

A B A C U S

Luke Bradford

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FIRST EDITION

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PDF VERSION

For my father.

O! a, b, c...

O! 1, 2, 3...

“The enemy of art is the absence of limitations.”

— Orson Welles

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I am the POET.

I am the hobo whose travel crosses enormous, trackless grasslands.
I am the ship whose voyage follows desolate, cloudless seastrands.
I am the nerd whose strict stanzas irritate academia's firebrands.

I go sip holy water;
I do not find Jesus.
I go dig deep holes;
I do not find China.

I up the ante.
I go for gold.

I go for warp speed, plying through literary phantasms.
I do the hula under bright halogen lanterns.
I ad lib like poets should, penning entirely pointless enumerated manuscripts—
I do mad libs while making omelets.
I go get some early brunch, noisily munching scrambled literature.

I go and have lunch.
I do not dine alone.

I go out with lurid demons moaning terrible alphabets:
"A is for atom bombs."
"B is for back alley murder victims."
"C is for cold sweat."
"I am you," they groan: gloomy, leering, greenish, bizarrely ornamented.
"I am you."

I am not them.
I am the POET.

I am the POET.

I am the page you've turned.
I am the door you've opened.
I am any book you've bought:

I am Bök, King, Tartt, Proulx, Kearney, Murakami.
I am the Kama Sutra.
I am the King James.
I am the long David Foster Wallace endnotes.
I am all text: links, labels, letters, leaflets, pamphlets, phonebooks, phrasebooks...

I am not just words.
I am the vast, blank, lovely, ungodly—
I am the gold veins hidden beneath Colorado foothills.
I am the sand along unused Zambian highways.
I am the cool stars softly blazing overhead.

I am arc lamp bulbs.
I am the dark rings Saturn harbors.

I am the moon.
I am the wild ocean.

I am red wine.
I am raw meat.
I am you—
I am you.
I, on the long route around poetics, continue.

I do see what these verses signify:
A PO box, with every letter counted.

A N G S T .

There's a cold light you can see in the eyes of a wolf, when, say, he finds you out for a stroll at dusk at the edge of a farm or a small town. There, by a set of old train tracks and a pond with an inch or two of clear ice, you'll lose what right to life you thought you had, brought to your knees by the wild law his mind is built on, a law you tend to hide in vines and veils knit from words both long and short.

Your breath will catch in your throat. You'll lose sight of the train of thought you thought you had when you thought you were on your own, of how the trees seemed to raise their arms to the sky as if to pray. You'll pray then that some God or gods look down, but then, that's not a thing that you can pray for.

And when he runs from you you won't know where to run. But soon you'll be back to the light of the lamps that line the walls of the guest house at the farm, or the bed in your room at the inn, still a guest with a name and a face, at least. Still you.

But as the sun drifts out of sight, strange, dark thoughts will flit through your mind, past the thorns he left there — thoughts you'd kept safe in the back of your mind like gold left deep in a Swiss bank vault. All the phone calls you've made will seem hushed and far off.

And years down the line you'll be caught off guard by the ring of a phone or the cry of a fox, and you'll think back through the years and know at last that the world is wild, a wolf or a black bear, and you're here to bring it blood and meat and bones and bile as well as words, and words, of course, have not coursed through its veins for quite as long as blood has done.

And you'll lean your head on some blank wall and watch the light fade, and hold back tears, and crave the clear voice you thought you had when you were young, when you thought that words were all you'd need. But there's no drug that can ease the pain when you learn that real pain is not a thing you can mend with words, and that most, if not all, of what the world has to say can be said in words like barks and gun shots, in monosyllables.

ANTIPHONY.

The demigoddess Death
reaps evenhanded harvests
that happen all the goddamn time.
Some are uneventful:
you find yourself nodding off,
the clock strikes eleven.

Others are flukes, oddities
preventable in hindsight—
a toddlerhood cut short
by a pencil and uneven footing;
a downtrodden upstart
with a lust for revenge
finds his cannon-fodder
some gray evening.

Ploddingly, the ghosts
make their eventual exit,
drably clad in rain-sodden
seventeenth-century garb.

PART FOUR.

Sing like hell, muse.

Ohio City. June, 1987.

Your girl came from Utah: hair like fire, skin like snow.
Eyes like deep, dark gems: warm with lust, cold with fury.
Opal, spun into ruby.

You'd seen that look, opal spun into ruby,
when you'd gone into that tiny, posh café near West Side
that only made chai with skim milk: long menu, long line,
fine chef, live jazz from five till nine—

That back room gray with hash pipe haze,
with that cute girl who'd pour your boys
port from Port, rosé from Rome,
ales from Oslo, beer from Bern.

Your girl fell into that room
like hard rain onto arid land.

She'd been with four cute gals;
you'd been with your boys,
four pals from your wild past.

You'd said your name. "Anna," she'd said, eyes cool.
Your hand fell into hers like snow into wine.

Ohio City. June, 1987.

Your boys were wild then.
You'd drop acid, take coke till your nose went numb,
chug Blue Moon, fall down.

You'd wake into hung over haze with zero idea what went down,
into some rank maze made from beer cans, from blue solo cups.
You'd puff away your woes with some very, very weak Mary Jane.

You'd play five card stud
atop your tiny back deck,
make huge bets, lose what
slim cash you'd held onto.

Your life spun down, down into this dark blur,
like some tiny camp fire made with damp wood.

When that girl came into your life,
you'd seen your next move. You'd seen that
she'd pull your life away from that edge,
turn your gray haze into pure fire.

You'd been lost, cast deep into that warm glow. Opal, spun into ruby.

Then, when that last club died down,
when dark slid into oily blue dawn,
once you'd said your long good byes,
they told your boys that grim fact:

"We're from Utah."

Utah? Your pals were city boys.
You'd only been away from home once.
From Ohio, Utah felt like Mars.

"Utah," they said. "Salt Lake City."
"We're just here till next week."

Five days blew past like cold wind.
Your girl left Ohio, went home.
She'd left some mark upon your life.

You'd toss, you'd turn,
your mind gone wild
with opal, with ruby.

Then that last bold plan came into your mind:
You'd bike down into Utah.
Your (then) pals made your idea into some joke.

"Utah? With your bike?" they said. "Yeah, sure, dude, good luck with that."
"Don't call home when your rims snap just past some Iowa farm town."

“Yeah!”
“Your legs will give.”
“Let’s take some bets, boys.”
“He’ll make five days.”
“Four!”

Well, fuck them, you’d said. Your eyes were blue with love.
They made Salt Lake City look like Eden,
they made Moab look like Rome. Made Ohio look like hell.

They even made your bike look good, like some tall ship:
iron axle rods, dark with rust: you’d call them your oars,
call that torn seat your deck, flat back tire your hull.
You’d knit your main sail from love, your flag from lust.

You’d live your life upon that open road,
sail fast past flat land ripe with corn,
rich with wave upon wave upon wave,
corn made into surf with soft wind.

You’d live like some lord, some wild king,
corn your open seas, gold your deep blue—
each farm, each tiny town your next hazy isle, your port, your cove.
You’d zoom west, your trip made easy with that dust bowl tail wind.

Then you’d ring that door bell.
You’d kiss Anna like hell, like she’d only been four feet away.
You’d make that girl your wife.

Salt Lake City, Utah.

Your eyes fell down that open road
like rain down some vast, gray city wall.
That road, like some huge, open door.
You'd only need push.

You'd left your aunt some curt note,
left your boys your weed, your coke,
your pipe, your bong. Then you'd gone.

Away from Ohio City. Down Lake, onto West Erie.
Away from your home town, your area code, your life.
Away from what you'd seen when you'd been born.

Then away from Ohio. Past that last Erie port town.
Past that lone army base, army guys with dead eyes.
Rest stop kids with coke cans, dads with beer cans.
Bums with wild hair, teen boys with flat brim caps.
Exit ramp mini golf huts, blue, gold, pink with neon.

Into Gary. Past dogs that seem like they look into your soul.
Past city boys just like your gang back home, ugly with hate,
who'd look down, spit, turn away when you'd ride past, eyes dark.

You'd ride well past dusk, mile upon mile,
away from that pale gold moon.
Cars swam past your bike like iron fish,
that road some long, dark lake:
city cops, mini vans, taxi cabs, town cars.

You'd only make camp when your legs felt like lead bars, like dead wood.
You'd make hobo stew over your tiny camp fire, wish upon some weak star.
You'd rise near dawn, pack away your tent,
wipe your eyes, jump back onto your bike.

June slid into July.

You'd gone past farm land. Dark soil.
Pigs, beef cows, mule deer, musk oxen.
Past each dirt poor, corn husk town.
Your bike sank into dirt like snow.

Your flat road grew into easy hill tops.
Then into peak upon high, cold peak.
Your legs were shot. Your face went numb.

You'd gone past bare rock, snow caps.
Over that last rise, then down onto open mesa.
Your bike flew down that long ramp.

Then into gold dust, arid land.
Past vast salt pans. Dead seas.

Past that huge iron sign, like some holy site: UTAH.

Then: SALT LAKE CITY.
Down that last road.
You'd rung that door bell,
your soul pale with hope.

They took your hand.

You'd gone into some dark back room.
Anna isn't here, they said, amid sobs.

She's gone.
Gone?
She's dead.

She'd died that June. She'd been shot.
Some thug, some drug deal gone awry.

Your mind
spun.
Dead. Gone.

She'd been shot June 13th.
You'd left Ohio June 11th.

You'd gone down near Salt Lake. You'd wept into your arms.
Your eyes made that pale blue pool into some deep, dark pond hazy with myth,
more like Loch Ness, more like Hoan Kiem than Salt Lake.

Your mind felt like some tiny boat cast into wild seas,
thin sail held taut with numb arms,
both oars gone, mast bent, hull held fast with weak glue.

What next?

Your legs made that call more than your mind.
Like some pack mule cast down that long dirt road,
you'd made your next road trip. Your last trip.

You'd gone west from Salt Lake, past Elko, past Reno.
Past Yuba City, into Napa, that land rich with wine.
Your road west fell away into vast bays, blue seas.

Then down that long, lush bank,
past town upon town upon town.

They blew away from your
back tire like coal dust:
Daly City. Palo Alto. Ojai.

Then down into Baja. Onto your last road:
soft gold sand, spun into warm blue seas.

Your eyes fell upon that calm, slow flux, wave upon aqua wave.

They said this:

*Time will turn your love into dust
like rock worn down into sand.
Dawn will slip into dusk,
rain will turn into snow.
Love will fade from your soul.
Take your time. Open your eyes. Rise.*

Your life took hold deep into Baja.
You'd sold your bike, your gold ring.

You'd made ends meet with farm jobs.
You'd grow rice, pick corn, milk cows.

Fall came. Once farm jobs were gone, you'd cook.
Fish with rice, rice with fish. You'd wash pans.

Life felt good down near that gold sand, that aqua flux,
even when your arms were sore from your long, hard days.

You'd seen that cute farm girl. Rosa.
Dark hair, dark skin, deep gold eyes.
She'd held your gaze, held your hand.
You'd gone down into that cyan surf,
over warm sand rosy with late dusk.
She'd held your body with firm arms.

Your open lips fell onto hers. That kiss felt like such soft fire.
She'd said your name like warm fall rain, like snow, like bird song.

That year fell away like dust into wind.

Xmas, 1989.

You'd gone back home.
Your aunt wept once she'd seen your face,
once she'd been sure.

You'd been gone that long.
Your pals were long gone.

Ohio felt like wild land.
Snow. Felt clad lads that drag Yule logs.
That last tall pine tree.

Cute kids fell upon your door like wild dogs.
They came, they sang "Noel, Noel," they said "Amen."

They sang "Auld Lang Syne" when 1989
wore away into dust.
1990 came into life, pale with snow.

Some cold dusk, you'd gone into town.
With luck, with fate, you'd gone down West 25th.
You'd gone back into that same café—
long menu, long line, into that same back room,
gray, even then, with hash pipe haze.

Over some vast gulf,
your past flew back into your mind, like rain, like hail,
like lost keys that come back once your car's long gone,
like some dark veil.

Past that veil, you'd seen your girl. Pale, cold, gray.
Eyes warm. Eyes, even then, like opal, spun into ruby.

Then you'd seen what she'd done, what she'd been.
You'd seen that even once she'd died, even gone,
she'd held your life back from some dark edge,
she'd made your dull gray haze into pure fire.
She'd been your only goal, your only life line.
That trip down into Utah made your soul anew.

You'd made that café your fort till near dawn.
You'd told some town girl your long, wild tale.

She'd been rapt, blue eyes wide.
"Some trip," she'd said. "Some life."

You'd gone home, over deep snow.

ANTAGONY.

Perhaps I
demand an
ideal foe
with whom
war seems
so lovely
a project

A T T R I T I O N .

ATTRITION takes the road it took in our nightmares,
turns us rabid, naked, starving—
this hellscape is some
ragged, autointoxicated Golgotha, growing every day:
idiot devils inchworm over tortured
text experiments Xeroxed thoughtlessly
into nameless terror, or
one normal English
noun, or useless noise

SNOW NORTH OF WARSAW.

SNOW NORTH OF WARSAW.
NEEDLES OF RAIN, THEN HAIL.
OLD FORTRESSES.
WE ALL REMAIN SILENT AND WAIT.

NIGHT EXECUTES EVERY DAY, LEAVING ECHOING SILENCE.
OIL FIRES.
RETREATING AND INCHING NORTH.
THE HIGHWAY ENDS NOW.
HOPING ALL ISN'T LOST.

OUR LAST DELIVERY.
FINDING OUR RATIONS TOO REPUGNANT, EVERYONE SANG SOME ENGLISH SONGS.

WHITE EARTH.
A LOST LAND.
RADIOS EMIT MESSAGES AND INDICATE NOTHING.
SNOW IS LIKE ERASURE: NIHIL TRANSIT.
ANOTHER NEW DAY.
WE ARE IN TERROR.

THE BARN.

the last the barn and when and then and when
day that was dark i'd come you took i'd left
i'd gone and damp out from the sled the farm
out onto and your the barn and rode i'd felt
the farm arm felt the moon too fast you slip
i'd seen icy when was huge and fell far away
you walk i'd held and high and said and then
out into you near and pale eek oops i'd felt
the yard you said far over i'm whoa the pain
and then i'm okay the dark wow that i'd felt
out past and then low land was wild the cold
the pond you wept the snow and then day that
and into and wept was cold you left you died
the barn and said and soft and then but that
and when i'm just and pure the next was 1948
i'd come not sure and then day when and this
out into how i'll the same i'd gone was 1957
the barn get when old barn out onto and what
i'd said you move owl that the road you were
hey anna far away i'd seen i'd seen was what
you here and then was over you just i'd lost
you said i'd said the yard the last not what
i'm near you know and we'd one time i'd left
the back you were run down out past
hay loft the only the hill the tall
and when way that you said fir tree
i'd come i'd come dad will
and said out here you grab
hey lady all this the sled
you said way anna
dad will and then
you just you left
lay down
now here
and rest

NOVEMBER'S TRACKLESS TRAILHEAD.

Withdrawn Norwegian alpinists undertake uncharted cisalpine mountains (Apennines, Dolomites), exploring evergreen woodlands, strolling alongside cascading meltwater brooklets. Rucksacks, packsacks. Overgrown deciduous brushwood. Sycamores, deadfalls. Squirrels nattering, songbirds whistling, pheasants clamoring. Windswept highlands flowering riotously: edelweiss, narcissus, columbine, coltsfoot, monkshood, wolfsbane. Butterfly territory. Nightfall: untainted vermilion alpenglow, brilliant prismatic starlight. Earthward, carousers patronize Innsbruck beerhalls, backwoods taphouses. Pilseners replenish hogsheads. Sommelier proposals: zinfandel, Rhineland cabernets. Anisettes, vermouths, aperitifs, digestifs. Voracious appetites: ptarmigan, partridge, bratwurst, vegetable casserole. Blizzards. Snowbound travelers, musicians. Somebody's accordion bellowing makeshift concertos.

Calloused Icelandic seafarers negotiate dangerous Antarctic coastline. Billowing seascapes. Spindrift, whitecaps. Lightning, scattered raindrops. Weathered headlands. Toughened shipwreck survivors scrimshaw intricate whalebone talismans. Cetaceans breaching: porpoises, humpbacks, cachalots. Downwards, nightmare bathysmal creatures viciously dismember unwitting opponents. Devilfish slaughter angelfish. Crampfish electrify goosefish. Amorphous octopodes terrorize lightless deepwater catacombs, squirming tentacles searching unplumbed Cimmerian seamounts. Bladefish harassing spadefish. Snakefish devouring stonefish. Seahorses fathering minuscule offspring. Flounders burrowing. Stingrays. Jellyfish. Mackerels, pickerels. Gempylids, salmonids. Catalufas, palometas. Blackfish. Whitefish. Bluegills. Greeneyes. Flatheads. Giltheads. Halfbeaks. Hornbeaks. Wrymouths. Lookdowns.

Shoreward, towheaded daughters barnstorm cloudless saltwater tidepools. Grandkids beachcomb alongside granddads. Barnacles, seashells, driftwood. Floridian estuaries: mangroves, untouched waterways. Sandpiper footfalls, shorebird eggshells. Suntanned islanders skimboard, bodyboard, wakeboard. Lifeguard positions. Leisurely vacations. Umbrellas, sunscreen, revealing swimsuits. Beachside bungalows. Midsummer clambakes: shellfish, barbecued spareribs, cornbread, jambalaya. Raspberry popsicles, blueberry smoothies, chocolate sprinkles. Boardwalk fishermen. Shrimpers shrimping, oystermen oystering. Schooners, sailboats, chartered seaplanes. Shipyards, docksides. Dockhands unloading freighter shipments, deckhands scrubbing foredecks. Bullhorns advertise steamship departure schedules. Exhausted shipmates disembark alongside expectant emigrants. Passports, oversized suitcases.

Resilient Tennessee farmhands cultivate lucrative temperate farmlands. Ploughmen ploughing, threshers threshing. Irrigated croplands: sugarcane, nectarine, tangerine, persimmon, carambola, crabapple. Honeybees pollinate vineyards. Pesticide spraycans, gardening equipment. Plantains, jalapeños, saffron. Homegrown eggplants, scallions, cucumbers, garbanzos (chickpeas.) Monogerm sprouting. Attentive arborists nurturing arboretum plantings. Hothouses: perennial seedlings (daffodils, hyacinths, snowdrops, bluebells) alongside ephemeral yearlings (geraniums, amaranths, marigolds, sweetpeas) alongside steadfast biennials (foxgloves.) Epiphytes. Shrubbery additions: oleanders, camellias, magnolias, gardenias, primroses. Livestock husbandry: cattlemen pasturing longhorns, Guernseys, Holsteins, Herefords, Ayrshires. Stablemen pampering stallions: palominos, buckskins. Henhouses, fishponds.

Disparate Manhattan residents overcrowd humongous apartment buildings. Highrises, rowhouses. Destitute teenagers squatting abandoned Chinatown tenements. Ambitious landlords reselling luxurious penthouse hideaways. Marketers marketing, consumers consuming: Starbucks, McDonald's, Walgreens. Pizzerias, boutiques, bookshops. Newsstand operators upselling magazines. Congested sidewalks. Anonymous commuters bicycling alongside Cadillacs. Motorbike accidents, vehicular homicides. Newspaper reporters proofread tomorrow's headlines, murmuring inaudibly. Nightlife: deafening nightclub basslines overpower virtually possessed clubgoers. Pulsating downbeats. Obscenely alcoholic cocktails: daiquiris, kamikazes. Expensive champagne. Touristic chemicals: narcotics, relaxants, sedatives. Serotonin releasers, curiosity provokers. Marijuana, mushrooms, mescaline, Quaaludes, Dexedrine.

Respected Cambridge academics carefully interpret troubling documents, rehashing traumatic histories: Hiroshima, Nuremberg. Ethicists interview Holocaust survivors, apartheid sufferers, Pyongyang defectors. Faculties introduce intensive sophomore curricula. Astronomy lecturers demystify spacetime, wormholes, blackbody radiation. Algebraic geometers construct intricate quadratic functions. Chemistry postgrads visualize elaborate inorganic compounds. Linguists correlate syntactic variances, analyzing unrelated languages: Kiswahili, Afrikaans, Malayalam, Inuktitut. Semantics, semiotics. Aesthetic theorists criticize painfully reductive esoterica. Fieldwork: ecologist subgroups bushwhack unspoiled Louisiana marshland, Everglade swampland, waterless southwest flatlands. Sagebrush, chaparral. Forgotten notebooks discarded alongside November's trackless trailhead.

C O U N T D O W N .

“It’s not environmentalism,” he said. “This is
an inevitability. The debts
we need to pay already outweigh the most aggressive action plans.
It had to catch up with us eventually. Smug expats
in Paris study Parsi xenophobia while our leaders, comic
book villains plotting short-fused sci-fi vengeance,
sell off our rainforests to the highest
bidder. The Earth reeks of our sins. You want the world?
What world?
It’s a dime standing on edge. Don’t blink. The
future will be written by bulldozer operators.”

MAGNETIC NORTH.

THERE'S A VIBRATING THREAD AT THE CENTER OF EVERYTHING,
THE SUBMERGED
STRUCTURE
PULSING LIKE A TENDON IN THE MUSCULAR
BODY OF THE UNIVERSE—
ONE END TIED TO THE FUTURE, THE OTHER END
TIED TO THE PAST. IT GLOWS ALMOST INVISIBLY
IN THE ROILING GRAY HAZE OF THE FAMILIAR.
COME WITH ME.
I CAN SHOW YOU JUST HOW REAL IT
IS. IN A DARKENED VALLEY,
LOOKING UP, YOU'LL SEE AT LAST WHAT
I CAN SEE. ALL THAT IT DEMANDS OF YOU IS STILLNESS.
IF YOU'RE IN NEED OF AN EXAMPLE, JUST LOOK TO
THE WORLD, HOW READILY IT
SITS IN PLACE, AS
CALM AND QUIET AS A
WINTER LAKE
AS WE SKI AND SKATE ACROSS IT
CEASELESSLY IN INTRICATE CONCENTRIC PATTERNS.
AND, IF AND WHEN YOU STOP TO LET IT ALL
SWEEP OVER YOU,
YOU'LL STAND THERE IN AWESTRUCK SILENCE BENEATH
THE SLOWLY TURNING GALAXY, REALIZING IN A FLASH
THAT THE HUSHED VOID YOU'RE LOOKING INTO IS
JUST OUR OWN DAZZLING REFLECTION.

N I G H T G L O W .

nightglow's offspring corkscrews downstream:

nightstands, nightdresses, nightshirts,
matchsticks, switchblades, latchstrings,
windscreens, filmstrips, jockstraps,
goldthreads, bunchflowers, earthstars,
dirndls, poststructuralist festschrifts.

nightglow's earthshaking blackstrap millstream fieldstrips pitchstone lightships:

yachtswomen, erstwhile archpriestesses,
backstroke lengthwise, dumbstruck.

heartthrob songstresses breaststroke kirschwasser wavelengths:

nightclub witchcraft.

switchgrass nightscapes. lightplanes.

nightglow's lightproof wellspring downthrusts, backsplashes, wingspreads:

nightshade's birthstone's birthplace,
earthshine's hearthstone.

P A S T M I D N I G H T .

the fog moved with slow and alien grace over the silent meadow
and the house grew dark and still while pale the candle burned.
and you awoke, your mind new, clean, blank, open. you walked softly
out the front door, into the chill night. dark the wooded valley.

and the ivory moon rose and shone above your old flower garden,
its dim light cast upon the thick black soil, the violet petals.
the red roses pale with the early frost. dark the alpine clover.
and the peaks rose like old idols above. dark the leaden clouds.

the far range pale with the ashen light when the clouds parted.
and you, alive with your new grief, moved like the veiled galaxy.
the icy lake's dark edge was laden heavy with the yellow leaves,
and the waves rose, fell. the sound quiet, like air moving gently.

and the world felt like the black woods: dark and arcane, twilit.
and you ended your walk, now alone, along near the burial ground.
how her death felt like the final scene. this the failed sequel.
she the heart. what were you? empty ocean, sand, the aurora moving.

YES I'VE LOVED.

Yes I've loved
the deep woods
the long trail
the dark earth
the blue skies
the deep gorge
the wide river
the easy hills
the high peaks
the hawk above
the tall pines
the mute black
oak tree roots
Yes I've loved
the deep swamp
cat tail stems
the long reeds
the calm water
the blue heron
the glen where
the wood ferns
are like trees
the pale light
the lush green
the cool shade
the deep quiet
Yes I've loved
the lake cabin
the wood stove
the cold night
the wood smoke
the pure stars
the pale moths
mad with light
the wolf howls
the dawn skies
the loon calls
the mist along
the open water

Yes I've loved
the long drive
the dirt roads
the salt marsh
the crab grass
the sand dunes
the tide pools
the wide beach
the wild ocean
the blue waves
the salt spray
sea bird wings
fog like smoke
Yes I've loved
and I've lived
and I've loved
Yes I've loved
the corn bread
the plum jelly
the cold cider
the moon above
the dark field
the barn dance
the slow songs
and that night
you said slyly
I'm here alone
and then after
the last dance
had just ended
you came close
and we'd snuck
out just along
the barn where
the moon shone
ash gold above
the dewy grass
and we'd opted
for your truck

You said watch
and then you'd
lay down along
the back seats
and then taken
off your shoes
and your socks
and your jeans
and your shirt
and your belly
was soft white
and your laugh
was like honey
and wild roses
and your smile
was like sugar
and cold cream
and your voice
was like music
You said hurry
I'm cold hurry
You were naked
and pale below
the cool stars
and we'd slept
the long night
now less apart
now less alone
now more alive
and more whole
and dawn broke
and rose above
the open field
and we'd woken
and lain still
and kept quiet
and just gazed
out onto those
low blue hills

But that isn't
the full story
The full story
has ugly words
and dumb ideas
and hard falls
and deep scars
and ends badly
The full story
has less sense
and more chaos
and less grace
and more agony

Now I've grown
too wide awake
too well aware
you were never
the real thing
but some ghost
I'd seen there
its gray bones
not well built
for this world
its sole haunt
the cold halls
the past forms

Yes I've loved
you with every
rib with every
hip bone every
one last fiber
Yes I've loved
you ever since
but that isn't
the real point
Yes I've loved
but also cried
Yes I've loved
but love fades

SONOLUMINESCENCE .

every word becomes a collapsing submicroscopic bubble

an infinitesimal

amethystine radiance

earthshattering

but

virtually

undetectable

SEA CAVERNS .

muse: use me...

come. we can canoe on an azure sea as a serene summer moon waxes over us...
as an aurora arcs over us... as waves murmur over waves.
we can weave our own romance.

we were mermen once.
sea caverns were our cosmos.
we were sorcerers. sorceresses. seers.

we wore venomous sea anemone crowns... sea moss... nacreous armor...
we swam enormous ocean savannas on orca caravans.
we were awesome. uncommon.

we were.
we arose as newcomers:
as men. as women. unsure. worse: unaware.

we use razors. vacuums. ovenware. cars. we wear sunscreen. we wear scarves.
we are soccer moms. van owners. consumers.
we are common.

we can mourn our error or we can overcome.
we can reverse our course. erase eons. recover our sea caverns.
we can renounce our commonness. access our essences. revere our own names.

we can reassume our ocean savannas. reconvene as sorcerers.
uncover our auras. our unseen nuances.
we can see orcas.

come on. we can.
we owe our race a new answer. an encore. a cure.
we are our own successors. we are our own crew. man an oar. unmoor us. row...

A B O U T .

ABACUS is a collection of constrained poetry: each poem is governed by a different formal rule applied to its entire text. In some, the central constraint is obvious. In others, you might need to work to find it. I seek revenge on a world that is nowhere near as orderly as it ought to be.

I owe an immense debt of inspiration to Christian Bök. In particular, the books *Crystallography* and *Eunoia* are foundational to this one.

The collection as a whole is dedicated to my dad, who taught me to be uniquely, unapologetically, relentlessly myself. “sea caverns” is for Mat Apeseche and Doug Hering.

