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OUR MESS IS MORE

by

CONYER CLAYTON

B.A., University of Louisville, 2010

A THESIS

Submitted to the faculty of the

College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English

University of Louisville

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A Thesis Approved on

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ABSTRACT

WHAT IS THIS MESS YOU ARE TALKING ABOUT?

Conyer Clayton

04/23/2013

This collection of thirty-one poems, composed between June 2012 and March 2013, was inspired by my travels to Belize, Prague, London, and Thailand. The collection is my attempt to negotiate, through poetry, the concept of wilderness, and the “messes” (literal and figurative), which we humans make in our attempts to tame it. Structurally, the sonnet is the guiding formal force of this collection, which is made up of a prefatory section, two major sections, and two concluding poems. The first section, “A Life Hardly Lived In,” contains fourteen short lyric poems. This section is structured so that each poem loosely mimics the traditional purpose of the corresponding line in a Shakespearean sonnet. The second section, “For the Birds. For the Humans,” is set entirely in London. I originally composed this section as a traditional heroic sonnet crown, or fifteen linked sonnets. In its final form, I have allowed the sequence to follow a more organic logic. Although the repeating lines are still present, I have moved away from strict adherence to the form. I extend the lessons learned by my interactions with the natural world to my negotiations of personal identity and relationships. My personal experiences are meant to extend towards a reflection on the wider human condition. Thematically, this collection considers how we thrive when we relinquish the desire to control the outside world. The tension in these poems is how, despite knowing this, we still balk at allowing the wild to take over.

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GOING

She imagines herself gathering
her things and going -
saying, *going*

for a walk, instead of, I'm just cold.
She sees herself walking
calmly away, fitting
her fingers into gloves while her socks
bunch because they're inside-out
as usual. Instead she stares

at the corner of the book
on the coffee table;
the corner without

words, no syntax
to tread or
punctuation to
stumble, sheer
white, soothing.

A LIFE HARDLY LIVED IN

The Reminder

You wrote “I miss you” on my stomach
in bright blue sharpie the morning I left,

just to remind me, a marking, a deterrent
for strangers and lace. It faded on the fifth day

in a dirty hostel shower, though I didn’t use soap.
I glanced in the mirror and saw only skin. You were missing.

I traced the ghost of your stenography with my finger.
I think about it still, three years later, as you trace

your fingers across my stomach.
I wonder what you’re writing.

Gone Fishing

Our toes grip the rocks,
and we grimace,
hold fast to bait
buckets, crabs
with their last meal
of coconut shavings.
We are still.

The osprey stoop
and we pray:
Teach us how
to glide through

life. The pelicans double
back. The sky is
ours. The sky is mine.
My eyes refocus

and I slip,
spilling the bait
into the sun-warmed shallows.

I could curse
but stay silent.
The birds fly
close. An eagle
turns his head.

Crumbs

I felt his soft-shell break before I heard it, my head
lamp pointed too far ahead, ignoring the ground
in front of me. I left him

to recover silently, to suffer,
just give me a minute, I'm fine really, I'm
fine. But he let himself be covered
by sand, his crushed insides spilling.
I carried him to the ocean
with a metal spoon, belly-up.
I made sure to rinse it off.

Foreclosure

We collect real-estate for hermits
from the most convenient waters. Prime
snail-crafted homes, lived in
slowly, easily, calmly, with a firm grip
on slick ground, adjustable
to the rising water levels, a fixed slow
rate and slow growth, live till we die, leave it

to the ocean, children have their own
rocks to claim. Don't worry. Risk
is natural. We signed a salted waiver
when we touched each other's insides.

We dress in our nicest shells, a healthy
coating of mold, but nothing a good scrub
of salt and sand and human hands can't
handle. We relocate to the shaded side
of the island, away from the piled brittle palm
leaves and coconut husks. Age creates

character. Who would want a shiny shell,
a life hardly lived in.

Labyrinth

The stairs are empty, inhabited
by ivy, and walls and walls and walls
and walls. I'm caught
between a singsong accent and heavy
breath, haggled to half
price near a chicken
coop and almond pastries. The walls
crumble to rebel, the walls crumble,
and a sharpie screams for a lost
regime, a slow theoretical decay, like bodies piled
in dozens, and kept within walls
and walls and walls and walls,
by a crow's beak and hard palms.
The clock chimes

and I stand,
reminded by the coming tour group to pull back
from the wall, from every castle and keep
a population in grips. I catch
a spider on pen point, with the best intentions,
but I tire of rescue, and I place him on the wall,
the wall, inescapable.

Pick Pocket in Paris

I.

I've been riding this carousel for hours,
whistling the words I cannot speak,
the ones I'll never find, leaving
my clarinet dismantled and praying
for another coin in my case. I fall
under fashion, under aversion
and stretch into the seats next to me,
the only empty ones on the subway,
and no one notices when I take a breath,
whet my lips.

II.

Times passes as planned,
like fingernails under your hair,
or a crowd pushed stomach to back.
I exist in between the tight and baggy,
the smoothed and locked, the painted
and scrubbed clean. I slip
my hand into your pockets while you watch
an actor in a cheap costume, waving
to a meager, distracted mob.
The cloud cover is coming.

Bell Tower Shadow

I balance on a bench's edge, coo
and peck for my pretty pretty eyes,
my wings drenched in dirty water and stone,
dodging her feet as she begs and stumbles

in the shadow of a messiah's gangled limbs
of gold, halos embroidered
instead of skirts and shoes, a gypsum scarf
covering toothless gums, stooped and shaking,

herding the wind to her chest
with a paper cup clinking, grasping
air between her pain-thinned nails.

She spreads peanut shells
in the dirt, muttering for lost money,
how passersby dismiss her shawled
drowning; trembling
in a confession booth; faith despite
a vaulted ceiling crumbling into her mouths.

I fly over fountains,
drain holes stopped with bread crumbs,
gliding over her firmly grounded back.

Signs

The church bells ring, *forget about the lies you've told.*
The time is wrong. I should floss daily.
The sun finds a hole in the clouds.
The paper jamming in the printer is the bread that wouldn't rise. The water was warm.
The Internet being slow is a gesture to the dead.
The train floods, and I know I've spent too much on drinks this week.
The lost puzzle piece is my husband whom my mother never met.
The cut on my upper gum is healing like all else, except for those things that never heal.
I'm on my last bit of chapstick. God knows I didn't call my mom enough.
The wine I spilled on my brand new tights shows me what a shitty friend I've been.
The sidewalk rose to stub my toe, and I don't know what to blame these mood swings on.
The record skips, and it's like my voice, unable to broach that subject.
I can't talk about what my mother would have thought. The record skips, and
I can't talk. The record skips.

Tropical Storm

My leg slept,
twitched under your weight
and we woke.

The dark inside matched
the clouds outside, and we worried
over the tent, rethinking our carelessness.
Stakes don't hold in sand.

Timeless

It's really a matter of pushing the edges down, of making a time tight seal, like plastic wrap on glass over spinach salad, or the butternut squash Dave made with leeks and thyme, when we lived in that shitty small apartment over a bulk grain and nut store, where our room was a cave and needles hid in the green plaid couch cushions, but oh, the time is getting in. Let's try wax this time. Drip sealed and dried on an envelope, or a white clump on a golden candlestick, the stalks mismatched in height, measuring greater depths in wine glasses and casserole dishes, the wear of the seats, the build-up of tension in extended families, and all this growing on a brass base, a slow melt of underhanded comments on mother's drinking and power struggles over clean plates, tongue and soap and scraping.

My body is the car I drive

I.

The earth lies loudly, with groaning
plates and thunder. It lies still with a simmering
temper, deep breath, deep
breath, timely eruption, moving boundaries.
If I speak faster, I have
the authority. If I rumble
there is intimidation. The waves
slap our skin.

II.

That time we walked in the rain with a bottle of wine, but
how I got cold after an hour and missed the chance
to kiss you under a tree, is

the constancy of desire, the repeated chiming
of clocks. Truth only in hearing.
A robin with a broken wing.
A dead bird on the sidewalk,
glass an unexpected warrant.
Death is a voice on the phone,
you didn't say hi the same way, you took
such a strange breath.

Fertilizer

Overheated in the underpass, as we sit
on a towel soaked in sweat and dead
grass. He'll be here in an hour, they said,
so relax with a book, your skin creased
and red. We watch an ant haul a hardshell,
while the friends who say they aren't dating kiss

across a cooler. Can we crack a beer
at least? Because who can stay sober
under a road sign, two miles to the next
exit. Who can stay sober without a word,
all attention paid to text. It's all for show,
and your tongue doesn't help, sitting
on the beginning of a sketch, remembering

the glass cracked sky, a fist brought down
on the stratosphere, making lightning leap.

Contents

The river teems eyeless and unseeing, blind
swimmers gilled and transparent, clouded
over, scaled. Our eyes are made seeing
crickets grope in darkness, stumbling
over hermaphroditic newts. Bats cling
and water drips, *build build build*.

Have you lived

in midnight creek beds? Swum
in blackness with white swans and ducks?
Felt their webbed legs on your saturated skin
as you float on the silted rock bottom?

Have you felt the contents of the world?

Water spiders skimming a surface
slick with oil and yesterdays egg and bacon
grease, fried bananas and fish.

I saw the leaves sitting blackened
the fall of the blackbird into another's nest, strangers
at their bus stops rearranging scarves.

I've seen branches
against moonlit stars,

a flock missing a leader, wandering
aimless in crowded skies.

Our Hanging Threads

Lay your lenins on an armchair.
Be filled with air
and nomads. Evolve

on camel back, sipping through plastic
and staring through cloth, a movement
in memory, toes dragging
over unsanded floorboards.
And so we move, forward
or back, it doesn't matter
really, since there's a blue rose
on your see-through shirt, a blooming

product of newly sewn sinew,
threaded through your jutting jaw,
a breath blown, your hand just out of reach.

At last at last we've seen a new
body, a new contour of mountains,
of flatland at first.
All final, at least, at last.

FOR THE BIRDS. FOR THE HUMANS.

Covent Square

The sun never got quite warm enough
after this week of bad weather, so he grabs
her waist and lifts her up to stand, burying
his face in her belly and her dress for just a moment.
She puts her hands on his shoulders, looks at the sky
and laughs, saying, *this is for sitting, not standing*,
but stays standing all the same. Pigeons swarm,
grouped in desperation. The stranger
seated next to her feet looks pointedly away
while the couple kisses. He feigns
focus, an eraser between his lips,
waiting for the words to come, like the sudden flight of birds.

Raven of the Tower of London

It is said the tower will fall
if I fly, so I'm clipped; trapped
in winged pacing; corner, corner,
corner, corner. I open my eyes,
extend my talons as far as iron allows.
Collecting cracked eggshells,
I count the bars and the fingers on your hand
and wonder how they'd taste in my mouth.
My bones shriek. *Hunt! Hunt and fly!*
So I do. Corner, corner,
corner, corner. My wings are the tightest manacle,
heavy with unused potential.

Cooing

We don't drink wind, just coffee and sugar water
that you leave behind. I've learned to ignore
the stares. You watch our flock instead
of speaking to each other, and make a point to keep
a rail between you as you eat lunch on benches.
Do you envy my squalid inclusion, my intuition
to directional shifts and body language?
Or do you envy my scavenging, the sips I take
from caps and pockets, my wings heavy with smoke.
Yes, my wings are heavy, but I have them,
while your heels slip over ketchup and sludge.
I slip under your gaze for that scrap
you let loose, taking refuge under a rain-wet seat.
The sun hasn't got quite warm enough to dry it.

Tracks

The city is heavy with unused potential,
swaying, shifting cobbles, vowels, sidewalks
busy with scheming and decay. Well-tended
cuticles and battlefields exist in tandem,
and we all pedal faster, attempting to free
the voices insulated by construction.

They echo in a pint glass and deep in my gut,
deeper in the sewers, claimed in the name of the queen
and rats. It's the difference between a guillotine
and a cutting board, a meadow and a lawn.
We step into the box, eager for escape.

Portrait of My Husband

I'm waiting for the words to come, like the sudden flight of birds,
so I can describe you in more natural terms.
My patient pine, my sweet chestnut, living
off peat and sand, avocado and quinoa.
You push taller and your skin falls off
in strips of hardened bark. You cedar, you larch,
you thorned and sprouting pet name. You keep
what's crucial hidden under sap and wax, so we are warmed
by your silky debris. My silver lining, you mountain
beech, short-armed and steady. You calm
my frantic growth and broad-leafed eagerness,
my greed for sun and sinew. You are a nest
for sparrows, a collarbone, even when
we are dispersed, playing puzzles with tectonic plates.

The Obvious

It seems we always make a mess of it,
mumbling sorry, oh sorry I didn't hear
you, aren't you listening, no, sorry,
to backs already turned. It's the gnarled root
of our obsession with flight, our ground bound envy
of those drinkers of wind, swallowing acres of coastline,
consuming without concern for parasites and eggs.
We envy the honesty of pigeons.
Their straightforward posturing and puffing, the fluidity
of intention. Our mess is more
dangerous than droppings on a windshield
and torn up loaves of bread. Our mess is ash
and tissue paper, words spoken too quickly or not at all.
We don't drink wind, just coffee and sugar water.

Assemble

Men will never rest till they've spoiled the earth,
says a rabbit, says a waiter, says a finch,
so say we all in our ships and fancy cars.
We built this. We suffered in deplorable conditions.
We planted trees in tardy reconciliation.
We piled objects on the backs of flat-bed trucks.
We wore black to hide blue blood under thin skin,
to cover the sad lack of worm hearts
under our nails, one for each broken finger,
for each boarded window. The train doesn't run
that way. Shovels are expensive. Descend
in a bucket and continue your work.
Don your frock and get to chiseling.

Saddled

Eager for escape, we tighten the straps
and ride back home. Yeah, I'm allergic,
but it's the image that counts, the heroism
of sweating fur and leather, the welcome scent
of shit on grass. The repeating green blades
are a welcome and beautiful suffocation.
Safety is in the soil. The worms
are trained in CPR and meditation.
The birds are classically practiced.

If I am lost, I'd rather be lost.
I'd rather be buried.
A hawk keeps watch
while I sleep, but the water hardly moves.

So why is my heart pounding?

Darwin at Westminster Abbey

The inside of your tomb must remind you of clouds gathering,
addressing your name on stone. You sailed
the wrong direction in death, away
from mollusks and the cut of wings
across moonlit cloth, reminding you just how far
you came for silence, for undisturbed eggs.
You must relish the dirt trodden over you
by queens and tourists and priests, the secrets
carried under our nails. Do you feel the cold
honor you've been given? Do candles and choirs
take the chill from decay, like hugging
your arms on a foggy hilltop?
I really have no clue where I'm going.

Shell

I get to chiseling.
I put my back into it.
Never mind the leaning I feel.
It's just my spirit longing for sea-salt
and sandy soil, for the appeal of emptiness.
Forget how I wish my fingers were wooden
homes for caterpillars. That a chrysalis hung
from my shoulder blades. Food for birds dangling
from my tongue and sappy spit. I am not in touch
with the semantic connection signaled in a root's bend.
I am not a flower reclaiming craters,
eating bombshells and shrapnel, fertilizer
and fireweed, railway spikes tilling the soil for roses.
I always make a mess of it.

Script

Our humor is written, our ink
carved from apple cores and empty stomachs.
The rigid paths we're forced to follow shear
the soft fuzz from our peaches and cheeks, and change
our words, meddle with our minds.
Mechanized, we stand in awe
of skyscrapers, instead of cells or bubbles or crowds
moving mindlessly. Plastered, we plaster
green men and gods on our beer soaked walls
and sooty floors, equating renewal with drunkenness,
a Celtic tradition. I get it. We've worked
hard. We deserve a break, a pint, an ax,
and someone to destroy and butcher.
But we cannot rest. The world is turning.

Darwin on the Beagle

We are dispersed, he said to yellow faced sailors,
watching symbols emerging in beaded eyes
and water alike, fearing mutiny in close quarters.
Oh let him see the peak, let him see the island
rising, the slow steady push of magma.
Praying to chance and mutation, he leaned over
the edge of the ship, marveling over a beetle's back,
a flightless bird and swimming lizards, noting
the slim chance we have for isolation, regarding
randomness and rising water levels as gods, until
he broke onto the land like sea-foam
on a turtle's back, a seagulls webbed toes.
Does the inside of your tomb remind you of clouds gathering?

Assessment

I really have no clue where I'm going,
so I take the first compelling left,
and find baby quails popping from the brush
like gumballs, or feathered marbles. I'm far
from Wordsworthian, all glowing description,
oh red beak, black back, so I grab my tweezers
and prepare the chick for careful inspection,
my eye looming in a magnifying glass. The heat
of my appraisal roasts him medium-rare, standard fare,
well-bred, but he didn't harden long enough. His gestation
left him soft and flimsy. I could crush him
in my hand, melt his beak down for coin, snap
his neck for diamonds. No. Put him back to toughen.
Everything is not salt-colored. Nowhere close.

FINAL SAY

Curtsy, then

gallop into the pasture, on fused
and airless roots. Hands sticky
with saliva fight strong-boned,
and the space in her lap is filled
with string, empty nesting babies.
Her gingham scratches a sun
burn, her nails ingrown, pulling
at udders, a continually empty bucket.

Old Town Square

We count the time in horses. Arrows and lions
chime. A new day. A new day. The same
river runs. We are built

by boulders. We are rolled
on logs. New money and old
oils, pooled from rotting foreheads.

We are painted, refinished, slowly carved,
another world's hardened
soil and bone, misshapen machinery.

The sky is marked
by time. A new day. A new day.
The same river runs.

CURRICULUM VITAE

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EDUCATION

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PUBLICATIONS AND PAPERS

Mochila Review “Full Sunlight” and “a recoil of springs”	2013
China Grove “Vegetables”	2013
The Snail Mail Review, Issue 4, “Bone-Bed”	2012
The Tau Creative Journal, “Trap”	2012
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