alt-country

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1 time

its funny it didnt hurt yesterday

the airplanes that fly over my village

man the preserver of god

sha la la la la as the saying goes

[]

lullaby at honalee

poem

poem where an insomniac puritan is visited by another in a sequence of ancestral spirits

list of things that happened

fyi

at the food court in the intergalactic space station

[]

global positioning system

inevitably one must take revenge

life story

the same loaf

fable

a poem where i realize that everyone i have ever kissed is a better person than me and integrate it into my self-image

how to prepare 4 doom

[]

yr going to have to believe me
every time i do acid i find buddha and other true stories

dont look now but i think we are being watched

looking at a photo of an egyptian fresco which was supposed to be impossible

ancient proverb
you do not know about tomorrow
-James, 4:14
1 time

i was thinking abt how ice cream feels when it melts
p sure we can all agree it must feel great

made a big mistake today i left the house w/ a pancake
now my arms are dripping honey

i was thinking abt how hard it is for us to pick out a movie
even when there are so many movies

made a big mistake today i left the house
now im bleeding on the side of the road
bones strewn across the desert
a rare cactus in the left corner

pls some1 bring water.
its funny it didnt hurt yesterday

my best friend says live every day like its the revolution. we are all breathing one flower he says. we have already been through the epic karate fights of history. now we are staring at our fingers at the most pristine rest stop in our time zone. a teenager is blowing up and taking the death star with him. im sorry im sorry he says shutting down his computer. dad is going to india and taking the kids why not. meanwhile every respectable boy in america labors over the timbre of a letter to santa. dear dear i tell everybody at once. dear no room at the inn so i went to the chinese drive-thru for a bed of rice. im sorry im sorry too. she is in texas and i am in maine. she is texting to remind me i am in the future. i am not convinced.
the airplanes that fly over my village

first they were noisy you could hear them coming for miles

now they are fast and silent and i suspect there are more of them

but like i said they are silent
man the preserver of god

im fireproof
like shadrach, meshach,
and that third dude

a young american icon
oclast baby

oh i was there,
cool as a cucumber
when they dropped the bomb on sodom
and the temple of doom was bulldozed
when gog & magog looted new orleans
and people jumped out of windows
and the hudson river turned to blood

at the woodstove: sweethearts
eat cereal & listen to things reorganize

must be the beloved part
where there's honeycomb w/ honey

must be the catastrophe
they're all talking about

people will do anything these days
to not burn alive
sha la la la la as the saying goes
(soundtrack by r kelly)

in my version the whole thing goes down in a cabin with panoramas & sturdy furniture. pick any mountain except it has to be perfect. it has to be like a marathon in a thunderstorm or like two coyotes howling at once. an eagle zooms across and we kiss with impressive symmetry brains melting all the while into a shallow puddle. critics agree: a definitive opus. they will call our love blasphemy and later they will call it a masterpiece. haha you are saying, im serious.
i am wrecking the bars with my bare claws the bars of my parrot cage that is
lullaby at honalee

i don't have time to be a good dad
so i will sing this as fast as i can

a boy and a dragon hallucinated for hours
in the autumn mist or something

the point is things start out great
we all have our strolls with god (and thank god)

but every dragon dies whether its mary travers
or richard nixon or a kind of dream

the 60s kid you had to be there
you are old enough to know what i am sick of

it is being cast out of gardens
poem

a little baby drone landed on my finger
it was cute and i wanted to keep it but mom said no

"you'll thank me later"

i don't care what mom says i will never burn
poem where an insomniac puritan is visited by another in a sequence of ancestral spirits

she (the spirit) wore a huge white sweater (vaguely familiar). same old song: blow up the tv, move to maine, jar things. i heard when they taught a chimp to draw he drew steel bars. the visions are ok but dimensional seepage is becoming a problem. for instance my love and i were reinvesting the other day and ran out. suddenly they called. they want us to renew our membership. i want to trust everybody no exceptions. still after all these lives i bury my talents in the ground. dirt is a good reminder of the ground. that thread you cling to it can be cut in an instant.
list of things that just happened

an ogre has smashed my head in oh how the blood spurts

a little boy named billy i guess has tripped on a strawberry the next town over

the whole time a dude was changing his hairstyle whilst changing his life

and an old woman examining a phone book how about that
fyi

i have seen god

i have seen god and can't open my fucking pudding
at the food court in the intergalactic space station

once a year we drive here early, park
the pod and sit down at a booth.

it is a cherished family tradition. don’t bother asking
why we honor our ancestors

we just do. we have already seen the coming and going
of at least three janitors. it is understood that everyone

is on the way to an important place. we are together
by accident. there are a few things

that do not change in the food court.
one is the smell of pork fried rice.
if i were a seagull no matter how many times i flew i would remember to have fun
global positioning system

hits sidewalk breathes deeply sips juice
winks at goldfish hails taxi skirts lava floes
scrolls through contacts practices signature
breaks tablets dreads french gets
comfortable gets radical haircut inverts
gender binary invests in gender binary stares
down dire wolf is cruel to own mom dribbles
furiously dances with stranger stands idly by
picks up revolutionary mantle puts it down
down starts profitable airline hires bodyguard
draws bath vanquishes foes downloads car
swims after lunch feigns interest drinks coors
‘exclusively’ follows trajectory plans defense
draws up contract reneges on primary clause
kicks off boots transcends time folds
bathrobe meddles with fate practices
mindfulness forgets milk misses opportunity
experiences joy tweaks formula fucks up big
time straightens tie composes symphony
tarries a while taps well wakes up next to
majestic waterfall misses deadline
dispatches envoy devises elaborate scheme
poisons water supply does literally anything
lies lies lies in bed tightens grip sharpens
teeth makes major breakthrough makes
same mistakes finds plausible medical
explanation looks at bumpy stuff on motel
ceiling predicts downfall holds moon and
stars in palm of hand and somehow does not
even notice believes angry men pushes up
button revamps image gives yoga a shot
gesticulates wildly negotiates safe passage
cries on airport payphone fails to get over
incommensurability of loving others marries
for love storms beachhead averts crisis calls
reinforcements realizes too late has sooo
many memories (oh) sips juice
inevitably one must take revenge

she went to the rodeo
to persuade somebody
to kill her boyfriend.
back at camp i boiled
potatoes.
life story

when i was a little boy and i could name basically any dinosaur

hold on i need to pick a font..

and i could name basically any dinosaur

AND I COULD NAME BASICALLY ANY DINOSAUR

and i could name basically any dinosaur
the same loaf

it's the same loaf, baby
it's the same fruit medley
it's the same blue flute
it's the same psalms
it's the same gurus running
across a fire pit
it's the same old gods
it's the same flesh and
the same awful haircut
it's the same number
of times to loop the
bunny ears (two)
it's the same stain
on the same jeans
it's the same distance
from here to the fridge
until you get here
when you get here
it's different.
fable

a respected consultant once stood alone in an office w/ lights off. one intern went in and felt his tie and said this is a dignified thing. a clerk felt his hair and said this thing is among thousands of its kind and yet is good. a perceptive member of the committee smelled his cologne, saying this thing has obviously spent warm nights under palm trees. a secretary said you’re all wrong. this thing is absolutely defenseless.
a poem where i realize that everyone i have ever kissed is a better person than me and integrate it into my self-image

its a good thing
she didn’t see his face

a cold face
where cold things happen.

i plead guilty he said lifting up his hands.
how to prepare 4 doom

dump the bubbling vat into a manhole. publish autobiography burn every copy. send one last telegram to the jellyfish captains of my sinking fleet. power up the blasters. we are surrounded by horse-eaters. even the nauseous waters know.

learn to repurpose household items. the imax at the mall is a workable shelter but eventually the air will run out. offshore accounts last longer whether you’re fighting bush-era vampires or obama-era zombies.

it is important to have strategically placed resources. iron, uranium deodorant sticks. safehouses and weapons caches line the borders of her apartment. house cats also make invaluable allies and are easily bought. tell them: just eat your fish and forget.

spread one side with jelly and tape it to a ceiling fan then do a cartwheel and you will break records. world’s most impossible sandwich. congratulations you’re the greatest artist on earth.

loosen up, live with intention!! try to remember as you lie in bed that there are huge anemones on the ocean floor just doing their thing. there are brilliant guitar solos yet to be shredded. there are volcanoes still in the closet.

btw i have written a pretty good song but watch out there is a bomb planted in the second chorus. a drop from which few recover. i am always wishing i was having a pancake. please god, remit us our debts and have us our pancakes.
I kind of prefer writing underwater as Marx would say.
yr going to have to trust me

her plans are usually characterized by steep slopes, white skullcaps, sheets soaked with something, grand stairwells leading to grand ballrooms, snarling marble lions, crude objects meant to participate in any number of futures, things that end with etamine or you'll all be sorry. tried and true methods, foldaway beds, loud arguments and honey i'm homes, marathon drives at night scored with dope beats, momentary lapses, catharses of varying potencies, and tunes in ears that you'd be pressed to call songs. take for instance the time she went to the platform and stood there for hours looking hell-bent like twelve or fifteen trains passed all going to the same place (flat bush ave) before she got on one and from there it was anyone's guess or the time she fell
asleep between the
seat cushions
or how she went
straight to the swing
set wearing a yellow
dress and was
found kicking
at the wolf’s belly
(her words)
from the inside.
there are no happy
mediums or days
spent at midas trying
to get the car
inspected. no
stagnant swamps
full of alligators,
old age or ok
cupid accounts.
there are just
churning rapids,
gnarly waves, kisses
over the breakfast
table in a small
apartment flooded
with light.
every time i do acid i find buddha and other true stories

every time i do acid i find true stories and other buddhas

i find every true buddha acid and other "i did time" stories

trudeau, other i, and every acid: buddha found storytime

i find every other story true and its time buddha does acid

do another accident. find time; truth. buddha in every store.
a;sdlkfj
(a memoir)

take it easy

catch some crayfish

i never lived on purpose

and neither did you
error:
this page has failed
dont look now but i think we are being watched

no not the wiretaps (old news) no i am talking about the hidden outposts where guards remove their eyes from spyglasses only once or twice a day to light cigarettes, brush the dust off their epaulets, and blink. they are not robots after all. like yesterday after my papers were denied i noticed a guided missile barrelling straight toward my head. take a deep breath and count to ten i said quickly. lucky for me she was a reasonable missile. just tired. she is sorry she is not perfect. she is not a robot after all.
looking at a photo of an egyptian fresco which was supposed to be impossible

what id like to know and id ask him if i could is if there were mornings when his chariot wouldn't start and there goes the day really makes u think huh cause here i am hardly able to fix the damn printer or finish my salad and these guys were cranking out world wonders like its nothing christ i cant imagine tomb after tomb oh you'd like another enormous osiris? no sweat fuckno way were they in it for the god-king they were after the nat geo fold-out. well they probably had lousy family lives not to mention the bugs and the boils and the first-born thing. didnt see that one coming. goes to show u can paint as many cat-people as u like god will take u down.
if karma was real there would be way more slugs
wow

i shifted 5 paradigms
before getting out of bed

wandered thru the ruins
of a midwestern city (name?)

started a tribe before my
wife woke up

wow what
a morning
ancient proverb

james bond comes to mind more often than i would like him to but i read on a fridge magnet once to accept things as they are. this time he is being chased by a blood-maddened barracuda. later we’ll be quietly humping. thats just the way things are.
A Reminder of the Piano
Notes for alt-country

My head is a bony guitar
-Bob Kaufman

An instrument with strings is always under stress. Wooden instruments go in and out of tune according to the humidity, and thus according to the seasons. When it is winter in Maine and the heat is on, moisture in a piano soundboard evaporates. The strings slacken, and the pitch drops. A friend told me once that when he called his piano tuner in the early winter of 2001, the tuner was very happy to hear from him. He typically got three or four household piano calls a week. This was his first in months. It was his first call since 9/11. My friend’s story fascinated me so much that I once googled “piano tuner 9/11,” and found a forum thread on a piano tuner community website titled with the ubiquitous American refrain: “re: 9/11……. where were you?” Many were working. Many stopped and watched the towers fall on client’s television sets. Some took the day off: “I cancelled my tunings for the rest of the day and went home. Pianos just didn’t seem to matter then.”

I have tried to think of a reason for the plight of the post-9/11 unemployed piano-tuner. Of course, the economy took a marked dip, but if you already own a piano, a tune up isn’t exactly a splurge. One might think that in days of mourning, pianos matter most. Perhaps people were playing as much or more than ever, just with some flat notes. The story implies a collective American consciousness, one that precludes something so trivial as having the piano tuned in the face of a national tragedy. Then again, it had been months since his last call. Propriety only goes so far. For a while there, we didn’t know we weren’t tuning our pianos. We just weren’t.

Actually Crying

Many of my favorite poets are searching for a collective American unconscious. They are searching for the place where we have collectively neglected our pianos. This isn’t to say that they want to make the unknown known; they just remind us that it is there. Working in the crude aftermath of surrealism, the 20th century poet I am speaking of has a few particularly useful talents. These include her ability to make ludicrous jokes, to profane the sacred, to sanctify the profane, to

collage uncanny images, and to paint “romantic ruins, the modern mannequin, or any other symbol capable of affecting the human sensibility for a period of time.” It is her job to jolt us out of comfort with a turning word. She skews ideologies by skewing language, because “when language is skewed, the world is viewed differently.” The poet’s job is not to make us think about 9/11 in terms of airplanes, nations, or violence. We already think about it that way. The poet’s job is to make us think about 9/11 in terms of unemployed piano tuners.

I first came to understand this reading the works of 20th century American surrealist poets. John Ashbery, Charles Simic, James Tate, Harryette Mullen, Dean Young, Bob Kaufman, and others use varying degrees of surrealism (borrowed from their French predecessors) to probe the American dreamworld. They “define the amount of the unknown awakening.” Take, for instance, a poem from Tate’s Viper Jazz.

THE TELEVISION WAS REMINDED OF THE STORY

This was before the first test pattern.

One night Slim Victuals, Estil Loney and Snörpa Little-Dew were out on a spree-

apricot-juice heads all.

They knocked over a couple of tabularasas.

Snörpa whispered
into the ear of a passing shoplifter:
“You have just made a complete fool of yourself!”

This is not that kind of town,
they told themselves:
this is our home, the town of stove-pipe hats.

A sign said YIELD
and a woman ran through the streets
actually crying.

If you have ever watched television, you may be as hopeful and as incredulous as I at the claim that the woman was actually crying. As both image and reflection, television is a gallery of the American psyche. The title is itself a reminder that this is the story. Stove-pipe hats, test patterns, and a punk named “Slim” hitting the town and causing trouble -- Tate has defamiliarized familiar scenes. He writes the perverted twin of a popular narrative. This device subverts television’s authoritative story; it clears a space for questioning our account of reality: “the more the relationship between the two

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3 James Tate, The Route as Briefed (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 2.
5 James Tate, Viper Jazz (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1976), 31.
juxtaposed realities is distant and true, the stronger the image will be -- the greater its emotional power and poetic reality.\textsuperscript{6} Success in circuit lies, as someone once scribbled on a receipt or something.

Snörpa is a likeness of Tate, whispering absurdities and vandalizing tabularasas (or breaking tablets). Tate's poem is evidence of an alternative history. It is a model for rethinking the terms of culture and politics that are otherwise taken for granted. In poetry, we are responding to reality; “even if a poet writes about sitting in a glass house drinking tea, it reflects politics.”\textsuperscript{7} Poems that hasten to tell us, however, that war is wrong, that planting trees is right, that car commercials are superficial, or that the president is a liar are typically awful.\textsuperscript{8} There is nothing worse than reading a vague polemic, made hazier by forced meter and metaphor. These poems “[congratulate] themselves on their great sensitivity.”\textsuperscript{9} To sit down with the intention of writing a political poem is to spell its inevitable doom. I have learned this by dooming many poems.

This isn’t to say that fantastic political poems aren’t written. They are, but they are always poems first. When Creeley sd to drive, for christ’s sake,\textsuperscript{10} he was steering as a poet, exercising his mastery of measure and succinctness. Still, darkness sur-rounded. In Robert Hass’ stark assessment, “what else is experience in the second half of the twentieth century about, but the sense of a world run by people with insane assurance who manipulate large and unmanageable forces over which they have almost no control?”\textsuperscript{11} This hasn’t changed in the 21st century. I don’t know how many Americans had faith in Harry Truman or Lyndon Johnson, but my experience of American politics, punctuated by wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the PATRIOT Act, NSA data collection, and the corporate stranglehold of Washington, has been one of overwhelming distrust. The poems I try to write are political in that they speak of frustration, paranoia, and dissolution.

My fascination with Surrealism is in part due to the political ambitions and failures of poetry in the French Surrealist movement. In theory, psychic automatism was meant as a metaphor and catalyst for revolution. The unfiltered, semi-clairvoyant poetry of automatic writing would be as beautiful as the subconscious structures it unveiled. Dreams, liberated from the rigid logic of false consciousness, would allow us to reshape the world. Breton prophesies that “the time is coming when [poetry] decrees the end of money and by itself will break the bread of heaven... may you only take the trouble to practice poetry”\textsuperscript{12} Surrealism intended to drag us out from a capitalist stupor enforced by the tyranny of rationalism. Walter Benjamin also indicates that liberation will coincide with the emancipation of the subconscious: “collective laughter is [a] preemptive and healing outbreak of mass psychosis... American slapstick comedies and Disney films trigger a therapeutic release of unconscious energies.”\textsuperscript{13} Breton and Benjamin each use elements of Freudian and Marxist

\textsuperscript{6} Paul Reverdy, \textit{Nord-Sud}, March, 1918.
\textsuperscript{8} Some exceptions come to mind: Woody Guthrie, his vagabond protegé, and maybe a few others.
\textsuperscript{9} Tate, \textit{The Route as Briefed}, 52.
\textsuperscript{10} Robert Creeley, “I Know a Man” from \textit{The Collected Poetry of Robert Creeley} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991)
\textsuperscript{12} Breton, 15.
theory to forecast the art of the revolution. Liberatory art hasn’t happened just yet, but it is always close at hand.

In practice, of course, Surrealism never lived up to its radical goals. *La Révolution surréaliste* has come and gone, and the juggernaut of global capitalism careens forward. Gone also are the days when we believed that, like 'Ala al-din, we might crawl into our subconscious caves of wonder and emerge with infinite riches. It also turned out that revolutionary poems could be written with no dream images at all. Perhaps this is due to poetry’s reluctance towards ideology. Simic explains his reluctance towards nationalist identification in an article on the breakup of Yugoslavia. As always, his words are penetrating: “here is something we can all count on. Sooner or later our tribe will always come to ask us to agree to murder.” Poets, then, should not make a habit of joining tribes, whether the leader is named Marx, Freud, or Marcel Duchamp. True, many of the greatest poets have been zealous nationalists, but even in their works we often find an underlying loyalty to the individual human voice.

What I admire politically about automatism and the Surrealist ethos is its promotion of improvisation and imagination. Both are essential to the creation of new political spaces. If a poem can imagine desire beyond what desire can anticipate, it allows for political arrangements beyond what we now know or imagine. Any Surrealist would agree that “a schizophrenic out for a walk is a better model than a neurotic lying on the analyst’s couch” because the (romanticized) schizophrenic will make things up. He will juxtapose images. He recognizes his auto-productive desiring-machine. He lives every day as a revolution. His language is the language of paradox, which is the language of poetry.

As for automatic writing, the idol at the Surrealist altar, I can only say that I cheat thoroughly. Some of my poems originate as automatic writing, but all are tinkered with to no end. None abide by the rigorous creed of Surrealism “the marvelous is always beautiful.” The poems of Simic and Tate don’t either. They are simply testament to the diffusion of Surrealist influence on American poetry. As one story goes, it was Breton himself who was visited in his study in Paris by Octavio Paz after the war. Breton got up from his desk and told Paz he had been doing some automatic writing:

“But,” Paz exclaimed, “I saw you erase repeatedly!”

“It wasn’t automatic enough,” Breton replied.

Many of my poems bear little surface evidence of Surrealism, even if they originated in automatic writing exercises. I have an appetite for liberatory politics, but my primary affiliation is with poetry, the task of which is often “to salvage a trace of the authentic from the wreckage of religious, philosophical, and political systems.” The tools I borrow most from the Surrealists and

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14 I say “reluctance” because even the most sagacious poet will never escape ideology. If you think you have, that’s the ideology talking.
15 Simic, 37.
17 Breton, 11.
their descendants are the wrench and the blowtorch with which American cultural images -- the symbols of these systems -- are twisted and fused.

My Country

i have two sunflowers willing on my bookshelf
that's it
that's all
the poem is done, get out
-Steve Roggenbuck

On the subway a few months ago I saw the face of a small girl lit up by her mother’s touchscreen. It made me think that I will be one of the last Americans to remember life in a world not dominated by the internet. Still, computer literacy is my native tongue, and the internet is my native country. It’s a birthright I am at times proud of and at times wish to renounce. My country allows for connections that are elsewhere unthinkable. Its revolutionary potential is its potential for immediate dissemination, for “alignment of reality with the masses and of the masses with reality,” and for the realization of “the human being’s legitimate claim to being reproduced.” I can read a poem written five minutes ago in another time zone, and respond in an instant. My country is also an unending wasteland. For each moment of intimacy, there are a thousand missed connections. Under the guise of self-expression, the structures of social media work insidiously to produce and pacify its citizenry. It silences many. Sometimes a voice is heard. The internet contains multitudes, as someone once tweeted into the void.

I have been to strange places in this country. I went to Ryan Lanza’s Facebook page around noon on December 14th, 2012. Ryan’s younger brother, Adam, had killed twenty-seven people and shot himself at an elementary school in Connecticut that morning. For a short period, news agencies had incorrectly reported Ryan to be the killer. In the town square of the global village, I witnessed Ryan deliver his defense.

Lanza didn’t use punctuation. I wouldn’t have either. My reaction that morning was clear: Ryan Lanza was innocent, the new agencies had made a mistake. Lanza’s status update is not poetry, but it is an example of internet poetics. I include it to give a sense that the internet is a sovereign realm, one with its own language, its own messengers, its own leaders, and its own system of justice.

20 Benjamin, 24.
21 Benjamin, 34.
The internet also has bards and historians. Like any new distribution technology, the internet has had innumerable effects on both the form and content of the texts it helps circulate. “The medium is the message” McLuhan proclaimed from the mountaintop in the early sixties, before proceeding to predict the internet. From video games to poetry generators, the 21st century has seen an explosion of experimentation with the poetic and narrative possibilities of the digital. Much of the art and theory on this cutting edge is intriguing. Little is moving. The digital poetry that interests me -- poetry that is born and often dies on social media -- is most concerned with the urgency and uncertainty of online life.

My favorite theorists of internet art (Benjamin and McLuhan) were dead before art was on the internet. Their prophetic prose is both vulnerable and eerily accurate: “the achievements of the first technology might be said to culminate in human sacrifice; those of the second, in the remote-controlled aircraft which needs no human crew.” When applied to the internet, their works become poetic language; they are exploring the unknown, predicting the future while allowing for its unpredictability. Their visions have at once come true and been hijacked. Benjamin imagines art (defined by its modes of reproduction) that will defy fascism. McLuhan grapples with the ecstatic implications of “utmost proximity... our electric involvement in one another’s lives.” It is in this light that I wish to consider the confluence of poetry and social media. Plenty of people will point out the cliché, that social media, while claiming to bring us closer together, is tearing us apart. They are often right. Some days I vow to blow up my computer. Here, however, I want to indulge in the fantasies of revolutionary prophecy. Like Heiko Julien, another human on the internet, I want to “imagine an orgy large enough to render government obsolete.”

Best known for his novels, Tao Lin is another heavyweight of internet writing (often referred to as “alt-lit”). Speaking a few months ago at a conference in Berlin, Lin called the internet a “human attempt at oneness,” but not without irony -- he has to “be in a certain mood for this to make sense.” He begins his first book with this poem:

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some of my happiest moments in life occur on AOL instant messenger

i will create a new category
on my instant messenger buddy list

i will call it
‘people i like who don’t like me back
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23 For an extensive approach to narrative theory online, see Markku Eskelinen’s Cybernetic Poetics: The Critical Landscape of New Media Literary Theory.
24 Benjamin, 26.
25 McLuhan, 45.
26 Heiko Julien, “I Am Ready to Die a Violent Death,” I am Ready to Die a Violent Death (Civil Coping Mechanisms, 2013), 52. Julien’s complete phrase: “Imagine an orgy large enough to render government obsolete. Now make your dreams a reality. You have a Facebook, probably.”
and i will move your screen name into that group
and i will invite you to my house and show you
and you will say ‘if i didn’t like you why did i come over’
and you will look at my face
and i will have an honest answer for your question
i will tell you that you came over to be polite
and after a while you will go home
and you won’t call
and i won’t either
and after a while i won’t like you anymore
and after a while we’ll forget each other
and after a while you will be beautiful and alone inside of your coffin
and i’ll be cold and alone inside of my coffin

Like Lin, I grew up using AOL Instant Messenger. I have typed a huge portion of my conversations, from the offhand to the intimate. Like Lin, I want to know what this means. This poem speaks of loneliness and unrequited love. Still, it is titled “happiest moments.” The title is a justification for online life. It is a justification for poetry on and about the internet.

Lin is also a representative of the New Sincerity movement in American poetry. In terms of literary context, New Sincerity is a response to David Foster Wallace’s notorious call in “E Unibus Pluram” for writing with the “gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles.” Since the mid-2000s, writers on the internet have posited New Sincerity as a reaction to the kind of poetry they saw dominating print journals and magazines. “MFA poetry” was laden with postmodern irony and self-congratulatory references; it was “poetry that keeps winking at us, winking at itself without really talking. Moving its lips.” New Sincerity responded with stylistic moves intended to render urgency and openness. These include irregular stanza and line lengths, minimal punctuation, hyper-realism, confessional autobiography, and abbreviated language modeled after internet forums and text messages. The language of these poems is meant to be liberated from the insular academy and from the “tyranny of irony.”

Many also propose post 9/11 America as the natural cultural context for New Sincerity. Novelist and editor Noah Cicero describes New Sincerity as an action driven by disillusioned youth:

28 Tao Lin, You Are A Little Bit Happier than I Am, (Notre Dame, IN: Action Books, 2006)
32 Jameson, “Theory of Prose.”
33 Wallace, 183.
the origins of the movement... derive from the early years of the Bush Administration and 9-11. America was super fucking weird then... the world is really fucked, because all the adults are lying. The only way to beat this shit/is by being sincere." Cicero is commenting on a blog post. His style is informal. It is characteristic of the New Sincerist's manic vigilance against density. Cicero's politics here are not nuanced and his words are not subtle. We must be cautious of truth claims on any side of an aesthetic argument. Still, I prefer Cicero's blog comments to the suffocating rhetoric of the Bush Administration.

If not for his political insight, Cicero should be commended for his insolence. Childlike sincerity is both his handicap and his edge. His technique, nevertheless, is not new. Sincerity isn't new either; most New Sincerists realize this. They also realize that their works can be just as stilted and ironic. The manifestoes of New Sincerity are not so much complete rejections of irony as they are positive fusions of irony and hope. In the words of PRI radio host Jesse Thorn, "Irony and sincerity combined like Voltron, to form a new movement of astonishing power." In particularly ironic prose, Thorn goes on to tell us that “around September 13th, 2001, irony was dead. In what would come to be called “the Post 9-11 World,” there would be no room for that particularly distasteful form of discourse. It was to be replaced by soft, sweet sincerity. Somewhere, an eagle shed a single tear." Thorn demonstrates that irony, one of Voltron’s indispensable arms, is alive and well. Still, Voltron is a symbol of childhood. He champions his faith in sincerity while recognizing its naïveté.

New Sincerity is a reaction to specific literary trends and political situations. It is also a self-conscious experiment. New Sincerity makes an urgent and uncertain promise: after the death and rebirth of irony, we have a chance at recovering meaning. We do not know what is coming, but we know that it will come if we let it.

In this way, there is a prophetic bond between surrealism and New Sincerity, between Breton, Benjamin, Wallace, and Massey. Each makes a prediction for the type of art that will emancipate us, art that we are on the cusp of but is still necessarily in the future. For the most part, they are absolutely wrong. What matters, however, is that their messianic visions are models for the revolutionary project of poetry. This is the project of imagining new possibilities for human interaction. It is about knowing that there are dreams beyond those we know today. Surrealism and New Sincerity are concerned with temporality because they both allow for such imagination. If the poet-prophet can get us to think about the piano tuner in the wake of catastrophe, for example, she has already done her job.

We cannot help but speak and write in the languages we are immersed in; “like it or not, we

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35 Joseph Massey's “EAT SHIT!: A Manifesto for the New Sincerity,” has been read both as a mission statement and as a bizarre joke.


are a part of our time." 38 As language changes, new poetry emerges, often as a reaction to the seemingly stilted style of the previous era. To justify the language and scenes of his pastorals, Wordsworth explains: "the principle object... was to chuse incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible, in a selection of language really used by men." 39 Each generation uses a variation of this defense to prove that this too is art. For Wordsworth, "language really used by men" meant nostalgia for the plain-spoken shepherd in the face of the industrial revolution. For a generation that has grown up on the internet, it means that "the main character of the Great American Novel (unwritten) will be named 'Dude Online.'" 40 We are constantly creating new relations, new myths, new scenes to get nostalgic about. For me, this language is navigation equipment for an online future. It does not presume to tell you where you are -- only that others are there too.

_everything not saved will be lost_
- nintendo quit screen

The library will close at 2 am and I will walk home. In my apartment, I will log onto Facebook and post a ridiculous video at 2:55 am. I will be trying to convey that I have had a long night. It is possible that nobody responds. It is also possible that someone will read it and respond at 3:01, and that I will respond again at 3:03. We will talk for a while about tv shows or something. Maybe we will both have had long nights. Or maybe it's day over there. I have never been good with time zones.

38 Tate, _The Rout as Briefed_, 1.
40 Julien, "am i cool," 17.
works cited:


Roggenbuck, Steve. i am like october when i am dead. 2010. http://www.iamlikeoctoberwheniamdead.com/


