

# An American Athlete

## A Poetic Examination

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## Abstract

This project is a creative work comprised of 25 poems. The aim of this collection is to analyze the intersections of psychology, philosophy, and athletics. Among the 25 poems, various poetic forms appear, ranging from free verse to more structured styles, such as the villanelle and the sonnet. The poems are ordered in a way that represents the development of a student-athlete through the experiences of a four year undergraduate education. They draw inspiration from the author's experiences as a member of a varsity athletic team at American University. The works explore such themes as names and identity, entitlement, risk, relationships, and team dynamics.

## Prologue

A blue ink ball point pen  
is not an ideal surgical tool  
yet I have no choice but to use it,  
making my incision  
with the dull rolling point,  
cutting out a small piece of flesh  
and laying it on paper.  
I know it will fail.  
It is dead before it hits the page,  
and I don't dare dig deep enough  
to find the glittering bits of truth,  
of soul,  
to be bled with ink's modern medicine,  
then given over to be  
read, spoken, shared, chewed, and  
spit back up.

## The Fingerprint Door

Don't you need an ID at the gym?  
No reply. I didn't expect one,  
mostly because I hadn't spoken out loud.  
Instead, I hurry to keep up,  
led in between a high brick wall  
and an overflowing dumpster,  
and I feel like I should be witnessing a drug deal  
or maybe getting mugged.  
I hurry down the steep cement stairs,  
stumble, stop, and watch with wide eyes  
as she opens the box on the wall and  
carefully places the pad of her index finger on the bronze plate.  
A small red light flashes green.  
A beep.  
A click.  
She opens the door.  
They'll get your fingerprint, she says. Soon.

## Crosswalk

I used to cross the street without much of a thought.  
I'd look out for cars, motorcycles, bicycles,  
casually glance at the seasonal scenery.  
That was before the mile,  
before running slower than a 6:30 pace  
meant punishment runs and no practice or games.  
Now, approaching the crosswalk, my heart, it beats faster.  
I watch the little white lights that make up a man  
stand as the seconds tick his short life away.  
I know he'll disappear, replaced by the red hand –  
How is he so casual?  
As I pick up the pace and step onto the road,  
pavement turns to red rubber track and I'm running,  
sprinting to catch up to the heels of my teammate  
who prays the Hail Mary to a rosary in her head.

## Mistaken Identity

Working at the pool on summer vacation,  
the tiny tadpoles call me Lauren  
and answer questions about water safety.

The girls I coach giggle between drills  
and call me Coach Scho  
when they make fun of my sock tan.

In Philosophy, my German professor  
uses my last name and gets angry  
when I don't pronounce it right.

The coaches bark out orders to Schoen,  
while my teammates make "O"s with their arms  
when I score a goal – to them, I am Oni.

Walking home on an April afternoon,  
traffic speeding by, cherry blossoms in bloom,  
none of them see me or call me anything.

## Goaltending

Bruises on your body are like a Rorschach test,  
changing every day, your skin can never rest  
as it races to heal before it's hit again,  
leaving fresh ink blots like an exploding pen,  
I feel like I've gone crazy when I look at them all,  
but you're the one who chose to stand in front of the ball.

## We Walked to the Field Most Every Day

We walked to the field most every day,  
You, sunglasses on, maybe a smile? Frown?  
I wonder what it is you had to say.

You stood there, ready to mold us like clay.  
We were your team, we wanted to show this town.  
We walked to the field most every day.

We walked to your office to learn our plays,  
Caught your smirk when we acted like a clown.  
I wonder what it is you had to say.

Sometimes we'd cry, our emotions would fray,  
We never intended to let you down.  
We walked to the field most every day.

Not a team, a family, and you would allay  
Our fears, we knew we wouldn't drown.  
I wonder what it is you had to say.

That night when you called, I sat by the Bay,  
You said you were leaving, but I heard no sound.  
I still walk to the field every day.  
And I still wonder what it was you had to say.



## The Reference Call

Hello? Ah yes, how nice to hear from you!  
No, I'm not busy at all. This would be  
A perfect time to talk about that one,  
A gem if I've ever known one before!  
Her leadership qualities – yes a good  
Place to start. She leads by example – oh,  
Well yes, she was at that meeting where those  
People lost that money – but hear me out –  
Ah, well yes, she was in charge of that group,  
But that was one time, and her coworkers  
Always seem to take a liking to her.  
And she is always no-nonsense...as long  
As her coworkers are ok with it.  
Move on? Ok, accountability,  
That's her middle name! No one from her group  
Would dare show up late, unless maybe you  
Are her friend, in which case, no worries, right?  
I mean, that's loyalty! Her focus? Yes,  
I can speak to that. One time a fellow  
Employee said he was planning to set  
Fire to the office on the south side.  
She kept it to herself until she heard  
She was moving to the south side building!  
Selfish and self-serving? No way! That was  
Just her great level of focus! Is she  
Consistent? Of course! She will keep you on  
Your toes for sure! No, that does not mean she's  
Inconsistent, as she consistently  
Keeps you guessing! Oh wait...I'm getting beeped...  
Oh speak of the devil! That's her right now!  
She says someone has broken a rule I  
Wasn't aware existed! Look at that.  
Always thinking one step ahead of the rest!

## Photoshop

The photographer came back to retake our picture  
after you quit the team.

He thought about photoshopping you out,  
but the space you left would have looked  
out of place.

The background is not as pretty  
since winter had set in since the last time.

I could see the man's breath as he told us how to stand  
and focused the lens.

The regular students were bundled up in scarves and jackets.

They must have thought we were crazy,  
posing outside in jerseys and skirts.

We had no choice.

Recruiting at Columbia

*To Eileen Myles*

I have no idea what you read from your book.  
Something about fish eyes, two farts, and some diet coke.  
You read fast, because “that’s the way we use language,”  
and you “don’t care if other people catch all the words,”  
both things you’ve realized with time,  
I’ve realized we’re not discussing the same thing.  
I should have known since you’re from New York,  
that your words would pass on the  
right and speed on despite the jolt of  
the curb, like my taxi near 110<sup>th</sup> and Broadway.

To K.W.

I still remember the last time we spoke.  
At home, the seasons were changing,  
but here was still stiflingly hot,  
and your air conditioned office forced my body into a state of shock.

We sat and we talked,  
me on the black leather armchair,  
you on the opposite side,  
behind the brand new desk you would hardly use.

I grew to despise the clock on your wall,  
taunting, tick-tocking my seconds away,  
but I knew the most deep-seated hatred could not slow it down.  
So you smiled, softened the blow,

told me you wouldn't leave for two more days.  
We still had time.  
So when I stood to leave,  
I did not say goodbye.

I write you now because I want you to know,  
I wish you had had more faith in me.  
A day later, I did go back,  
and all that remained was the blank name plate beside the locked office door.

Easter

I.

I always imagined Sacrifice in the name of The Lord  
to be something done consciously,  
the slaughter of sheep on a mountain top,  
the flow of human blood down Aztec steps,  
the self-deprivation of chocolates or Facebook,  
all in mindful self-reflection.  
I think we gave up winning for Lent.  
I hope unintentional sacrifice counts, too.

## II.

Two boys slither about the Tidal Basin  
among cherry blossoms in full bloom,  
mother watching over the book of drawings  
where she builds a world.

The boys reach up, tempted by flowers,  
shake the branches of the trees,  
dance in the shower of pink and white  
that rain down in the chaos.

The all-seeing mother drags the boys away,  
who look back in longing at the Tree  
as the last petal gently hits the ground.

III.

In John, Jesus turns water to wine  
to spice up a wedding party.  
In his honor, we drank all day.

IV.

Senior Day,  
The last home game of regular season.  
The last home game of my career.  
A win would clinch a tournament spot,  
The last chance to control our own fate,  
To prolong the inevitable at least three more weeks.  
When we lost that Holy Saturday,  
When destiny was taken out of our hands,  
I realized my mortality.



## Selling Goods

I lied when the recruit asked what I thought  
about the team, the school, and our head coach.  
I had counterfeit goods that needed to be bought,  
I knew exactly how I would approach:  
“I’ve never seen a closer group of girls;  
The school? Top choice of anyone around;  
National arboretum! Black squirrels!  
And coach, she keeps us on firm, solid ground.”

There’s a chance, though I won’t be there to see,  
That the stories I told her on our stroll  
Will become the truth and she won’t get hurt.  
With wide-eyed excitement all thanks to me,  
She signed the papers to give up her soul  
And purchased the bookstore lacrosse t-shirt.

## Ode to the rain

I didn't used to like you much.  
Your mud dirtied my shoes,  
Moisture curled my straight hair,  
I slipped and fell because you made the walk so slick.  
You seeped into my phone, and now all I get is static.  
The smell of worms is nauseating.  
Facedown in your puddle  
I wish you would come back.  
I'm thirsty.

## Black Ice

It lies unseen by human eyes,  
waiting for its prey,  
surrounding itself with snow  
and other obstacles to say  
“Step here on my safe, solid ground,  
right before you here I lay.”  
Unknowingly I step forth  
to avoid the snow – and pray,  
for my feet are no longer under me,  
up in the air they stay.  
Shrieks are heard from all about  
like a victim in a play.  
But all at once I catch myself  
and glance without delay  
over my shoulder, no one there,  
I run, I run away.

## Flow

Mind and body turn to one in  
a blissful state of unawareness  
and reactivity as each movement  
and each moment  
stretch the time beyond control  
for a calmly clear  
perfection.

## When You Tore Your ACL

It reminded me of the time when  
I stood in shit and watched  
as the waterfall of neighborhood sewage  
poured out of the toilet  
and covered the basement floor.  
The orange home-depot bins  
rested by the wall where I set them  
after dad told me  
I might as well bail the Titanic.  
I could hear mom's panicked voice  
pleading with the other side of the phone to help,  
and dad's footsteps pounding up the stairs,  
carrying an armful of books,  
the last of the things we could save,  
while I stood, ankle deep.

## Pregame Speech

Ladies! Ladies!

Today is the day we've been waiting for,  
you've been training hard and you might be sore,  
but I tell you, today, we'll be great,  
just listen while I give one last update.

You, attack, your job is always simple,  
do it well, and you'll make my cheek dimple!

When you shoot, aim *between* the posts,  
*On* cage, early, and the goalie is toast.

Middies, run fast, move the ball up the field,  
there's no time to rest on attack, seal the deal,  
and recover as quick as you can the other way,  
in fact, you should probably just run all day.

Defenders, remember, you are a wall,  
and goalies, I guess...keep your eye on the ball.

Most importantly and across the board,  
do what I say, keep listening for more  
feedback – I say jump, you say how high,  
I say look at the clouds, your eyes are to the sky.

I'm wearing my lucky USA pin,  
So let's cheer, and now, get out there and win!

## Navy

They run half a lap with the American flag,  
and stand at attention during the National Anthem.  
I feel like every time that I shift my weight  
from one foot to the other,  
I assault their practiced stillness.

Two lines of girls stand shoulder to shoulder  
on the sideline during the game,  
the picture of order and composure.  
They could make a whole new team  
of the people who never see the field,  
while the eight girls on our bench leap up and down  
and hope they get to play.

When the game is over and Navy has won,  
and we've shaken hands like good sports,  
they sing the Navy Blue and Gold  
and the crowd yells back "Beat Army."  
We stand too because we have to.  
And even though my career has just ended  
before I thought it would,  
I find the strength to fight back the tears  
that are not in Navy's script.

## The Good Times

Why does it have to be so sad  
you ask after reading the poems.  
I sit in silence.  
How can I tell you that  
it's so much easier  
to explain the visible pain,  
cuts, bruises, tears,  
than it is to remember wins,  
spitting out water from laughing so hard,  
bus trips, overnights,  
how much I will miss  
every person on this team  
that I love?  
No. It has to be sad  
because it was so happy.



## The Storm Cloud

The time has come, my little friends,  
to go your separate ways,  
each of you has come so far  
has traveled days and days.  
I've gathered drops from Tennessee  
all the way to the sunshine coast,  
some from Boston, Philly, 'Cuse,  
I'm not afraid to boast,  
But you knew one day it'd be too much,  
the load has grown too heavy,  
I'm dropping you down when this is done  
whether or not you're ready.  
I hope that luck will find you each  
another cloud to build,  
but you knew this end was coming  
so for that I have no guilt.

## Post Season Displacement

I used to joke that I was in  
a four year relationship with lacrosse.  
A four year prison sentence makes more sense.  
I used to know exactly when  
to eat, sleep, exercise, shower,  
where to be, who to talk to,  
what would happen each and every day.  
Life was stable, but now they've let me out.  
I'm on the wrong side of the barbed wire,  
and there's nothing I can steal  
to make them let me back in.

## Life as a Worm

When it rains,  
The worms climb to the surface  
To breathe in fresh air  
And writhe to the pounding  
Of cleansing water.

The older ones know,  
As the beat starts to fade,  
To return to the maze of soil and rocks.  
The young chase the rain,  
But the sun chases faster.

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