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Murmuration

Braeden Dillenbeck
Portland State University

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Murmuration

by

Braeden Dillenbeck

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

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing

Thesis Committee:
Michele Glazer, Chair
Robert Schlegel
Janice Lee

Portland State University
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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

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*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

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.