

BURN, ONLY ASH

A POETRY COLLECTION

A Thesis Submitted to the
College of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Writing
In the Department of English
University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon

By

DANIEL EUGENE KIM

© Copyright Daniel Eugene Kim, September, 2018. All rights reserved.

PERMISSION TO USE

In presenting this thesis/dissertation in partial fulfillment of the requirements for an MFA in Writing degree from the University of Saskatchewan, I agree that the Libraries of this University may make its Preliminary Pages freely available for inspection as outlined in the MFA in Writing Thesis Licence/Access Agreement accepted by the College of Graduate Studies and Research in June, 2013.

Requests for permission to make use of material beyond the Preliminary Pages of this thesis should be addressed to the author of this thesis, or:

Coordinator, MFA Writing
Department of English
University of Saskatchewan
509 – 9 Campus Drive
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan S7N 5A5

Or

Dean
College of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
University of Saskatchewan
116 Thorvaldson Building, 110 Science Place
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan S7N 5C9

Abstract

Burn, Only Ash is a collection of poems centered within the in-between states, applying associations, referential material, rhyme, affect, and notions of linear movement that reach for comprehension in uncertain times. My poetry collection particularly focuses on the fears, phobias, and illnesses that accompany the condition of grasping for meaning. The collection examines predominant themes including that of recurrence: how one experiences the sense of change (impermanence, time) and/or how one senses others and their sense of change. My poetry is grounded in my personal familial location as a second-generation immigrant exploring issues of moments of transcendence amidst challenges of the diaspora. The poems explore coupled relationships, difficult emotions, and mental health struggles. Overall, the poetry collection applies the work of language poets, most notably the work of Lyn Hejinian and Ron Silliman, and the tradition of “personal, subjective, short, meditative, emotive, private, musical” (Rader 128) lyric poems. My work takes instruction from the use of informative gaps, such as in Lyn Hejinian’s brilliant work, *My Life*. Hejinian fills in spaces between substantive content with additional information, for example, by referencing an earlier sentence’s grammatical construction, in order to springboard to the next sentence. I contemplate the effect or possibility of leaving gaps, with the prospect of reaching towards otherness. Finally, my poetry work intertwines both Buddhist spiritual thinking and methodology, supported by Ian McGilchrist’s writing on the brain and the dangers of over-rationalism.

Acknowledgments

I extend my sincere appreciation to Jeanette Lynes and the entire MFA in Writing program in the Department of English, including the assistance of Professor Joanne Leow. I would like to express my gratitude for my writing mentor, Sylvia Legris, who greatly assisted in strengthening my writing skills and developing the initial themes for my poetry works. Importantly, I wish to thank my parents, brother and his family, and my partner for all of their continued support. My MFA project was gratefully supported by two Graduate Teaching Fellowship Awards through the MFA in Writing program at the University of Saskatchewan.

Artist Statement

Burn, Only Ash is a collection of poems centered within the connective tissue between content, referential material, rhyme, affect, and notions of linear movement that reach for comprehension in uncertain times. My work focuses on phobias, mental health, and spirituality. The Upanishads state, “The Spirit, without moving, is swifter than the mind” (49). My work questions the place of the mind within our body, but also within a work of art. Illustrated best by poet Jane Hirshfield, in an interview for *Tricycle*, she describes her meditation practice as a form of stepping out of the mind and links the way in which her poetry is similar to her meditation practice, but with the use of words:

In the practice of Soto Zen shikantaza meditation (“just sitting”) is wordless. Poetry is its own form of meditation, done through words. Both can be felt as a kind of searchlight – consciousness. You stay rooted in one place while listening and looking both inward and outward.

I agree with Hirshfield that good poems, similar to Buddhist meditation practice, bring compassion and awareness, and furthermore, the experience of the poems does not need to be sequential or causative (14). In this essay, I will outline three main themes: 1) Gaps and Non-linearity; 2) Transcendence; and 3) Fluid subjectivity. Each theme overlaps, and opposes mental health, well-being and racial identity.

My poetry collection first theme focuses on gaps, aiming to remain outside the fixed boundaries of signification, to hug as close to mental illness without succumbing to its hermetic and untranslatable confusion, while at the same time, endeavouring to distill an imagined beauty. The poems can be considered failures, yet the writing is an experiment for meaning. Nonetheless, the poems attempt to hold gaps, not for more comprehension, but less. Tibetan monk, Pema Chodron, teaches about a pause or gap, meaning taking a moment to breathe, a moment of clarity. My work at times touches on that urgent moment or crux within a person’s life, a moment of moral implication and a time when a significant decision must be made. This is the time of the gap.

The poems particularly focus on the fears and illnesses that accompany the condition of grasping for meaning. The poetry collection collides with the work of language poets, most notably the work of Lyn Hejinian and Ron Silliman, and the tradition of “personal, subjective, short, meditative, emotive, private, musical” (Rader 128) lyric poems. My work also intertwines the Buddhist thinking on the constructed self, while also weaving in Ian McGilchrist’s work on the dangers of over-rationalism leading to a condition where escape can only happen when “whatever can ‘leap’ beyond the world of language and reason can break out of the imprisoning hall of mirrors and reconnect us with the lived world” (McGilchrist 315).

My thesis takes instruction from the use of informative gaps, such as in Lyn Hejinian’s brilliant work, *My Life*. Hejinian writes:

One of the results of this compositional technique, building a work out of discrete fields, is the creation of sizeable gaps between the units. To negotiate this disrupted terrain, the reader (and I can say also the writer) must overleap the end stop, the period, and cover the distance to the next sentence. Meanwhile, what stays in the gaps remains crucial and

informative. Part of the reading occurs as the recovery of that information (looking behind) and the discovery of newly structured ideas (stepping forward). (46)

Hejinian fills in the spaces between substantive content with additional information, such as for example referencing an earlier sentence's grammatical construction in order to springboard to the next sentence. My work contemplates the effect or possibility of leaving gaps, with the prospect of reaching towards the non-rational, or inarticulate.

My poetry further examines the criteria of successful use/ inhabitation of language expressly through reading and writing mind gaps in comprehension, and which is best accomplished by poets, in my opinion, such as John Ashbery and, as mentioned above, Lyn Hejinian. My work intends to write to the limits of understanding, to the gaps and glitches where logic stalls, and to see if in selection (in editing out associations) — deductive at first or even third readings — the work hints of another/ other (higher or background) order existing (what Jan Zwicky calls Gestalt experience). My aim is to examine whether a sense of comprehension remains in language unvanquished by reason assails. The works sets out to limit calculations, echoes, psychoanalysis, certainty, and pointed abstractedness. My poetry work considers the concept of signification, questioning if Gestalt moves then in which direction?

The second theme within my poetry collection is the focus on fluid subjectivities. Although certain writers believe that you can step outside yourself, some scholars however, such as Avtar Brah and Lily Cho, assert it is difficult or even impossible to step outside your reality of gender, race or class or that, even at the edge of knowing, more knowing can or should be inserted to assist in understanding and comprehension. As Cathy Caruth writes, “And it is indeed at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet” (3). Caruth appears to turn the situation of facing the unknown within literature into a pathological condition. I question whether we can be liberated from a historical world which is in marked contrast to ideas of Hirshfield, Bashō, and Johnson.

While I believe it is possible to step outside one's historicized identity, other Critical Race Theory scholars present ideas contrary to this belief. Firstly, Avtar Brah, a sociologist and diaspora scholar, holds the notion that everywhere is diasporic space, which “includes the entanglement of genealogies of dispersion with those of ‘staying put’” made up of individuals of no fixed origin (181). For Brah, even imagination is racialized and that at “multiple semiotic spaces at diasporic borders” individual “consciousness emerging are subject to the play of political power and psychic investments in the maintenance or evasion of the status quo”, but never free from them (208). Secondly, Lily Cho, a cultural studies and English scholar, writes that dispossessed individuals face the inevitable and inescapable fact of being diasporic, and “that diasporic subjects emerge in turning, turning back upon those markers of the self — homeland, memory, loss — even as they turn on, or away from them” (15). Cho believes that in this situation the “major challenges to thinking about the formation of diasporic subjectivity lies in understanding the legacies of displacement and dislocation as crucially mutable features of the present” with no recourse in transcendence (20). It is important to note that by “transcendence” I use a definition similar to Ken Wilber's use of the term “transpersonal” which he describes as “in higher development the personal is negated and preserved, or transcended and included: hence “transpersonal.” In this case, transcendence is seen as “personal plus,” not “personal minus” (Wilber 10). Finally, cultural theorist Stuart Hall views identity as fluid and not fixed, as “never

complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation”, but nonetheless always a marker of difference becoming (222). These markers of “[c]ultural identities come from somewhere, have histories” (225). In other words, they are tied to “history, culture and power”, and are transformable, but not escapable (225). The essential issue writers such as Cho, Brah, and Hall fail to mention is that transcendence from a racialized historical self is possible, but admittedly, for certain bodies access to safe spaces to allow a transcendent moment is much more difficult.

Two other scholars, Claudia Rankine and Betty Loffreda, address the issue of writers of colour and transcendence, within an adapted version of their forward to *The Racial Imaginary*. They write, “For writers of color, transcendence can feel like a distant and elusive thing, because writers of color often begin from the place of being addressed, and accessed”. Furthermore, the poet Ben Lerner comments that the capacity for transcendence is oftentimes difficult to imagine for persons of colour, that “[t]he capacity to transcend history has historically been ascribed to white men of a certain class while denied to individuals marked by difference (whether of race or gender)” (63). Of course I must state that even if transcendence happens, a person still lands back in a world marked by difference and is often full of fear, anxiety and mental illness. Thus my writing methodology, as I will elaborate below, entails a practice of writing towards moments of incomprehension, towards phrases “placed in a relationship that seems neither sequential nor causative” (Hirshfield 14).

Relevant to my poetry collection, as a person of colour, is the issue of critiquing whiteness and race in experimental poetry and also the invisible, and oftentimes unconscious anxiety, assumption and promotion of whiteness as the universal “we” addressed and spoken for. Rankine and Loffreda write: “But we are captive, still, to a sensibility that champions the universal while simultaneously defining the universal, still, as white” (22). Of course this leap into/ for the hidden does not mean erasure of the body, of genealogies, of racialized histories and genocides. That in the reaching for transcendence, in reaching for the limits of comprehension - where those type of gaps happen that race is discarded or that colourless writing aka white (white the default) is of any less worth or value, if aesthetic pleasure is the gauge of merit, or peace of mind. Acknowledging great imbalance, and throwing the object of enquiry and the questioner into separation is something I’ve strived for in my work, for a landscape that points to strangeness, to the edge of knowing.

The third theme within my collection focuses on transcendence. Commentators on Buddhism have much to offer here on the topics of what is outside individual or collectivist comprehension. For example, in the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, which is a 9th Century Buddhist text, Dajian Huineng, one of the founders of the Chan school of Buddhism (later becoming Seon in Korea, and Zen in Japan), states:

No matter when, the self-natures are fundamentally and naturally pure. No matter when, the self-natures are fundamentally neither generated nor extinguished. No matter when, the self-natures are fundamentally and naturally sufficient unto themselves. (23)

By “self-nature” I believe what is intended within this excerpt is an experience outside of rational thought, of a nature which exists prior to classification, which exists but is not manifested in the material world, yet can paradoxically be consciously experienced. In relation to literature, the goal is to write content that rubs against this unquantifiable nature that is beyond

“markers of difference” (Brah 189). The African-American scholar and novelist Charles R. Johnson in his essay “Going Beyond Ethnic Dualism” speaks of this ungraspable place which both provides inner refuge and clarity:

Yet seldom, if ever, do we acknowledge in our apolitical and nonracial discussions of Buddhism the fact that for many African Americans the “three jewels” of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha provide, like Christianity, not only solace in the face of life’s general sufferings (sickness, old age, and death) but also a clarifying refuge from white racism, Eurocentrism, Western hegemony, and even certain crippling aspects of black American culture itself.

This Buddha nature for Johnson, and I would contend in my own writing, is outside of comprehension and offers a space to view racism and the formation of socially constructed selves through a place of refuge or gap. As Charles Johnson elaborates in the essay “The Dharma of Social Transformation,” as a Black person learning about Buddhism, he is aware now that “racial illusions...are products of the relative, conditioned mind”. He recognizes the differences of race and gender but is not bound by them. My poetic pieces were inspired by Johnson for three apparent reasons: 1) first as a person of colour practicing Buddhism; 2) second, in Johnson’s Buddhist practice, he also considers the idea of self and race as socially constructed; and 3) my admiration of his ability to see these markers of difference as a means to inspire a “dedication to social transformations” (Johnson 9) which can be used to help others.

In summary, this transcendent writing practice involves stepping outside the plane, or model of understanding, that humans have collectively created over centuries that has evolved into tradition, customs, and/or legacies of racism and to attempt to take a moment before re-entering this plane with a clearer perspective on its systemic workings. This blending of an individual’s path of liberation is central to my writing practice: to see the self as created, yet with the pure essence that exists outside of our personality. Matsuo Bashō, a famous Japanese haiku poet, wrote in his journal that what took him to poetry was something not clearly articulated or understood, but differentiated from his physical self, separate like “a wind-swept spirit.” (qtd. in Hirshfield 3). Bashō quite likely is referring to something beyond physical sensation, thought and emotion. His writing points to a phenomenon that is past his ability to grasp with certainty, but also to the space that sparks or inspires haikus. Jane Hirshfield, in discussing Bashō’s haikus, writes, “The reader who enters Bashō’s perceptions fully can’t help but find in them a kind of liberation. They unshackle the mind from a single or absolute story, unshackle us from the clumsy dividing of world into subjective and objective, self and other, illness and blossom, freedom and capture” (75). It is not Bashō’s *form* that is the aim within my poems, but his *intent* of presenting “its author as a person outside any sense of the personal self” (Hirshfield 10).

One of the present-day issues in trying to compose a poem that is alive and that feels vital and meaningful has always been one of navigating self-consciousness; the witness plus an observer; sometimes streamed into a single speaker, or a cacophony, a chorus, or fragments. This has been a focus of poetry from Buddha’s time, to our modern day hyperaware schizophrenic geological age. At the same time, others have argued that there is a complimentary pull, witnessed in the self-conscious artist moving towards the hidden, the shadow, aware of the ever-present danger of excessive self-consciousness or over-thinking can lead to a trapped, fixed, mind-state, location, worldview, model. The split of witness and observer acknowledges the relationality, the co-habiting –a break that slows down, yet speeds up intensity in feeling of a

single speaker. As I stated earlier, the self-conscious artist must work in and towards the hidden, but not be trapped within the thought of the hidden. The present day literary tradition I explore extends from Surrealism and the Avant-Garde through to John Ashbery, as Ashbery believed there is much to gain from Surrealism and the Avant-Garde. The poet Ben Lerner continues this viewpoint in his polemic essay: the hatred of poetry, as he writes: “But there is an important class of intense poetry haters who would probably hate my description of poetry as providing a kind of inverted and necessarily limited glimmer of poetic potentiality: the avant-garde” (38). Lerner goes on to state his definition of the term as originally a French military term for those elite soldiers who were dispatched ahead of the rest of an armed force in order to determine its course” (38). Lerner, in conclusion, applies the metaphor of sacrifice to further extend duty and movement.

Finally, I believe that John Ashbery’s poems present examples of the limits of knowing, holds gaps and moves in, and towards strangeness, which can be in fact a form of transcendence. For Ashbery, what lies outside consciousness is closely aligned with the dream world. Ashbery partially accomplishes this navigation of known and unknown, The poet Ben Lerner says in his review of ashbery’s collected poems 1956-1987 by use of hypotaxis : for example, yet, and but, and always being on the edge of comprehension, context. Lerner states: “Ashbery’s use of deictic language invites readers to defer identifying antecedents and to await a clarification of context that rarely arrives...”(204). But other than incorporating some of these literary mannerisms, how does one write strange when one is control of the act, in other words, how does one contradict one’s self when even the contradiction isn’t an argument. Or, put another way, one cannot be too conscious of one’s actions. Overall, I believe Ashbery acknowledges that the attempt for strangeness in writing has become a trope, that it has become co-opted by the mainstream.

In conclusion, my work commonly appears within a narrative form, but aims to include moments or gaps of comprehension. I often apply distraction through multivalence, for example within the phrase “a card greeting”. The word “card” denotes both a piece of stiff paper and simultaneously an eccentric or amusing person. I also apply juxtaposition and parataxis, but differ from Lyn Hejinian’s use of informative gaps, shrouding my gaps in hiddenness. My work experiments with oddness, for something slightly off in the subject of the phrase or in the speaker. For instance, in the phrases, “relatives tired of flashlights on gravel” or, “the blinking out of old hits”, recognizing that in isolation the immediate meaning alludes placement. Finally, I gravitated towards simple words to keep as many possibilities of meaning open. As Louise Gluck writes: “It seemed to me that simple language best suited this enterprise; such language, in being generic, is likely to contain the greatest and most dramatic variety of meaning within individual words” (4). Overall, my work simplifies language, shakes up comprehension and searches for transcendent gaps, taking space from worldly realities.

Daniel Kim

Saskatoon, SK

September 2018

Works Cited

- Ashbery, John. *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*. Penguin Books, 1976.
- Baudrillard, Jean. *The Vital Illusion*. Columbia UP, 2000.
- Brah, Avtar. "Diaspora, Border and Transnational Identities." *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. Routledge, 1996. pp. 178-210.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience*. Johns Hopkins UP, 2016.
- Cho, Lily. "The Turn to Diaspora." *Topia* 17, Spring 2007, pp.11-30.
- Chodron, Pema. *Taking the Leap*. Shambhala, 2009.
- Gluck, Louise. *Proofs and Theories*. HarperCollins, 1994.
- Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*. Edited by Laura Chrisman and Patrick Williams, Harvester Wheatsheaf Press, 1993, pp 222-237.
- Hejinian, Lyn. *My Life and My Life in the Nineties*. Wesleyan, 2013.
- Hejinian, Lyn. *The Language of Inquiry*. University of California Press, 2000.
- Hirshfield, Jane. *The Heart of Haiku*. Kindle Edition, 2011.
- Hirshfield, Jane. "Felt in its Fullness." *Tricycle*, 2015, www.tricycle.org/trikedaily/felt-its-fullness. Accessed Jan. 2017.
- Jaynes, Julian. *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*. Mariner Books, 2003.
- Johnson, Charles R. "Going Beyond Ethnic Dualism." *Tricycle*, Summer 2001, tricycle.org/magazine/going-beyond-ethnic-dualism. Accessed 17 July 2018.
- Johnson, Charles R. "The Dharma of Social Transformation." *Tricycle*, Winter 2006, tricycle.org/magazine/dharma-social-transformation. Accessed 17 July 2018.
- Lerner, Ben. *The Hatred of Poetry*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016.
- Mahasatipathhana Sutta*. Vipassana Research Publications, 2010.
- McGilchrist, Iain. *The Master and his Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*. Yale UP, 2010.
- Rader, Dean. "The Epic Lyric: Genre and Contemporary American Indian Poetry." *Speak*

to Me Words: Essays on Contemporary American Indian Poetry, edited by Dean Rader, Janice Gould, The University of Arizona Press, 2003.

Rankine, Claudia, and Betty Loffreda. "On Whiteness and the Racial Imaginary." *Literary Hub*, 9 April 2015, lithub.com/on-whiteness-and-the-racial-imaginary. Accessed 15 July 2018.

Sass, A. Louis. "Schizophrenia, Modernism, and the 'Creative Imagination': On Creativity and Psychopathology." *Creativity Research Journal*, 13:1, 2001, 55-74.

Silliman, Ron. "from the New Sentence". *In the American Tree: language, realism, thought*, edited by Ron Silliman, National Poetry Foundation, 2007.

Soho, Takuan. *The Unfettered Mind: Writings of the Zen Master to the Sword Master*. Translated by William Scott Wilson, Kodansha International Ltd., 1987.

Wilber, Ken. *The Essential Ken Wilbur: An Introductory Reader*. Shambala publications, 1998.

The Sixth Patriarch's Dharma Jewel Platform Sutra. Buddhist Text Translation Society, 2001.

The Upanishads. Translated by Juan Mascaro, Penguin, 1965.

Zwicky, Jan. "Poetry and Meaninglessness: The Pleasures of Gestalts." *Brick Literary Journal* 2016, Summer, pp. 28-37.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my father, mother, and ancestors.

Table of Contents

page

Permission to Use.....	i
Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgments.....	iii
Artist Statement	iv
Works Cited	ix
Dedication.....	xi
Table of Contents.....	xii
Sometime After Escaping the Relationship.....	1
In Jeollanam-do: Fear of intergenerational Trauma.....	2
Dromophobia.....	3
Pharmacophobia: Fear of Medicine Not Working.....	4
Somniphobia.....	5
Autophobia: Fear of Schizophrenia	6
Arachnophobia: Fear of Children.....	7
Necrophobia.....	8
OCD: Fear of hurting his partner during sleep.....	9
Ghost Children: Fearing for a Second Child.....	10
Ablutophobia: Fear of bed bathing.....	11

Xenophobia: Fear of Dogs.....	12
Robophobia: Fear of Cloning.....	13
Responding to Louis A. Sass’s Response to Kay Redfield Jamison	14
Third Man Factor: Fear of Comfort	16
Fear of Feed.....	17
Indecision: Fear of hit and run.....	18
Overhearing a conversation at Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal	20
Another morning.....	21
Directions	22
Spitting Rain	23
A Cashier	24
Abrasions	25
Falling	26
A Jehovah Witness from Wakaw	27
Wind and Sky	28
Gratitude	29
Fear of breaking oneself and others.....	30
A therapist fears her students	31
Fear of being a copy	32
At the gas station	33
Texting beside you in bed.....	34
Dissatisfaction	35

Agoraphobia.....	36
Fear of Pollution not Nukes	37
Fear of Neighbours	38
Dysthymia: deep sadness and fear of going forward.....	39
Idiosyncratic Hypersomnia: Fear of Being Awake	40
Long Poem	41
Bibliography	45