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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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The Designated Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled

ALL THINGS COME TO PASS

by

Brandon Luu

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND COMPARATIVE
LITERATURE

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May 2020

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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.

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