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Unwanted guest

Adam Mitts

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Unwanted guest

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Department

English Language and Literature

First Advisor

Dr. Rob Halpern

Second Advisor

Dr. Christine Hume

UNWANTED GUEST

by

Adam Mitts

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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
 gifts 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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