

A Sound Way Off

by

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Our Slice of the Virtual

“A Sound Way Off” is a collection that explores endings and what it is to exist in the aftermath. The situations presented here include endings like death of a loved one, death of the self, endings of a variety of different relationships, and endings regarding different times in one’s life. It took a long time to understand where these thirty-one pages were stemming from, but after a lot of mediating on the subject I found that the answer was me. Over the past few years, I’ve started anew after (almost) each of these endings. While they didn’t seem like too much at the time, or enough to turn into a collection of this size, they were, and ultimately needed to break out of me through my writing.

Of course, that sounds simple and perhaps obvious, but there is nothing simple about the content of the poems here. Some of these pieces are new while some have been in revision since 2016. The process has been a lot different than I ever imagined it would be. In my mind, I knew this would not happen overnight. However, there was still this piece of me that believed I would magically produce thirty pages of poetry very effortlessly and be on my way. The reality of it has been many late nights lingering on the past and trying to dissect the emotions behind events that have happened. Events I admittedly tried hard to forget about. I used to say my poetry wasn’t personal, but as I move deeper into this project, I find it increasingly difficult to believe myself when I say that. While the particulars of the situations presented in the poems aren’t true to actual life events, they’re undeniably the result of some deeper emotion that is or has been a real presence in my life.

This said, they aren’t meant to tell a story about *me*, but rather a story that somebody can find something for themselves in. These are not linear, either. But you will find reoccurring thematic tropes and “characters” throughout. The “you” is an ever-present piece of my work as well as “the dead”, different aspects of wildlife, and the female essence.

Pieces that really speak to this are ones such as “Why Am I Me & Not You”— a poem that includes three of these themes within one. The opening lines are very explicit in that reveal, stating: “The geese lie at our feet/On the beach in the Cape./This & my shallow breath/is the currency/Of the dead.” Others that touch more on the state of being a woman include “Finnguala as Swan” and “Apricot Princess”. The first is a quasi response to the Irish myth, “The Children of Lier” where Finnguala and her brothers are transformed into Swans and cursed to fly Ireland by their jealous stepmother. This is an ending of humanity in a way. “Apricot Princess” hits in a more realistic realm of being a woman in today’s society and how we are so often deemed less desirable after a certain age or when those signs of age become noticeable. This piece also speaks on the notions of more philosophical study such as time and beauty.

In my sophomore year of college, I took a course with a philosophy professor named Frank Farrell. It was one combining literature and philosophical thought that stretched pretty far into the realm of poetry. We looked at poets such as John Ashbery, James Merrill, and Charles Bernstein, reviewing their thoughts on the meaning and message one is to achieve from poetry. It was Ashbery, an already incredible influence on my work at that point, whose answer stuck out the most to me. The main point of his argument was the historical association of poetry to a higher class that thus made it seemingly inaccessible to your every-day person. Because of this, people were generally turned off from reading poetry and he sought to change that through his own work. I’m aiming to do the same through the emotion gathered after reading a piece of mine. I’m aware that the stories told in my work are at times abstract or frankly confusing, for that matter, but a sterile takeaway is not the goal. I want my reader to be able to use my writing as a diving board into themselves. I also want to make a connection to them on this emotional level. I believe as humans we are, at the most basic level, connected by our ability to feel. If the feelings I transfer into my work can seep through to you, the reader, and give you this very

personal experience, then I feel as though we've made something beautiful together. The reader is equally as important as the writer.

Another huge influence of this collection that further relates to the emotional stance has been author and poet Ben Lerner. More specifically the motif of “real” emotion his character Adam seeks in the novel *Leaving the Antocha Station*. For Adam, much of the emotion he witnesses others express is simply an act that society has conditioned them to reveal; he is in search of the purest form of it, and credits John Ashbery as being a prime source of extracting that. He speaks of the virtual, or, the quality of a work of art where you're almost understanding the meaning of it, but just shy of the full realization. That's what makes “good” poetry for him—good art in general. Trying to wrap my head around this was hard, but I found it compelling and ultimately worth taking seriously in my own work. While I didn't always agree with the morals of Adam's character, I did find myself resonating with these notions. So, I too wish to be a source for the virtual and the pure reactions that come with it.

Pieces of the project that inform this are ones like “Sierra”. The vague nature of the story, yet very pointed ways of speaking to the reader leads towards an almost understanding of what you think you should be getting from the piece. I leave just enough out here to let the reader insert themselves. Other pieces I feel do this exceptionally well are “The Dead” and “Overture”.

The poems in this small, thirty-page capsule experienced a pretty dramatic shift about two weeks out from handing in the final version. I completely changed the idea of separating this collection into three parts with the use of what I referred to as the “Act Poems.” These three were meant to guide the reader into understanding the poems that followed through an emotion or action common among every human. Through this, I thought I could resolve the issues I was facing in critique which was the ability for others to understand what exactly I was trying to tell them. I scrapped this idea and re-ordered everything because it wasn't what *I* wanted. It felt very

counter intuitive to my intentions. Another contributing reason was the actual focus of my project was revealing itself to me later than I expected it to. I still hope for the reader to understand these poems through their own associations, but there is an undeniable air of ending and loss that must be taken into consideration. Removing these titles seemed to open the door to both the interpretation I wanted and the This was huge for me and felt like a risk I wasn't sure I should make so close to the deadline; ultimately, I couldn't be happier with my choice.

Due to the nature of my goals, I find it conflicting to go into too much of an explanation of it. I want to leave you with a passage from Lerner's *Leaving the Antocha Station* I feel very perfectly condenses my deeper feeling on the matter. Throughout the book, we see a young Adam grappling with the idea "true art" and the reactions to it in his world. He often wonders throughout his fellowship in Spain if his art of really true art or just another performance he's been conditioned to preform for society. He says:

"I tried hard to imagine my poems or any poems as machines that could make things happen, changing the government, or the economy or even their language, the body or its sensorium, but I could not imagine this, could not even imagine imagining it. And yet when I imagined the total victory of those other things over poetry, when I imagined, with a sinking feeling, a world without even the terrible excuses for poems that kept faith with the virtual possibilities of the medium, without the sort of absurd ritual I'd participated in that evening then I intuited an inestimable loss, a loss not of artworks but of art, and therefore infinite, the total triumph of the actual, and I realized that, in such a world, I would swallow a bottle of white pills."

A Sound Way Off

Redemption

I treat myself like a dog
and lick my wounds until they bleed again.

I learn nothing
new, & sever the doctored hand
that feeds me.

Sleeping on granite,
I make no room for the foot.
The underground is my holt.
Its fiddle players taunt me
With their small disks of copper,
& their torn-up palms.

They entertain the masses
With weary notes at strange hours.
The hunger of their drum pads
Invade the commute, &

I am their puppet, bending
only slight for their haggard song.
When they collect their false earning,
and leave me with the platform

I dive to the electric,
and start new with the rats.

North! North!

Everybody is leaving
In great sheets of migration
 Towards open Decembers
In places where boys have names last names
that sound better rubbed into the curb
and you don't have to be
who you were here.

Tell me about your winters,
 Darling.
How you can spell frostbite
With all ten disgusting fingers
In the ice water behind the garden.

You are a child,
Then you are a monster,
You are the negative capacity
 for humility on the blistering
Manhattan streets.

At home
The clock screws itself
 Tighter to the wall
Because it knows
Little else of this world,
But you don't understand this.
You think it would look better
In the garbage.

I think I hate
 The heat.
I think your mother was right
About the wool sweater.
I think two more Advil
 Would work this time,
And before we know it
 It will be morning.

Tenure

Your mother does not mean that.
She asks her lover to call for you
 in rigged tongues, to sing for you
in the dense growth of the labyrinth

And how sad it is
that you have never lived a day of your life
without somebody
 To call back to.

In times like this you think
of all the things you do not know—
Like the fear
 of the red poppy
on the brink of November.

More now than ever
the lights could use changing.
More now than ever
The scarecrow
Stitches his eye sockets shut.

Show us your back.
Let us see that it is empty.
Say that you're honest about this
At least.

Tell us sometimes,
This is as good
 As good gets.

Overture

Here is a woman.

 This is her body.

It dances like August tar. She spits
heresy at the sea.

Teaches herself to summersault
Between worship circles,
to become a home

to others who ask for her by name
 in the dark evenings, no longer
inside letting fortune escape them.

And I am selfish.

Eating grapes in a famine zone,
 stopping myself from devouring
my own body whole.

Her ghost sits on the front porch
in wicker chairs turned
towards the highway.

She knows what it is like
 to be alone.

She knows how to tie knots
in the Earth's blue air.

I wonder if she will ever be
 a mother.

Bad Gardener

Uprooted backbone, yr
vertebra are the love children
of smoke and hard drink.

Outside are the swallows.
They are waiting, they are actors,
They only want you
& yr childhood

& yr rigid breathing patterns –
Why would Mercy
make a difference?
Watch them glisten
with the dead.

Roscoe

The deer do magic tricks.
Disappearing acts behind red oaks I fold
backwards into paper planes with Jude.

When the clouds pull their blinds
and tango in blackness, we light
 our single matches
and let them off to the fields.

Even now when I crane my neck
to see our shoulders touching,
our elbows tied together,
 trunks of the deepest cherries,
I know I am already alone,
& less beautiful at the end of it.

He says he will leave,
that this is not the first time
 We have returned home
At the foot of ashes.

In the middle of it the lands clap –
 Flamenco. Baile.
Here comes the part
Where we dance, and we do it
 With our hands,
Do it with our shirts off.

We do it
Better than you.

Sierra

In this place are the repugnant habits
Of want and shame,
and the fire burns through all seasons.

Winter opens like a bad accident.
We all remember the air that morning.
How it ate through the thin lake
and green sap like a child
starved.

The sisters whispered upstairs
about the home's broken stories
and gnarled limbs, still covered with dust.
Their soiled feet danced
with the splintered wood in the false cold.

Even the water tried to escape
with its audacious acts of bubbling over
the screaming lid before we wanted it.

Look out!
This is the blank page, I know
it is not what you thought you'd find here—

This is what we use now.

Sorry, the door is locked, too,
and the keys are missing their teeth.

Finnuala Thinks as Swan

She accepts the wind
Like maggots in her bloodstream // Surprised Liam
Is still here.

Had she been a horse,
Her knees would have been shot by the end of it // Where
Are the answers to songs of hunger? What rat holds down
The insecure feather? // Her tights
Are torn and sullied// The winds make her paths like jagged glass
and her fair shoulder braves the winter.

No Shepard in sight, drums beat through
her weary webs. If this is fate,
She thinks she'd rather none.

A View of the Living

These days,
A musket rots in the young boy's closet.
On occasion, his father thinks about it
In relation to his own hand.

The boy is fed
 The ripest pear
And the truest maroon seeps
Through the corridor to stain his robes.

He does not think about the musket.
He thinks of the ants
on his nightstand. He is sorry
They don't have muskets for themselves.

They deserve them.
Their knotted bodies against
an impenetrable world—
 Either dying or on the verge of it.

Look how the child has grown, now.
 How he does his dance
And sings his bubbling sorrows
From the middle of his throat
In the evenings meant for waiting.

His father takes the gun.
The boy asks
 for a story.
The ants keep up their marching.

Jass & Death &&

1.

kissing friends don't laugh.
they hip check desk corners
and cry,
 giving their children
better lungs, a stronger nose,
let all that rage
heave forward—

this is the kind of love
you kill for.
let it push, and crack,
 and eat you
a little more while you set the table
for yourself.

tonight, you find the echo
of morning's heavy hum
wrapped around your home
 again.

2.

there is a sign on the fire escape
that says please
 do not touch.

he sits on it,
legs sprawled
like messy children
 in moving water;

he is waiting for her
to do it again.

the woman walks downstairs,
buys lemons, holds them
to her chest in the bedroom
 just for show
waiting to be left
with the rind.

Birth Day

you unfurl a blue carpet
over broken
candles in the dining room.

the wax stains
will not be the important factor
when cleaning this up.

the man you are looking for
has gotten on the L train
with your wallet & the methane
for a fire.

An Interaction

I confess,
I've cut the cords on all the lamps
and electricity bleeds out. It is
not my fault. It is
 an ill sutured thing.

Now light coagulates
in streams of fat,
pouring down our wallpaper,
 filling in collar bone sockets.
We pray with our backs to it.

Your body has outgrown
 the door frames here.
It speaks in ways my skin
does not understand.

Here it is overgrown,
pushing through floorboards,
outliving the musk strew corners
 that have collected
like misfortunes do
in any lifetime.

Outside, the weathered leaves on the lawn
white knuckle one another to keep
from falling further away,

They are more than what we see them as—
bad drivers on the damp road
 of our togetherness,
blanketing our wounded movements.

Every Town Has a Broadway

The neighbors are home tonight.
They will have a party
and drink silver mercury
Straight from their grandparent's
Thermometers.

They don't care if I call them
Cheap in spirit or value,
which they are.

They never remember anyway,
the way their thin bones knock
against one another the way trains
do, or the trees that aren't actually
trees but might pass as them, balding
Under the parkway streetlamps while

I'm on my way to Queens,
To see Jack
Who puts me on

The middle shelf in his dark room
Next to the cigars, and the glue,
and a statue
of Lazarus.

This is a place you have prepared for me—
Tell him

I am not his sinner, I cannot even be
My own.

Poetry

The cops have run out of crime, so they take me to the station for questioning
and lock me in a room with no ceiling. I take off my clothes.

Put my wide boned feet on the concrete bench
and laugh at them through the bars.

What am I *doing*?

Officer,
wouldn't the world like to know.

I know my mother would. Yours, too, if she was here to see all this "going down."

On my haunches I bare these canines for them and the lines
foam out the corner of my mouth.

One storms in
greasy fingers grabbing at the excretion, looking to collect what he can
to bring to the lab. He looks disappointed when there's nothing for him to bring back
as prize money. No gold.
No ace in this hand.

Now, he's mad. I've run out of better words to describe it,
so he's mad, and the other men don't understand
what he was looking for in the first place.

Defeated, he leaves me there, my hips knocking
against the floor, my body still rabid with my own head, and more leftover
for tomorrow.

Discothèque Fight Club

I writhe in the light
Of the night club. Bodies bouncing,
I press my mouth to every one of them
cloaked in translucent versions
of their imitation dream coats.

It's the music that makes me do it—
Puppet master of the hours
Making my limbs gestures
of grotesque sincerity.
I cannot get enough

Sweat off my brow
Or on my tongue. And like
any good girl,
I give them what they ask for.
Singing in their deconstructed speech

they flock to me
requesting songs of my birth, *where &*
don't I remember—
Why would I?
Why don't you ask me

about where I died. Now that's a better story.
Usually one of improv. Tonight,
it's right here
an hour before closing.

Among the grease & the gin
I walk myself to the door.

Apricot Princess

But now you've gone soft!
Your skin puckered & dinged.
Sickness all around. You move
 Too easy, your scent a
repulsion. When I bite, you are grain and meal.
So sad is your becoming, I'm sorry
It happened this way. Lack of use
Will do that to a lady – your core
 A hollow bit of rot.
I'm telling you to fix it,
fix it,
 The door is open when you're ready.

Transition/Transmission

Hitting the walk, you are,
 every time you hear the static
of the miles. And every time I leave you
 the day goes bitter, but stays
in the same, aging cup
 on the same, patient windowsill.

You know
There's more to this.
 You can spot the fake laugh
 if you turn your hearing up. The problem is
You won't, would rather not
listen to the broken record, the awkward backtrack scratch
against the needle.

I play it in the passenger seat again, and again—
 Taken I am. I imagine I can hear
Your hoarse voice intersected by another
exhale, a woman who is not me,
but who is peeling an orange
for you. Her angel hands

dissecting it and you,
 somewhere
on a bed with your mouth wide open
 asking for another.

No Exceptions

The man you love runs
a car engine, &
 stretches his eyes
across the trophy wall
of neglected hammers in the garage
on the day your mother dies.

Rolls down the windows,

takes a sip
of Rye and walks around
to the passenger seat to cry about it.

When he opens his mouth,
 he lets out a string
of orange butterflies. They rip the air from your body
while you're sighing over the sight of it all.

Maybe you didn't come to the right guy this time.
Maybe that's exactly what you wanted.
You dream of him in contrast—
Blue skin, all red washed
 Eye sockets.

You have
 no shitty love poems to hand him,
But you can unscrew your chest & let the organs hang
& hope that will make a sufficient engagement
instead.

Nameless, Faceless

A leaf falls
off a teetering branch
by the bedroom window
and nobody is home
to see it happen.

When somebody arrives,
it is too dark to notice
that more have fallen.

The man who owns the house
looks concerned about the garden he left
that morning,

but not the soiled leaves
or the branch that lost them
or the community

of grass blades
now burdened with the weight
of foreign bodies.

It is too bad, he says, that the tomatoes
seem smaller this year.
It is too bad the wind
can't move us all.

Connecticut

The earth moves
in battle cry. The sea is not red, but it is not really
The sea, either.

I close my eyes, let the brine hold me
By my skullcap. I open my mouth
And make the salt last.

Still I hear the boulders, they are straining themselves
Against one another to have her
baptize them.
As if it would make a difference in the end.

A wave of lovers' middle names—
forgotten and missing— swells in the horizon.
They rattle the sand in revolt against the shoreline.

They disfigure the skin on my hands first,
and curl my body inwards.
How my heaviness is becoming an anchor
At the bottom of her aching belly.

It is noon, now, which means
It's time to turn my back to them,
To cast out my rags
And sop up all the mess I've left.

Dead Girl

It happens
all at once.

 A spade splits
her bottom lip.

It falls apart
like bruised, summer fruit.

We watch
the dark red sand
 spill down her body.

There's nothing really wrong
with this.

I look away and say I want
to hold you, but this
isn't the time.

We used to care more
about this kind of ending.
 Somebody still does—
your loud descendants,

your sorry ancestors
with gravel in their teeth

who are tucked away
somewhere in this thick Earth
 waiting for her.

She arcs
an unsteady neck.

 We do strange things
with our bodies she says

as she walks
through the sinking skyline,
 the emerald casket
of California.

Where she is polished
and stored

like the most perfect
paper crane

folding into herself
eternal luck,

waiting to be given to the next set
of empty worker's hands.

Why Am I Me & Not You

*“I want to know two things by the next
person who writes: Tell me – When, & then
– How will it happen?”*

- Lucie Brock-Broido “To A Strange Fashion of Forsaking”, *The Master Letters*

The geese lie at our feet
On the beach in the Cape.
This & my shallow breath
is the currency

Of the dead.

The fire consumes another frigid acre
With each fowl’s swear to their kin,
& you may be starting to tell me of that time

Your father mounted five birds
to the wood walls of your living room when you were small
and how the heat made all the feathers fall off,
and how this was the last thing he ever did for you.

And it does not matter. I am falling
Into the most vulnerable production of sleep,
Where the dead march fast and sweaty with their rucksacks
and dirt born canteens
to carry me off, a prize
for a parade of coins. They will hold my lungs
and shriek their malicious joy–

Master!

Master!

Poem for God

I question
The living— are you also
 the spirit of the dead?
If you are,
The poultry sacks should appear
Growing into their misshapen curves
Around the roots of the only tree
Here. If you eat the moss off the stones,
I could tell. I would see it — the olive
Brand across your teeth, your waif fingers
Moving in a malicious delicacy,
Stripping the rocks of that kind of life
That they bank on. Your throat revealing itself,
Each earthy piece moving down it
Like another lover's patient kiss.
 The spirit bubbles up,
As long as it may be here. It grows
In the cellar like the vines that make it dirty.
It wakes you up with the pigs crying
Their throaty ballads.
I don't recall the conversations, but remember you
had something to say. You can't get it
out. Tell me anything.
Make me stay.

Loom

I need you
to keep me on time. this house
is burning. we only have
a year to leave.
we never will.
the dogs will stay, too.
Instead, we'll make motions
of happiness in the rearview mirror,
rent out forgotten cities, make love
in the parking lots,
spill blood over the crumbled mezzanine
and dry fountains.
I remember the way you held dark berries
between your fingers
in the later evenings of the summer
the way they looked busted
and thin and poor
against my temples.
they were the only thing
you could have saved
but you put them out in the heat
to dry and acted
like they'd never
change.

Red Light

Like any good daughter,
I leave to peel the earthworms
off my mother's neck
in the company of moss and arbor.

She says
it is the rain that keeps them in slickness,
tiger striping her esophagus.
 & they love her,
 they do. They offer gas money,
and put up a good fight. When they're done,
 they shut out the light..

There is no salvation
in their dancing—
 The worms move like oil,
her body a glass jar curved for their hardening.
She is their instrument, a sacred hall. They never
stop coming and I envy it.

The night rests in the machine
of her tragedy, filling with mud
And strange bodies.
I go home with a knife and an empty tin bucket.
I tell the others asking
 I couldn't find her

Denial

The last time
I went into town
there were bodies in the convenience store

strangled with garlands
of their own
misfortune.

I knelt beside them,
thanked them as I plucked
rubies
from their eye sockets

and continued on
to the milk aisle.

Room Blue

It was your grave
where we gathered for the party.
How strange to have been drinking
by the window without you.

There needs to be more evenings
like these. Where the room
pretends to be your body
and the guests act out each contour of it.

If you were here, I think
you would be writing about the happening
of this— devoid of all the excess
that I marinate in.

Remember this place—
All the ways we made motions
through it with January writing
threats in our heatless skins.

The Dead

In the space where the wind breaks for you
The dead file in. Sluggish beasts of the past,
happy whistlers of now—
They're waiting for you to join them.

They want to be
just like you, but they have no home,
and there are more of them, anyway.
So, they pack in behind you
on your way to the place you meant to go

hoping you'd catch them, notice rather
the pauses in your heart as the train
misses your feet.
This is what they practice
 for long hours with no breaks
 or sleep.

It's not that they want you to die,
 they just want you
to understand. They toil in the remains
of the living. The price of their rumination
is eternity's hollow song.

They do it out of love.
They only want the best for you. They promise
 To give you stamps to send back to the world
You'll leave behind for them.
They're nothing
 but jealous things—
Why don't you listen?

Last Train

(For M.)

Moving now against the wind, the city is open.
There are no locks.

Everything can be fixed
because everything is broken.

The house is, too.

But in it
there is still a mirror for our reflections.

You went to bed believing
That you were safe from it all.

The endless swimming pools
The skin off the back
of the Hudson.

The black crow.

The black earth.

The lonely
steering wheel.

I look up
and there is the moon
and all her static whiteness,

wondering if this is the way it will always be,
or just the way it happened.