

TINY VICTORIES

Honors Thesis

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Abstract

Tiny Victories is a poetry collection that was experiential as much as it was research based. In preparing for this creative project, I read many collections, and spoke to poets to discuss their process. Preparation for this collection included writing free-hand in my journal for months, and reaching back into old journals I've kept since middle school and then transferring and editing these words to craft poems. This required reflection, revisiting old pain and past loves and ultimately a reworking of my world. In this collection I explored themes of mental health, memory, nostalgia, trauma, time and healing. The title *Tiny Victories* was meant to capture a duality with tiny obviously meaning small and victory invoking a large feeling of conquest. I used this to define a concept of "baselines" without actually ever using the term. This concept was introduced to me by an old therapist and has changed my perspective and provides comfort. It basically means we all have different capacities on different days. Getting out of bed or taking a shower on some days is a real win for me, which is not to say I am not also capable of accomplishing astronomical feats. I wanted to make this focus and idea clear to validate my experience as well as potentially those of my readers. This collection features an applied study of a variety of classic forms as well as free-verse. The collection is divided into two sections titled *Unlearning* and *Relearning*, which is meant to repeat the duality within the cycle of human development, involving both regression and rebuilding. This theme is repeated throughout the collection to tell a story of revisiting and reframing trauma and experience for therapeutic purposes.

Process Information

In this collection, I wanted to apply what I had learned in my college career about crafting creative writing. To do this I had to do more research about the process, and accomplished that by visiting with different published poets and connecting with them through questions about intention and their personal process. One thing seemed to stick out as a common factor in everyone's advice: be authentic. Everyone I spoke to seemed to come back to this idea, of being confident in the development of your unique voice as a poet. I took this advice to heart and wrote about what I needed to, and what resonated with me, instead of writing about what I thought people would want to hear or to emulate my favorites.

Reflections

I learned so much through this process. Not only have I learned about the composition and editorial aspect of arranging a poetry collection, but it was also an intensely therapeutic process that forced me to analyze my own patterns, trauma, past and memories. I revisited old journals and letters for inspiration and rewrote plenty of pieces. This process was intensive and emotional, allowing me to reconnect with and observe intimate parts of my psyche that had previously been compartmentalized. This taught me a lot about the emotional task that comes with writing authentic poetry from the heart. For the future, I want to gain more mastery over different forms and utilize those. I also want to experiment with more line breaks, indentations and just the general rhythm and flow of my free-verse poems because I stayed a bit within my comfort zone for this collection.

Tiny Victories

Kayma Snook

I dedicate these words to anyone who has ever doubted the power and validity of their own voice or experience. Your existence is a necessary art. Keep creating.

Unlearning

FORGIVENESS, PERSISTENCE

When I feel like this,
All raw skinned and thin
Like every half-smoked cigarette
Left to dissolve in the rain
I pray,
To a god without a name
That the times I hurt someone,
Is not what stays.
I've learned happiness isn't something
You can just make stick
Only I can forgive myself,
Meet eyes with the monster inside that only wants to eat me alive
Only I can unwrap the bitten fingertips of clenched fists
Whisper into palms all the apologies and affirmations
Never delivered,
But always deserved

BODY

Sometimes my body is vessel to hold mac & cheese

Sometimes a pillow for my cat to sleep

It has been a weapon

Fashioned carefully into hardness

An arrowhead

It has been a wasteland I toss trash into

Which splinter inside me

Like chicken bones

It can be a boomerang in which I distance myself from

And returns back to me in unexpected moments of sympathy

Sometimes my body is an abandoned building

Set up for squatters

Hallways congested with ghosts

It can be artistic

In its movement and what I fashion from it

Sometimes it's sacred geometry:

Everything with a purpose, a perfection

A meaning

It has been my greatest treasure, my most cursed cruelty

But only one thing is it always:

Mine.

GROWING DOWN

Do we see people as they are, or as we want to?

growing up came with dismantling skewed childhood views

eventually

the tooth fairy became my mother

my father became an asshole

and God became just wishful thinking

I wonder if anyone's ever seen me as I really am

when you grow up in a broken home

you never learn how to build a structurally sound shelter on your own

my father was a contractor

who made beautiful houses

but our home never came to fruition,

always under construction

he passed on to me the pain of misplaced effort

in the form of two blue thumbs

with no blueprints

I have my mother's eyes

sometimes grey

sometimes blue

sometimes green

always pleading: please

while in my own bed, I want to go home
nostalgic for a feeling I've never known
I've learned to fashion temporary shelter
from the ruins at hand
materials salvaged in self-destruction

I've grown tolerant to chaos
need something stronger
I find a sense of belonging
in the greedy lips and strangling grip of a stranger.
on psychedelics, staring at the rainbow grease puddle sinking in the sidewalk
let it be a leak into another dimension,
a world meant for me

life feels like a long commute home
it's rush hour
cars crawling
furious drivers sing to silence through
muted snarling
and the guardrail is calling my name like the cold side of the pillow

death is a tall black Victorian-style house
with bone white trim
out front, bushes of pink chrysanthemum
the grim reaper sleeps in the tower,
spooning his scythe
each day I
creep closer to the great mahogany doors
to let out the breath I've held in for too long

and whisper under it,
honey, I'm home

SESTINA

I remember our kitchen, a jungle of house plants
 how the sun stretched over the tile to kiss the cat,
 in the same spot every morning. I remember how you'd save every jam jar
 to fill with buttons, pennies, pencils: small, organized chaos feels fine.
 I remember my resourcefulness, as much as the violence.
 It was not yours or mine, but something we kept from our childhood address.

What makes a home? Is it the roof over us? The address
 on the mailbox? The posters we hung up? The flowers I plant
 in a crystalline vase, center table, just for them to succumb to the violence
 of nature a week later. Maybe it's the cat,
 the way he looks so at peace, contented. Okay fine,
 he's not always happy but neither are we - the way we jar

each other with rage. Why can't we walk away? Leave the front door ajar
 let the breeze in, so I can feel the full weight of its empty - address
 me - head on - what we're working with, where we're working from. I'm not fine.
 you need nutrients for growth, some places are just starved of it. The pothos plant
 reminds me of myself, leaves yellowing, vines crawling, yearning. The cat
 is not something to hold on to for too long, he'll turn to violence

like a switch, bite the hand that feeds him, this violence
 is not the answer, it never claimed to be. We can trap our fears in jars
 to keep and hold like something sacred. Refuse to learn from the cat
 about brutal honesty and acceptance, instead, buy myself a dress.
 If I can't manifest success I'll dress up as it, wear red lipstick to bed. Plant

seeds of trying, pray they'll grow into sunflowers with big fine

smiling faces that will turn to one another when they're out of sun. To feel fine...
I forget what it feels like. Who would I be with the absence of perpetual violence
gnawing from the inside? Like my irrational fear of the neighborhood nuclear plant
where people breed war, when it's safety we need. Keep destruction in a jar.
Play chicken with triggers, wipe clean the address,
evidence that others have been here before. I swear he's an evil fucker too, the cat

I mean - unconcerned with eyes all knowing. Does every cat
sit on the sofa like he's God? Maybe he does know. And we are fine,
even if we don't feel it. Maybe we can build without an address,
wherever we go, recast the role of violence
as an essential piece of the flow, smash the samples in their jars,
stop obsessing over wet specimens, how to float in formaldehyde. Not every plant

can be preserved, life's lawless address of ultraviolence
lives in the cat, who embraces his nature and gets by just fine
no jar can hold our roots. Where we land, we'll plant.

ANTI-SONNET

A quiet, stubborn rage
sits down deep like a sunken stone
I see you, in your homemade cage
I see myself in you, the fear of being left alone
I said it wasn't like you
to fight with commands
taste hate, neither spit nor swallow, but chew
all I could see - feel - was my throat in your hands
the night you shattered the light fixture in frustration
I couldn't help but shiver
you mistook my fear for an accusation
in your fire, I wither
this self pity, hatred, all consuming
the destructive nature of assuming

THE BINARY

I don't know much about anything
but if there's one thing I know
(besides the inescapable fact that we all die someday)
It's that there's always more than two types of people
no matter the variety of binary they're enforcing
there's always more than two choices
we just reduce

I fight with my professor over the "validity" of a singular they
she asks if I've been marked down for its usage in my academic writing,
I tell her passive aggressively:
*most professors can recognize and appreciate humanity, experiential accuracy
the evolution of how we understand ourselves*

I was a dog person
until a cat padded over my heart while sleeping on a friend's couch,
chose my chest to lie in
just one of the million moments when I re-remember
I don't need words to define love, at least definitively

I used to think I only liked boys
like that
until I met someone who showed me it's okay
to be different versions of yourself on different days,
that no one stays the same
she taught me it's brave to love things that don't love us back

to be yourself, when everyone is trying to find somebody else to be
there will always be another world we'll never know completely
but I know
as good as anybody
that people are mostly experts in themselves
and you are not entitled to an explanation
but responsible,
for repeatedly
taking oneself apart
and putting it all back together again

a process of being
instead of becoming
there's no missing pieces to discover,
nothing broken to fix
a mosaic: already complete in its fragmented state
we need space to grow
just as much as shelter
there's freedom in
that left unfinished

SUBJECTIVE SATIATION

"If this isn't nice what is?"

- Kurt Vonnegut

I never minded my cluttered closet
the ash and soil and cat hair in everything
I always thought of

Do you believe in destiny?

to be too romantic a concept to meditate on
all I knew was that I was destined to pay rent next week
and therefore destined to put these non slip shoes on
then fill the tank to take me to my \$5/h waitressing gig

my parents taught me
you don't need money to be happy
but when they stopped making dinner
I realized you need money to eat
I've learned how to smile
and mean it
on an empty belly
I taught myself
and I'm still learning

there's this passage
I still remember from reading

The Family Under The Bridge

in my 6th grade English class

where the homeless man sits down outside

the French restaurant he can't afford a crumb from,

squints his eyes and bops his head

to make a dancing show of the Parisian lights,

inhales just the distant smell of decadence for his dinner

and is satisfied

BLOODLETTING

all of my poems stopped having happy endings
because I didn't care if the ending was happy or not
so long as it came
how can you find the words
to tell someone you love
you want to die

the only thing I wanted then was to become nothing
my mother drove me home wailing in the passenger seat,
gritting my teeth to stop myself from slamming
my skull on the dashboard so all
the evil thoughts could tumble out

when we got home,
she drew me a bath like I was a baby again
made a makeshift womb of warm water for me
to lie in - fetal position -
overflowing with pain
swallowing water so
we could become one
and the same:
a flowing substance
something less sensitive
with the tenacity it takes to survive

I know the feeling
of being trapped in your own skin
the feeling of nothing that's so consuming
you begin to succumb,
become it
to want to let the blood out of your
wrists like weightless ribbons
if only bloodletting were a viable practice
if only there were a sure-fire way...
to get the evil out

we have to find better methods of coping
than cutting ourselves open!
destroying ourselves everyday
in little ways
lusting for death, an addiction
smoking too much
driving too fast on the highway
developing a sense of apathy,
this reckless honesty
like the way the brutal truth
pours out onto the page
ink stained

and that's all it was at first,
a looming blotch of violent thought
until the day I became Icarus
flew too close to the sun
except the sun was black and empty

Apollo with a veil of darkness
and I -
I was smitten

all I can say
after coming back from such a dark place
is it feels surreal
unnatural
like you don't belong

jamais vu:
the French phenomenon of being in
a place you always knew
yet it's unfamiliar now
as if someone had cut you open
and surgically removed every memory of it
from inside of you

I had to learn all over again
how to cope with basic existence
just. being. here.
I began again, how everything begins
with baby steps
start using old birthday cards as bookmarks
to remind me of this mantra:
you are loved
you are alive
and you cannot let yourself die
because you'd take pieces of your siblings'

souls along with you

if you crawled into that years-in-the-making,
imagined, golden tomb
if the world doesn't feel like it was made for you
that's because it wasn't
but we can make it ours
we can learn together
after coming back from such pain
how to love again
on accident,
in little ways
when you forget to hold back, find yourself laughing
that bottom of the belly, hands in the mud
natural kind of laugh

we can find a way
stay up until the middle of the night
for that glimmer of a moment where we finally feel okay
because Emerson said the purpose of the stars
is so we can stare blindingly
sit directly
face to face
with the sublime
and here we are on the hood of your car on this January night
winter is eating us alive
but it's okay
because if we can feel the bite
of the bitter cold it means we're still breathing

and living is something we're meant to do
and when the warm springtime sunshine returns
we'll feel that too
but for now I'll wait it out with you
we're supposed to be here
and I swear to god
we're gonna be alright

CORRECTING MISCONCEPTIONS OF OWNERSHIP

when your new girlfriend posted a picture of the two of you
for your anniversary
my thumb hovered over the screen
frozen mid mindless scrolling
I tried to remember
what it was like to stand next to you

in the photo
you were wearing *my* sweater
her looking at you,
you were cradling
my guitar
in your hands
by the plastic Christmas tree
we used to pull out of its cardboard box once a year
and stack together like layers in a cake

I know that spot on the rug
it used to be mine
or it felt like it was

when I think on it
I had surely inherited that sweater from a friend
and that guitar was overflow from my Father's own collection
nothing is ever ours

no matter how much you work, pay or pray for it

I know, this year, your mother has probably already given
her a set of Christmas PJ's to match the family
but I'll remember fondly
how miraculous it felt
to hold you
even if only for
a little while

MEMORY

whatever I touch turns to

memory

too quickly

the Midas of impermanence

I wish you were here with me

no - I wish I didn't

always feel this yearning

this mourning

when I am here

I am also not

instead

lost in thought

hollowed

retreated into a more familiar existence

the present becomes the past so rapidly

my mind feels like a spinning top

that never stops

wobbling

like the Earth rotating on its tilted axis

moving from

coming to

leaning toward

then away

from the sun

learning

unlearning

piecing together

and coming undone

REPETITION

moving in circles
and forward
simultaneously:
biking home
out of your backpack
pokes a paper bag
from the grocery
around the bottleneck of
your favorite brandy

I think of you
while I wait for you
to come home to me

yesterday's criticisms echo
through me
I am not here
not inside this body
I offer to you, upon returning
like an apology gift

WHEN THERE IS NOTHING LEFT

when there is something we cannot give one another,
can we build it?
look for it, wait for it, together?
when there is nothing left to give or exchange - sans words today
will you sit with me? In silence,
until the words come or sleep finds me
we'll keep buying produce that goes bad before we use it:
bananas drooping in the kitchen like ripe corpses
collecting flies
forget the cuppa on the counter,
let it grow cold

when I let the hair in my armpits and on my legs go,
grow
become unladylike, unruly
will you hold me?
when I get like this, too sad to make a meal
but not to snack on the individual ingredients
when I talk like this,
like it makes no difference
swearing it all ends up in the same place
will you sit with me?
let the sun swallow us
be content in our discontent
alive in our fear
survivors in solidarity

Relearning

TINY VICTORIES

I got out of bed today,
not to meet friends or keep appointments,
but for no reason other than a cup of coffee
and a piece of leftover cheesecake.

I dressed up today,
not for other eyes,
but, for no reason other than to watch the way my skirt floats
around my hips when twirling to the tune of a swing record.

I went outside today,
not to weed the garden or fetch the mail,
but for no reason other than to lie in the grass, to feel the sun and smell the dirt.

I didn't call you today,
not because I wanted to give you space or felt simply, that you'd be better off without
me,
but because, lately, I've been regaining my footing in a world
I've since realized is my own for the making

OBLIVION

it seems you can never find the cicada singing
unseen concerto
summer oblivion
only at its most vulnerable, most beautiful
after cracking open and climbing out of
its protective skeleton

how brave it is
to sit in chartreuse solitude
to trust the sun will come for you
in time: warm and dry your
fresh, moist flesh
to know, that somewhere in
an illuminated future
there will be wind in your wings
and a scream in your heart again

MARCH SNOW

came falling, piling up
slowly, silently
laying a quilt of quiet
over the obnoxious junk
in our backyard
putting chaos at peace

like how my mother
is made younger
when she slips into sleep
on the swivel chair
huddled by the space heater,
in front of the TV
while *Cheers* reruns
play through static flurries
a couple hollow wine bottles at her feet

the yellow-green clock numbers glow: 9:33
she has to be up at 3 in the morning
I stir her into a half-here state
just enough to lead her to bed
lay two more duvets over her body
as a couple of Chihuahuas curl into the curves of her calves

I find my place in the next room

and watch the snowfall in a silence so
beautiful I cannot speak
making certain my loneliness

DORMANCY

why do we punish ourselves for our natural pathology
the way so many organisms require a sunken state,
a shivering temperature to stimulate a necessary dormancy

how the redwoods rely on fire
a burning erasure
an internal catastrophe
a moment of silence
heed an ancient knowledge

waves of suffering tend to ripple
into all my reactions,
it seems
we're more animal than we pretend to be
more so ruled by nature than we'd like to believe
when I call you arrogant, egotistical,
I mean, me too.
we're both just foraging for more shiny
fragments of trash to collect and covet like crows

fall that fades into winter has always been my favorite
it's the one time a year we can
inhale decay,
look upon the vivid colors of death
witness the morbidity of existence
and feel comfortable to call it what it is:
beautiful

MY OLDEST FRIEND

Is a spider plant
that I can't kill
and that's saying
a lot
given my record

You gave me a pack
of rolling papers
that lasted longer
than it took
for us to fall
apart, again
and that's saying
a lot
given my worst habit

I loved you
and I could not say
anything

THANKSGIVING

One year my mother brought home a turkey

Alive

But barely

Wheezing through a broken neck

She said every living thing

Deserves love

And I resented her

For taking on the responsibility

Of resolving the world's cruelties

And failing miserably

I wish she'd left it to die

On the side of the road

Alone,

At least it wouldn't have been

For anybody else

BLUE

we were in the back seat of the car
windows steamed with passion
we were crying
until we were
laughing
because it hurt so much
then we were touching, fumbling
grasping for something
to fill the empty space between us
you were whispering
please don't leave me
as if people can ever keep each other

I wanted to inhale the ghost falling out
your throat like a lost soul
make it tangible
the space where the cold air met your warm sigh
breathe you in and hold it here
let it haunt
my insides

I want to be as sturdy as you need me to be

you used to let me talk about feelings in colors
It's always been easier for me to explain things
metaphorically
to look at life through poetry

kissing was hot pink
getting high was chartreuse
holding on too tight
white knuckle tight
and the feeling left in my hands after
letting go was a lonely shade of blue

we were in the back seat
looking up into the blue black
through the moon-roof
full of the numbness that follows
feeling too much all at once

we sat in silence
drowning in a black and white truth
we had been born from different kinds of love:
you couldn't understand my hesitation
and I couldn't comprehend your faith

you reached for my hand over the console
I let my fingers find the spaces between yours
squeezed
held tight
knuckle white
and let you go,
closed the car door behind me
and walked home
pockets stuffed with
ten fingers

stained indigo

WHAT CAN I GIVE TO YOU?

I

the crushing weight of an empty page
beckons to be filled
or forgotten
how can I arrive in a moment without immediately
preparing for it to leave me,
or me, it
when you cannot coax the devil
out from inside your ears
in solitude, you can set the value of anything
in your fixation alone
there's nothing to compare it to,
so I won't have to bargain with strangers
on what we're willing to pay
there's no price to life
yet I'm bidding it away

II

what can I write to you, that is worth anything?
what can I say that has not already been said?
what can I offer except this: I am human, and it hurts to be.
my brain, someday, is all fire and no forgiveness.
flashbacks to a war I don't remember
what first made me so afraid?
or is it worse

the always lurking anxiety:
the itch I cannot reach,
the pimple I must pick
my greatest fear materialized:
that there is, has always been
no explanation, no meaning
the world goes on for forever,
for what?
I entertain the possibility
that there's really
nothing to it

JUST LIKE HIM

when I was in the third grade,
I went to my friends to play imaginative games
and try on different characters
her older brother had friends over,
loud laughing boys, who took up space
I was embarrassed by their ability to
fill a room with themselves so shamelessly
when dinner arrived they flooded in from the basement,
I hid my stuffed toy beneath the table

we sat around a tilted tower of pizza boxes
I was taught the polite portion size was two slices
but one boy, sitting across from me
did that thing thirteen year old boys do:
dare themselves, then try to prove it to you
he bet he could guzzle down 8 slices
in one sitting

long after most everyone had their fill and
retreated to the cave to play videogames
I stayed glued to my chair, fixated,
making my crust pieces last - tummy rumbling

when he finally finished his very own, whole pie
grease rolling down his chin

he let out a tremendous belch that
tickled all the children still present
except me

I was too busy deciding right then
that I wanted to grow up to
be just like him

CRAB APPLE TREE

the day came this week,
as it always does
that I cannot be bothered to leave my bed
for much else but to empty the ashtray

I wrestle with bedsheets and lie defeated
peer through the blinds
from my window I can see
a flowering crab apple tree

spring is here and she has changed
from barren branches
to clustered soft white blooms

when the wind blows
she cries softly
flowers falling out of her

I mourn the presence of empty space,
the cold that passes through her

the thing about intention,
is it's uselessness in the failure of fruition
my father meant for her to
be a Macintosh,
but instead had planted
seeds of resentment

DANDELION

From the French "Dent de lion"

Meaning teeth of the lion

The dandelion pays no heed to whether

We name it a flower

Or a weed

It pushes through the concrete

Instinctively

Unconcerned

With the gap in your understanding

IN DEFENSE OF SYLVIA PLATH

the world is cruel
and how much crueler
when you're a poet and a woman
while they just see weakness
with a death wish

to have your pain live on long after you
manipulated, misinterpreted
your abuser takes an eraser to your notes,
the only evidence left of your eyes

resentment illuminated,
glowing, glorified
a mystery made of your misery

rest peacefully
in a tomb of your own intuition
unquestioned

to live closely with death, is more honest
than speaking as if immune to it
no matter who we think we are,
what power we believe we possess over anything
she was right
mortality is our mutual condition

in the end,
it's the small things we failed to recognize
that will eat us alive

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The epigraph in “Subjective Satiation” is taken from “If This Isn’t Nice, What Is?: the Graduation Speeches and Other Words to Live By”. *Vonnegut, Kurt, and Dan Wakefield. Seven Stories Press, 2020.*

“Subjective Satiation” refers to “The Family under the Bridge”. *Carlson, Natalie Savage., and Garth Williams. Harper, 2019.*

About the Poet

Kayma Snook is an emerging poet from the small town Upton, Massachusetts. She will graduate in 2020 from Salem State University with a Bachelor's degree in English. *Tiny Victories* is her second poetry collection, preceded by *To Burn*. Her poetry has been her source of reflection and expression since preschool. She is inspired by the natural world, death, love, and people. She loves houseplants, Earl Grey tea, roller skating and antiques.

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