

*All That We Can't Leave Behind*  
a collection of poetry

by

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of MASTER OF ARTS  
in

The Department of English

State University of New York  
New Paltz, New York 12561

May 2023

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We, the thesis committee for the above candidate for the Master of Arts degree, hereby recommend acceptance of this thesis.

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Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in English  
at the State University of New York at New Paltz

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## Purpose

I know that I have stories to tell.  
They bubble up out of me  
to froth and toil on my tongue  
too weak to hold such weight,  
better suited to my pen.

## Wrong Number

I am the bomb.  
I mean  
I am some  
incendiary device  
hell bent  
on destruction.  
I know this  
because  
I can hear the ticking as  
I walk  
down the hallway  
to her room.

“There was another bat in the house”  
I tell her.

My daughter is peering  
through the din of her  
iridescent midnight bedroom  
while  
I speak this hasty lie  
through lips that feel as cold  
as my brother’s limbs grow

just a few miles away.

Lips that lie because I  
awoke her with  
my screaming.  
It seems like an echo now.

I am the bomb because  
the night that phone rang  
it  
was  
mine.

Numb fingers find stored numbers,  
familiar to me as family.  
it goes:  
Asher, Broderick, Carter.  
ABC.  
Three pieces

of what used to five.

I am the bomb.  
and with every passing ring  
the ticking grows louder until  
I explode their phones,  
and their quiet California homes.  
With a word I gut their faith  
and any hope they still had left.

My calls are over before  
the paramedics can  
pull the needle  
from his arm.  
It's all business now.  
*This shit ain't new in my town.*

On writing haiku for my brother

there is no *old pond*  
no *frog* to jump and the *wind*  
of *Fuji* cannot

reach me here

rain not measured in  
*mouthfuls* but in great seas who  
swallow my grief whole

## What death does not prepare you for

Our sister said you fell like pebbles  
when she tossed you  
into the stream.

The sinking of bones heavy with  
old hopes and newly born ash.

Heavy with the weight of your future.

Your future that could have been  
scoured clean in a current  
slow as nature and methodical as time.

Your future now drowned  
in a river of black tar  
and dashed on rocks that  
melt with the gentle caress  
of a hot spoon.

Old habits die hard.

Your quick smile  
and your soft-boiled heart  
gave way to  
a future of *without*.

A future that is  
lost along banks  
covered in trees  
slowly dying  
in early Autumn light.



## Christmas Lights

The cold air catches our breath,  
yours still spilling forth from your lungs.

It's five days until Christmas.  
You'll be dead within the year.

We drag on our cigarettes and we laugh  
at the Santa with the missing fingers.

You look at me, mid sentence,  
talking about something serious now.

I see in you every memory we made as kids.  
They are lined up, each one bright as the one before it.

You're hurting, but you won't say it.  
You sit back in the dark, your light dimming.

And when you finally burn out,  
you'll take the whole strand with you.

I'm at my best when I'm escaping

It's easier to run  
than to send out a signal,  
to wait for a rescue mission  
you know will never come.

Unpacking the flares proved  
too burdensome.  
They stay sealed behind  
stubbornness and shame.

*Commencing countdown,  
engines on.*

Travel light, no room for hope.  
A planet growing small and  
insignificant as your  
memories. Still sealed.

The rumble of fuel  
propelling you far from anyone  
who ever knew you  
or ever cared for you.

A new star awaits.  
One where you can play  
the foreign girl  
in a foreign world.  
All mysteries extend into  
the vacuum of space.  
There is no knowing here.

## Take My Pride

I pay rent to this land like your great grandfather did.

I crease my papers over again, pacing outside the courtroom while  
my children weep in a cage at some border town south of  
those purple mountains majesty we never reached.

Mountains that frame the path just beyond  
a desert filled with the melodic drone of crickets  
burrowing in the soft sand  
and never let us forget, even for a night,  
our footsteps, our very existence  
is rogue.

Given half a chance, your government can and will  
eviscerate our dreams in this foreign town  
where I'm pacing, wringing my papers  
and staring outside at a pigeon  
willing to carry my story  
to your television sets  
and make you realize:

I pay rent like you.

I'm just a little short this month.

## Born Again

Our childhood passed you by  
and still you would not be moved.  
The whirlwind of adolescence  
and still you would not be moved.  
Your daughters married...divorced  
and still you would not be moved.  
The cries of grandchildren filled your home  
and still you would not be moved.

Then, all at once  
your stone-faced façade slipped.

Your son was dead,  
and all of your scrambled insides  
came sliding out onto the cold  
funeral home carpet,  
soaked in the sickly sweet scent  
of yellow roses  
adorning the  
box containing  
the wrecking ball  
that finally broke you open.

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## Berlin

This city we sleep in cradles us like the ribs of a whale,  
rocking us while it drifts among waves of streetlights and garbage and wet dirty snow,  
your heartbeat smooth and undulating.

Our decrepit radiator creaks and pops in the corner,  
unreliable blasts of stale air warming our raw noses  
chasing spiderwebs of frost from the windows.

We huddle like rabbits under the threadbare blanket.  
You tore up the good one to tie my wrists last week,  
remember, after we drank all that cheap bohemian beer?

Now your twitching toes hang long over the edge of the mattress,  
childlike, extending from your outlandish length of body.  
You never mind the cold like I do.

I sleep with my ragged woolen sock on these mornings,  
where Berlin winter has thrust itself into my bones, an unwelcome intruder.  
nothing like that deep dive of your body heating me from inside.

A lone lightbulb dangles from its wire,  
the glow bouncing off the sweat on our bodies, naked  
but for my socks.

We aren't cold anymore today in our shambolic single room,  
cobbled together with all the parts of our gypsy life,  
warmed instead in our blind and needy faith.

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## Mornings on Mulholland

Books stacked  
so high they threaten  
the lazy bamboo fan  
stirring the air above  
in languid currents.  
Papers litter the floor  
like lily pads on a pond.  
Each one sinking  
into the muck of  
the words printed upon them.

A trail of heavy perfume  
opium based  
mingles with stale cigarettes  
gold tipped  
and smeared with crimson lipstick,  
crushed into cut crystal ashtrays  
around the room like confetti.

A silk robe is crumpled  
on the blushing velvet couch  
like a pool  
of someone's pleasure.  
The worn oriental rug  
is stained with whiskey.  
The air is thick with  
that barrel aged scent.  
The sun bleached sails  
billow in the window  
with every heaving  
breath from the coast.

Far down the rocky hill  
the sound of traffic swells  
upward through the canyon.  
Impatient horns and music  
create a symphony that clashes  
with the static rising from  
the record spinning idly in the corner,  
forgotten since dawn.  
Crackling and sputtering out  
a warbling song that sticks  
to the walls like salt.

In this morning filtered sunlight  
you can watch dust gyrate  
like so many minute dancers  
perching on:  
a plate of apricots, weeping in the heat.  
plush stargazer lilies, spread wide with  
their tired heads nodding  
in the blue and white vase.  
and a dozen bottles of champagne  
strewn about the room  
each one whispering  
about the night before.

## Picket Fences

My sister said she hates my town,  
says it's a nightmare,  
an idyll turned upside down.

A police chief stands with a frown.  
There is no part left in him to care.  
My sister said she hates my town.

The dirt is piled on the casket like a crown  
covering the embarrassment there.  
An idyll turned upside down.

*This shit ain't new in my hometown.*  
We have plenty of addicts to spare.  
My sister said she hates my town.

From the baptismal to the wedding gown,  
we live blissfully unaware  
of our idyll turned upside down.

Then it comes home and now we drown.  
It is all too much to bear.  
My sister said she hates my town,  
An idyll turned upside down.



## Ukulele in the Snow

As absurd a sound as any you've heard.  
Sun-soaked notes lift into greedy winter light.

The absurdity of life makes for a poor friend.  
It is moments we cannot see, to which we must hold tight.

## Loser

A white blank page  
sits still and heavy  
as death.

It remains  
a glaring reminder of  
failure to produce.

As black and white as:

the empty ultrasound.

the letter that says, "Thank you,  
but no, you aren't Ivy League material"

The stack of papers  
as tall as the lies  
that substantiated the marriage  
they declare null and void.

The voicemail  
from the person  
you loved the most in this world  
but could not save.

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## Saturday

I'm not sure which was stained worse.  
The leather or my dignity.  
Every drop of yeasty liquid  
sliding down my face took with it  
my sense of self.

The purse was a gift from my sisters.  
They had saved up for it.  
A real bag for a real woman.  
I was grown now that I had  
a Coach purse and a boyfriend.

It's amazing how much  
the public eye will consume  
before stepping in to help.  
Or how quickly they will turn their gaze,  
embarrassed by shame

as the upended contents  
of a twelve-dollar beer  
drip down my neck — like a lover's caress  
showing everyone  
just how much he thought of me.

You want it back?

Frightened creatures tend to cower  
when confronted with a fist.

Teasing, like a kitten with a string.

Clenched in your fingers:

A passport.

A promise.

A punch.

You want it back?

Come get it.

I won't.

## If I Could, I Would

Joints are a funny thing.

The best of us can do all sorts of interesting or

vaguely sexual

things with them.

Doing the splits?

Cute when you're eight.

Erotic when you're twenty.

A liability at thirty-five.

Mine aren't cooperating anymore.

They've done all sorts of demeaning things for me and now

they creak and groan and threaten my whole body until I lie

on the pavement, a mass of bones and skin and jiggly bits.

Useless.

Except for maybe performing as a sort of abstract piece of art.

At least then, I might be admired.

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## Lament

It starts early in the morning  
or maybe it's still night.  
It's hard to tell in the hazy dark  
made darker still by the stark  
realization that it's happening. Again.

Our blood weeps softly  
onto the floor between my feet.  
Painting the warm hardwood with  
an unholy constellation  
of my own creation.

Pain comes faster. With purpose.  
It thrashes life a creature in the  
depths of my fathoms.  
Like tides it waxes while  
the full moon in my belly wanes until

whale-like, I moan.  
A guttural song played on strings  
made of tangled cord that is  
made of sacred fibers that is  
made to connect no longer.

Now my pain carries me  
over the miles of moonlit sea I crossed to  
get here. To this moment

where you slip out of me and into an ocean  
lit by soft phosphorescence

and promises of what could have been.

## Poppies

That enchanted scarlet.  
That "precious ore of confirmation."  
So suited to giving penance to the earth.  
Bodies acting as nationalistic fertilizer to the soil.

## Violets

Pressed petals  
brittle as bones  
not trod down into but  
burst out of  
the earth.  
They were fresh once too.  
Now they live only in  
the pages of love letters.  
Creased carefully over again  
thin as the hope  
they once contained.



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## Champagne

They say the grapes grown in Champagne, France, 1914,  
were among the most remarkable of vintages.  
So sweet a Summer, they dropped like mortars into dark soil.  
Turned over and fertilized. Turned over and made richer.  
Bursting with the honeyed hope for a future that would  
transform them into something greater  
than their humble origins.

The pressure growing inside their bottles  
urged on by yeast  
fermenting, dissolving.  
Breaking down  
to build back something better.  
An effervescence growing in the dark.  
A spark spreading outward.

They say the grapes grown in Champagne, France, 1918,  
were among the most remarkable of vintages.  
So sweet a Summer, giving way to ecstatic transformation.  
Turned over and fertilized. First by steel shovels, then by iron and fire.  
Bursting with the honeyed hope for a future that would  
return them to their humble origins  
or else a quiet grave.

## Gasp

Clocks do not so much tick  
as create small silences of  
moments that grow louder  
the longer you hold your breath.

As they create small silences,  
minutes become hours.  
The longer you hold your breath,  
the harder it is to breathe.

Minutes become hours  
with a hand clamped over your mouth.  
The harder it is to breathe,  
the more he presses down.

With a hand clamped over your mouth,  
there's no more yelling here.  
The more he presses down,  
the less you have to fear.

There is no more yelling here  
as your silence fills the air.  
The longer you hold your breath,  
the less there is to fear.

---

## Faith

He'll slide up to you at the bar,  
grinning beneath a black ball cap,  
all leather and budes and  
too much cologne.  
He's cunning, this one.  
He'll seduce you with  
lines of banter and  
lines of coke and  
you'll watch as the highway  
drops away and you speed toward  
some oblivion you think you  
deserve.  
He'll indulge you.  
He'll let you pay the victim,  
hold you by the throat while he  
fucks you to remind you of your  
self-centered fantasy.  
He'll stroke your skin  
with his words and let you  
imagine a world where you  
deserve it.  
He'll give you all the room  
you need to pretend you are  
growing up while you  
blow his friend in the parking lot  
on Christmas Eve.  
Because you can.  
He will kneel in front of you,  
begging for *your* forgiveness after.  
You deserve it.

## Virginity

I knew that it would feel  
like being pinned to the paper.  
Like a bug spread out  
for examination.  
For your viewing pleasure.

What I wasn't ready for  
was the stream of shame that would  
pour out of me  
from places  
I didn't know existed.

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## Practice

“Write me a poem,” he said.  
As if I can reach out and pluck magic from air.  
My fingers are not nimble enough.  
Such tenderness resists words.

As if I can reach out and pluck magic from the air  
when all that floats there is dust.  
Such tenderness resists words.  
Oh, what magic it is.

When all that floats there is dust,  
we must create our own beauty.  
Oh, what magic it is,  
the moment I find the perfect word.

We must create our own beauty  
in our hope to find,  
that moment I grasp the perfect word,  
to capture the rapture between us.

In our hope to find  
a poem. “Write me,” he said,  
“Let’s capture the rapture between us.”  
My fingers are not nimble enough.

## Puzzle Man

You say that you're a mender  
of broken things.  
You use gold to paint  
the cracks of a bowl  
slivers of vase  
splinters of skateboard.

I look at you, two seats down  
from me. Beer in your hand.  
Your throat pulses when you drink.

Maybe you could work me over.  
Maybe those long hands  
skilled with wood and gold and  
precious materials could  
cover my flaws, make me whole again.

Or maybe you are just as fucked up  
as I am. Trying hard to hand to your daughter  
something beautiful.

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The Cardiologist

had a heart too big.

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## Vincent

I stop when I walk into the room.  
It is hushed, and the marble walls  
muffle the drone of the city outside.  
My heels echo on the parquet floors  
as I try not to tumble forward  
falling head first into swirls of  
the brightest cream.  
The deepest green.  
The froth of white dappling  
petals painted thick with emotion.

A thousand times, in books, on screens.  
Nothing prepared me for the immensity.  
Leaning closer, trying to breathe in the curving lines.

Lines different from the rest, not as angry.  
Different from the wheat field and the sunflowers,  
from the cold night skies and cafés.

Colors different too, not as hopeless.  
Different from the manic yellows and frenzied reds,  
from the darkest blue and the pitch of black.

A single petal lies off to the side — the signature of a madman.  
And so many more bunched in  
voluminous clouds billow  
from a milky, green glass vase.

It's too calm an arrangement.  
Where is the wild man  
who roamed the fields of Provence?  
Where is the torment  
spelled out in spirals of sensation?

A blue period. A red period.  
Call this a green period.  
A taste of an altogether easier life.  
The highs and lows replaced  
with something in between.

Something that tasted like reality.  
That looked like self-love.  
That smelled like blooming roses.



## He's in a better place

where you don't have to look at him  
and acknowledge how much pain  
stemmed from the rejection he felt  
after he finally said those words:

*I think I'm gay.*

he laughed and laughed afterwards  
what else could he do, faced with  
the notion that he could be loved  
but never allowed.

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## Writing as a substitute for murder

Premeditated would not begin to cover it.  
The jury would have a field day.  
That's not to mention the media.

We all love a good justice story.  
Wouldn't it make it all better?  
The feeling of blood on my hands?

When I dream, I picture you as an animal.  
Some creature that bristles with  
the passing of every small shadow.

You slither down your hallways  
past your wife and kids,  
your wake reeking like a fiend.

Your teeth gleam as you hide behind  
houses lined up in neat rows  
filled with fresh summer children.

You took everything from us.

First, I'd make you say it. What you did.  
Then, I'd take your tongue.  
No preaching to your neighbors now.

Next, I'd pull out your fingernails.  
I saw that on a movie once  
when I was too young to understand.

It is so tempting to cut off your hands  
clean at the wrists. You can't touch without them.  
But then you wouldn't feel what's next!

One by one, I'd lay each finger bare.  
Down to the bone — the only human part of you.  
Stripping from you slowly, your sick instruments.

Never again to take everything from us.

If there is a heaven, it is covered in snow

The mountain sits in the distant dark  
a great ship on some unknown ocean.  
Ablaze with lights that line  
snow-covered paths you'd walk down.

Winding roads home turn away from me  
the mountain slipping from my vision.  
Each time, feeling over again  
the senseless tragedy of your death.

Until suddenly, rising in front of me, it sits like a crown  
shimmering on the winter horizon.  
Atop a stretch of land, sloping upward,  
a road unfurling itself to lead me to some lofty place

where I might find you.

And for a moment, I glimpse an afterlife  
I so secretly wish was prepared for you.  
Where it is always winter and never cold and  
you are happy and far from this pain below.

Until, descending into the valley  
the hills pull a pall over the snow and sky.  
And the road lies ahead without mercy  
as quiet as life down here, without you.