THROUGH AN OPEN WINDOW

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The poems in this collection are elegiac; celebrations of losses and failures, tributes to the daily doldrums that are at the center of human experience. They threaten to expose the uncertainty that exists and refuses to exist in our everyday lives. They explore the otherness associated with the individual and often turn to the universal formulas of music and physics to make order of the world around them. Often times the Speaker finds that the seeming chaos manifests within her already orderly life, the daily routines of work and family. Poetic magic, so to speak, weds this ordered chaos to the laws of nature and its routines, especially birds, which makes a recurrent appearance throughout the manuscript.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Lastly, I wish to thank all the editors of the journals that have supported my work, without whom I would occupy a small, dark space alone.

Crannog Magazine: “Self Portrait without Birds”

W.O.W Awards: “Rats” long listed as the only poem by an American poet.

Red River Review: “At Thirty-two”

The Inn is Free Journal: “The Art of Sumo,” “Constellations,” “Three Poets”
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PART I

MUSIC AND MEMORY
When you write poems over a period of six or so years, you lose sight of the narrative threads that bind the poems together. I can say for certain, that for most of my career as a poet, these are the poems that matter. I know some believe that all poems are love poems and I suppose that is true. Writing is an act of love, that is. However, the poems themselves resonate with a voice of sorrow, a voice of wonder and exploration of the human condition. So naturally the poems are most concerned with those things most important to being human. In this manuscript it is the recurring motifs, music and memory, that stitches the singular to the collective.

Music lifts its head early in the manuscript, like a mysterious sea serpent, slipping in and out of the poems. At times, it is a bird song, the ring of a bell or the stammer of prayer on the lips of the troubled. However the circumstance, it is the single metaphor that exists in the world and lives inside the Speaker, simultaneously, and is aesthetically beautiful to me. As humans, in our awkward groping to make since of the chaos around us, it is only natural to prize the thing that is both worldly and human. In this manuscript music is that thing. There are two poetic forms that began as song forms: the ballad stanza and the blues stanzas of Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes. These forms which dominated the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are still vibrant forms in poetics today. Musicality has been a part of poetics from conception, just as music is a part of the human experience from birth. Our parents sing us lullabies when we are born and we sing them hymnals upon death. We eternalize the rhythms of music and mimic those rhythms in our art. Song is a way for humans to convey experience, and we do it almost naturally. Along side memory, music functions to connect the concrete to mysticism, the living with the dead, the present with the forgotten.
The manuscript is populated with many inconsistencies and misremembering. It is no wonder that memory is called upon to reconcile the discrepancies. As the poems engage in remembering, we find that memory brings its own discordance. A true poetic discourse evolves in the poems. It is through memory’s fallibility that we come to revise our past without abandoning our present. This kind of historical flux, so to speak, invites language to critically engage the poems and allows for examination and revision of memories.

True discourse is the purpose of all art and we cannot have discourse without examination and revision. Be it the past or the present. These ideas underpin the manuscript and allow for contradictions and a deliberate openness to interpretation as well as a solipsistic view. Having said that, I intend to bring these concepts to the page and have them take their natural course. To let poetry demystify the thing most important to us as human beings, our current state.
PART II

THROUGH AN OPEN WINDOW
Watchman
for Sharlene

These are the days white Keds sail across hospital tiles.
   All night I hear the Ferryman,

   his gurney creaking in its slip, next door, down the hall.
   But you, you remain vigilant

   in your solitude, moored deep in sleep, even as the whir
   & buzz of machines drag the anchor.

I, too, want you to push from the body that fails you, the unkind
   shores of paralysis. But who am I to usher you out?

Watcher, waiter, ruminator of Time’s expansion:
   a child grown older, less distant.

At the heart of a different life you were my watchman,
   your widening eye like the steady ruin of a flower.
You haven’t always been a rock. When you were born
your eyes were full of fire.

I thought those flames would carry you across a lifetime
of purpose & fury.

Now, those once bright orbs drift cold & lean in solitude.
Although I want the fire to come again,
your mouth says I will burn not burn, I will be a stone.
There are admirations for a rock: in the ash bed
you give your body to the fire. No hand can carry you out.
Not a mother’s, not even a father’s.

But if you can think of the rock as a foothold, then I can
imagine its undoing,

Time’s slow erasure. Pillar, a pathetic Stone Hinge, basking
in the sun, you are not wildflowers.

Daughter, don’t waste your time in this crush. Be a city alive
with light. An ocean ablaze.

Be an explosion, a tremble on the lip of a lover. Yes,
riot but don’t forget the song of a moth’s wings,

when it flutters to the fire & gives everything to the flame.
Wake

From the pew I watch the mortician’s
idiot son; careful hands caress the baby’s
coffin lining flat.

Toes slightly bend, expose taught ankles
of a dancer.

He throws a shadow against the white top. A large bouquet
combines to him to form an arabesque
poised

above the baby, dipping into her folded arms. She reaches to hold
their form as an ensemble of shadows stretch

to the awkward thrum of mourning: a mother’s quiver,
a father’s low groan and the sweet hum of the mortician’s
son (ignoring the lead sheet).

Madness takes the stage, its melody
belonging to the quickly dead.
I, too, Believe Light Moves Us

Out of the mud-bed you crawled,
   flexed your fin
until you found your footing.
   You, who grew otherwise
with a will for looking, grew lonely
   in that slight drift of life.

I imagine desire drew out,
   the way every point in the sky
desires to be a star.
   You looked back to find
the water still held you.
   I, too, want to believe light moves us,
like petals in the palms of water.
   To believe you resolved to steal fire
long before lightning struck.

Reason blossoms like madness.
   But when the first seed of air
bloomed inside your lungs, then died
   & bloomed & died,
Could you want a promise other than death?
Ghost
for Leair

I have no pictures of you as a boy. No jet black hair against a peach complexion & deepening sky.

No dog, save the one you half imagine, half-remember. The one that followed you & your brothers home.

Jon threw the first rock, skipping it across a lake of gravel & because you were younger

you gathered a fistful of dust and stones—it wasn’t mean. You were boys, the musk of manhood ripening.

So little brought you joy then; forgotten on a mountain, too poor even to be called to war. The dog, pitiful, threatening to follow. You decided then, the next summer, you would go you would loose the meat from your bones with grief.

You told me how you went to kick the dog, your foot passing through its body, swift & quiet, the way time must have moved

when the sweet smell of its blossoms darkened inside you.
Opening Night at Hip-Pocket Theater

It’s not the high cheek bones
nor curve of lip.
It’s not the dimpled chin
or thin collar.
It’s not even the nipple
visible through lace.
It’s not the thick thighs that tell
dropped from a sequined womb
or the ankles
steady in four inch spikes.
Not the pinned wig, either.
And his baritone voice settling
the theater to a hush? No,

when Juliet breaks the curtain.
Bells

_The temple bell stops but I still hear the sound coming out of the flowers._

Matsuo Basho

[Muse]

You came to me in disguise:
  a sickness in the lungs, weight
that to my ears seemed like terrific ringing.
    I suspected all along you’d been a bell.
When my father died, you clamored.
    No hand-held sacring or temple bell,
but a thing rung by a thick, swinging beam
    nearly tore you out.
[Daughter]

When you were born, the silence from those long months stilled your lips. The doctor didn’t need to say what Guericke proved; only a bell without air refuses to ring.
I bought the suit at the Goodwill.
   The mortician promised he could make it fit;
   pins pinched between his lips,
   his hands swept the inseam until it looked as if
I’d gone to your closet and picked
   your favorite coat and trousers.
There is no need to talk of who among us walks
   through walls, no need to lament.
I believed nothing between us existed
   before Galileo discovered air. I believed you
were a galaxy. If you must be a bell, ring.
Self Portrait without Birds

They ate them all,  
the year Mao ordered the farmers into the cities;  
a whole country sustained by sparrows.  
And when the sky emptied, the people starved.  
Those who remained stacked the dead  
like apples and resolved  
their hunger would outlast the meat.  
I imagine they forgot the faces of their neighbors,  
the name of the birds  
as they parsed need from bone.  
There was too much to know:  
the grain rotting in the silos,  
prayers dying like light on a ledge,  
bodies mad with the memory of music, waiting  
for a song to claim them from the inside.
While Making Dinner

for Randi

Tonight, the cookbook is our road-map—
special care is given to cutting; fingers tucked back,

the hip of the onion curved toward the blade.
You return to the recipe and hesitate

as if pronouncing the name of some foreign city.
Clarify—I explain—is a process that removes milk solids.

You are eager to listen but practice hard at pretending not to.
When a cringe emerges like a familiar place,

I know you want to move, faster than the click of the knife,
to slip into a brighter skin that warns, I can wound.

I should tell you the world has its fill of color, that you'll only burn
as hot as a street lamp.

Instead, I say—melt the butter and place it in the fridge.
I like to cool the butter with a ladle dipped inside

so I can pull to tear a hole and pour out the water and solids.
A hole not unlike this aperture between us.

Daughter, I'll tell you what I meant to say—you are quick silver
through the thick heart of a wolf.
Blackberries

The whole plant withered the summer before,
curling back into the ground.

No, no ancient skeleton, no rheumatoid hands
open, waiting for rain.

Just sticks, thorny and brittle.
But here, now, in the chill of February blooms drape

over the garden bed walls, white flowers clinging
like a nude to a black rock.

I wait for her to break, to ripen to the point of spoiling,
but days pass and I begin to think

she is a statue, an expectation of warmer weather.
If she is real, wake her.

Ask her, why so early. How can you sleep in the bright
cold. Who have you come to mourn.

What is it you refuse to imagine. What berries do you bring
ripening in the sun.
Riddle of the Sphinx

Already the birds are eating the garden.

Confident, they dart & fall,  
land & preen near the stone cat.

Wings calico upon its back.

Once, the great sphinx hunted birds,  
consumed their song to hide its riddle.

Back when its thick thighs moved into sky,  
its shadow pinned to earth,  
the birds to their silence.

Its history, its fractured rock  
endures, even as the garden crumbles.

Guardian of nothing, birds pillage  
berries in the crack of its spine.

As for ruin, it has three parts: birds alit  
a stone cat, telling & telling.
When the smell finally wafted through the floor,
    I woke the next morning to find my mother
    opening all the windows.

We lived for days like this: cold come
    to settle on the panels of each room,
    conversations of passersby mere

whispers down the halls. Our cat always sneaking
    out, never content. She could have slipped away
    long ago.

But these walls have a way of holding on:
    if not the tiny shrines built for each child,
    visible for visitors to marvel at,

then the rooms, their high ceiling’s promise of heaven.
    And all their expectations: never run,
    remove shoes before entry, fold cloths

or hang, right shoulder facing out like little soldiers.
    I could hardly look Jesus in the face, him hanging there
    like that, my shirt pressed straight, tail tucked.

At times he seemed more real than the bodies
    that passed like clouds through there,
    as if the bloated silence kept us afloat.

What more do you want to know? That I believed the cat
    escaped down some alley. With a mind
    to break away, she broke.
An Acrobat’s Prayer

Always the weighted predicament:
   excess at one end, too little at the other.

The mindful heart goes about
   reckoning the threads of her life, knotting them
drawing them taught like a tightrope.
   And isn’t that perfection?

The mind and the body and the spirit maintaining tension.

Then, there is the one leaded to sorrow
   heavy beneath the weight of light.

The one who uses her body as the counter.
   She grasps for props to keep balance:

first a chair, an umbrella, a bigger house.
   She moves and the rope moves,

swinging this way, then that, following.
   While she thinks of earth, she stammers the body’s rosary,

unsure the net will catch those prayers below.
Stars

*Teriyaki Grill opened in 2011, closed in 2011*

Up and down the street lights go out like stars,
windows growing farther and farther apart

as more and more storefronts close.
I know the man who held heaven on his shoulders.

One day he shrugged across a parking lot and didn’t return.
Maybe he boarded a plane, headed home

to say the American Dream is only a rumor. He didn’t worry
about the flight, the ocean, or failure. For months he’d been drowning

in empty seats, too many hours with too little sleep. I know the way
his mind works: when stepping from the plane,

it felt good to be a sleeping giant. To know starlight plunged
like sky into more sky and came down, terrible and bright.
For the first time I recognize Orion.
His bow drawn and poised over
Pleiades, a cowering cluster, the Bear
awkwardly watching.

The boy beside me stirs,
Disturbing the puddle of beads
Pooled where our skin meets.
He begins to dress

And then we’re at my home.
The porch light illuminates my
Father in the placid glass.

Arms folded, lips pursed, eyes
Open, close— buttoned up
Like the blouse I fastened with
Unsteady fingers.

Were it not for the boy, whose
Hands explored tenderly,
Whose awkward mouth pursued
Me like a hungry bear,

I would run to my father
Into his widening arms
that have grown slender and yellow.

Instead, I kiss the boy’s cheek
And linger long enough that my
My father dissolves.
I make my way to my bedroom.

Through an open window, where
I see the boy’s tail-lights fade,
Out beyond the widening sky
I barely make out the star-lines.
When the rats came they pinned her to cruelty.
Hours she worked in that diorama of traps and poisons.

Mornings the doors of the bistro were opened
to find figures on display: a body beneath

the kitchen sink, another in the bread box. She was quick
to claim them before the staff could see, afraid
discovery would be her ruin. She had dreams
for this place: the small cafe brimming with patrons,
more bubbling in the doors, her spring and toxin
transformed to wine & creme.

Those moments were brief, back when rats were quiet,
when failure was an option. Long after she surrendered
her business to erratic traffic & growing franchise chains,
we found the nests, her poisons arrowed deep into their bodies.

The rats came to her table to dine. Birthed their children there.
They laughed and wept at that table.

No proof she made anything that lasted, only bones remained,
their faces pressed flat

as if they once were flowers, too cherished to wither away.
The Art of Sumo

Love is stronger than Death
(Roadside church bulletin)

I imagine the two hefty wrestlers,
Bulky in their loin clothes,
Sole purpose to push the other off his feet;
Big D with his slicked back hair,
L’s pouty lips and topknot.
And this is their dance:
To one-up the other around the ring
Around & around—
Until I’ve lost my car,
Because I lost my job,
Because I was sleeping with my boss
Who was married to a woman who was dying,
Or so he said.
He was going to divorce her
As soon as her cancer went into remission.
And I find myself selfishly
Rooting for Big D to knock L flat on his ass.
Because I’ve got a dog in this fight.
Because I’m tired of loosing out on Love.
It’s tricky, this tradition of living.
I’ve been rushing the sorority my whole life
And for once I can imagine life after Death
Lops off L’s big wobbly head:
The woman who gets the guy,
The promotion and, yes, the one left standing
When Love gets back on his feet.
Three Poets

Three women are writing poems about my father.
The first one drowns him in the rhythm of the ocean
washing his body out to sea.

She delights in his head lying in the sand, a pebble
lit by the moon, and like a child closes her eyes
before she skips the shiny face across the waves.

Her metaphors confuse the second poet
who thinks she saw him, gutted like a fish
blue-lipped body on ice, one day at the market.

She writes about my father’s ghost:
a leering lamp shade, a dark spot in a photo,
a door that opens too slowly.

It’s only a shadow but she swears he’s there.
Unable to frame him, she resigns to measure
his realness in degrees of memory.

He called yesterday, I argue. But was it yesterday or
ten years ago. It was January/September.
She claims my memories are under revision.
Self Portrait with a Dying Butterfly

Because my hands are not a church.
Because my fingers are too thin for steeples.
I cannot lift you from the earth.
I will not press your wings between the tips of my fingers
and pin you back into this blue diorama.

Because my eyes know you are not a galaxy.
Because you die even when they are closed.
I watch that ant pinch your leg and carry it off
and because I do not think of your soul
I can leave you there and not worry over bones.
Not an Ode on a Sad Friend

Or the shadow your body casts
or the weight of it, heavy, the way your eyes are heavy
on the cliffs of your cheeks.
Once fire burned in those eyes.
Now, they sit, cold and quiet, two tiny planets
spinning without a sun.
Still, it’s your heart’s shadow that aches in this space.
Your star-dusted hole, behind the eyes, shining.
At Thirty-two

after Linda Hull

We knew the future: a husband, two kids, an expansive knowledge of laundry.

We burned long into the night, measuring the flame of our desire

against the faithfulness of Tommy’s cleft chin
against the durability of Billy Turino’s broad shoulders.

Each nuance of our weddings planned: the bride
and groom doppelgängers on top the cake,

diamond studs like molecule-diagrams
pinned to our white silk gowns,

names of our future children memorized
like weights on the periodic table.

Our books shut tight, we painted our nails
and considered the occupations of our husbands--

how unsettling to wake to an un-lived life;
to be murdered,

body buried in the back of your mind
with the atomic weight of Neon.
Self Portrait with Imaginary Lover

Your words press like hands
against my brain, where are we now?

I want to catalog my answer,
mark each syllable an increment;

something earned, however lost
then divide.

Desire led me to that index,
my intellect to this equation:

When a woman stretches to fit, a man
reduces his circumference.

You can no more write this math by hand
than a kite holds still in the wind.

I know the broad sweep of your nouns,
the hard flick of your verbs.

Beyond this ontology, what else?
Like a new dress, I tried you on

but like the dress, I liked you best empty.
The Thief

Small things; seconds there, minutes here.
    I spent hours thinking about it. On my way to work
I missed my exit. At work I forgot the lettuce.
    You can imagine the difficulty;
full time job and a family. Still, every chance I got I plotted.
    There is something to be said for small things,
that accumulation can matter, that to date, I hold in my possession
    an hour. Not an hour in bits and pieces,
oten minutes in the morning or five in the afternoon,
    but sixty consecutive minutes. I must confess,
I didn’t stumble on them like a ten dollar bill on the side walk.
    No, I took them and stuffed them in my pocket
like blue marbles. You see, when I was a kid, I had this move.
    I would pull my hands into the sleeves of my hoodie
and walk through an entire store. I would grab some small item
    pull it up inside my sleeve, then walk away.
It felt good, knowing those blue marbles were mine the second I shut
    the car door, my body still trembling with uncertainty.
After Exile

It’s difficult to put a finger on when
    Adam recognized his bones:
when the deer pressed its pale tongue to water,
    I imagine a silence so loud it rang.
Adam lifted his spear, afraid the stag would flee.

    No time to remember that God promised
him a city or believe the deer was the one named.
    Spear tore from his fingers, a tornado
shot through the thin heart of the wild beast.

It was the first time he grieved, sorrow settling
    in the pit of his gut where hunger gathered.
He knew then the body is always first. Even as hunger
    lay sated, he heard the remnant of its roar
calling him from his bones.
Rimbaud
“For I is Someone Else”

If you go with me now, we can see the birds rise to sky
then drop like leaves.

Don’t ask why they fall to earth together. Here
there is only grieving.

What we know is what the world tells us.
Birds need two wings to fly.

Do you think they know themselves by this singular
narrative, or are they persuaded
to be a book of unrelated words, bound together
by resonance alone.

I suspect they have questions about the shadow
their body forms when passing like clouds
and how those clouds can be the metaphor for doubt
for their persevering love.

In the end they must find redemption in language.
Out of fear they embrace a singular story.

It takes tremendous devotion to plunge like a dagger
into the thin heart of the earth,
to give yourself so completely to completion, terror’s
cavernous siren threatening to sound.
Through An Open Window

Sky is sky is sky.
   Sunlight like a beach-kite’s streamers.

When the bird slipped
   through the open window, I knew it left

all that brightness behind.
   Left the ocean’s blue for a blue

that loves a ladder, the way it steps down a shade.
   Now it is us who looks out the window.

We are a body anchored in silence.
   Our head drags against the heart’s wall.

The wind says, you need two wings to fly.
   The kite reminds us there is another way

another ladder to the ocean, another choice.
   The bird says goodbye to the kite, the wind

goodbye to the natural law. That’s its nature.
   Who can say what the bird came for.

Shelter or abandon, solace or youth.
   These are the questions the body wants

to uncover/remember. It interprets the birds
   even in sleep, unfurling their long sounds

like kites rising in the sky,
   then stammers a prayer into the terrible wind.
Redeeming Walter White
“Say my name.”

When my own father was diagnosed with cancer
I thought he hired a sky writer.
Everything knew. The dishes sang like a canary.
The blackberry bush refused to bloom.

Then, in winter, its tiny white buds burgeoned
spilling over the garden wall.
Enough was said about it, so I said nothing.
Even as his skin yellowed and thinned, the edges of him
threatening to disappear, I enjoyed coffee
and watched the birds gorge, in disbelief, on the berries.

It was February when they took the cancer
from his gut. I took the shears and cut
the blackberry bush to the ground. I didn’t care
the drought confused the thing.

That’s why I admire you, Walter, the way you stain
the good things, the heavy things
like children and family and jobs. You struck a match
and watched them all burn, even as the cancer swept
your body like a brush fire, and when it came back,
you averted your eyes.
This abandoning thing, this bird
who refuses song,
nested in the nervous heart of a body,

the shallow depression of loss,
left overs,
tufts of feathers, hands held, breath

and saliva and mud, rotting vegetation
left behind,
all dark, sweet residues of its music.

No wonder we forget music is made
to be breathed.
What we give the dead is for the living.

That damn bird of happiness, holding its breath
until it turns blue.
Either it dies here and now, or let it breathe

a song to rattle the living back to life.