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WELCOME TO THE PLANET: FORT LIVING ROOM O ROTTING SUN

Michael T. Cooper

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WELCOME TO THE PLANET: FORT LIVING ROOM

O ROTTING SUN

A Project

Presented to the

Faculty of

California State University,

San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing:

Poetry

by

Michael Thomas Cooper

June 2015

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O ROTTING SUN

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Approved by:

Julie Sophia Paegle, First Reader

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ABSTRACT

O Rotting Sun is a pair of long narrative poems that leap, spanning over an epic-length manuscript—175 pages of prose block, lyrical verse, and projective verse. Its chief poetic-operational modes are: inclusion, fragmentation, textual destructions, intentional omissions, intentional misspelling, large narrative leaps; all of which engage a poetics of doubt and multiplicity. *O Rotting Sun* is a jarring and jangly poem of resistance, intended if possible, for being read aloud and argued with: a provocation of intense meditation, reflection, and when successful, disintegration of anger & agonism—followed by a reintegration of the reader back into a community of change and hope. These poems are an invitation to that hero's journey which is sometimes painful, sometimes beautiful, sometimes both. I wish to welcome my heroic, wonderful, deep reader into this new world of *O Rotting Sun*.

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I am deeply indebted to too many wonderful mentors, peers, poets, philosophers and my family—this manuscript is dedicated to the following people: first Family; Terra Babcock (personal psychologist, friend, love-most awesomely—an incredibly strong writer in her own right), Jonathan Borrero (the eldest son—steadfast and deep), Markus Cooper (the younger son—the talker/thinker), Tali'zarah (the dog and not the character from Mass Effect, the video game from which she gets her name), Joker (her new dog friend we recently rescued but has made life bearable for all of us here in Fort Living-Room—named Joker after the ace pilot-navigator in Mass Effect/not for “Batman’s Joker”), our collective of domesticated ratties—great companions—“may they live long and prosper,” my mentors whom most assuredly saved my life and made it purposeful; Ted Porter, Ted Norene, Dave Tenant, Chad Sweeney, Julia Sophia Paegle & Stephen Lehigh, Juan Delgado, Michelle Dowd, Denise Johnson, Joel Harris, Jessica Luck, Merrill Feitell, Claudia Kokalari, Nancy Best, a host of folks I’m missing, champions of the word: Larry Eby, Chance Castro, Aaron Reeder, Rueben Rodriguez, the entire MFA classes of 2013-2016, Cindy Rinne (co-conspirator in awesomeness), all of the crew from PoetriE, and so many more. Poets and Philosophers, we all know who you are, we are thankful, thankful. Mom, you gave me life, and helped me shape it, I am forever in debt to you, all that time, energy, and kindness when this world was so, so terrifyingly ugly. My work only came about because of your care.

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STATEMENT OF PURPOSE:

WELCOME TO THE PLANET: FORT LIVING-ROOM

Introduction to *O Rotting Sun*

O Rotting Sun is a pair of long narrative poems that leap, spanning over a 175 pages of prose-block, lyrical verse, and projective verse. The main portion of the text comprises about four-fifths of that page count, and shares the manuscript's title. "O Rotting Sun" the poem follows several character threads, Most notably that of the lovers, Sarah and Conor. Conor serves as a sort of palimpsest for both my personal experiences in the military over-stamped by my understanding of military history in the world-at-large. Sarah serves as a conduit of my spiritual understanding and she represents growth of the self and awareness of others throughout the manuscript. Their intertwined story goes through a cycle of invocation, confrontation with the world, and disintegration in the unsupportive society in which they finally drown.

The second long form poem, "The Corpse-Bearer" works as a sort of prayer and re-boot of energies. Here the daughter of the couple, Io lays Conor to rest and gives him funeral rites, not knowing that he was her father, and he also in the double-blind as the citizen-soldier that had barred her passage back into America.

Both poems when read aloud together create a sort of ceremony in which confused and wounded people disintegrate their anger, and are returned

to a place of care in the absence of judgment. This is as close to a religious framework that I, as a secular person, can describe. I feel this particular body of work honors doubt, compassion, and engages the reader with a multiplicity of readings. These readings are intended to welcome the reader into a place of resistance to the status quo. I want to encourage them to decide on meaning as a form of collaboration with me, the poet. These are my compositional and content concerns in the guiding of the delivery of this manuscript.

O Rotting Sun required a different mode of operation than the one I have seen operating in the mainstream of poetic dialog I've witnessed in contemporary American poetry. This is an observation and not a judgment: there are so many fine poets out there, and I consider them all my allies in a world that is desperate to return to meaning and care. In this manuscript's case, I require a different set of compositional tools, all of which I have found from the current avant-garde and from a close, guided look at its manifold history. For this manuscript it was imperative for me to make a choice, to continue with what I currently see, or dive into the avant-garde and risk alienation. Is that risk worth the potential gains in awareness?

I had to make a choice—this is how *O Rotting Sun* was rendered, as a sum of those choices. Its chief poetic-operational modes are: inclusion, fragmentation, textual destructions, intentional omissions, censored messages, intentional misspelling, large narrative leaps; all of which engage a poetics of doubt and multiplicity. *O Rotting Sun* is a jarring and jangly poem of resistance,

intended if possible, for being read aloud and argued with: a provocation of intense meditation, reflection, and when successful, disintegration of anger & agonism—followed by a reintegration of the reader back into a community of change and hope. These poems are an invitation to that hero's journey which is sometimes painful, sometimes beautiful, sometimes both. I wish to welcome my heroic, wonderful, deep reader into this new world of *O Rotting Sun*.

Adopted Grand-Fathers: Olson and Snodgrass

When all the energies collided and produced this manuscript, I had no idea how to handle them, so I let them run amok. The work spans nearly four years of both autonomic and prompt driven free-writing that was a mess to herd into a book form. The 175 or so pages that remained survived rigorous editing, and I actively dismissed all text that did not contribute to the whole. The process was crazy-making.

It took me about a year of review and organization to gather the poem's pieces together in a way that they would cohere and be relevant for a reader, and it was at that time I discovered that the same life-narratives that produced me (mad me), were leaping out on to the page as a sort of energy (mad energy) exchange between my life, me as a poet, onto the page (the mad, mad page)—and it was the next process of releasing that energy in a somewhat comprehensible format to a reader that became my ultimate compositional goal.

It was about this time when I took on Charles Olson and W. D. Snodgrass as chosen replacements for my (thankfully missing, incredibly abusive/neglectful) natural grandfathers. Taking a deep look at these poet's poems and essays gave me insight into what I was doing intuitively and with vigor, that also could provide clarity, and a way of looking into these mad energies I'd arrived at for the readers of my work.

The inclusion of Charles Olson's vision was first, and what he said made my heart stop a moment when I first read it:

What we have suffered from, is manuscript, press, the removal of verse from its producer and its reproducer, the voice, a removal by one, by two removes from its place of origin *and* its destination. For the breath has a double meaning which Latin had not yet lost—breath; soul or life. (Olson 1058)

This embodiment of the voice on the page was my first notion of what my energy exchanges with that page were: the breath as a conduit of life force into the page, preparing it for a meaningful exchange of energy from the page to the reader. I began to delve into this concept more and realized that Olson was my central root to a tradition of poetics that I required further study of. I became aware, through the insights of my dear mentors, Chad Sweeney and Julia Paegle that what I was doing had a name: Composition by Field. Olson elaborates: "First, some simplicities that a [hu]man learns, if [they] work in the OPEN, or what can also be called COMPOSITION BY FIELD, (as opposed to inherited line,

stanza, over all form, what is the old base of the non-projective.” (Olson 1054). I began to suspect that there were necessary, compositional differences between my performance as a poet, and what I was interested in engaging with, over the poetics of the world-at-large, which I was accustomed to reading. The focus, often subtly—was shifted away from narrative and lyricism to energy stamped through nouns further energized arterially through verbs into the live-poetic-field.

Olson continues:

The kinetics of the thing. A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it ([they] will have some several causations), by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader. Okay. Then the poem itself must, at all times be a high energy construct, and at all points, an energy-discharge. (Olson 1054)

There it was, my most profound desire for my work laid out casually, almost conversationally, from a poet of the past to me—a poet who is, hopefully, a realization, in some way, of the goals of my ancestral link to the word through Olson. This desire to push, push the density of language and experience like blood into the page—live blood—to give, to give the reader as much of it as I’ve got.

If Olson was a shocking, liberating surprise, working as a grandfather on one side—generatively and compositionally; 1960 Pulitzer-Prize-Winner W. D. Snodgrass became the grandfather of chastisement and restraint that I never wanted—but so desperately needed on the other side.

I encountered Snodgrass when I began to study the work of veterans in poetry, and at first, seeing his rhymes and adherence to “dead forms,” I didn’t give the “old man” another thought. It wasn’t until I worked up the hubris to try to emulate his work on a lark that I began to respect the depth of his insight, within the framework of his rich, formal exploration. During this study, I encountered his prose and was struck:

I believe—and I hope this sounds either dangerously revolutionary, or else hopelessly old-fashioned—that it is a poet’s business to say something interesting. Something so interesting and so valuable that people should stop whatever it is they are doing and listen [. . . .] The pursuit of living, of some opinion to shape your life, of love—you must offer people something more valuable so they can dare to stop. (Snodgrass 420)

Here is the “blood” I so desperately wanted to exchange with the reader. Snodgrass understood the connection with the reader as an audience that I had, and still have, a limited knowledge of. What a strange thought, but so obvious, that we want the reader to stop. We need a poetry that will stop us in our tracks. We as readers need a reason to listen, and that is not something that is going to be given lightly in a world of instant pain and gratification. We are here to serve with the word. This is an inherently giving process. This flipped my entire paradigm, which, until the discovery of my adversarial “grandfather,” had been to explore without question, the words and the field: find its potentials. What a

difference it makes for the reader's experience when you do that, and then, selectively, open up that newly liberated space for them? The work, if yoked properly, is service, and not a slave to selfish experimentation for its own sake. The work is the stuff of exchange, a flow of energy from the poet, to the page, out to the reader. This is all guided by a poet that must be "aware" of the values of that exchange, and the needs of the people whom the poet addresses that energy.

These two great poets, adopted role models functioning as stand-ins for my absent, abusive/neglectful grandfathers, created platforms from which I have sprung, and with great guidance from these poets, framed a space of welcome for the readers of *O Rotting Sun*. It is with the skills that I gleaned from studying them that I can leap into my memory of the past: re-witness it in a way that is useful and worthwhile for my reader. I hope to draw my words from life, down into the voice and page, and return them back to the reader or listener in service of life.

Autobiography—Church

The first time I found out what I said mattered was when I was thrown out of church. I was 9 years old. The pastor had a special "kid's moment" Thanksgiving Sunday. Naturally, given the holiday, the teaching was on "Indians in the Missions," a sort-of thematic mash-up between the national celebration of manifest destiny meets local California lore: instead of pilgrims we were to learn

about Father Serra and Catholic missionary service. The pastor was a nice older gentleman, and was going through the usual motions of the church-approved revision of mission life. The problem was my father, who was a California history teacher and a history buff; further, I'd been to something like 15 of the 21 missions in California and been taught on those sites much of what there was to know about the mistreatment of the people, particularly the indigenous, in the missions. I was made to understand how many Native Americans were forced to convert, and often, their lives were made forfeit directly afterwards, to prevent them from "sliding back" into sin. It was presumed by the missionaries that these people, who had lived free on this same land for thousands of years, either didn't know right from wrong, or didn't care. The Native Americans that did stay worked very hard to support the mission life. These thoughts flooded through my mind there in the church that Sunday morning.

As my memory serves, the "kid's moment" was held in front of the congregation, past the wooden sanctuary gate, where we the young were meant to sit on either side of the pulpit in two wings of plastic chairs. The church itself was hot, an older stone building on Euclid avenue in Ontario, California, which had been refurbished with ceiling fans that dangled lamely from the a frame ceiling. I remember many moments singing or playing in front of the pillory-like gate, but only when the Pastor was to directly instruct us were we allowed across the threshold into the mysterious space surrounding the pulpit. The Pastor began his mini-sermon, and my younger, 3rd grade self was horrified.

He said that the missionaries brought the word of God to a God-less people. That they brought medicine, and much needed education, along with a strong work ethic—a drive to work the land and stay in one place. He characterized the indigenous people as lazy, and full of sin. He glossed over the forced conversions, but instead emphasized that many were brought to Jesus. As he spoke his voice ran from his casual day to day tone to a tenor of great height. It was terrifying. When he finally stated that the American Indian people thought this was a good thing, I could no longer be silent.

I proceeded to tell the pastor in front of the congregation that he wasn't telling the story right and that there was much resistance from Native Americans and punishment on part of the Missionaries trying to convert them. I was very angry at the lie, but oddly not at the person. I had no idea I was confronting authority, or fighting re-visioning forces at work in my culture. My child self thought that I was doing the right thing, but only because what was said was not true to the understanding of history I was taught by my father.

I feel pain now when I think of my 3rd grade self in the middle of this moment: I feel pain for the Pastor who was probably infrequently rebuked in front of his congregation, and I hurt for my poor father, who must have been incredibly embarrassed. I'm sorry for the discomfort I caused the shocked congregation: I would have rather disappeared at that moment, and erased this memory. I am sorry that I didn't understand at the time that I had done something profoundly

right—that there was great value in challenging the status quo opinions which are often found on revisions delivered up from the Hegemony.

My adult self, having spent time with many different kinds of people, wishes I could whisper to that child-self, let him know that Christ (as I understand him now) would want me to think of the people, all of the people, and do what was best to minister to both wound and wrong. Today I know that a momentary discomfort might be what is needed to bring someone around to understanding.

And what discomfort I caused that day! Between the stifled gasps and the here-heres there was the muted pandemonium of a congregation that could not sit still and watch the mind-mugging of their infallible pastor, at the hands of a wee-lad who didn't understand his place. As I finished my diatribe He was already reaching for the hymnal, and the children fell forth like the red sea before him, some imaginary chariots chasing them through the parted waters of the sanctuary threshold. I have never seen such a swift recovery of demeanor by anyone that wasn't a Drill Sergeant since—as the pastor flipped expertly to the next scheduled moribund hymn one handed, and then thrust his other dread hand out toward the congregation where he felt I, still standing there shocked, should probably sit.

I was secretly stung. I don't believe I have ever admitted to myself how much I loved the smells of the church: incense burned before I was born, sweat on the vest placed over the choir's robes, the skin-motes of people long gone before—or the perfume of the recently married. I'd witnessed many things there I

still don't understand. I loved the fake, but well intended-ness of the smiles pressed on every carnivore's lips (do this in memory of me, my body, my blood) from pew to shinning pew, the old books, and the strange made-up stories. I felt like I was losing Christ, and his Christmas and Easter songs, the ones that wound me to this day, for some reason that I can explain in my other-wise very secular world view. Somehow I have always known that my mother's womb chose me from the "other" box of children that probably shouldn't be baptized until after they are done mucking up their lives.

Close Reading: "Dear Iago"

One of the ways in which I address this core concern rising up out of my childhood is direct—through confrontation with some of the historical and autobiographical bullies that either created havoc in my life, or present aspects of systematized wrong-doing that I want to reproach. I recall a phrase from W. S. Merwin that made me think of the qualities of a poem that features *directness*: "To recur in its purest forms [. . .] poetry seems to have to keep reverting to its naked condition, where it touches on all that is realized." (Merwin 305) The idea of the poem being "nude," represents a sort of fragility and exposure, but could also be a sort of projected energy of boldness: this is what happens in "Dear Iago" where I summon two spirits and speak to them directly, plainly. Boldly. This is my anger, made "naked." These specters are invoked and rebuked:

Dear Iago,

I began like you. but I decided to say:
 I know you white construction—I know you
 male construction—I can't unlock my hit
 privilege for you my pigface I tear underneath, grandpa, O
 frostblind blue eye mirror—remnant me, jawbone, deodand in the
 tub. (Cooper 107)

In this section I underscore the ties between constructions of race and white privilege, and two characters that I both must understand as mirrors of that construction: Iago (from William Shakespeare's *Othello*) and my Grandfather. To put things briefly in regards to my grandfather on my mother's side, I neither know his name, nor have ever seen a photo of him. He remains a mystery to me due to the horrific abuse he heaped upon my mother. Iago, a stand-in for what I would consider the ultimate villain, is a representation of both classist and racist forces at work: a being so disturbed that it would destroy itself to harm its Other. In this passage I address my ties to my Grandfather through blood relation, which have rendered an inescapable "white privilege" upon my person. This construction stamps me, the descendant, as a "blue-eyed mirror" of him, tying me to the very same chain of beings (Iago/Grandfather/self) that I am exploring.

I decided because of the intensity of the profanity in this section, and the incredible anger I felt as I wrote these words, that the section had become unbalanced, and would be merely shocking, and not as I wanted: effective/projective. I felt a familiar editorial voice tsk-tsk me, and there was

Snodgrass admonishing me to have: “tact—a tact so highly refined that both passages are colored (perhaps even controlled) by crucial words or phrases which are never spoken.” (Snodgrass 419) This passage made me think of screenplays and literature that have gone under the heavy marks of censorship. These broad bars of content which was “too much.” I felt I could use this to my own advantage as a purposefully, and self-imposed technique.

As I began to incorporate the technique in “Dear Iago” I recognized that by “censor-barring” all the I’s that appeared in the invective, my poem went in two directions at once: firstly, the erasure of “I” removed the subject from the poem and left only the derided object, and secondly, that when the I was under the censor bar it gave an even bigger footprint for I, and injected I into words where the pronoun wasn’t present before. The I spread even more under censorship than I could have ever hoped to do by repeating it as a pronoun linked to harsh judgment.

I also “censored” most of the profanity, as it often works in the opposite direction of authorial intentions of invective and intensifier: it weakens itself through over-use. I decided to use it as sparingly as possible to heed Snodgrass’ terrific advice.

The cumulative effect of these large bars of darkened out text is to highlight the remaining words, which I put to use symbolically to reinforce the feeling of the loss of words. The “jawbone-deodand” in the tub is a representation of the “death-sacrifice” which is forfeited to God. The ties of the

jaw as one of the principle articulators of speech, and the tub's ties to water and indirectly baptism, draw the drafter of the letter into death and rebirth of identity.

The passage continues:

what should I do now? Call the police on myself, or ambulance the water that drains on me clawing at myself in the broad bathtub of the hotel room tub? Re-manifesting you, damned Iago, I accomplice in my undoing. (Cooper 107)

The question of what to do now should be central to every person who finds themselves a part of hegemonic force through the lottery of ancestry. This is a central question because as hegemonic force changes those that occupy the majority power become the direct targets of assault, or the unwitting continuity in the disparate displacement of power hegemony visits upon the minority. The deeper question is how can I no longer be "an accomplice in my undoing?" In the resolution of this poem's energies is a mirror back at the ancestor:

O frostblind blue eye mirror—Grandpa, show me how to unfuck my face, so like yours, how can you ride on? (Cooper 108)

How can I undo what you have done? How can otherwise good folk behave like Iago?

My point in "raising the dead" isn't to assign blame, or to destroy Iago or my natural grandfather. I don't really know them, and how can I? I am forever

locked away from two formative components of my own personal identity, one fictive, known only through another artist's work, and the other, a part of my genetic and familial Diaspora. This technique of addressing the past comprises one of the lines of engagement with which *O Rotting Sun* attempts to resist and critique hegemonic force. To do this, I often traverse dark terrain in this manuscript, as Snodgrass asserts: "unfortunately for the writer, [they] will always have to frighten people, and just in these ways." (Snodgrass 421) To follow the rest of his advice, as an ethical poet, I must also make this journey worthwhile.

O Rotting Sun—Title, Concept, Happy Accident

Love then screams in my own throat; I am the Jesuve, the filthy parody of the torrid and blinding sun. —Georges Batialle, *The Solar Anus*

The title and conceptual birth of *O Rotting Sun* came from an image-seizure I had after encountering and reading poet and literary theorist Georges Bataille's poem-essay "The Solar Anus." I am fairly certain that the subversive energies, particularly the ones fixated on cycles of consumption and excretion, rocked me out of the sort of scholarly somnambulance into which academic pursuits have often lulled me. The intense, disorienting effect the work has had on my thinking has seemed to me to be the sort of anti-cathartic movement that I wanted to instill in my work. To clarify, I'm not interested in the artifacts of pornography and counter-culture that litter Bataille's mind-scapes. However, I

am very interested in the mind-event of disruption, the agency gained by breaking gaze. This energy is regained by breaking the knee-jerk coupling of gaze and reactions, the reactions that are decided and prepackaged as memes and scripts for us to follow as if they were our own thoughts. The rupture of the gaze and the disintegration of platitude, the way out of convenient self-mythology is through the maze of disruption and fragmentation.

Autobiography—Church, Interrupted

It might not surprise the reader to learn that we were not invited back to church by the family who were sponsoring us. They are a profoundly good, but equally *appropriate* sort of people, who actually had a huge impact on my development, as they watched me after school from kindergarten through fifth grade, when my parents determined I no longer needed adult supervision. I remained good friends with their youngest son. Their innate decency always chafed against my child-barbarian ways: those scoldings, strange punishments, the delight the moment I would be released from duty or time out. They could abide my presence genuinely, with Christian love, but church was no longer for me.

I'm still not sure if they made the right decision, regarding my silent expulsion from the Methodist tribe of Christ, nor am I sure whether my father, also a sort of proper fellow—and easily embarrassed—wasn't in agreement with them in their view of my separation from church. I think he, a scholar, secular,

interested in California history, but also in religion, feeling like an outsider himself, may have taken this as a sign that his little man did not require such study. I'm not sure who this move protected, really. Was I really bad for the church, or was the church just a bad fit for me? Why didn't I belong, one who so clearly required such instruction? Who was dangerous to whom, and why? Regardless of my adult answers to some of these questions, it did seem odd to me as a child, that what I had done wasn't wrong, in and of itself.

I realize now that my verbal protest could be perceived as unkind to both father and Pastor, but that same protest did cause me to think for a long time about what it's like to be the other, to be on the outside. This feeling of marginalization is something I've gotten used to as I have moved further and further away from the center of many common thought patterns and into alternate constructions of the past, philosophy, and religion. This distance, coupled with a profound and pervasive sense of powerlessness, has required me to speak with poise, specificity, and understanding, when they can be had, of my "other-ness." An awareness of alterity has become one of my principle drives to write. Over the years, I have come to see voicing an alternate point of view was a sort of activism; and that to bear witness, even as a youth, is to realize potential for conflict which in turn gives one a brilliant, precious chance: the opportunity to change people's minds. It also can reaffirm one's own understanding. If I had not been sent away, would I have embarked on such a strange journey?

Close Reading: “Forward Xero”—Following Boyington

Part of the pathway I tread in my manuscript is one of overturning my prior misconceptions of a childhood hero; one who had a huge impact on my adult decisions. My childhood understanding of WWII pilot Greg “Pappy” Boyington came from the fictional TV show account of his life: “Black Sheep Squadron.” From the first moment the show aired (I was about 4 years old at the time) I knew, absolutely and irrevocably, three certainties: I wanted to fly, I wanted to be free, and I wanted to dominate the air as an ace fighter pilot.

I’ve done my best, in prose poem form, to approach both what I felt then, and the dawning, retrospective awareness I gained as an adult of what being a fighter pilot (and an ace in particular) meant:

Blue Midnight gull wing—a khaki canvas aviator’s glove on F4u
Corsair control yoke—right thumb presses the red trigger—close up
of 3-wing-mounted-.50cals—close up of Pappy Boyington
Chomping on an unlit cigar. (Cooper 5)

This section seems pretty innocuous. That is, its focus is primarily on the ace pilot, that conventional hero very much in control of the most terrifying scenarios as he begins to shoot at the Zero he is stalking. The connective language fixates a bit on the show’s camera technique (“Black Sheep Squadron” blended stock footage from gun cameras over the pacific to reduce cost and wear and tear on valuable vintage aircraft) and then zooms in on the consequences of what fighter pilots do:

The rising sun pilot pitches forward—Hiro's eyes wide—pilot washes into background as focus shifts to the flat black antiglare paint on the fake plane's cowling—Boyington victory rolls, slides back into finger four formation to nurse his wounded fighters home—this is my first time /first dream/earliest memory. (Cooper 5)

The Japanese pilot is killed by large caliber rounds, (from my adult perspective this is the equivalent of being drawn and quartered; the body is literally ripped apart). This kind of death was all too common a fate for many pilots on both sides of WWII in the Pacific, but "Black Sheep Squadron" unwittingly reveals to me an additional, and all too often obscured, story about control and the ease of victory: Many aerial "victories" resulting in the loss of a pilot's life were gained in a decidedly un-heroic way: that is, precisely when the "target" was unable to defend themselves or had blundered into a tactical mistake. As I began to see that my "understanding" of a "hero" such as Boyington might be very flawed; I wondered: "[is it] Boyington or his aerial victories [we see](skirling an airfield shooting down slowly ascending planes)" (Cooper 4)

These two lines present the crux of the energies of this poem's representational field. As I began to study the life of Boyington, I uncovered the disconcerting fact that many pilots disagreed with Boyington's version of his story of the aerial battle over the Pacific, and that numerous victories he claimed (if you downed 5 planes you were considered an ace, Boyington claimed he

downed 26 or more) may not even have been his, or may have been his unverifiable inventions. I was shocked to learn that in one engagement he flew, he claimed several victories over planes that were barely off the ground, which means the pilots of those planes could do virtually nothing to defend themselves. He continued with his cadre of pilots to buzz and strafe that field to goad more planes into the air and add to their squadron's "score."

My desire in this work is not to remove honors from Boyington, whom I still admire as a person who worked very hard in his duties. Rather, my goal is to qualify what the reality of those "victories" are. We so often dismantle and shame our heroes, rather than allowing them their full humanity, flaws as an intact as their heroics. So many celebrated pilots were alcoholic and tenacious fighters; desperate, possibly morally reprehensibly angry men.

Parable of the Two Spheres

My manuscript, *O Rotting Sun* is, in many ways, my exploration of alterity: the transposition of self outward and away from what I believe to be core identity into the ruptured space of the other. The return journey, back into the discarded self, gives me many different points of reference for me to work from as discrete points of view. *O Rotting Sun* is a fractured mirror, the shards of which catch the gleam of all the many elements I most dislike about myself. The core goals of the work include: the disruption of hegemonic thought patterns; the obstruction of catharsis; and a profound desire for reintegration of the whole, a sort of anti-

nihilism that tries to get to a place where the actual and the individual meet and cohere.

This space I describe is a dubious and dangerous place to stand. It is a difficult place, a difficult sort of poem that represents it in the field, as Charles Simic asserts in prose:

To be 'capable of being in uncertainties' is to be literally in the midst. The poem, too, is in the midst, a kind of magnet for complex historical, literary and psychological forces, as well as a way of maintaining oneself in the face of that multiplicity." (Simic 399)

Simic's suggestion could be understood as a visual metaphor. Imagine a place as if one were standing between two sorts of mirrors within it, that did not allow you easy access to the self, just the projections of self. This is a maddening cell: a hell of endless projections and the moving target of personhood.

Close Reading: "The Allprisoner"

I often use a technique of de-familiarization to deliberately trip up a reader, to make them doubt and second guess syntactical meaning. I am not a cruel poet for this: the desire within the work is to break up language and require meditation. By parceling out smaller and smaller attentions to detail in my drafting I was able to achieve a greater density of language and energy exchange between the page and reader. This is the attention called to the syllable by Olson:

It would do no harm, as an act of correction to both prose and verse as now written, if both rime and meter, and in quantity of words, both sense and sound, were less in the forefront than the syllable [. . .]. With this warning, to those who would try: to step back here to this place of the elements and minims of language, is to engage speech where it is least careless—and least logical. (Olson 1055)

What this awareness does is place the ultimate point of focus the literary “now” of the reader seeing the word on the page, or the speaker releasing their breath/life into the world, through the medium “ear” of the listener/reader. This focus on now, can be exhausting for the writer, but the benefits for the reader is that the focus, that “now-ness” is explosively filled with projective energy. When the focus starts to fall on images that jar the subconscious, or engage the meditative part of the active mind, they begin to stack or over-stamp the reader/listener’s consciousness with too much to think about, a place poet Frank O’Hara rejoices reaching: “when I get lofty enough I’ve stopped thinking and that is when refreshment arrives.” (O’Hara 306) The moment when there is too much to think, and you let go into another state of awareness, that moment “arrives” as “refreshment!” How astonishing and counter intuitive is this impulse to overwhelm, and enjoy the potentials of being overwhelmed? This is the disruption of the ability to think, that opens up new awareness to other modes of being.

In “The All-Prisoner” I attempt such disruptions with interruptive gestures within the syntactical line to “break up” the sentence level meaning with a sort of running “ground noise.” Watch how the words “adieu” and “Moloch” function as both aside and a means to insert more complex meaning through interruption:

walk in foot chains, bundles of court documents under arm. Adieu.

Depressed

the button on the White Crane’s nape summons the wailing

of a bone saw—chew corrugated aluminum roof

we are information in flesh

ragged passed thru chains of custody

good mourning is it

is it

Moloch, kyng, the sacrifice of

child

Orange— the compliment of Green. (Cooper 92)

In this particular excerpt the aforementioned interrupting words break up regular speech patterns with noise. What is intended is a sort of polyphonic cross conversation where the interruptive language inserts suggestions of leave taking and child sacrifice (in the case of Moloch—also hints of great beat poetry fountainhead Allen Ginsberg) which functions as a mimetic device for how we, as humans, operate as “information in flesh.” Our bodies “remember” everything, the “white crane” the “foot chains” and the “court documents” as images that are

all jumbled and processed together. This passage is an attempt to recreate how awful it is at times to be possessed by ourselves, how haunted and influential are these over-stampings of unpleasant experiences; how they create wounds we cannot forget. The closing energy of “Orange is the complement of Green” refers to the strange similarities I have seen between institutions, the odd equality a “uniform” represents, whether it is the jumpsuit of an inmate or the battle dress uniform of a soldier—it is a demarcation of an owned self that has a debt to an institution.

This passage also uses Olson’s thoughts on page-work and how to stamp the page with the breath and its natural pauses in speech: “If a contemporary poet leaves a space as long as the phrase before it, he means that space to held, by the breath, and equal length of time.” (Olson 1058) I am in complete agreement with Olson, as long as we remember his linking of the breath to life. The link between these two things suggests to me that life’s interruptions, the intrusions of unwanted thoughts and second guessing one’s self, could also be stamped into the page, indicators of the movements of the soul of the person speaking. As you can see in “The All-Prisoner,” the intertwining of interruption and the breath resembles life and its energies spilled into the page, and they both indicate a sort of score that can help the reader into the text.

To unpack these thoughts specific to the poem “The All-Prisoner” further and open them outward in relation to *O Rotting Sun* at large; I intentionally fragment language, rupture causal links, make unapologetically ambitious claims

and large associative leaps, all in the hope of challenge the consciousness and conscience of the reader.

These are all trappings of my profession which I have gleaned from the poets that have come before me, and stem from the avant-garde. Poet-Theorist Richard Kostelanetz makes an excellent case for the difficulty of these passages:

One explanation for why avant-garde works should be initially hard to comprehend is not that they are intrinsically inscrutable but that they challenge the perceptual procedures of artistically educated people: they forbid easy access or easy acceptance. An audience perceives them as different, if not forbiddingly revolutionary.

(Kostelanetz 239)

What Kostelanetz is suggesting here is a core mechanic of *O Rotting Sun*, and is done with one goal in mind, the direction of where this manuscript's energy flows: "If the audience learns to accept an innovative work, it will stretch their perceptual capabilities, affording them kinds of perceptual experience unknown before." (Kostelanetz 239) This peaceful revolution is driven with content that constantly disrupts the gaze, refocuses its attention back to an awareness of self, the limits of that awareness, and the limited nature of our understanding of Others. Charles Simic reaffirms this: "One suffers from self consciousness. One longs for self-knowledge while realizing at the same time that under the circumstances self-knowledge can never be complete." (Simic 399) How can a poet express this incompleteness of knowledge, the suffering of

our lack of ability to understand self and others, the limitations of awareness of self and others, the terrific anger and agonism that lack of awareness engenders: how do we get purposefully angry about being angry? How can representations of that angry space we all inhabit create peace and healing, when they so often spark further agony, accusation, aggression?

For me, the answer is in the disorienting techniques of the avant-garde. When successful, *O Rotting Sun* creates a mirrored sphere, allows the reader to be a source of light and perception outside that sphere, and then encircles readers within the interior of yet another mirrored sphere. This newly framed space is a place of un-kind generosity where we can see ourselves in the grossly expanded surface of the convex interior, as, if you will, bloated. We look outward into the concave mirror and we see our-self in the minimal-ized interior as a single point of light orbiting a mirrored sphere that reflects only us, the miniscule. *And* we see the multiplicity of image bouncing endlessly between the two mirrors.

I want the reader to have the ability look deeply into all these projections, where they are made to appear infinitely large, infinitely small, and recognize that the identity we intuitively grasp as our-self in the mirror, *is already also a projected other*, one that cannot escape from our own gaze, one that cannot escape the gaze of others. This space of un-comfort, this mode of reading/seeing is a gift I bring, not to weapon-ize guilt or sharpen old knives (with tongues in the old wounds) but to hold the reader in the space of being: that the light, and the ability to perceive are captured inside the being that is neither

reflected or caught. This place is not the mind, not the body, not the super-ego, but the sum of its experiences and performance in the actual.

Close Reading: “Forward Xero”—Following Reagan

Here is an example of a poem in the manuscript that works principles of shattered and refracted persona:

Ronald Reagan the hero of Cold Wars, or in-direct drug
dealer/money launderer/over-spending Star Wars ABM dreamer, or
the budding

compassion in me for a being fundamentally

:blacksuitparson

scattered—an alter persona standing in as former president/
mirrorkaleidoscope of imperial power through the flexed
vivisecting complexes—recognition of self

in my reflective enemy. (Cooper 4)

This is the earliest reference in *O Rotting Sun* to mirrors, in which I coin the compound word “mirrorkaleidoscope” to describe our former President, Ronald Reagan’s mindscape. This metaphor/coinage shows both the fragmentation of Reagan’s performative identity and the issues said identity causes with transposition, refraction, and multiplicity required by a Hollywood actor to navigate national political life. I choose an example of someone from the upper-class and in a position of power as a subject for my poetic field because there is no possible way for me to know him personally—I only know him from a

multitude of representational fields, all with their own biases and needs to codify/assign an identity to his being. Ultimately, there is no way of teasing apart his actual life and story from the multiple images which palimpsest over our “gaze” that is fixed on him. This collective gaze, further, is constructed of the collage of those images, by which we judge him and determining whether we view him as “the black suit parson,” or the “indirect drug-dealer?” Is Ronald Reagan my enemy? How can I see through this Kaleidoscope? Where must we go, if we want to understand and have “compassion” for a “being fundamentally—scattered?” And, crucially, *why are such judgments so important?*

To answer these questions with rigorous self-awareness, I must “witness” my past life, my own journey into the war machine.

Autobiography—Military Service, Boot

There is a moment you learn that you are not good at something you really want to do. My moment came on a live-fire course in basic training at Fort (relaxin’) Jackson, 1998. Instructions were clear. Take the two live hand-grenades tucked (for safety) into tin cans, run to the bunker, while you are running make sure to yell what hand you throw with loudly and clearly as you approach the Drill Sergeant. Stop behind the bunker wall, step over the wall, and be instructed on grenade “cook-off” and clear the range after the grenades are thrown. Bone-head simple stuff for a “great mind” like mine, right?

Right, right, right, right, right—vaulting the bunker wall at top speed I quickly came to realize the practical wisdom behind the instructions, and why they were so specific about stopping and stepping. The toe of my left combat boot caught on the back of the bunker wall, spilling me onto my knees, crotch high with the range Drill Sergeant—two live hand grenades bouncing inside their tin can homes.

I'm not sure if the blow to my head was worse than being embarrassed in front of my platoon. The impact was swift, a ping pong paddle attached to a small metal stop sign right to the Kevlar helmet that protected the squishy part of the top of my head. Curses were exchanged. I recovered, threw the first grenade short, ducking behind the sandbags with the D. S. covering my body with his flack vest covered torso. Loud boom. More curses about the sorry state of my ancestral history. Then I managed to lob the second grenade right at the "feet" of the range's pop-up target. The D.I. complemented my "kill" but then would not let up about how I had destroyed his best friend, Ed, the dead pop-up target.

Close Reading: "On Cowardice"

"On Cowardice" is a poem that functions to further delve into the false representations and perceptions America cherishes regarding warfare and its place in our domestic and foreign policies. The poem explores the confusing cropped cinematic and media images which deliberately obfuscate the disturbing

realities of how we conduct ourselves in physical conflict. "On Cowardice"

begins:

*a soldier on point encounters the enemy, 'black pajama's around
his ankles*

squat-slung over a hole:

*on cowardice[. . .]all skirmishes are won through ambush or
overwhelming*

force...“involution [. . . .because we like it that way]” (Cooper 82)

I feel that the initial image of an enemy defecating and hopelessly unable to defend themselves is a synecdoche for almost all engagements between armed forces. Any time total warfare (engagements where combatants rip each other's forces apart, and then lay waste to whomever that opponent was protecting) occurs the losses are horrific. If a protracted engagement occurs the losses on both sides are incredible. Humans have traditionally avoided these sorts of innocent, collateral losses by invasion, and armies, when un-tethered from their protective (securitas!) mode become masters of the field. This is because one does not invade when one doesn't have an enormous surplus of armed forces. No sane person would put their loved ones at risk, unless they believed that they could invade with impunity.

If we go back to this initial image, what does it say about honor, when you engage someone who is simply trying to relieve themselves? Before the reader

believes that I am condemning the soldier on offense, I must remind them that at all points of engagement any invading force must resist retaliatory strikes. There is no "honorable" option for this soldier on point, *not* to take the life of the already defeated person who is caught unaware. There is no morality at this point in a conflict. And this is the horrible truth, with which I have grappled in my own life, and which I attempt to represent in my poetry: *diplomacy and ethics have already failed both soldiers.*

If this is the case, and I must stress this, that the "case" is an obvious one, why do we repeatedly put our soldiers and the lives of people in other countries directly in harm's way—do "we like it that way?" The poem continues to explore what drives a person to enlist and put themselves in such an awful position:

Private Cooper—The Love Doctor

get down and push, make love
to the ground—despite
your dreams of flying and all this talk
of glory &
Forty rounds—under this stadium
lighting, each bear-mound
of soldier to be a patch
work of crawling skin
which climbs the blisters
of the fire ant

all-desiccant

The clacking of plastic crates bone

in the milkgarden. Earth

worms. (Cooper 85)

The initial address of this section was first addressed to me as a young recruit, and came from an incredible person, Drill Sergeant Lloyd. "*Private Cooper—The Love Doctor get down and push, make love to the ground*" was my Drill Sergeant's way of getting me to laugh when training got to the ridiculous level where we exercised until several of us were throwing up and shaking with muscle failure. It is hard to imagine such a statement being a kindness, but I believe in my core that my drill sergeant was a profoundly good individual who cared about the survival of the people he trained. This man helped me when my pay situation failed me; when my family was struggling economically. This man taught me how to shoot, which is to say: this man taught me how to survive in adverse scenarios. Above all, this man taught me how to salvage my dignity even in the most profoundly humiliating situations.

How odd then, that the actual, literal meaning of what he said to me was "have sex with the ground?" Did he mean "let love go?" Did he mean "get used to death?" Did he mean that all of us go "into the ground?" Is there a way to still, or silence, or even soften, these tense, vibrating questions he trained into me, right alongside how to survive and how to be a decent human being?

I look to poet and Pulitzer-Prize-winner Galway Kinnell for answers about this seemingly odd desire for death:

“The death of the self I seek, in poetry and out of poetry, is not a drying up or withering. It is a death, yes, but a death out of which one might hope to be reborn more giving, more alive, more open, more related to natural life.” (Kinnell 235)

Having gotten to know Drill Sergeant Lloyd fairly well through boot camp, it wouldn't surprise me if his thoughts might parallel Kinnell's pragmatic vision for these seemingly closed doorways to be the opening of the capacities of grace, and it is precisely these ideas which opened the reconciliatory energies that populate the “prayer” of O Rotting Sun's 2nd movement “The Corpse-Bearer.” It is the disintegration of the self and the spilling over of the awareness gained by doing so that enables a recruit fresh out of boot camp, understand that their needs were not necessarily as important as the mission and the lives of others within their platoon. This is an odd, but profoundly good example of community building under intense adverse pressures.

As we return to, and move forward into “On Cowardice” I question my reasons for enlisting, “the dreams of flying” when my poor eyesight regulated me to aviation maintenance. 40 rounds (one shot, one kill—the maxim of all basic rifle marksmanship—based on a story from WWII where ammunition ran out, and American forces held off the enemy with precise, directed fire; people who achieve this on a range may be culled out for sniper trainer and “earn” a Hawk-

eye) when I was at best 27 for 40. All these dreams brought into stark contrast when you recognize that even in 1998, with coed training, we were out in the middle of the night bear-crawling in an unlit stadium and doing push-ups until we shook uncontrollably, and all the while the fire-ant biting and leaving its welts on our arms. What an absurd way to learn to live. We were useless—earth worms!

Shifting to the end of “On Cowardice” we find that:

you can enter the unreality

of these static-

display machines where humans fought

the final moment

of their lives—museum of natural

science, San Bernardino

1977

locked in the hull of some

M4

Sherman

Tank
a part of my unopened

boyself: a sea
of gulls swarm the armpit hair of a single
cadaver. (Cooper 85-86)

This last section works on energy release in the form of an anti-pastorale, where the beautiful language belies the incredible wreck of what is. It couples the notion of “static display” or the demilitarization (removal of dangerous items from a museum piece that can then be inhabited) of a vehicle of war, and the movement of the childhood imagination into that space. This scene sets us up for the understanding that the child cannot possibly fathom the terror and pain of warfare that the space they inhabit has been witness to. That inanimate objects only project power, and not consequence. The schema that is produced is the same crazy-making pattern of invasion with impunity. The movement of the child’s mind into this zone of engagement without the relevant education in the pain of the adult war machine reproduces the invulnerability-mindscape that, when it blossoms in pre-war adulthood, allows one to step into an enlistment, with all the entitlements of an enlistment bonus enticing them along that crazy path.

The final energy of the poem moves the energy outward from my very specific scenario to the world of young people everywhere : “boyself: a sea of

gulls swarm the armpit hair of a single cadaver.” I apologize that the artifact of my specific experience creates a seemingly gender-specific argument, I feel this is a failure of my piece. The conclusion of the energy at cadaver is important, because regardless of gender, this particular anti-pastorale’s energy movement is into the ground, all of that desire, aggression, force, only creates bodies that “make love to the ground.” I find myself returning over and over to Galway Kinnell for advice, and in this I am in perfect accord with what he has to say: “For myself, I would like a death that would give me more loves, not fewer. And greater desire, not less.” (Kinnell 235)

Autobiography—Reboot

I made it through all of my training, and I successfully completed my 8 years of service in the Army National Guard, in the 1st of the 18th Air Cav, F troop (Swift and Deadly). In boot camp I eventually learned how to kill simply, efficiently. It is at the root of basic training, along with follow the instructions of the chain-of-command. They break you down to the point where desperation and a drive to live becomes an ingrained part of your character, and in many ways the Drill Sergeants that trained me represent the best and finest humans I have ever known.

But I failed in every way, in learning that these things are right, that war produces security. My ability was further displayed when I dislocated another soldier’s shoulder in a pugil-stick fight. I learned how to shoot okay, I was very

good with a grenade-launcher. I became more and more reluctant to this process of “production.” There was always the nagging suspicion that survival in any war scenario was due to luck, overwhelming force, and avoidance of accidents.

I find myself in a unique place as a poet, full of experiences I did not want, having passed through a crucible I did not understand until I entered and was expelled, I have such strange dreams, such a strange point of view, one that I could never have pre-planned. As an artist I find myself more and more wrapped in a debt to people and institutions who I am radically dissimilar to, despite such close living space, despite much conflict. I find myself both centered, and destroyed, and I feel my work, when successful, displays that in the poetic field.

About Odd Debts: Batialle—Rupturing the Gaze

It is here, in a disruptive space where our perceptions of an event take the time to stop behind the bunker, then step over its threshold into a place where we can decide to throw or not throw our grenade. This is a space that no longer has us on our knees, staring up at some pastor, poet, philosopher, some drill sergeant, some deity that gives us both punishment and an assigned task that we must fulfill to graduate into the ranks of their army. People who serve the greater good need only commune with the fountain from which we are born and must return.

We may find inspiration in some of the darkest, most unexpected of places and persons: but we are never bound to them, of us they can ask no allegiance that breaks our continuity with the life-form. I am indebted to Batielle, a person who I often find personally distasteful in both character and concept. I find my pathway oddly parallel to his in terms of process. Is this a possible intersection with a being that, so dissimilar from myself, is something more than a mirror, is a person capable of breaching that discrete partition of Identity we seem to cherish so much? What am I when I work in tandem with a voice I assume to be monstrous, even if my desire is to fragment from institutions that perform monstrously? This is some of the work I hope *O Rotting Sun* allows the reader space to resolve for themselves, a work which borrows its title directly from the work of Batielle. Now we must push the sculpture of the two spheres and the lighted space between that I have made at great cost over—may we scatter or gather the pieces where we find value.

Red Giant—Conclusion

Like the last stages of the growth of a star before its collapse, my work has become urgent, has become unkind—we have, as a species, provoked a profound ire within the universe. If we could accept, in some small way, the culpability we share we can begin to change. We can engage in language that uses our plural perceptions and speaks through us as a cultural conduit of our chief desire, to survive and replicate: we may realize that the very same lines of

communication that house mimetic and consumer content can discharge powerful and necessary tools for survival among we the people. To disengage these misappropriated tools (bound to desire of the corporate and state entities which no longer serve the people) we must work together at all nexuses of exchange to rebuke the replication and sale of goods and commodities, and instead exchange meaning, mutual value (one in which the exchange is not predetermined or moderated by the use of martial force) community, and at all points mutual concern for the closed systems we share.

O Rotting Sun, when successful, serves as a warning that we can no longer tolerate the over production of expendable goods, potlatch, the vertiginous rise and plummet of unsupportable class distinctions and everywhere the excretion of asphalt and conventional munitions.

As a poet, I have no interest in the aggrandizement of the intellect, of the self, and serve no higher power other than that which will serve this throbbing life, within me and my brothers and sisters (open to all beings of sentience, even animals—whom some of us deem very low in self-awareness). I am singularly disinterested in reproduction of language and philosophy that is reduced to memes and the distribution of ad-copy as a means to sell or redistribute goods—this despite the very different needs of the beings these processes were initially intended to serve. I am concerned with the actuality we share, and what can be done with kindness and generosity within our spheres of influence.

O Rotting Sun is in conversation with these principle themes, but changes the nature of these engagements. I feel strongly that one of the greatest ruptures in the discourse of class struggle throughout the ages is the misconception of writers and thinkers that any particular thrust must be addressed at some other being, that the way of navigating conflict is to have a better, more powerful argument or weapon to unleash on the very beings they most desperately need to convince of their point. We spiral in our agonism.

Through the writing of *O Rotting Sun*, I have learned that all energies directed into an argument, and in fact all anger, is always directed at the self. There is no intersection with other, and the more bellicose the reaction, the greater the rupture of self, the more broken the mirror, the more anger returns the next day. We believe we direct our anger on our target. For me, the realization is that I have always had my own hands around my own throat.

We exist in the same atmosphere, share the same resources, languages, cultural exchanges, have troubles and vices foisted upon us by incalculable decisions made by Others. Finding a way to represent Others responsibly, and with an eye on our own distorted—mythopoetic—image of ourselves is my core aim with this manuscript and in my future work.

This work is difficult, but always close-at-hand—we need look no further than at “our” image in any mirror to see our enemy. This is my return, through my poetry, to the living message I see in the examples of Jesus and other spiritual leaders that I have now, in solitude, had time to study. We can no longer

point our finger at the military-industrial complex as if we are not complicit with its machination when we so clearly benefit from its Diaspora of murder. I believe that as a people we can no longer afford to project our anger-energy at an unreachable 1% (beings which we have no insight into, people we don't know, who don't know us) or at a foreigner (which, we as migrants from one of four ports of origin, all are) or at a boogey-man. What are the responsibilities, for this our gaze, for our actions, for our resistance, for our insistence on purposeful change?

O Rotting Sun provides the reader with two spheres, one outer, one inner, and a space between. This is where we all sit, shedding and consuming light. We—momentary, unsure beings, trapped in this actuality we desperately must navigate. I invite you inside a memory device within this space—I have welcomed you, my wonderful—deep reader, to a place where the holy and profane ride inside the same skin. I welcome you to be “the witness: as container.” I give this to you as a gift of my time of duty, my call to generate a resistance re-contextualized as a process of perception, moving out into your sphere of influence, doing what you can for yourself and others, and the reflective heroes' journey home to meditate and pray on the next foray into this world we all share. I have profound respect for your capacities of understanding, desire for a decent life, your love of your children and the people of your now-expanded household. This household is our world.

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APPENDIX
O ROTTING SUN