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# Unwanted Guest

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# Unwanted Guest

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English Language and Literature

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UNWANTED GUEST

by

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A Senior Thesis submitted to  
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“A virus is an unwanted guest who repeats himself over and over.”

- William S. Burroughs

“The world gets into one’s bloodstream with the invisibility of a lover.”

- David Wojnarowicz

“Illness often takes the disguise of love, and plays the same tricks.”

- Virginia Woolf

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## Inviting Wounds

My flesh is a palimpsest  
    you tattoo  
    to bleed your inscription  
    heave pages  
    from throat  
        to choke the knife  
    carving my voice  
        garnets  
you braid in my binding

Spine worn, pages torn  
    by rug burns  
    gaping mouth adorns  
contusions of ropes on limbs  
    while you read  
my body as braille

    transcribing fever's lesions  
        in marionette seizures  
        heating my flesh  
    to yeast my tongue as  
        your hymnal  
scoring my body as a bedsore

    Tiny hands  
    grow from my flesh  
    to guide you in

    small white tongues  
    erupt in blood  
    when they rip

    Oracle bones  
    thrown to mark  
    patterns  
    etched as scars

    Petals of flesh  
    arranged in a star

    shed embers  
to merge the burn  
as fugitive scrawl  
    on manacles

you shake to lurch  
     my parched limbs  
     your meteors spit  
 ashes thick as crows  
     to script  
     my lip's declension

Each lesion now a cave  
     where upturned spiders  
     drowned by murmurs  
     tenderly knit  
 raw flesh to question  
     cleft in porous bone

burrow cursive tunnels  
     ink the marrow  
     as an answer  
 undress the pulsing flesh  
     as a moan

tongue leaks  
 green creek  
 bitter as lung

caves where scribes hide  
     our sounding

My throat is a street  
     I've learned to avoid  
     teeming with burns  
     from bad batch  
     of long weekend

This body, my only evidence

the skin of the book  
     bursts red berries  
     where a bone cart  
 tames the bones of his name  
     so that each ferry  
     sepia as song  
     a lay of him  
 my hymnals anchor

each of us  
 the phantom of  
 the other's archive

My hides  
gnarl with his mange  
gaps in my vellum  
his famished eye floods

birds fall  
from skies, heifers heave  
mares sick  
with foals, bright flares  
burn the skin of this manuscript

pestilent shower of crows  
mottles filthy ashes  
horses trample  
snowfall feathers  
razor hail severs limbs  
merging to mud  
cold breath molds to clay tablets

the corpus  
flowers a forest of lances  
spindles the yew  
where teeth cavern  
read frantic gouge by lantern  
knowing he gnaws  
my lexicon



## Interior Landscapes

My abscission you inscribe to précis  
     urticaria budding cocoon caress  
 Blue spores adorn rosebuds from vents  
     damp sulfur. Red ulcer  
     sucks rough anemone  
 seeds black veins

Armor thins to solar flare  
     seething purple burst  
     Thirst, fugitive morsel  
     drifting violet lagoon  
 Barnacle me, my rudders tender  
 I often shipwreck at your shoals

Dry husk of pale this Mojave morning  
     febrile. Smear out of frame  
 We twins, drunk on mold  
     slither our lava in confab  
 a handshake of skin graft to log rot  
 all the phantoms boiling from the bone

Alone           you    my scarlet tapestry  
                   where keening erupts in sigils  
 I vigil                           pulse  
                                   maladapting  
 you            fissure  
                                   the navel of my world

You seem tired, bending fecund bruises  
                                   still a red moldering  
 as if a blush.           Octopus stretch  
                   grifts adoration           of seeping methane  
 Seamen chart your unsung facia  
     as if a bastinado  
     as if a burn

Epiphyte        or epitaph  
 I leech the wound you leak in me  
     the bleed of light to catch our crime  
 frayed by gold instance of algae  
 But how to trace the factors           the fractures  
     Our allergen, a cotton halo  
 once our winter drenched us in milk

Wrestling, nova to nova  
blood sickles ocean void  
    Flare the carcass of a kiss  
        on this lens  
    bending to aporia  
Crater our earths mutually hollow  
    trading a sudden flare  
        from solar cavities  
        slowly merging  
  
    Annexing debt to the annex  
        of what ragout  
            you spool  
        from my marrow  
            Our bodies  
only a skin we wear on where we knot  
            or where we're not  
our signals reconstitute  
    this voice which choruses our voice

## Intimate Strangers

Let me explain.

He's the raw meat  
 the teeth of the trap  
     Knows hand by scent  
     teething on bones  
     moaning  
 my trembling

    I am an island  
     by fens warped  
 returned from fucking  
 a frail hidden rain. Bleeds  
 on sheets, to whisper our ashtray

Forest weaves fur to fleece  
     falling to syringe sweet  
     stretches all of it a sore  
 The batch, the clouds the bike bleeds  
     is it him, this forest  
     dogs my breathing  
     Eat what stomachs us  
     in ecstasy of knife  
 I'm hunting our lost trees

    I couldn't fit his meaning,  
 tore the tension of these lines  
 I tightrope, my longing  
     as long as  
 his sentence, which  
     confines  
 him for our lifetime

A mob amok  
     for wolf beheld –  
     "Behead the wolf!"  
 They recede to house dogs  
     asleep on damp pyres  
 Saw the land as ban to outlaw  
     what we can't sigil

A mob amok  
 mad with white guts  
     By threat came  
     ate of him  
 though every vein  
     is a thorn  
 in their maw

Though his arms snap  
 I wrap around  
 as hemlock boughs  
     and as deadly  
 I live by his wilding my roots

So that the ravening beast  
 rewinds the tape  
 reshaping the shape  
 of us. Our whole swallowing  
 the bleed of screen. On a bus  
 my legs leak his white  
 teeth of a cop's eye  
     recording his blood  
 now my face a wildfire

Do you hear me, watchman?  
 This seed planted in me  
 a mandrake screeching  
 His rod spoils our child  
 Abandoned in woods  
 by fens warped  
 where wolves wander

My kin pursue him  
 grafting our legs  
 to cough my skin  
 My thoughts pursue him  
 sick a dog  
 pine for him  
 who has made me sick

His blood is a gift  
 These charcoal trees  
     we brush fire.  
 Our arms lapping flames  
     his night. He paints  
 my skin his blood erases

Only want to forget  
     the wolf's head, binds me  
 to backwoods, as we're hunted  
 At leaping buck in sniper's light  
     our wound reduced  
 to headlines

How your name came  
     to be your blood  
     mottled on  
 leaves the autumn leaves  
     I stretch your letters  
     across my maps  
 Hounds leash him to my scent

His prison my chapel  
     where we often wail  
     our lot, suffering  
 this change. I haven't earned  
     your loss. I become  
 your whelp. Scramble the  
     Memorex. I wouldn't know  
 your shadow. I shake my skull  
     to fog the sun before it rises

Oft, past through my skull  
     maps to escape  
     I am a scholar  
 of our tape, rewinding  
 He did not read to learn  
     my riddle

Where flesh encrypts  
     his lips  
     lap lightning  
 burning this verse  
     so near my mask

Only hunger for his night  
     to breathe. To breed  
 Grinding, pinning, my  
     pulse in his hides  
 I ache. My throat grafts  
     his wounds to  
     the mob's red teeth  
 prolongs our burning

I enter the ring  
 where he forfeits his fangs  
 to spoil my lands  
 of their vesture

So easy to prove  
 how battle-scarred arms  
 grinding, pinning  
 collapse his scent  
 to my sense. I wept  
 his breath, my trembling

Animal hides  
 girding his skin  
 my spoils of him  
 now spoil our corpse  
 which brings  
 the wounds together

What wounds remain  
 spread his seed by wind  
 I wait for his fire  
 gnaw heat from night  
 muttering dead grass. Vast canyons stare  
 beneath where he snares  
 me in his gaze

Inscriptions on his skin  
 grant scripture to  
 our echoes. He moans  
 I collapse bones to his jaw  
 were I not him. We  
 were.

I siphon his ether  
 leavening evening  
 for this approaches laughter  
 I as a meaning  
 a treacherous path  
 where I falter, these ferns our fear

I can't always glisten frontiers  
    where his tongue scrawls  
    our moonlit theft shape  
my shuddering thigh  
    my fallback road lag  
Audible highway groans window

Our tale wants groan of tape  
    muffling my want of him  
    to wake every rifle  
which rustles this grass on his thigh  
    Add us to nothing  
    our whorl  
a fingerprint smearing the ink

I wander my victory there  
    as flag map of wolf teeth  
    knothole  
    portraits in the pines  
How was I to blame  
    what of him  
was labyrinth

As I collect his symbols  
    to tremble farther  
    his skin, my poem  
our silence

He is at war with crows  
    who haunt what caress  
    the hounds would hunt  
were they to see our writhing  
    So many signals  
    collapsing the air

Rewind to garage and police line-up  
    A chorus calls for  
    a rope and a tree  
as I Upharsin our mourning

## Enemy Interface

So who hunts who  
    I ghost your corridors  
see me in your shadow  
    I confirm your position  
a gun with a man there  
    twitching your radar  
I got you in my sights

    Where did you turn  
My armor mimetic  
    down steel corridors  
stitching steel to flesh  
    lance fever to burn  
Burst plasma to clot  
    welding skin  
to second skin

Reject the graft  
    bomb broke by bone blast  
quick strafe the corner  
    wasp buzz to bomb lag  
keg stand then med kit  
    sleep heals all wounds  
frag addict zeroes to syringe pulse

    Ask each other's mouth  
to relay the sentry  
    me in scope caught  
my confirmed kill  
    transcribes to webcam  
watch instant replay  
    rendering mouth  
wound where I'm throbbing  
    my mouth answers fire

Access interior swarm  
    where I mortar your pulse  
Xenomorph x'acto'd  
    displacing the mirror  
Imperial data strike  
    I photon the relay  
of my sights to your site  
    scrambling our shadow  
nearing the target



My wound haunts your limb  
To viron the environ  
as I remix my marrow  
I recon your ghost  
tattoo me on your leg stump  
charred now to bone shard  
charged as this figment  
in the Situation Room

Evacuate the homeland  
allergic to maps  
my borders are a freeze  
we are weighted against  
gun blast steel rivers  
I wall as our zone  
but my home is  
your home now

## Depleted Futures

I begin to cry. I don't cry that often.  
 Inured to the use and abuse of my flesh  
 Inured to his task, my lack of control  
 o'er this role assigned to my body

But this, this massive rift  
 this monstrous gap which fills me  
 a mare in a paddock a stallion mounts  
 with an empty groan  
 a gnawing abcess  
 as if a tree grows in me  
 inch by excruciating inch

But this, this abyss, this is too much.

To speed up my intake of his coins  
 circulating in my bloodstream  
 he boils his currency into a gruel  
 which he forces down my throat  
 I feel my shame blush from my veins  
 depleting my value in his market

His gold is an estimation of my time  
 remaining to consume him  
 who scalds my throat  
 and cramps my retching stomach  
 He pumps gallons of himself in me  
 causing my belly to bulge  
 with the fullness of hunger

As he lies atop the surplus  
 produced by the lands in me  
 I am fed by his weight  
 and my sudden surplus of nerves  
 increasing with each coin I swallow  
 lubricating my markets for further supply

In the rank aroma of his spent labor  
 I calculate the unit price of sperm  
 and my own value, leaking down my thigh  
 marking the bills with my tongue  
 to evaluate him according to his breeding  
 My mouth, my nose, widen  
 our channels to shipping lanes

My head spins drunk from this fix  
    of my species to his gold  
mined from my teeth although they contain  
    no commodity whatsoever  
Yet I ascend to the gargle  
    his foam in my throat  
    which fixes our value

So I continue working on the docks  
    licking them clean of excess  
    removing any imported crud  
    the seas often smear  
His freighter slick with my spit  
    which babbles my value  
    depleting tongues  
extinct languages only heard in songs  
    eroding his hull with my spit

I steel myself against his nation  
    spanning my globe  
    now intersected  
    with these vectors  
    of sprawling cities  
jammed into the tube  
    jammed in my throat

If I am produced by his land  
    these animals feeding me  
    from inside me  
are the darkness, the silence  
    that is now his home  
    inside me  
    feeding me my world

His coarse, gritty porridge  
    enters into a relation  
    with my tongue  
and I begin to swallow my own measure  
    ignoring the foul taste

I am but the measure of his measuring  
    this disgusting food I am  
    my time feeds  
I being a measure of time  
    where I am famished  
    eating my own minutes as hours

not only these coins  
 the same time my wants  
 but also our time, consuming  
 I gulp what tubes feed. These wants are  
 reciprocal, the measure of  
 what is forced into my throat

His price, the common price of all  
 this probing finger  
 thrusting cash  
 slowly, gently  
 in and out  
 of my gaping mouth

Is this why I'm here? To be  
 the value of raw meat?  
 Now that I'm his raw material  
 I'm a payment  
 for his expended labor

His silver, once aroused  
 for its own pleasure  
 is now but the resource  
 for my lattice-work  
 This prison  
 where we prism

The source of often arching silk  
 this linen pain  
 Crushed, pinched by serrated clips  
 weighed down so heavy  
 I hang, a ploy  
 to render me squeezed  
 and stretched of my resources

Unserviceable for any other use  
 than the use for which I am  
 manufactured  
 to produce what precious metals  
 I could never provide  
 This why labor time, being his use  
 of the foundry in which  
 I am employed  
 has given a form to his prodding

I pleasure myself with gentle rubbing  
his substance, rendered a finger  
molded to a hole  
useful, ornamental  
servicing for anything  
and gaping wide in welcome  
Who would desire its use?

My sale alone can determine my price  
Value seems, by necessity  
bigger inside me  
once consumed  
Only a frequent sale can fix  
my standard

Now this frequent sale is me  
getting closer  
ejaculating  
my worth  
"More" marks a distribution  
of urgency. "More  
violent."

I am this eruption of pain.

I am a puppet now  
whose strings  
are pulled from within  
I am unable to control  
my own movements  
His arm, his sign  
language interpreting  
me inside me

## Diminishing Returns

I would not mind that you mine  
    so much of my loss  
    were any of it mine  
not this promissory note  
    to which I'm attached  
        a pulse overdrawn  
from my veins

you speculate  
    my waning breath  
    the crow's descent  
        to carrion  
    A zero you seed  
    in subzero fields  
yields my thin yield  
    to your fattening

A wood tick sick  
    with my blood  
        swells my swill  
        spills his head  
    fat as a melon burst  
in my foreclosed plot

    you plot against me  
You breathe into dust  
    animate specter  
    zero in ledger  
the fruit multiplying  
    my toil

your proboscis retracts  
    extracting the crude  
    toll of what bell  
bends bones to daybreak  
    then breaks bones  
to boneyard

Mosquito oil wells  
    lit by gas flares  
haze the roadmap  
    evade your maze  
        horizon's fern  
already a fossil melting

what remains I mulch  
 wet grain to milk  
     for more than sores  
         you mulct  
 oats mix with snakeroot  
     milk sick, I retch

                I birth you  
 calf mad with tremors  
                 I feed you  
 sour milk you lap  
         my bleeding  
 raw teeth gnaw  
         where mosquitos breed

Soldier, this levee  
         full to burst  
         abdomen bay  
 where lightning pain is  
         so much rain  
 my bones can't bear  
         the weight of you

        levy subtraction  
 cull the meek from the herd  
         then send them to wildfire  
                 to blast the cyst  
 forge teeth to gallows  
         lupine and brash

while I lay supine  
         you lash my back  
 where bruises bloom  
         cnidarian clouds  
 your sudden flood  
         over my brackish  
         vale of welts

I wrap my lips around  
         our wedding ring  
 your finger's foul taste  
         gold dug from pits  
         washed in your sweat  
 amalgamate waste  
         you dredge from  
 wastes where I'm fallow

You bend me to the shape  
of your briefcase  
holding a deposit  
my strategic reserves  
my hunger  
lubricates your arm  
as you dredge me deep  
for our commerce

Your syringe extracts  
this subsidy  
from my arm  
blood steels  
to a drone  
you surge  
hunting insurgents  
evading port scanners  
you trace in my track marks

In debt to your harvest  
my flesh the munition  
flowers from medicine  
thorn abrades throat ablaze  
aching markets  
a gash in the map  
your tongue salts  
charcoal soil  
I now owe you



## Unwanted Guest

Unwanted guest,  
 I write this letter  
 to trace your aphasia  
 Use it for a tissue  
 conjugate our coughs

                  every morning  
 I rehearse your repetition  
                   buzzing in my teeth  
                                   sirens  
 luring my words to mutiny  
 I fasten to your mast

                  shiver Antarctic blast  
 you leave the freezer open  
                   mold thaws and sprawls  
 what we store for winter  
                   spores eat the ants  
 then hijack their hive mind

                  hypocrite lecturer  
                   my infant monster  
 burst from the bulge  
                   this corpse balloons  
 to gulp brown rivers

Underwater bones  
                   ate to thin gruel  
                                   for minnows  
 swamps burn the lamps  
                   to map  
                   dark's periphery

I quarantine you to my couch  
 you snore my morning  
                   empty my pantry  
                   hijack my stereo  
 to loop your melodies

                  howl my interior  
 your swarming instance  
                   kerosene nest  
 I feel your wasps  
                   buzzing my pulse

Unwanted guest,  
    these unpaid bills  
    paper mountains  
tempting nicotine fix  
    to loop a fire hazard

        you paw  
        my rose  
warping guts to origami  
        tapering  
        blood's rosary  
hid in a wastebasket

        telescoping  
from the tree to the truck  
        my head in your lap  
        evades  
the laser on your skull

hit the gas, breathe faster  
    your lungs rev  
tighten cords, choke song  
    throat gasp roping  
    me to the edge  
of a tree limb

        lamp grown damp  
you the soil I mulch  
        don't choke  
soak marrow  
        tender root  
        clutch femur  
heat seeking pod

        I lose my tongue  
where you bury it  
        ash lichen marsh  
        brittle November  
set flame for pipeline

My flesh deforested  
    starving burns  
    fossil town  
    now mere flare  
for a freeway

Unwanted guest,  
     my semblance  
     my enemy  
 a mirror as friendly  
     as fire

Your sentences  
     often fragment  
     sentence me to  
 mandatory minimum  
     enjamb my throat  
     to zero in  
 on my serostatus

    in the bank lobby  
     I ask for your name  
     we have the same ID  
 draw funds from the same accounts  
     I draw your visage  
 invisible diamond spirochete

My apartment sealed due to fever  
     muscle on muscle writhing  
     rewriting  
     these red corridors  
 metonymous with life

the chorus of bones and sinew  
     acids and fluids  
     won't harmonize  
 cells the prisoners sing

    contrapuntal voices  
 merge their babel to gust  
     up esophagus  
     faint echoes  
     of diaspora  
 the imperial bellows of my jaw

I feed you with the flesh  
     I take inside my flesh  
     I mistake for my flesh  
 connecting to server  
     to service  
     flesh modem spools

We twins soldered together  
soldier through crowds  
dispersing, allergenic  
the red sea  
we bleed to part with bodies

what could be closer  
than my own arm  
than my own blood  
the noise by which I measure  
the pulse in my neck  
where we rhyme

There are evenings I doubt  
the ocean mapped inside us  
when I see you  
on a mirroring shore  
trying to find home  
by spiraling further  
into the exile of metaphor

## Vector Poetics

I hold in my hand a curious document, a little over half a page, which is at once the most pressing organizing fact of my identity and the one piece of information which, above all else, must always remain concealed. This unassuming document has the paradoxical power of changing everything and changing nothing at all – placing it, perhaps, in the lineage of performative speech acts, or some Althusserian interpellation, an artifact of language with a reverberating power to construct and deconstruct simultaneously.

Time-stamped October 20, 2006, produced by an anonymous technician at the Mayo Medical Laboratories in Rochester, Minnesota, this document which functions as a caesura in my narrative is mostly a boilerplate rehearsal of medical and legal jargon except for a single typed phrase, underlined in wobbly pen, which states “HIV-1 Ab, Western Blot Assay, Positive.” These words would mean nothing without the context of a small haiku which follows them: “Reportable Disease / -- Expected Value -- / Negative.” Contained here is the entire complex narrative of diagnosis: that an unexpected event can blot out one’s former existence, that a positive result can subtract one to a negative value, that this disease, in particular, marks one as someone reportable to the authorities. A week later, a woman from the CDC visited my home and insisted that I give her the names, addresses, and phone numbers of all my former sexual partners so that the government could graph their identities on a map of HIV in America, the presence of a virus in my blood centering a dizzying series of vectors across the nation’s imagined cartography.

What does it mean to have this disease in America in the Twenty-First Century? In some respects, it doesn’t mean anything at all. If I can hustle health insurance from the government or an employer, I can access medications which drive the virus from my blood and into my lymph

nodes, minimizing its damage to my body and making it nearly impossible for me to infect others. However, this medication, costing around \$2,500 a month because of a lack of price controls for pharmaceuticals in this country, transforms me into a site where the government extracts corporate welfare from my body.

Yet my experience of living with HIV has changed everything. When it comes to that most subjective of experiences, my subjectivity, there has been a tectonic shift. HIV makes me feel like half of me is missing. There are parts of my biology which cannot be shared, and there is something defiled which must always be held back. One of the first things doctors warn you about when you get this disease is that you must segregate your toothbrushes and razors from your roommates to minimize the risk of infection. Condoms must always be worn, and you better wash your hands in scalding water if you ever touch yourself. When you bleed, it's not a mere annoyance but an emergency requiring quick sanitation of any surface you've touched and an even quicker binding of the wound. These prescriptions have made me a reverse germophobe, not afraid of something getting into my body but afraid of something getting out. Another aspect of the subjectivity that HIV produces is this sense of being porous, of being exposed to the outside world, as the one thing you're never supposed to have in your body has taken residence in your blood, has fused with your DNA, and has turned your body into a factory for replicating itself.

One of the weirder aspects of living with HIV is navigating the constantly shifting terrain between disclosure and stigma. Well-meaning professionals, in medicine and social work, produce paradoxical dictums arranging behavior on these fronts. First, there is the question of law, which is that if one is to engage in any sexual activity, no matter how minor, the fact of being HIV-positive must be disclosed before the beginning of intimacy. Failure to do so can

result in life imprisonment, even if a condom is worn or one adheres to one's medication regimen, both of which make the chances of transmitting the virus infinitesimal, and make the law, as a result, anachronistic.

This compulsion to disclose is counteracted by a compulsion to conceal. The other advice often given to people with HIV is to never disclose their status to employers, to avoid workplace discrimination, or to total strangers, to avoid violence due to the stigma the disease carries. The very word, stigma, connotes a sort of visible marking at odds with this often invisible disease. Since treatment options have improved, HIV rarely involves the visible markers of AIDS, such as Kaposi lesions or lipodystrophy. Stigma, as a metaphor, is an invisible marker which makes visible an invisible status, adhering to the subject in a way which recalls the biohazard tattoos worn by some HIV-positive porn stars, itself a perhaps misguided attempt at reclaiming the territory of one's body from right-wing homophobes like William F. Buckley who wanted to make the forcible tattooing of HIV-positive people a matter of public policy.

This dichotomy between disclosure and stigma is only one of the paradoxes of living with HIV in America today. The other has to do with the sense of time. Since medications have improved, to have HIV today means to have one's death always deferred. "HIV isn't a death sentence," the saying goes, yet the death sentence is still the imaginary by which HIV is defined. The virus is there, somewhere inside you, but is rendered dormant by treatment. Having HIV holds out the possibility of dying from AIDS, but this is an event which is deposited in an always receding horizon. When images of the disease are present in the media, they usually come from the 1980s when HIV was a death sentence, so that one's understanding of one's disease is an image from the distant past, yet signifies a future event which is constantly retreating from one's present while simultaneously looping back as a sort of imminence toward which one must

always remain vigilant. This recursive sense of time makes any point on one's chronology somehow referring to a different point in time, deferring its meaning to a future date which will resemble the past.

The problems of identity, narrative, metaphor, temporality, disclosure – all of which inform my experience of disease – are also the problems of poetry. What problematizes the lyric is that the speaking subject, the poem's I, is at once a construction of institutional discourses, an artifact in language of false coherence, a figurative gesture, an element of rhetoric, and a residual effect of bourgeois values in which individuals speak to other individuals as an expression of a feigned authenticity. But if I am to take seriously the metaphors of the virus, seeing documents such as my diagnosis or media narratives of pandemics as constructing the poem's I, of collaborating with me to construct a voice in my poems, then these infectious documents activate a space in which the I, and other pronouns such as you, we, they, him, act as containers for other voices, for ghosts haunting the archive, for mediated reports and infectious narratives. Out of one, the subject of the poem becomes many. After all, this body is no longer solely my own.

Was the virus ever anything but a metaphor? Is the metaphor of the virus itself behaving in ways we might see as viral? "Ebola and ISIS are serious global health security challenges that mask deeper, more complex problems," writes General Stanley McChrystal. "They are, in essence, opportunistic infections taking advantage of weakened, vulnerable systems" (McChrystal and Talbert-Slagle). Here we see AIDS become a metaphor in service to a militaristic ideology, as one of the architects of the failed Afghanistan War deploys the virus metaphor in a way which both erases, through metaphor, the particularity of those suffering from pandemic diseases and suffering, and which threatens to increase that suffering by arguing for an increased presence of US troops in affected regions. There are two discourses at work in this



quote which my poetry attempts to address: one, the discourse of cybernetics, whereby each event is seen as a problem of command and control in a global system to which there is no outside or alternative; two, the metaphor of the virus, in its xenophobic and dehumanizing aspects, and in the virulence of metaphor itself, the process by which a word can infect and alter the functions of other words.

For the problems of virus metaphors, I could quote Susan Sontag's *AIDS and Its Metaphors* in its entirety. Sontag traces how the virus is metaphorically figured as a "domestic subversion" (105), an alien invader (106), the result of deviance or excess (114), the result of immigration or war (136) or commerce (137) or poverty (139) or a government experiment (140), a divine punishment (142), a lack of hygiene (143), an act of terrorism (156) – in short, the entire complex of anxieties which disfigure the modern world are figured in the metaphor of the virus. This tiny strand of rogue code becomes the means by which we encode an increasingly globalized and pluralized world whose circuits and circulations stubbornly refuse an easy integration and often lapse into the discourse of paranoia. Now that AIDS, at least in the West, is under control, much of its metaphoric valence has been transferred to Ebola, which is how we come to the insane spectacle of right-wing conspiracy theorists insisting that ISIS militants are infecting themselves with Ebola and disguising themselves as Central American immigrants in order to detonate their bodies in the US, as if they were the explosive zombies from the video game *Left 4 Dead*.

Ed Cohen's work is a genealogy of how scientists adopted the legal concept of immunity and metaphorically transferred it to biology. In contrast to the radical openness of the medieval body, which falls under Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque (Cohen 11), the modern body is figuratively derived from the work of Thomas Hobbes – its porousness a form of vulnerability,

beset by enemies from all sides, transforming it into “a form of violence that we do to the world – and that is done to us, both individually and collectively – to contain a violence that the world contains” (88). When this Hobbesian sense of the body is matched with the deployment of the virus as a metaphor for the Other, what results is a dehumanization of the Other as a pathogen which must be eliminated in order to protect the fortress of the individual and collective body.

The other strand of this metaphoric complex is the understanding of the virus as information, which has reverberated through contemporary ideas of cultural products “going viral” on the Internet, and through the increasingly paranoid rhetoric around computer viruses, malware, cyberwar, and information security. The concept of self-replicating computer programs has been around since John Von Neumann in the 1940s, but it wasn’t until 1984, at the height of the AIDS epidemic, that Fred Cohen coined the term “computer virus.” One of the earliest Apple II viruses was even popularly known as CyberAIDS. In a 1988 series of chat logs between crypto-virologists, reprinted by the *Rutgers Security Digest*, a host of metaphors are used to make sense of the malware crisis: lock picking, anti-burglary alarm systems, disarming a bomb, the Trojan horse, firefighting. Yet, with the AIDS epidemic looming in the background, and the mutating, self-replicating aspects of the virus being too convenient to ignore, the virus metaphor attaches itself firmly to self-replicating computer programs. This metaphoric move occurs in conjunction with another metaphor gaining traction at the time: the cyborg.

When Donna Haraway wrote her “Cyborg Manifesto,” its prescience was still unable to predict how successful the fusion of humans and machines has become. Since the rise of smart phones and near universal Wi-Fi in the US, many of us are at every moment tapped into an Internet which is seen as a sort of universal consciousness, a metaphor which elides how corporations own the means of information production, and how governments seek, through

surveillance, to control this information. Haraway writes that “the relationship between organism and machine has been a border war” (150). Here the anxiety of globalization, with its increasingly fluid borders, merges with the anxiety of infection, the process by which the outside becomes incorporated as inside. If abjection is seen as the self’s violent nausea in the presence of what it must cast aside in order to define itself, then a repeated exposure to the abject redefines the porous borders of the self, incorporating more and more of the outside world until a fusion occurs. In the assemblage of postmodern identity, this fusion with the abject occurs with predictable frequency: there are subsets of pornography which fetishize HIV, and the idea of the cyborg, once so violently abject that some evangelical Christians saw RFID chips and personal computers as “the Mark of the Beast,” is now so comfortable and familiar that almost every American has merged with the Internet through the prosthetic device of the phone.

This merger of human and machine has troubling political implications. The Obama administration recently redefined cyberwar as an act of conventional warfare, thus opening the space for an act of virtual aggression to be met with physical retaliation, even to the point of using nuclear weapons. This shift in policy has occurred along with the rise of predator drones to fight undeclared wars against terrorism, and the increasing automation of the nuclear arsenal, such as when the Pentagon considered placing US nuclear weapons under the control of a satellite equipped with an artificial intelligence described by one Pentagon analyst as “an enormously complex but stupid organism” (Weiner 49). One can easily imagine a future war fought by machine against machine, with human bodies as mere collateral damage. Then there is the use of computer viruses, like Stuxnet, to attack energy infrastructure, or the NSA’s Prism program to compile the metadata of Internet searches by Americans, data which is already used

by private companies like Google to predict our consumption patterns and micro-target us with advertising (a technique adopted, with some fanfare, by the Obama campaign).

In this border war between humans and machines, how might we activate a resistance which recovers our humanity? One of the more disturbing aspects of cybernetics is its insistence on a totalizing view of social problems as mere issues of finding the proper mechanisms for restoring central control over the social machine. The increasing standardization of technical, scientific, and economic discourses produces a language toward which there is no longer an outside, a perfect cybernetic organism which inscribes any act of resistance as pathology and pathogen. Against such discourse, poetry's ability to affect breakdowns and faults within language marks it as an effective path of resistance. Haraway writes that "cyborg politics is the struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly...[insisting] on noise and [advocating] pollution" (176). Haraway sees new forms of writing as people "seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other" (175), a way in which people are "actively rewriting the texts of their bodies and societies" (177). Haraway's sense of a resistance to language being activated within language, as breakdown, almost a form of malware, resonates with the experiments of language-centered writing in the San Francisco Bay area, and the many poetic experiments galvanizing language in the past few decades, from the distorted and politicized lyricism of writers like Rob Halpern, Brenda Iijima, and Taylor Brady, to name a few, to the myriad conceptualisms seeking a *detournement* of the Furies unleashed by the Internet. My own poetry is informed by these experiments, but also by a sense that "during illness, there is a breakdown in communication" (Rukeyser 54). As a person living with HIV, taking medications which have sometimes odd psychoactive side effects and effects on my language, and as a former caretaker for a stroke

victim, whose language I watched decompose and recompose with intriguing fluidity, it is this connection between language and illness which I am trying to explore in these poems.

Any discussion of the interactions between viruses, virus metaphors, and language must contend with William S. Burroughs' apocryphal statement that "language is a virus from outer space." Burroughs' conceit of language as a virus has many complex valences, but for my purposes I will focus on three: the processes in language as being analogous to the processes of biological and computer viruses; how media narratives and institutional documents infect and rewrite bodies and political subjects; and how language, as a virus, might act as a glitch which scrambles the oppressive codes which language itself produces.

In regards to the first element of this series, much of my senior thesis has engaged in an attempt to replicate the behavior of computer viruses and biological viruses within language. The type of computer virus called Buffer Overflow, by which the virus transcribes a code larger than the segment of registry it is overwriting, thus overwriting adjacent areas of code, lends itself to a use of enjambment which disrupts normative syntax by allowing for a multivalent reading of the relations between lines. For the species of virus called a Data Injection, where a hacker replaces one segment of code, such as a password, with another segment allowing remote access to parts of the computer otherwise secured, I've experimented with paradigmatic substitutions, breaking poetic lines down into temporal segments dilated by paradigms, such as commerce or sexuality or war, keeping the syntax intact while substituting one paradigm for another in a way which expands the poem beyond its expected registers.

The most notorious recent virus, Heartbleed, functioned in a way analogous to one person asking a simple question of another person who then shared more information than was implicated by the question. In regards to this virus, I related its workings to the problems of

disclosure and stigma discussed above. Discussing the Nixon administration's use of wiretapping and surveillance, Burroughs wrote about the power of disclosure to prevent the use of "shame and fear as weapons of political control" (Odier 11). Throughout these poems, I've used many iterations of the virus metaphor – stranger, enemy, lycanthrope, toxic waste, toxic assets – but in the interest of these metaphors acting as a skeleton key which unlocks areas of my biography which, for political and professional reasons, are best left undisclosed. I am interested in testing this thin prophylactic barrier between privacy and disclosure, at the risk of tearing its tissue and allowing that most dangerous of events: the full disclosure, the drunken unveiling of the body in all its nudity and vulnerability – of going from the paranoid self-defense of the modern body to the radical openness of the pre-modern body. Thus, there is in these poems the immediate vulnerability of the confessional, conscripted into the exiled adjacency of metaphor.

"The virus [is] an unwanted guest... who always repeats itself word for word," Burroughs writes in the statement I used for the title of my senior thesis (Odier 189-90). I often pondered Burroughs' aphorism as I woke up each morning, my phone buzzing with the latest inflammation of media panic over Ebola and ISIS and Ferguson and the midterms and immigration and climate change and (insert major news story here). When I say the media infects our bodies, I do not mean it as a figure of speech. We define our worth in comparison to mediated images of health or wealth; we organize our consumption patterns according to mediated trends, and our lives according to mediated ideas of what one ought to be, and how one ought to live. One of my processes in writing these poems was to wake up, look at my phone, scroll through headlines which ransacked my home like an unwanted guest, repeating the same phrases, phrases which made me feel less than human in the way they dehumanized others. The challenge was to challenge these dehumanizing metaphors head on – not to resist them by turning away from

them, but to resist them by inhabiting them. “The metaphors cannot be distanced by just abstaining from them,” Sontag warns. “They have to be exposed, criticized, belabored, used up” (182). This book is an attempt to expose and belabor the metaphors around viruses, to exploit their inherent contradictions, to use the essential absurdity of metaphor, by which one word becomes another, to magnify that distance, to gesture toward a breakdown in language by which the skin of metaphoric association ruptures.

Burroughs, as one of the earliest writers to reckon with the relationship between language and viruses, presents a wealth of techniques with which a writer can disrupt the viral properties of language. The cut-up method, perhaps Burroughs’ most famous contribution to poetic technique, has been a valuable technique for me in the process of writing these poems. The cut-up method has the virtue of releasing relations between words which are not otherwise accessible to the conscious mind, by combining words in unfamiliar ways and drawing on all the resources of the writer to forge associations where they might not otherwise be apparent. But Burroughs has lessons to teach beyond the cut-up method. “Scrambled speech already has many of the characteristics of the virus,” Burroughs remarks (Odier 189), thus forging a metaphoric link between syntactic distortions and the distortions that viruses wreak on organisms. Later in the same series of interviews, Burroughs attempts to counteract the effects of language-as-virus by disrupting a series of binary operations – the “is” of identity, the “either/or” of identity, the definite article “the” – which themselves operate in a metaphoric relation to the operations of computer programs (Odier 200-03). By recoding the codes of language, Burroughs suggests, we can reorient our relation to both the language that defines us and to the outside world that frames us, rewriting our existence, in relation to both, in a way which is more humane, less paranoid, more open to the possibilities of our organism, whether lingual or corporeal.

“Considering how common illness is,” Virginia Woolf muses, what “undiscovered countries” might be disclosed, why is it that we do not write “epic poems to typhoid; odes to pneumonia; lyrics to toothache” (3-4)? Woolf answers her own question by remarking that, where disease is concerned, “there is the poverty of language” (6) – despite our best efforts to speak this unspeakable thing inside us, “all day, all night the body intervenes” (4). In one of the more remarkable investigations of how language and disease inform each other, David Wojnarowicz writes that “I am a prisoner of language that doesn’t have a letter or a sign or gesture that approximates what I’m sensing” (117). Even if it were possible for our language to approximate somatic sensation, “the imagination is encoded with the invented information” of “the world of coded sounds, the world of language, the world of lies” (87-88). It would be simple enough if it were only the body that intervenes; yet it is our curse, as poets, that hospitals, government agencies, right-wing bloggers, television pundits, sociologists, psychologists, epidemiologists, and a host of other definers of the definitions which confine us, freeze these sudden pains and uncertain frequencies which we cannot find words for, and so we search through the inaccurate words of the experts, seeking to find some foothold in an alien language which is our only tool to describe our experience.

Here is where metaphor shows its utility. Rather than being a space where words are severed from their referents and adhered to other referents for ideological projects, or a space where the instability of language presents itself in all its glittering indeterminacy, we might imagine metaphor as a space in which the contours of the object in language are best defined by resorting to an exile of language as far from that object as possible – as if, by casting one’s words across the ocean, by rote of memory and the longing of implacable currents, one might describe the edges of a shoreline which one cannot possibly access when standing on its soil. In the space



of disease, where one's experience of one's body is always a sort of exile, as one's body has become colonized by outside forces, and one's control of one's biology is defenestrated in a violent way, what else might heal one's broken flesh except the disease of metaphor – especially since metaphor, in its virulent aspect, behaves so often like a disease, infecting everything around it and twisting one's words to a flat line?

A vector poetics is one which establishes vectors across elements relating to communication, time, visibility, the image, metaphor, the subject and its relation to documents and narratives encoding it – in short, to all the elements of the poem. A vector poetics is one in which the poet acts as a vector for the narratives and metaphors infecting the self, but acts in such a way that the poet uses these narratives and metaphors in a way in which they are challenged. I am using this charged word, “vector,” because of its metaphoric relationship to both disease and mapping, and the ways in which disease becomes a narrative mapped onto a body. But I am also attempting a reparative reading of this word, wondering how I might conceive of the diseased body as a space of production and coexistence rather than one of attrition and conflict. If we counter the Hobbesian body with an understanding of the body as a biome, as an environment made up of microorganisms such as bacteria, viruses, one's own cells, then there are alternatives to the militarized metaphors which permeate medical science and our broader society. What might a non-violent perspective on one's body look like, and how might it affect the ways one's bodily experiences interact with the body of the poem?

In an essay on the work of kari edwards, Rob Halpern posits community as the antonym of immunity. If immunity works on a logic of self-defense and self-preservation against external threats, then community imagines a space in which “vulnerability is held in common trust” (182). As community involves an economy of the gift and reciprocity, it is attended by

vulnerability and risk, so that it becomes "a somatic practice whose stakes are those of the whole body" (181). While Halpern's replacement of immunity with community involves a reordering of social relations, I wondered how it might relate to the individual body and its relation to itself. For while the vulnerabilities of my immune system and the virus inside me are not equivalent, we are sharing this space in which the stakes are our mutual survival. Ever since the armistice of medical treatment, my relation to my virus is no longer one of antagonist but one of host to an unwanted guest. I wanted my poems to reconsider the logic of antagonism at work in virus metaphors, to instead forge a space in language where the body and what infects it might work out a temporary truce.

Establishing community with illness is not a matter of surrendering the body's processes to the illness, thus precluding healing, any more than documentary techniques such as appropriation or the cut-up method, surrender the poem's processes uncritically to social inscription of the poem by outside forces. Rather, community involves a rejection of a self bifurcated between the political-lyrical subject and the infectious materials, rather microbe or discourse. It involves a recognition that the subject, whether a body or a function in poetry, is a collaboration with outside forces which are then internalized as the self. Immunity's resistance is a sham, as presuming one can purge the self and return to a state of purity is to be ignorant of the forces shaping the self. To recognize the contours of how the self is constructed, in a dialectic between the interior and the internalized exterior, is to maintain a critical relation to this construction and to intervene in the process in a constructivist attitude toward the self and the poem. These poems enact a space where the pronouns are in a relationship of a sometimes violent inscription and transcription of the other, a mutual infection and collapse of boundaries,

but I was careful to leave spaces of collaboration and desire, to not mire the work in negativity, but to see if an erotics of infection could still become a critique of infection's narrative logic.

I structured this work as a series of poems and an essay, each of which correspond to one of the components of the HIV virus, to etymological cousins of the word "guest," and to virus metaphors emerging from my research. To show a few examples, the first poem, "Inviting Wounds" relates the HIV gene gag, which codes the basic structural proteins of the virus, to the concept of the introduction or prefatory poem being a wound in the body of the text. Env, the gene which makes up HIV's viral envelope and fuses to the host's cellular membrane, was linked to the word "hospitality," then evolved into "Interior Landscapes," an ekphrastic poem written about photographs of immune cells attacking and absorbing other microbes. Tat, which acts as a time-bomb regulating the production of virions in the cell and then the death of the cell and the release of virions, was linked to the word "hostage" and became "Diminishing Returns," a meditation on debt as a sort of virus.

In each of these metaphoric linkages, I attempted to strike a balance between the immunological antagonism between the elements, and the communitarian risk of porousness as a means for finding a resolution or a disarmament. As I migrated these narrative spaces of soldiers and outlaws, strangers and lovers, unwanted guests and toxic environments, financial viruses and language viruses, I tried to reach some place of forgiveness in relation to my own virus. A computer virus in the late 1990s once announced itself by saying "I'm sorry, just doing my job, nothing personal." Recognizing that the virus inside me, along with the discourses that shape me, are just doing their jobs and performing their functions, these poems are a small attempt to accept that apology, to see the body not as a battleground but as a complex environment in which antagonistic forces must be brought into balance in order to survive.

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