


Boxes of
Self-Expression:
A Crown for Empty Spaces



Amanda Trout

A tall, precarious stack of cardboard boxes leans against a purple paneled door. The stack is composed of numerous small, rectangular cardboard boxes, some of which are slightly offset, creating a wobbly, leaning structure. The door behind the stack is a deep purple color with a classic paneled design, featuring several rectangular panels of varying sizes. The lighting is soft, highlighting the texture of the cardboard and the smooth surface of the door. The overall composition is a study in balance and color contrast.

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*To the empty spaces in the world
and those who used to fill them.*

—A.T.



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I. Washington Elementary

—For Jacob, on his mission to Denmark

I sought the empty lot—our place—where remains
of stalled construction hide playground cement.
Thin cracks from youth have widened; Earth reclaims
forgotten places our friends feet once went.
The tree, *our tree*, now lies dwarfed by our heights—
even yours, since through the years you grew
to surpass me. A lack of playground lights
leaves other changes hidden from view,
and my mind fills in details: the vacant field
marred with footprints, the sidewalks still bearing
shadows of student scrawls, blood from unhealed
scrapes. The memory of us is living there
within abandoned school where we first met,
a memory that left room for regret.



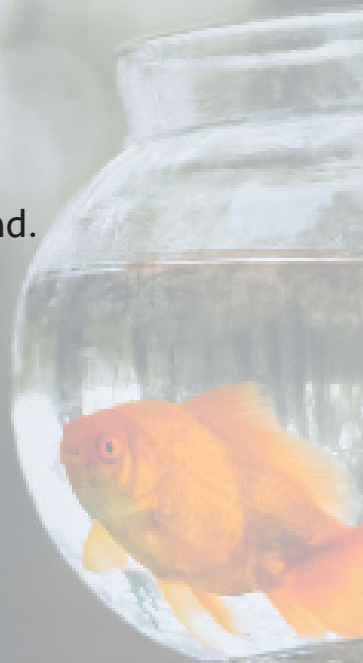
II. My Grandpa's Tree-Hive By the Road

Your memory leaves no room for regrets
since you lived so full of light. You loved life
with me for eight straight years—the greatest years—
told in a swirl of snow drifts, bugs and bikes.
You drove the Oldsmobile down from your house
while I plastered a grin to your window,
watching the bees fly by. Buzzing terrified
me, but you turned all bees to butterflies.
Bees brought me no fear in the years you were
sick, locked in a hospital bed, breathless,
an endless cycle of done and death-bound.
The bees stopped swarming as the end of August
drove them southward. I drive the Oldsmobile
down rough gravel. My faded face-print frames
an empty home where your bright life once lived.



III. How to Clean a Fish-Tank

Take the home where a bright life once lived.
Pour tainted water in the sink. Scrub first
each object he would hide behind, then sift
gravel. Remove any decaying food—
He'd never eat. Why would he never eat?—
then place the gravel back. Cup up your corpse
with water or else he'll start to smell.
Check one last time for signs of life. Respect
the absence, bury body in bowl then
flush; his fins drift behind him, his final
swim a dance of swirls. The end begins
when he leaves you for the sewer. You may
cry only then. Return with tank in hand
and place it, prepped and patient, on its stand.





IV. False Start

Her place waits patient, prepared for her stand;
defending champion, hundred meter sprint.
She's waited all year for this, the state meet.
One fierce rival stands in her way. Hair tight,
spikes laced, with matched positions on the block,
they leave each other with a simple smile
that speaks of timed trials, the cracks and smokes
of starting guns. All has led to this one
run, but the shot has barely sounded when
shadow surges through her vision. Quiet
sweeps the field. Refs take her rival's race.
One spot stays empty when the shot goes off
again. She runs a sprint against quick wind;
her favorite rival's race imagined there.

V. The Dreamer Among Imagined Nations

Her favorite friends remain imagined. Where empty space remains, they reside. Though intangible themselves, each unique form bears touches of reality. They start as echo and outline, end as thoughts made coherent. She wraps air in her hand's palm, whispers secrets to the wind, speaks her mind to the speaker her mind has created. She finds shelter in invented replies until true footsteps invade her fortress and she forces her hands inside pockets, cuts whispers short with a snap of her lips, speaks nothing. Feet pounding pavement fade fast. The solitude of silence consumes her.

VI. Introvert

The solitude of silence consumes her.
She lives in a universe of silence,
in the absence of abundant interaction.
Her heart sits in perpetual quarantine,
distanced, cleansed of each thought that can't—
won't—understand. Her mind, a haven, lacks
the judgments of others', their anger, swift
violence against every difference. Silence soothes
her sadness, her own anger. It's a type
of meditation; give time all your words
and she will pay you back in peace. Give time
your creativity, and she will play
utopia. An introvert believes
in a world of her making, bright with color.



VII. To the Character in My First Short Story

Together we made a colorful world
after years of toil, of words written,
erased, then written again. I wrote you
a purpose, and you lived a life I could
only imagine. Our journey began
in a sea of white, paper pristine, daunting
in its emptiness. Our boat is a phrase,
a beginning, our *once upon a time*,
a night, dark and storm-filled, where adventure
flourishes. I filled your sea with vessels,
black ships packed with the potential to shift
your story. We sailed to oblivion
and found new truths. We sailed to an ending
and finally found ourselves immersed in space.



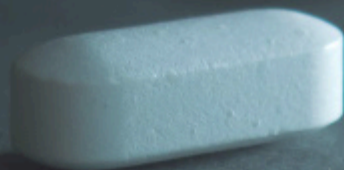


VIII. Attic Boxes

Immersed in empty space she placed herself,
soul framed in perfect pictures, gold antiques,
a tarnished ring from a tarnished marriage,
board games that barely get played anymore.
She remembers when the room was barely filled
with boxes. Her husband helped her decorate,
green wallpaper, a crib, a soul to fill it
with more life than pictures would ever have.
When pictures were all that remained, he left
for a place that would let him forget. She
stayed, traded crib for cardboard, framed what few
smiles she had. She hears his laugh, distanced,
echo of memory that takes her back
to the road he crossed, to nostalgia and sorrow.

IX. Anti-Depressant

Nostalgia and sorrow are a crossroads
and I walk the precipice between the two,
above yet enveloped. I encounter each
as I traverse mind's hills. A memory starts
smiling, sunlight bright, riding high.
Inevitable downfall strikes sudden.
Plunged into blue-black moods. Smiles shift
downward. This inconsistent mess drives me
mad. Medication, impermanent fix
for a problem that plays at permanence.
White to one side, Black on the other.
The dividing line seems far too thin
but I sit and take a moment's smooth breath
before fate shoves me one way or another.



The background of the image is a dark, moody interior space. Two arched windows are visible, one on the left and one on the right. The windows look out onto a bright, colorful sky, likely during sunrise or sunset, with hues of orange, yellow, and blue. The light from the windows casts a warm glow on the dark surfaces and creates a long, bright reflection on the floor in the bottom right corner. The overall atmosphere is contemplative and serene.

X. March 2020

Fate chose to shove us away from each other with an enemy made of microscopic acids. It burns through our cells and gives birth, multiplies, divides, conquers our beings, invades through handshakes, monthly meetings, and soon we ourselves divide. Everything cancels, classes and concerts. Chaos crawls through social media. We go shopping, find shelves barren. We go to work until that work is deemed unessential. We go to church until the most sacred meeting becomes a virtual meeting we forsake. Yet the virus bears a benefit. This Earth is made better by our forced separation.

XI. The Absence of Shadows

Has this forced separation made us strong
or did our proximity build our strength
up. Too close, we drowned in a rain of tears
and crescent gouges, in the shattered shards
of porcelain that made each step a risk
and the faded shade of someone's foreign lips
etched in red where nape meets neck. My neck,
etched in bruises shaped by your sharp knuckled
hands that dug trenches in my softened skin.
Your ring circled my finger, small manacle
that bound my life to yours. I buried it
under the oak tree, that place where our first date
began all this. The world glows brighter now
without your shadow blacking out my view.



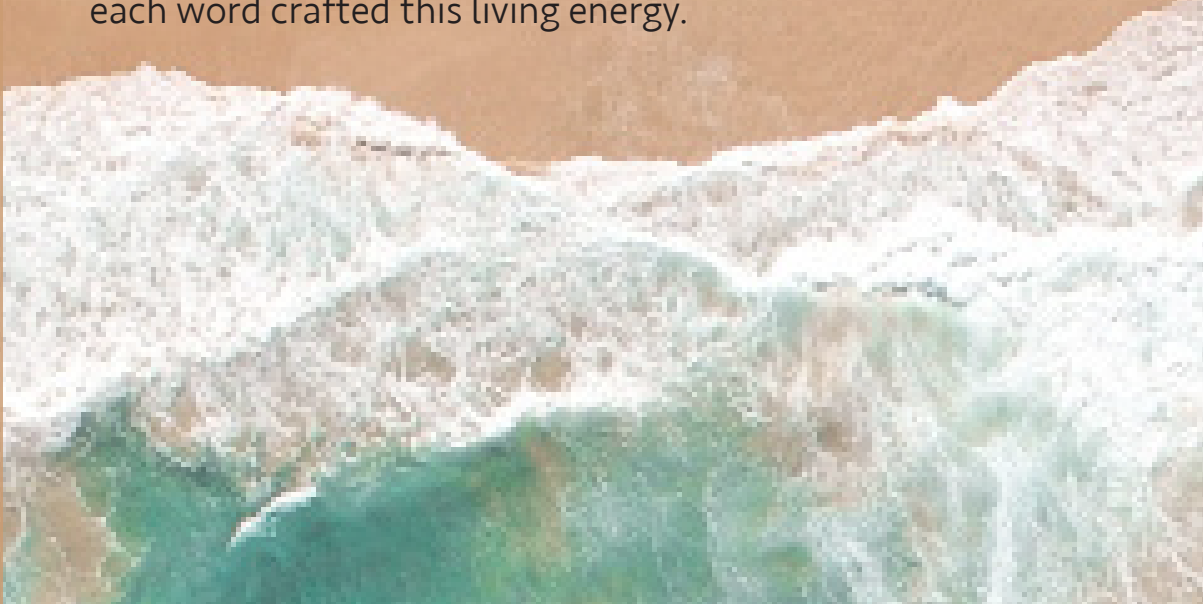
XII. Where Faith Began

The shadows no longer blacken my view,
nor do I walk alone among the dark
craggs of the valley. I found you in white,
between black lines of sacred text. For years
I read with just adventure tales in mind;
and yes, your book is filled with awesome tales
of kings and wars, but I let those consume
instead of giving myself up to true joy.
As Matthew wrote of a man bearing sins,
Mark sent him to the cross, Luke crucifies
and John sees the Lord risen in three days.
This story was written to change my life,
and each day I'm reminded of its worth.
Each day in faith brings new reasons to live.



XIII. On the Third Planet

I wake each day and find reason to thrive
in the sweet songs sung by boundless nature
given by some higher power. He chose
this land, though once its perfect fields were filled
with darkness, settled like a weighted blanket
over barren landscape. There was no water,
no sound but silence and the singular being
floating listless through the inky void.
Some sound gave structure to the sky, the ground
and shifting waters. A voice delivered
fish to twist the waves, birds to wing the air,
animals to receive names precise, unique.
Each word spoken brought love to this planet,
each word crafted this living energy.



XIV. Ars Poetica

My chosen words craft living energy
through songs I score to sing and words I write
in curling structure, through idea, creation,
the memorialization of love.

I write to reveal the parts of my soul
that my scared inner self won't let my mouth
reveal. I write to bring about justice
for the ideas that inspire me to live
better: nature in its intrinsic forms,
the battles between brain and pure instinct,
emotion in the simple, distance from
the most complex. I write poetry for
my selfish self who desires perfection
in boxes filled with potent self-expression.

XV. A Crown for Empty Spaces

I sought the empty. This found place remains
a memory with no room for regrets,
an empty home where fervent life once lived.
This place waits patient, prepared for my stand;
our favorite times remain imagined here,
silent, consumed by perfect solitude
in this colorful place we made together.
We filled this empty space and found ourselves
at a crossroads of nostalgia and sorrow.
Fate chose to shove us away from each other,
made us better in our forced separation.
Your shadow no longer blackens my view.
Each day my faith finds me reason to live.
My own words craft me living energy
to box my lonely self and express *me*.



