

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. Orgin**

## **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 air's cool bite  
when our lies would take us four directions from truth  
light came between us  
our shadows walked ahead  
knowing our bodies better than  
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 hum  
 Puerto Rico into his house  
 his eyes and hands like

ceiba 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 air  
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 63<sup>rd</sup> 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 Taíno 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  
Coquí 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  
 dead 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

## II.

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,

(BREAK)

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 11<sup>th</sup> 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 63<sup>rd</sup> 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.

Scarlet. Rage. Lust. Lower lips.  
 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  
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 kneed 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 swang 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.