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# Murmuration

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Murmuration

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

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in  
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## ABSTRACT

The poems that comprise *Murmuration* are an act of vigilance in the face of loss. At certain moments in the distorted timeline of grief one searches the remaining world around them for signs of the beloved, signs that they are not simply gone but instead transformed or dispersed into another way of being. In this looking one's relationship to the external world undergoes a radical transformation of its own and demands a sustained attention from the bereaved that often draws from, but ultimately outruns cataloguing acts of memory. These poems attempt to render the movements of that attention as it learns to track a body made formless. These are moments of a consciousness dispersed in language as it follows the undulations, ambiguities, absences, presences, and transformations of form after death. Here, the speaker of these poems listens and watches for the languages of the transformed in whatever form they take; an attempt to listen to the murmur and eventually to learn to murmur back.

*For Dannica Jade*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract | i

Dedication | ii

Epigraph | v

### Section I

Vernal Distance | 2

Lividity | 3

Wakeful | 4

Magpie | 5

Token | 6

Black Widow | 7

Kid | 8

Bingham | 9

In Sleep | 10

Night Eye | 11

Amaranthine | 12

End of the Visible Self | 13

### Section II

Two of Cups | 15

Moth Through a Fan Blade | 16

Stillhued | 17

The Only Seeable Thing | 18

Candid Photo | 20

October Return | 21

Santiam | 22

Guard | 24

Antelope Island | 25

Wind Mountain | 26

Silver Falls | 27

Carbon Copy | 28

Nodus Tollens | 29

Snowfall | 30

Cathedral | 31

### Section III

Faun | 33

The First Hour of Every Day | 34

Late in the Isolation | 35

The Promise of Relief | 36

Honey Bee | 37

Daphne | 38

Leaf | 39

Wreathed | 40

Letter to the Three | 41

Visitation | 44

Murmuration | 45

Potato Bug | 49

References | 50

*It's dark as the sun  
this desire. Mysterious and grave  
as an ant dragging away the wing of a butterfly  
or as the yes that we say when things ask us  
— do you want to live?*

— Jaime Sabines

**I.**



*Vernal Distance*

I enter winter, it begins  
    in spring.  
        In branches,  
            the blossoms  
dress me in bed  
    again and again  
to scatter the sleepfags.

I enter the morning  
    the way one shows  
off the dead in their eyes.

You, me, the constellations  
that form in the void between  
  
    new blossoms.

They resemble you most.

## *Lividity*

Morning glory  
makes a nest of your limbs  
and the whitest winter  
lies down to rest  
at the edges:  
a bruised song  
about going home.  
I see where the vines  
are growing from  
the way they'll drink  
even snow  
from the desperate livor  
of your palms.  
November  
is a crisis tide  
that pools  
under your skin:  
sail away from here.  
Here is your midnight,  
your moths to swaddle.  
Here is my disfigurement  
a twin to yours.  
Take my finished hand  
with its gasping draft  
and honey.

## *Wakeful*

white, clean, unbroken, and unbroken in  
your face half drawn and shear  
the light is not like the light  
front door behind a dream of air  
small benevolence  
the house is empty  
old smoke in the freezer  
things not as they are  
then or now a gentle  
mint gum  
the childhoods of that  
doorknob crying focus  
remember it remember  
the touch of it

*Magpie*

In my palm the price of family.  
A smell that won't wash out of a sweater.

The anchors of season.      Then, a life  
now the cold.      Here, a cresting wave  
approaching the edge of my pool.  
   Thirsty  
bird, love that tends my left behind.

Meal, ritual, a passage through.  
Don't leave me alone.  
    Leave me alone.

The yard contains no yard.

*Token*

needle ice: the false ground  
extending

low shine, round goldray

thrush, sluice  
sisterhush

•

pocket black walnut  
out

out alive

***Black Widow***

The web she knots in front of my eyes  
will catch anything — the way  
she taps my granite cheek,  
my mother's patience.

•

She said gardens were clues.  
See them up close, in light. Here's stupor  
beside the rosemary. There are the peas  
back in your years. Black widows  
grow in the rock pile. You touch one  
once before the poison —  
She said gardens lead to more gardens —

*Kid*

Curled into yourself, nesting dry earth by a small fire  
in deep sleep, the last  
enterable home unfolding late.

Dusk settles  
the fine paced over dust and ember winds  
ashing your curls.  
Pine logs pop against  
the hard shut shells  
of your eyes. You sleep.

Look how your mouth, radiant with naming  
takes in dim morsels of light.  
Your story, my story a mantle  
on a soft garden plot. *Snapdragon*  
rooting down and gaping  
as a child in rain.

The burned out garden sinks  
under its own cloud of ash,  
your voice calling me, seeds spilling from your mouth.

## ***Bingham***

When I say *copper* I mean visitation  
the last spindle of basil  
in the planter box that weed  
that grows near the compost pile  
mom said we could eat poplars  
kissing each other I mean the worms  
all have names the crab grass  
slices my finger fools  
gold in the sidewalk I mean carried  
away by a downdraft  
and cleaning up after the austrees

When I say *home* I say *copper mine*  
I say *lattice* stunted ivy  
climbs naked green in twilight  
I see the mirror break on masonry  
I say *little hands* I mean welcome  
to the heart I mean the creek  
behind the house is too dangerous  
I say *the blessing* I mean ghost  
loose feathers collect in the herb garden  
I mean not quite conscious  
tomato leaves waft into dusk  
I say *morning glory* I mean moth



*In Sleep*

more moons than I realize  
closer than power  
revenant  
eyelashes cobwebb the scene  
power line to power line  
in the mailbox  
trip wire trip web  
delinquent slide of my eye  
stained glass beacon  
projector room  
lights are on but no one is  
too much to see

•

weather indiscriminate  
patterned lazy  
grey strata piling up  
one row  
white ones  
to blacken with lichen  
filaments of rust  
an old retaining wall  
in the post  
project archive  
the homework of last year  
the world  
the stone  
and bone  
behind this window  
another window  
behind that window  
yet another  
and behind that  
timber  
the one good eye  
pitch in the eye

## *Night Eye*

This way to reveal warm saddle  
stone this way to cover deep  
the holding hour your body  
wrought into this, your stretch of wing  
above the darkest entrance  
undressing light, flush, and hurry  
down to the trivial now, the trivial later  
that pulls me from sleep's hairsnake  
no end to the number of wakings  
gloaming together in total blind reach  
of each other's form  
the light only as light imagined

*Amaranthine*

Danni gathers  
cabbage butterflies, soft whites  
hidden in basil, rosemary,  
the yard when it quivers with reception  
steep light in the eye yellow green  
to untroubled blue —  
space between shaped  
as a mouth, stammering  
for a name —  
    she gathers  
worms from potting holes  
carries them one, then another  
brown curl unraveling  
into the house, out of the house  
whispers them welcome  
to her world —  
she gives them names, plants  
them back as seed —  
family that will return  
    in her palm  
things full of their own color,  
primrose, snapdragon,  
the garden in motion—  
the silken place she stays

*End of the Visible Self*

But first the bodies —  
air held in lungs, mouth, blood, brain  
downwinding in hesitancy, awaiting direction —  
god is motion.

Disaster, vibration whirring through living  
cavities as voice, unrolling in hot streamers from the ceiling.

I don't know what kind of party to throw.

I see so little of what moves.

I open my mouth to die of that voice, it calls my heart by name  
and says: adapt. My body oscillates in this, our dimensional gulf  
where to be is to move.

Soon there will be change that does not include me.

**II.**

*Two of Cups*

The year milks its jaundice into a cup  
and leaves it on your table.

On the beach, shuck open the sea's  
fat blisters.

On the table at dinner  
there will be two cups beside your plate.

Whichever you drink from  
drink completely.

*Moth Through a Fan Blade*

They live lightward  
and it cuts them

bits of wing  
leg, their heads

try to fly  
the abdomen's

cathedral  
mother of

pearl dust  
as some beauty

down on  
the floorboards

the brief  
tranquility

trauma  
a windchime

teasing  
them about

*Stillhued*

your final hours  
caught in the light that poured  
to your eyes —

even with all the room  
you left in them

— over honeyed insects  
ambering into stones  
the light ridden stones



### *The Only Seeable Thing*

There were signs, pronouncements  
Insects halved in a fan  
Fish filled with human sewage baking on the banks  
A goose cracked open on the rocks,  
The Witch Tree machining our dreams from the woods  
The whole skin of an animal inside out  
Slung on a low branch  
Danni was served the tea of amnesia  
Thunderclapped in and out of consciousness  
Amidst leaf piles of tar speech  
October brushed the braille of our heads  
Toward a November punctuation  
Headlights breaking  
Dredged out of the trustmire  
She walked with a cane  
Aged by confusion into fits  
Her limp appeared in my gait  
Her wordlessness rasped into my speech  
All possible endlines hiving through the trees  
Then splintering - one here, one there,  
Her tokens presented themselves  
Acorn cap, broken brick, totem frog, mushroom stalk  
Furnaces lit up in my dreams  
A brother becomes an uncle  
A sister becomes an aunt  
A brother bottles forest air  
A sister vacates her autumn  
A brother bundles witch fingers  
A sister puts time to bed  
A brother sleeps in the past  
A sister finishes dinner  
A brother steals the show  
A sister owns the stage  
A brother sees through a mask  
A sister dances violin  
A brother lives with his sister  
A sister lives on this earth  
Electric notes of exile rang out  
Recognizable life was braided then burned  
Her cane became my cane  
Face aged twenty years overnight  
In the living room as family arrive  
My own bed a monstrous blindfold

Afraid of the sheer earthlessness of sleep  
Afraid to wake and forget what happened  
The whistle of the wakescythe singing "sisterless"  
Through the arc of its harvest

*Candid Photo*

beside  
her ashes —

had i seen  
    myself  
then

    my first  
thought

like the  
mothers

are you

are you eating?

*October Return*

I cross this  
    risen snow

the living  
air that allowed neither tears  
    nor poplar

on the bank of the Willamette

light hangs

    like human faces

I take  
this stinking black  
    stone from the sand

worse than memory  
    this river continuing

*Santium*

Receive me.

Sickle me open  
with cold viridian.

I hear the relic cobbling  
of the river below.

The miners  
have all gone.

The stones  
trundle deep.

Rust carts drag down  
the shaft

of my breath  
to retrieve

the twinkling ore  
of my grief.

The mountains lash  
my eyes

to April's  
snow line.

The animals are gone.

Show me  
my daylight face

in the wood  
in the river stones.

Is it  
gone away?

To the valley plucked  
like a berry

and drowned.  
The cold green  
water

constricts  
my veins

until the blood  
runs opal.

Sets me walking  
sheaves of alder

for the first  
time

without the old face  
to come back to.

***Guard***

You fix me in place with sight  
mind of the mirror self  
self afraid, in gravity, bringing in closer the blind  
language of the body  
close as whisper, stutter.

Protection too has a body that shakes, speaks the red words  
that litter through fall, temporal, lawless  
divorced of shimmer. The beautiful  
tortured into human. I only want to sleep in the world  
of touch, being touched  
the belief in catastrophe  
drifting overhead in tangled orange streamers.  
Your dread of our body lights up the minutes —  
one stuttering mouth beneath armor, one spear  
and the power to cut. Mirrored threat.

You pull me close in, panic in your eye, my eye  
lungs crumpling of smoke,  
we survive with a spear aimed selfward.

*Antelope Island*

Deep in the salt  
glints the windows of my home:  
I don't understand the danger, how the water pours  
and becomes a lesson, a messenger,  
a whole future fathomed into my shape.

How can I feel that?  
These sweet, hellbent galleries live  
inside my hands: violet pools, bison and sage, salty years,  
the deathless twists of a lure caught in the lake bed —  
some chapter of myself anchoring the line.



### *Wind Mountain*

Storied with asking, our falling feet on talus  
posed to this peak who birthed landslide  
not in flows but shards not for life the life of my body  
my sister's body warmth and name for carrying  
but for loosening tongues  
the teeth too deep in slate to speak their clatter  
to give voice by shatter the voice of what for who

too deep in the story we ask with our feet  
to see rock live like water we ask we bury our sister  
to learn where the ground flows  
not yet far far enough to return to the peak  
for our names youth in the berries  
so sour so hissed out of the thickets when  
we least expect it

## *Silver Falls*

The trees,  
hoar parents we turn to  
to feel recognizable.

They lead us to the falls  
where ancestors mumble  
through water  
with no tongues for speaking  
no ears for hearing  
the solstice rising in our throats.

They say wipe blank  
the slate of your eyes,  
look *through* the falling.  
Lost faces will appear  
on their way to the cold pools  
after death's shudder.  
The water sunders air  
but we see no faces.

That we look for our family  
deep in this hiss means  
the home we are from is a home  
we can't find the door to.

*Carbon Copy*

stand of trees and  
the eyes that look on it

my body as ash or  
flesh buried

wood veins  
drawn into cell, seed

and oil  
transfigure

me into or out of  
breath and

breather  
breath and breathed

bereaved

*Nodus Tollens*

Above the falls breathing, breathing, wintering.  
Hoarfrost lifting the ground to meet my boots  
through the north meadow thickets. I look  
for the stump near the treeline where Danni  
stood in the last good snow.  
Picture this, sun striping through mist onto snow  
footprints leading into the forest  
and none leading back out.  
My family stood around a fire and sang  
in this clearing, to mark it as a spot of home.  
I feel it. Apocalypse.

*Snowfall*

When the camp path leads to no camp  
and the dream of waking leads into night:  
Why can't I see the lost faces of my dead  
when I tend the last cinders, when I walk  
to the edges of the trees, the water? I've gifted myself  
sweat to the mouth of my planet, years to  
the unmappable mouthless song of Where.

## *Cathedral*

A dusk in motion is a dusk in belief  
and at a certain hour near midwinter  
the sun goes down so full of years that we lose  
our chance to die young under the boiling awe.  
The light makes us family to the family without  
a tree where we see ourselves echo down  
the lineage of memories with no beginning.  
Yet seeing color that painful makes us  
younger than we've ever been. The curvature  
of the field, the thicket of fir to the right, clouds  
fanning out of the west toward Danni and I.  
The light giving off such sweet smoke  
as to hallow our bodies the same way a tradition  
hallows the string of years it gives birth to.

**III.**

*Faun*

You, the only thought sitting by a small fire  
    in gloom grown  
and pulled in buckets from some well or other last century  
    don't look up from the cinder  
though I know you see through to me from behind the glow  
    arrived at first on your own  
then together with the parts  
    of animals that lap the pool  
showing them their own faces. It is dark.

I hear your hooves in the back  
    of my head like a grabby set of years.  
    Out of your mouth  
comes the glade way —  
    startles me out of my myth  
    nothing seeable by looking, just looking  
from side to side like a rat.  
    A hoof stamps into the cinderbowl  
one more night. I feel  
    the underworld of it.

Here is the chance, you say.  
    The never ending flint in your joints  
to strike returning to me.



*The First Hour of Every Day*

The heat of a mown lawn is failing me across the distance between bodies  
and I'm strung up by my ankles to the ceiling fan in June.  
The sun peels varnish on a piano and heats the wire.  
I need to understand fate well enough to build a chrysalis  
in the night, cornering myself into a perfection worth shattering.  
My limbs are being repossessed by doctored fireworks  
mashed by a hammer, cast in duct tape, and left to bark  
at the moon in an empty intersection.  
Let me breathe into the lungs of someone irrelevant  
to the dreams of the chemical workers  
and the proverbs of insomniacs.  
I don't think I can fall any further  
but the facts keep changing  
and the only way I'm getting out of this bed  
is with a retinue of crash test egg shells  
between me and the necessary frenzy of waking.  
Read the signs Mallow-Face! Living life begins  
by standing on the edge of a bridge opening my mouth  
to the saxophonic tongue of three a.m. in August.  
Don't cross anything out of the windpipe,  
The night is nothing more than an indigo marble  
tumbling down my naked spine.  
On the banks of the river are dead fish that gape white  
in the choke and I know they're here  
to make sure that I take flesh and starlight personally until it hits me  
that the arms I'm clutching are my own,  
that I will never fear anything as much as I fear my own flesh.

*Late in the Isolation*

What could get away doesn't, falters or clings  
sprinkling of drops  
log watering down by the railroad bridge  
the month's measurable shore  
    sand, printing, pacing, sputtering gristle  
and spirogyra.  
This month, walkable  
here's an eddy riding this river  
    carcassed.

One hand on my chest,  
conversion out to revise these gulls like water.  
    I name the month for what it is —

Animal, Basalt,  
    is it she,  
angel with sand in her teeth.

No sorry, not yet, no — prophecy  
fishbacked into the mud. No henceforth — log ferrying cormorants.

The long days shiver out their prices.

*The Promise of Relief*

In a birdcage, the promise of relief is placed  
then forgotten.

Malediction hides  
inside a stone.

The first hour of every day rattles  
in a bone white dish.

A cry from within sleep, pure  
from within stone, unreasonable.

I want to touch a pair of hands  
that hold sprigs of laurel.

Desire brushed out  
caught in the pitch of a tree.

A spider's filaments  
drown in dew.

The fog swallows a honeybee.

## *Honey Bee*

Little god, little floral thunder-hum  
journeying the brickwalk,

wings drying out in the noon  
of your bewilderment  
    you send the rain skyward.

I have seen you silent on the white sill -  
still citrine punctuation mark,  
throbbing empty paper.

You've been drinking singing voices  
your stinger stuck elsewhere,

foot of a human, a ripe peach.  
    Hunger is not hunger –

but the untouchable touching us  
between the legs.

A different kind of change is coming:  
airy hurt of the Daphne blooms  
    I'll no longer be alone in beauty.

*Daphne*

Fingers and the gaps between them, the knot —  
joints in motion no quicker, no stronger  
than the unturned season — the rush of reaching  
winter in persuasion. Leaves sealed  
to the minutes.

The reach — an afterlife  
    full touch the last thing  
that wipes away language  
crumbs on the cheek, the last meal.

Windpain, the diaphanous love.  
    An afterlife also is full  
of touching. Under those fingertips  
waft the shapes of what fit to my body  
    the way they approached,  
gestures made of February, threadbare cotton.

How will I teach my body  
to speak of that?

*Leaf*

Has tongue on it — sponge  
knit seams, platelets, and elasticity — the utterly unspooled  
afternoon in its age, this instant's birthday celebrated  
by the landing of one yellowjacket hovering  
down.

Picture a yellowjacket on tongue pricking the buds —  
that is the red of this. Puckerthorn. Sweet oldsore.  
    Maple dragged by the tongue  
    toward, through the new world;  
    flies sexing the mud  
    all this seedscreaming filling the air  
    till her face opens  
    what flickers  
    in the light first, one tongue fluttering out  
into the clearing, her face opens  
on a red grammer, ritualworn  
    unrecognizable as wilderness.  
    The air cools with each sickly, red word.

*Wreathed*

in rose      light

          eyes  
shut

          in this room

siblings  
    not moving

          I see  
your twilit

face autumning

          inside me

          in that place

where I  
    most horrifically  
    say

Always.

*Letter to the Three*

you, myself

stepping into field, at home

in grasses, endings

that go

on yellow to green

glowing

salt caked to feet,

do our footsteps

end ? —

at the points prints in mud

prints in dust

the field says *unforgettable*—

mud promise

grass chalice

the returning vow

in a field between mountains

you were once

weathertrue

and I carried your radiant name

into night



you, my protector

the beautiful  
glow wrought stone

this is not a quiet place

the blood, bone, and stone  
swirl, red plume —  
embers  
into the hot, dark  
survival

our talismans  
our dried, rattling leaves

we lived in this body  
smoke chambers — minutes

that vibrated, in waking,  
sleep,  
home  
in its deepest state

we candled against loss

you, my dreamer

promise            that I might  
                        outlast this season  
the gate  
                        wreathed  
                        in purple vines  
  blooms  
emptying of their last pale chorus —

what words  
                        I saved  
disperse,            burn off            until

softly, a hiss  
                        your persistent murmur  
of animal attending  
  animal —

                        of bodies made formless  
bodies made many

                        swell, fold, and flock

                        words I will die  
learning  
  to speak

*Visitation*

Danni among salal  
hedges weathering into their forms —  
    blue late in the berries, sparrows  
    lifting, cedar in the smoke.  
    Each transforming  
one silken touch into another.

She's made her youth  
    an entry into earth-hood.  
Her celebrations a heart mirror to bird and worm —  
    this her quiet making,  
    sparrow that leapt from the hedges  
without a word, nothing but  
    light, wind,  
    one flutter landing  
in her curls.

Gentle talons among hair, a quiet season  
in touch, the mysterious yes to a question  
    that may or may not have been asked  
    but hung in the air, in the long minutes  
that settled on her quiet head,  
    on the sparrow's raveling wing.  
The way she was smiling —

as if she knew  
    she had no one body.

*Murmuration*

you are watering through meadow

mouth fluttering open,  
                    riparian  
grasses weeping over  
            in steam —

            smoke-blue, early,  
                    escaping

the scalding pool  
folds mineral into air

you are drawn in too many  
            directions dissolve—

            touching  
everything at once

your mouth opens  
            the steam swept glade

            thistlesong  
                    rising

your eyes continue in color

as in bird wing

cutting

light, one turn,

one note

the flock's

medicinal

slow bruised

horizon— lavender

eyes continuing

flock ridden

and face sore

among catkins

set in  
windbirth

yellow to green  
to white

seeds floating  
swelling the air

cottonvoice  
that covers

the name you  
carried to  
budding

If you are with me  
say it

you're ash under  
                  aspen

planted as into another  
                  quaking  
body—

leaves turn,  
          flutter

          can we say that  
you are  
with us?   gone

          home  
in the   flutter  
          escaping    through  
the meadow

dust body —

          the last touch  
my inhale  
my exhale

*Potato Bug*

The shale is still  
my story  
nobody to gift  
my body to.

I cup my hands  
fill with canyon —  
spinebender.

I love the look of things.

I've told all  
my homes: I love you  
I collide the homes.

The perfect end in mind —  
I say something  
that does not change.



## REFERENCES

The epigraph is an excerpt from the poem “From the Bodies” by Jaime Sabines, translated by W.S. Merwin.

“Vernal Distance” contains references to Paul Celan’s poem “The Years from You to Me.”

“Bingham” is the name of a large open pit copper mine located in the Oquirrh Mountain Range of northern Utah. The mine is also called Kennecott Copper Mine or RioTinto Kennecott.

Antelope Island is a large island located in the Great Salt Lake.

“Nodus Tollens” is an obscure phrase used to describe the feeling that the plot of one’s life no longer makes sense.

“Wreathed” contains references to Paul Celan’s poem “I Can Still See You.”

“Murmuration” is a term used to describe flocking behavior in birds and is most commonly applied to groups of starlings in flight.