
From the Instructor

In “Poetry Now,” students read and write about books by contemporary North American poets, to appraise the varied ways in which poetry engages with the world. Students also engage creatively with these books, to explore authors’ thematic, linguistic, aesthetic, and formal intentions.

To complement our reading of his book, *The Constitution* (Black Ocean, 2014), poet Brian Foley asked students to write two short poems: the first using declarative language to make an assertion about the self; the second (amendment) poem, qualifying, negating, or refracting the emotional logic of the source poem.

In this wonderfully ambitious and ethically complex poem, Jimmy Sbordone demonstrates his understanding of Foley’s use of line and stanza breaks to create and destabilize meaning, to defamiliarize language so that we see and hear it anew. The title carries quietly across sections, both enacting and bridging the seeming distance between a violent history and humanity. Additionally, Jimmy displayed persistent curiosity as he grappled with similar concerns across genres. He wrote about astronomy in “Is Violence—,” as well as in his final critical engagement with Foley’s book and Cathy Linh Che’s *Split*.

— Jessica Bozek

WR 100: Poetry Now

From the Writer

The inspiration for this poem came when I was sitting in my astronomy class, and the professor showed a few artists' renderings of supernovae. The images conjured up an odd dichotomy, where one part of me almost mourned for the civilizations that may have lived near this star before the supernova. Hence, the two contrasting halves of this poem coax both of those feelings. In its concision and abrupt enjambments, this poem was a radical break from anything I had written before. It took a wealth of editing out words to pare this down to what it is now, but that process got me to appreciate every word. I intended the abundance of white space to be conducive to individual readers' connections and created a handful of double meanings and otherwise ambiguous lines.

— James Sbordone

JAMES SBORDONE

Prize Essay Winner

IS VIOLENCE—

A supernova is perhaps the most destructive process in the known universe: it is the final act of a large star that runs out of fuel. These massive explosions are so immense that they obliterate any planets or other bodies in orbit of the star. It is not purely destructive, though: a supernova is the only way to produce many of the heavier metals necessary for life as we know it on Earth.

Is Violence—

1. Our identity?

The love-
child species

Of atomic calamities
& galactic murder.

For the metals in your brain
Thank the planet

Somewhere.

You'll never know
Individual names

lost, to the event
horizon of Forget.

2. Just a wisp
of our past?

Far from it
To love arises

History's peripheral lens
Demands we utter "Oh, horror!"
So that we emerge mindful
Of a molecular act of compassion

Only caverns of our nature
Can cognize

a single point of light

Two of the poets we have studied in class (Cathy Linh Che and Brian Foley) use images of astronomy to illustrate their experiences: Che talks of "men like galaxies," while Foley tries to unpack a supernova of enlightenment stemming from a break-up. Like these two poets, I employed an objective correlative with the image of a supernova. I think this motif serves the poem well because, much like our own heritage, a supernova is a very distant series of events that is still largely vague and unknown to us: it is, in and of itself, already defamiliarized by its foreign-

ness. Although we do not understand these events, we know that they have some massive impact on our own personal development, as the heavier metals in our bodies and around the Earth (alluding to the mettle of our own identities) can only be produced in the process of a supernova. My hope is that the poem feels ethically uncomfortable: we as living organisms need the elements produced by this violent process, and supernovae always obliterate the planets orbiting around the former star. I was trying to get the readers to raise the same doubt of themselves that the speaker presents in the final scene of *Saving Private Ryan*: “Tell me I’m a good man.”

I was trying to draw from the way Foley incorporates line breaks in the middle of words or phrases to create an ambiguity through a double meaning. The example in this poem that I think was very effective was on “event / horizon” at the end of the first poem. Putting a line break there opens the door to two readings of this poem: one that reflects on the “event horizon” (the point of no return in a black hole) of forget, and one which broaches the depth of the event and the horizon of forget. Splitting the line and creating these two meanings opens the door to a plethora of interpretations of the entire poem, which was definitely a central goal for me in this poem: for Che and Foley, the speakers learn to see new insights through the same images of astronomy, and I aspired to do the same. My hope is that each reader gleans a new pearl of wisdom that I never foresaw being planted in the poem.

JAMES SBORDONE (CAS '18) is pursuing a double major in International Relations and Linguistics. Born and raised in Newton, Massachusetts, he was first inspired to write by his mother, who read Robert Frost poems aloud.