HERE, WE BECOME ISLANDS

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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*Here, We Become Islands* is the debut collection from a poet in motion at the borderlands of hip-hop and Puerto Rican culture, family history known and discovered, masculinity and beauty. These poems of blood-letting honesty shift narrative into lyric, elegy into celebration, and prayer into action. Full of rhythm and discovery these poems remap the line break and pivot into ecstasy, consecrate the unsaid, find roots in a shifting geography and the other. Here is a dancing at the crossroads between life and death. In *Here, We Become Islands* the poet is a spirit-bridge between his ancestors and a nomadic life inspired music.
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They will become hermits or rogue animals, increasingly exotic hybrids, broken bridges between two ancestries, Europe and the Third World of Africa and Asia; in other words, they will become islands.

-Derek Walcott

Your love is the weather of my being.
What is an island without the sea?

-Daniel Hoffman
I. Origin

II. Sound

IV. Breath

III. Ritual

*Note: For lack of time this is to be a circle drawn through all of the roman numerals, and the section of the book will be in bold. To represent both the trunk of a tree, and the cypher that defines the relationships in the book.
Obedience
*for Daniel, Rickey, and Myself*

The levee path lined with gravel pebbles
took us close to thick fog on those nights
the crunch under shoes was black & mild ash
was the music by which our words travelled
as we unwove “bitch” from the women we loved
as we stitched back broken hearts in the shape of walls
our fingers burned charcoal against the night sky
here river houses are two stories we would praise
like temples full of smoke before our heads
swivel to the stars swishing liquor to lips
there was a fence laid low by a fallen tree
where we would stop if the hours were small
but these nights time kept us like minutes
our feet dancing the space between 4 and 8
the spin of our record was sober close
when the buzz wore thin like the airs cool bite
when our lies would take us four directions from truth
light came between us
our shadows walked ahead
knowing our bodies better then
on nights when death was respectful
we mourned like monks who can’t stop talking
lions we’ve tamed Camaros we’ve never owned
the way betrayal is a hard-hornet sting
we had no choice but to be poets on those nights
we served language then with narrow eyes and compass breath
Papi Stands

the ticket in his left hand
the time to go on his right wrist
left leg rhythm ready
he stands shifting weight
across the axis of his hips
the airbus to the US foreign
like the sound of Santos
from American lips

his speech a bilingual blend
English and Spanish accent heavy
He fixed houses and railings
Opened pool halls and restaurants
ran numbers and took brown bags
of money to Chinatown
summers he sent my dad and uncles
out to slang snow cones on the corner
of Lincoln and Claim
the money for food to feed family
pork chops like butter
wholesale rice and beans

and in the pitch black of night
he would mix split pea with chicken noodle

a story my father would tell me
the world was fixture in his memory
as they drove he pointed left then right

over there where you get your engine fixed

here if you need someone to paint your house

he owes me, he will never forget

in the backyard he would bury liquor
ferment into strong throat burn
and he would sing him
Puerto Rico into his house
his eyes and hands like
chiba roots stand face-to-face
with Huracán tropical
even drunk they run ground
Torres strong
stubborn big vision where even an angry
sunovabich becomes the music we live by
Origins

There is Norwegian in my mother’s family
the hard earth farm hands and strong stomachs
milk churned butter rural Illinois and quiet.
Sometimes I look at how she takes pain
without a wince or buckle and I imagine her
on the farm in the swamp heat of a Midwest summer
stoic as a lost Viking whittling Odin
out of a fallen pine years before Columbus.
My father is one hundred percent Boricua
long lineage of hard work and afro skin,
pennies turned nickels island Coquí loud.
I would watch as he would leave the house
leather bag slung round his shoulder
his PhD quick out of his mouth
first of 9 to go to college sometimes
I imagine him listening as his father said:
*I think you love books, more than people.*
How his father never said I love you.
I think of how God wove my
15 and a half year old father to my
21 year old mother that day outside
of the health clinic in Aurora
where they both worked.
How forty years of together looks in my flesh
How I would never have been except
for this exact moment in time
how miscegenation laws and my grandfather
boarding that plane to the US relaxed long enough.
I think of how my grandparents
felt when my alabaster mother and
afro wearing father walked through the door
walking a line smooth out of the 70s
when silent disapproving nods
have the power to name
what is illegal
I know in my flesh
every love is an act of courage
the shadow of vinegar

is how death tastes
the taste of vinegar as it
traces just beyond swallow
name against the roof
and tongue the way waves
tear at the sand of the beach
How long, Araceli, have you
sat in nothingness?
Before your tongue spun
this violent weaving of knives
retreating thunder eyes
streams of leaden threats
filling veins with gravel
the third failed relationship
the one that pinned me to a chair
threatened to kill herself
her hand twisting the cap off
the pill bottle her hand grabbing
the scissors against her wrist
her hand holding my body
pinned against a chair her knees
pressed into the leather the knees
thinning in my blood her head
bouncing off the floor when
I pushed her off my lap
I do not remember my name
words hollow on my tongue
riveted the bone of my chest to stand
my heart hungry to drink
the blood of forgetting
I feel guilt praying after
to escape death part of myself
what I had to leave behind in that room
for years I breathe
the smoke of a fire smoldering
just this side of buried
I no longer like the way death tastes.
We Men

Sometimes, we men, forget where we come from.
Need reminders the way the radio works through repetition,
song after song until it sticks, until turning from one
station to the next we mouth the rest of the hook.

That’s why they call it a hook, it sticks in your guts
like wine and thick russet bread.

Sometimes, the hook doesn’t let go, and we flail
oxygen deprived with nothing save rapture,

That wild stupidity caught in our feet,
That holy ghost of manhood, pride.

Definition can be a sin and a savior for a body
Crossing a river too deep for what we are carrying,

Mouth full of water and confusion, legs frantic
Feet reaching for solid ground, settling in mud.

We arch our backs drenched in assembly line sweat
We men, beaten and bruised, swallowed and corralled.

Nothing but husk, return home after days end
carrying fear and dreams in our black leather wallets.

We look at you and see how everything falls short
Taught since boyhood that tears are weak and beauty suspect

We forget the language of God, we reach for something
And come up with a hook, our fathers sang of this

To our mothers, and when it failed they sang the blues,
And when that failed, they bled dark red into the earth.
The sky erupts over 63rd street

there are moments before the first drop falls
Erik lighting faces into laughter late at night
sides split into rhythm of deep belly joy
when thunder rumbles from the belly of clouds
golden lightning cracks a crimson blue gray

a thick fog sweat breaks out on eyelids
did the men in that garage feel time slow
creep around corner guns out the window

the garage erupts as shots lodge bullets in spine

drops the size of hail ring out
patters garage with long gentle translucence
blue drachmas to pay Hade’s toll

passage through pain
freezing breath in place
cobalt clouds stuck in Erik’s bone

stone gaze – eyes wince
ground cracks – pain erupts
shock and awe inside of a body
jokes silenced by red mist

the garage erupts as shots lodge bullets in spine
Erik that late night muse of humor and wit
wrong place, wrong time
now rolls a wheelchair into throne—

Erik when the air cracks
with news you still catch and spin it
slant like the face of a mountain
at home with a story to tell
and the slow pour of hennessy into a big gulp

a contractor by trade
you still lean into your arm
as you strike a nail clean through
a two by four
Sonnet: Puerto Rican History

*after Jack Agueros*

The turtle wants to claim the island it left smoldering
In the clutches of countries that burn people like cheap tobacco
Wants to reconstruct itself with a hard shell painted Taño red
Suck the earthly paradise back into the Pumpkin’s oblivion.

Now there are walls with guards that keep vampires at bay
The crucifix replaced by shadows that wear dollar signs
From the bodega to the old brick streets of San Juan
From the national bank to the dirt packed roads of Caguas
The piraguas man selling passion fruit syrup on ice shaved fine
The brown man in blue police uniform heeling a dog with jack boots

there are people here now whose hands conjure magic
in coffee fields tobacco rolling tomorrow’s sweet fire
there is struggle sharp enough to chisel a machete into paper

in blood the steel earns the right to call itself Boriken.
Caribbean Nights

There is threnody just below the silt of the ocean floor
that has seeped into the carapace of honeyed salmon
A rain stolen summer in the pit of my stomach
a call of hinterland through rough hands tying knots
around jutting metal anchors littered with cigarette ash
the docks are oaken peat fine whiskey and oblation
three poets call toward a mountain the sun sets behind
the mountain doesn’t need my language
my love says to me on the balcony before dinner
and here I know we must meditate alone sometimes
shake dust from tomes to mine the resin in the binding
look for a truth so pure it can only end in sunder
drink to the end truth brought in the company of men
composite thoughts on the splayed anthems of cosmology
coquí cracking night-silence cacophony swilling the salt air
and drive way banter breaking over makeshift
hoods and Dominican Psalms that say
the Pina Colada caught the seascape of Puerto Rico
in the foam coconut beating the shore of its glass
I want to drink its fine rum straight no cortege
and breathe a spark back into faith pure as a shadowless sun
there are no words banned from my tongue
there is nothing I have not found the heart to say.

Late at night I crept the shore in San Juan
felt the sky was leaning its head in to drink
In the belly of a cloud I was punished
for every lie that pushed my language slant
knee deep in benediction I caught my breath
renouncing the act of survival I have
bought freedom at the expense of loved ones
and I do not regret bridges burning
the cinders of their hearts to ghost
I mourn, quietly, in my own way then
move on, never turning back
the lot in front of me is filled with salt
and the ash of belief
My path is wrought with the iron of craft
the foundry of my Grandfather’s breath
songlines so old reason supplicates at their altar
I have unearthed the sweetest sound
and can’t bring myself to describe the beauty of silence
but I will tell you her eyes are amber when they graze my soul.
nine ways to look at return

1. the border between air and country right below your rib cage singing like dissonance

2. When the hummingbird flickers into lighter before your eyes does it come back home in stillness?

3. My teenage years were Gibran & Hammad Coqué climbing cedar and olive to palm Mofongo shaped like a quartered coconut Drawn to breaking and wholeness What prophet can speak for us now?

4. Boriqua to poem is like clock to tick tradition thick with occluded vision our hands will return to what they know the heat and the work

5. whisk the egg until almond extract sugar and butter blend then flour slow bake add slivered almonds dust with powdered sugar

6. breaking sound machete hung round neck there is rhythm in flight a steady beat wings drum the moon, calluses hum feet

7. my right hand knows two things: A family ring gold and onyx Writing a good poem bruises

8. there is sun in my skin a riddle in my flesh
abstraction coursing veins
and the call for concrete
I am of the canon and yet so far away

9.

I return home to many places
none of them feel honest

prayer hinges me
like a well-worn spine
Carmel Beach

She was there next to me
on the beach at night. Under
the sky full of shooting stars
I held sand in my fist. Wore
a quiet expression. I wanted
to roll over, to let my lips
meet hers. I held silence here
I knew she would let me.
The silence she was carving
in the beach told me so. The seaweed
lapped in the pooling waves.
And the ground itself held my desire
against toes and lower back.
On a bench later that night,
I placed my arms around
her shoulders. All I had left
inside was gentle, the tremble of
fear I scattered along the sand
opalescent seashells glistened
in moonlight as we walked.
That night gazing at the sea
I read oblivion in the shadow
beneath stars and clouds
where horizon becomes no place
watched her heart beat through
the nape of her neck. It revealed
her wanting. She told me
I was sweet when I was walking
with my arm around her, asked
me later why I didn’t make a move
I forgot what it meant
to be wanted, I leaned into the question
and it wasn’t her lips but
how space felt as it narrowed,
air became fresh-water ocean
that I gulped until thirst
gave way to body
swift be the hard times

Pastoral has always meant the droning
of white men to the sounds of land they can never own
over the brown mathematics of hard bourbon
our pastoral is Armington nights and grown men
cyclically drunk on dreams sieved through 211 cylinders
judgment: those men are stuck
reality: they practice gathering like words on a page
catch smoke in their lungs like ancient censers
swift be the hard times as they flow through us
side of the house grown men piss on concrete
and wood fence carries liquor fire starter I swear
the matches lighters and flint rocks
are chattering teeth and spinning heads
our laughter binds us code breakers of swallowed tongues
why does wind feel like stepping out of a painting
and how long can these nights last before sunrise
before we drift from bottle to smoke watch all these
subjects clothe themselves in liquor & words
until they sleep their shadows awake
at sunrise I am the only one still up
while the dew collects on the grass
Intoxicated I leave and sometimes forget
what happens between one stoplight and the next
Huraca’n

My burning city
catches the shadow cast
by water as it pulls away
from a freshly darkened beach
holds her smile carried in
the glass of my silence
I never look back.

The ocean smells of
death fish and sharp wind
prying nostrils open filling
them with murk and seaweed.
There love grips you like
passion fruit piraguas
dissolving on ridges of tongue
a bloody desert red.

An arc of young brown men
sprawling shades of earth
standing around auctioning
every drug a mind can conjure
The street is lined Escalade
shining rims that a ten year
olds hands run rag and water
round and round until they spin
reflections back into eyes.
There are alleys where men
purchase anonymity
between the thighs of young
women, and weed smoke
drifts through their black hair
curls around their nose
fills it with sulfur and char
cheap perfume and wetness.

My burning city flames
*with your back pressed against brick
spin me with your tongue*

past flesh bone and tendon
carve the apple’s flesh to core
taste snake venom trickery
drip in Eden and Gomorrah
flowing veins classical and blues
How do I tell your story 916
Steel Reserve 40s gonna keep you trapped
circling up on cold nights in dark driveways
smoke billowing above stagnation
playing that same 90s music until
you become a figment of imagination
until the Ulysses inside is buried in 9 to 5
until that coffee shop eats you into numb
until that shady lady Hemingway Daiquiri
becomes lightning in a glass chasing dreams
of the perfect simple syntax into philosophy
over cigarette smoke at Naked

City burning somewhere red somewhere blue
Lauryn’s voice becomes sledgehammer
to rib cage, through the sound of bone breaking
gang signs out the back seat of a Cadillac and
the taste of desperation on mouths stitched quiet
Burning City dias de los muertos caminando
with fuck it attitude and concrete stare
I don’t want to feel
Feelings are weak and fragile
inside and out

Afraid –
that truths with bullets for teeth
will chase me into the open veins of city
cooking me alive in distance
glimpse the sly grin of her freeways from
plane windows see neighborhoods become grids
then flickers of light as engines hum
fingerprints scatter onto the corners of turned pages

wrestling

memory is salt to open wound
preserver of ghostflesh and body
the ocean holding on for dear life
My burning city is salt
kiss me with my back pressed against a wall
take the tongue out of my mouth
baptize it in feeling. I don’t want forgiveness.
The knife is too close to my throat.
II. Sound
Compass

Inside my body, just behind
the heart muscle a needle threads
word to flesh and points north.

On my finger a contact sits perched
over a city of memory
I spend all day trying to navigate.
Recommended accompaniment *Something I Dreamed of Last Night* by Miles Davis

The moon casts a lonely shadow over the pages
  as he squints to read sitting by a foggy window.
Through the glass stars backdrop the border
  between him and hunger –
an acquired freedom that tastes like salt stirred
  into scrambled eggs and cream into coffee –
smells like late night diner breakfast.
  He’s still riding the buzz of his black label
  scotch blend as the notes stretch themselves wide
  before his brow he catches a glimpse of the blue note.
    A note felt outside the body.
That space between two conjurers
  where only feeling carries thought into lung.
  He watches words as his fingers drum
the back of the hard thick binding, unconscious, rhythmic
  catching the eyes of other tables.
His rhythm intoxicated –
  through bites of brown potatoes
    and the crunch of toast. Something
  professional in his fingers catches their ear,
the patrons in the red booth to the left listen,
  the food in their mouth captive.
Where all stars go when they flicker out of sight,
  the pause between coffee sip and swallow –
  thick like pulp filled orange juice.
Silence where there should be,
  where there shouldn’t be,
  he teaches the doubt to follow him into rhythm.
There is a shine off the golden ring
  on his drumming hand.
    Across from him an empty space slowly
  filling with Bolden soloing cornet,
    Miles gasping for life through trumpet,
  and Thelonius clapping him on the back
between piano solo and beauty between break
and the fast of a long night in Birdland.
a hunger to these spirits who riff with his drumming –
  a sadness drawn over their shadowy faces –
    no one but the night can hear them. It is the darkness swilling around him
he plays, long after his heart skips through his fingers.
Walking Lake Merritt

my first taste of Mystic was effervescent bordering sweet
beauty from Oakland who traveled drum and kick
grew mistress to every thought, shook dust
off my tomb, her eyes were a gentle mate, took time
to look and not touch, I was an aside
a voice calling to her when love seemed as distant as starlight
we were the shadows of enrapture carrying each other for a time
Touch (between n. and v.)

1. that kingdom between fingertips and flesh.
2. Delicate, that’s what she called her father’s after he got sick.
3. can carry the sound of forgetting, can carry memory and guilt and fear.
4. once when the sky opened itself and water poured from great heights, he looked up
   saw how the sun tinged the clouds into faded red, saw how close the clouds came
to enveloping the sun, he needed to distinguish between the land deep brown in
his hands, and what the now deep purple clouds were doing to the sun.
5. the charge between two opposites, infinitely pulled into each other. The hum of two
   lips vibrating a blues that is ancient.
6. Phylum: graze, caress, contact, metaphor, the brush past, the like, the as…
7. the veins in C’s hands, a nervous tick at her knees, hands that shuffle, her breath
   catches in her midsection when she disagrees, I want to be closer
8. in ways only a lover can, the right tension building when two fingers find the
   balance between rub and push, a mouth lost deep bringing conclusion
9. as in inappropriate, as in risk, as in flirt, forward, froward, as in tocamé, as in friction,
   as in found.
10. As in cartography: what two countries do at their borders.
11. lips light on lips and for an instant before the tongue careens past there is a breath that
   feels shared
12. the sun, the waves of heat as they swerve through air, the person you used to be,
    the sky faded red, and the city you grew up in the way it was
13. the dirt at the moment it turns into mud, the water and soap as it meets flesh, the
    person sitting next to you, the sheets as they tent onto your skin, cool almost wet
14. Acid, lush, whisper, shadow, force, church, confession, trust. Broken as in: one, or
    some combination, or all
moonside kalakuta
“music is the weapon of the future”

Fela Kuti
in the night his body became a drum
the republic was quiet save the pour
of plantation rum there was a clink on
the wooden bar tables and the lights flickered
the swirl at the bottom of the glass tilted
up meeting Fela
humming Fela
whisper Fela

saxophone tracing the arch of a neck
as it sways into his wisdom
unravels knotted logic out of thick air

in pain tables become drums
the clank off metal lids struck by
truth moves on song tongue
echoes deep wails into reed

words that dance off nervous bodies
here risk is beneath the sweat of dancing people

long into the night his words
curve into the silence between
feet and batons meeting flesh

Fela rides belief
in the long horn pull
doubled to draw breath
men cannot beat
the music out of him

Come, dance with us
We’re making music over here.
the second stitch is the hardest

*after Terrance Hayes*

Inside of awe eyes discover the roots of things
a thread cross-stitch crochet my aunt made blankets with
the blue and pink blending with squares of space
holding twenty-five years strong from birth to now.

Wet concrete walls as far as the eyes can see
sand-blasting steps in yellow rain boots the brown man
stands with vibrating hands shaking grime from ground stone.
Freedom, there are many actions that at first seem pointless.

Territory borders the powerful on maps penned in
canons treaties shadows of back rooms and smoke
just beyond the ocean. Gray, colonial white
property becomes freedom dressed down in fatigue.

Inside of fatigue, Virginia, my abuela who had nine children
young and riddled with tired, lupus or cancer took her
beautiful and left her in Aurora’s cold wintered earth
this is not a dream, America, men, can be hard on a woman.

I am told the second stitch is the hardest for the hands to learn
there is so much about that first cross our knuckles rebel against
the sound of work

I.

sand grain paintings etched into palms
entire universe laid out in twisting lines
here veins pulse beset by vision

lifetimes learning to listen to bricks
calluses form on palms opposite knuckles
stone disciples reformed blisters

praising the act itself for bringing
home one trowel at a time the hands
spread mortar along row of bricks

three by three lay across quickening sand
each brick cementing each brick in place
each place becoming a testament to work

the grip of the line sets firm the truth
under the baking sun the hand weathers
the lines grow dense the calluses firm
foundry smoke steam sweat  
carrying the smell of men  
over aluminum ovens and lunch  

was a heaven of coolness  
was the anaphora of a river  
the sound of teeth and tongues  

tearing free from bones  
grating the lines my Grandfather  
was a tall bearded man who  
brought home an aluminum alligator  
the tail would come up and the mouth  
would crack a nut smooth open  

the taste of a walnut was  
the smooth flesh of the morning  
when coffee was good  

and the workday was solid  
Plano, IL birthed my mother  
out of soldier, Norwegian stock,  

and farms in the summertime  
she would keep this alligator in the house  
tell me how Grandpa Jimmy  
brought this home in his bare hands  
hands layered with sweat and skill  
she smiles when she thinks of him  

6’3 in his orange VW bug  
driving to work on cold mornings  
crunching gravel under tire  

to manage men the ovens the liquid  
aluminum poured into sand cores  
silica that would crack away leaving  

rough edges that needed sanding  
and a circular motion from the elbow  
my mother would do this for her first job
to smooth a life and hold it together
she did more than smooth aluminum
her eyes became molds that a thousand
degrees of sizzling metal could
pass through and with silica calm
she held clay, resin, water
aluminum in her thoughts
Grandpa Jimmy left me a foundry
taught me how to weather the broken cast
Somewhere in Somonauk there is
an echo of a conversation Jimmy had
in the heat of the afternoon
iii.

rain glowing tin roofs
slow rust captures prints of cats
scurrying on motion

black covered in leather capture the cards carrying logos like VISA
California ID blue background class C drivers license through plastic
the top right corner frayed against the constant pocket slide
mounds of business collaged where money lacks
with names like LIDS, Rutgers, Chase books through
Berkeley Public Library on the wind of another blockbuster
there on the bottom side a United claim sticker
for luggage still this gruff-thundering voice escapes the wallet
holds itself together on raspy wandering lightning and sheer will
the dry sun tans its hide the dye turns it black pitching night

thought will lead to this
the sound of work odes the hands
scrape climb mountain sky

in the dark where winter holds itself for warmth
a glitter off a ghost blade carries the machete through cane
gambling men throw dice to the sound of rum
ferment shadows and fear in two directions
turn east for anger the sound of men scaling scaffolding
turn west for sobs as the sunset leaves the day in tattering
diamonds glistening to the sound of night bugs
their wings jesting about like sweat on a brow
sometimes cats can be seen running into the field
where no man can follow without learning
more about himself than he ever cared to know

mourn for the soft shell
shattered into the hardness
of logic and storm cloud
Grace Women

wind strong women eye
of hurricane through quiet breaths
mend sons callused hands

trade in sunlight for
work sure steps lead feet quick
fast as two hearts beat

watch over all grace
women catch our fallen leaves
break whisper in rain

strong levee embrace
hold broken dreams like water
head high even in darkness

grace.
Wielding a Stick and Breath

In bound web
the Spider caught
a sharp stone,
a wisdom shard,
three lost maps
from ancient Buffalo
time glistened bright.

East of Rockies
the plains spread
across the land
that birthed me
like a welcome
land of little
moisture, Great Plains.

Strong winds shook
the Spider’s web
broke the stone
in two, reveal
the many eyes
concentric bound rings
we, all things.

St. Charles the city
and the hospital
the man lost
in confession, sometimes
claimed, others shadowed
history is like that
fickle, of men.

The Spider swung
to the ground
spun web quick
the rock told
of a burning
ceremony, tobacco lit
blown toward wind.

I ate frybread
before six years
the land cradled
me through death
by three, three
Grandfather Torres
Arterburn, Robert taken.

The Spider planted
tobacco in ground
topped as flower
formed, then aged
for three years
spun dry web
round and lit.

In Illinois weather
was fierce, cold
would shred bones
weather faces haggard.
When vultures gather
around a corpse
first, the eyes.

The stone glistened
blood bloomed light
the Spider sat
with the Buffalo
half the night
they spoke flower
petals into air.

Family says I
look like those
who have gone
before. Maybe I
am one who
never leaves, watches
all seasons close.

Spider and Buffalo
laughed at goodbye
they left no
mention, shared vision
through ten eyes.
Glared at each
silence, unwound hope.

My hands would
dig in earth,
wielding a stick
and breath. Searching
for something old
I could show
my parents, here.

Spider climbed up
into thick web
licked the stone,
until whole, then
planted in dirt.
When children dig
he thought, here.
An Inquiry: Prayer

I came to God in the gut checking silence of a breakup
alcohol swirled words into complaint heavy on night air.
My thoughts loud, the bible became home to direction
the sweltering language consumed me whole, apple core and honey
bloodletting and bone chronicles, loss begat inquiry begat prayer.
God, I have come to question what it means to be chosen.
By a woman, by You, is it the stir in front of people
when it feels like the words are in step with pure light
when speech diaphragm and eyes translating words
from page to mouth, sound sermon. What of the
prayers hidden in abstraction, in the body, so estranged
from speaking desire we imagine lust a sin.
Sometimes it feels You listen in punishment,
or ride serendipity into our quiet thank you’s.
I have prayed for my desires more than Your will
fingers crossed palms steeple, mind whittling words selfish.
There is a litany of names I pray, a chronology of classes
teachers, safe travel, hallowed memories given form.
Sometimes, though, form collapses entirely and it
is for an end, a beginning, pain to subside, sometimes
it is for the pain to start, sometimes pain feels right.
I have prayed for a woman I lusted through commitment
through hours of reasoning, countless poems, utterance
becomes power becomes words spoken quietly, to myself,
in the dark hallway between the bed and the bathroom.
There are few regrets in prayer, for me prayer asks forgiveness once
begs nothing into conversation, holds everything violently still.
I catch myself sometimes, in the fold of sheets, in script
a draft revelation, a sound catching the wind just right
a carrion call between life and breathlessness
wondering if there is anything left to do but amen.
in the belly of the black keys

where the blues grates your soul down to gristled bone
and long fingers reach to climb you ivory splitting black
the sharp the flat hallow of your spirit there is a man
who makes you in a Midwest factory day after day
and he loves his job the string man next to him
always talks about a new red wine vintage and harps
about his lack of boredom w/ hummingbird nimble fingers
he laces the Grand with the air not yet percussive not
pulled or tuned not yet sanded down to a shiny finish
of black the golden Steinway auspiciously glimmering in its bottle
empty dark liquor into Thelonius and watch him sway you
like the perfect counterfeit, watch as he gets up in
the middle of you and pushes you into the white
watch her quiver under the weight of a Monks concentration
capital flowing down the strings lid open and awaiting the
butterfly wings to flap back against the reverb of time
watch the setting of keys so delicate it makes you think
this man could never beat a soul without cause
he never watches football says he prefers a cold beer and fishing
drawing lines across the surface of a lake catching mostly air
leaning into the sun the music in the mosquitoes and hiccup of the water
he has never heard a Grand in Carnegie and doesn’t want to
he knows the wood sounds best when whisky and women have
spilled all over it when the sounds of bowed strings and arthritic
hands loosen themselves on those black keys and dance duende
until even ghosts stir grab the hands of shadows and dance
Whittle a Poem fine

*in response to Bukowski’s “so you want to be a writer?”*

take hard granite deep in your fist
whittle it down with sand water and chisel
carve the words out of places you have never been
look Charles Bukowski in the face and suggest re-vision.

Spend hours with teeth trapping eyes
in the esophagus of a poem until the perfect word
acids the poem into unheard doneness
read your poem to poets read your poem
with poets close at hand to offer edits
poetry is not an individual act
a poem is not done until the reader
is changed by the process of digestion
look Charles Bukowski in the face and suggest
fermentation of raw cabbage has a place next to coarse ground salt over meat.

Tell the world of your landscape
how we can’t all sit in a house at a typewriter
how delivering mail and mothering require
a different approach to alcohol
write how a fist senses skin on the point of impact
how the blood you look at later
is inseparable from your own
write how careful we must be with language
how much has been taken from people through obfuscation and carelessness
write pretentious poems if arguing with academics
pay attention to verbs be careful
when crossing the page
a writing process can take you hours away
from the beach into the thick of old growth
sometimes you want the sand sometimes
you want a cold river to run clear water
over stones over hands over lips
until your words look like
there is nowhere else they belong

then do it over and over again

there is no other way,
until there is.
III. Ritual
There Is No Ritual For This

Daniel and me would drive around in Matt’s Suburban
e-4o on the system knockin loud like infant thunder
You would beg us to pick your boyfriend up
his spiderman backpack and awkward high school
gravity. We turned the music up so we didn’t
have to hear him talk. Already we were well versed
in silence. Daniel loved you in that way older brothers do,
somewhere between your handful of shut up’s
you’re hella annoying’s, and loud laughter
a love that would throw an uppercut, break a jaw,
hold you in its arms when you needed most. You were my
little sister too. We wanted to be left alone in the world
of 11th grade so often we would ignore what you did
seek quiet where your words would shout.
Loud. That’s what I remember most. Went through every racial option trying to find where your hybridity would land. Black, Brown, you would run your tongue along vernacular and accent like it was a new outfit. I remember the last few times I saw your brother Matt’s apartment. You and Elyas, your son, would glow. You caught the holy work ethic when he was inside you. You had a dream of teaching that no one would have expected. Follow-through was in the very objects you would build your home from: paintings, furniture, woven fabric. I listened to people at the memorial, the act of dream following blossomed in their throats honey buzzing on their tongues. The pictures of your life that slid by made me cry and Rickey Put his big bear arms around my shoulders.
What did his hands look like? I want to hate this man who took you tricked you into love before you knew the monster in his eyes
When did you first feel the back of his hand, where was I?
This man who filled you with love then turned the handle
Matt took a machete to his house when you came to him
told him this man put his hands on you bruised your flesh
Daniel called me from overseas get ready spilled from his lips
Your mom held us all back when he first put his hands on you.
Pam, Mom, woman who raised us taught us the ritual of coming home from work. Told us to finish the food, tortillas in hot grease clean the house, run to Bel-Air for missing ingredients
a mom to all of 63rd who rode a Harley and worked anti-terrorism aware violence only begets violence. A mom who took no shit.
On Facebook the status read:
Have you seen or heard from Vanessa?
Your sister, your mom, everyone over night
had shared the post. You left your son,
Elyas in Matt’s house and went out to the parking lot
of that apartment complex.
The ex, the father, lay in wait,
Something happened between his hands
and your flesh… before he drove
all the way to san francisco with you motionless
beside him… before he chose to burn the car
with your body in it. Before Daniel would call me
sobbing his body broken on foreign ground,
stationed overseas, shattered, grief driven
through the tender parts, the vinegar of news on his tongue…

he killed her, Vanessa’s dead…
I sat in silence with Daniel,
I don’t know what to do man
Over seas Japan catching all of Daniel in its arms
no sleep, no food, absence filled him
and I don’t know what he thought
I was lost and there were no words that could resurrect
conjure, help, or solace the body riddled
she was here and not she was flesh and past tense
she is my little sister crafter of
life fashioned out of dream and work ethic.
before he threw the match…before he was caught
Jessica, your older sister, told me about the black stain
where the car was. How she had to see it.
Her knuckles at deaths throat. I swallowed the taste
of this image down hard.
What language do your eyes speak
if they know they will never open again –
this man who you chose to love before his hands…
before violence taught me numb
this man who made you smile at least once…
I didn’t want him dead, I didn’t want him alive,
I wanted him not to be real —
but I felt how real he was in the three am kitchen
as I wretched into wail—an elegy of sound
a murderer becomes a robber and a myth maker at the same time
violence can turn words from the mouth of poet’s bitter
it breaks us every time over the beauty of your life
the theft of your breath held in our palm.
I struggle because I do not care about his thoughts
nor what color his eyes have become
I want him to un-be, other’s who loved you want him dead.
Language seems concrete in your absence
a heavy thing to be picked up and fed, the subject of prayer,
a place to pass it on
Did you bring me language after it was lost
Did you know I would meet her in Berkeley

Did you see her in that apartment with
his hands around her throat did you
see Cynthia as she tasted the same death
how does anything survive

Her son

Paul happened into my life eight years old.
I will be a father V, and I am afraid
of how my anger and sharp tones will bend him
As I try to raise him to love women, to use his hands
to hold them close, to mend best as he can.
I may fail. But I will tell him your story
when he is old enough.
I will whisper of you lyric,
your love for song and life
how you brought us together.

~

R&B will play in your memory
in that garage where Rick & I sat
listening to your careful attention
to what sound can do when it is put together
whittled into a fine mix.
Love’s rhythm and lust echoing
on the CD Rick played
The same mix you made all those years ago
for him while the rest of us
barely noticed your head nodding with purpose in the kitchen
your advice,
“look her in the eyes…always in the eyes”
to remember

grief hit me slow at 3am
as I slid into myself
my face breath close to my knees

Why a curse I slung at God
it had been three days without
your body here on earth

death hit me in those thick seconds
everyone was asleep but my soul
felt you tear away like wind

into the past tense
you became was a memory
from here you would fade

back into Jessica’s room
where you shared her old clothes
and talked on the phone to a boy

with a Spider Man backpack
that trademark shut up Daniel
and steady hunt for who you were

in the kitchen of my parents house
I rent the banner as I yelled out
in my Father’s name

the pain tasted like tinny vinegar
reason was on the cross bloody and pierced
God was watching I know he was

my soul with well-worn knuckles
came then and lifted me to my feet
took me out to open air draped in black

4am stars flew into my throat
on each sobbing inhale I carved
your name to remember
IV. Breath
Out of Elegy

Salt winds its way into a cavernous mouth.  
As wind dries ocean to rock 
we carry fragments of memory in our fault lines. 
We hold faith in fingertips, rosary of fallen loves, 
we carry cinder blocks to build floodgates, 
to hold up walls, to fight wildly against doubt; 
we carve pens out of I will never, 
we draw the short straw and dive into the sea 
Salt winds its way into a cavernous mouth. 

Salt winds its way into a cavernous mouth; 
And he reaches out for your hand, precious fear 
companion and disciple shifting along stone 
carving the whistle of one thousand life times 
into the stalactite of tomorrow’s rising sun. 
He swings his heart at a tower of ivory, 
Day piling on top of day, a red sea of blood 
part of surrender wades into the belly of now 
Salt winds its way into a cavernous mouth. 

Salt winds its way into a cavernous mouth.  
And I cannot stop the seasons as they move 
Like wind through the autumn leaves 
my hands hopeless barriers to spring and all 
grief is prosaic and long it shifts counter 
clockwise as the news sinks into sinew 
becomes a giant pinning us to the light 
death slings a goliath stone shattering body 
Salt winds its way into a cavernous mouth.
Akūpāra - Unbounded

The turtle grew long claws into lion breath
It’s waddle slow and steady erupted gazelle
Stretching out beyond the limits of its shell
it learned what dirt felt like against its carapace
its hind limbs grew bulky and shadow filled
it held its beady eyes toward the sun and inhaled.

The turtle grew restless on land and sought sea
dove in on its pride it would spin into float
and chase fish nipping at their fins
amphibian hunger would course through its flesh
as salt water would lingered on the shell
the sun felt good as it sank into the ridges
the turtle grew Taíno red in the Caribbean waters.

After the sea, the turtle turned its hunger toward
the moon and whistled for an eagle
latching onto the bird’s neck it rode him skyward
by now the turtle was pure lightning
and flung himself toward the crater filled moon
scuttling on the surface as the rocks shattered
under the weight of his shell. He gripped the moon
and began to tunnel with his two fore limbs
deeper and deeper against the resistance
gravity bent his tunnel and he would pop
back up at the surface without getting
to the center. He danced fits of anger
thundered against the dark side
and bathed in the light. Eventually he looked
out over the entire surface where he had
left upside down shell shapes and he shouted
for the earth he had left behind in his greed.

The turtle ran as fast as he could toward
the biggest crater he had dug and spun
into his shell dancing out of the moons pull
he whistled as he flew back toward earth
he skipped off of the atmosphere like
a stone thrown at a lake by a skilled boy
and drifted into the orbit of the earth
carrying the weight of everything it left behind
longing for the sea he retreated into his shell
Where he remembered why he had moved
slow when the hare had challenged him to a race.
“You Better Be A Mechanic About This Shit” —
Willie Perdomo’s advice on the craft of poetry

a palm frond dry in Miami heat
feels like thick rubber dense as blue’s
silence our class carries voice back
to that raw gut nerve on a long street in rush hour
the cadence crawl in a hinged window
the frame creaking and mirror honest
metal sculptures in a green field
like wrought desire twisting vision
one sculpture sits the hue of hands
a deep painted rust brown
on horizon’s edge in the sun’s middle
our profé Perdomo casts us clues
windbreaker jacket and Spanish Harlem
out his lips skill tripping inside locks
the metal groove quick clicks in darkness
clock the seconds inside of an image
eye the police siren’s red blue howl past
sweat clings the poem against the body
the rain is spotty and it’s time to go
slide out the back door in quick funk
and let the black hoody fade
into the sky’s darkest gray
Long Drink Waterfall

My soul cries out of the abstraction
as sweat rides down the middle of my back
swinging shirt to skin in El Yunque’s belly
The rainforest comes alive in waterfall heat
My feet grip large fallen leaves and don’t slip
on humid brown stones sticking to wet ground
the leaves big as split coconut and I hear her
my abuela in the distance between tourists
with suntan lotion spread thick on bodies
dipping into clear water and wind dancing
through tops of palm’s sky-kissing sheaves
my lungs pressed against my chest
heaving oxygen in as my feet move faster
I am running on wet ground and not slipping
I was here before and never in this body
I was older then whistling footsteps light
Quick like a moth with black eye framed golden
glinting on top of a brown leaf the color of earth
dry in the sun light through canopy and
I looked at myself through eyes not my own

My abuela came back here when my father
was nine left her body and quickened her spirit
grafted herself into these roots that grow above ground
came home to this land and listened for me
drew me like an arrow through the sky
back to her she gifted me safe passage
on three plane rides from California
and the heart in the middle of my chest beating
balancing contradiction on top of Yokahá Tower
the roll of mountain green phasing shadow
into fluorescent flesh and bone into flute
she plays holy the blue Boriken sky
and my fingers drum off chest
palm to flesh and let the sound of wood
under foot creak a sweet rhythm
a tender hello
An Argument’s Refrain

I lost myself in the sound of a passing train,
Her eyes in anger’s resin burned amber bright
The shadow was thick, my thoughts never came.

We sat into the evening arguing through rain,
She was right and still I did not give in, tonight
I lost myself in the sound of a passing train.

I grabbed hold of what courage could not contain,
and wrestled hope to the ground, snatched in flight
The shadow was thick, my thoughts never came.

She tried to convince, weigh me down in blame
My heart escaped my mouth loving the fight,
I lost myself in the sound of a passing train.

She moved away into freshly cauterized vein,
I saw her shift out of body and her eyes grow light
The shadow was thick, my thoughts never came.

Encompassed by grief my eyes grew tame,
Then quiet in the search for words
I lost myself in the sound of a passing train,
The shadow was thick, my thoughts never came.
To See, Listen

Cynthia, Beloved
You spin life out of thread
one strand
tied into the written line, twice
moon draped
light channels through blinds onto face
you ocean
me into silence that tastes breathless
pure light
that looks like God’s glow here
now, believe
in yourself only love birth’s words
raise Paul
through storm he will riddle dreams
trouble poems
be your own mountain move slow
but move
under the weight of river water
wash clean
every night before you follow dreams
they remember
when no one else takes time
they speak
through blood what has come before
they remember
first step you walked entire planet.

—for Cynthia Dewi Oka
There & Here: Where Dreams Live

I.

There sound grates iron like sandpaper on fire
Rust catches hold of precious metal and digs.

The calendar rotates first and fifteenthless
Lender’s teeth swallow paychecks whole

spit back boot black and muddy white shoes with grime.
College professors walk into a room and write NO

In big block letters, wave students away like flies.
Cameras glare out of iPhones, taking pictures,

Nowhere is safe. Winters last longer than summers
And snow melts before it touches the ground.

Poems ride memory, but still they blow away.
Rain is the color of blues. A poet cannot help

But howl. Hunger dissolves on the line and leaves
faint traces on the next page: lit, it ghosts into shadow.
II.

Here light splits into diamond like the edge of glass
A hand pours water onto a twenty-five
year-old bonsai. The air smells like the mountains
of Puerto Rico. The coffee is root bark black and rich
the milk is fresh from the udder. Sound blends jazz
blues soul and funk into God rhythm seasoned
with salsa reggae and cumbia. Cries out of joy
dance with body and reason shake ground till
everywhere is home. Roots in palms that blue sky
creeps through into eyes, the summer rains effervescent
even hurricanes bring warm water. There is gutter
belly swag and clear cane rum glancing tongues.

Hunger rides the eyes into feast, swallows the line whole.
Recites truth in the morning, early, with fresh baked bread.
Ode to Resurrection

In the summer of
   my eighth grade year,
I lifted DMX’s style into my voice
   the world broke open
into the words between snare snap
   and bass kick.

Time took on quarter notes, peppered
   skipping eighths into
voice thickening into manhood.
   Sixteen’s flew out
my mouth to the sound of hip-hop.
   Every spare moment

I would put pen to paper
   words from the back of class
numbered lines into bars, rhyme scheme
   into rhythm.
My whole body opened to the sound
   of struggle captured.

Sometimes I made life hard
   just to write,
pressure feels at home
   in the walls of
my stomach, learned to breathe
   from my diaphragm

to fill it with air close to bursting.
   After years I slowed
into the slow precision of academia,
   honeyed in poetry
for the people my insides turned
   into kites

that the slightest wind
   would tear into song.
It was fever, the way
   reason would hide my soul
in college. But the back block burnished
   me into glowing cinder

my breath blew on a Vancouver
   couch, stirred voice into
the belly of the black keys,
    drummed prayer on the stations
of the cross, language has a way
    of finding a mouth to fill
Elegy for Red

Laces crimson through
air force ones, the soles red-40.
The glow of knuckles after meeting
metal lockers in high school.
Button up plaid shirts and N hats
clipping vocals in pro tools,
too loud. The shrill of sadness.

Almost purple wine spilled across
a tablecloth. Carlo Rossi. The blood
stainglassing Carlos’ eye, a dozen
Oak Park Bloods ripping pride from
flesh. The lipstick she wore,
the tip of her tongue in his mouth
the edge they walked barbed.
Slit. The fire brick alley where
he took off his shirt, raised hands.
The sound of the one good hit he
got off, and the echo of the windows.

The click of gas, the steam of flame
as it rides the bottom of the pan.
The desert earth out of a train window
as it blurs orange and brown. The sun
hitting oxygen. The faint glow of
old neon. Watermelon as it slides
off a blade. Parts of Vegas in the night,
an angry chorus of fuck you.
Spidery lines shot through eyeballs
after hours pilgrimaged at a screen.
The heated din of stir fry
the sizzle, the burn, the smoke.

The suffering of blue meeting air.
The scrawl of teacher’s ink. Catholic cardinals
and silence. Stripes whipped into back.
A trail from death to tire. A forensic
technician’s stock-in-trade. The whistle
of come here, now. The peeled back nail
on a concrete wall. The urge for release.
Molten metal tracing the arc of a mold.
The violence of stop. That moment
right before go, when you are in two places
at once. The color we all are when skin
peels back. The shout of a mountain
angry at trespass. Molten, as it screams
against the air.

The element we bring to the world.
What it does for us, that we are unwilling
to let go.
Resolved

I.

In thrall with the sound of words
destiny wound its way through me
caught neurons and synapses

I learned to speak
first syllables then words
soon sentences would string together

ideas free from consciousness
sounds raced with sight
and soon words conjured images

here in the liquid present
words echoed from the diaphragm
wandered through the halls of myself

first syllables became compass
then words became guide
then something elusive

I would wrestle into form
tap into emotion, upend with rhythm
and stir toward truth

II.

mastery is years
playing one note

until the mind catches
the body mid-dip

knowing sound
feels somewhere
beyond logic

Beginning in this space
to play
for the first time

III.
Math is not exact
the bewilderment of poetry
one of it’s propositions
things must fit where they must
always equations to be solved
sometimes there is magic
not what legends are made of
but the force of meeting someone
at just the right moment
seeing them once will turn you
inside out
all neurons exposed
to their warm breath like wind

IV.

Spirit moves between now
and the places to come
it dances and wanders and sits.
Soul is buried in my vein
somewhere by my stomach
or chest, my atoms,
soul is in me twisting action
whispering commandment—
soul has wondered about God
for a long time –and still has no answers.
But spirit, holy and full of awe
it moves, and it holds, and it listens.
That is the truth, it listens.

V.

When I first felt my soul
I was 12 and the poem came
the forest grew metaphor
to smoke
My breath caught in the lines
and home became something
I forged from syllables—something
that clicked in rhyme
sound would be my guide
my cure to anxiety between melody and drum
how I wooed and how I cut my vein open
to feel ecstatic lost and paint my other sight
there is where I bled out soul’s tension
VI.

Has it been an island or a cairn
The will it takes to stack basalt rocks higher and higher above the body.

Make mine out of books
stack a library atop my body
so my family has something of me to read.

While they wait
ey they must learn something new about the world their pulse must quicken.

On my bones
erect a city full of imagination
yield to oncoming dragons
dance the fringe of science.

On my bones
Make a monument to awe
write the word bewilderment then, before, seek.

There is nothing but what
We leave behind and that will fade still there is a thing, part of us that is older, that knows,

how the earth was formed
that first there was a spark then a breath, then a will finally a word. Always, a word.
Here, We Become Islands

From the graves where Aurora would sprawl by the river
The smell of steel where Pittsburgh would scrape the sky
The streets of South Sacramento where driveways became temples
my hands with small hairs would knead a mythic geography

let rise like an eagle in flight. There was always a river near
Three, dancing into my mind and out of my finger tips.
The water would surround me and my hands would wade
drawn like skip rocks over the current and into memory

friends were made, then left behind as we hopped on train
after train toward our next home. The shadows of the city
we left lingering in my mind would ink themselves into being
I have always loved the question, where are you from?

through my muted smile all of the memories would flood back
the vines in Monroeville where we swung out over concrete
the Mexican restaurant where chips would crack in Aurora
the Sacramento black & mild smell lingering on coat jacket

there was great depression in letting go, scraping the bottom
where dust would ride under bedsheets packed in boxes
knowing only a few will hold on through distance hurt
in ways that drown words down the core of my stomach

I began to feel like a nomad by the age of twelve. Movement
was comfort and new was familiar, my eyes grew strong
at quick perception and darted rooms for threats and friends
the slight turn of a neck, the eyes tracing you down and up

the multiple meanings of this gesture were home to me
always in, but never of this scout turned body of a thousand tales
listening was the way into anyone’s heart, that and bubblegum
offered to a student in a desk next to me sparking conversation

I believe you have five minutes to impress someone you just meet
and for years I stayed quiet, poured my soul into the page
my soul was all of those things I couldn’t say out loud
gathering into a steam that would fury the quiet into whistle

Between. Place, love, and skin tone the world would move.
Here, we become islands. But what is an island without a sea?
She came to me like everything we need, unexpected and light
Harbinger of home, resin spilling over our love like amber.