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MOUSIKÉ

by

ROBBIE MOORHEAD
B.A. University of Central Florida, 2009

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of English
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
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ABSTRACT

Music Etymology:

Middle English *musik*, from Anglo-French *musike*, from Latin *musica*, from Greek *Mousikê*, any art presided over by the Muses, especially music.

This collection is a celebration of imagination, music, and everyday experience. It is a constant quest for new and different. It tackles the simplest of moments, “Tai Chi on the Porch,” with the most complex, “Death-Sitting,” it pulls from the abstract, “The Secret Lives of Requiems,” and the concrete, “Driving Past Orange Groves on My Way to Work.”

Influences on this collection are W.S. Merwin, for his imagination and foundness of language, Philip Levine, because of his external vision and voice, and Kim Addonizio, who’s awareness of music is a content presence in her poetry.

Mousikê seeks to capture the music of all moments and translate them into language that is ripe with vibrant sound, imagery, and voice. An eclectic collection, the body of work unifies itself around how sound helps to define experience. Each poem is its own endeavor, its own voice, its own entity, and while the separate poems each stress their own individuality, *Mousikê* unites them to create a varied mix of work in which Moorhead constantly explores herself as a poet.

This collection is dedicated to my muse.
Without you, there could be no *Mousiké*.

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INTRODUCTION: Translating *Mousikê*

W.S. Merwin's love for imagination and language, Philip Levine's external vision and voice, and Kim Addinizio's awareness of music, have greatly influenced this collection of poetry: Mousikê. Of course, there have been other influences over time. Billy Collins' charming humor, Seamus Heaney's sound devices, Tony Hoagland's stark sarcasm, and David Wojahn's intellectual introspection have all shaded my work and the ways that I appreciate poetry.

I'm proud to say, however, that this collection doesn't reflect any one poet or any one style over another. I value the eclectic nature of my writing. I never want to feel stapled to a style, and though I am constantly developing my own voice on the page, I never develop an attachment for it. If a poem arrives and requires a new voice, I like to think that I can provide it the tools it needs to exist successfully.

I value the imaginative process that allows poems to manifest. I find often when I am open to that process, the words gather on their own, and ideas arrive to fill the gaps between the words. Theme begins to develop from the words and ideas, and ultimately a voice is born to carry it. Many of my poems are written in first person, but they aren't my own personal voice. They may have some of my own beliefs, things I have heard, things I have seen may be scattered all through them, but they are almost always presented in a voice that suits them better than my own ever could.

I love poetry exercises; I love the challenge of them. Often, their rules allow me to push past what I have written before and create an original work. I'm

the happiest when I write a poem I feel I have never written before. Poetry exercises have helped me play with syntax, sound, imagery, and my own unconscious. I've learned how to make their rules work for me and how to break those rules for the poem they helped create. I try not to have a favorite. There isn't one exercise I can say I've done twice. I'm afraid of forming an attachment to any one writing exercise. I don't want it to become a crutch or a rut. I've scoured them off the internet, read books full of them, asked well known poets which exercises they would recommend. There are enough poetry exercises in the world to fill a lifetime full of work, but less than half of the poems in this collection come from an exercise; again, I don't want to depend on exercises to write. While poetry exercises help me tap into a more subconscious imagination, that isn't the only perspective I want in my poetry. I also value observation and the imagination that stems from just watching the world and writing about it.

Sometimes I write from dreams. I am fortunate to have extremely vivid dreams, and I use them as images and subjects for poems. The dreams seem to tell me when they need to be written down. I wake with the desire to capture them, but much like poetry exercises, once these poems recognize themselves, they aren't required to stay true to the dream any more than the rules of a writing exercise. Only "Tilt Table" stays completely faithful to the dream, and that was only because the dream was the central focus of the poem, and the poem never asked to change it. It did, however, ask me to change the order of the reality that surrounded it. The poem had attached itself to the dream, and I had attached myself to the reality. Because this was also one of very few personal poems told

in my own voice, I fought that change, and I lost. I value that struggle because I now know how to avoid yet another attachment in the future.

If there is anything that I can say I am completely attached to, it is the sound of language. Because of this, music and sound devices are an intricate part of my poetry, much as the name of the collection implies. I enjoy reading poems that beg to be read aloud. When assonance and consonance are mixed with a good blend of alliteration and internal rhyme, a poem tickles my inner ear the way a great song moves me to want to sing. I read them out loud to myself and thoroughly enjoy the moment. I try to capture those moments in my own writing and rely heavily on sound devices to complete each poem. The translation of sound means so much to language; it is essential, and I feel likewise about sound in my poetry.

I believe that while prose and poetry both share many similarities such as metaphor, symbolism, and tone, music and poetry have far more in common. They are symbiotic art forms, and I think a poet who immerses herself in music will find that sound devices, rhythm, and line breaks come far more naturally than for poets who distance themselves from it. I don't know if this can be said of all music. I believe it has to be music that touches the poet as much as the poetry they choose to read and admire. My taste in music is just as eclectic as the poetry I write. Mousikê makes mention of many musicians who have inspired me: Verdi, Janis Joplin, Nirvana, Jimmy Hendrix, and Pearl Jam are just a few; although many others exist behind the backdrop of this collection.

There isn't a poem in Mousikê that wasn't written and revised to music. Movie scores, classical music, alternative rock, blues and jazz all influence the way I write, and the music I choose to listen to while writing directly correlates with the tone I'm trying to capture in the poem. "The Secret Lives of Requiems" is an example of that. When I first wrote the poem, I was in my car waiting for a doctor's appointment. A gorgeous requiem came on. I don't know who wrote it, but it reminded me of Verdi. Later that night, I was listening to Nirvana while revising that poem, and I found myself wanting to take this runaway requiem and let it cut loose. I placed Verdi's "Libera Me" in a bar and started to weave in lines from a Nirvana song, "Breed." I found just the idea of listening to the intensity of "Libera Me" mixed with the Kurt Cobain's passion in "Breed" excited me. I felt like I found a new music, and naturally, without even trying, it became poetry. Many poems in Mousikê are a similar journey between music and poetry, though not all the poems are as obvious about that process as "The Secret Lives of Requiems" tends to be.

I think another way that music and poetry draw a parallel is through the act of performance. Sometimes poetry is written to be read aloud. A few great poets have become well known not just because of their ability to write poetry but also because of their ability to read it with passion and emotion to a crowd. A good reader knows when to pause, accentuate, breathe and accelerate. In music, there is, *Tempo Rubato*, an Italian term used to define when a soloist or conductor pulls the audience into the song by slightly speeding up or slowing down the tempo. It is the sole discretion of the artist as to how they choose to

present the song and what tempo best suits each note. I find *Tempo Rubato* often when I play the piano and disappear into the music. Once that happens, I'm no longer worried about quarter notes or half notes. I begin to focus on what will sound best. I've been trying to apply and perfect that art when I read poetry aloud.

A poem from Mousikê that lends itself to such a term is, "When the Sun Tries to Rise to Blues and Jazz." I feel there is a balance that must be accomplished when reading this poem. If it is read too fast, the jazz aspect of the poem can flourish, but the blues tempos get lost in the quick beats and vice versa if the poem is read too slowly. I feel the poem has to pull the reader in by alternating the value of fast and slow. I practice reading all kinds of poetry out loud, including my own, because I want to be a poet that people will enjoy listening to as much as they enjoy reading.

Mousikê is definitely a celebration of music, but it is also a celebration of imagination, art, and everyday experiences. It is a constant quest for new and different. It tackles the simplest of moments, "Tai Chi on the Porch" with the most complex, "Death-Sitting," it pulls from the abstract, "Godiva in the Rain" and the concrete, "Driving Past Orange Groves on My Way to Work." Above all else, though, it is a varied mix of the things I find most important in poetry and a constant exploration of myself as a poet.

WHEN THE SUN TRIES TO RISE TO BLUES AND JAZZ

Rain cuts the fog of morning
spiking off asphalt to evaporate
on the street with a tip-tip-tap and
a splash into a puddle that reflects
neon lights left on since just before dawn
when the crowd died down and only
housewives and real-estate agents remained
tapping their fingers in off-beat drunken
rhythm to the sound of winded tenor
and heavy piano while the Pacific blows
brass-cold winds from the west
making the cigarette lit warmth of a dark room
feel like a tepid blanket that protects
infants from a chill that slices the air
like a surgeon's scalpel across a papier-mâché
chest to expose the heart of a city
that invites Ellington up to mix with the clouds
and pour back to the ground in an early
morning torrent of rain and jazz

AWAKE AT NIRVANA

Inside, a wild voice whispers,
 wake up, reminds her that sorrel
needs sunlight, unlike little red
 plastic monkeys connected,
hanging in yellow barrels,

chained to the day to day
 where her baby sits nannied
by the cheap Miss TV, who
 flaunts secrets in a high-

definition cocktail dress.

It's two in the morning, and she
wants to pack and run,
 but the highway home closed

due to a flood of bourbon, and she
 never learned a new route
back to Daddy's lap
 only a new exit number
for an off ramp

that returns her to a hometown
 where familiar roads feel
as foreign as the gas pedal once felt
 when she first learned that driving
would allow her to escape.

Wild voice whispers, *wake up*, reminds her
 how music hung thick in the air,
reminds her of the girl who talked to birds
 and danced on treetops

around a hidden lake that now
 boasts condo rentals.
A lake that on occasion concealed a girl
 who liked to skip school,

sit alone in her car, smoke
 cigarettes, and listen
as her radio
 reached Nirvana.

SNOWMAN

remember when we danced across the ice
together toe to toe thoughts of slipping

nothing more than missing a beat we glided in and
out like choreography and I never once

stopped to wonder if the music in your head was the same
as mine or if you felt the snow melting in your eyelashes

as I felt the wind reddening my cheeks
we built a snow palace that December and

you crowned me queen with an icicle scepter
wrapped me warm in winter told me

snow was infallible and I believed in it like
an architect trusts steel to support dreams

and then suddenly you melted faster than I could mend
and I found the only questions in the end weren't

why and how because I suppose I always knew you were a
snowman but I wanted to ask who created you

who gave you eyes that glittered like white
lights when they lied and was any of it true

maybe we never danced at all

A TASTE OF LETHE

The dead know how it
feels to want it
back. Like an addict
who clings to the wispy
tail of a fading high
we float face up,
in and out of the river

of consciousness, with eyes
closed we look for a memory
of sound or scent that will bring
back the texture of breath on
our tongues. Sometimes we

gather, but we never touch.
Still, we crave touch. We
reach, long arms parting smoke-
like water, grasping at pieces

of the past. Sometimes we allow
ourselves to believe that the dead
have ways of slipping into
fresh bodies and laughing

at things as simple as
a child with ice cream dabbed
on the tip of her nose, but no one
knows if it's even possible to stand. Instead

we float, seeking the taste of sunlight
on our silk-pillow skin. We beg to remember
a glimpse, a moment. A poet once
said, *the dead shall be raised
incorruptible*, and for a second we're able

to consider our own innocence before
desire shatters all thoughts into
pieces, each fitting into the cracks of one
wish: I want it back.

GREY WARRIOR

One summer evening, I fell in love with a squirrel.
A grey mouse with a tail twice its size. He hurried

along the top of a chain link fence a hop-like run
that suggested it had no where important to be.

I watched the little guy traverse down the weathered links,
shuffle beneath our kumquat tree, and stumble over the body

of an owl lying, recently dead, beak open, on the ground.
You'd have thought the squirrel a warrior the way he climbed

on top of the large bird and stood tall, white stomach,
raised head, round black eyes shining. He looked around

the yard to make sure everyone saw that he was not afraid
of the yellow-orange talons curled beneath the fluff

of his duster-like tail. At that moment he could have held up a spear,
cut off a trophy, wore a headdress of soft brown feathers.

He could have returned to his tree a hero, dragging a great
burrowing owl behind him, and telling a story to the younger squirrels

at the campfire, of the courage it takes to mount an owl
and claim it for one's own.

DRIVING PAST ORANGE GROVES ON MY WAY TO WORK

Mid-spring white flowers pop out between leaves.
I pass them at forty-five miles per hour.

My window rolled down to smell the blossoms,
a sickly-sweet scent that tosses me back

to when I tried to make my own perfume
from small white flowers that browned and withered

in my little bowl, when I was too young
to know about oils, or how to preserve things.

But the memory always fades like spring,
and the summer flowers erupt with fruit.

At first one by one, but soon the whole grove
grows thick with citrus hanging globular,

green, unripe, full of the promise of juice,
a tangy-sweet taste, like sweat and honey.

Summer's heat fills them, little round canteens,
bursting to open by the start of winter.

I pass the grove each day in December,
still moving forty-five miles per hour.

Withered fruit plummets from browning limbs,
and I wonder why I never drive past

a picker, a keeper, a child, a person,
a bucket, a crate, anyone to taste

the chaste fruit that falls back to nature
to become untended seeds, weeds in the grove.

One day I'll stop, slip through the wire fence,
touch their dry leaves and speak my condolences.

I'll tell them it's not fair that they're willing
to share and no one bothers to even

or pick or prune their branches. Instead, this
grove is bare, and stinks of rotten oranges.

GODIVA IN THE RAIN

She opened her
eyes, leaned
back and caught

trumpets on her tongue

as water
poured from
the open mouth of an ancient

winged gargoyle
onto the crown of
her sacred head, washing

cobwebs from her hair.

She once taught
a crow to hold
her calls and cook

eggs for breakfast.

The bird cleans her home
with an ax and places
the dust in little

green berry baskets
lined up along

the wall. When she
sleeps face down,
she breathes pillow

and dreams of a spiral ratchet
turning the top
of the world

counter-clockwise.

Earth opens
and music
erupts from
its innermost core.

[line break]

When awake, she
chews on the tops
of bullets and spits

them at Christians
passing too near.
In an attempt to hide,

she cuts off her hair

Tonight, she bathes
bald in the moonlight
and relishes the way

water drips down
her skull to tickle
the nape of her neck

before racing
down her spine and joining
the gargoyle's reflection

in the puddle
gathering around her
naked feet.

TILT TABLE

*“My life closed twice before its close;
It yet remains to see
If Immortality unveil
A third event to me”*

-Emily Dickenson

*We’re going to fasten the buckles-
dim the lights. We won’t talk
to you. You haven’t done anything*

*wrong. We aren’t mad at you,
but we can’t talk to you. The table
will tilt to a 90 degree*

angle. Do you understand?

Hair fell into my face. A flurry
of green and blue lights
blinked reports from machines

speaking ancient algorithmic languages.
I stood there, strapped, waited.
They stood there, blinked, waited.

My heart stopped beating – 24 seconds - but I didn’t
know. Instead, I stood in a sepia landscape
on a dusty Irish road that ushered Frankie

and Malachy forward. They took hold of my
hand, and I felt comfortable touching their cold
colorless fingers because I knew them.

Angela’s Ashes had comforted me through
test after test, forbidden to eat, so hungry,
I escaped into their world where their

hunger was more than my own.
Women over my head, talking, asking the proper
questions through saffron colored paper

facemasks. I licked my lips, tasted foam,
felt the wetness of my pants. The cardiologist
watched, held his breath, hoped for open eyes.

[line break]

Malachy let go of my hand. He ran
up ahead, called out, "Come on," and I was about
to follow when all of a sudden obtrusive color

invaded everything. I was in the wrong world.

WILD ROSE

She escaped
in her finest yellow
cloche that hid
her brown eyes
and the fact that one could see
through her thinning whitewashed
hair to the liver spots
that dotted the top of her head.

The bus came
fifteen minutes after meds.
Its arrival timed
in conjunction with
the blue pills
that crept through her
thoughts like thick gas,
eating away at the idea
of departure until nothing
remained, not even desire.

But the 9:15 bus came
on time today, and she climbed
aboard in her favorite
knit sweater, its marble
brown buttons unclasped
to her side, unveiling
a worn white t-shirt
with large capital letters,
each blocked out to read,
“F _CK Y _ _!”
She smiled and told the bus driver,
“I would like to buy a vowel, please”
as she handed him her only four
quarters won from bingo
last Thursday.

The bus rocked across
charted streets, making
frequent stops at
familiar ports of call—
Richman, Midway, Graves, Fountain Grove.

Fountain Grove, she thought.
sounds like a simple place

[no line break]

where the roses might grow wild.

So she disembarked,
tipping the low brim
of her bright yellow cloche
to the driver as she passed.

"Thanks for the ride."
He didn't reply, and she
didn't stop to ask when
the last bus would pick her up.

A bronze man greeted her.

His finger pressed
to his lips in engaged
meditation as he studied
a park bench on his right
hand side. She looked
at the bench, then back at him.

"I don't know how it got there
either," she said, then sat down next
to the metallic man with copper
glazed eyes and waited
for her friends.

In time they all came, some in pairs,
some in flocks, as word
spread through the wind,
of her arrival. They swooped
down to greet her, to coo
and to meet her, the bird lady,
Wild Rose of Fountain Grove.

MAGIC BEANS

Would my cracked porcelain-
princess trade her tiara for them?

They won't grow, you know.
The potassium benzoate steals

their sparkle. They create no music.
Even their rattle in a tin cup sounds empty.

When you look at me, can you hear
me doubt? Does it scream at you

of another world, where another man
fucked my wife, your mother, this morning?

No. You don't hear that. You don't hear
Mommy waking up, her barefoot steps

padding down the wooden hall. No, you
don't hear her bedtime promises that she

loves you. Neither do I.
I hear, "Daddy . . . daddy come out

to play. Come out." An outlying
voice behind fairytale eyes, and I

envy the things that you can't
see, and I wouldn't trade these beans

if I thought they'd grow for me.

FOR A MOMENT

stare into wide
space where seagulls spill
white that mutes their caws

the vacant place
in a jigsaw puzzle

almost imaginable emptiness

fill it with horizon
blinking sunlight waking

breathing seaweed salt air fill it

with waves a single file
parade somersaults
crashing cymbals

fill it with small opal crabs
tracing the tide settling into

ground push down
deep until

the world becomes nothing
more than starlight

reflecting off your closed eyes

DEATH-SITTING

I.
Southern County Memorial Hospital, Room 303

She checks in with the volunteer
desk, and is given a new request slip
that reads: 303 - Martha Parkins, 88, stroke,

no immediate family. She folds the paper,
places it in her purse, walks to the elevator,
and punches the quarter sized button
marked with a three.

It's a silent routine
that has taken place
since the day her mother
died, 12,000 miles away while

she conducted important business
that secured a million dollar merger.

When the elevator stops,
she follows the hall to the marked door, cracks

it open, takes a peek, a breath, steps
in, introduces herself to a woman
sleeping in a metal railed bed, a curtain

drawn between her and whoever was lucky
enough to get the window.

She likes it better when there
is a window. It gives
her something to look at when
the elderly orphans only want to hold her hand.

She watches parking lots, fields, streets,
the places where life continues to beat
inextinguishable, and she waits for silence

to replace the raspy rattle of breath
in deflated lungs.

But today, the woman
wakes and smiles fleshy-pink

[no line break]

trembling gums, her milky eyes shift
through emptiness as she reaches
toward a voice warm as cocoa in winter.

And the routine begins, a middle aged woman
takes a small hand that is a fraction
of the size it once was when
it opened pickle jars and raised
forks to mouth.

A small conversation,
“I’m so glad you’re here.” Maybe
a question, “How do you feel?”

There is more than politeness in
both women’s voices. When then the hour
passes, and one leaves the other, she
doesn’t have a choice, it’s the right time to go,
but they both leave calmed because they
know someone else benefited from their pain.

II.

American Regional Hospital, Room 222

He sat in the hallway, swinging
his feet, counting gray flecked tiles, bored
and wishing his mother had allowed
him to bring his DS,

or at least his
Nano. At thirteen death
isn't as real as music and no one
gave him the cheat codes
for what to say or do, so

he sat confused while his
mother cried, and he
tried to console her, but
she wouldn't listen, and it

made him angry that
he wasn't enough, that
his father was working,
that he didn't get to stay
home, that he'd have to
go to school tomorrow, that

he didn't know what to say
if his grandma died, how
he would reply to sad eyes
asking if he was ok when he

didn't feel upset, not about
her anyway.

His mother opened the door
to 222, face swollen, head
shaking, hands trembling. "You
should go say good bye." She

choked out the words, placed
her hand on his shoulder and
ushered him into the room. He stopped

at the door and stared at
a stranger who had forgotten
his name two years

[line break]

earlier, and now when she'd speak,
if she could speak, when she tried, she
only talked about people

who had died before
he was ever born.

And while he stared at
her from the doorway, repulsed
by dried phlegm

gathered at the cracks
of her zombie mouth, and sores
flaking scabs from

wax paper skin, she
reached out a longing

hand to him, but at the time
he didn't understand that she
just needed touch, that it didn't
matter whose, that he should
have given it to her.

He said, "What's the point?"
closed his eyes and walked

out, sat back down
in the hall, again to count tiles
and minutes, and wish
she would hurry up and die.

III.

Eastern Shores Community Hospital, Room 109, Intensive Care

When we arrived,
his breathing had become shallow.
He didn't know we

had taken the first flight, at first word
of his collapse, we gathered
by his side to talk, the kind of talk
that is only inspired in distant
families gathered around death.

We set aside the petty, to sit by
his side and recite our favorite memories.
Like the time he set me in his lap,
and let me drive his bass boat

across Lake Silver, the wind in my hair,
my small hands on the first real
steering wheel I'd ever clutched,

and his large, knuckle-scraped
fist on the throttle.

Each of us took turns
holding his hand, sitting alone,
and saying the things we felt
needed to be said most.

And when his eyes opened, we
couldn't believe that he had
returned long enough to smile, to

know we were at his side, and to die
a loved man. Except he didn't

pass that night, instead he
squeezed our hands and tried to
talk, but the nurses sedated
him and warned against stress

We took turns visiting for a week, and it
wasn't long before his room was moved,

from ICU to the fourth floor, where people

[no line break]

visited any time they wanted.

He said, "I think you're bringing me back to life," and I bit back a helpless smile as I thought, *We don't have that power.*

He continued to grow strong, day by day, hour by hour, until we had to fly back to our children, our jobs, our pets, and our power bills.

It wasn't long after, we were summoned, back to the town where we previously gathered.

This time we came with potted guilt, useless trumpeting flowers.

POWER SHORTAGE

My laptop battery is almost out,
and I'm clacking away
trying to capture an idea before

the power drains completely. It's odd though,
that while my young epiphany, a wild
thought I could shoot, stuff, and hang

over my fireplace, still feels
important to write down,
I can't focus on that right now.

Instead, I am distracted
by the waning power bar,
and I can't help thinking about

how dependent I am on this crafty machine
that spreads the alphabet between my fingers
giving me full command of language,

turning me into Ruloff writing in a cell,
wondering if there will be time
to finish this thought and move on to the next.

I start to think how our relationship
began so innocent, back when I carried
paper everywhere I went.

A short introduction, you didn't say much.
I wanted you to come home with me,
and you didn't protest to the arrangement.

It wasn't long until you accompanied me everywhere I went,
to work, the beach, my honeymoon, my graduation.
You presided over all occasions, a gigabyte clergyman.

I became your congregation.
My belief in paper and pen washed clean
by the comforting glow of your LCD screen.

LUNA MOTH

Language is pointless
when you have no
voice. The mouth

does not convey
the message of
sex, not like

the smell of wings
spread, batting false
eyes to the male,

the male she covets,
the one who devises
purpose in the lunar

glow of Florida forest.
She left her cocoon
for intercourse,

predestined, born to
parents
who abandoned

her long before
her first steps,
their voices as mute

as her own lipless language.

She is rare, like
nymph tracks
in sugar sand. Hard

to find, to recognize,
she hides well in
dense swamplands,

mastering deception, reigning
in her own untamed
promiscuity, fluttering

between the to's and fro's
of a world that

[no line break]

hardly knows

she exists. This Actias
Luna, a feminine
exquisiteness, impossible

to know, impractical
to tame. She will fly,
fuck, die. She will never

know her pale form, silhouetted
in the blue-gold hue
of midnight moon, holds

rare and perfect beauty.

A HOUSEWIFE, THE EVERAFTER, AND A BOTTLE OF GIN

You'll never know where I was last night,
my night

crowned with a double moon. Romeo and
Juliet are fighting again.

They fight
flat fisted over that damned rose.

Too bland
for my taste, I needed more

than a shot
of fervor to erase those words.

They fight
with no passion. So, what would you have thought
if I called you a different name? I
doubt it would sound as sweet.

But I kept
that hidden. I protected you from me,
from my thorns. I sheltered you,

I left
Verona and slept in another bed.

THIRTEEN WAYS OF RECORDING ROCK'N'ROLL

I.

Among four-hundred and fifty thousand screaming fans,
The only voice amplified above the crowd says,
I see that we meet again hmm. . .

II.

She was addicted by twenty-nine,
Like Layne,
Sitting in the angry chair, down in a hole, getting born again.

III.

The Stratocaster trills whirled out my window.
They were a huge part of my adolescent pantomime.

IV.

A brush on a snare and fingers on white keys
Are one.
A man and a woman and a song
Are one.

V.

I do not know which to prefer,
The beauty of pained voice
Or the beauty of revelation,
Joplin's *Ball and Chain*
Or Pearl Jam's *Wishlist*.

VI.

Daydreams filled the long summer
With places Rock would tour.
The shadow of the band it wanted to be
Blocked out the shouting.
While closed fists,
Punched at Rock's dreams
Until they became indecipherable.

VII.

Children of pop,
Why do you listen to the over produced?
Can you not hear the value of raw instruments
Played with passion by people
Who feel from their soul outward?

[line break]

VIII.

Cohen knows *the boat is sinking*
The rich stay rich and the poor stay poor,
But I know, too, that some lyrics are an invitation
to change what we know.

IX.

When the song was over,
The band walked off stage and ended
One of many musical phases.

X.

At the sound of a bass guitar
Slapping strings under blue lights,
Even the less coordinated
Bob their heads and feel groovy.

XI.

She drove to Seattle
In a Plexiglas Civic.
Her heart thumped in her stomach.
Tickets burned in her back pocket.
She refused to believe the radio.
Curt couldn't be dead.

XII.

I am moving.
Music must be playing.

XIII.

We were drunk all night.
We were drinking tequila.
We were going to drink more.
Music hung between us,
like quarter notes on a staff.

After W.S.

THE THREE DEGREES OF SEPARATION

The clouds see the way the sober-minded muscle through the day to day. They ponder how language floats between people, each person's dialog a reality bouncing from one contradicting truth to another.

The stars learn the rhythms that propel dance. They study body language and watch for choreography, accolading most moments when autonomy flavors unbridled steps and pushes life into the center of it all.

The moon dissolves into the language of movement and consumes isolation, so it might one day bring a connection to those who are looking past the everyday darkness of solitude.

POST 2008

I.

Back from Trashcanistan
with still fresh stories
and a desire to share
Riding in my pop's
bedless '76 Chevy
windows rolled down
sweating
I had forgotten
the weight of Southern air
how it presses
heavy on the shoulders
drowns the lungs
fogs the mind and tires
even the most enthusiastic muscles
His narrow eyes never divert
from the thin dirt road
even when he talks about
his friends at the VFW
how they'll enjoy my stories
even when a blackbird
darts past the windshield
even when I ask
how much longer
he looks forward.

II.

I follow several steps behind,
head hanging in the sun
as we enter the main room,
shaded, dusty, cool.

Sunlight slants through
torn window tinting and casts
a sliver of silver dust glitter onto

a jukebox that shouts
country songs I grew
out of, drinking songs
about Cuervo, making it strong,
or how to prop a stiff drink
in the hand of a dead body
so the cowboy can still party.

Four white haired men
curl over the left side of the bar.

One scratches mindlessly
at a brown beer bottle, label peeled,
frayed beside his elbow.

Pop calls out, two men turn,
raise their palms, a sign
of welcome around the world.
One shouts, *Hey Chief*.
Round drunken osprey-
eyes narrow in on me.

I nod my hello and wonder if anyone
wants to hear about the time I handed
out Beanie Babies to children, and they
told me where to find hidden IED's.

III.

We chain-smoke,

fill the air with thickening gray
that hovers as heavy as our stories.

We come together,

barter funny jokes about Mexicans
motorbikes, sex, and housewives.

We drink whisky,

remind each other about pot luck dinners,
the importance of companionship, any kind.

We tell stories,

masquerade in elaborate costumes
decorated with metals and memories.

We compare scars,

smallest buys another round,
largest stays secreted beneath tough skin.

We slap down

a full house, hug greedy at the chips,
complain about politics and how we never really win.

THE ID'S LAMENT OF EGO

It wants an education,
it does. It wants
big shiny proof of its control,
it wants to feel

proud, it's wanting to pound
on chest like gorilla, like red
throated skink it expands
with desire to mate

intelligence. It wants
to achieve. A-cheev-ment.
It stretches the syllables
like taffy, rolling

them transversely
over its tongue. As if
anything so intangible could
taste so sweet. It thinks

it needs proof
it can succeed. It doesn't
see confirmation in Covelo,
it's never been to Mendocino's

Round Valley, touched
the tallest tree, inhaled
wind that carried
subtle scents of photosynthesis.

It can't smell at all, can
only see what it wants. What it
wants, I know. It wants
to destroy me.

THE MUSIC OF TREES

A tree once followed me
home from the forest
and settled in my front yard.

The tree and I became
friends, and I took it
to a carnival. It wanted

to be a ride, so I created
a booth, painted a sign,
sold alluring blue paper

tickets. Children climbed high
into the uppermost
branches, and when

they reached the top,
the tree sent them
soaring, arms spread,

little stringless kites.
But the tree bored
with the ride and returned

to my yard. I took the tree
to an art museum. It grew
fascinated with the frames

of paintings and studied
the angles of their grain,
calculating the difference

between a bent knife groove
and the curve of a chisel. People
came from all around to watch

the tree study fine art, and it
became aggravated with
the way they treated it

like the museum's
latest and greatest
exhibit, so the tree

[line break]

gave up art and returned
to my yard. That fall,
I took the tree with me to college.

It excelled at
mathematics and learned
to read and write. It joined

a jazz club, listened to Coltrane,
but never wrote anything
down. The professors flunked

the tree. They said if it wouldn't
write it couldn't prove that it
knew anything, and they

suspended the tree
from the jazz club.
The tree returned

to my yard and decided it wanted
to see the ocean, so I took it to
the beach, rented a boat,

and rowed us out to sea. From its
highest branch, the tree could see
nothing but water and horizon

in every direction.

It became landsick, and its leaves
filled the boat with cadmium scarlet

and spun gold. I felt sorry for the tree
as it trembled, stroked
its rough bark, told it not to worry,

that I would take it home.

The next morning I woke to find the tree
no longer in my yard. Today though,

from my window, I hear it as its
crest rises above the doldrums
of the forest, it hums

"Come Rain or Come Shine"
to fired steel clouds

[no line break]

swelling with spring thunder.

SAINT CLOUD, FLORIDA

Cows, the idle queens of my father's small farm, enthroned in the pasture each morning, they lull past the shadow of the barn which watches with empty-window eyes while the southern bred monarchy shuffles hooves and shakes heads in sturdy bass-like rhythms.

My mother smacks my hand back from baked morning biscuits as she cleans beans so fresh they burst open with a wet snap. She pokes me playfully in the ribs then passes me an oversized bottle with a nipple the size of my small fist, and a large cardboard box filled with sweet-smelling cream colored powder. My first chore before breakfast, give the calves theirs.

I love to kneel beside my children, their black-brown eyes like caverns. I always fall in. I assure them that everything will be all right. I vow to protect them from all harm as I wipe blood from a freshly punched baby blue tag on the dark one's ear. Nursing them gives me the right to play mommy.

Cleaning the bottle in a faded yellow paint-chipped room behind the barn, an olive green washer rumbles, Mom's radio buzzes out a favorite, I forget chores, drop the bottle in the dirt by a metal water tub, and dance and sing and twirl to the twang: "*Jose Cuervo, you are a friend of mine.*"

The queens do not dance. They watch with gentle eyes.

TAI CHI ON THE BACK PORCH

crouched
 without trembling
muscles lean as piano strings
strung tight between kumquat trees

I unfold to precise chords in a key all my own
like laundry draped on the line to dry
sounds like cardinals spreading wings
brush knee push breath clouds
mind still – still – still

eloquent like a beautiful woman turning at the waist

STILL LIFE

No wind in my hair, instead
the air is filled with the near
distant chaos of thick lines
impatient for repair.

Patience whittled away,
they hover over me like
thin legged pine trees with breathless
questions that disgorge
onto my desk and discourage
the clock from ticking.

No tick-tock.

It is timeless.
At this moment,
fall fruit ceases to grow
and light only chooses
to reflect the shadows that file
one by one
through the door.

No painted pause
illuminates the placid
yellow-gold that spills in
from the afternoon as the door
closes and opens
and closes.

Instead it becomes lost
to the floor, where feet shuffle
and stomp unwarily about
until all that's left is worn
polyester and me,
staring at the clock,
no tick-tock,
no wind.

BAD AIR

Mosquito alights, her stiletto
mouth a long filament harboring
parasites hungry for hemoglobin.
Her cutting blades pump
through thin layers of networked
micro-capillaries. She drinks.
It happens quickly, minute
creatures, plasmodia,
thousands release
in the soft tip.

A nip-

Ride the flumes and circulate
to the liver to live like fat,
rich men, to create
new nations and strains
that can out-
number the majority
in Africa. This year
it'll take twice
the annual toll. Easy
to overlook, a plague
of the poor,
standing on the brink
of a buzzing past
that can't be
diffused by herbal
cocktails or religious
medicines.

Zambia, a beautiful
sprawling nation,
devastated routinely
by falciparum creating
hidden agents
in the brain. A child
plays soccer in the morning,
dies of malaria
that night, as a baby
that won't
live past her fifth
birthday is born with
just enough

[no line break]

immunity for her
mother to give her
a name, pick
up the pieces
of her faith and place
them in the child's
pink stalemate smile.

DREAMSCAPES IN TANDEM

I found it hiding on
a sun-drenched day of childhood.
A heyday lazy beast

beneath kudzu; it groaned
annoyance as my feet snagged
leafy leviathan vines that pulled
layers of rust
from their
commensal gathering.

Adventure left the door cracked,
splintered in such a way
as to allow a tiny glimpse
of washed out alizarin
upholstery with weather worn rips

where seeds found refuge and pushed
shaded vines toward light that leaked
through a dingy cracked windshield.

That night I lived in the ocean. Blackness
chased me, wanted me, always
from a distance, always
jumping into the sky,
seal-skinned silhouette arched against moon, so I
swam deep where the people

in ocean villages hid me. I endangered
them, just by being there, but I didn't care.
I wanted to live, to breath bubbles in water, and swim
careless through the darkness of deep ocean.

They protected me, and that sea
creature knew. It jumped
into the night,
Scared, I swam
to the surface – to the wake.

THE VOLTAS

I sat at a table, beneath
a blue and white umbrella,
hiding from the weight
of summer in Florida.

A classical song I didn't know
hummed from a string quartet.
Through the slight crackle of speakers
that had played too long in the sun,

I relished the Cello's throaty
syllabics while studying
a book of Italian sonnets and sipping
on too-sweet lemonade that made me thirsty.

I began to focus on the voltas. The moment
of change that made those sonnets so much
more than just pretty words lined up in pink

dresses with lace-lined puffy sleeves. No these
poems where whores, naked, voltas spread open,
they begged me to climb inside them, and I found
I was willing to pay their price. I gave them

everything I had, and they left me
on the patio, sweating, book closed.

GREENSLEEVES

An old monster of a thing,
the piano creaked
and bellowed as four men pushed

it through the door, wheels broken, they
cursed and heaved it into a cramped
open space I had cleared hours earlier.

Too poor to buy my own, I accepted
this beast, a gift I felt honored to
nest between books of poetry,

magazines and music CD's
leaning in random piles around
a stained wine-colored carpet.

When everyone was gone, I stood,
hands on hips, proud of the paint chipped,
yellow-keyed creature that stared back at me

through missing panels over the foot peddles. It looked
like furniture mice had lived in,
no varnish, no frills, no wooden gloss

or shine. I pulled up a kitchen chair
and began to tinker away at the one song
I could always play by heart.

Its moth-eaten damper felt played
otherworldly chords that complimented
the squeak of the sustain peddle.

And it didn't take me long
to figure out the middle C key stuck
or that one G had no hammer,

but I played on and on, the same song,
all night, over and over.

MIDWAY

Folks call it Midway, but they can't
recollect anything down the road, except,

where the vines grow green up slanted
power lines, hiding the place Chris carved

affection for Sam. Some memories have
ways of burying themselves beneath

large, damp, green leaves.
Locals tell me, *Ain't no bright*

*lights there after dark. Ain't nothing to attract
a crowd. People just gawk their heads*

*out locked sedans with their windows
half rolled down.*

*Naw, there ain't never strangers at our
corner store. We all know each other. Ain't no*

*secret there. Your business is
as private as the shit stains in your*

underwear flappin' on the laundry line.
Sometimes they sit on paint chipped porches

with Southern-style slanted roofs and watch
the international airport across the highway,

wonder where the planes fly, and why
the entrance is on the other side of town,

where trees are planted in fashionable
lines, and where the kudzu never seems

to climb because everything is new,
and memories never beg to be forgotten.

SLEEP-WALKING

Like Kartikeya, I stand in the street, hands filled
with a bottle, a cigarette, my regret, and your name

scrawled frantically on a letter you will never read.

Only the gutter is familiar with such garbage.

What wakes me in the pitch of night and forces
my feet to beat to the rhythms of your address,

so that once again I find myself perched

in the moon's morning shadow of your building,

a broken warrior on a dirty curb screaming at an empty window.

ALICE IN I.T. MIDDLE MANAGEMENT REALIZES WHAT MATTERS MOST

Middle-
aged men sit around laughing at their
reflections in a long shiny table,
made of mahogany,
oak, or laquered
particle board, floating
atop a large concrete pedestal.
Mad men at tea.

I want to scream.
I want to remind
them that tea parties
never leave people thirsty.

Comfort rarely
leaves one strong.

Instead, I say
nothing, bow my head, blush, and take
the brunt of another joke. Another jab because

the loud Dodo with the loud
bird-eyes knows I don't know
how to run the cock-ass race.

And I thank him, so stupid,
I thank him when I should have shouted, *drink this,*
ass hole! I should have spit mushrooms in his face.
I should've said, *I don't know the meaning of half*
those long words, and I doubt you do either.

I thanked him.

And when I think about that now, I'm so grateful
I had a white rabbit to follow,

a way to escape the curious nonsense and the tea room at dusk.

THE SECRET LIVES OF REQUIEMS

Music fills wheat fields with
the scent of orange blossoms,
and stalks bow to soil and dew
left over from sunrise, tastes
like the playful C sharp of a flute.

Verdi dances through
the roots of the Palouse, Verdi
has never visited the Palouse –
a song doesn't need

a passport, so the pikey little notes
tend to wander past melody
into bars where they can dance staccato
into the musky early hours of twilight.

Because no one recognizes
them, they are free to drink
margaritas and kiss in public
as Kurt sings, *we don't have to breed*.
Excitement laden sweat of escape
makes them glisten as they crave

solidarity, the individuality of sex.
So they strip off their classical
composure and push together
to create bulbous grapelike
notes not found on any musical
scale. Lorelei watches, listens
from a dark, smoky corner.

She will search for this sound
again, over and over, but rain
never hears its own music.

Water doesn't have ears, and so it can
only turnaround tap with its fingers
on a tin roof, fall to the ground
like millions of deflated
balloons, and explode
into a choir of droplets.