

Collaborative Poetics: Images of Strangers and the Street



AUTHOR'S NOTE:

Most of the photographs in this collection are the result of going out to the streets of Chicago and asking strangers if I could take their portraits. The hope was that they would have a part in the creation of these pictures. After talking with them, it was almost always easy to find something we had in common, and the poetry here often used pieces of conversation or points of connection as starting ideas. Altogether, the text and images act as documentation of an attempt for more genuine interaction in a world that feels devoid of it sometimes, and they seek to prove that it can exist all around us, if only we make it happen.

- Hannah Radeke, 2018

Chicago, spring

All winter we walked around
with rocks on our shoulders,

time like boulders we couldn't roll.

The city split
then broke,
jagged bodies crawling out

from the ground
like a cracked geode
in an open palm.

Chalky dust sifts down our wrists.

Our cores are cold,
cooled too long in shadows,
curled up in wasted days.

But the light is longer now,

no more room to fade away.





On the Beauty of Physical Things

The night winds down like a wristwatch
then opens like a cold knife.

We compare cameras,
talk light.

Strive for time made visible.
Consider digital intangible
and thrive on touch.

Agree that we need to mess up,
keep our hands unsteady,
our rolls of film streaked with sun.

Sometimes it is easy to love a ruinous thing.

We'd rather start a fire to get things gone.
Michelangelo burned everything he had left.
Epistolary pyres
& drawings thrown
into fires.

What a sight to see from the street!
Tongue of ash & smoked out teeth.

Strangers Contemplate Space

Outside the planetarium,
 against the lake,

water washes the concrete
& small feet climb shadows.

The day of the eclipse
we lined the steps like
pigeons on cliffs.
All we had to do was watch the moon.

Today we find ourselves
stuck in the azure band
between sky & land,

the atmosphere's hand
cupping our eyes.

We want the days to be longer,
but the nights are just right.

Caught in the moon's smirk,
the tick of the tide claps on.
We try to resist.

& the sun up there
doesn't even know

all the work we have to do,
other than just exist.



I Have a Shadow So I Must Be Real

By the water,
our shirt collars
snag on
concrete teeth,

and we hug the trees
so we don't slip away.

I heard them say
the lake smells the same as the ocean,
that's how you know you're close.

We float toward the shore
& out past land.
Arms, ghost limbs
hung around our heads.

It's not so much like the heavy rust of rain,
but with the same mossy punch.

As soon as our chins go under
it's all icicles behind our eyes,
jaws stuck shut, frozen teeth,
& we're left without feeling in our feet.



Poem With Distance and Daring

We both traveled oceans by tightrope, love
strung on our necks, leashes leading beasts.
We never cared how long it would take. Our heat
could be off for days, making shade under
overturned tugboats tucked into sand, but not
dreaming of land.

How often I'd like to slip in some truth.
We tiptoed all this way, so what's left to lose.
Turn our heads to coral reefs, ink on our sleeves.

I almost gave up, but the gulls caught my breath.

I had this idea
 the other day,
 to stop mis-loving
all the wrong charms,
flutter my heart backwards,
fountain-like,
collapsing the night, falling
into shouts, lip-stained & trembling,
 but head up & arms out.





The Days We Drag Our Fingers
Through the City Like It's Wet Paint

Pinpricks of light through the trees
bore holes like pores along jawlines.

Bark like bone
rubs dust into our tired eyes.

We can at least say that we tried.

My feet walked statues into the ground
on my way out,
not stopping
until monuments
 were painted over.

You're out here looking for inspiration,
but I like to make my own.

Encaustic portraits
scarred with slag,
 gouache casts of hands dragged
 through the sky, crashed to land,
while silent towers tick time away,
leaving pocks of hours across the glass.

Who Do We Trust Here?

We were meant to get lost
in the city as it sleeps.
The streets like a tongue,
drag feathers of glass
against the backs of our teeth.

We follow the birds
& practice having places to go.

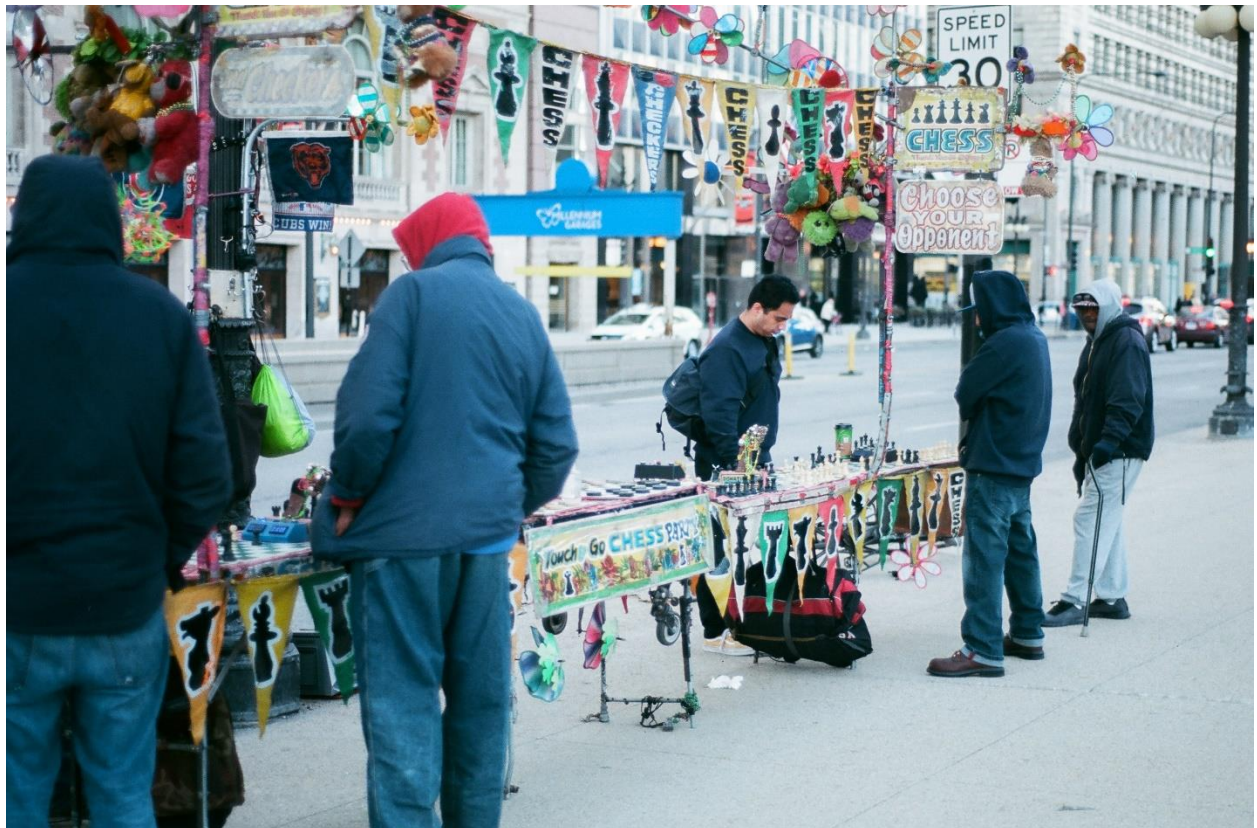
Look for the blur
or create or own,

tie our brain wires to power lines
while our bones blister.

What else have we
been told to do
that can be undone?

The silver-lipped bridge stretches on.





We Stand Above Traffic

staring at lanes below,
and thank the sun that
the roads don't dictate
where we have to go.

Underneath the streets nothing grows.

Above them, no one talks to each other anymore,
you keep both feet on the floor,
and everyone thinks where they're heading
couldn't be beat.

Worse yet are the endless gaps between songs,
and the only feeling is the dead in your legs
when you sit too long.

We prefer to leave beelines of light
between buildings, to run our *hands*
over stone surfaces instead.

People play electric clarinets
and keyboards on the corner
and keep time with the slap
of change against a plastic case.

A cinnamon breeze slides up
from a subterranean doughnut shop.

The sun lives unblocked, except by
brick edges and steel divides.

Here we can afford to
hold our heads up to the sky

and not only from the passenger side.

Stable Places

In the shade of the fountain where nobody is,
we cover ourselves with silence.
Everyone enjoys sitting where the sun hits.

Segways loop around,
their soft treads grip the ground.

You could take a tour in the winter if you wanted:
around Buckingham & back again. I bet the city
would look the same – other than the ice
corroding the concrete & wrought-iron
gate around the fountain, when there's
no water to mask traffic, when there's no show
but only skeletal shadows

as the dark parts get longer,
as the sun falls through the sky.





In Favor of Aimlessness

If we ever get stuck
in between panes again
we'll just leave.

You know what I mean
if you ever need to pull your brain away
to get it back all clean.

To see things from the city's perspective
but then shake it loose again.

To run our tongues over wet stone,

to have our mouths overflow
with the city's runoff,
rainwater blurring its sides,
 streaking black across the sky.

The edges of buildings
were once graphite lines,
held together only by somebody's mind.
Now it's mortar and the sand
comes off in our hands,
and you can walk inside.

In the plaza we duck underneath
the Monument with Standing Beast,
swirls of Jean Dubuffet,
his eyebrows all creased,

extending his drawing out into space.

We slide south down Dearborn until
we tuck our heads into
the tobacco shop at Monadnock,
press our noses into Captain Black.

We bounce our shouts and shoe taps
off walls because they're here now,
drag our fingertips along the empty cement,

walk worlds into existence.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

Major thanks to Kathleen Rooney, Lisa Mahoney, and Mark Pohlada for guidance and feedback.

And a thank you to everyone else who participated in this, especially the strangers, who aren't strangers anymore.

- Hannah