

# Let These Birds Out

by

Katie Cavallucci

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Let These Birds Out

Katie Cavallucci

State University of New York at New Paltz

I, the thesis advisor for the above candidate for the  
Master of Arts in English: Creative Writing degree,  
hereby recommend acceptance of this thesis.

Timothy Liu, Thesis Advisor  
Department of English, SUNY New Paltz

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## Writer's Statement

The following collection of original poems consists of new pieces written this autumn as well as revised versions of pieces I began when I was fifteen years old. Bits of my younger self are preserved in this thesis.

My work is inspired by the raw, often vicious nature of Richard Siken's poetry whose words tear open the angsty adolescent inside of me and get to the very heart of all pain. Recently, I've been touched by Maggie Smith's work, its brazen honesty wrapped in eloquence. The concise yet poignant observations of Mary Oliver, whose work is seemingly always bent toward finding beauty in life, certainly played a part in developing the themes of my project.

I shrink at the idea of trying to explain what this collection is about. In the thesis, I attempt to paint portraits, to capture the essence of the people, places, and elements of my environment that have most influenced my identity up until now. I suppose it conveys my evolving attitudes toward family and friendship and spirituality and the imminent end of everything. When I was younger, I was perpetually anxious about lack of control, death, and the end of the world. But by the end of the thesis, I have perhaps found some peace in the notion of apocalypse, of everything falling apart.

I suppose this thesis may be an ode to optimistic nihilism, accepting that nothing really matters, and I should fully embrace the immediate world around me while I still can. And I suppose it's maybe about birds. I did not realize that birds were such a significant theme in my life until I put these poems together.

As Abraham Maslow says, "To be looking elsewhere for miracles is to me a sure sign of ignorance that everything is miraculous." It sounds cliché, but I've found great meaning in this. I quite adore being alive, in this ordinary place. I wouldn't know how to write about anything else.

## Where I Come From

Where I come from we wander through town wearing sagging pajamas and walking our pit bulls on heavy chains. We are advertised as having too little teeth and doing too many drugs. A few years back, the police seized eleven pounds of cocaine from a house five minutes away from mine, and I thought, *My God, that's a lot of cocaine.*

Where I come from, there's not much to do and not many people, so any business is everybody's business. I've worked four different jobs in my life within the village limits and I can recognize a majority of the town's population by their favorite food from the pizzeria and by their children I had to supervise at summer camp and how much they owe in fines to the library.

Where I come from, there used to be a knife factory on the river over a hundred years ago. Maybe we never got past being just a little too sharp. There used to be an eclectic supermarket when I was a kid, near where the old factory was. It sold everything from Christmas trees to washing machines and it had the highest ceilings I'd ever seen and birds lived in the rafters. They tore it down to build a chain store when I was thirteen.

## Fledgling

We once were children who fell asleep  
lulled and rocked by the siren song  
of tree frogs and crickets, days bursting  
with juvenile joyous jaw-aching laughter,  
the times of eleven and enchantment,  
scaling ancient pines in the backyard  
because our fledgling brains reveled  
in unformed ideas—  
nothing was terrible and  
everything was good.

I long for fifteen and flying high,  
the days that felt like livewire and sunrise,  
prank calling prostitutes, cutting each other's  
hair at midnight, staying awake twenty-four hours,  
unknowingly playing at how much we could love  
between one moment and the next,  
between today and tomorrow.

And growing up is to have dreams  
about saying goodbye to the forest,  
to realize that some people would  
make poison ivy out of sunflowers  
if they could; growing up means  
having that child look at me  
across the years with a whimper  
in her eyes, the look that screams,  
*I'm afraid of who I'll be once the world  
is done with me.*

## The Regular

He called us ma'am.  
We thought his name was Eddie.

He got one slice of plain pizza,  
just on a plate, no bag please,  
ma'am.

He wore faded loose jeans  
and an old, dirty t-shirt. We knew  
he did heroin. A nothing-to-be-done  
situation.

He was kind, a pinnacle  
of politeness.

Last month, he came in  
incoherent. I gave him his slice  
of plain pizza, just on a plate, hoping  
it was what he wanted.

He wobbled at the edge  
of the counter for a half hour, oregano  
shaker in hand, his eyes closed  
to it all.

When he left, he passed out in the  
mulch outside the door. We let him  
sleep there until he started scaring  
the other customers.

On the day that his body was found  
in a condemned house two minutes  
away, some of us went outside  
after closing.

Our boss was half-drunk from  
Stellas he'd been drinking  
all night.

All sincerity in the moonlight,  
he poured the big beer trap tub  
slowly into the mulch and proclaimed  
that we would miss Eddie.

My boss poured for ages, a massive  
puddle forming.

No more basil, my coworker  
remarked. Basil will never  
grow here again.

That night he had passed out,  
when I left work, I passed him  
on the bridge.

He was crouched low, palms  
covering his face, swaying side to  
side. A nothing-to-be-done situation. I  
drove away.

He was younger than any of us  
knew. We got his name  
wrong.

“For sufferance is the badge of all our tribe” (a letter to Shylock from *The Merchant of Venice*)

You are a heavy man. You carry  
the weight of every other man  
come before you across your sad  
shoulders, your slumping neck;  
it settles into your ribs and hips,  
and you used to think it was steel  
but maybe it is lead, a poison you  
have always welcomed with open  
arms. The court is the final  
blow that makes you crumble;  
the worst one will forever be when  
you lost your wife, though, and then  
your daughter, not very long after.

Stripped of your very own nature,  
it returns only to weep at your feet.

It wraps tired roots around your  
ankles and begs you to stay. But you  
merely pluck the crimson roses that  
sprout between your toes and go to  
lay them across your wife's grave.  
You think her headstone should read  
something like, *survived by a husband  
who was too much for her*, something like,  
*her heart was so big, it pumped more  
blood than has ever been spilled across  
the earth*. You are certain you were  
not born with a heart quite like that.

Not born to be an optimist or even  
a realist, you could never hope to  
live or die so easy. And so you  
follow her voice calling *Shylock*  
from the deep. And does it get any  
more pious than sinking into the  
earth, as you inevitably know you  
will? To be with her, to escape a  
world evacuated of your honor;  
how much more absent can you get,  
in that last act, and still be able to  
reach out with trembling fingers and touch?  
You are not spineless, no, but you  
let it bend in an attempt to lessen  
the damages.

You are predisposed to the ache of anger  
that rests just beneath your skin. You  
got it from your father, and his father before  
him. You have been often surprised it  
doesn't burn you up whole. You can still  
taste your mistakes on your tongue like  
something bad, something ugly, but  
you know that the pound of flesh would  
have tasted so, so good. You can still  
remember your father cupping your  
cheeks and whispering of how you would  
grow. You think you would have  
disappointed him. But oh, the fight you  
brought, and what peace she will bring.

## Homebody

Everyone I know goes fast-paced, citybound,  
or flees south, weary of frosts, snow drifts.  
I do not budge; I will not visit; they think  
I'm trapped. But here I can fall asleep to the  
broken fluorescent streetlamp flickering outside  
my window. I can weave between the dips  
in the yard with my eyes closed. In my house  
I can walk down the stairs in the dark.  
There's a pattern to everything if you put  
your face right up to it, if you feel it slowly  
under your fingertips. In town I know where all  
the potholes are. I know where the deer stand  
wide-eyed, waiting to dart into traffic.  
There is the camp, where I worked. There  
is the library, where I worked. There is the bridge,  
where a woman jumped into the river. I know  
how the water will pool on Main Street after rainfall.  
There is the cemetery, where six people I know  
are buried. There is the restaurant, where I worked.  
There is the church, where I wanted to die; the  
church, where I was bored; the church, where I worked.  
Elsewhere, nothing belongs to me. The roads are  
unpredictable and the strands of willow leaves  
are defying gravity. At the bottom of my street  
the maple tree is the same every year. I don't know  
how to explain it but the traffic lights all stay  
green for me. Here is all my painful mortality;  
I plan to stay and die in this valley. Here I know  
how the sunlight falls, where it is warm, where it  
burns. I am learning to grow herbs on the back patio.  
I can make my marigolds last for months. My  
oldest friends are all in love and moving away  
and now strangers are living in their houses.  
I went out this morning and got my garden watered.  
The hummingbirds come more often now.  
My rosemary is getting taller.

Crisis at Chili's, circa 2019

We are devouring stale chips  
and runny salsa, and you announce:

*When one of us dies, we're going  
to have to find a way to talk.*

The air catches rough and ragged  
at the back of my throat.

I have been haunted ever since.  
There will be no mediums, no

candles or rituals to it. You  
have been part and parcel of

my cells since we were tiny bob cuts,  
knobby hands tumbling together

over untuned piano keys. You  
are countless meals together,

mountaintop views, bumblebees,  
my only tattoo. You are master

of impossible math equations and you  
are division by zero. You are songs

written and sung in juvenile  
harmony: *the solid stone is*

*being crushed. Soon you will turn  
into dust. Don't let it get that far.*

The girl who was glad to have  
a cockroach in her first empty

city apartment to keep her company.  
Anyone who does not have a you

must certainly be so sad. I do not  
recall life before you and I will never

know it without. I go home and  
bite my lip and everything tastes

like salsa and blood. No seances  
needed here. I have planned to go first

since I was seven years old. I am  
weak albuterol clogging the lungs.

You are mirage made real in the  
desert, and I will have you live forever.

## Meditations at the Church Piano

### I.

The service begins six minutes late because  
the Pastor is late, and I fall into  
a gentle tune while the candles are lit  
and I space out so badly that I keep  
playing, long after I hear the footsteps that  
signal the candle-lighter is returning to his  
seat, and I fumble an abrupt ending, fingers  
stumbling over the notes and my god, I  
already can't wait for this to be over.

II.

I hide behind the piano because Methodists  
are hand-shakers and huggers and although  
baptismally (supposedly) we are clean,  
everybody's hands are dirty and never  
have so many pathogens been spread so willingly  
as when we pass the peace.

## III.

Communion time arrives and so the Pastor  
 throws hands heavenward high and haughty  
 and I am a heathen I am a heathen I am a  
 heathen, and with a heave the Pastor cries out  
*we have been delivered from slavery to  
 sin and death* and—wait, why are we  
 delivered to death?—now the Pastor goes on  
 to begin the Sacrament: the Communion  
 coughs heavily at me from the altar and  
 I think Communion Christian Cannibalism,  
 but it makes no matter for the Pastor has blessed  
 the wine (it's fake, it's juice) with a mighty  
*TAKE, DRINK, THIS IS MY BLOOD GIVEN  
 UP FOR YOU* and the Pastor holds gaudy goblet  
 aloft into awkward sanctuary silence  
 like maybe Jesus is going to dance down the  
 aisle to his own blood-drinking party, and  
 the Pastor trumpets an even mightier  
*TAKE, EAT, THIS IS MY BODY GIVEN  
 UP FOR YOU* and I think boy oh boy this  
 must really be a budget mass when Pastor  
 raises the body *The Actual Body* of Christ  
 and we all see Revelation:

Jesus  
 is a tortilla

Jesus flops a little as Pastor tears him  
 in half and I feel bad, poor guy,  
 he sure has been through a lot with all  
 that crucifixion business and it seems cruel  
 to just let him flap around like that, I mean,  
 he just doesn't have much dignity left  
 and my *god* is he whole fucking wheat?

I lose myself in JesusTortilla and I  
start thinking Jesus Burrito Jesus Pita  
Jesus Wrap maybe breaded chicken caesar  
oh god I would kill for a breaded chicken  
caesar wrap but no that's not right  
(thou shalt not kill thou shalt not kill thou  
shalt not kill) and I stagger into a hymn  
about breaking bread—there is no song  
for a tortilla, no biblical precedent—  
while everyone patiently waits their turn  
to tear off a tortilla piece with their own  
hands, waits to devour just a bit of Jesus  
and germs.

IV.

We end Communion with the Lord's Prayer:

*Our Father who art in heaven hallowbethyname*

Hallow hollow wallow

hollow like a tree wallow like me

swallow every sin till you can't speak

find me a prophet and serve me his head

on a platter, we've already eaten the

Jesus tortilla, what's a little more people

eating people?

V.

The Pastor begins her sermon which is,  
in actuality, time for her to fabricate  
her acts of martyrdom and I know it's  
all bullshit because the most saintly  
people I've ever known are the ones  
who never tried to be, and I get so near  
to sleep while she speaks that I dream  
I am the sheep the shepherd cradles  
in vivid watercolor, trapped inside  
the stained glass; I wonder at the value  
of prayer and question why we look up,  
why we send our problems to the sky,  
offering pleas and sacrifices as if they  
will ascend, as if the tower will build  
itself for us to climb and climb, like clouds  
will reach down with thunderous hands and  
speak sweet, sweet prophecy into our seeking  
ears.

I drift and wonder at lending credence to creeds  
and condescendence, cantatas, candor  
and cooties and Christian crackpots of crap;  
think about Sunday school and sex and  
the unspoken Commandments; sinking in  
memories of confession and counting penance  
on a rosary; rosary hosiery ovary, ring around  
the rosie like the end is near and we can't all be  
Lazarus, raised from the dead; and Hail Mary,  
does she wail from those beads? What  
does penance mean when you are never sorry?  
When you look at the rosary, do you ever see  
poetry?

VI.

My god's in the ground

with the dead who need him.

My god's in the trees that sing

to me between seasons, and

what a pity for the ones who

can't hear it.

## VII.

There are moments, usually during  
the closing hymn, when I feel, maybe,  
some kind of spirit; the way my body feels  
when I touch piano keys is better than any  
homily could hope to be, and I rise and fall  
with the melody and am tickled by memories  
of a younger me, falling in love with the  
ivory, and when the people sing—they're  
not very good, but they carry the tune as  
best they can—I must listen closely (so  
closely) for their breaks in breath to know  
when I must go on, surge into a good chord.  
Maybe I stumble over the rhythm, my  
inner metronome is never right, maybe  
my pinky skids downward to make a sharp  
into a flat, but the lyrics are so very sweet:  
*joyful music, they say, leads us sunward*  
and so perhaps no god cares that the music is  
not perfect—only that we make music  
at all.

## By Blood

all stone-faced and swallowed up in rage,  
excessive pronouncements, prophet  
on the mountaintop, all debt and no  
generosity, my worst parts in dizzying  
extremes, gutpunch cruelty, unclaimed  
blood and bruises, the beast turned  
inside out, brewery reeking, I am inside  
his brain, our very own Narcissus, vomit  
in the backyard, car totaled again and  
again, I do not exist without him, violent  
child ungrown, slamming doors, broken  
hinges and exposed nails, we do not know  
where he came from, night owl, all  
mystery, unmovable and silent in the  
hallway, masquerading as shatterproof,  
every phone call might be the one where  
a stranger tells us of his death, cloying  
and clever and cold, making mother  
sad, and where did we go wrong, his  
ice makes the house unwelcome us, I  
have a dream where he smiles, I  
have a dream where he speaks to me

Uncle George

smiles at me, all yellow teeth  
*don't smoke, he says, nasty habit*  
he scratches at his eyebrow  
and bares his inked forearms to me  
*never get no names of ex-lovers*  
*tattooed on ya, hear me?*  
he's full of uninspired advice  
*(don't eat yellow snow)*  
*(be nice to nurses, they got drugs)*  
*(be nice to bartenders, they got booze)*  
he must see the way i'm looking at him  
and says *i know what ya thinking:*  
*if bullshit were electricity*  
*i'd light up manhattan*  
he slaps his knee and laughs  
cookie crumbs dangling off his mustache  
there's something about his eyes  
the way they level me from beneath  
his cracked glasses  
*listen to me, i been in the war*  
he taps his forehead, says  
*i know things*  
he pops off a beer bottle cap  
with his teeth so hard his lips  
crack and bloom black with blood

## The Crows

I am haunted by massive crows,  
gleaming black beasts that circle  
above and settle up on the telephone  
tower, congregated in a circle, wings spread  
wide for hours on end, inexplicably godlike  
and hulking, bodies broad and beaks  
prophesying, taking up all the sun.

## Things Worth Touching

dandelions downy plucked wished on  
 leaves scarlet crackle crumble underfoot  
 books old weathered wrinkled pages  
 baby blanket blue knitted f r a y i n g  
 snowflakes fleeting ephemeral  
 icicles sharp

dripping

falling

towels warm mugs warm sweaters  
 warm anything warm  
 dog fur faces feet  
 cat stray at end of street no  
 oh no cat has fleas  
 palm delicate

curving

lines

auburn hair soulmate's braid  
 unbraid rebraid  
 friends sorrowful mirthful  
 guitar strings silver aching  
 calluses raw bubbling  
 albums dad's collection  
 cheeks baby cousin's  
 toy monkey baby cousin's  
 toy dinosaur baby cousin's  
 toys all baby cousin's he won't  
 stop giving them to you  
 frogs slippery relocated from pool  
 soil soft damp  
 shifting between toes  
 everything you love  
 pianos ancient grand swallowing rooms  
 willow tree before rain  
 willow tree after rain  
 raindrops slipping through fingers  
 fingernails mom accidentally painted  
 glow-in-the-dark touch them and  
 laugh and laugh and laugh

For Matteo

lake boy  
boy of strangers  
you are so young  
you make me feel ancient  
but you hunt for mussels  
like you will die if you don't  
dying men wish not to die  
you, boy, you wish for mussels

siren boy  
boy of the subterranean  
dives to the lake floor  
we both imagine the sunken  
wilds but I believe in monstrosity  
and you know leviathan possibility

voyager boy  
boy of the salts and ships  
hands wrap around a mussel  
and you beam at me, colossal,  
from the very, very bottom  
you don't know it but  
I love you like you love  
the plastic thud of clams  
dropped into your bucket

sacred boy  
boy of flooded wisdom  
you flutter your fingers at me  
and the drowned souls call  
to me in your voice  
as you slide away into the deep

there are two things I know:  
you are a gift from god  
and you make the water  
sing

For the Girl Who Was a Tempest

you're best at making your mark in partials,  
in scree only half-tumbled down slopes,  
an avalanche with time only to half-destroy;  
everything behind you is a piece of  
    how you feel, and above all you have never felt  
    free.

you never got to decide your own fate. your father,  
    he made sure of that; fight or flight was  
    something you had to kill quick.  
you learned from the sparrows in your backyard,  
    who never learned to avoid the foxes.

when your mother leaves you know why she does it:  
    she cried the most when your father sat at the kitchen table  
    biting back bullets like hard candies and spitting  
    through charcoal and salt that hunting season  
    was just around the corner.

she had eyes like a fawn and flowers bloomed across her skin;  
    she was a breathing monument  
    to what life could be and  
    it broke her.

(you remember this, now,  
as it glints spontaneously in  
vivid watercolor from the furthest  
corner of your mind:  
you, impossibly young, and  
your mother, spread across a field  
where the sunlight and sapphire  
iris petals rise up around her,  
outline the breaks and soft edges  
of her, and hold her close.  
you crawl across her belly,  
and you feel it when she exhales  
and the air swallows her breath whole.  
with your elbow between her ribs  
you want to ask her something  
about the ocean,  
but you don't have to.  
you can see it rolling  
beneath her closed eyelids,  
the rush of sea foam  
across her skin, ready to simply  
seep away and leave only  
the shape of her body behind.  
you can feel it.  
you are tiny, but you know this.  
she is your mother  
but she is not yours.  
she belongs to the earth,  
giving back what she takes.)

## Canary

the myth of my family is that we can't wear yellow  
because it's a death sentence  
at dinner grandmother tells us of a girl that nobody knew but who  
existed nonetheless, and once upon a time  
she slipped into a gauzy yellow dress and died  
alone in a bedroom somewhere  
I imagine she followed her father into the coal mine,  
living each day to die once again

October

soft moon-faced barn owl

blazing orange and gold

as if to say watch

perched endlessly looking out

dappled tree crowns and fringes

me at the start of turning

at the riverside

hues slipping inward

before I am all gone

little more wondrous

to live a whole bright life

simply standing still

## The Carving

scoop  
 my guts out  
 scrape my  
 insides till they're smooth  
 peel away bits till they  
 gleam carve me but gently  
 and leave skin thick  
 enough to disguise the  
 skeleton beneath  
 the empty bare  
 haunted bones of me  
 rip my mask away  
 crush me between  
 teeth  
 like  
 jawbreaker sweet  
 caramel sucker  
 candy corn  
 neon jelly  
 beans tell me do  
 i stain mouths  
 green am i real  
 do i breathe  
 how does my ghost sit  
 upon a tongue  
 see the deep  
 yawning  
 abyss  
 lick ghastly lips  
 open wide  
 swallow  
 entirely  
 will i soon be  
 held captive  
 all of me  
 frenzied flood  
 of corrupt juices  
 vicious vampire-  
 sucked out of me  
 all poisoned parts  
 made clean i rest on the porch  
 a hollowed pumpkin for years  
 where i rot and scream and bleed

## Poor Animals

my neighbor names every deer elsa  
even though the first elsa died  
and decomposed in her yard forever ago  
we keep finding small creatures in the pool  
a chipmunk three years ago and a  
bloated mouse two years ago  
and last year there was a chickadee  
small and splayed on the front porch  
and last march my mother accidentally  
ran over the neighbor's yorkie  
and on my birthday  
i found a dead squirrel in the backyard  
rigor mortis all set in and forever  
curled into a ball  
i sang happy birthday to myself  
and rolled the squirrel with a stick  
through the grass off the property line  
i think nothing is natural and  
everything is an omen  
i hoped my dad would come home later  
pick it up with the shovel and carry it  
across the street to throw into the woods  
as we've done with so many before

## Dispatch From Inside a Lion

Wish I could write better in this darkness. Birds stuck in my ribcage don't bother trying to get out. Wish New Year's resolutions could crawl into my brain. No upholding. There will be no promises if not spoken aloud. All filled to the brim with scar tissue and tired things. There's a monster out in the playpen and maybe that's the fucker in my dreams. The one who turned to me and looked me in the center with ripe flesh dangling from his mouth. Look at how I can tear you apart. No man will love you like the animals do. Talk too much and breathe too much and never let it all out. Desire to die in a wall and never be dug out. Desire to live in a stream that freezes over in winter to spend four months among water-rounded pebbles. Be more than cracking bones and birds that won't be quiet in the forest growing in my throat. Creaking like a worm-ridden, rotting wood door. Branches always on the brink of slashing their way out. And you were never meant to be like this and you shouldn't have seen that. Pour alcohol down that tunnel and follow it. Set it on fire and let it lead the way. Everyone thinks the world will end tomorrow. It will be my fault. Swim to those fireworks just over the event horizon. Swallow them whole. I am light for such fleeting seconds. Be the sun. Maybe it's all horrible but wait until later to tell me. After you rip me open like the cannibal inside my dreams. Let me hide in the shadows under our joints. This bed sinks too deep for my liking. There's a new mattress burning down the block. I would gladly lie in it with you. Wish I could wildfire all this away. I could stay in this darkness. I want a few more moments and then to burn out. And let these birds out.

## Entropy

I wait at the edge of your wingspan. I want to fold you inward, head to shoulder, palm to cheek. Fingertips pressed to the extra rib, the hunched neck. You do not like to be touched.

As children we ached at being human. Like overlooked animals, we were not socialized properly. I did not anticipate we would grow up and hurt any less. I did not anticipate we would grow up.

Listen. I have to get this down now or the words will be gone by morning. Everyone you love has no idea how much you love them. I am trying to tell you something.

To be a person is all pretend. We exist at the edge of other people's souls. We are flesh and elemental frames and we just want to breathe and move and make art.

You hold all my strangest secrets and I yours. You are unfairly yourself. When I met you I saw imminent cataclysm and did not look away. I think you were made for another world.

Listen. We are skeletons in envelopes and I am trying to tell you something. I will take you as you are. We are dividing cells sinking into disarray.

All this labor and money and civilization and playing at personhood means nothing. I think you were made for another world. We're all wrapped up in this entropy.

Earth vibrates its way toward the highest point of chaos and we are only making art. In the collapse we will lighten. In the collapse I will embrace you.