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Memoryhouse is a creative nonfiction arts organization that encourages undergraduates, graduates, faculty, and staff to share their first-person narratives with one another through writing and performance. We feature creative nonfiction and poetry that present concrete narratives, as well as art and photography in our magazine, which we release on a quarterly basis. We also host an active blog, the celebrated Memoryhouse Performance Ensemble, and several events per quarter, ranging from chapbook and slam poetry workshops to storytelling competitions and standup comedy events.

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“Cain ene’ un alp?”

That’s his slogan, on repeat, at full volume; his spoken advertisement on the street alongside the multinational corporations. The initial confusion is part of his hook. While simple taglines like “I have two children”, “Homeless veteran” and “God bless” are easily understood and just as easily discarded, his chant evaded my usual mental ad block, catching my attention despite a carefully practiced disregard. It’s difficult to immunize yourself against something you doesn’t understand which is why, I think, I’m still captivated by that encounter.

Two weeks later, and sometimes, when I think back on how little I’ve done to help, I’m still walking toward him, just starting to grasp what he’s saying. “Cain ene’ un alp?” My excuse for walking without a second thought past the destitute couple and the woman with the sign, a hijab, and dog, was the justification that soon I’d volunteer for something, donate somewhere, that I’d do something to help intervene in the systemic causes of their situation as opposed to an ineffective and unofficial street side donation. I had told myself I could do better than that.

Now, two more weeks later and I still haven’t donated, volunteered or intervened. I’ve almost reached him and finally, I understand his words. It’s been four weeks. I’ve had a month. I’ve had opportunities. I’ve done nothing.

I wonder whether it would have been cruel to hold him firmly by the shoulders as he cried out to the world, “Cain ene’ un alp?” and answer:

“Can’t anyone help?”

“Yes, but we don’t.”
you have been tricked into desiring this secondary pink; yellow, not knowing it has poisoned your thoughts, torn you from yourself, given praise to violence, made love of rape. blinding, stifling.
you like me because i am yellow, because of inspite of with regard to the loss and the disconnect when We only ever see Ourselves in a mirror someone else is holding.

Sally Hemings Yellowbone
Jasmine Hebel

yellow is blood stripped of its vital cells.
yellow is a liver grown cynical with its workload, waiting to retire.
yellow is what you get when a master enslaves in a labor beyond fields or housework, the hallowed filled.
yellow is forgetting, and being forgotten.

i am yellow, but my yellow is another kind, the product of a once-love (a non-sequitur in two lifetimes made one, for half a childhood):
Pretty Girl met Handsome Boy at a Party, Got Married, had Three Babies (in Three Different Shades), Lived in a House in the Suburbs with a Dog and a Fence and a Willow Tree.

i love my yellow. it is the sum of my parts, equalled in love. i was loved in abundance.

but you
i love my yellow because of in spite of with regard to the unspoken other, the yellow of sorrow, sown in a silenced womb, born of sugar, sweat, cotton.

no, you
look at me and you don’t care about my parts, their past, their sum, my whole.

you like my yellow because we have been learnt, in historical concurrency, that this was the betterment of your own flaws, the kindly doing of a doting white father, printing a new edition (not comparable to the original, oh, no, but sufficient, in a pinch) of the beauty bestowed solely upon a delicate pink like the puckered jelly flesh of an uncooked chicken breast tender, humid, untouched—that pink is pretty. pink is soft.
Shh
Unbend and unbutton in my hands
I’ll knead every pocket of air
Each stubborn knot caught in your
Stoneware shoulders, your porcelain neck, your
Freckled, earthenware back
Leave them dimming on the wedging table

Please,
I offer a second slick dance
To the beat of slip and grog perhaps
The first time around the tempo
Wasn’t quite right, the wrists
Too stiff, the core thrown off center
Though if you’ll just remember

Two hands on the wheel roving up and tight,
Steady against the palms you belly out
And taper in we are one work
Of rings, born of motion
Raised by devotion

The mess is most of the process
And I am ready
To find streaks in my bangs
Smears plastered to the backs of my arms
This is a game of agains.

Reclaimed Clay

Olivia Tse
Mountain Dew Commercial Disguised as a Love Poem

Claire Haffner

Foreword

Mountain Dew Commercial Disguised as a Love Poem, composed by Matthew Scott Olzmann (born in 1976), first appeared in the thirty-first issue of the literary publication Rattle, released in June 2009. The poem consists of thirty lines written in free verse wherein the poet provides a list of reasons for why he thinks his marriage with Vievee Francis will work.

Matthew Olzmann is not yet well known enough (though I am sure he will be soon) to have his own Wikipedia page, so it is hard to know what is important about him and what might interest his reader. I do know that the poet was born in Detroit, Michigan, and lived most of his life near that city, though he currently resides in Asheville, North Carolina. His first book of poems, Mezzanines, won the Kundiman Poetry Prize in 2011. I have not read this book, nor do I plan to, if it is a glorification of those oddly placed floors that sometimes afford pleasant views. His writing has also appeared in Gulf Coast, New England Review, Fallbetter, and Poetry Northwest. In short, his writing has appeared in a lot of places, but those poems are not the subject of this work.

Upon my initial reading of his poem, Mountain Dew Commercial Disguised as a Love Poem, I had the utmost respect for Olzmann, which was diminished only a bit when I saw the somewhat inane title at the bottom that, for some reason, he chose to slap on to his masterpiece. However, now that I have read more of our poet’s work, I am sorry to say that my admiration for him is not what it used to be.

If you are interested in learning further biographical tidbits concerning our poet, I suggest you look elsewhere. I will not bore my reader any longer with an arduous enumeration of the poet’s influences, academic achievements, or other irrelevant details of the like. Before we begin, I find it necessary to warn the reader that the poet uses the word “because” exactly twelve times, and almost always at the beginning of a sentence. Let us brace ourselves for this repetition.

Commentary

Lines 1-2: Here’s what I’ve got, the reasons why our marriage, etc. It is an interesting idea, proposing through a poem. I can imagine the poet, bald and bespectacled, unfurling a piece of white paper from his back pocket, getting down on one knee amidst daisies and lilacs in a magnificent country field, or perhaps even a rooftop garden, where the proposal took place, and reading this poem to his soon-to-be-wife. He would read these words aloud to her in that voice of his that isn’t particularly interesting but not altogether unpleasant, but it is shaky this time and his fingertips leave gentle spots of sweat on the back page, and Vievee looks on lovingly and perhaps just as nervously, because it is sometimes painful to hear the words someone you love has written about you. Towards the end of my senior year of high school, for the Parent-Teacher meeting day, my Creative Writing teacher, Mrs. Forst read each poem aloud and had us guess whose parent had written it. My mom’s poem was obvious, and my best friends, Emma and Sammy, guessed right away. When she read my dad’s poem aloud, however, I looked around the room sadly and somewhat pityingly, wondering whose mother or father would doubt them so much, whose parent would rhyme so playfully while inflicting so many little pains. It turned out to be mine, my parent, my own father. He wasn’t sure if I would ever be able to get anything done, if I could ever survive on my own.

I smiled, walked to the middle of the room and received my poem, forcing a laugh. I thought maybe it could still be a mistake. But it was his handwriting, loopy and distinctive, the letters (so often in blue) that had always reminded me of sailboats.

Line 2: you wear pink

Beginning with the Christmas of 2007, when I was still just a sophomore in high school, my stepmother, Mary, started giving me pink North...
The coat became a discussion piece. I did look like a big ball of fluff, but I had to explain a countless number of times that no, the coat was not actually as pink as everyone knew it to be so absurd (and rather offensive), especially coming from a poet and professor, that I didn’t quite know how to respond. How could one live eighteen years of their life without taking an interest in poetry? What else would you do with your time?

Line 3: bullets and gravestones

I have read one poem by the poet’s wife that mentions bullets, though I can only bring myself to exchange it for a different color. Whenever I wore it in college, my friends would mock me endlessly. They called me a marshmallow, the Michelin man, an astronaut wearing magenta, though I can see how she may have preferred a less girly color; girls love pink; everyone knows that.

Line 1: poems

can’t remember the age that I started writing poetry, nor do I expect that the poet himself could say when exactly he began, either. I had already started reading poetry on my own by the time my mom instituted her poetry rule at the dinner table. Before my older brother, Willy, or I could excuse ourselves, we had to read at least one poem. I found these nights enjoyable and entertaining, especially since my brother often chose poems by Ogden Nash. The poetry evenings were short-lived, though, as Willy became less and less willing to play along. I distinctly remember, towards the end of my first year of college, meeting my boyfriend’s parents. His father is a poet and professor of Creative Writing, and one of the first things he asked me was whether Sam was the reason I had taken an interest in poetry. I found this question to be so absurd (and rather offensive), especially coming from a poet and professor, that I didn’t quite know how to respond. How could one live eighteen years of their life without taking an interest in poetry? What else would you do with your time?

Line 2: poems

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Line 3: you yell

One Sunday morning, when I was still young and innocent enough that I had not really questioned my own religious beliefs, my brother decided to put up a fight about going to church. He had done similar things before, complaining about how boring and pointless mass was, but never to this extent. He and my mom screamed at each other, Willy claiming that he was an atheist and she couldn’t make him believe something he could not believe, so there was no point in him going to church. I initially took his side, though quietly, and my mom became so enraged that she threw her keys at the kitchen floor out of anger, shouting a word that began with a d or maybe an s that I will not repeat here out of my desire not to offend my reader with such language (even though the poet does not seem to have any qualms about doing so; see note to line 29). It was obvious that my mom knew she was fighting a losing battle, but she...
is nothing if not a fighter.
I do not remember whether we ended up going to church in the end, but I would guess that we did.

**Line 4: when you lose**

I lost in the final round of the Spelling Bee every year of middle school, and every year I felt that a great injustice had been dealt me. In sixth grade, it was prerequisite (pronounced by our superintendent as prerecosit, which is how I spelled it). In seventh, ubiquitous. In eighth, hermeneutics. The eighth grade upset would not have caused such a fury if redhead Peter Briggs (with whom I would become besotted my senior year of high school, regretting my middle school rejection of him) hadn’t then proceeded to win with the word “misspell” – as if that were on par with “hermeneutics” (though I do appreciate the potential for irony). Mr. Witz, my Language Arts teacher, agreed that it must be favoritism on the part of Mrs. Crall, who had been reading the words to us; I was his student, and Peter was hers.

I seem to have a problem with u’s, akin to that of our dear poet’s problem with because.

**Line 5: loudly**

When I listened to Matthew Olzmann read his poem The Rug, he seemed to be aiming at a style of reading similar to that of slam poetry, though he didn’t quite hit his target. He wasn’t quite emphatic enough, nor loud enough, and was a little too serious when the crowd burst out laughing at my Assistant Assistant Regional Vice President of Shut the Hell Up. It might be worth noting that this poem has the epigraph “After Robert Fanning”. Who exactly this Robert Fanning is, I cannot claim to know, though after a brief glance at his “postscript” I can safely deem it neither concluding nor unscientific. I do not understand why my roommates have to slam the kitchen cabinets so loudly. I have asked them numerous times to refrain from doing so, as the kitchen is directly beneath my bedroom, but no one ever seems to heed my pleas for silence. I cannot sleep when the radiator hisses like that.

**Line 5: you can hold a pistol**

This is not at all surprising, given that the poet’s wife is particularly inclined to writing about guns and bullets. (see note to line 3)

**Lines 6-7: because you memorize songs, even commercials from thirty years back, etc.**

I feel like this is a common practice, though I must admit that I’m skeptical about the timing of this. I’m no mathematician, despite the high hopes they had for me going into sixth grade, but by my calculations, the poet is roughly 36 years old, and I don’t think it would be unreasonable to assume that his wife is of a similar age. (Remove previous comment. Surprising discovery that the poet’s wife is 13 years his senior.)

**Line 8: hands**

I share the poet’s fascination with hands. Perhaps my training as a classical violinist has sharpened my awareness of hands, but I am particularly pleased when people have long, slender fingers, rather than little stumps in a shape vaguely resembling carrots. I find it disturbing when women have small hands, frighteningly small, such that it is a wonder they are able to use them for anything at all.

**Line 9: boxes**

For as long as I can remember, my dad has given me tiny boxes for trinkets, jewelry, and other small things. I have recently asked him to stop, unless it is a very special little box, because I have quite the box collection as it is. But I love how he loves to give me them, so I never refuse them too strongly, but more and more accept them with the quiet resignation that I will likely give it away, or put it somewhere and forget about it. I wish this weren’t true, but he too often frequents secondhand shops, jewelry stores, and glass blowers, looking for the next little gift for me. It is possible that this is just divorced parent syndrome; it has been going on for so long that I could not say with certainty. Perhaps my favorite of these boxes is the one that stands on my dresser now, a ceramic box of
light blue with a curved lid, covered in tiny stars, clouds, and moons, with a blue rhinestone on top. All over the box it says Sweet Dreams, Wishes and Dreams, Dreams and Wishes.

Line 11: Because you drove me to the train station

Though I can see how this would signify a certain level of commitment in a relationship, it does not seem to carry as much weight as taking someone to the airport, as Billy Crystal points out in the film When Harry Met Sally (a wonderfully touching romantic comedy, the opening shot of which takes place at my alma mater). Though it could be that this simple act means much more to our poet than we can know.

Line 13: you underline everything you read

Sometimes I feel like the poet is speaking to me (see note to line 24). I, too, have this unfortunate tendency, though I have been working on it and have learned to limit myself to just the important things and combinations of words that I find particularly pleasing.

Line 14: stars

I have always loved looking at the stars (see note to line 9). In high school, my good friend Sammy and I eagerly tried to attend a meeting of the astronomy club, only to discover that the club had been dissolved and the flyer advertising the meeting was five years old. I cannot even begin to express my disappointment upon making this discovery.

Line 15: the things you think I should think are important

The things my mom thinks I should think are important are finding a job, as Billy Crystal points out, with an illustration of a man in a tailcoat with the words “Mayakovsky’s Dream” on the top. This is a certain poem that appeared in one of the illustrations. The illustration I am referring to is the one depicting a matchbox with an illustration of a man in a tailcoat with the words “Mayakovsky’s Dream” on the top. This is evidently a fancy Russian restaurant in the novel, yet the words on the side of the matchbox read: “Mayakovsky’s Dream.” Before I looked up these words, I hesitated. Nothing else in the novel had actually existed thus far. Not the main character’s favorite movie, When the Elevator Descends, not the movie stars Lottie Cornelian, or the musician Hawk Davies. At this point in the novel, I had learned better than to look things up, and yet this time I felt like I would

Line 19: the Frida Khalo Cookbook

I find this error to be an intriguing one. It has appeared in every version of the poem that I have seen, which leads me to believe that it is, in fact, the spelling that our poet used. Perhaps I’m being presumptuous in thinking that everyone knows how to spell Frida Kahlo’s name, because everyone, at the very least, learned about her in some art unit in elementary or middle school, and everyone was grossed out by her mustache and unibrow (why didn’t she do anything about that?) and probably remember them more vividly than anything else about her artwork, which is a shame.

Still, did the poet not proofread? Did he not have an editor? Should he have sent his work to me, I surely would have caught this glaring mistake. I also would have recommended that he drop some of the because’s and search himself for a better word, or many better words. Alas, I have yet to be recognized by the publishing industry as the next shining star, the next prodigy of our time. Or something like that. If only they would stop rejecting me.

Line 20: that essay about Rilke

I must admit I do not know which essay about Rilke our poet is referencing here. I am, however, somewhat familiar with Rilke’s Letters to a Young Poet, which I read at the age of fifteen, when young and yearning to become a poet. I had never read any Rilke before, and may have continued on like that, had I not gone to poetry camp. Yes, that is the kind of thing I did with my summers. While my friends were at the beach talking about boys or eating ice cream from Sweets in Market Square, looking at the window display of the Toy Station and perusing the overpriced shoe selection at the Forest Bootery, I was mere blocks away from them doing one of these people might pick up some book and read it or the word “love.” I’m worried that without all these things, I might not be able to remember.

Line 18: pork

I have always loved the smell of pork, but can never quite bring myself to stomach it under normal circumstances. The one exception to this rule is the pork tamales at Nuevo Leon in Pilsen, served with a side of rice and refried beans.

Line 22: to be consumed in flames

If my reader has literary tastes similar to mine (and I trust that you do because you are reading this commentary on the poem that I chose, after all), I suggest you take a look at the book Why We Broke Up by Daniel Handler. It sounds juvenile and like it should fit easily into that abhorrent new genre called “chick lit,” but I promise my reader that this book is different. Daniel Handler (also known as Lemony Snicket) writes in a unique, youthful, and wildly creative voice. One thing that has been nagging at me ever since, however, is a certain poem that appeared in one of the illustrations. The illustration I am referring to is the one depicting a matchbox with an illustration of a man in a tailcoat with the words “Mayakovsky’s Dream.” On the top. This is evidently a fancy Russian restaurant in the novel, yet the words on the side of the matchbox read: “Mayakovsky’s Dream.” I stand entwined in fire on the inexpressible bonfire of inconceivable love. Before I looked up these words, I hesitated. Nothing else in the novel had actually existed thus far. Not the main character’s favorite movie, When the Elevator Descends, not the movie stars Lottie Cornelian, or the musician Hawk Davies. At this point in the novel, I had learned better than to look things up, and yet this time I felt like I would
find something, something eerily inconsistent with this world. Those words were too good. Lo and behold, this was the single instance where Handler referenced something real, something that existed outside of the novel. I will provide Vladimir Mayakovsky's poem, Chelovek (Man), for the reader to enjoy:

Everything will perish.
It will all come down to nothing.
And the one
who moves life
will burn out of the last suns
the last ray
over the darkness of the planets.
And only
my pain
is sharper –
I stand,
entwined in fire,
on the inextinguishable bonfire
of inconceivable love.

Lines 22-25: when the lights... can see you
I can sympathize with the poet's wife here, as I often feel like this when I am in Sam's bedroom. He does have an entire wall of windows with many broken blinds that open onto his balcony, which opens onto the courtyard, so this worry is not an entirely unreasonable one. Even so, nailing a sheet over the window does seem like a bit of a drastic and unnecessary step.

Lines 28-30: there was a single twenty-ounce bottle of Mountain Dew... because you once overheard me say that I liked it
It is these lines that bring tears to my eyes and make me forgive the poem any of its shortcomings, because this is exactly the kind of thing that I would do (see my note to line 13). It is for the same reason that I check the score of Heat games when I'm not with Sam, the reason I walked through his favorite quad every day two summers ago when I was in Chicago and he was not. It is for the same reason that I sit at certain tables in the library when I'm not with him, the reason it is painful to see redheads or hear the word “Miami”. It is for the same reason that I listen to Bob Dylan and dubstep because there's a good chance that he is, too, and the reason that I bought Frank O'Hara's Lunch Poems. It is for the same reason that I sew tiny hearts into all of my sweaters, because he once told me he likes it when a person wears their heart on their sleeve.
Cornell Study Finds Kids Prefer Their Parents’ Music

Felicity Deiss

The cat’s heavy-eyed purrs like crickets in the floorboards that first winter in our old home

That year I was seven and split my lip in a game of stickball

And the road trip fries the true taste of salt like the prickle of cactus spines

And the same salt sting in the desert night followed us back home

When Joan Baez sang and the evening sun rainbowed Swiffer-scented floors

I sat with the cat and watched the street for your friends to arrive

And now in my apartment the cat is kneading me for milk pulling me awake at three in the morning to think of home
Lists like these count you down, ticking off directions like 3, 2, 1 until you’re baptized in guarantees; micro-lists for your salvation. They promise honeyed balms for the wounded ego, as if following each step of a Wiki-How for your soul was somehow comparable to the quotidian removal of a stain from a blouse.

I've sat for days in a lake full of sympathetic vignettes, saturated to my toes. If you asked, I could rattle off five thousand bite-sized aphorisms dripping with can-do, New-Age, self-help vibes.

Take time for yourself, don’t get bogged down in the details, respect yourself in order to respect others.

But after all these years, I've learned that the "virus" you’re fighting is, just you. You can cover this in hazy music and rationalizations, but these injected vaccinations of smile until-it’s-real and watch-a-sunrise-once-a-week only fight the sickness off until you’ve grown strong enough to mutate again.

My parents have always told me that I’m a beautiful piecemeal creation; that somehow in the womb, I selected their most elegant halves. Like split faces of the moon, I created a girl molded of quiet symmetry and brimming elegance. They say that I inherited my father’s eloquence and my mother’s sensitivity to color, the bombast of his laugh but her voice that rings sharp and glassy. They speak as if I was sewn of silk, but I can see, when I look at them, how I bottle my father’s rage inside the frame of my mother’s vast arms. The mirror speaks the truth; their faces, their eyes like stitched-together patches, slick with a veneer of smooth paint.

My virus is the unfortunate alchemy that birthed me, and no number of dry-pill, swallowed-down enlightenments is going to change what thrums inside my very bones. Darwin spoke about how everybody’s just searching for a way to survive. As if we’re all just halfway clocks; ticking in time to those rasping commands to cure the sadness, the sickness burning in our hearts, in some vain hope for immortality.

Treating your body like a temple, dance like nobody’s watching, be vulnerable.

But I can’t listen any longer without hearing the soft crush of sand sifting irretrievably downward. Maybe it’s the virus inside of me talking, maybe these are just daydreams to soothe a stirring soul for a time before it ticks its last gasp. That is the only cure for this virus; all we can do is breathe.

Again and again and again, until at last it comes; the sweetest sigh.