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## All Things Come to Pass

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ALL THINGS COME TO PASS

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English and Comparative Literature

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

by

Brandon Luu

May 2020

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ALL THINGS COME TO PASS

by

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## ABSTRACT

### ALL THINGS COME TO PASS

by Brandon Luu

*All Things Come to Pass* is a poetry collection consisting of 36 poems that revolve around the themes of impermanence, death, and memory. It is divided into three sections: Crisis, Melancholy, and Acceptance, inspired by the five stages of grief by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. The poems are written primarily in free-verse and include genres such as elegy, pastoral, and narrative. The collection contemplates whether given the finite nature of life, in an existence where nothing lasts forever and everything seems ultimately inconsequential, what is it that should be considered important?

## PREFACE

The project of this thesis is to explore time in the medium of poetry. Specifically, it looks at the impermanence of life and objects in the passage of time; what has passed cannot exist in the present, and the future is an indeterminable mystery that reflects the consequences of the present. Everything is subject to entropy and decay, and it is nearly impossible to know the consequentiality of one's life after death. In the face of this truth, what should people deem important and how should they come to terms with things that will one day end?

The poetry collection is divided into three sections titled as follows: Crisis, Melancholy, and Acceptance. These sections are based on Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief. This method of division is meant to capture a possible human reaction toward death, both the death of the self and the things associated with human life. The first section encapsulates Denial, Anger, and Bargaining. The second deals with Depression, and the last section matches Kübler-Ross's own terminology, Acceptance. Though the human reaction to death is not restricted to Kübler-Ross's model in the proposed emotions nor the order in which they are given, the poetry collection handles the matter from an individual's perspective and establishes a narrative and emotional arc in the creative whole using this model.

While the sections do contain each of these emotions, on the other hand, they are also able to hold broader scopes of meaning as well. The poems that are organized in each section reflect this, having a diverse range of individual sub-topics within the larger related framework.

"Crisis" can refer not only to a sense of panic toward a realization of inevitable death but also an awareness of imminent or currently occurring disasters in the present and a sense of loss for things that have passed and cannot be restored, such as childhood innocence in the poem "*Kem*" or even a broken camera, mentioned in the poem "Flash Back." "Melancholy" includes the feelings and incidents associated with depression in addition to feelings of bereavement for the past and the concept of futility stemming from the belief that all actions made within an infinite timeframe will be rendered ineffectual, found in poems such as "Aging" which depicts a person reflecting their own purpose in life in relation to others. Lastly, while "Acceptance" does imply a sense of peace, this section is more of an exploration of the question regarding what can be left behind and still retain significance within a human lifetime, contrasting the opposing feelings of the previous two sections, as can be seen in poems such as "Passing Through," which conveys a sense of moving forward despite all the obstacles that the speaker faces. As an interconnected narrative stretching across the entirety of the collection, the sections tell the story of an individual struggling to accept what is happening in the world in relation to the brevity of human life before coming to a sense of closure and forming a resolve to move forward regardless of consequence.

The poems included in this collection are written in a postmodern style influenced by the Black Mountain school's idea of composition by field and the concepts of Zen Buddhism. Many of them are ekphrastic, inspired by other pieces or forms of art, while others are written after deep reflection. Poets that have had an influence on this work include Robert Creeley, Bob Hicok, Jane Hirshfield, Philip Levine, Lia Purpura, Ocean

Vuong. Each has had some bearing on the style of each poem, whether it be the formatting or the subject matter.

Robert Creeley plays an important role in my use of enjambment in many of the poems in this collection. His idea that form is an extension of content is evident in the method in which he compresses an abundance of emotion in his short lines. His role as a Black Mountain Poet and his continuation of William Carlos Williams's style of line breaks and variable foot line lengths are ever apparent in his poetry, opting for tight parataxis and compact forms in his work. In addition, his use of simple language and minimalism works to profound effect, seen in poems such as "For Love": "That is love yesterday / or tomorrow, not / now. Can I eat / what you give me. I / have not earned it. Must / I think of everything / as earned. Now love also / becomes a reward so / remote from me I have / only made it with my mind" (Creeley 159). By pairing a finely-honed form with concise and purposeful language, Creeley's poetry manages to deliver powerful images and intense feelings of release. This poetry collection does seek to pay homage to Creeley's mastery over this style, especially in poems such as "Riding" which uses tight paratactic syntax to drive the reader through each line.

Bob Hicok's ability to construct narratives in a conversational tone is one of the greatest strengths of his poetry. He is constantly contemplative and thoughtful in various situations presented in his poems, and in doing so, he allows readers to confront the more difficult side of topics such as violence, sex, survival, and masculinity. One example can be found in some of the lines of his poem "Ticktock": "As I have treated my life / as the only leg I have to stand on / and the only mouth I'll ever get / to open in a moon-shape or



close / around her nipples and feel blood” (Hicok 65). One of Hicock's ideas that this collection of poetry takes from is the idea that writing a poem does not construct revelation but rather leads to it. Often, a poem will reveal a truth or new insight in the process of writing it that would not have been apparent during its conception. A key factor of Hicock's flow and pacing of his poetry comes from the clever way that the ends of his lines feed into the next. In this collection, poems such as "Passing Through" attempt to replicate Hicock's conversational style and contemplative tone while retaining kinetic movement throughout the piece.

Jane Hirshfield places a large emphasis on life experience in writing poetry. Her studies in Zen Buddhism reflect this idea, as she suspended her writing activity for eight years in order to explore more of what it means to be human first. In her poetry, there is a careful sensitivity and an acute awareness of the things around her. She gives consideration to the ordinary, breathing new life into it by offering new perspectives on how to view them, demonstrated in her poems such as “My Skeleton”: “My skeleton, / who once ached / with your own growing larger, / are now, / each year / imperceptibly smaller, / lighter, / absorbed by your own / concentration” (Hirshfield 7). The simplicity of Hirshfield’s writing and the use of short lines lend themselves to her focus of domestic and natural subject matters. Her technique of careful observation coupled with the sensitive nature of her language serve to create a unique style that this poetry collection attempts to emulate. For example, "Twilight" is a poem that scrutinizes the mundane environment of a backyard while projecting dejection in a way that is simplistic without losing complexity.

Philip Levine's style is one that contains an overabundance of emotion within a hardened shell of unflinching resolve. His use of straightforward language about and for the working man works in tandem with his use of narrative in his poetry, often depicting grim or bitter scenes of either his own life experiences or of those that share experiences similar to his own. Levine's writing serves to call attention to the disenfranchised, undeserving of the hardships in their lives. The feelings that he expresses in his poetry are personal and direct, employing relaxed and matter-of-fact syntax that reflects the reality of the people he interacted with. He leaves no room for obscurity, choosing instead to make his images clear and the intention behind his words apparent. Where Levine's interests and this poetry collection most overlap is in the themes of expressing loss and inadequacy. The last two stanzas of Levine's poem "You Can Have It" best showcase his language at its most vengeful, going against life itself in regards to what he deems important to him: "I give you back 1948. / I give you all the years from then / to the coming one. Give me back the moon / with its frail light falling across a face. / Give me back my young brother, hard / and furious, with wide shoulders and a curse / for God and burning eyes that look upon / all creation and say, You can have it" (Levine 65). A poem of my own that closely matches the degree of emotional intensity that Levine conveys is "This, I Confess to You," combining Creeley-style parataxis, enjambment, and line length with the severe sincerity of Levine's diction. It is sparse and concentrated, and it does not attempt to muddle what it wishes to convey in its language.

Lia Purpura's poetry is capacious while being succinct; its sparseness leaves room for thought while still providing an emotional center to anchor the reader. Her command of

language is precise and fully manages to capture the weight of single moments with minute details. Her use of short lines and line breaks often transition into an unexpected idea or insightful clause, and because they are so short, each of her poems functions almost like a vignette, exploring how even the simplest of things contain dualities of meaning, such as her poem "Design": "Here is the day, sun, gulls / backlit and cresting, / a jackhammer / suggesting I'm / here but not really / in it" (Purpura 5). There is a contemplative fervor and stillness that Purpura's poetry captures in the way that she ponders non-concrete subject matters. This poetry collection shares her interest in abstract topics, which can be seen in poems such as "Unopened Jars" and "A Spiral" that concern concepts of time and apathy. The poems do not intend to pin down an idea but rather introduce complexity in a way that leaves room for discussion about the meaning behind it.

Ocean Vuong's poetry is like a continuation of Creeley's idea that form is an extension of content. The way in which Vuong makes his words move across the page, making the medium complement the vividness of his content, reflects this. Where he differs from Creeley's style, however, is in his variation of line length, both short and long while traveling back and forth with indentation. In addition, his subject matters are often gripping, using surprising language that creates energy without losing focus. In his collection, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, Vuong chooses to focus on various topics such as war, violence, memory, and grief. His poems encompass a plethora of emotions, carrying incomparable weight without becoming sentimental, such as the opening lines of his poem "Threshold": "In the body, where everything has a price, / I was a beggar. On my

knees, / I watched, through the keyhole, not / the man showering, but the rain / falling through him: guitar strings snapping / over his globed shoulders” (Vuong 3). Where this poetry collection overlaps with Vuong's writing is in the importance of recognizing events that shape the present and in voicing moments that would otherwise go unnoticed. The poem "Equilibrium" in this collection, for example, places importance in an environmental topic and brings attention to aspects of it that would be overlooked. The key to Vuong's poetry is in the patience of his words, giving them the space they need to unfurl and pace themselves across the page, allowing them to gain gravity and meaning.

In regards to the reason behind writing this poetry collection, it is one that spans several years of contemplation. I am a young man with little life experience in comparison to many of my peers and those older than me. I try to keep a routine in my life that allows me to work efficiently and do well in whatever endeavor I pursue to succeed. I have many people who support me, and overall I live comfortably thanks to the efforts of my family. I am pursuing what I believe to be best for myself and my future, and I want to one day repay my parents for all that they have given me and do good in the world. I am not ignorant to the hardships of reality; I know that there will always be hurdles to overcome, and not everything will work out in the way that I plan it. Despite everything that keeps me upright, there are times when I will still crumple in fear of my inadequacy; I am afraid to fail and let down everyone who has supported me. I am afraid that what I do will not matter, that my presence in this world will mean nothing and that nothing I do will last past my own lifetime. I realize that this fear of mortality and failure is not new and that many others are like me, struggling to leave their mark on

human history. I think often on the legacy I might leave behind, whether I will have fulfilled my responsibilities and achieved my goals in the future. I reflect on the things I have done in the past and how they will affect the people I know. I have been told I am too young to be worrying about these kinds of things, that I still have a lot of life left to live. I have been told to worry about myself first before worrying about others because how would I be able to help others if I cannot help myself first?

I wrote this poetry collection to express these feelings I have as well as allow others to find themselves in these poems, to allow these poems to function as a well of emotion and understanding, as if to say that you are not alone in these feelings. To recognize the problem is the first step to solving it; in this case, how to live life can be a mystery. How should we live it fully knowing that one day it will end? A person can never anticipate everything that can happen, and sometimes, we do things we regret or fear to do anything because we are afraid to fail or that what we do will not matter in the long-term. The future is made of infinitely branching paths, and every decision made fractures these paths further, making it impossible to know where life will lead us. I wrote this poetry collection to say that it is okay to feel the things we do; we are human and have enough awareness to know that we will die one day. It is okay to feel these things because it informs our decisions and reminds us to be thoughtful of the present. It reminds us that life is precious because it is limited. The title of this work, *All Things Come to Pass*, reflects this sentiment. It can be a sad statement, but also one that reinforces how important life is.

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## DEDICATION

This SJSU thesis is dedicated to my family, my friends, my colleagues, and my teachers.

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I.

Crisis

## **Unopened Jars**

Time is traveling  
Backwards in  
Directions that we

Cannot see, for the  
Mistakes of our past  
Manifest in our

Children's futures  
A guidance of  
Hands pulling and

Pushing, molding  
Clay in shapes that  
Only gods could

Conceive  
Love is flying  
South for the

Sake of others  
While jars of  
Preservatives

Lie unsweetened  
In the cellar  
Waiting

For the old man to  
Stay awhile and  
Remember because

Sweet as they are  
They do not taste  
The way they used to

## A Spiral

the swirl  
of the toilet's wash  
the shit grazing  
the rims  
that form the face  
of the clock  
that spins the earth along  
and turns the wheel  
of a lexus or chrysler  
that keeps the churning  
of an electric whisk  
in full throttle  
that leaves the lives  
of good men at sea  
and pulls the currents  
of air around the earth  
at speeds largely ignored  
until the summer heat  
leaves a desire for cooler days  
or the wind picks up houses  
in its wake while  
young men  
and women  
watch time  
swirl  
down the drain

## **Its Name is Money**

It's got me pinned,  
Hands tied,  
Face pressed against the wall.  
Leaning down, it whispers in my ear:  
Nice clothes you got there,  
And you're getting a nice meal to boot.  
What would you do without me?  
It sends me threatening letters in the mailbox,  
Plagues my emails no matter how often I send them  
To the spam folder. It spies on me  
From the windows of shopping malls,  
Behind the ATMs near the bank.  
It stops me at the gas station, telling me it knows  
I've got places to go, places to be.  
Sometimes I think I see it slinking around the house  
Putting its hands on my parents' shoulders,  
Giving me a smile as it tightens its grip.  
Worst of all, it tells my only brother  
Which friends he can go out with,  
What places are okay for him to eat at  
All while giving him that same stiff smile  
And wrapping a fat, crinkly arm around his neck.

## **The Week I Lost**

Where did my week go?  
The week I lost  
And could not find,  
When I thought time was as infinite  
As stars and the universe was always  
Something you could not see  
All of. I think back  
To when I was young,  
When I would tilt my head  
Back so I could try and take in  
All of the sky at night and try to gauge  
The distance of horizons  
From one end to the other  
Until I could no longer stop  
Myself from spinning  
Around and around,  
Until the stars were blurs  
And my vision slowly receded  
Into the scent of grass.  
The week I lost  
Is nothing like this.  
It was singular,  
More tangential,  
Arriving at only  
A single point  
Before moving  
Away from me.

## **Collapse**

No amount of  
Lights in this city  
Can excuse what  
Has been done  
To the sky.

Give it back:  
The deep blue  
Of night, the  
Stars and moon. I  
Cannot see the  
Hills, I cannot see  
Distance, only  
Gray and red  
Opaque steel  
Sheet of wall  
Pressing down on all  
Of us. Please give it  
Back, the sky  
And stars, give it all  
Back, it is falling,

all

falling,

the sky

is

falling

apart.

*Kem*

My mother taught me the word  
For “ice cream” in Vietnamese  
When I was about three or four.

I remember how it would feel  
In the back of my throat, a soft  
“Cuh” sound followed by the long “ehm.”

It was nothing like the English “kay,”  
So hard and sudden. No, the word  
My mother taught me suited ice cream

Just fine. It suited the way you could  
Scoop it from the container, watch it  
Curl into the spoon and sit in the bowl.

It suited the way you could kiss the cone  
As you caught a stray dribble falling  
Down the side toward your hand.

You could shout it at the top of your lungs  
To let your mother know that the truck  
Was coming down the lane, and you

Would never know to feel bad  
Because ice cream when you are young  
Has gumball eyes and cartoon shapes.

It is different from the tropical fruit  
Puddings and desserts your family ate  
That never came from a bright wrapper or bag.

It has an alluring color and sweetness  
That blinds you from how much  
Your mother is paying from her pocket

To buy you the one you want, and you aren't  
Thinking of her or anything else because  
Summer when you are young is made of

Suns that set never set, bare and dirty  
Feet under a running hose. It is the taste

Of dry popsicle sticks and chapped lips. It is

The smell of charred meat and chlorine  
From the public pool, the dust rising  
From tanbark in the distance. It is

The sound of crickets in the evening  
As the feeling of a moist tank top  
Sticks to your skin like gauze

As your parents whisper late at night  
About things you don't need to know  
Because you are still too young to worry

About how the world works.



## **Prodding**

I have attempted  
    To fill the gopher holes  
    With dirt

Armed with only  
    A hockey stick  
    With no head

No tongue to  
    Lap up the loam  
    Dehydrated

In white sun  
    Light too bright  
    And bleached

Prodding  
    The dirt I push  
    Back into the hole

Each thrust  
    A stab wound  
    Into the Earth

The gopher is  
    Nowhere to be  
    Found

## Cell Cycle

They grow back

Maybe not fingers or toes

But cells, certainly

Building endlessly

Breaking down

Unceasing

Growth without end

Mitosis, mitosis, mitosis...

Until one dies

And another

And maybe too many after that

Until you realize

Maybe they don't grow back

Not all of them

Not all of them

## **Flash Back**

In sixth grade  
I dropped my mother's camera  
At the Capitol building  
The bulky black one  
That makes a flash  
Like no other camera I know

In that second  
Many seconds passed  
And I am reminded of  
A movie I once watched  
Where still frames are  
Chopped and cobbled  
Together purposefully  
But imperfectly

My retina plays pause  
As if there were a rewind  
Function on demand  
But no  
The moment passes  
And the camera is bent out of shape

No flash  
No cracking sound  
No click of the shutter  
Only a quiet thud  
As it hits the carpet  
At the top of the stairs  
The button coming off  
Completely

## The Way We Lie Here

was it inevitable  
    that this war should occur?  
that my mother and father would flee  
    eastward-bound, away from  
what rots the soil or congeals the streams  
    with conceit? churned by a  
trembling hand at the trigger,  
    barrel aimed at the neighbor's back,  
a burning smell only inches away  
    as if to say, "you cannot be happy  
here." we lie and make space  
    for thought, a long-drifting tide  
our only escape. this boat should be  
    a helicopter, one would think,  
the shadow of a plane passing by,  
    the size of a child's hands.  
better to let bygones be bygones,  
    but we do not burn the pictures  
of our past. we carry them  
    in our smiles, in our songs.  
they do carry, somehow,  
    this weight a swinging cartridge  
in the air, with every amount  
    of impact as a falling star.

## **Persistence**

How far will you  
Stretch this last beam  
Of sunlight  
To see the end of this  
Addled road  
Winding up and  
Down this lonely  
Hillside that people  
Have forgotten?  
Where deer and buck  
Look to cross holes  
In these wire fences  
And mountain lions  
Are known to roam?  
Will you struggle  
Till your knees give  
Out and your lungs  
No longer scream?  
Till the muscles  
In your legs cry  
And the wind blasts  
Away the tears in  
Your eyes?  
How far will you go  
To see the end of  
This road? And what  
Will you give  
To know it will  
Still be here  
When you are  
Gone?

## Portrait of a Man Walking Through the Rain

His head bent low,  
He carries onward  
Holding the folds  
Of his bottomless coat  
With folded arms.  
If he were to let go  
All that he is might  
Come tumbling out  
Into the cold, wet  
Storm. His decrepit  
Figure hobbles slowly  
Forward, the hailing rain  
Breaking upon his back.  
His soaked shoes shuffle  
Through growing puddles  
As the cuffs of his pants  
Take on more water every  
Moment. A tarp covers  
His backside, hiding away  
The pack he carries, its  
Bulking form apparent  
Under the creases  
Of the tarp. As he exits  
The cone of fluorescent  
Street light, his shambling  
Shadow is swallowed  
By the dark.

## Traffic

Keep your hands on the goddamn  
Wheel and I will keep

Driving the fact that this city is nothing  
But a bunch of lunatics running a monkey show  
On the street

The tails hanging off the  
Florescent lamps, the lights  
Turning

Green, stop  
Red, GO

(Set reminder: stop texting)

BOOM-POP-POW!

Who let the potholes get this bad?  
I am eating gravel up the wazoo  
And will not hesitate to share!

Lines painted, yellow  
White, stay  
in your lane you sonuva—

— CRASH into windows glass buses

Too yellow in the head to see that everything  
is turning blue:

The trees, the sky, the grass, the lights

The lights

Are yellow

Please slow

Down  
There are children present and  
Walking

Down one-way streets,  
Down crosswalks and sidewalks

A chip in the road  
Tire marks

*SKIDDING*

*SKIPPING*

*ROARING* in the background

The distance too far to measure  
But long enough to signal

My hand a middle finger  
Flicking a booger in the wind



II.

Melancholy

## **Aging**

The folding screen dragon  
Climbs a crumbling  
Mountain  
Behind the counter

The chef  
Serves me the large  
Steaming noodle bowl  
With a flourish

I give thanks  
For the meal  
And split the chopsticks  
With a crack

The broth is too hot  
To take in all at once  
But a single sip  
Warms the blood

As my glasses fog  
I look up to watch the chef  
Work the stove  
His back broad and weary

I wonder if he has a son or daughter  
Would they be my age?  
A dreamer  
Without the means to dream?

The broth is now lukewarm  
And my chopsticks grasp  
At only strands that swim  
Aimlessly, without purpose

## Drizzle

I remember a Halloween  
Years ago, when  
I was old enough  
To stop trick-or-treating  
But went anyway  
With a friend  
And his group of friends  
Whom I didn't know as well.  
We dressed in clothes  
That could hardly be called costumes  
And walked the darkened streets  
Alone  
Together.

The air was damp  
From a light drizzle  
Earlier in the fading day.  
The roads glistened black,  
Wet with mist and spattered with leaves.  
I couldn't see a thing.

But I followed along  
On the heels of my friends.  
Going from door to door,  
The real adults giving us strange looks  
As they handed us candy galore.  
Occasionally I'd feel a drip, drip, drip  
From the canopy of leaves above,  
My jacket barely holding up  
From keeping out the damp  
Feeling.

Down we went  
Through the neighboring lanes,  
Sometimes laughing, sometimes quiet.  
The bag of candy felt heavy in my hands.

That's when I heard a crunch.  
I looked down to see I'd crushed a snail.  
I yelled,  
And my friends all looked at me  
So I told them

I'd stepped on a snail.

Crunch, crunch.  
Two more snails.  
My friends all laughed  
I didn't like killing things.

Crunch, crunch, crunch.  
Three more snails died.  
I jumped and yelled at everything,  
Leaves and snails alike,  
Because everything went crunch.  
But my friends all kept laughing,  
And the lamps kept glowing orange,  
And during it all, I think  
It started to drizzle again.

## **I Cannot Be Bothered to Do So**

Pardon my aging; it's been years  
Since I last let the dust shake loose  
From my hulking form, afraid  
To follow up on old reminders:  
Be cooler, be kinder, my  
Appearance too cantankerous,  
Too candid, this contour. And why  
Am I still here correcting  
Every person's words while accepting  
That change comes only at the turn  
Of seasons when I need no  
Reason to see myself out of  
The hole I dug? So bug me  
About anything else besides  
The fact that acting up at this age  
Might mean having to leave  
Everything behind in blind  
Pursuit of what it means  
To be alive. Try to grasp  
At sand, let it fall between  
My hands, and watch which way  
The setting sun illuminates  
The shadows falling  
From my face.

## The Last Memory of Summer

I swam in the pool behind the house,  
A contented stranger among a friend's  
Friends, a family I did not know,  
Childhood dripping with chlorine.  
Draped in a towel, my shorts still clung  
To the back of my legs. The shower was  
Occupied. So instead, we waited for ice  
Cream in the kitchen, the island surrounded  
By stools so high my legs dangled  
Off the sides. Outside was dark; inside  
A house dimmed save for the small  
Yellow lights that glowed in the kitchen.  
Yes, I believe it was the mother who asked  
If we wanted to turn on more lights  
And we obliged. And then I saw it:  
Across the room, the enormous painting,  
The old man much too close to the wall  
That separates art from reality, his eyes  
The size of my head, his pupils seeming to stare  
At me and only me with a fury through those thick-rimmed  
Glasses. I screamed and ran  
Without hesitation, the halls  
Twisting, contorting—  
Every ornament, every wall  
Towered. When I found the door,  
Above, a lion  
Menaced, biting down on a metal ring. It, too, stared me down.  
So I flew from out those doors  
    Onto wet grass  
        Over cobbled pavement  
            In only my shorts and towel  
                Shivering in the dark  
                    as my mother  
                            chased me down, the car  
  
quiet on the way home.

## **This, I Confess to You**

I am hurting  
Inside, myself

A pale form,  
A pile of sludge

Or waste nailed  
To the wall.

For you, I am hurt  
-ing myself, for you

I cannot give  
More time.

I cannot live  
Through your eyes

As you cannot  
Through mine.

I can throw my heart  
At the wall, let it

Slide and smear  
On the way down

Before it falls and  
Lands with only

A dull thud,  
Small on the carpet.

I can do  
However many things

It takes to say I'm sorry,  
But an apology

Can only be sincere  
When it's ready.

## **Cantata Set to Nightfall**

When all is quiet  
and dust no longer needs  
to settle,

When the echoes  
of a deer's footsteps  
are audible at dusk

And the last vestiges  
of sunlight no longer need  
to crowd along cloud-breaks,

When the air  
is clear of birdsong  
and the roar of planes,

and not a single car  
engine or siren can be heard  
in the distance,

When the house  
has finally been gutted  
empty and hollow,

Perhaps then  
you will find solitude  
on the kitchen floor,

your ear flush  
against the screen door,  
listening for silence.



## **Tantalus**

If Tantalus were to ever  
Taste the fruit and water  
That eluded him, would it  
Justify the aeons of longing?  
The eternity of torture?  
Tantalizing, truly;  
The very end of the rope,  
The last chance after all of time;  
How would it taste  
To know that satisfaction?

And what after?

That may be the saddest thing  
And greater punishment by far.

## **Disembodied Voices**

If you read this  
Poem while I am not  
Here then my voice has  
Become disembodied.

Whose voice do you  
Hear when you see these  
Words left over? I  
Am left as invisible

Limb upon limb  
Tangled flesh in the  
Air, my pulse  
Breathing what is

In the room,  
Some ghost on the  
Page, a soul with no  
Body but ink to

Bind myself to your  
Mind, an echo  
Of someone you  
Once knew, still know

## Water Lily

Water lily, water lily,  
Where have you gone?  
The mud does not flatter me  
The way your skin graced mine  
But I still find your traces  
In trees and pond weeds  
Where your finger traced  
Their shapes and cradled  
Their buds in your warmth.  
Cry gently.  
The lives of birds do not  
Show themselves so easily  
For people like us  
At least not the way they used to.  
I cannot imagine stars  
Anymore.  
I no longer feel your face  
In the air, the back of your hand  
Against my cheek. I am  
Lost in these woods now;  
I look for your sign in the trees:  
A single leaf to show me  
You were home.

## **For Mini**

Late at night  
Outside in the shed  
I told her I love you  
As she lay in her bed

Her eyes looked so tired  
Unmoving, unstirred  
But she still looked at me  
When I uttered my words

I wished I'd said more  
But the moment was gone  
And I thought to myself  
That I'd see her at dawn

## Twilight

In the backyard of the moment  
The flies don't care if you're sad  
The dog will sniff at your pants  
Without asking how you're doing

And the sun will continue to set while  
The birds chatter and warble  
In the corner of your ears  
The clover doesn't want to listen to

Your problems; it is too busy trying  
To bloom in the hard California  
Soil as it does every year. Even under  
Skies this blue, the wind remains

Convinced that it is winter, the chill  
Apparent at the creases of your brow  
How quaint, then, that the upturned  
Wheelbarrow is covered with an old

Rice bag in case it rains.  
No one will notice if you sigh in the  
Breeze. The garden is lonely enough  
Without you.

## What Marks the Years Apart

We watch the ball drop from Times Square  
Counting down the seconds,  
The reason long lost to me  
As the years pass.  
Outside of duty or tradition,  
I find myself wondering  
What marks the years  
Apart. Numbers flash by  
On hats and novelty  
Glasses as I look for  
Something, anything  
To break from this routine.  
The adults smile and laugh  
For the camera, one  
After another  
Until each has had their fill.  
Would they  
Still remember the occasion  
If we took away the hats  
And glasses? The number  
Marks the time, but if I asked you  
What we did the year before  
Or the one before that,  
Wouldn't the answer be the same?

I'd like to spend the evening  
On a hill instead,  
Watching how the stars move  
Across the pocket watch  
My brother gave me  
As its steady hands tell me  
A year has passed.

III.

Acceptance

## Passing Through

If I break the wristwatch you gave  
My brother for his birthday  
Would you be mad?  
I might have cracked  
It on the road  
When I fell upon  
Hard times served cold  
From my mother's  
Lessons on life.  
There is not enough time  
To leave the planet to others  
But I find myself still  
Telling people to recycle.  
The phone line still goes  
To dial tone when I call  
To ask about my college loans.  
Where did the time go?  
You told me it really does  
Rain in Seattle all that often  
But it feels like a kick  
In the teeth to know that  
I can't wake up  
As early as I used to.  
The "I Voted" sticker  
Is still stuck to the wall  
Where you put it.  
I've added a couple more  
Since then.



## Listless in the Face of Clocks

I stretched the clock  
Over the snare like a drum skin  
To keep time to a beat  
Maybe save it for later

I slept in today

Woke up late for nothing  
Borrowed time from the afternoon  
So I could be in bed alone

Phone screens don't glow in the morning  
Like they do in the dark  
The ringer still plays  
When I close my eyes

Like there's a tempo missing

A gap in the beat where  
No ticking can be heard

But maybe it's just the wind playing games

I'm not deaf to the sound of clocks melting  
Dalí taught me better than that  
Elephants are only invisible  
To those who ignore them

So I'll be sure to greet them  
When the time is right

## **The Shelf**

Dust has collected  
On the surface  
Of every nook and cranny  
On this shelf of mine.

Books left untouched  
Are caked in layers  
Of furry gray matter.

The figurines at the top  
Are still frozen in time,  
Their limbs rusted and unused  
Like toys left in the rain.

Loose paper hangs  
From underneath  
Piles of files,  
Unopened and unwanted.

Even the wood itself  
Has lost its shine.  
The brown has since  
Faded and dried white.

My cleaning rag will choke  
Several times in the washroom  
Before my shelf  
Will be well again.

## **Dominos**

The domino  
In question  
Hangs suspended  
Mid-fall  
By a single thread  
Gradually fraying  
At its ends  
Any day  
The whole line  
Of dominos  
Might topple  
And fall  
All due to this one  
That we've held aloft  
For so long

So what if we pushed it?  
Set the whole thing in motion?  
Accelerate the inevitable?  
Let it all come down,

Crashing and burning,  
Allowing ourselves the reality  
Of a crisis  
We'd been denying  
For so long

At least then  
We could begin building again,  
Maybe this time  
Without dominos

## **What Comes After**

No fire lasts forever  
It all eventually subsides  
Consuming all  
As we ride the wave

Beautiful fire  
Terrible, terrible fire  
You take life and nourish  
What is left  
What will you give  
When we are gone?

The water I dream of  
Ends in flame and shadow

These days the world seems  
All too small for me  
Almost claustrophobic  
In its tightness  
A compressor  
Packing us all together  
Without room to breathe  
And air to think  
For ourselves  
What it is we can do  
For each other

## Endings

Endings are like permanent goodbyes.  
You watch them go, knowing  
They'll never come back to say hello.

It will never be "Maybe  
We'll meet again soon,"  
Or even a "Somewhere,  
Someday at noon."

The end is a resounding stone  
In the bottom of the river  
You pass by on your way downstream.

But no matter how many times you might try  
To ride the river and see it again,  
The ending will always be the same,  
And over time, the stone wears down,  
And you've moved on  
Somewhere way downstream  
And have passed many more endings  
Before settling down to rest  
To become an ending yourself.

It's why sunsets give me anxiety.  
It's almost like watching the time slip away,  
The inexorable and inescapable.  
Days become nights and nights become days.  
How many more will I see until my own end, I wonder.  
By then will I have made my ending  
One I can look back on fondly  
Like a rock in the river?  
Or will I be forgotten  
Like a stone sunk deeper down?

## Creating Distance

I needed some time away. I needed some time to give myself space  
Away from myself. I needed time  
To give myself time, to give myself towards something higher, something larger than my  
small self,  
To forgive myself for all the things I'd done, all the things I'd come to regret. I wanted to  
understand why  
Bones break so easily, why windows shatter when given enough force, why the sound of  
birds in the night  
Arrive only when all is silent and the color of blood  
Is black as everything else in a cluttered garage. I still have  
No answers, but maybe now I know how Holden felt, not being able to  
Close his fists all the way anymore, wanting to cry  
At the sight of his sister on a carousel.

## **At Night Near the Calero Reservoir**

Anxious, I drove down that road  
Much longer than I expected,  
The night stretching on, quiet  
And empty, only the occasional

Headlights of an oncoming car  
To assure me I was not alone.  
Near midnight,  
I could make out the shadows

Of trees and hills on one side,  
The lights of small houses and farms  
On the other, dimly lighting  
A darkness only a full moon can

Evoke. Once or twice I thought  
The shape of an animal appeared  
Before me, the eyes of a spirit  
That might steal me away

In the night. At the corner of  
Harry and McKean, the road opened  
And swallowed everything  
In deep blue and black,

And it was then I knew  
If anything were to happen,  
No one would find me  
Until the next day.

I could die here, make one wrong turn,  
The nose of my car diving  
Into a gutter somewhere  
Among the trees of Bailey Avenue,

The sound of a blinking engine light  
Unwavering in the wreck.  
As the speedometer crept to 60,  
I could feel my hands go numb.

But the road remained  
Ahead of me, unchanging

Like the blinking of a digital clock.  
My car felt small against the night,

And home felt so far away,  
So I counted the minutes.  
I had to breathe slow and watch  
The darkened landscape,

Understand it was a secret  
I was privy to, a beauty  
Only the moon could reveal.  
The flicker of a streetlight

Brought me out of my thoughts.  
I was soon among cars again, and the dark  
Was no longer a living thing  
That knew me.



## **Riding**

a bicycle  
will take  
me as far as  
I will take  
it. up

the hill,  
climbing,  
the pedals  
swing in  
lunar cycles:

waxing,  
waning,  
crescent,  
full of

vigor,  
brimming,  
the heat  
a passion  
the love  
a drive

forward,  
up the hill  
until again  
the wheels  
turn by  
themselves,

a sliver  
of gold  
landing  
upon  
silver  
fields  
as I am flying  
down this hill.

## Equilibrium

### 1. After Fire

There is quiet  
Solitude in the falling  
Cinders. The ash is fine  
Enough to mistake for snow.  
On the ground,  
The wood chips smolder  
And glow. The sky is darkened  
Above the silhouette of  
Naked trees.

\*

The incense burns  
In silent prayer at the altar.  
The smoke dissipates  
Slowly, as if it, too,  
Wishes to pay its respects.  
In time, the stick crumbles  
Into ash along with its brothers:  
Defiant red stumps  
In a field of white.

\*

The charred rocks burn  
With quiet intensity,  
The warmth a testament  
To their resilience.  
Even now,  
They seem to breathe  
And pulsate with life,  
Little black stones,  
The eggs of a  
Sleeping phoenix.

### 2. Abundance

“Drink,” she says,

Offering me a glass  
From the dispenser.  
“There is more than enough  
To go around.” And I see  
She is not lying, as the employee  
Behind her rolls another cart  
Forward with more.

“There is enough,”  
I tell myself, holding  
The glass to my lips,  
And as the water slides  
Down my throat, cold  
And inviting,  
I am in that moment  
Avocados and oranges,  
Rice and almonds;  
I see the well without  
Its prize, the lake without  
Its treasure. I see a child’s  
Hands scooping  
Nothing but mud and algae  
Yet still letting it all go  
To their mouth to drink  
Before turning to me  
And asking if I know  
What it's like to be thirsty.

I put the glass down  
And she asks me if  
I would like another.  
I quietly thank her  
And tell her I've had enough.

### 3. Lanterns

The candle floats  
Along the water,  
It's only guide  
An origami boat.  
It joins its family  
In the procession,  
And they become a swath  
Of fireflies.

The river takes them gently  
Downstream  
While the moon stands as  
Their witness.  
A small breeze  
Licks the flames  
And makes waves  
Across the water.  
Above, the trees  
Rustle softly.  
As the boats  
Reach the river's bend,  
I think,  
We, too, could be  
Like boats  
Moving  
In the night.

## **Later**

We'll all die eventually.  
That's not such a bad thing, is it?

There's still time, if you believe it.

Learn to shoe a horse.  
Get some sleep, maybe.  
Maybe help someone  
that needs it.

The world will continue  
to do its own thing.

So take this one life you have

And give it enough time for later.

## Notes

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“This, I Confess to You” was written after reading works by Robert Creeley and Philip Levine.

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