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Her Still Singing Limbs: A Collection of Poetry

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Her Still Singing Limbs: A Collection of Poetry

Thesis directed by Professor Rodger Kamenetz

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ABSTRACT

Her Still Singing Limbs: A Collection of Poetry is a fragmented rumination on the intrinsic loneliness of the human condition. Using the Greek myth of Echo's destruction at her beloved Narcissus's hands as the foundation, these poems combine voyeuristic images of beauty and violence to explain why all poets write "songs of exquisite loneliness."

HER STILL SINGING LIMBS: A COLLECTION OF POETRY

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The Department of English

by
Anthony William Rintala
B.A., University of Southern Mississippi, 1997
August, 2002

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To my father who read "The Land of Counterpane" while I was wrapped in my own: this is all your fault.

To Kendra and Trey, my students and peers.

To my friends, who know your own names, and understand everything about me except the poetry.

To Manny, who is alone so that I never have to be. One of us is lost in Omelas, the other locked out; we'll decide who's who when we meet at the gate.

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Abstract

Her Still Singing Limbs: A Collection of Poetry is a fragmented rumination on the intrinsic loneliness of the human condition. Using the Greek myth of Echo's destruction at her beloved Narcissus's hands as the foundation, these poems combine voyeuristic images of beauty and violence to explain why all poets write "songs of exquisite loneliness."

Arthur Murray Crab

Beyond where this stretch of beach
is blanched and locked in headlights, the gulf
applauds with the shore in the surrounding night.
The beams scoop tunnels toward where the land collides
again with water pulsing unseen in the dark,
curling up to eclipse the shore, nuzzle
at the mirrored facets of reflective sand, and fall back.

From this division,
one shell jitters into the light. Rising and falling
on sharpened ballerina toes, the rounded, low crab dances
up-beach in the intersection of thrown headlights.
Illumination then bathes the man
as he steps into a slow minuet with the clawed dancer,
his bare feet compressing
the sand as they circle
each other like echoes.

Three pale faces blurred behind a windshield
watch the waltz. The woman laughs as her husband

pirouettes before the low white shell, setting it to swirl,
scuttle, feint, sidestep and snap.

Claws raise high to grasp
the man's shoulders and lead him away.

They move together like fire, throwing sparks
of sand up into a breeze that billows
and tears the grains into smoke. Wild shadows
flare from the legs of the dancers and escape
into the undulating abyss beyond.

The man dances, back turned to his family,
leaning down, body writhing
into the shadows to this new embrace.

The wife turns off the lights
but the night does not flood
fast enough over the shore.

Her children still see the straining mouth
and inhuman eyes of their father as he lifts
his torn heel from the single, shattered
claw stabbing up from the white sand.

Pitch beads of blood fall around it,
miniature oceans absorbing the light.

Her Still Singing Limbs

Fragments of echoes immured in the Earth

(rising in twists through the air and
foundering beneath waters pulled wild
by the perambulations of the moon)
cry out still, wailing to be heard.

Loneliness isn't a bloody business like birth;
it's the dry sundering of split wood,
reverberating with the fingerbone shatter of branches.
It is the gasp of an axe moving air
and the shriek it drives into the trunk.

Osiris only made fourteen walnut logs
planted down the Nile. Echo went farther.
She is every wall, crying out in tandem
with forlorn calls, resounding lonesome cries.
She is every flat surface that reflects.

She is in the shout of the box spring frame
and the ceiling shadows moved by passing headlights;

split so fine, she is the axe handle, too,
moaning with every lovely chop.

If we all cried out as one,
expelled the truth wedged so long in lungs,
and sang the ancient song first put to reed
by the nymph held down,
torn apart by loved hands,
the echoes that would come back
from man-made walls and heavens,
would shatter the eyes reflected in water..

Eyes Closed

Enclosed in layers of house
while the rain scrubs the outside naked
and entranced
in dark blankets I
close eyes listen
to the air shake itself clean seconds
after lightning flashes the world stark
beautiful nude female
flesh in the shower
I hear through cracked window
a small cry from the wetting woods
maybe a hedgehog drowning
in its caverns under pinestraw wiring or
a chick washed out of its nest
by the falling sheets
and flying down
tail raised
while she lathers
just feet away from me
water breaking on her

inside and out

she is only as real as the falling bird

outside fluttering weak kicking splashes

a place I kissed

with a sound like the bird

crushed to the ground

beneath these blankets

I can't believe in her

or the water falling

The Lizard

As he drove, the overhanging branches
tore the bright air into spokes thrown
spinning across the road, over the hood, to break
through the windshield where they collected
in the seat beside him, silent and warm as a body.

The wheels blurred, pulling the car through light
and shade, instant by instant. He rolled the dial
with his thumb, eliding bands of static,
moving through dead stations. The car filled
with the sound of water falling from leaves.

The lizard leaped out from the hood, unwrapped
in the air by the crush of air, and slapped against
the glass, struck by an eighty mile-per-hour palsy.
Its skin shone in the tree-stroked light, pale and wet
as a peeled grape, wild tail making faint patter
as it slid up the glass. Each foot lost hold in turn.

The trees collapsed behind and the sun fell

onto the car, tearing the shadows from its green
skin and lifting the lizard up into blazing light.

Nude Words (from a photograph)

She had waded to the waist in words
and was crawling into bed
when the flashbulb caught the ink
on her skin, flaring everything white--
white flesh, white walls, white linen--
only the faint tracery of shadows
writhed beneath her to supply definition.
Her vagina squints along the sharp
angles of bent legs doused in bad poetry.

It half-rhymes along the backs of calves
and a sloppy enjambment
pinches the finger thick tendon
where thigh ends and hair curls.

Whoever wrote her thought
she needed modifying:
adverbs set to shatter along
ankles and her heels were smeared
with stacks of adjectives,
each in turn wiped off by a licked thumb

and replaced by synonyms.

Her toes are splayed, stretching words
into individual syllables.

Her face is lost in shadow behind hair
poured like milk over her shoulders.

Though the flash pins her to the mattress
and the poem tangles her legs together,
unseen eyes draw her to the undifferentiated
smooth white where the far wall and the bed join.

Her crawl stamps knee-print haikus along the mattress,
shoulder blades threaten through taut skin,
and hipbones carve the words like an editor's pen.

Her movement is the critic;
one moment, frozen in this frame,
alters the poem as she shrugs
off the words and leaves them
drying on the sheets, out of context.

The photo is only of the poet's work.

She is the poem.

Quibron (500mg)

Days are packed in lots of thirty
high above the counter
in the latch locked cabinet
beside the fridge's
dusty moon mare
in child-proofed orange cylinders.

Pasted dot matrix label
suggests once a day
as symptoms persist.

Days sit moistening
in the hot grotto of a tongue,
dry swallow dragging
a taste of metal down the throat.

Nights were allergy free
while chemical flywheels deep
behind cortex spun, slipped gears.

Mg by mg, I am
dissipating,
like
air into standing water,
dispersing like
a wall collapsing into the sky
when the rising sun
caught
on its corners.

I am arming myself against a sea of troubles.
I am drowning in this armor.

The Ghost

Ruffled like a flag of surrender,
the white page lifts
from a stack of perfectly blank paper
and is drawn into the breathing
waves that crest through the window's screen.

In the air, it is put to dance,
to intersect dusty beams
which reflect from that fair blank,
to flash the unattended furniture
arranged quietly around the room
with seemingly random beacons.

Once the air loses its breath,
the page loses its drift and finds a tumble,
bowing out into a loop, stopping
in a snap, hovering, then floating down to land,
corners squared like a fitted sheet,
back on the stack it left.

Though the paper is now quiet in place,
the stack crisp and flat on all edges,
unseen movements still haunt the room.

Lost City: Landscape in Miniature

Somewhere, she snuggles
all faultine and fraulein
under her blanket of grass and stone.

Trellises trace blue and curve
along shoulder and breast
down to the soft valley below me.

I walk the silent land
of the sleeping city, leaving twilight
footprints across her moon-washed flesh.

She stirs and
her hair breaks
against the pillow,
a bay of sudden wet shadows.

Clambering up the slope of her hip,
I find myself high enough to look
down on her full sprawl

suburban limbs curling
from the body like galaxy whorls.

I blow whispers from this height
that run in echoes along shimmering flanks
tickling the city's skin
to giggle her into shaking awake

Light

Spotlights burnish the sky
caress its surface and come
together as fingers to pluck the moon.
Turning, they sweep the stars aside on their edge
like the curves of our hands brushing
along the silken smooth of blouses.

These gestures above our homes and heads
are unthinking, overwrought pantomimes
that pull us to the sides of roads,
through doorframes and under sky
and lift us by our chins to see
mechanical desire in simple movements.

Light peels the clinging atmosphere
away like silk to hold the moon

Lake Erie Blues

Painted in gray water light, Erie
is an unfiltered aquarium coated in quilts
of algae that pad the water, protecting it
from the slow drag of shadows
as the night rolls the light west.
One could almost step across the skin;
it seems no less solid than the shore.

When the day dies for good,
a light stabs out, stirring
the shadows to swirl
around the flashlight's blade
as it cuts a hole in Erie's flesh
and the dark drains in.

Manny lets the light rest still
in spots before he moves on
to let the radiance diffuse its way deeper.
He looks for whatever he happens to find,
and he's entranced by what flies from his hand.

The land isn't the land; the lake isn't the lake.

All that is, is the cone of light

jumping in unbounded night.

One end scoops a crescent

from the face of a half-remembered boy;

the other searches for a reflection.

Something Like Music

Left foot-- toes cramp-- cold on the lip
of the toilet, electric toothbrush
jackhammering molars, one hand on the green
handle the other on my spout guiding the sound
of static down to water, trying to catch
the echoes of the song

I was just singing

with the glass voice of a girl small
enough to get lost in my body. Each word is
rounded like the chimes of a clock pulling
at my chest, pulling me up out of piles
of sleep and sheets, and pulling my mouth
wide open to release

Clear throat and cough voice

into the bowl, bending over, alone
above the toilet, looking for something
special in the swirl as it falls through the floor

The Butterfly

Jet engines yawn with dry throats,
suck the sky in to gain height,
pull the ground aflutter,
lift each glittering wing up
from weeds like knives drawn,
and set them to rumbling around the cut
diamonds of the chain-link fence.

The butterflies rise, clamber over echoes,
lifting free of the flowered life,
the warm dirt and those who live in it.
They tumble up over the freeway
thundering with great armored trucks
that drag their thoraxes behind.
Flicking themselves free by measures,
their wings catch the sun and flash
everything with wet reflections.

The watery light diffuses in the air.
Some settle,

some are pulled down the concrete
in battering currents, winking out
into steely glints as the distance drowns.

One pair of wings wraps the air and
swings along like an ape in vines,
clawing higher into the thickening day.
Sunlight shines through the abstract
black sketching on each bladed wing,
casting the faintest shadow
on road, fence, and leaf alike,
like the indentation of handwriting
on the following page.

Flutterbye

Your car is a cigarette snuffing
against the underpass, glass blowing

to ash to hang in a flutter of colloidal light;
metal folds like a passed note

stolen away in a fist. And it's on fire,
lighting me where I stand

across the street, still raising my eyebrow
at our smiles crossed through your window.

There will be smoke soon,
and maybe noise will lift from the still colliding tangle

of glass, girl and steel, swelling out in a shimmer,
lifting great liquid wings into the trees.

The leaves will puncture
the iridescent skin, tearing it open

until the sound suspends the sky;
I drift and separate from the sidewalk
as its weight flushes downhill.
This moment will crack

when you kiss the glass
but now you are beautiful, hovering.

Scars

When the two-by-four nailed itself through my foot,
I was running a spiral in a South Houston junkyard,
jumping across the planks stitched along the
leaking contusions of sun-boiled trash bags.
The rucksack swinging from my hand sagged
with sifted fragments of imagined treasure.

I hugged that sack to my chest, my teeth biting
through the zipper as I skied on the concrete.
Marbles, dice, and board game tokens bounced
along my legs, and stuck in the blood congealed
to glue on the surface of the board.

I slide the mile home with my bare
foot burning on the summer surface, flip flop long lost.

Eight giant steps in that three foot clown shoe
pulled me over the lawn until I wedged and
jammed this uncrossed cross in the screen door;
the nail suddenly unzipped itself through bone.
The empty sack did not pillow the floor in the slightest.

Since then, other scars have been written across me:
chin, finger, chest, wrist. A knuckle doesn't fit
anymore. Ankles twist like summer taffy.
Each scar loops and jumps in a woman's handwriting,
curled lines left in flesh by the pads of her fingers.
I tell intricate lies to seduce her into writing more.

From the AWP Conference (March, 2002)

The EXIT sign flickers
with tantalizing neon porn lights.
Across the floor-- green and exploding
with golden leafy swirls, randomized chaos
in parallel lines—waft the gentle,
modulated tones of poetry.

The room is huge with nothing to sop up
the bouncing sounds of this rhythmic,
toneless voice armed with “penis” and “vagina;”
the scattered listeners, silent in their seats, do little
to absorb the poet’s words from bouncing from wall
to wall, all along the same damn chaos that runs
to each corner. The sign sizzles in the poet’s
pauses, popping like needles trapped
spinning in the dust of grooved jazz platters.

Beneath the sign, beyond the casino carpet,
behind the white door scuffed from rubber soles,
basted entrees, and sweat crushed into fingertip

swirls is a clatter of flatware
tumbling into a sink, and distant singing,
“Ay Yi Yi Yi.”
The full-throated call buffets its way
through the percussion of plastic trays
slamming together under the steaming froth of the sink.

The poet shuffles paper and thanks the front row,
lost in the darkness beyond the spotlight
that holds her in place. Her eyes follow the echoes
of her voice to the battered door lit by the EXIT
as glass makes music on an unseen floor
and someone sings, “Cunt!” in the kitchen.

Polite applause to follow.

Venusian

She is an alien landscape
 where he brings his mouth
down glistening curves

to shadowed valleys crushed
 with infinitesimal hairs
that shift with his breath.

Wind wipes across
 skin worked into burnished
whorls and calligraphy tracings

which crinkle in what light filters
 through the cotton sky draped
over us. It is easy to forget why

he came to her, pulled under
 sheets to an atmosphere
heated into mist, itself

pulled into tight spirals

by the subtle shifting of limbs.

It bites the tongue like a 9-volt.

She opens with tectonic speed.

Pink alluvial silting-- this

is where all rivers end and

all voyages wash up. A siren croons

under the sky, calling him

to a perilous berth on strange land.

irReflective

Whole photo albums of the stranger posing
with people I love – the pages snap
like blinds under my thumb –

Some enormous dunce
whose face is all sweaty cheek
eyes like marbles pressed in a ham
smiles, page after page,
with his arm around
my mother, bent with a courtly kiss
to my lover's nose.

They laugh , burrowing comfortable into his bulk.
In each frame, he does the strangest things
with his hands and never extends his neck

– he looks up, out, at me.
I keep meeting his eyes,
glassy with a momentary happiness,
thrilled by the camera's flash.

The man in the photos isn't the man who holds them.

Whatever lonely fear keeps shuffling these chemical images

is replaced in the bright flare by a lopsided smile.

The beard he pulls with his free hand is a ragged

mat of dark with scattered golden threads reflecting,

the patch of white under the chin

occluded by the weight of the face's shadow.

Expression

The hope rests in mimicking with words
what the doctor did with her hands,
each finger tipped with a stretched bubble curving
under the vanilla stretch of surgical gloves.

Laid bare from the waist up, hair spread
across my chest like press-dried butterfly wings, I
sweat imprints through the strip of paper on the table
which tore itself to tatters as I squirmed under her grip.

What the doctor set free ripped across my chest, attempting flight,
and burrowed itself into the potted, plastic ficus, battering
the Venetian blinds to ruffle like wings pulling at air.
Slats of light shuddered around the room, stricken for a moment.

The cyst, snapped open like a clutch purse clasp, scattered
slim copper coins which the doctor, sexless with my blood
on her gloves, collected to secret away in gauze pads.

The room stinks like the inside of my body.

“You get to play the home game,” she said as a nurse
pinned back her hair to start dabbing at the plant.
She shucked her gloves and jimmied on a new pair to pat my head.
“As long as the hole stays open, you can express yourself.”

I spent nights in a mirror trying to bleed myself as she did,
pulling poison out from under my skin onto white rags.
A doorknob of scar tissue finally twisted the wound shut
without my ever learning the cheat of her fingers.

Echo

In this empty place, sing
and let the echoes dance.

Our songs are songs
of exquisite loneliness.

Everything we breathe comes out
in a panicked hunt for ears,
reverberating across the rafters
dusty with clouds.

The roof almighty, we cry to you!
Throw back our sounds
for once in a voice not our own.

Sing of arms and a woman,
one drawing us from the other.

A chorus of newborns
sounds the void, bereft.

their songs are songs
of exquisite loneliness.

That sound of the first shout
echoes in our chests

we sing it amongst ourselves
but never speak; it is the scream
of waking up and the threat of sex.
This is all we have to talk about,
fully aware that the calls we loose
will never fill the pitted scar we share.

Our lives repeat the sound, repeat
the despair of cruel release.

Rubbing song against song
to recreate the heat
of the padded walls that held us,
silent save for the whispered drum
we kept rhythm with in the water
we first saw light move through.

Fill this empty place with noise
and let the echoes dance.

All songs are songs
of exquisite loneliness.

The Levee Cows

She lives on a street where
cows step horizontal to the road,
each cleaving inverted hearts
in the thick hummock bordering the River.

They moan in their chests and turn
their faces to the water beneath the earth
as it nuzzles at the yielding
surface of their world,
delicate as a curl of flesh,
wet with the rush and push,
yearning to yawn wide and
pull each kicking beast under.

At night with her window open,
they harmonize with the lowing
of the levee cows
as the ground beneath them
is licked free like beads of sweat
and swallowed to New Orleans.
Knees bite into her mattress

as he lowers himself to kissing,
one hand on her stomach
the other reaches for the wall
to keep from her from falling
out from under him.

Paternity Suit

Tailors have a way
of looking at a guy, like cops
at car wrecks waiting for the ambulance.
They chalk lines and talk
in gruff negatives, pulling and tucking
unsure how intact the body
is crammed in the wreckage.

When they are caught in mirrors,
moving behind a body,
they roll away from the reflection
like the moon compacting down
to the cruel sliver of a smile.

They hunch between legs, tug
the fabric from crotch, pat,
prod, think of the sort of stick
they would use if they could poke.

They are burial artists,
experts in fashionable rags,

sizing a cotton coffin
across the chest, snug in
the shoulders, everything else
hangs like billowing burial cloth.
The suit is a snare and the tie
is the pin that holds back the snap.

Wyrd

Somewhere there's a man posed
before a library shelf of blank headstones
waiting to chisel a check from me.

Somewhere there's a tailor
with needles in his teeth
and inched tape wrapped
around his fingers like brass knuckles.

Somewhere there's a bullet
with my name on it
and the knife that carved it there.

A man in an alley
and a woman at the end of an aisle,
each with thumbs hooked together
and tapping toes,
wonder what's taking me so long.

Tumors crowd together in an unpurchased
pack of Marlboros waiting

for the light to switch on,
and a heart attack is hiding in a sirloin
like plastic Baby Jesus crammed up the backside
of a Mardi Gras King Cake.

There are children swimming in my testicles--
packed and waiting for moving day--
tapping pencils idly to their chins
as they plan out Christmas lists
and recriminations.

Paperwork (Math and the Aftermath)

(Math, 9/11)

Torn up to the sky, white origami wings
lift on convection currents, spin above settling
dust like tenuous tea leaves that swirl
above sunken sediment.

Vital forms in triplicate swarm above Manhattan;
the carbon that separates them burns slowly
tugged from crushed outboxes and thrown
from windows, litters the easterly wind.

Flapping and following, the gravity folds them and they fold
themselves into a tight formation of paper airplanes that
bombards the streets of Brooklyn, falling past the crying pie-
eyes of grandfathers who run outside to protect their lawns as
the paper blizzards down, striking each home with simple
precision.

(Aftermath, 9/12)

Rakes bite down with the orderly teeth of combs
to gnaw lawns into straight lines,
shuffle paper and leaves into separate stacks.

Everything is filed at sidewalk edges,
spindled on the rakes.

When it rains tomorrow, signatures will bleed
out into the grass, effortlessly forgotten, leaving a stain.

Return To Cydonia

“He never left his tower the lab, the telescope,
just stared up at heaven and waited for a sign.”

-Amy Montz, “Doomsday Astronomer”

She has this idea of poets as astronomers,

their eyelashes as great blades

scything the sky, plucking

beauty from the emptiness.

“What are you thinking about?”

There was once a glowering face on Mars,

that too much squinting has shattered

to bare rock and drifting sand.

Cydonia is lifeless now,

its face stripped away

by infinitesimal razors.

The ground is and statues wasted

by the rotors of our eyes.

Mars, once cut with grand canals

that scrawled across its face in strange sigils--

bold liquid tattoos--

is now breathless and red-faced

hanging low in the sky.

The water dried into the land,
lifted into the air, and rusted it all the same.

“You never write about me”

The greatest fear I have is that I will look
at her too long and wear her away.

Manny's Final Transmission

Manny Carcano falls from space,
suspended between steel walls
papered in ink-thumbed poetry.

Everything is tearing
to ash from friction.

Incandescent, Manny tumbles
into the Earth's shadow.

His satellite throws
its own light as he skims
along the membrane of air
throwing off sparks
and the sound of static,
like wind shuffled pages,
drilling whispers into the walls.

He is in a still burning
cigarette end thrown from shore

into the moving nothingness
of the ocean at night,
not a thing in itself
but the whispering border
around everything else.

He stretches into a line
of light drawn between the
emptiness of the sky and
the emptiness of the water.
The light casts sound on the
unseen waves moving below.

It will stutter along,
broken and chewed
by the uneven teeth
of the unreflective crests,
until it reaches any sanctuary
shore offered.

“I am not dying.”

Vita

A university instructor, editor and writer during the day, Anthony William Rintala spends his nights delving into popular culture and hoping to discover how poetry can reconnect to the masses. The solution to this problem, once distilled, will be mass marketed in decorative containers, each emblazoned with his name.