma and Heffernan). This dissertation has periodically acknowledged its subjects as teachers (Ginsberg's Naropa transcripts, Bishop's letter about her frustrations teaching pentameter) but has not, up to this point, foregrounded those identities or capitalized much on their specific interpretive possibilities in relation to actual instances of ghost iambic pentameter. The coda will gesture more firmly in those directions, indicating avenues for my own future work both on the page and in the classroom, as well as encouraging readers to think along these lines in theirs.

To that end, the coda will begin by reading ghost pentameters in the work of two overtly experimental contemporary poets who are also teachers—work that is, to my mind, representative of the current landscape of book-length, project-based, multimedia-inflected, archivally minded, and intensely autobiographical poetry: Diana Khoi Nguyen's *Ghost of* (2018) and Victoria Chang's *Obit* (2020). Nguyen teaches at the Low-Residency MFA at Randolph College and serves as a writer-in-residence at University of Tennessee-Knoxville; *Ghost of* features photographic cut-out triptychs that chop words up letter-by-letter as part of the project of mourning Nguyen's younger brother's suicide. These poems would seem to prioritize the materiality and visuality of language over its sonic or rhythmic qualities, but units of iambic pentameter still surface, marking Nguyen's desire to count time, trace edges, and test her memory—activities she associates, to various extents, with school. Similarly, Chang, who is a professor at Georgia Tech and director of their community-oriented Poetry@Tech program, creates rigidly center-justified, columnar "obits," which use split pentameters to locate existential interstices even amid the speaker's seeming discursive clarity, interrogating the reliability of both perception and care in the context of her father's dementia and her mother's death. Like those of Nguyen, Chang's ghostly pentameters reflect the alternations of her teaching-marked writing schedule; further, Chang's pedagogical tendency to suggest meter as a problem-solving tool for young poets sheds light on the remedial, even healing role they can play in her own work. That both of these books are works of familial elegy may seem to pick up on my second chapter's probing of that haunted genre in relation to this haunted form, but, in this context, the genre's significance lies largely in its teachability: elegy has a rhetorical purpose and palpable teleology that make it attractive to instructors and memorable for students. Indeed, I encountered

both Nguyen's and Chang's work first as a teacher, and I felt their phantom rhythms first while reading them aloud in class.

Finally and very briefly, the coda will acknowledge the importance of ghost pentameters to two contemporary poet-teachers known for extra-metrical but conspicuously elaborate relationships to measuring or producing the sounds of language, signaling possible approaches to reading their work with both theory and practice in mind. In *A Woman of Property* (2016), Robyn Schiff, director of the creative writing program at the University of Chicago, uses syllabic lines and conspicuously long sentences to probe worries about parenthood, home ownership, and, I speculate, institutional affiliation. In *Babette* (2015), Sara Deniz Akant, professor of the practice at Tufts whose prosodic-pedagogical discourse is, I will suggest, distinctly paraliterary, uses macaronic nonsense and neologism to build and deconstruct sly pseudo-hymn stanzas, chanting a cast of imaginary creatures into being. In both works, pentameter is secondary but spectrally present, embodying contemporary political anxieties or delimiting the edges of fabricated beasties…and often registering a kind of sublime rage.

Each of these four contemporary poets—Nguyen and Chang, whom I will read in relative depth in this coda, and Schiff and Akant, towards whom I will only have time to gesture—has some formal or stylistic commitment that would seem to render the presence of ghost iambic pentameter in their work untenable, insignificant, or otherwise beside the point. These short readings will show that the devices expounded upon in the preceding three chapters often coexist alongside other, more salient formal concerns, providing a way to delight in self-consciously tricky contemporary verse that juggles multiple formal, stylistic, generic, and linguistic commitments. More saliently, it will explore how the teaching archive of each poet sheds light on the affordances of their ghostly pentameters.

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Five of the poems in Nguyen's *Ghost of* are called "Triptych." In each three-page poem, the first page shows a black-and-white family portrait with one figure—a child, her brother—cut out. The second proffers a block of text in the shape of that cutout, filling the space of Nguyen's brother's absence with words. On the third, there is a rectangle of text the shape of the photograph itself, with white space where the cutout would be.[78] Nguyen has explained that the cutouts are found rather than made:

> The triptychs emerged as a response to the silence surrounding an action of my brother's two years before his suicide. In 2012, in the middle of the night, Oliver took every hanging portrait of the family down from the walls of our childhood home, and carefully sliced his visage out of each photograph before returning the framed pictures back in their places. [...] Two years later, Oliver removed himself from the family via suicide; the pictures still hanging in our childhood home like awful portends, and then, memorials. And still, my family wouldn't talk about these cutout photographs. Around the first anniversary of his death, I wanted to address this silence surrounding the images and what resulted were these triptychs. (Mischler)

From its inception, the empty space in Nguyen's poems is collaborative (her brother is arguably the co-author of the cutout images that begin each sequence), sonic (countering "silence"), and even pedagogical, or at least demonstrative (within the context of her family, she intends them as conversation-starters, or at least as silence-enders). In interviews, Nguyen has described her

[78] Nguyen has made this three-part structure and method utterly clear in interviews: "The first part is the photograph, the second part is a word-text which fills in the body that has been cut out, and the third part is my attempt to use poetry as a frame to support the white space, the person who is no longer here" (Mischler).

process after receiving scans of the photos from her sister and beginning to "fill in the white space of the cutout": "It was a new form which dictated how many words and characters I could use [...]. I didn't have to think about line breaks—and I also couldn't finish my sentence since the form would abruptly end" (Mischler). She speaks about the form's appeal as residing in its power to forcefully override other formal concerns. Yet, in many of the actual triptychs, the tendency for shape to supersede lineation and syntax creates opportunities for the ghost of meter to appear, and the reader's experience of hearing that meter despite the troubling of word boundaries almost beyond recognition mimics something like what we imagine the speaker to feel as she contends directly with the traces of her brother's life.

On the second page of the first triptych in *Ghost of*, Nguyen writes:

mind
ful of
the setti
ing he co
unted off
the seconds
in his head a
s the solitary
bee struggles
to fly inside t
he walls of a
n empty hou
se, her siste
rs dead bel
ow her; no
wind, no r
ain; we st
ayed

Nguyen imagines her brother's internal clock with a hyper-split, hyper-embedded unit of iambic pentameter: "...he **co / un**ted **off** / the **se**conds / **in** his **head**" (*Ghost of* 20). The line break in the middle of the compound vowel in the word "counted" makes it clear that space is running roughshod over sound, breaking words into non-phonemic units. Nevertheless, this instance of ghost meter sets up the rhyme with "dead" later in the poem. It also predicts other, similar instances in later triptychs, such as "he / no **long**er **feels** the **w** / **atch** a**gainst** his **wrist**" (36), showing that, in the manner of Finch's metrical code (via Easthope) as well as Glaser's

metronome (via Pound), Nguyen associates meter with impossible or unbearable acts of timekeeping.

These associations resonate with an early memory of counting, one of Nguyen's origin stories as a poet, from her time in elementary school in Southern California:

> …we had a big outdoor courtyard and whenever there was a school assembly, all the classes would exit their classrooms and assemble in [...] the main courtyard. I remember walking through the hallway in the line and there was a young boy, and he was counting. He would take three steps forward, then two steps back, then count three steps forward and I was like, "What an inefficient way of moving." But I never forgot that boy. I don't even know who it was. I don't know this person but I'll never forget the 'One, two, three, one, two, one, two, three, one.' It's like a skipping metronome, like it's not skipping the right way. All these years later, that's become a really critical guiding post in my thinking and poetics which is when I write, I put down a few words, then I go all the way back to the beginning and I move really slowly through those words before I can then offer a fourth, a third, and a fifth word—and that's how I write. (Naimon)

As she reflects on this anecdote, which takes place in an interstitial slice of time between school engagements, Nguyen draws a connection between the recursivity of this boy's counted-out gait and her writing process, which moves backwards as well as forwards, incorporating revision into the act of composition. Even though she compares that gait to "a skipping metronome," she seems to elide the more obvious resonance with distorted metrical forms that this story suggests. In particular, the three-forward/two-back pattern evokes the five-foot form of iambic pentameter. Thus, although she doesn't acknowledge meter's presence in this writerly origin story, Nguyen tethers counting not just to writing but also to school.

Comments that Nguyen has made about how her identity as a teacher affects the temporal rhythms of her writing schedule also suggest the conjunction of prosodic maneuver, visual experimentation, and intimately personal symbolism in "Triptych" (19-21) without mentioning meter explicitly. Nguyen writes poetry for fifteen straight days in the summer and fifteen straight days in the winter, and at no other time: "I write in the summer and winter because that is the only time I am not teaching and I am free" (Raees). This professional boundary dovetails with an emotional one: "December is especially difficult because that's the month that my brother committed suicide, and it's important for me to be in a safe and familiar space" (Raees). Like the boy at her elementary school, Nguyen saves her "inefficient" (Naimon) experiments for the breaks between classes. Arguably, this writing schedule is conducive to project-based experiments as opposed to piecemeal collections of lyrics; in this respect, Nguyen's comments support Andrews's contention, in *The Academic Avant-Garde,* that it is "possible for vanguardist practice to be based on academic institutionality" (Andrews 3).[79] Nguyen doesn't "have conscious thoughts about meter / ghost meter" or "formally teach prosody outside of a little unit [she does] sometimes in undergrad and grad classes (just the fundamentals)" ("Research query"), but alternating rhythms suggestive of iambic pentameter infuse her writing life, and the poems she writes feature ghost units of iambic pentameter that reflect her concern with skewed counts.

Andrews's reading of Jorie Graham shows how, in *The End of Beauty* (1987), formal features like the blank and the variable "serve a dual function as a concealment that protects the interests of the intellectual class as vanguard, and as a form of invitation that offers entree into that class, in accordance with its pedagogical aims" (Andrews 113). Because these devices

[79] On the topic of the constraints of the academic year, Andrews later adds, voicing the "hard optimism" (Andrews 5) towards which she gravitates, "The container that [teaching academics] are in is one of the only containers that allows us to really think through the possibility of being container-free" (119).

"maintain a sense of ineffability, distance, and abstract multiplicity in their erasure of a key grammatical term in a given phrase but can be simultaneously read as invitations or pedagogical tools" (113), poems that aren't explicitly about teaching reveal themselves to be actively engaged in thematizing teaching. Something similar is arguably going on with *Ghost of*, which, in its comparable tendency to offer blank spaces and then demonstrate how to fill them, could seem to instruct or test its reader in the fundamentals of loss and grief. Phantom units of iambic pentameter surface when Nguyen is being most explicit about her methods yet most elliptical about the emotions they convey, all amid heightened affect; in the third section of the triptych that I analyze above, she begs her brother, "please—**be** no // t **art** but **life**, be **life**, please **be**" (*Ghost of* 21), making the art/life dichotomy palpable yet assailable through the recursive syntax and monosyllabic diction that secure the scansion. Giving explicit instructions later on the same page, she commands, "re**move** your**self** from **frames** re**move** the **frame**" (21). This unit of iambic pentameter, distinguished by its recursive but discrete syntax, suggests a creative writing prompt that a student could use to imitate *Ghost of*.

While meter may play a minor role in Nguyen's stated poetics and pedagogy, the images and techniques that surface in connection with her hyper-split pentameters resonate with her school-inflected writing schedule—with the sense that, in part because poetry is taught as well as practiced, not all her time is equally hers. Other readings could probe further into how Nguyen's sly attitude towards the spectral ("Perhaps funny of me to say, but I don't even really 'believe' in ghosts…" ("Formative Years")) helps her navigate the personal-vocational tensions that these ghost meters broach and embody.[80]

[80] The profusion of contemporary works that hinge on a ghostly metaphor, from Brian Turner's *Phantom Noise* (2010) to Cathy Linh Che's *Becoming Ghost* (2025), means that these avenues are not limited to Nguyen's work. Furthermore, still other readings of Nguyen and anyone in the Susan Howe lineage could draw on Michael Davidson's *Ghostlier Demarcations*, referenced in the introduction to the present dissertation, to contend more

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Not only is Victoria Chang's *Obit*—another recent work of familial elegy featuring experimental, visually arresting forms that play with spatial constraint—marked by the "ghost of" iambic pentameter in ways that bring to mind the triptychs of *Ghost of*, but Chang has also spoken about her inter-semester writing schedule in ways that resemble Nguyen's fifteen-day intervals; both Nguyen and Chang are "figures [who] measure[] out their professional lives by the academic year, the length of the term, and the lecture hour" (Buurma and Heffernan 1). In reference to her mother's death and the creation of *Obit*, Chang has said, "She died in August of 2015, and it was in maybe January or February of 2016 that I wrote those Obits over a two-week period. I have a very obsessive personality, for better or for worse. So that, combined with my schedule, I feel like that's how I write poems" (Seaborn). However, whereas Nguyen avowedly does not center the idea of meter's covert presence in non-metrical contemporary poetry in her teaching, Chang does. This difference hints that, while there exist profound resonances between many poets' prosodies and their teaching archives, those relations are curiously inconsistent from poet to poet. What determines them? These readings hint at, but do not settle on, certain answers to that question.

Obit isn't comprised exclusively of the center-justified, coffin-shaped, newspaper column poems that Chang calls obits; a sequence of tankas about parenting, characteristically in syllabics, is dispersed throughout, and the middle section is a lengthy non-metrical sonnet sequence set in the suburbs, featuring in-line visual caesurae reminiscent of McCrae. Chang's formal catholicism is reflected in her teaching; her poetry & poetics syllabus for Georgia Tech

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directly with how the ephemeral materiality of the multimedia work that Nguyen does renders the sense of language's sonic embodiment particularly shadowy and insubstantial, even as it bolsters the project's teaching potential through interdisciplinarity and iterability.

states as its first learning goal that "Students will learn/review/enhance their understanding of the *basic poetry techniques and forms*" ("LMC 3204," my emphasis). In citing this seemingly banal statement, I follow Buurma and Heffernan, who write, "When we look to classroom practices rather than methodological manifestos or critics' high-profile complaints about the professionalization of literary study, we find alternative genealogies for literary study's most familiar practices and longer, continuous histories for literary study's seemingly recent methods" (Buurma and Heffernan 9); this seems true for Chang's teaching materials, which evince a desire to equip student poets with understanding of many forms, not just nonce or "faddish[]" (Emre 11) ones.[81] Still, counterintuitively, in *Obit*, the obits—the invented form—are where iambic pentameter haunts most plainly and with the most significant implications for the questions this book asks about the care humans provide for one another.

In Chang's poems, the ghost of iambic pentameter functions, much as enclosing metapentameters do for Rita Dove, Kiki Petrosino, or Kevin Young, to demarcate the limits of human sympathy or empathy, the phenomenological thresholds past which we cannot help or even communicate with one another. In her obituary for "Language" itself, Chang remembers hiring "a night / person" for her mother's "difficult nights" spent suffering from the cancer that would kill her: "By the time I got there, she / was always gone" (*Obit* 12). This sinister pronouncement, a single sentence, is also a split pentameter, "By the **time** I **got** there, **she** / was **al**ways **gone**." Its placement at the line edge secures the promotion of "she" in the third foot to

[81] Notably, others recognize in Chang's obits a faddishness that lends itself to teaching. Seaborn asked Chang about the pedagogical potential of the obit form: "I think you've probably seen this already, but once this full collection is out, people are going to be teaching obits. This is going to be *the* generative writing exercise thing. Every writing class or seminar will suddenly be 'Okay, we're all going to write an obit.' I think it's definitely going to be a thing" (Seaborn). In response, Chang deflected: "I do that with A. Van Jordan's book a lot, *Macnolia*. He has these awesome dictionary poems in there, and sometimes I'll give those as writing exercises, and they really do spark some pretty cool poems. I don't at all need mine to do that, but I do hope they resonate with people, and that they can help people" (Seaborn).

confirm the scansion, permitting the reader to dwell in some meaningful antecedent ambiguity: who was always gone, the caretaker, the mother, or another version of the speaker? Though the next sentence confirms that the disappearer is indeed the "night / person," describing her as "a ghost who / left letters on my lips" (a rich descriptor in the context of this argument, to be sure), that secondary reading lingers, suggesting the mother's presence-in-absence as well as the meter's; my readings of spectral return in Ginsberg and Bishop are obviously relevant here, but the prosodic context is distinctly different. As in the case of Nguyen's triptychs, one is moved to ask: what does it mean to split units of iambic pentameter across line breaks that are the result of a conceptual constraint rather than a writerly choice?

After all, Chang has implied that, in terms of process, the obit shape comes *after* the poet has composed the poem's text: "We think of form as oftentimes constraining us, but in this case, it was so free. I didn't write in a box, like I didn't actually give myself a box to write within, but I think that thinking in these terms, and this form that it was going to be in, was really freeing" (Seaborn). This comment suggests that Chang wrote these poems *and then* formatted them into their distinctive obit-shaped boxes; one has to imagine that, post-formatting, she fiddled with the sentences, arranging for more fortuitous words and phrases to fall at the box's edges—though she doesn't explicitly describe this step of the process in interviews. The process she does describe seems to be organized around an anticipated loss of control, a conscious hand-over of the poem's form to the word-processor; conceptually, this process seems like a rehearsal or imitation of the dynamic into which she describes settling with her mother's caretakers, wherein the true relative and the hired one alternate with one another, performing the loving vigilance their charge demands only half the time each.

Many of the other phantom pentameters in *Obit* embody the abstract partitions that divide selves from their existential, familial, and temporal doppelgängers, exposing the difficulty of maintaining trust, empathy, and support across those boundaries. In an obit for "Victoria Chang" on the page right after the one about the caretakers, Chang metaphorizes her father's dementia by imagining him "As if he were visiting his past self in / prison," writing, "He / **tried** to **ask** his **form**er **self** for **help** but / the guards wouldn't allow him to pass / notes" (*Obit* 13). This ghostly unit of iambic pentameter, cut across the edge of the box and distinguished by syntax, communicates the anguished yearning of her father's request to his former self; the dissolution of the metrical pattern it so briefly establishes reflects that failure to "pass / notes"—to achieve true communication across those transparent but unyielding boundaries. Similarly, in a later obit directly announcing the deaths of her mother's caretakers, Chang writes, "The handle of time's door is hot for the dying," asking, "What / use is a door if you can't exit?" and concluding, "A **door** / that **can't** be **op**ened is **called** a **wall**" (62). The aphoristic conclusion, reminiscent of Ginsberg's "What **came** is **gone** for**ev**er **ev**ery **time**" (*Kaddish* 8) in its anti-consolatory decisiveness, activates the sing-songiness of meter to achieve a tone of bitter self-reminder.

Chang achieves something analogous in an obit for the very concept of blame, writing, "Blame / is just an echo of pain, a **veil** a**cross** / the **face** of the **one** you **blame**" (*Obit* 72). The off-rhyme between "pain" and "blame" helps the reader's ear hear the phrase that fills the space between those sounds as a prosodic unit, despite the anapestic substitution in the fourth foot. From the veil, to the wall, to the prison glass, these split *meta*pentameters crystallize Chang's unique tonal approach to elegy—akin to what Kamram Javadizadeh has called, specifically in reference to *Obit*, "the brisk objectivity of someone writing about death on a deadline"

(Javadizadeh). Yet there's even more complexity to Chang's tone than "brisk objectivity"; for instance, in an obit for "Form," she remembers how, after her mother's death, a bird "fell out of the ficus" and "left its eggs": "The arm that turned the earth / never bothered to stop for the bird, / and the **bird** was **crushed** bet**ween** / the **earth** and **time**" (*Obit* 75). In this sonically dense passage, a tender being finds herself lodged between two vast entities, and the ghost of iambic pentameter, in its sinister (dis)embodiment, lightly registers the crushing inevitability of the obliteration that will result. There is pathos, irony, helplessness, authority, and curiosity in these lines.

What difference does it make that Chang's teaching archive explicitly acknowledges the possibility for this kind of meaning-making, while Nguyen's does not? In a guide to rhythm and meter that Chang provides for her poetry & poetics students, she advises that metrical training can help readers approach ostensibly non-metrical contemporary poetry: "Most contemporary poetry is in free verse with no obvious formal meter, but learning about regular meter can help train a poet's ear to irregular rhythms while reading and in your own work" ("Rhythm"). She later addresses creative writers more directly, adding:

> Many poets will tell you that you should always read a poem out loud several times every time you get a draft done. If it doesn't sound 'right' every time, there might be something that isn't working. This is where scanning the poem might come in handy; dissecting the lines and sculpting them until they sound 'right' to your ear. ("Rhythm")

Here, Chang suggests that metrical analysis is a method to which poets can turn when their instincts aren't guiding them effectively—that they can retroactively scan their drafts to look for opportunities for finessing, whether by cementing a half-created rhythm or by dissolving a misbegotten one. Is this a rationalization for a more deeply entrenched pedagogical preference

for ‘teaching the basics,’ or is it a hint that, for Chang, meter in free verse is a response to unforeseen difficulty, a band-aid over rough patches, a hired assistant for treacherous crossings? I see enormous potential for readings that turn thus to the ghostly “traces,” the “ephemeral acts and documents” (Buurma and Heffernan 14) of the teaching archive.

To that end, Buurma and Heffernan contend that the pedagogical formalism of twentieth-century “working poets who also taught” was “tied not to the literary object or the ‘text’ itself but to smaller, more extensive units of poetic production,” explaining, “They tended to focus on continuity rather than rupture, traditions rather than innovations, minor poets rather than major. Their syllabuses’ writerly orientation toward literary technique and its literary history constitutes, we find, a robust tradition in its own right but one not currently represented by disciplinary history” (Buurma and Heffernan 11). These readings of Nguyen and Chang confirm the need for such a disciplinary history; that Chang’s teaching materials resonate with and complicate her writerly testimonials and actual work suggests avenues for future metrical analysis that acknowledges, rather than ignores, poets’ active identities as critics and teachers.

Indeed, Buurma and Heffernan see this acknowledgment as necessary for the future of the discipline: “...the absence of a shared and official history and collective memory of th[e] inseparability [of teaching and research] has left us vulnerable to interests inside and outside the university that profit from declaring humanities research valueless and teaching a failing endeavor to be radically reinvented” (Buurma and Heffernan 210). Neither this coda, nor the dissertation of which it is a part, purports to protect the humanities from its belittlers except in as much as any joyous work might, but it does partake in the deconstruction of that formalist/historicist binary, demonstrating through meticulous prosodic readings and attention to

poets' craft articulations how the lived attitudes inform the work and vice versa. This is one way of practicing contemporary poetics.

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Schiff's *A Woman of Property* and Akant's *Babette* each represent inviting spheres in which to test and expand that practice. Affectively, Schiff's work offers a rapturous array of anxiety gradations, each embodied by a quick appraisal and subsequent evasion of iambic pentameter in a prosodic and formal environment densely populated with other commitments, from the counted syllable to the multiplied tercet. To attend to these gradations would be to build on this dissertation's elucidation of metrical anxiety in the work of Bishop, Coleman, McCrae, and others. When Schiff writes in "Siren Test," a poem about phantom itches, false alarms, and crisis protocols, "It **al**ters **you** to / **make** a **sound** like **this**" (*A Woman of Property* 39), she uses a split pentameter to voice a worry that the sonic textures of poems warp the perceptive capacities of those who create them, making it harder to agree on a shared reality.[82]

Schiff's articulations of the role of ghost meter in her own teaching at the University of Chicago, where she offers poetry courses that foreground both ghosts and forms, make these resonances all the more intriguing. In a personal interview, she explained to me how an early-career post with Northwestern's explicitly formalist department pushed her to develop a "pedagogical outlook" that, in turn, caused her to think of metrics as "a tension" in her own work (Personal Interview). Schiff's institutional affiliation affected her conception of her own poetics—and maybe even, I would propose, her prosodic decision-making in "Siren Test," which

[82] Similarly, when Schiff declares in "Gate" that "**Pe**ter **said** a **walk** would **do** him **good**" (*A Woman of Property* 1)—the second line of the entire book—she engages the mode of freed verse as I define it in my second chapter, setting up that poem's exploration of risky edges and species-boundary deceptions, two themes I also unpack in relation to Bishop's prosody in "Crusoe in England."

laces together seemingly disparate scenes of learning related to danger and safety. Though Schiff no longer uses the teaching methods she developed at Northwestern, she does guide students towards the apprehension of metrical deviations, an anxious brand of scansion reminiscent of Lucy Alford's vigilant "multidirectional scanning" (Alford 186): "In regular meter, it's usually moments of divergence that I want to show students. [...] The opposite of that usually arises in contemporary verse" (Personal Interview).

One wonders if Schiff's penchant for prosodic variation lies at the root of the tension between the performatively arbitrary syllabics for which she is known and the ghostly pentameters that show up in her work, coinciding with those strains of anxious affect.[83] One wonders, indeed, if the way the mind's ear hears syllable counts and the way it hears accentual-syllabic specters are compatible modes. And there is so much more to wonder: what about what Maggie Millner refers to as Schiff's "many-hinged sentences," which she composes "therapeutically" (Schiff's word), over long periods of time (Millner)? Though this dissertation has cast basic syntactic divisions as devices capable of distinguishing units of ghost meter from their surroundings, and though my reading of embedded pentameter in "Kaddish" revels in the prosodic hybridity possible amid parataxis, I have not delved sufficiently into the possibilities of hypotactic prosody. If, as I demonstrated in Chapter 3, syntax is as interpretively important as

[83] In an interview with poet Maggie Millner, Schiff explained one of those syllabic schemes: "The poem I'm working on now is comprised of 6-line stanzas that all contain the number of syllables coinciding with my age. Although the line lengths differ, the stanzas all add up to first 45, then 46, and now 47 syllables, as I age while the poem is in progress. In this sense, I'm always reckoning as I write, and thinking about the relationship between *accounting* in the narrative sense, *accounting* in a financial, receipt-keeping sense, and the *accountability* of a poet holding herself to the kind of complicated, sometimes convoluting high standard of accuracy in self-expression that confuses the tea party when Alice, the Rabbit, and the Mad Hatter get into it over the difference between saying what you mean, and meaning what you say" (Millner).

meter and lineation, *A Woman of Property* is a promising locus for analysis that lives that value.[84]

Akant's *Babette* is another story—really, from anything else. It's a good note on which to end this coda because of the impression it gives of limitless prosodic possibility:

> **g o h s t**
>
> - - -
> -
> *driving through a really empty room*
>
> it was intensely morning-still, a moment-in-surprise, surmised
> by the common-everything, the grave-off heat, off-heat
> besides – it was in silence we were out, were we but out and passing
> by – the grasses blown, their distance shone – a different kind
> of knowing. (*Babette* 18)

In her engagement with Dickinson and Hopkins, her purposeful mis-spellings and mis-formattings, her use of over-hyphenation, her internal rhymes, and her preoccupation with 4-3 forms suggesting the hymn and the ballad, Akant is a poet with many formal commitments already active whenever she writes, yet her work also performs an artful impropriety producing "a different kind / of knowing." What role does the "gohst" of iambic pentameter play in this poetics? In this passage, the italicized subtitle ("***driv**ing **through** a **really** **emp**ty **room***") cues the reader's ear to hear units of five, and, especially at the end of this short poem, it really can hear them: "it **was** in **sil**ence **we** were **out**, were **we** but **out** and **pass**ing / **by** – the **grass**es **blown**, their **dist**ance **shone** – a **diff**erent **kind** / of **know**ing." If not for the word "by," this iambic passage would resolve easily into two units of seven, or two relineated 4/3 couplets; the addition of "by" at the beginning of the second-to-last line, idiomatically connected to "passing" and

[84] Of her hypotactic syntax, Schiff has said, "I try to find a place in the syntax where it almost falls apart, where it's as extreme as it can get, really, before it breaks. That's a place of deep expression for me" (Wood).

sonically connected to “silence,” makes fifteen iambs, which divide into three meaningfully enjambed units of five. The rhythmic experience of this poem arguably inheres in the tension between these two time signatures; to employ a musical metaphor, it makes a kind of poetic hemiola.

What is most fascinating is that Akant’s articulations of her prosody and pedagogy show her to be a prime example—and self-confessed member—of Emre’s paraliterary class, one who “exist[s] alongside and in dialogue with the institutions of literature” (Emre 6) and reads in both “bad” and “good” ways.[85] Phantom mistakes have historically been the instructors of Akant’s ear—“My early poems were produced out of a sense of error on the page, or some flicker of language I would see as I was reading, or something I heard or misheard” (Kane)—and she doesn’t hesitate to characterize her prosodic teaching as shot through with revealing error. In an email to me, she described with self-deprecating humor and deep irony how her periodic and scattershot efforts to teach meter have ended in awkward impasse: “a student has to continually correct me” (“Meter question!”). Even more pertinently, she wrote, “I'd be wrong to say I wasn't formally taught meter and form in poetry—what with ALL the traditional education I received. And yet I don't feel confident that I ‘know’ meter the way that most writers ‘I know’ do (I couldn't tell you what a trochee is, maybe not even an ‘iamb’)” (“Meter question!”).

Maybe not even an iamb! Written by the author of metrically intricate verse that engages deeply with the ghost of iambic pentameter, that passage exemplifies many of the affects upon which this dissertation has turned. It associates “traditional education” with meter while

[85] Emre defines paraliterary reading as “the cultivation of publicly oriented schemes of action, a weakened commitment to fictionality, a newfound attentiveness to the political temporalities of texts, and the juggling of distinct documentary genres” (Emre 10). What would a contemporary, poetry-based definition of paraliterary reading be?

distancing itself from the kinds of knowledge such education produces, implicitly acknowledges that iambs are more famous than other kinds of feet while performing an inability to define them, and conflates the "know[ing]" of prosody with the "know[ing]" of writers themselves. This affective and prosodic dance is fascinating, and the preceding pages have only begun to explain it—and thereby to explore how poetry makes students and teachers of us all. Furthermore, "paraliterary" though it may seem to piggyback onto the last of Akant's sentiments, there is no question that, in the experience of composing the present dissertation, knowing prosody has indeed entailed knowing people—attending to their sensibilities, mood changes, and personal musics. Teaching does this, too. And so: if any ghosts, living or dead, are left in the room of this paragraph, reading me now, I welcome them and invite them to make themselves known: "be no // t art but life, be life, please be" (*Ghost of* 21).

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