

The Strong Memory of Past Love

by

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This creative project is dedicated to my grandmother, Willie Sue Kilgore, whose impregnable love has always been awe-inspiring to me.

Abstract:

The focus of this creative project was to explore the poetic possibilities in the creation of a literary persona within a set of ten poems. I chose to focus on the creation of a narrative that explores the emotions that exist within the memories of a widow who has long been separated from her beloved by death.

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## Background

Growing up, I was told many stories of my grandfather, Norman, who died in the coal mines before I was born. The story that stuck with the most was the one my grandmother told of the time when he was in the yard, picking wild onions. She told me that after eating some, he came into the house, grabbed her and kissed her with the wild onion taste still in his mouth. My grandmother recently told me that that incident happened only three days before he died, but now, thirty years later she can still remember the taste of the wild onion. Although it has been so long since he passed away, my grandmother remains faithful to his memory, although at times she has been pressed to seek new companionship. Her answer has always been that Norman was the only man she had ever needed. For my grandmother, the memory of the man she had loved was all that she needed. The fact that she has kept the memory of their shared love so strong even after so much time has passed is something that I find awe-inspiring. Her faithfulness to his memory despite having lost him so many years ago is a state of being that I wanted to delve into with this project.

Love, loss, and fidelity are certainly not a new concept for poetry: they have been used as themes for centuries. Shakespeare's sonnets are probably the most famous of all of these. Amongst Shakespeare's sonnets are the sonnets that are to the Dark Lady. However, those sonnets carry the theme of "despair and bondage" (Sarkar 255). It is a relationship that creates an almost sublime terror within the narrator of the poems as he contemplates the combined horror and wonder of his relationship with the 'Dark Lady.'

I decided to create a set of ten poems that subvert the idea of the restless, unfaithful love that occurs within the set of Shakespearean sonnets about the 'Dark Lady'

by creating a subject matter that surrounds the lover/narrator as a mourner speaking to a beloved to whom she is still faithful to even though much time has passed. I wished to approach the lover as a mourner who has transcended the stages of grief and speaks from a place of acceptance and loyal remembrance. Instead of using a male narrator as was the style in Shakespeare's poems, I created my sonnets with a widowed female persona as the narrator.

Truck

Your truck sits where I parked it when it died

Repairs too costly it became our shed

I keep the chicken feed inside

And the back becomes the chickens' bed.

The truck's as blue as when we bought it

The morning glory's shade the color of your eyes

Opening their blooms before sunrise hits their petals

Akin to how you woke up before the hens began to brood.

Your door squeaks like when we paid the deposit

Not even your WD-40 could destroy the sound

Our daughter now heaves the door ajar

The sound reverberates into her blood,

Hits her heart, we both picture you, Norm,

Pulling it open to go to the store.

## Crows

The pesky crows returned to steal corn once more

I took the gun you hunted with, shot twice

Black birds screamed flew away sore

With your guns *my* hands are not as precise

Remembering my hand's grip when handing over your last suit

my hands formed it under the sewing machine

As you came home with the squirrels you shot

Through the door I can still see the scene

You gutting and skinning the squirrels

Preparing them for the frying

As you whistled that one old carol

Pretending you don't know I'm inside looking.

After you cleaned the gun it shined

like when you wore your suit the gun was quite fine.

## Corn

The tassels of corn grown over my head

With ears almost ready to eat

How many times did we stand in them

Pretending we were there for the corn treat

Inside the stalks was a good place to rest

From the burning sun in the garden

It was there I remember we snuck our first kiss

In Barn and Elvie's old garden,

The stalks were your favorite seat

When we talked about our plans

I don't think there are many others

Who went on their knees in the corn bed

The corn stalks were our outside space

Once they'd grown large over our heads.

## Chair

My spot is counter to your empty rocking chair

between them are the words we used to speak.

When our family comes to eat together

the young ones always fight to claim your seat.

Their battle is gentle under my glare

because the good Lord knows

if they cracked your chair, I'd tan their hide.

The brown chair that once reclined as you held your baby daughter,

your gentleness engraved on the lines upon your face.

Though tired from your hard day at the mines

your callused hands cradled her to your dusty face

that never changed its etchings through six kids.

Their gentle argument a glad reminder

That we'll meet to sit together in Heaven.

Cucumbers

Grabbing another cucumber to remove its spines

Heat burns down on my gardening hat

The scarecrow's smile shimmers into your face's lines

Coming forward placing the wheelbarrow flat

You'd pick some squash to fry in the house

I'd cut the cucumbers into spears

We'd eat them, the freshness-

The garden inside our mouths

The taste of the dirt they grew in

Not washing off under running water

Walking from the sunny memory

I wash the cucumber, and fry some squash

the flavor still remains the same

As the ones I used to grow with you.

## House

The house we bought so many years ago  
in which we raised five daughters and one son  
the home you and I didn't outgrow.

Our lives grounded here in the images on the walls  
open doors into the days we were together.

You walked down to hall preparing for colder weather.

I see you opening our back door,

hauling the wood to keep our fire warm.

Your jokes kept anything from being chores

As your shirt pulled back upon your shoulders

broadly sharing your deep-seated strength

The fire within the stove left warmth on your face

That was always echoed within your arms

The glowing heart you shone on me.

Flashlight Frost

The frost will be coming tonight

Like the night we picked the entire garden

Calling to each other with flapping flashlights

“I’ve got all the tomatoes. Green peppers next?”

Saving the vegetables bringing them in

Keeping the frost from killing them all

The day had been hot and warm

Your sweat left ink marks all down your dusty face

Returning from work in the overheated truck

Chilly wind blew in leaving us surprised

Found us after dark freezing in the garden

Pulling every bean and squash into the well shed

You blew warmth onto our hands

As we laughed collapsing after dusk into bed.

## Chickens

Today I clipped the chicken's wings

The grandboy helped me catch them

He chased them into my arms

I used the nail clippers to make it so they could not fly

The grandboy looked the spit and image of you

Holding the one he managed to catch

His grin held that same dimple in the bottom of the cheek

That you wore when we tripped in our first walk in the snow.

I still say you were the one that made us trip

You laughed so hard you started clucking

Your breath leaving images in the air

Coming faster as I fretted on how wet we were

Your eyes closed in backwards grins

The grandboy's smile is just like yours.

## Dining Table

The kids want me to get rid of the dining table

It's got one leg and seven blocks holding it up

They're convinced it's going to fall in the middle of a supper

You wheeled it in while I was at the neighbors'

Made me think the house's floor had fallen in

Telling me to be careful going through the door

You kept your face straight when I fretted

Wondering how we'd pay for a new floor

Just laughing when I flapped a paper at your head

Your jokes and surprises were always that way

Unexpected and pretending to be bad

Winding me up never bringing me down

I promised I'd stand beside you and hold you up

Even if it's just by keeping our old table with only one leg.

## Wild Onion

When onion breath lay heavy on your wild lips

Your pressed your flirting lips onto mine

Laughing pulled away leaving me the taste

Of the dirt still in your mouth from off the ground

Inside mine, burning with the wild onion

You just ate, not even washed

Your playful smile was smug and warm

Your breath as wild as the onions

That grew everywhere within our yard

Three days before your body became a shell

Your breath was as free as ever,

Until you spun me and grabbed hold,

Feeding it from your mouth to mine

Still, thirty years, that taste and breath lingers on my lips.

## Epilogue

As I look back over my thesis, I find myself marveling over just how much it represents the growth that I have personally had over the past couple years. I was also surprised by just how much changed as I worked on the project. The process of creating my sonnets enabled me to learn about my own ways of writing as well as view how my background affects what I write.

When I first began working on my thesis, inspired by Shakespeare's sonnets, I intended to follow the traditional style of the English sonnet to the smallest foot of iambic pentameter. Because of this, I looked at several books that analyzed Shakespeare's sonnets and their form. I also looked through a few that looked at their roots such as in the book *Imitating the Italians* that discusses how the English sonnets took from Petrarchan sonnets. I was absolutely determined that my poems would be in iambic pentameter and follow the rhyme scheme of the English sonnet. Because I wanted to write a Shakespearean love sonnet. However, I was working on my sonnets, I found myself struggling. As I began my revisions on "Chair," "Wild Onion," and "Truck," I could not get the words to cooperate with me. As I wrote them, I found myself trying to use language that did not fit with the tone that I was attempting to create. At one point, I stared at the notebook I was writing in and gripped my hair, asking in frustration, "Why isn't this working?"

I realized that I was clearly doing something wrong with my use of the language, but uncertain of what, I decided to look over *In the Palm of Your Hand: A Poet's Portable Workshop*, which I had gotten for use as a textbook in Dr. Brewer's Poetry Writing class the semester I was writing my proposal. As I reread several of the chapters

where Steve Kowit discussed form and language, I realized what I was doing wrong. I was so focused on form I was sacrificing the intent I had for the subject and tone of the sonnets for form. At that point, I decided I would focus on the sonnets first and later rewrite them within the form of an English sonnet. However, as I worked on revisions with Dr. Arroyo and Dr. Hollings, I came to realize that I did not want my sonnets in the full form. Dr. Arroyo pointed out that I was still using language that was too elevated for the rest of the tone in several points throughout some of my sonnets. I looked over them, and, yes those were all places where I was still focusing on form rather than subject matter and tone. Dr. Hollings was an immense help as I worked with the poem in guiding me to accept that it was okay to play with the form, instead of focusing on the form of the English sonnet as being the end result for my sonnets.

Moreover, I started looking at modern sonnet writers such as CD Wright, and I found myself thinking back on my original plan for my sonnets. I had intended my sonnets to be a form of subversion when it came to the idea of lovers such as Shakespeare had used, so I decided in the end to echo that with a faded version of the English form inside the sonnet, instead of full on blasting the sonnet form in the face of my readers which is essentially what I was trying to do.

When I first began brainstorming for the sonnets, I already knew that I was going to create “Wild Onions.” The story of my grandfather kissing my grandmother with the taste of wild onions was what had inspired me to create this sequence. However, as I was trying to form this conversation of the narrator speaking to her passed away loved one, the need to create a reasoning behind what started these small conversations had me focusing on objects, many of which I did in fact take inspiration from my own grandparent’s lives.

It was interesting to realize how this use of focusing on the object draws from my background in photography. In photography, I was taught to focus with the camera on the ordinary, and find the extraordinary inside it. Almost every object I chose is a common ordinary thing from the life of a farmer, and even the frost, while not an every day object, is still something that is not necessarily considered commonplace. I wanted to use the object as both a starting place for the memories of my narrator, but also as a grounding place for the details. By using the object, I found that I could place the details in such a way that I could strike them into the memory and reinforce that memory.

However, there was a problem with my use of the objects. I drew the inspiration of every object from my grandparent's lives, and several of the stories with those objects were inspired by stories that my family has told me. While this might seem like a good thing since the story of the wild onions was the initial inspiration for the sonnets, the fact that these objects were pulled from items that are actually at my grandmother's home meant that as I played with them initially, I was stopping myself from controlling the sonnets as much as I could. As I wrote the sonnets, multiple times I would stop myself from adding in a detail in a sonnet because it was not actually like that in real life. "Chair" and "Truck" were the two sonnets that I struggled with this the most, as the stories held within those sonnets about those objects were most closely linked to the objects that I had selected. It was when I was discussing revisions on "Chair" with Dr. Arroyo that I finally realized that I was allowing those stories too much control and that I was the author of the sonnets, not the story. When I decided to change the color of the truck from orange to blue to match the color of the eyes of the passed away beloved, I finally started to use my control over the stories behind the objects that I was using. If I had not gained that comprehension for the necessity of controlling the object's story as

my own with “Chair” and “Truck,” I would not have been able to create “Dining Table.” That was the first of my sonnets that I completely fashioned instead of drawing inspiration from the oral traditions of my family.

Drawing from those oral traditions was challenging in ways I was not expecting, because while I was pulling from my grandparents’ story, I was also using the stories that had been passed down to me to create my own story within these sonnets. I pulled elements that I had heard growing up and wove them into my sonnets where I was attempting create this idealistic view of a lover whose emotions towards her long passed away beloved were still strong and beautiful.

That was another reason I chose to focus on objects. I wanted every object to be a symbol of this relationship the lovers built together. I decided to have one sonnet that specifically focused on that idea, and that was what I worked with in “House.” Homes have a connotation of the family life and the success of the family life. Every one of my relatives’ homes have walls that are covered with photos, sometimes all the way from the ceiling to slightly lower than hip height, and there are more family images placed over coffee tables throughout those homes. This imagery of the family inside the home was something I planned to evoke as I wrote “House,” but as I did I decided to only briefly visit the idea of the “images on the wall” and focus again more on the view of my narrator.

Each of my sonnets went through an editing process in which I found myself revisiting word choices, going back and forth on the ideas I wanted to use within each one. All ten of them had details I decided to remove, and other details I kept from my very first draft. I even had a few other drafts of poems I decided not to use, as they did

not follow the pattern I was trying to create within this sequence. “Crow” was an interesting case in that it began as two separate poems, one that focused on the guns that my narrator’s beloved had owned, and another that had focused on the crows in the garden. Each poem went through at least ten revisions, though that is probably a low estimate that also does not count the many times, I crossed out lines and rewrote a single line at least four or five times before I was satisfied with it. The power held within a single word was both beautiful and immensely frustrating; at times, I argued with myself over things as seemingly simple as whether to use the pronoun “it” or “he” for the truck. Being able to dedicate the time to edit each sonnet allowed me to ensure that the little details worked with the larger idea I was working on.

Looking back on the sonnets, I am satisfied with the details in them. I am especially pleased with the moments where the details focus on the way my narrator looks around her, and combine with the memory of her beloved. Moments such as the one where she looks at the grandboy and sees the dimple just like her husband’s dimple, and the one where she compares the truck and the morning glories to his eyes are ones that I was delighted to use within the sonnets. Using the juxtaposition of something that was present to evoke the memory of something no longer present was an idea that I wanted to weave throughout each sonnet, and I am glad that I was able to use smaller details within the larger moment.

Originally, I had intended each sonnet to be solely a conversation, that of my narrator, saying something to her beloved. When I first began creating the sonnets, I quickly found that I was straying from the idea of a loving conversation to a monologue. This led to me asking why these conversations were being started by the narrator. I did not want a narrator who appeared to be randomly talking, and I knew I had to create the

poems in such a way that her story could be seen without ever fully explaining it. With the idea of the wild onion already in my head, I decided to that each poem should be my narrator remembering something. For me, the idea of memory is tied into material objects, whether it is through objects that have been a part of that memory or through photographs that hold that memory. Because of this, I was able to tie each of the main objects within the poem to a memory that began the conversation for the narrator without feeling that I was writing a monologue.

As I have previously mentioned, the narrator and her story was inspired and heavily influenced by my grandmother. However, as I wrote this sequence, I did not intend to merely tell the story of my grandmother and grandfather. I wanted to work with the sonnet because I wanted to work on my poetic abilities and writing from a different perspective. The idea of the mask that the poet must wear in order to create a believable narrative is something that I wanted to work with. I did struggle with it, as I found myself at times leaning too strongly on my grandparents' story. However, as I worked in the editing process, I found it easier to pull the narrator away from that to create the narrative I wanted to make.

That is not to say that I pulled the story so far away from my grandparents it has nothing to do with them. In fact, I think that writing these sonnets has drawn me a little closer to knowing my grandfather. In some ways, my sonnet sequence is about an idealized relationship. My narrator is a woman who is looking at the past with no regrets and her sorrow is merely for the temporary parting. However, as I wrote these poems, I had to consider things that were pulled from my grandparents' lives. I do not live on a farm; my familiarity with farms largely comes from days spent with my grandmother. My grandfather's humor is something that I have only known through stories, but I found

myself growing closer to as I tried to create believable actions that he might have done. Working to create the narratives allowed me to consider actions that would be uncommon for me but would have been normal for my grandparents.

So many influences created the idea for this project within me that it would be hard to list them all. My grandmother and my adoration for Shakespeare's writings were the most obvious. Little influences built the momentum for this creative project, even before I had begun. I was introduced to Shakespeare's sonnets at a fairly young age thanks to my mother's insistence on a good education. The education program she chose had me memorize several of them and the way they flowed through my mouth made me desire to be a poet. I remember writing a poem at twelve that I was very proud of, but as time moved on, I decided I was not very good as the poetic element of the program focused solely on traditional poets, and I only occasionally used traditional forms. I continued to write poems for my own enjoyment, but I never planned to go any further with them than myself.

I had known for some time that I wanted to pursue a creative project having to do with my grandfather. He worked in the coal Mine 21 near Whitwell, Tennessee. The area's coal mines have all been shut down for many years now, and there has been a great deal of interest raised in the history of the miners that lived there. I also wanted to focus on him, because I was curious about the man that I had only known through images on the wall, and the stories my family had told.

Smaller influences added to the reasoning behind the choices I made. While I was beginning to ponder what I wanted to do for my honors thesis, I was taking two classes that would have a heavy influence on my project: British Literature with Dr. Hollings,

and Shakespeare's Sixteenth Century Plays with Dr. Donovan. Both classes were filled with the enthusiasm both professors have with their subject. With Dr. Donovan I found myself revisiting my old adoration for Shakespeare's works, especially as the discussion of the love tale of Beatrice and Benedict in *Much Ado About Nothing* had me turning my eye back to my collection of Shakespeare's love sonnets.

In Dr. Hollings' class, as we discussed the older poems, her delight and relish in the poems was so great that it was tangible within the class. She was also extremely encouraging about student writing, so I approached her with three poems that I had written. It was her encouragement over those poems that grounded my decision to work with poetry in my creative project.

All those influences flowed together inside my brain to create the beginning of this project. Much like each word in my sonnets works together to form the narrative I wanted, each of these influences pulled me towards this project. In the end, I chose to pull those influences into the form of the project I wanted, just as I had to pull each factor (language, tone, form) together within my sonnets.

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