

# Coinage

by

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# COINAGE

BY ALEC HARRIS

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## TALKING ABOUT AND TALKING AS: AN INTRODUCTION

This collection started with a dare. My Professor and eventual thesis advisor, Elizabeth Willis, dared me to write a bad poem. It was junior year and I had been having trouble writing. I often found myself in some hazy rabbit hole thinking about thinking about thinking. If I tried to write, my eyes would leave the screen or notebook and scan aimlessly, I can only assume, in hopes of finding the back of my head. I found nothing. There is a life-threatening anxiety that arises from an empty mind—a fear that the mind will stay drifting forever. Professor Willis must have recognized this. She called for something rough, something my mind could catch on.

The dare turned into “What Economists Look Like,” (25). I was intrigued by the voice of the poem: part skeptical, part analytical, part careless, and part self-deprecating. It afforded me a new energy. I knew this strange, little poem felt good. It felt like breaking rules in the right way or for the right reasons. I wanted to learn more about how this voice could behave in other poems and exactly why it felt like progress. As an English and economics double major, this was the first time the two were explicitly fighting to occupy the same space.

English, more specifically poetry, and economics have always been separated in my mind. When I tend to them individually, I find them both particularly and uniquely beautiful. Poetry allows me to tap into parts of the self that are unknowable. With a specific combination of words, line breaks, and white space, a poem can act as an exact articulation of intricate and oftentimes oppressive emotions. The work of a poem can connect, enliven, and activate readers by clearing a common ground. Alternatively, economics taps into another part of the self—the self that must make practical, everyday decisions and interact with others. Economics uses its hands. It illustrates that everyone has a personal budget constraint and everyone is constantly aware of their opportunity costs, exactly what they are not doing. Economics details metered solutions without leeway. Where poetry explores and exposes uncertainty, economics has it built into its foundation—the numbers derived from economic models are strict on the surface, but teeming with anxieties underneath. Poetry reveres and is guided by language. In economics, trade is a different type of language, a way to communicate what matters based on analyzing an individual’s specific decisions.

As I continued through college, switching from one headspace to the other became increasingly difficult. English then econ then English then econ required more acrobatics the deeper into the subjects I went. The languages became less and less translatable. The divide between the two got wider and somewhere, in some assignment, some discussion, I got lost in transit. “What Economists Look Like” felt like a victory because it gave legitimacy to my position. The poem centers on an economist and uses analytical language common to the world of economics and business: “Accordingly,” “in aggregate.” With permission to write a bad poem I allowed my economic self to come forth. Writing a bad poem meant writing a new poem; bad is new because new is uncomfortable. I created an environment where both poet and economist could coexist and a vocabulary with which both poet and economist could communicate. In this poem I simultaneously talk about and talk as economics, talk about and talk as poetry.

Now that I am leaving school, it strikes me just how important it is to create a space for myself. I have grown accustomed to the classroom and in just over three months I begin my first salaried job at an investment research firm. I will have to keep carving out a home for a finance poet like myself. This collection begins the labor of creating a space, a currency.

In time, people have forgotten the reason why higher is better.

—Alan Lightman, *Einstein's Dreams*

Now imagine turning this line sideways to lay it horizontal.

—Liz Lerman, *Hiking the Horizontal*

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## Utils

Let's count them like we can.

This is the measure  
of happiness,  
of pleasure.  
Put them in a beaker,  
Bunsen-burn them,  
run a regression.

This T-bone steak  
is pleasure.  
This T-bone steak  
might still be pleasure.  
This T-bone steak  
is pain.

We've excised 3-dimensional talk—  
Bentham is our angel investor.

The spectrum is safe  
and polarizing  
as in a parent's  
"how was your day, honey?"  
met with "good," "good,"  
"good."



## What Economists Know

I am in the business  
of understanding fear.

I used to worry  
about what remained  
on a menu  
uneaten.  
Here, choices  
know no tyranny.

If I'm not enjoying  
a T-bone steak,  
my 21.99  
is growing safely  
in a mutual fund.

Sincere questions  
for those  
who nurture  
my 21.99:

On what teat  
does my 21.99 suckle  
and  
does it remember  
the pocket  
it came from?

My 21.99,  
it is  
part Eli Lilly,  
part Merck,  
part Glaxo.  
It's fun  
betting on drugs  
in the pipeline.

My fund is fancy  
and vehicular,  
it was almost  
a steak.

To be fair,  
I'm still

in training.  
I feel too much  
for phantom steak.

Every decision  
has an other.  
My job  
is to capture  
these others.

Decisions are simple  
because equations are simple  
because variables  
do the capturing, it boils  
down to numbers, numbers  
are manageable.

I am in the business  
of boiling numbers.

## Gold

A hedge against inflation,  
it reliably  
outperforms prices.

The selling points:  
gold is pretty and  
gold is historically pretty.

We are kept afloat  
by a lily pad.

This brings us to 1637,  
the Dutch Golden Age.  
The tulip is so beloved  
a single bud  
is sold  
for several times  
a yearly salary.

When the market crashed,  
the investor sat curbside  
bulb in hand,  
sinking.

If the gold market crashes,  
the investor,  
exposed to inflation  
and its dissolving powers,  
descends with only  
a pretty twinkling in hand.

## How Alka-Seltzer Dissolves

Citric acid and sodium bicarbonate yield  
carbon dioxide, sodium citrate, and water.

This monkey's fist will unclench  
with enough water and time.

On December 8th, 1994  
Bayer stock dropped \$200.

The rippling subsides quickly  
in the patter of an IV drip.

Ol' Speedy says:  
"Plop plop, fizz fizz."

An individual is forgotten  
in the meat of a bell curve.

Sooner or later  
we creak like old houses do.

Outside the nurses slant,  
smoking the day past.

## Job Prospect

I have situated myself  
in between. I thought  
this would give me  
a vantage point,  
a pristine candidacy.  
In reality, I am standing  
mid highway: my brain  
runs antiparallel  
and on fumes.

I catch myself  
saying things like,  
“into the belly  
of the beast.”  
I am saying them  
all the time.

I am drawn to words  
like “development”  
and “program”  
and especially  
“development program.”

Different things  
ask different things of me  
I am trying all over.

I have said the word “I”  
8 now 9 times  
in this poem  
what does that say  
about my capacity  
for teamwork.

## Salarium

Ducats, daughters,  
what's the difference:  
if it's not merchandise,  
it's love that has you  
in a bind.

We deal with life  
through currency—  
it's easier in a deck.

So what's your currency of choice?  
Have you proved your mettle?  
Are you worth your salt?  
Your weight in gold?

A daughter doesn't fit  
in a coin purse.  
She's rosy and warm  
and beating familiar blood.

The coins  
tell a similar story.  
To check for authenticity  
you're encouraged  
to bite them—  
the ones that dimple  
are the ones you want.

## Preparation

Coach says,  
“If you’re 15 minutes early  
you’re on time,  
if you’re on time  
you’re late.”  
Likewise,  
if you are standing still  
you are falling behind.

This is not a lesson  
in Economics, although  
it helps with the poem:  
if prices balloon,  
a paycheck in hand  
can no longer carry you  
to the next one.  
This means you should  
find a better place  
for that 21.99  
than your gut.  
Your kids’ kids’ kids  
will thank you  
when they get extra legroom  
on their flight to Napa.

The space under my mattress  
has been cleared.  
To relax  
would be irresponsible:  
I invest  
with a chip on my shoulder.

When we run marathons,  
the fear, I believe,  
is that the guy  
paid to set the pace,  
paid to make it  
fast and fair,  
doesn’t drop out,  
but instead  
continues on his high  
and finishes the race.

Consistency  
is not enough,  
your fast  
must be getting faster,  
your growth  
must be growing.

Before, when I said  
this is not a lesson  
in Economics,  
I meant it  
in a human way.  
Weimar Republic Germany  
prices are hyperinflating.  
The 11am pub-goers  
have figured out as much—  
buy two beers at once,  
it's cheaper that way.  
Prices rise  
as the afternoon  
yawns past.

Economics  
can save you some marks,  
but it'll warm your beer.  
The stakes get higher, though.

I have spent each day  
bracing for the next.



## Invisible Hand

With a lawyer's grace  
my father explained English,  
"this poetry stuff," precisely,  
was a luxury.  
I've yet to digest that.  
Inessential, indulgence,  
lavishness—I'd rather stop.  
The math holds.

With a father's grace  
my lawyer explained volleyball  
was a luxury.  
Petty, inconsequential—  
the markets clear.

My family taught me  
we live  
for the book first.  
The opposite—  
how  
daring  
to live  
for the violin  
that comes after  
the train ride home.

## Notes on “Invisible Hand”

My dad considered the CIA.  
He was recruited,  
asked to shoot.  
They needed to make sure  
he could shoot.  
He could shoot.

An agent is on  
another's itinerary.  
My mom knew that.  
She wrote him a poem.

I don't know  
what it said exactly,  
but what stuck was,  
“I love you,  
but not enough  
to uproot to Guam.”

I'd like to think  
he was moved by it.  
Understood  
immediately,  
taped it  
to his tie rack.

I choose to see my dad  
wrenched by a poem.

## Consumer Confidence

In aggregate,  
we decide  
whether we float  
or not.  
Sentiment  
can drive the economy.  
Fear of fear  
keeps us  
in a recession.

We are  
self-fulfilling  
or self-feeding—  
it's one of those.  
Whatever it is,  
it's fast and  
has something to do  
with being on or off  
a wagon.

Economists  
talk of traps.  
A poverty trap  
is more like a trench.  
Having no money  
is muddy—  
you need money  
to get money.  
A liquidity trap  
is also like a trench.  
Under the mattress  
seems most fertile  
for green things.

We need a term  
to explain why  
we can't move.  
We need a term  
to explain why  
we aren't moving.  
We need a term  
to explain why  
we keep returning  
to some sick equilibrium.

Biologists  
dismiss chicken-egg  
in one breath:  
“It’s the egg.”

I wish it were that easy.  
I turn over  
the same leaf  
every week.

I try different names, though.  
The latest was  
“artistic reallocation.”

I end up  
in the same place  
wanting  
the same things  
executed  
on the same timeline  
looking  
for a different name.

I’ve written about this before.  
It was something about a wagon.

## Job Offer

After the mind games  
in regards to  
the mind games  
they give me money.

Additionally,  
they give me access  
to the adult lexicon.  
I get benefits—  
I preen myself  
with words like “dental”  
in its noun form.

My safety hinges  
on a few words  
most often three:  
“regret to inform” or  
“extend an offer.”  
HR won’t know  
if I lineate them.

The trick with  
receiving the former  
is believing the dominoes  
fall similarly or the grass  
is equally as inviting.

I have experience with this one—  
dominoes are a career path,  
faith in momentum.  
Green grass is comfort  
in belonging.  
Their prose poem  
told me so.

## Model

When I was ten,  
I met Rod Blagojevich.  
Stuck out  
my left hand.

He smiled,  
then corrected me.  
Called me  
“young man.”

## Canongate Kirkyard

Step one  
was Scotland.  
I heard about  
Canongate Kirkyard  
and two residents  
of interest—  
Adam Smith  
and Robert Fergusson.

Step one:  
be in the midst  
of two greats—  
economist and poet  
only 50 paces apart.

Step one:  
it was supposed  
to move me,  
make me consider  
the worms that  
degraded both brains,  
comment on texture.  
I would use the word  
“sinewy” for one of them,  
or maybe “gristly.”

I felt nothing.  
Their bodies  
were long gone  
and so were  
the worms  
that knew them.

The only remains  
were their stones.  
Robert Burns  
wrote Fergusson’s epitaph;  
Smith’s epitaph  
was “Gifted  
by Adam & Company  
in 2006.”  
That had marketing  
written all over it.

When companies  
donate millions  
never anonymous,  
how are we  
supposed to feel?  
When a poet  
afraid of dying  
in an asylum,  
concusses himself  
into depression  
and dies in an asylum  
at 24, how are we  
supposed to feel?

My trajectory was off  
from the beginning.  
Adam Smith  
did not write textbooks,  
dry and unforgiving.  
Robert Fergusson  
was originally  
laid to rest  
in an unmarked grave.  
They knew much about  
each other's discipline.

Assignment one:  
learn about consumption—  
poem and business.  
Learn about the worms.



## Vegas

For my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday,  
my dad took me  
to Vegas

We talked retirement,  
“the next step.”  
We can’t just fish.  
Think two months in:  
it’s hard to enjoy  
what doesn’t feel  
brutally earned.

We talked depression,  
“the mist settling.”  
Think sinusoidal  
plus hiccups.  
Think ceilings:  
there’s a limit  
to up.

In the airport,  
I watched a man  
play the slots  
for two hours.

The way the wheels  
turn and jerk  
to a halt,  
the chance  
for a chance,  
must speak  
to a solitary soul.

Maybe things  
will line up today.  
Maybe today  
is the new leaf.

## Economists Ponder the Human Condition

### I. Sunk Cost

Life is an accumulation  
of sunk costs.  
Like all sunk costs  
it's sunk.  
A gold necklace of mine  
is at the bottom  
of some lake  
at some summer camp—  
it's covered with clay  
by now.

This is not  
the curbside investor  
sinking.  
Sunk as in gone—  
a lost cause.

Gold is pretty.  
Don't waste your time  
writing a poem about it.

## II. Depreciation

Your bulldozer creaks.  
The building's insulation thins—  
the workers are cold.  
In short,  
everything rusts.

On the bright side,  
the breakdown  
is tax deductible  
and replaceable.

My dad's hip:  
the socket is metal  
the ball is ceramic.  
He knows  
what it feels like  
to degrade,  
to take inventory  
of the self.

### III. Free Lunch

No such thing.

In a vacuum  
lunch can be free.  
In reality,  
someone out-of-mind  
is paying.  
In reality,  
there are no vacuums.

We can't bank  
on altruism.  
It's enough to know  
there's an entire  
class of metaphors  
concerning bootstraps.

#### IV. Supply and Demand

Everybody  
occupies a spot  
on a curve  
if they are willing  
and able  
to feel small.

Each person  
is a single exchange.  
If we pay attention  
and magnify,  
every point  
tells a story.  
For my first father's day  
in memory  
I bought my dad  
a battery-operated fish  
singing "Don't Worry,  
Be Happy."  
24.99  
was the most money  
I could fathom.

Given the trend line  
no one magnifies,  
no one cares  
for these little plots.

## V. Scarcity

Every thing  
is finite.

How do we manage  
disequilibrium?

We allocate  
the best we can.

## Record

In seventh grade  
I beat myself bloody  
over a wrestling match.  
No prize money  
up for grabs  
only stats,  
maybe a ribbon.  
There are few variables  
on a mat.

Maybe iron  
pooling around my eye  
made something  
forgiving.

To leave everything on the field,  
to understand net worth,  
renders you carcassed.

The auditors  
can have their way with you:  
everyone's books  
must be published  
in a yearly report.  
Mine, on display  
in meat form.  
What they find  
is systemic—  
a body sick from perfection  
denatures at room temperature.

## What Economists Look Like

This will be tied with a bow.  
So clean it smells bad  
like you want to  
smear dirt on the walls,  
make it smell organic  
which reminds me—  
every economist I've met  
wore a bowtie.  
Accordingly, when we  
went to lunch he  
ordered egg drop soup, slurped  
it down broth and snot  
in aggregate.

His handkerchief  
was crusted with egg  
or phlegm which reminds me—  
I'll only buy a handkerchief  
when I'm making 10 grand an hour  
talking to assholes who  
say important shit like  
"Casual Friday" or  
"yeah, me too."



## Work Night

In grade school,  
we start and stop  
with a bell.

Responsibility  
through take-home folders,  
accountability  
through take-home folders.

Our first summers  
we are circadian—  
wake when we do,  
and sleep when we do.

In high school,  
we start and stop  
with a bell.

The classroom  
enacts its lessons:  
we are salivary,  
we know  
when it's time  
to learn.

In college,  
we get up  
when we need to  
and sleep  
if we can.  
Parties,  
then tinnitus.  
The buzzing  
stays all day.

College summers  
we begin  
alarms  
at 7:48.  
A sample  
of the pace to come.

As interns  
we're just trying

to learn the ways.  
To start,  
we start  
with the basics:  
“Monday...  
can you believe it?”

The rest  
is for the duration:  
we arise and retire  
with the markets,  
which open and close  
with a bell.

## Equilibrium

It looks unflinching:  
Ps and Qs  
are accounted for.  
Perpendicular  
and perfect  
at intersection—  
the golden-child exchange.  
It's at these times  
we can play policy,  
make models.

But entropy.  
But vacuum.  
But shadows.  
But barter.  
But singing-fish plot.

I'm trying to say  
this is not  
an "of course" thing.

Even if the markets clear,  
even if the data  
needs no scrubbing,  
a bell curve  
is just people.

My dad has fighting dreams.  
At our old house,  
he smashed his bedside lamp.  
He was lunging  
for a quarterback.

We moved from the suburbs  
so he could take a break  
from the commute.  
He wakes,  
fists clenched  
pounding the mattress.

The nighttime routine  
hasn't changed much:  
8pm on the couch  
is not a bedtime.

Now, the commute  
is dream-wise.  
The car fills  
with contracts and deadlines—  
health care providers  
don't speak hospital and  
referrals can't part the cars.

He surprises himself awake  
by intercepting a question  
I ask my mom.  
“How was the traffic today?”  
“We need to firm up  
our accounts receivable,”  
he answers.

I'm having trouble  
fitting this into  
a trend line:

in the move,  
he lost his violin lessons.

## Squawk Box

Some say  
the stock market  
is a random walk,  
or at least  
predicted from yesterday  
plus or minus  
arbitrary drift—  
white noise.

A professor  
challenges the class  
to pick five stocks  
that could outperform  
his own.  
Their hours of research  
never once beat  
darts thrown  
at a board  
of ticker symbols.

A reincarnated lesson  
from my younger years:  
my dad says  
day-traders  
always lose—  
it's an amateur's game.

This market,  
this jonesing,  
is awfully slippery.

It's a leap  
when your money  
is no longer  
at the corner bank  
but a blip on some  
caterpillared  
NY data crawl.

Compared to the wallet,  
its cellulose filings,  
buying small slices  
of big companies  
is less intuitive.

Buying small slices  
of a bigger pie  
comprised of  
many companies  
is even less intuitive.  
Buying the right  
to buy a small slice  
of a big company  
at a future time—  
even less so.

These are  
the basics.

I understand them  
only sometimes.

## The Island of Stone Money

Limestone disks  
several feet wide  
and 1000s of pounds  
pepper the Island  
of Yap.

These rai stones  
are a coveted currency.  
A stone is status,  
a life's savings,  
a dowry.

Limestone  
is not found  
on Yap.  
All rai stones  
must be mined,  
then imported  
from miles away.

The story  
of invention:  
a ship  
caught in a storm  
sets a stone free  
to prevent shipwreck.  
Upon returning to Yap,  
those aboard  
vouched for  
its exquisite purity  
and fine cut.  
The stone's presence  
was considered trivial,  
a nonissue.  
That the village believed,  
was enough.  
Thus,  
a new technology:  
faith as currency.

Today,  
we call it  
fiat money.  
It replaced gold.

Stone, paper, wampum,  
it makes no difference.  
Banks lend  
to other banks  
with a few keystrokes  
of electricity.

When the ship  
released the stone  
a silent race began.  
The lights dimmed quickly  
as it streaked down  
leaving a trail  
of bubbles  
and then  
no trail at all.  
Limestone dissolves  
at great depths.  
It's gone by now,  
less than  
a heap of sand.

Let's away to Yap,  
where value  
is assessed by ton,  
peril of the import,  
the story  
of the journey.  
A life lost  
during transport  
increases the worth,  
the man's story  
etched into stone.

Here,  
money is memory,  
a weathered ledger.

Here,  
a story  
less than  
a heap of sand  
is still  
in circulation.



## **B.R.E.A.M.**

Home from work,  
my dad calls it bacon.  
It doesn't mean bacon.  
It means money.  
I know you knew that.  
I need to see the deduction  
on paper.

It's a metaphor  
I can handle.

Linguistically speaking—  
the bacon fields  
were plentiful today.  
I love my dad most  
when he speaks  
in this way.  
Reelin' in  
the bacon.  
It's a bad  
bacon crop  
this year.

The search  
for cured meat  
is not always  
slaughter and smoke.

Sunday mornings  
in the 90s Harris household:  
omelets each fitted  
with a secret ingredient.

The son that  
guessed correctly,  
won either  
a Siamese Fighting Fish  
or Jujufruits—  
winner's choice.

We're older now,  
no dance-a-thons,  
no gummies, which  
seems normal.

This poem  
is less about  
leaving childhood  
and more about  
how food matures  
through a family.

My parents  
have a new apartment,  
it's shiny with mirrors—  
Lake Michigan  
is in the kitchen.

In the kitchen  
my parents  
split a chicken breast  
lights dimmed  
waiting for  
the 10 o'clock news.

## Externality

The first lesson  
on externalities  
explains graphs  
don't behave perfectly.

Problem:  
the town is experiencing  
too many robberies.

Solution:  
construct more lampposts—  
crime avoids the light.

Consider:  
lampposts  
dilute the stars.

## Spirits

*Of the animal variety:*

Today  
is a ribeye day  
just because.  
Throw a wrench  
in the economic models—  
we have whims.

These cuts  
are all beautiful  
in their own right.  
Bone-in, no, out.

I don't know  
what "go with your gut"  
means anymore.

Animal spirits  
can breed  
positive things, too.  
Namely trust.

The stories  
of domesticated pit bulls,  
rogue and undone  
never quite surprise us.

Contagion is also  
a business term.

*Of the entrepreneurial variety:*

This kind  
is insatiable.

This kind  
knows that  
every business  
will end and  
pushes forward  
regardless.

All colonies of yeast  
run themselves  
into the ground.

This kind  
lives for the spike,  
the logarithmic phase.

It gets antsy  
when standing still.

*Of the competitive variety:*

Like a training partner.  
Like the Joneses.  
If we race,  
we push each other.

Most things  
can be made  
into a game.  
At a bed and breakfast  
outside Oxford, OH,  
my brother and I  
had an apple  
to amuse ourselves.  
We found flat ground  
and whipped it  
back and forth.

Each toss  
it softened,  
browned.  
When the flesh punctured  
the game ended.  
We couldn't deal  
with the stickiness  
staining our wrists.

Ironed  
into businessmen:  
the neck  
is always tender.

*Of the "after a long day" variety:*

The expectation of growth,  
the requests for proposal,  
the excel spreadsheets.  
Once in a while  
they can tremble  
an executive's  
sculpted frame.

It's time for  
something dark and warm,  
something to stir  
the animal spirits.

When I feel sorry for myself,  
I think of hamster wheels.  
I am thinking of hamster wheels.

## **Fiscal, Circadian**

Picking a career is  
picking a schedule.

Sunday night  
is a deep breath  
held until  
the sapping stops.  
Tuesday morning  
is a Mylar balloon  
almost one week  
after a birthday.  
Friday afternoon  
the cordon lifts.

The heart rests  
somewhere between  
dub and lub.

This is about  
violin practice again.



**April 16<sup>th</sup>**

A day for massages.

## An Exchange Between Businessman and Poet

B: Creative accounting  
is an art.  
It's all about  
what story we can tell  
with the numbers we have.

Numbers are not  
as absolute  
as they seem:  
inventory—widgets  
in the warehouse—  
is malleable.  
Also, debt has increased.  
We're just building,  
upping our  
brick-and-mortar.

This is corporate personhood.  
Every type of person  
learns to press flesh.  
Do you see the footnotes?  
Only the information  
they contain  
is mandated by the SEC.  
How we present it  
is part of  
the art form.

We'll flood it  
with notes,  
make it  
nice and opaque.

P: Like *Pale Fire*—

B: Exactly  
like *Pale Fire*.  
We're just  
telling a story.

## To: Steven Harris

It's hard  
to shed the act,  
the voice that shields.  
This voice that  
is part of me  
and parcel of me.

I'll shed it  
for a line:  
you raised me right.

Maybe more:  
all of this  
is just projection.  
These are  
my fears,  
my way  
of taking  
my next step.

In Vegas,  
we played  
Let it Ride.

Our dealer  
was Robert.  
70-something,  
the shakes,  
arthritic and bulbous  
in the hands,  
he deals deliberately.

His casino-distributed vest  
taut across his belly  
he is tired  
with miles to go  
before sleep.  
Miles to go  
before sleep.

In the midst  
of hand 10 or 11  
he shares a story.

He used to be  
a pilot instructor,  
took a student—  
“female student,  
good girl,  
good pilot”—  
into the mountains.  
The engine failed.  
His only option:  
crash the plane  
into the tallest pine  
in exactly  
the right place.  
Too high,  
the plane misses,  
lives end.  
Too low,  
the plane meets  
the trunk’s  
5-foot diameter,  
lives end.  
He slowed the plane  
the best he could,  
hit the tree.  
It bent,  
the plane stuck.

She’s a pilot  
for Southwest now.

When his shift finished,  
Ronda took his place.  
A smoker to our right,  
“That was like watching  
two turtles fuck,  
Jesus Christ.”

The plane ride home  
I thought of Robert  
and his days.  
Alarm clock,  
public transit,  
vest too small,  
“two turtles,”  
deal until  
knuckles give up.

She’s a pilot

for Southwest now.  
That's all  
the thanks he needs.

This is not about Icarus  
or 8-fold.  
This is about  
just beginning  
to understand  
what it means  
to be a worker,  
a father.  
To commute  
for 25 years  
without complaint.  
To wake  
everyday  
every day,  
for the family  
when just walking to work  
is work.

It's not perfect,  
it never is.  
Mom says  
the idea of safety  
gets pushed back  
every bad day  
in the market.

If I ever spoke  
about labor before,  
I missed the mark.

## **Finance Poet**

*for the Finance Poets*

Colloquially speaking,  
I've dubbed you  
the Finance Poets.  
I know some  
may take issue with that.  
This is for my sake.  
It's my coinage.  
It helps me organize,  
know what "up" is.

For now  
I'm an associate.  
I have to  
put in the time,  
earn my stripes,  
move up the ladder.

Where one said,  
"It was a haven  
from the cold,"  
another said,  
"It's all  
one big text."  
I don't know if "up"  
makes sense here.

If this is how you  
speak to your colleagues,  
then how do you  
speak to your colleagues?  
If this is work,  
then what is that?  
Words like  
"vocation" and "calling"  
get thrown around.

What business  
do I have  
writing about finance?  
What poetry  
do I have  
writing about finance?

What business  
do I have  
writing about poetry?  
What poetry  
do I have  
writing about poetry?

I'm going to wait  
to have my business cards  
drawn up.

## Coinage

If you watch  
the markets long enough  
you start to decipher  
a mad pulse.

If I'm being poetic,  
I'd say  
it's a hummingbird heart.

If I'm being intuitive  
I'd say  
I understand it most  
when I forget to take  
my anxiety meds.

If I'm saying it here  
I'd say  
we're a jittery bunch.



## NOTES

### Utils

For more nuanced, often food-related definitions of “utility” please see the *Dictionary of Modern Economics* by Byrne J. Horton, Ph.D. Selected terms: utility, direct utility, elementary utility, form utility, indirect utility, marginal utility, place utility, possession utility, service utility, time utility.

### What Economists Know

The title is derived from Benjamin Higgins’s book, *What Do Economists Know?* The first line of the poem is informed by the book’s first line: “The conquest of fear must be counted among the major victories in the forward march of human progress” (1).

According to Higgins, these are things that frighten us (provided in this order):

1. Inflation
2. Depression
3. Social Strife
4. Revolution
5. War
6. The scientist’s ignorance
7. The layman’s ignorance (1).

### Gold

This poem references the tulip market in 17th-century Netherlands. This craze, which peaked and crashed in 1637, has been dubbed “Tulipomania” or “Tulip Mania.” As Peter M. Garber explains in his book, *Famous First Bubbles*, a specific mosaic virus caused the tulip to “break” or exhibit exquisite patterns (40-41). These tulips were the most sought after.

### How Alka-Seltzer Dissolves

The balanced equation describing the dissolution of citric acid and sodium bicarbonate (active ingredients):



A monkey’s fist (or paw) is a type of heaving line knot used by sailors to make throwing lines easier. Its name derives from the knot’s appearance, which is often likened to a bunched fist.

Historical data on Bayer stock (BAYRY) was acquired from Nasdaq.com.

Starting in the 1950s, Alka-Seltzer began a marketing campaign that featured Speedy—a red-haired, goon-faced, half-boy half-Alka-Seltzer-tablet—to emphasize Alka-Seltzer’s ability to give quick relief. At the end of commercials, Speedy would conclude with a song. Below, is one example:

*You work too hard,  
you ate too much,  
the cheesecake made you greedy.  
Let your aching head and stomach  
hear this message from Ol’ Speedy:*

*Alka-Seltzer:  
Plop plop, fizz fizz,  
oh, what a relief it is. (x2)*

*Oh, what a relief it is (what a relief!).*

### **Salarium**

This poem is informed by and takes language from *The Merchant of Venice*, specifically the following passages:

SALERIO:

But tell not me, I know, Antonio  
Is sad to think upon his merchandise.

ANTONIO:

Believe me, no I thank my fortune for it,  
My ventures are not in one bottom trusted,  
Nor to one place; nor is my whole estate  
Upon the fortune of this present year:  
Therefore my merchandise makes me not sad.

SALERIO:

Why, then you are in love. (1.1.40–46)

SOLANIO:

‘My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter!  
Fled with a Christian! O my Christian ducats!  
Justice, the law, my ducats, and my daughter!’ (2.8.15–17)

*Salarium* is the Latin root of “salary.” Solanio and Salerio (and/or Salarino in other editions of the play), bear a striking resemblance to this same root.

### **Preparation**

In 1923, the Weimar Republic experienced hyperinflation—an extremely rapid and seemingly limitless rise in prices. In a single month, prices rose 2500% (Greenwald 245). New bills needed to be printed to account for this rapid change, which explains the introduction of trillion mark banknotes.

### Notes on “Invisible Hand”

The title is modeled after Robert Hass’s poem, “Notes on ‘Layover’” from *Sun Under Wood*.

### Canongate Kirkyard

Canongate Kirkyard is a cemetery located directly off the Royal Mile in Edinburgh, Scotland.

Robert Fergusson’s epitaph:

No sculpturd Marble here nor pompous lay  
No storied Urn nor animated Bust  
This simple Stone directs Pale Scotia’s way  
To pour her Sorrows o’er her Poets Dust

Adam Smith’s epitaphs:

(1)

Here are deposited the remains of ADAM SMITH. Author of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, and *Wealth of Nations*.

(2)

The  
Property  
Which every man  
Has in his own labour  
As it is the original foundation  
Of all other property  
So it is the most  
Sacred and  
Inviolable

—Gifted by Adam & Company, 2006

### Economists Ponder the Human Condition

Big Mouth Billy Bass also sang “Take Me To The River” by Al Green in addition to “Don’t Worry, Be Happy,” by Bobby McFerrin. The current price is around \$19.50 on the secondary market.

### What Economists Look Like

The last line is taken from a story told by Louis C.K. in his standup special entitled *Shameless* (2007). The story centers on a coffee shop and an “Awesome Possum” t-shirt.

### **Squawk Box**

A squawk box is an intercom used by banks to allow fast communication between the bank's analysts and brokers. It is also a business news program on CNBC.

"Arbitrary drift" is taken from the phrase, "Arbitrary drift parameter," which is found in *A Non-Random Walk Down Wall Street* by Andrew W. Lo and A. Craig MacKinlay.

### **Island of Stone Money**

The title comes from a book written by William Henry Furness III by the same name. According to Furness, rai stones (also referred to as fei stones) are, "Originally quarried and shaped in Babelthuap, one of The Pelao Islands, four hundred miles to the southward" (93). The story of the lost stone comes from the chapter entitled "Money and Currency."

"Let's away to Yap" is an echo of King Lear's exclamation, "Let's away to prison" in *King Lear* (5.3.9).

The phrase "Money is memory" is taken from an essay of the same name by Narayana R. Kocherlakota.

### **B.R.E.A.M.**

The title is derived from Wu-Tang Clan's "C.R.E.A.M." ("Cash Rules Everything Around Me") from the 1993 album *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)*.

### **To: Steven Harris**

The lines, "he is tired / with miles to go / before sleep. / Miles to go / before sleep," are derived from the closing lines of "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" by Robert Frost.

### **Finance Poet**

This poem takes language directly from conversations I had with John Tipton, William Fuller, and Katy Lederer. These individuals are poets who have worked or are currently working in a finance-related field.

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