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These poems explore the possibility of recovering irrational experience within a rational syntax. By exploring new systems of imagery and language, they attempt to sketch a lyric space the speaker herself does not always understand, but which the reader learns to navigate and create as a meaningful and consequential experience.

THE QUARRY

by

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Committee Chair

APPROVAL PAGE

This Thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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I

Glass-Bottomed Boat in a Dammed Lake

In the glass-bottomed boat
I do not look down to the village
staring from the lake's bed,
place where a river once stopped to grow.

 Slow as the blind come to love,
learning first an arm, hand, jaw,
the river learned to fill
the flood line, brim
to the schoolyard's bottom rung,
build force, spill across
the first step,
take the deer stand's planks, build
stillness, build intent,
hold a whole house,
cover the spires, the oak frames
not absorbing, but becoming lake.

 What is it
facing me, staring out
and into me,
asking that I stretch that deep, speak
from the part I'll never touch—

 Our blurs, from below, drift—clouds
the boy watched all day. He was standing
dreaming of the new farm.

Sundial

Late July, when without knowing, everything
knows the sun's position—

—not knows, receives:

without knowing, everything
receives the sun's position. You are here.
You are here.

On my back dash

a bottle sucked itself into itself
all month, orange cap tight, cut
brindled light. I was not that kind
of lonely.

I stopped my walk

for every tree down, the trunks' red
pushed out by termites into mounds
like anthills. Years now since the storm,
roots still poked through dry dirt
the same red as the trunk's pulp,
still hoisted pebbly soil over ragged holes.

Each tree lay in the same direction
and I could not stop staring.

Ode to the Man Who Invented the Wheel

You watched a girl at dusk
when your true sight failed,
when everything had no shadow:
she moved like water spilling,
mindless, wasteful grace.
You thought, I'll pin her down.
You later rolled your weight off hers
and thought of the sled
for slaughtered goats, drawn by goats
to the fire and spit.
You held a wine bowl,
rolled it in your hands,
watched as she woke
stretching, her bracelets
up her arm, then sliding down
to rest on the floor by her wrist.

You'd carved the disk,
roundness nothing new, but now
you took your spear and worked it at the center.
And carved another disk.
And worked its center.
Tell me how you knew,
for I have also felt the weight
of harvest, and the promise
of a body under mine,
but do not know how to read the signs
which are not signs, which are plain things
and do not seem to need improvement.

Fourth of July at Topsail Beach

When the pier breaks it makes new letters,
two stocky I's. We still hold hands,
the fireworks still ooh above. Our mothers
run from our towels and chairs,
sharp and lean as we've never seen them,
dive into the feeble surf
though the fallen people keep wading in, unhurt.
Before we're tucked in a huge white car
behind the dunes, we see their faces
light up again and again,
handsome as spilled oil,
dotted all around the pier's
two blunt halves. I don't want
a new place where the thing to say
isn't ooh. I don't want
to leave the bench where the sirens
bark like gulls and the man
with the cut-away face throws dimes
and pennies scattering. I've been stung
by a bee. I should have had stitches
but didn't. I know our mothers come back,
or don't. The insides
of the car are all one red,
and we're still holding hands, watching
what we can—the sky, always blooming.

We Keep Five Steps Ahead of the Weather

We keep five steps ahead of the weather.
We bury our names in the hail as clues,
scattering forked trees, the heavy sun, news
light as leaves. Rain quails. We pull together
from the glassy riptide's faultless tether,
suck out of fog, dodge the needled hay, lose
the firstborn, lose the twister's horn, subdue
what, in us, stirs the sands' storm. We measure

and step away. We become our own great
need. We become the birds circling above,
and the hounds that beg, Here, here. We migrate,
we are the hills, our bone veins bringers of
what kills, and of what heals. We are the bait
guts, the house, the fear, and we the doves.

“The Fire Won’t Burn Past the Mountains”

The night sky is the view behind closed eyes,
light through flesh.

That red torn range we know is stone
does not move. When we sweat,
the ash reveals our true flesh

and we marvel at our new
adaptability. We cough it,
we eat it, we call it

confidence, a word
as round as cantaloupe,
wet and safe in its gritty skin.

We come together, not thinking
how our moving speaks
of us, or of anything.

That line of red, eating, but fixed.
The naturalness of this.

The Slab is Hot Today

He doesn't know which to say,
rock or stone. Rock
an outcrop, echo
in a canyon's jaw,
not red, not black,
hawk's stop, cold claw.
Stone a home, how the world,
how the body hums alone.
Grave round and worn, known.

Heat from the slab,
heat from the sun. Heat
from fire—he can build a pit,
ringed with the head-sized chunks
that line the river. When it gets dark
they laugh and shout across
to each other. He'd rather
be the asteroid belt, always
running round its own whole orbit.

Recognition

My sister's newborn has blue eyes, mine
before mine changed.
His quicksilver body pooled in my arms.
I thought, He fit inside her. Each eyelid
a fishmouth. I thought, He sees me.

It's a dangerous path. Like lying flat
in a well-made canoe,
thinking I'm the lake's center,
a dark dot. Who sees my boat move?
I see only blue, no green-frayed
edge of branch-edge,
the summer tree line one long hourglass, tipped.
All curves bright, all still.

Then the shore, the sturdy pier,
the first tree in flame. The field the path leads to.
Looking up.

Sounds in a Drought

The geese sound
like reams of loose
paper from the sky, look like question
marks as they pull up so they can
rest on the lake, which I learn
is in trouble as we near. Not

that geese care if there's not
a full lake—though sound
carries less, it still carries, I learn
as they chatter the dock, which stands loose
from the water—the floating geese can
cluster beneath. Each step a question,

my breath a question,
the sun's not
bright enough, nothing can
overwhelm. The low sound
you made I can't forget, can't lose.
With these insistent geese, I learn

how they learn,
without questions,
how they lose
their breath unthinking, not
making sound
as sound is for us: theirs can

measure any space, and they can
always learn
from that sound,
which is why they have no use for questions.
I want to know, but do not
lose

a cry as generously as these geese, their loose
harsh call on the lake, which can,
being a body and home, not
help but bounce it back to them. I learn
how quietly the woods give back your name, question
how to make them sound.

The sound learned so that I cannot
unlearn it. If it is not a question,
what fills, what turns me loose?

Starling Flock at Twilight

The massing flock swept past my building's roof, the air just
turned from pink to gray. Then the branches broke up
lifting out into another hundred birds,
and the first swell swept back through the bare lot catching up
these scattered ones;
then they all rose,
held one shape,
and slid away again in thirds, perching back
in the tree tops, playing consolation.
I thought, soon it will be dark
and anyone could see me standing here.
I almost stepped back from the window
as I have a hundred times
hearing a shattering,
or tires scattering gravel,
or seeing my face take shape
in the glass. All night,
small displacements fill the thin oak,
fill the small dark gods
who watch, deciding.

The Woman I Watch While You Sleep

The woman in the yard next door pries tacks
from the arms and back of an antique chair.
She tears the cardboard, exposing heads
of matted hair, and works her hands in, tugging,
nodding as the fibers snap. Her razor
slices velvet. The seat unrolls thick tongues.
She jerks the canvas from the springs, firm coils
not removable with her tools. She lowers
one hand through a coil
carefully, like she doesn't want to let the metal
touch her arm—her hand on the ground
steadies her, steadies her view
as she peers through the chair's new eye.
Sweating now at dawn, she straightens, rests
on the chair's dark bones.
The yard is full of bones.
Now she stands, pulls a trash bag
from her back jeans' pocket—
she pulls and pulls, and the flat black
plastic flaps free, balloons.

Peppercorn

It's windy, yes, and cold on the cliff we
finally meet on, face to face—dense as teeth
the cloudbanks gather out above the past's
well-covered bed. We've climbed for days, surpassed
the first hope, the second, the line of hands
brought from the villages to shush us and
to pillage our rich myth, our sacraments—
we dodged them all, never looking, not once
at each other, not even when we heard
that first bed tug its covers, that reward
ahead, the crack of gulls dropping oysters,
the story's final, dramatic gesture
all ahead. The clouds chomp their course toward us,
underbellies darkening with purpose
now we've gained the edge. Why do we see our
own bodies everywhere? Up here, before
we lose nerve, we dig ourselves in, begin
the work we came for: I see you start to grin,
wanting the shell's first bite, you're for bitter,
we peck each other open, we savor.

Prayer at the Bar

Let me show no one
the bottleneck's shadow
beside her nose as she talks
on the patio about men
and how she hates men,
the shadow bobbing
to the side, near her ear.

Let me not say,
Move this way you look
like a dick is on your face.

Let me be fair.

And let my neck stretch just as thin,
let light outline me, let me be picked up
in someone's hand, let me
be drunk and then let
my shattering life begin.

II

The Quarry

On the ledge, I am the extraction
once quartz and gypsum
sparkling, hidden

Teeth, what gasp what held
breath you have, full-of-yourself

Each edge cuts you out a grin
weight with no core,
you'd not be in the way, disappear
with the sun full on

Drop, dread,
I will not make this small, I will not
give away the break
in the blue face staring all at once to hold me

Knowing When He Dives He Won't Come Up

When we went to the quarry I pretended not to be scared.
Some animal distrust of something huge
and silent.

In the drought, the quarry's white rock showed.
It looked like rock, what they'd all said,
and from high above I saw a puddle wink.
Now he says it's deep enough again,
and his body leans out—what is my fear? This water

can't grab hold with just its mass, like a rip tide,
quicksand if you trust it with your weight. This water
can't rise from the stone like the hidden
thought come true, showing me
again the hole I made.

It is so deep. We are
so high above the bed.
The water sits and waits, my face
twenty feet below
my face he springs, a light blur in

Dark Sky White Pier

Purple storm backing trees
lit in the day's last
rays sheltering the lake
this is how you thought it came
soft held breath
trees bright in the open
everything in the open
from the day whose face will
change if you look down
if you look away if
you watch it will
and the wind will not
feel anything like
when you dive from the ledge
to the water holding
the heat and the
water closes

Alex Wears Sunglasses

Wind hits then slides off
the building's glass rising
from the avenue

the men and women inside
wait for the ship
wait for its hustle

and dark guess its kegs
of fireworks girls
scream delighted at

honoring liberty
in small towns he brought
booms to he brought

risk to brought
green near white blooming out
from red to

brought smoke drifts from the center
light to he brought
this to the girls

staring like he never
knew their names
what else to bring

when they stick like leeches
they are not a cure

The Surgery

The surgeon pulls her skin back:
a large bird's spine is fit to hers,
under-feathers mashed in with her muscles.
Each hanger-sized wing pops neatly
from its red bed. Nurses pluck
the down that's stuck.

During the drought a cardinal hopped
an empty fountain's perimeter,
head cocked at the ledge.
I watched for an hour. Sometimes
she quickened, sometimes the wings
tapped her body—I thought she would fly out.

The girl who wasn't me said she
felt better now. Her neck
and shoulder pain was gone.
It must have been uncomfortable,
beak pressed against her skull
all night, the two wings
pressing at her ribs when she breathed.

III

The Night Bridge

The night bridge hunches up
from the river, toe-hung
from the cliffs like a bat.

Carefully the sky inverts
as I near the high point

where each move is called diminishment.
But I feel fine, I can hear

each wave's soft sounds. We sway above the inky sky,
the bat and I. We sink above the ground not

where it seemed. We call out.
We call the night a face.

—

Every view was cables,
cross and ripple,

but here at the top
every move leads away.

The waves aren't waves, they're bats that nest
in the girders and trusses, the bridge

hunched like a huge mother bat above: I'm the flat,
exact dot of her blindness.

This feeling I will never shake:
furred wings, miniature

faces brushing past each other
under me, hunting

and hunching under me.
When I leave
it will not be because I'm called.

At the Beach at Night

Watching the waves, or where
the waves would be,

or it's the sky that starts right

where you feel—no chance
to really see—the sea
get lighter, or the sky get lighter—

Look just there, right
where that sound, I

think I see a man
in the tide,
the sure shape

of one dark head straining
to drag ashore,
my eyes

movement against movement,
blank, falling back

there, blur,

in unseen waves—

Black of each
surge, point
where the sides curl in,

the real wave
eaten to an eye
closing when it's seen.

Aubade

I open the door
hold a shotgun steady
pump the barrel squeeze
the trigger sobbing God
I'm sorry every pellet
slowed in time
so I see each
traced path worry
the pellets' tight
mouths will fail
to open your chest
will lodge
halfway in
you'll look up at me
blood will shine your chest
you'll ask me Why
but the pellets bite
through your skin
covered in hair
now covered with your
steady hand you don't look at me
you look at your body
still your body
though I've opened it
sobs shake me so hard I wake
and find it is my heart
beating in my chest
and it is not summer
and you've put your
shirt back on

The Traveler

The neon pink sky falls into some mountains. Underfoot all sand shifts to the side, though the wild horses run past, parting river-like. They snort and never meet my eyes with theirs, small hot eyes set apart like fish. Streaks of blue and green flash from the foothills. Is there a tree? The land rises. There should be a tree, it could be behind me. At once the horses melt. One straggler thunders by, raises his violet tail. Are the clouds still humming? Neon heat. Where else have I heard that song?

Day I can't see coming,
Is the faint line man or fire?
Sharp mountain teeth.

Live Oak Growing in the Dunes

Be easy, oak in the wind.
The boat you watch floats near.
You were made for this, to bend,

though you're swept back, opened
by the force pitching him here.
But no, easy: forked by the wind

his small flame moves—an errand
called him out, not fear. His arms on the oars' arms steer.
They were made for this, they bend,

but how will you defend
your grappling roots when he gets here?
Is every branch in the wind

a stiff arm, will they offend
when he, in the grasping waves, appears?
But you were made to. Bend.

This squall is not the end,
it is the thought made clear
and is thought made to bend.
You break the wind, or break.

I Wear Your Face

Keep a loop where your Chevy fishtails
the gravel. Keep a loop where your Chevy
almost takes the turn before
the dust tucks down to repeat its slow bloom,
and your Chevy's back
by the house. Keep your face
taped to mine, my nose fit tight,
dust tucked down to repeat its bloom
beneath your nose. Keep watching you
through your face almost take
the turn each time the dust a loop
always tucking down, everything
going clear each time.
Keep watching you leave no tracks,
fishtail dust tucking down when you should
just turn, going clear through where
I keep my face behind yours.

Rare Rooster

His vain voice, very coyote,
cuts correct, covers the tracks,
tempts the two-ton truck to me,
mimics mayhem. Make each
echo easy, each vein
vest to ventral verify codes.
Cause and counter. Creep toward
the true town, melancholy
melody, that madman's ear.
He'd eat the eager, elegant void,
vast valley clean and verified,
a circular crest, tender cabin
tended by torchlight, by a mother trusting
her mouth to myth. Edged mile,
enigma, earn vast endless
voyages to the valley, calm vat,
crowd turning close to the chest,
a touch made to teach:
math's magnet is your entry, man,
electrified end to end, a vane.

I Walk Around with Impact Fresh in Me

On his bike on two wheels black
and slim the road is black and slick
with rain and new tar and the tires
whir it up in wings of mist
he rides down the hill I stand
right at the bottom of his head
two blocks from me a door-
knob eggshell waterdrop his head
so unhandled his strange body
angled out the knees aren't right
and the wheel is so close to
the curb as if trucks scream around
the block and as if we have bags
and bags of ice to unload as if men
with clubs clubbed as if the children
hid beneath the bags I think
it must be better going that way one
pebble at a slant I tell you sometimes
looking at his face I taste blood

Fate Comes and You Refuse to Run

Our car speeds around
the mountain's curve we pass
a man I see
he has a gun he aims
at us I crouch
He has a gun I scream
You nod and turn left
as the gunman shoots
two women in the face
now he stands on the corner
where we always stop for gas
and beer and I
am so scared you
become another man you stand
in line behind me gunshots
in the air outside your hands
around my waist my hands
on yours I don't see
him come in you
whisper something

IV

We Are Each Part of the Train

We are each part of the train
when the pistons and the throttle
we are each part of the train
when the boxcars of scrap metal

when the pistons and the throttle
where grooved iron flywheel tandem
when the boxcars of scrap metal
where the high, hurt sound

where grooved iron flywheel tandem
then the spreading field's pale body
where the high, hurt sound
then the mountain's chest pierced for us

then the spreading field's pale body
if the fast and if the true
then the mountain's chest pierced for us
if cold air, if bright

if the fast and if the true
if it stays, if or
if cold air, if bright
if I stand, if I

if it stays, if or
how the blood and all the organs
if I stand, if I
how the humming how an answer

how the blood and all the organs
beat, run
how the humming how an answer
beat, through

beat, run
we are each part of the train
beat, through
we are each part of the train

Trip to the Origin

While I wait on the curb, I picture the fir
I saw beside a small, ornamental pond,

one fir stood round by fog and six white pillars
topped with a black roof structure
with no floor, no bench, no cobbled path,

no fountain in the pond to show the tree
what face to make—

but here comes a hauler, its purple cab
with flamed streaks swinging through the curve all
wheels fine all wheels scream, bring wind, bring fear take
fear away my hair
just waving wildly.

The Night Watch

Your shape blooms on the porch slats,
and my small words expand above the pines

blocking the sky with childish glee—
slashed Orion splayed,

the whole dark East, though he will tighten,
focus later when we forget to watch,

like when I drove alone
and just could feel the night's black
was a field and not a lake.

The Horse

A hole takes up the horse's side,
wets its white hide red.
The horse's huge face
on the girl's knee. She's a stump
in the snowy field. He's a snow bank
whose heart exploded. The red
melts the white away.

How much field will he thaw to a slick?

She holds cloth to the wound.

—

When the horse starts to rise she's surprised
as the horse. His front legs scrabble,
his neck and head pump up and down,
strain at the ground, the trees,
until with a full-body quiver his hind legs
shoulder the bulk.

His blood still shrinks the snow where he lay.

Can he make the ice?
Clink of hoof over something stilled.
And will he melt through?

From the truck her brothers watch,
holding their saws and their steel.

Walk, she says, Come on, boy.

The First of Many Decisions

I wait with the dog by the bridge.
Crossing makes him nervous.
I have a poem
where I build a bridge myself. It ends,
“Now
bring me water.”

The dog stops. There’s another dog in the tall grass hunting.

The others in my poem
are hidden from me.
I’d like some place

to finish, but he barks
when anyone comes near.

You as Two Men in One Canoe

Two men in one canoe
paddle, each to his own pulse,
elbowing the slushy dawn.

They cut through fog.
Each holds half the night
in his mouth. One tastes

the hare still, one dwells
on the fur's soft give.
They scrape ashore,

hoist their craft overhead,
bear it high, water
rilling from the hull,

run through the brush
arms up, run
bow-boned as wolves,

run like light carves
trees thin, carves day
to a weapon's spring,

run full
of low knocks, peering
from the keel, run

sure as a man
who steadies the horizon
that bears his path—

I have gold,

I have guns with inlaid pearl.
I would learn your names.
I hear your drums all night.