

# Where Does It Hurt? A Poetic Holding of Existential Hurt

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Article abstract

The question of an existential experience of hurt is not only relevant during present times of enduring hurt through realities such as a deadly pandemic, racialized violence, precarious educational realities, and ongoing struggles for justice in its many forms. The work of this poetic inquiry is enduringly relevant insofar as both institutions and people hold, create, sustain, and attempt to respond to hurt of many kinds. At times, we may cause more hurt than we soothe. As I write, I am grounded in the practices of poetic and literary analysis and position this piece a space and a form to hold the seemingly incommensurable questions for us as teachers, as artists, and as humans existing and living through a world of hurt. As a philosopher of education, I am perpetually concerned with the possibilities of a humanizing education that may soothe and eradicate existential hurt. I look toward poetry and art to show us the way.

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## WHERE DOES IT HURT? A POETIC HOLDING OF EXISTENTIAL HURT

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**Abstract:** The question of an existential experience of hurt is not only relevant during present times of enduring hurt through realities such as a deadly pandemic, racialized violence, precarious educational realities, and ongoing struggles for justice in its many forms. The work of this poetic inquiry is enduringly relevant insofar as both institutions and people hold, create, sustain, and attempt to respond to hurt of many kinds. At times we may cause more hurt than we soothe. As I write, I am grounded in the practices of poetic and literary analysis, and position this piece as a space and a form to hold the seemingly incommensurable questions for us as teachers, as artists, and as humans, existing and living through a world of hurt. As a philosopher of education, I am perpetually concerned with the possibilities of a humanizing education that may soothe and eradicate existential hurt. I look toward poetry and art to show us the way.

**Keywords:** poetic inquiry; literary analysis; existential; hurt; education

## Introduction

It is not only the medical doctor who asks the question, *Where does it hurt?* The poet, the philosopher, and the teacher pose variations of the same question. The poet Warsan Shire famously asks this question in the poem titled “what they did yesterday afternoon” when she writes: “later that night / i held an atlas in my lap / ran my fingers across / the whole world / and whispered / where does it hurt? / it answered / everywhere / everywhere / everywhere.”<sup>1</sup> The question of hurt taken up by the poet, the philosopher, and the teacher spiral into further questions like: What is hurt? How did hurt come to be? How do we hold this hurt? Perhaps “in times like these / to have you listen at all, it’s necessary / to talk about trees” Adrienne Rich suggests.<sup>2</sup> And it is when we are among Mary Oliver’s trees that we remember how “you too have come / into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled with light.”<sup>3</sup> We meet together in this light, as we take up a poetic inquiry that asks: How can a poem illuminate and contend with the question of hurt? The question is explored in literature and contended with through poetry. Such an inquiry asks what literature reveals about hurt, and what poetry can make of such revealing. The hurt I attend to here focuses on matters of existential hurt.

The question of an existential experience of hurt is not only relevant during present times of enduring hurt through realities such as a deadly pandemic, racialized violence, precarious educational realities, and ongoing struggles for justice in its many forms. The work of this poetic inquiry is enduringly relevant insofar as both institutions and people hold, create, sustain, and attempt to respond to hurt of many kinds. At times, we may cause more hurt than we soothe. As I write, I am grounded in the practices of poetic and literary analysis, and position this piece as a space and a form to hold the seemingly incommensurable questions for us as teachers, as artists, and as humans, existing and living through a world of hurt. As a philosopher of education, I am perpetually concerned with the possibilities of a humanizing education that may soothe and eradicate existential hurt. I look toward poetry and art to show us the way.

From here, we unravel the primary question of the paper: How does poetic inquiry illuminate existential hurt and hold it bare for us to witness? It should be clear that I am not suggesting that the poem absolves us of all human pain. There would be particular and worrisome hazards within this kind of claim. For instance, implementing something like poetic inquiry into school curriculum would not eradicate the harms of exclusionary punishment and racialized oppressions in the colonial institution of schooling. Poetry does not abolish structural injustice from which experiences of hurt, pain, and trauma often derive. Rather, the emphasis within our primary question is how poetic inquiry brings forth something for us to take in. In all its nakedness. We can understand poetry and poetic inquiry as an educative power of laying something bare.

Poetry can help hold, sometimes soothe, and evocatively describe hurt. But it does not undo or negate it. Poetry might show us the way, but it is not the way itself to eradicating existential hurt.

In the scope of this poetic inquiry, I develop a poetic analysis rendered through the frames offered by the educator and poet, Carl Leggo. Leggo offers four senses of what a poem can do as he writes “a poem can heal . . . a poem can teach us . . . a poem can show us the way . . . a poem can linger.”<sup>4</sup> I take seriously Leggo’s poetic offering, and frame it as the layered poetic potential to heal, to teach, to show, and to linger. I approach this work very similarly to Leggo in his paper “A Poem Can: Poetic Encounters” as he writes through each sense of how a poem can, coupled with a poem and a narrative. I find it particularly intriguing how Leggo frames a poetic encounter through the language of “a poem can.”<sup>5</sup> For Leggo, it is not *a poem is*; or *a poem does*; or *a poem means*. In this sense, the poem is both restricted and freed through its precarious possibility. Before turning to the narrative below, it is important to highlight that this paper is unfinished in the sense that it is a perpetual draft, in that it breathes. It is doubly unfinished in that it concludes in a persistent lingering, beginning in the personal and necessitating further reach into the collective. In what follows, I offer a meandering narrative interrupted by poetic interludes intended to reflect on the four senses of what a poem can with existential hurt.

In what follows, each section begins with an original poem to introduce you, the reader, to the four senses of a poem to heal, to teach, to show, and to linger. The poems also offer a poetic, yet personal, entry point into the literary expositions on various forms of hurt that follow. The reader takes in the poems through the first person positioning as you read to yourself, something like the reverberation of the opening line in the first poem: “who am I when alone?” The narrative expositions that come after the poems are crafted as an analysis of literary fiction that showcase realities of existential hurt to which poetry might respond. Each narrative story takes us through different depictions, contexts, and sites of hurt rendered through contrasting experiences of identity, culture, and life.

Fictive accounts have much to offer our question on how poetic inquiry illuminates existential hurt and holds it bare for us to witness. As Maurice Natanson suggests, literary fiction is a way of “comprehending the living in terms of fictive possibility . . . literature is an entrance to reality.”<sup>6</sup> Simone de Beauvoir suggests that only in the fictional world of the novel “is it possible to evoke the primordial gushing-forth of life in all its concrete, particular and temporal verity.”<sup>7</sup> In what follows, I begin from common existential themes of hurt such as: pain, anxiety, despair, freedom, guilt, and loneliness. I work through a descriptive analysis of three stories within the literature of

Toni Morrison, Clarice Lispector, and Franz Kafka as they are intermixed between poetic interludes.

I pick up these particular works and authors because of their influential and, at times, haunting themes of dehumanization, misrecognition, and exclusion. Each story offers a distinct context and experience of these forms of hurt. Each author describes and illuminates such harms through their own styles and traditions. Among and between them are the significant refrains of being so very human. The human desire of belonging to humanity. While not all these stories are placed within the Existential canon, they each have something unique to say about existential hurt. The thread that pulses through this poetic inquiry and narrative analysis on existential hurt is the precariousness of a worldly tether, capable of holding one in the world, or letting one go.

## Poem To Heal

who am I when alone?  
 Can only write of one thing  
 as old man, black shirt, new shoes  
 staggers into thought, alone  
 the old man looks  
 aches at one thing  
 atop a shadow beneath a moon  
 supposedly, they say  
 substantiated by nothing, by everything  
 the self in company of only the self  
 wakes up devastated  
 staggers into thought or perhaps away  
 to ache at one thing  
 only to ache within the thing

I did not know  
 the emptiness of peace  
 take things out  
 put them some place else  
 I am left with a vacancy  
 that comes before healing  
 there is so much leftover  
 that it aches, it echoes  
 this—all I desired  
 this—all this peace  
 this—unbearable emptiness  
 who knew peace  
 could feel hollow  
 only to ache within the thing

## Toni Morrison and The Hurt of Dehumanization

Toni Morrison's novel *BeLoved* follows the life of a prominent character, Sethe.<sup>8</sup> The novel is based on the story of Margaret Garner, rendered through Sethe. In 1856, Garner fled with her husband and children from her enslavement in a Kentucky plantation towards freedom in Ohio. Margaret Garner wanted to protect her children from the horrors of slavery by killing, and thus sparing, her youngest daughter. Morrison narrates these events through a fictionalized and imagined space of the memories of

hauntings from the ghost of Sethe's child, Beloved. Lingering throughout the story is the question of freedom and enslavement. Post-Civil War Sethe is a free woman; however, imprisoned by memories and hauntings of life in slavery. Morrison draws on many themes that guide us in contending with existential hurt such as: memory, existence, death, selfhood, trauma, violence, belonging, and love.

In the final pages, the narrator reflects on two variations of loneliness. The first sense is a "loneliness that can be rocked. Arms crossed, knees drawn up . . . holding on, this motion, unlike a ship's, smooths and contains the rocker. It's an inside kind—wrapped tight like skin."<sup>9</sup> The second sense of loneliness is one that roams; "no rocking can hold it down. It is alive, on its own. A dry and spreading thing that makes the sound of one's own feet going seem to come from a far-off place."<sup>10</sup> The first loneliness can be soothed as it is *within* oneself, wrapping and constituting the self. The second loneliness cannot be contained as it wanders and distances one from oneself. I go further to suggest that both accounts of loneliness encompass an existential hurt of feeling alone. Both senses resemble a shared human condition. Yet, within the context of Morrison's novel, these senses of loneliness and being estranged from oneself are experienced through slavery and racialized oppression, rather than within a shared condition of what it means to be human.

This particularized and institutionally enforced existential hurt is apparent in the question of each character's existence. For instance, Beloved is a presence that no longer lives or has a worldly existence, but nevertheless she remains. She returns to the living characters in memory, however haunting or joyful. Beloved's existence before and after her death is lost in memory, as the narrator explains, "everybody knew what she was called, but nobody anywhere knew her name. Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her."<sup>11</sup> Beloved was never known to exist. For this reason, she cannot be claimed, nor is she necessarily lost. Her existence was precarious from the moment it began. The narrator continues, "in the place where long grass opens, the girl who waited to be loved and cry shame erupts into her separate parts, to make it easy for the chewing laughter to swallow her all away."<sup>12</sup> The existence of Beloved is destructed and swallowed away.

The existential hurt is further illuminated by the question of death and an unbearable life. The novel opens with the scene of the dying Grandmother Baby Suggs. On her deathbed, Baby Suggs is "suspended between the nastiness of life and the meanness of the dead."<sup>13</sup> In other words, she is halted at the precipice of living an unbearable life or leaving it behind for a "death . . . [that is] anything but forgetfulness."<sup>14</sup> The inaccessibility of her selfhood continues through the lingering question of death. By selfhood, I mean one's ability and the necessary conditions for one to exist in the world,

to constitute a worldly self. Beloved exemplifies the question of selfhood in the moment of trying to find and maintain the existence of a self. The narrator suggests Beloved's sister Denver cries "because she has no self. Death is a skipped meal compared to this."<sup>15</sup>

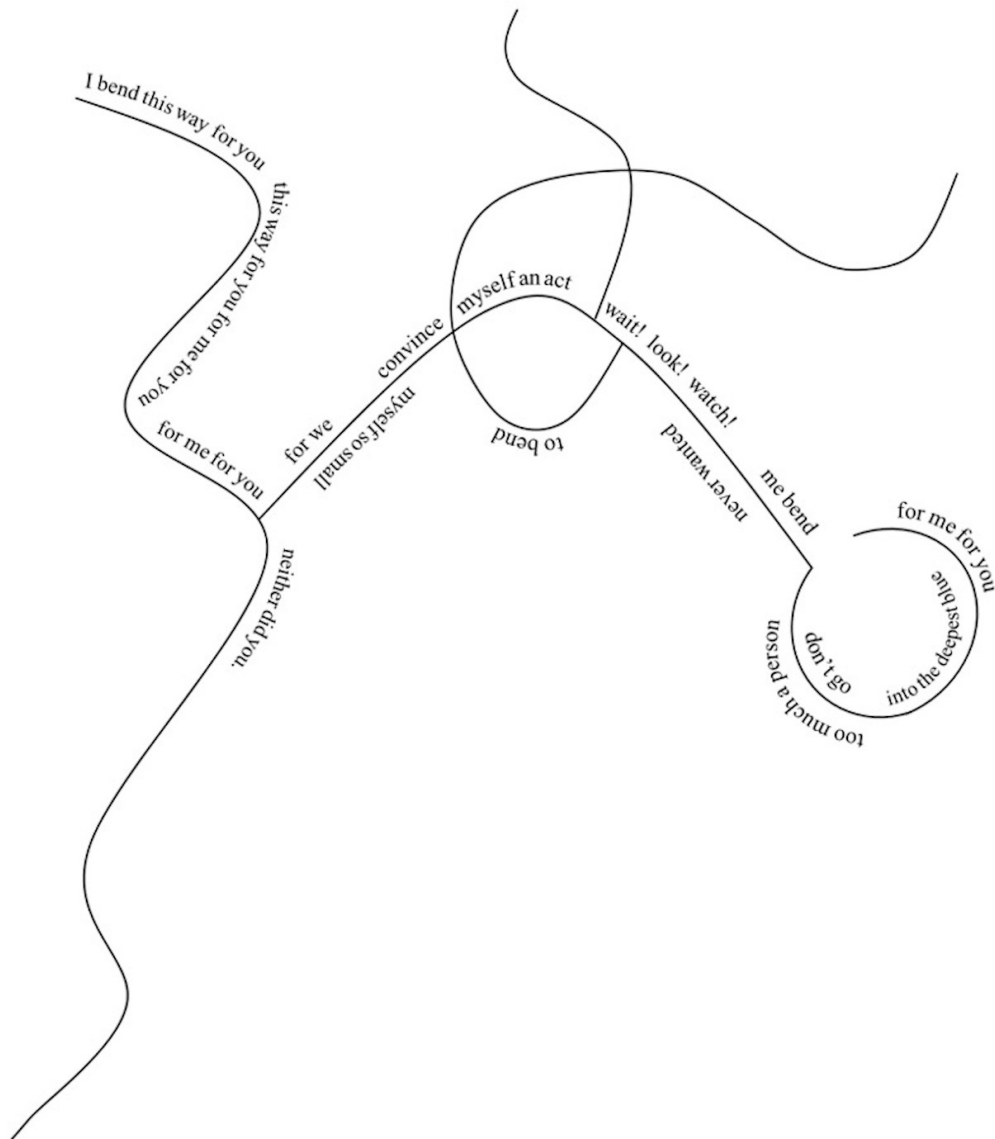
What does it mean to be without a self? This form of existential hurt—being without a self—is in the experience of feeling one's "thickness thinning, dissolving into nothing." And yet, Denver tries to hold on as to "halt . . . the melting for a while."<sup>16</sup> The dissolving, the melting of a self is constituted through one's access to the world. The narrator suggests that Denver does not open the door in this moment because for her, "there is no world out there."<sup>17</sup> Instead, she remains in the house, confined to an isolating darkness that swallows her, perhaps similar to the chewing laughter that swallowed her away. She cannot go outside; she cannot remain inside. Denver has no existence. For her, there is no world outside, nor is there a world inside, her selfhood or worldly existence are at risk of complete dissolution.

Within such existential hurt—of not having a world for oneself—there is the question of belonging. For instance, the narrator suggests that "schoolteacher [the slave owner] beat him [Sixo] anyway to show him that definitions belonged to the definers—not the defined."<sup>18</sup> Such definitions sustain boundaries of belonging insofar as the narrator suggests, "one step off that ground and they were trespassers among the human race."<sup>19</sup> To be considered a trespasser of the human race is surely an existential trauma as one's existence as a fully-realized human person is continually questioned. The question of boundaries of existence is realized in the desiring of a future. For example, the character Paul D suggests to Sethe such a desire as he says, "me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow."<sup>20</sup> In the hope for a tomorrow, of belonging to the human race, there is a common thread of the characters desiring a "love you don't have to deserve."<sup>21</sup> They desire an existence—as fully human—which they do not have to deserve, one that *is* on the basis that one *exists*.

In Morrison's novel the characters experience the existential hurt of a dehumanization which compelled them to be contingent beings, forced within the institution of American slavery. The conditions of life for Baby Suggs had been unbearable, not because the mere fact that general life itself is unbearable—life had been intolerable within the conditions and realities of slavery. This is not a shared intolerability of life, but rather an unjust one. Under such conditions of injustice, oppression, and enslavement, Baby Suggs was denied a full, human, worldly existence insofar as "she had overstepped, given too much, offended them by excess."<sup>22</sup> Her

existence was not only contingent on account of being alive, it was further at risk on account of her exclusion from the world, from freedom, from personhood.

**Figure 1**  
*Poem to Teach*





## Clarice Lispector and the Hurt of Misrecognition

In Lispector's short story, titled "Preciousness," I attend to the notions of being seen into an existence, and the existential fear of being seen. This fear is in the unsolicited nature of a destined form of existence. The story begins with the opening line: "early in the morning it was always the same thing renewed: waking up...Vastly she'd open her eyes. She was fifteen years old and not pretty . . . But inside her . . . [was] the nearly majestic vastness in which she moved as within meditation."<sup>23</sup> The girl—as she is named—moves through the world protecting something of hers so that it never becomes contaminated. She safeguards what is named *the jewel*. The girl believes she will be safe if no one were to look at her. Put another way, the girl is safe if no one recognizes her as a person who exists. As she travels to and from school, she crosses the Largo da Lapa in Rio de Janeiro. She witnesses the changing city as images of disparity, poverty, and hunger become obvious. As the narrator describes, she witnesses "hundreds of people reverberating with hunger."<sup>24</sup>

We can read the girl's existence as including the existential hurt in being seen or recognized by society in a way that allows one to be harmed. While she does exist, she tries to move through the world unrecognized, unnoticed, and protected. She fears being seen to the extent that such recognition might bring her into existence, an existence which she dreads. For instance, the narrator describes her commute to school. In the morning, she is confronted with the men and boys on their way to work. She fears they might say something to her, that they might look at her too long. Although the workers remain silent on the bus, "holding their lunch boxes, sleep still on their faces," she fears them while at the same time experiencing shame for distrusting them. And yet her fear prevails because of what they know. The content of their knowing is not disclosed; however, it is a clear source of the girl's fear as the narrator contends, "she felt ashamed at not trusting them, tired as they were . . . Because they 'knew.' And since she knew too, hence her discomfort. They all knew the same thing. Her father knew too. An old man begging for change knew. The wealth distributed, and the silence."<sup>25</sup>

At times she succeeds in a meager existence, in escaping the gaze of being seen as "she cast more of a shadow than she existed;" however, in casting such a long shadow—cloaking her full existence—she attempts to deny "the looming shadow of a girl without a man."<sup>26</sup> She arrives at school having escaped the knowing gaze of men and boys. And yet, as she walks through the school, she fears the noise of her wooden shoes will disclose her secret, perhaps her secret being that she exists. The girl reaches the classroom, where—"at last"—she is treated like a boy. Once she is treated as a

boy, she becomes intelligent, she learns to think. She walks this tight line of perception, of recognition in which she—like the line—had to be “both strong and delicate.”<sup>27</sup> If she were to stray beyond the imagined boundary in which the line fits, “everything would collapse.”<sup>28</sup> Once she leaves the classroom, she walks the delicacy of the line in which she continues on, “suffering in obedience.”<sup>29</sup>

After lunch, she commutes back to school. The narrator vaguely points to a pivotal event where something happens and the girl “is not alone”.<sup>30</sup> Again, she risks being seen. Walking along a dark street, she is confronted with two men who she must pass. With fear and curiosity, she steals a glance of the men. She regrets looking because she believes she has risked becoming an individual, as did they. She knows the warning to stay within the boundaries of the line, as the narrator suggests, “as long as she operated in a classical world, as long as she was impersonal, she’d be a daughter of the gods, aided by whatever must be done.”<sup>31</sup> In this moment of fear and panic she contemplates escaping to the edge of the world where one is alone, where memories are expunged. If she runs, she risks collapsing the boundary, she risks altering the order of the world in which “she was destined to copy.”<sup>32</sup> The girl contemplates what will happen when she is seen. She reconciles that it will be quick and painless. And so, she continues. The next scene is masked in obscurity and illuminated in clarity as the narrator describes the something that happens:

What happened next were four difficult hands, four hands that didn’t know what they wanted, four errant hands belonging to people who lacked the vocation, four hands that touched her so unexpectedly that she did the best thing she could have in the realm of movement: she got paralyzed. They, whose predestined role consisted only of passing near the darkness of her fear, and then the first of the seven mysteries would be revealed; they who represented only the horizon of a single approaching footstep. . . . It was less than a fraction of a second on the tranquil street. In a fraction of a second they touched her as if entitled to all the seven mysteries. All of which she preserved, and she became more larval, and seven years further behind. <sup>33</sup>

After this scene, the girl does not look at the men, as “her face was turned serenely toward the nothing.”<sup>34</sup> Within the context of the short story, it is not clear if this moment is one of sexual assault or if it is the violence and fear of being seen into an existence she is “destined to copy.”<sup>35</sup> The narrator describes other encounters in which the girl risks being seen with a similar tone and description. The story continues as she arrives back to school two hours late. She runs to the bathroom—recounting memories of the shoes and the hands—and cries that she is alone in the world, that no one is going to help her, nor does anyone love her. She repeats again and again: “I’m alone in the world!”<sup>36</sup>

The night before, she returns home after school, where she no longer marched like a soldier. At home she no longer needed to be careful. Although she recounts missing the battle on the streets. The girl—now safe at home—is alone in the “melancholy of freedom, with the horizon still so far off.”<sup>37</sup> She remains nostalgic for the present. The girl is trained in the patience of waiting “from which she might never manage to free herself” as the afternoon continues endlessly.<sup>38</sup> It is when her family returns home for dinner that she is filled with relief that “she could become a daughter.”<sup>39</sup> Although, the scene ends with the girl’s head sunk in her hands in hopelessness, a turn from hope back to despair.

Lispector’s short story concludes as the narrator contends, “she possessed so little, and they had touched it.”<sup>40</sup> The exclusion of herself, of purposeful hiding and withdrawal from the streets, spurs an internal battle with the fact of her existence as the girl suggests, “a person is nothing.” However, she responds to herself in protest, “no . . . don’t say that.”<sup>41</sup> The narrator recounts this internal dialogue as the girl feels both kindness and melancholy. She responds, “a person is something;” although the narrator confirms she only utters this response “just to be nice.”<sup>42</sup> The girl tries to believe in the substance of her existence, while she remains fearful of what her particular existence entails. Once seen, once recognized, she is no longer protected and must not fall off the bounded line.

## Poem to Show

I thought the lyric read:  
*what is love if not violent*  
 my heart breaks at the thought  
 but I understand  
 that love makes sense.  
 the earth spins

more violent love.

it turns out the lyric reads:  
*what is love if not violet*  
 my heart breaks at the thought  
 the heart-shaped leaves  
 of Sappho’s queer love  
 covered in violets

I wield a term reserved for another.

call myself babe because I like the taste on my tongue  
 warm and tender  
 I become the love of my life  
 call myself love because I have been found  
 for I have always been

my own term of endearment.

## Franz Kafka and The Hurt of Exclusion

Franz Kafka's short story, "The Metamorphosis," offers a narrative on the hurt of exclusion. Kafka opens with the line: "one morning, as Gregor Samsa woke from a fitful, dream-filled sleep, he found that he had changed into an enormous bedbug."<sup>43</sup> Gregor cannot quite manage getting out of bed as he does not know how to manage his new body. For a moment he remains in bed, "quietly . . . [and] barely breathing, as if he thought that this utter silence might restore some reality and comprehensibility to his world."<sup>44</sup> While comprehensibility is not quite repaired, Gregor instead turns to worry. He fears he will be late for work and as such may risk his job that supports his family. As the morning unfolds, his family notices his confinement to his room. While they cannot open the door, they wait in the hallway, no longer able to understand Gregor speaking. In the morning Gregor's family is ready to help. Although they are still unaware of his transformation, Gregor momentarily feels "part of the human race again."<sup>45</sup>

There is an obvious transition of Gregor's sentiment for his new condition. Before he is revealed to his family he does not appear to be overly concerned with his transformation into a large bedbug. The narrator recounts that "despite his feelings of anguish he couldn't help but smile."<sup>46</sup> For Gregor, his current state is cause for delight and despair. Prior to opening the door, his family demands that he show himself. Gregor resolves that if he reveals himself and his family was "horrified then he would have nothing more to answer for and would be able to relax. But if they took it calmly then he would have no reason to be upset either."<sup>47</sup> Once Gregor manages to unlock his bedroom door, however, his family is shocked at the sight of him. They fear his bodily transformation as they quickly force him to become a prisoner in his room.

As the days continue, so do his family's fear and distaste of him. Gregor continues to live confined to his room. He begins to almost mirror the sentiments of his family as he smolders with "shame and despondency."<sup>48</sup> As a result, he works to

conceal himself from sight each time his sister bears to open the door. In effect, he places himself in further isolation. Gregor's sister develops a curious relation to her brother in his new embodied state of existence. His sister is the only one of his family who remains close to Gregor. She discovers what Gregor actually desires to eat as his appetite has transformed with his body. She works to make his new state of living more tolerable for him.

While Gregor finds comfort in his sister's attentiveness and care, he is pained by his inability to communicate his gratitude. He believes if he were able to express his gratitude it would have made his isolation more bearable. The inability to communicate and to express his appreciation causes Gregor further suffering. However, the relation begins to change once his sister catches sight of Gregor standing upright, looking out the window. She is further horrified by her brother to the extent that entering his room now required extravagant effort.

Gregor's isolation, not only from the world but from his family, proves interesting. Although, what I find even more curious is the narrative decision of naming. Gregor is the only character who is referred to by name from the beginning of the story. Others are referenced only in their relation to Gregor. Towards the middle of the story his sister gains her name, Grete. Only upon Gregor's death do his parents receive their names: Herr Samsa and Frau Samsa.

As the story develops, Gregor experiences two months devoid of direct communication with any human being. In this exclusion from human connection, he reflects on his "monotonous existence that he led in the midst of his family" and how it "must have affected his mind."<sup>49</sup> In the continuation of exclusion and development of extreme isolation Gregor is at risk of losing "all memory of having been a human being."<sup>50</sup> His existence as a human person precariously hangs on his relational tethers to his family and to the outside world. In Gregor's state of isolation, despair, and anxiety, he begins to crawl over the walls, furniture, and ceiling in his room before falling onto the table. His mother and sister open his door to respond and his mother faints at the sight of her son. The door is left open as Grete leaves to find aid for her mother. Gregor leaves his room in attempt to help his sister.

When his father returns home, he is relayed the dramatic events of the day. From Grete's description of the events, the father assumes Gregor performed an "act of violence" with "malicious intent."<sup>51</sup> The scene culminates in Gregor's father throwing apples to force him back into exile. In this moment, it is clear his family continues to exclude, to detain Gregor in fear and disgust of his existence to the extent that they allow further suffering. The narrator describes:

as no one dared to remove the apple, which remained embedded in his body like a visible memento, for more than a month Gregor suffered from a serious injury that nonetheless seemed to remind even his father that despite his pitiful, repulsive appearance, Gregor was still a member of the family who ought not to be treated as an enemy—on the contrary, it was their duty as a family to take a deep breath, swallow their feelings of disgust and simply suffer; suffer in silence.<sup>52</sup>

The state of Gregor's existence radically shifts and digresses after this pivotal moment. He transitions from the preliminary smile and anguish of the opening scene, to shame and despondency, to the pain of his inability to communicate, to the depths and despair of isolation, to the fear of losing his memory and his existence as a human being, to anxiety and restlessness, to physical violence and distress, and then, finally, to Gregor's resolve to suffer in silence. He soon advances into a state of rage at the condition of the treatment and exile on account of his family. The rage soon settles into indifference as no one takes notice of him anymore. Gregor loses appetite, recoils and hides, and becomes completely inattentive to the outside world.

In the concluding scenes, Gregor's sister Grete proclaims that their family cannot continue this way, that they must get rid of the monster. Gregor is renounced to something less than human as Grete claims that the thing—Gregor—must go, they have “done everything humanly possible to look after and put up with it.”<sup>53</sup> Grete believes the family's trouble to be how they continued to believe for too long that the *it* remains to be Gregor, their son and her brother. She contends that if it were, in fact, still him, Gregor “would have realized a long time ago that it's not possible for human beings to live under the same roof as a creature like that, and he would have left of his own accord.”<sup>54</sup> After Gregor overhears, he retreats to the final scene of his death:

if the truth be known he ached all over, but he sensed that the pain would gradually ease until eventually stopped completely. By now he could hardly feel the rotten apple embedded in his back or the inflammation around it. . . . Brimming with emotion and feelings of love, he thought back to his family. He was now even more determined than his sister—if that were possible—that he had to go. He remained in this serene and vacant meditative state until the church clock struck three a.m., when outside the window he saw the sky begin to pale into another new day. And then, unable to prevent his head from sinking to the floor, through his nostrils he drew his final breath.<sup>55</sup>

In the aftermath of his death, Gregor's family quickly moves on as they start planning to marry off his sister. The cleaning lady is the only character to offer Gregor a last glimpse of dignity. After his death, the narrator recounts the scene of the cleaning

lady finding his body, “she just thought that he was deliberately lying there without moving, pretending to be offended—because she credited him with all the intelligence in the world.”<sup>56</sup> She is the only one to maintain—even after death—that Gregor remained himself even though his body had transformed.

## Poem to Linger

It has been two tubes of toothpaste since. You. Human, so very human you are. She tells me a truth I want to understand. “Human, all too human,” Nietzsche’s book I’ve yet to read. Crisis in a moment of a human all too human. Sometimes a human sometimes a sound, Ocean Vuong’s pages in my hands. Asking to be read somewhere between breath and word. But what does that make? A human all so very too humansometimes. Fallible in pain. Fallible in joy. Is that it? The phrase substituted for analysis. It’s supposed to mean something, I think. A human, so very human. Can you find me in a book? Or better yet. Write me into your novel. For now a human so very human. Left counting toothpastes.

## Conclusion

Carl Leggo writes, “a poem is / breath and breathing / waiting between the lines to be called / calling me calling you calling / the heart’s beat, beating heartfully in this poem.”<sup>57</sup> Perhaps the event of it all subsists, moves, or is noticed in the breath, or the call, or the beat. The day has been long and quiet. It has been a day of writing alone. When I can no longer permit the ache of the silence, the loudness of my thoughts, I clean the house. As Hanif Abdurraqib compels, “I / too / am at a loss for language / can’t beg myself / a doorway / out of anyone.”<sup>58</sup> Here, we are left in the lingering of what another could be. Language and self and other act as anticipations and attempts. They are glimpses at finding and opening a doorway as an invitation to another, a doorway through existential hurt.

I move through the mundanity of household chores, something with a tangible end, something I can cross off the list. I turn on the Paris Review Podcast and slide my phone into my back pocket. I need to hear a sound in the room that is not my own. Toni Morrison responds, “I think of beauty as an absolute necessity. I don’t think it’s a privilege or an indulgence . . . I think it’s almost like knowledge. Which is to say it’s what we were born for . . . [it] is what humans do, with or without authorities telling us what it is . . . I don’t think we can do without it any more than we can do without dreams or oxygen.”<sup>59</sup> In this moment I am halted. Or maybe I am thrown. I run but my home is small and provides no room. I do it anyway. Because I have to. I rewind the interview to hear again. I stand and listen to make sure I heard her. I rewind it again. I write it down.

I listen in attempts to hold the moment as long as I can. Something happens, pulls me from myself. Morrison doesn't know, as Lispector doesn't know, as Kafka doesn't know, as Leggo doesn't know that something happened to me, with them. And yet. I sense they actually knew in the residue of their words and their voices, that something happened, that it did and that it continues. The poem holds hurt in its line breaks, in what is left absent and lingering. For a poem is meant to break. A poem—in Leggo's sense that it can—reveals hurt anew. So that, together, we can attend to existential hurt more seriously, more tenderly, and more responsibly. Let us look toward poetry as it holds us and shows us the way toward dreaming up a more humanizing education and a world with less hurt.

Something happens, pulls me from myself

I am halted

or maybe thrown

something happens

and

chest expands and the heart knows

this moment saves me and . . .

this *and* can't articulate

gum stuck in my belly for seven years since

belly wrought with digestive ellipses

something happened, and hasn't happened since

our kettle stirs

a light bulb quits

I am dissolving

I am



the gasp that exists on account of forgetting

but you,

witness to my sigh

my gasp

my cry

but I,

am afraid

I've forgotten how to be moved

anyway,

there once was a child baptized in poetry

as necessary as desiderata

but I,

am afraid

can't self-soothe another moment

self

soothing

self

sleuthing

self

oozing

the moment spurs

but the horse kicks

[breathe]

easy there

how beautiful is it

can't tell you what I so desperately wish to tell you

please hold me like a poem

this is it everyone

the stuff of life

hold on,

there's more

the only thing saving us is *and*<sup>60</sup>

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## ENDNOTES

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60. The concluding poem and some pieces of the narrative conclusion were written by Addyson Frattura and were derived from their original form as a presentation with Alecia Beymer. The presentation evolved out of two years of writing, thinking, and dreaming with each other on the idea of the poetic event, from Alecia Beymer and Addyson Frattura, *A Poetic Event: The Only Thing Saving Us Is "and,"* American Educational Research Association (AERA)—Arts-Based Educational Research SIG, San Diego, April 22-25, 2022.