

If Your Matter Could Reform

Robert Okaji

Dink Press

Nat. Poetry Month Chapbook Series No. 1

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Wind

That it shudders through
and presages an untimely end,

that it transforms the night's
body and leaves us

breathless and wanting,
petals strewn about,

messenger and message in one,
corporeal hosts entwined,

that it moves, that it blends,
that it withdraws and returns without

remorse, without forethought, that it
increases, expands, subtracts,

renders, imposes and releases
in one quick breath, saying

*I cannot feel but I touch,
I cannot feel.*

If We Burn

What flares instead to replace our
privileged nights? And which

assemblage of words could reorder these
deaths into comprehension,

change *I can't breathe* from epitaph
to actuated plea for help?

Are words ever enough?
Can we stack our indifference and fear

into a mile-high pyre, and torching it
watch them rise to nothingness,

disappearing through the clouds
into the streaming light of cold, dark stars?

Raise your hands and sing. Blow softly
upon the ember. Inhale and recall.

Do you still feel? Will you breathe?
Every fire needs oxygen.

Ashes

To sweeten the dish, add salt. To bear the pain,
render the insoluble. She envied

the past its incursions, yet the past yields to all,
avoidance to acceptance, trees to smoke.

My mother brought to this country a token of her death to come.

Now it sits on my shelf bearing implements of music.
In her last days I played *Sakura* on the mandolin,

trusting that she might find comfort
in the blossoms fluttering through the failing notes,

a return to mornings
of tea and rice, of
warmth and paper walls and deep laughter.

Today the rain spells *forgive*

and every idea becomes form, every shadow a symptom,
each gesture a word, a naming in silence.

Scatter me in air I've never breathed.

In Praise of Darkness

Night falls, but day
breaks. A raw deal,

no doubt, but fairness
applies itself unevenly. Who

chooses weeds over
lies, flowers over truth?

Last night's rain fell, too,
but didn't crack the drought.

Again, we think injustice!
Again, we consider falls.

Rain Forest Bridge

To cross
you must first
trust the strands

to hold.
The second tentative
step precedes
 the next,

each successive one
gaining strength:
 here to

there, now
to then, a summoning of
entreaties within
 one's faith.

Vapor meets cooler air,
forming droplets,

clouding the far side.

I have feared endings
and the strictures of the unseen,

but here
in this vast

swaying,

I know

one line
bisects the void.

Nine Ways of Shaping the Moon

for Lissa

1

Tilt your head and laugh
until the night bends
and I see only you.

2

Weave the wind into a song.
Rub its fabric over your skin.
For whom does it speak?

3

Remove all stars and streetlights.
Remove thought, remove voice.
Remove me. But do not remove yourself.

4

Tear the clouds into threads
and place them in layered circles.
Then breathe slowly into my ear.

5

Drink deeply. Raise your eyes to the brightness
above the cedars. Observe their motion
through the empty glass. Repeat.

6

Talk music to me. Talk conspiracies
and food and dogs and rain. Do this
under the wild night sky.

7

Harvest red pollen from the trees.
Cast it about the room
and look through the haze.

8

From the bed, gaze into the mirror.
The reflection you see is the darkness
absorbing your glow.

9

Fold the light around us, and listen.
You are the moon in whose waters
I would gladly drown.

Nocturne with a Line from Porchia

Everything is nothing, but afterwards.

I rise and the moon disturbs the darkness, revealing symbols, a few stolen words on the bureau. Tomorrow I'll express my gratitude by disappearing before I'm found, which is to say *goodbye* before *hello*, a paradigm for the prepossessed. Compton tells us to imply what's missing, like Van Gogh or Bill Monroe, but why listen to the dead before they've stopped speaking? Unfortunately we throw out the bad with the good, only to save the worst. I return to bed, and the floor spins. Nothing is everything, but before.

Self-Portrait with *Umeboshi*

Our resemblance strengthens each day.

Reddened by sun and *shiso*,
seasoned with salt,

we preside, finding
comfort in failure. Or does
the subjugation of one's flavor for another's

define defeat? The bitter, the sour, the sweet
attract and repel

like lovers separated by distances
too subtle to see.

Filling space becomes the end.

What do you learn when you look through the glass?

Knowing my fate, I say fallen. I say earth.

Apricot Wood

I built a frame of apricot
wood. This was for you. The clouds float
through it even as I sleep. You wrote
once of wild herbs gathered and brought
to a lovely girl, an offering not
of passion but of some remote
desire to hear a word from the throat
of the Lord Within Clouds. I thought
of this as I chiseled the wood.
Last night it rained. I listened to
it from my bed by the open
window, hoping that the clouds would
not leave. This morning two birds flew
by. It is raining again.

Trains

1

In the marrowbone of night,
your song parts the fog.

I never knew the secrets entrusted there.

I never knew that cinders and steel
could lie so passionately

and still believe that the watchman's hours
would evaporate and leave us scratching for more.

I have stolen time.

The windows remain closed and shuttered.
Even the wind turns away.

The track narrows.

You call.

Again.

2

Sometimes song seems the only respite,
the rhythm of clashing cars

and moments stretched beyond the next bend
to that point where light winks out.

We both know this lonely tunnel.

Payment is due.

I have always exited alone.

3

Another evening, and red smoke completes the horizon.

Your ribs stretch for distance,
and while I cannot see their end,
I know by sound
their lot.

Sing for me.
It is not
too close.

Gaza

We presume affliction by census,
whereas light

requires no faith.

Is the roofless house a home? When you call
who answers? The vulture

spreads its wings
but remains on post. Shifting,
I note minute of angle, windage. No

regrets, only tension. Breathe in. Exhale.
Again.

Irretrievable

How we grieve the simplest
truths: we are
 the scatterings,
 relics of
the mind's
erosions,
 less than the sum
 of our
bodies. I cannot see
the word
 but it smokes like
 the color green
burning, but not of
flame,
 and once the knife
 enters
you must avoid
its secretion
 and peel the flesh
 to reveal
what hides within: the stem's
purchase, pith,
 seeds, the
 irretrievable

shape
of a word

my lips cannot
form.

In Praise of Gravity

Which bestows weight
or slings me around
some other heavenly

body, a version of you
wondering whether
I'll rise from my next

plummet, victim of
curvature and infinite
range held in place,

attractive in nature,
bent perhaps and
scarred, proud to have

survived but never wiser.
Cleansed, we continue
our orbit, our mirrored fall.

Elegies for the Night (2002)

for W

1

You might palm a small token, damp and misshapen as the words
you expel, never admitting the dark truth.

Or the plundered life, neither black nor white, invisible yet whole.

Someone prays, yet all around silence reigns and the snow melts.

Possibilities cleansed in the light of misplaced certainty.

2

The charred wind's fruit bears little resemblance to its predecessor.

And later, within the garden's stones, what remains
but an acrid taste on the tongues of the speechless?

And if the bones have dispersed where might their thoughts
reside?

The wind takes nothing it does not want.

The wind wants nothing.

Nothing remains.

I am afraid, she said. Please tell me.

3

Though the moon returns in its diminished
state, I shall not listen. Words

turn back and eat
themselves, exposing intent

behind form, consonants beneath
vowels lying in wait. Abandonment.

And further senseless
debates: gain from loss, shock and awe,
the incessant demand for others to do

not what you would do but what you would have them do.
I claim no insight,

but even the light you reveal burns unclean.

4

Despair and its siblings fall to mind.
Scarcities: clean water, air, the simplest meal

when ashes swirl and fingers burn long after
the rain. *My son, my son,*

and other cries lost in the sand.
If he listened what sounds could he bear,

what sights, which odors? I tremble and lie quiet.

Chipotle

Sometimes it pauses and the light
translates what we've lost,

momentarily framing the taste
entering our bodies through

mouth and nose and eye,
the knowledge of dissolution

enhanced. One bite
and it all returns: fire, peat,

water, the retracted
flesh become another's

endeavor, as if giving form
to the world of air.

Without remorse,
we steal its most intimate self.

Earth's Damp Mound

in memoriam, P.M.

***I. February
1998.***

That week it rained white petals
and loss completed its

turn, the words finding themselves
alone, without measure,

without force, and no body to compare.
Though strangers spoke I could not.

Is this destiny, an unopened
mouth filled with

pebbles, a pear tree
deflowered by the wind? The earth's

damp mound settles among your bones.

II. Count the Almonds

What bitterness
preserves your sleep,

reflects the eye's
task along the inward thread?

Not the unspoken, but the unsayable.

Curious path, curious seed.
A shadow separates

to join another, and in the darker
frame carries the uncertain

further, past silence, past touch,
leaving its hunger alert and unfed,

allowing us our own protections.

III. The Bowl of Flowering Shadows

Reconciled, and of particular
grace, they lean, placing emphasis on balance,

on layer and focus, on depth of angle
absorbing the elegant darkness,

a lip, an upturned glance, the mirror.

What light caresses, it may destroy.
Even the frailest may alter intent.

So which, of all those you might recall,
if your matter could reform

and place you back into yourself,
would you choose? Forgive me

my selfishness, but I must know.

IV. Requiem

Then, you said, the art of nothingness
requires nothing more

than your greatest effort.

And how, seeing yours, could we,

the remaining, reclaim our
space without encroaching on what

you've left? One eye closes, then
the other. One mouth moves and another

speaks. One hears, one listens, the eternal
continuation. Rest, my friend. After.

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