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BURNING THE CHERRY TREES (POETRY COLLECTION)

BY

AMELIA CHANTAL SORENSEN

BA, Binghamton University, 2012

THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts in English
in the Graduate School of
Binghamton University
State University of New York
2014

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Abstract

This work is a collection of forty-five (45) poems written and edited throughout the author's time at Binghamton University. Combining strong images with experiments in form, *Burning the Cherry Trees* is a multi-faceted collection about achieving renewal through the loss and destruction inherent to change.

This work is humbly dedicated to my thesis advisor and “soul-mate in the Arts”, Dr. Gayle Whittier, and also to great friend and fellow artist, Cecil Lee Jordan. Without the advice and support of these individuals in particular, I would certainly not have been able to complete this work.

Dirty Kitchen
(For Cecil)

*What the Hell is stuck to my sock?
Condensed milk,
Coconut.*

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Aesthetic Statement

Even as a creative writing major, I hadn't anticipated that poetry would be an integral part of my master's thesis. Perhaps part of human nature is to resist what comes naturally. Despite my desire and ability to write stories and my affinity for photography, it has been the powerful, succinct verses of poetry that have attracted me the longest. To be able to say I have a collection of poems after so many years of courting the craft is glorious.

Burning the Cherry Trees is a collection of forty-five poems, many of which represent a Western evolution of Japanese poetic aesthetics. The main themes in *Burning the Cherry Trees* (Love, Loneliness, Beauty, and Sadness) have been tamed through poetics at one time or another across various cultures, and I feel the most important poetic tradition is not one of nationality or school, but something much more universal. As a result of this belief, the poetry in this collection is hard to categorize due to its loyalty to multiple influences. As an example, I find myself frequently drawn to the Romantic idea of Beauty's relation to ordinary, ugly things. While I am certainly not the only poet who has tangled with this theme, on an aesthetic level I am keenly aware that it would make many of the classic Japanese poets I emulate laugh out loud. Even the very idea of the personified concept, like Beauty with a capital B, is not present in the classical Japanese poetic tradition as it is in the English poetic tradition. While the task of attempting to ensure a harmonious marriage between influences can occasionally prove tricky, I have found that there is an effortlessness in poetry that I attribute to revelation. In this sense,

the poet is a kind of seer. Once she realizes and accepts that, she cannot turn from her task- which is, like many great things in life, both liberating and terrifying.

As artists, I believe that most of us strive to respect the traditions which precede us. Though I am no exception, I am not concerned with following convention for its own sake. I write two-page poems and two-line poems. Sometimes I use punctuation intentionally and other times I refuse it altogether, depending on what the poem has to say. Deviation from convention is a kind of destruction, and this collection is chiefly about finding renewal in the wake of change and destruction. As a human being, there are many different ways I process change and loss. From the thin balm of religion to the unreliable embrace of love, I've explored many remedies to the existential problem of impermanence. Each poem I write contains some sort of answer for me, and if the true tradition of the poet is universal in the way I believe it is, then maybe my answers have some significance outside of my own experience. I share these poems in the hope that they might resonate.

Burning the Cherry Trees

The Movers Have Come (3 Main St.)

The thought of your bed
No longer in your small, hand-built home
Arrests me, as I consider
How non-existent you'll be
To the next family who will live there.

Your bed was not a place of death.
It was a place of rest and repose.
A place where you would lie awake
Each Sunday morning,
Newspaper in hand, gentle and impatient,
Awaiting your breakfast
Of plain cereal and dry toast.

This bed was not like that other one
In the room with the barred windows
On the third floor of the facility on
Hospital Hill. That room,
Already re-occupied with
Another sad and hopeless body,
Is not a home. Despite its name
That was never its function.

We think of "home" in the long-term.
Capitalist fingers count browned dollars
To be surrendered to mortgage companies or
Landlords. But people move and die, and
We leave these precious structures as the
Only things we will ever truly share with
People who will always remain guests.

I imagine new people in your home.
They are seated in the kitchen,
Butter on their toast and sugar in their cereal,
Their bodies refilling
The spaces you left behind.

The Heap

From a young age
other people had discarded
their junk onto me –
Old tires, used toothbrushes,
car bumpers, burnt pots and pans,
even tiny silver gum wrappers
that stuck to the sweat
on the back of my neck.

By the time I was fourteen
I carried a landfill on my
shoulders. I lugged the load
from class to class. At night,
I tried to fit it into my bed,
lying awake under its gravity.

At nineteen
the sharp bits had become
overgrown with scar tissue.
The heap was mostly invisible now.
It seemed lighter, though I felt
a new jealousy towards people
who seemed happy.
I began to share
loose bits of junk with others.

In my twenty-second year
I was shown a mirror
for the first time. Running
my fingers over the
bumps and ruts, I asked the
old gentleman holding it
if this was normal. He smiled and I
saw the smooth and even scars
on his face.

He gave me a book called “Recovery:
How to Remove the Junk
From Under Our Skin”.
The first piece I removed,
a disposable razor, just made me
feel sad. The second piece was an
empty pen, and I felt nauseous.
When I removed the fish hook from
my heart, I thought I'd never stop
crying, and I knew I had to continue.

One by one I cut out
most of the pieces of junk that had
for so long been grown into me.
I'm afraid to touch the deepest ones.
I await another with
kind eyes and smooth scars
to help remove what's left.

Woodbone

A friend tells me
that on magic mushrooms
to exhale smoke is to breathe fractals.
How we love the Truth
of patterns and circles!

Tree rings bear the record
of triumphs and traumas.
My dentist brings up my X-rays
and tells me my teeth look “cloudy”.
Her words are delicate, they
hold the hand of my emotions,
but these are old scars.
Offended by her gentleness, I say,
“I don’t recall hitting my head.”

I wonder if it is true
that George Washington's dentures
were made from wood?
I imagine the woodgrain,
each ring a record of regeneration.
I picture General Washington
chattering those dentures
on a cold day,
Feeling the odd, clairvoyant whisper
Of deforestation yet to come.

GUTS: A Manifesto

Progeny!
O! Human hope!
The orgastic future!
How vicariously we live,
Another ring in the ancestral tree.

When the old Doctor
Shines up her crystal ball and
Shakes a mystical, manicured
Finger at me, the all-powerful
Hoodoo juju of Asklepios
Foretells the possibility
Of my eternal death.

No passionate farmer
Here to sow among
Dry hills of blighted grain.
Hewn together with scars
And fat,
This land is rough,
Though there is refuge
In these barren hips
Of Coatlicue.
I turn my own soil.

A poly-cystic beast,
I roar and bare
My fangs!
I shudder.
I laugh, I scream,
I dream of the kill.
Oh, yes! I am still
Very much alive.

If I Lived in the Wild

If I lived in the wild
I would live along Scouten Hill
With the hundreds of baby pines
As they struggle to grow
In the shadows of their forebearers.
Hidden among the hearty lace of green ferns,
The uprooted - the fallen -
Create caves for squirrels, rabbits, me.

If I lived in the wild
I would eat only what grew around me
Or what I could kill with these soft two hands.
I would accept the role of omnivore
With a certain harmony and
Always afford my prey
The luxury of respect.

If I lived in the wild
I would still forage for purpose.
Idle time is the womb of philosophy.
I would live the myth of solitude and
Abide the delusion of freedom
From duty and want,
Reliant on my well of inner-faith.

If I lived in the wild
I would dream of captivity.

Solitary

I sleep for 12 hours
And wake exhausted.
I go to work, return home,
Sleep again. This time
I dream you touch
The small of my back with your
Dirty fingers. It is enough
To keep the exhaustion away
For a while.

Like the waters of baptism,
I let my dreams of your
Naked body wash briefly
Over my mind for the last time.
I burn my photo of you
And cross myself with the ashes.

O Lord of Hosts!
Let me now be a dab of Gilead's Balm
On a finger of the Hand of God.

Author, Please

Author, please
Don't kill off my favorite character.
Don't make her suffer for you.

Author, please
Stop writing open-ended stories.
I already know what those are like,
I've been around for a while.

Author, please
Stop inviting me into your warm house
In the dead of winter.
Stop smiling at me like that.

Author, please
Don't lock the door behind me so fast.
Don't look me in the eyes.

Don't loosen your belt so quickly
Don't touch me like that
Don't push me down
Don't watch me so ravenously
Consume every single inch
Until at last
I yell
Stop.

Author,
Please.

You Steel Yourself for the News

Any day now.
Practice control
And mythical composure.
Imagine the drip
Of the vowels and the lilt
Of consonants
In the phrase,
“She’s passed away.”
The words wear their own mask.

Under your medulla oblongata
You sail sans-compass
Through the cycles told to you
By the smiley face clock in the lobby
Before a man with a clipboard
Walks up to you
And tells you
His secret.

“You’re So Smart!”

They tell me,
Often, about myself
And sing the praises
Of my brain.

What powerful mind
Indeed, that drags
From thought to
Rapid thought!
Ghost threads revealed.
I can’t turn
Meaning off.

Cry “Relief!”
Yet who can soothe?
The leash slips
From my hands-

Cerberus is loosed!

Belief

God moves in mysterious ways.
He sometimes communicates through an infrared space heater at 2:30 AM.
When you ask why people are cruel
The answer comes swiftly,
"So you'll notice them."
The heater turns off on its own.

Delicacy

The Nutcracker Suite
on TV in December.
It is cold but
there is no snow.
Dancers spin and fly from
toe to toe. Even
men's sinewy muscles
marry Precision and Beauty.

I could never
hold a crayon in my hand
without breaking it.

Romantics

Distant cousin talks of *Twilight*

'Silly' I think

As night descends

I weep for fallen Capulets

5:50 a.m.

Alarm clocks

Echo the cry of waking,

Old covenant of love and work.

Arise!

Build the bridge from sleep to eloquence!

White Honda

I stare back

Thunder frightens a passing dog

Hearing the yelp
You look away

During this drought

I think,
"I want Love
to pour from my eyes
and drip from my fingertips
like steady rain,"
even as I know
it cannot rain forever.

Winter

I only appreciate
the natural geometry of snowflakes
before they melt against my windshield
like a reminder.

Understanding Art

Roped-off exhibit:

Ugly abstract sculpture?

Piece of the World Trade Center.

Sapient Silk

Thick, soft hair!

The fine surgery
of winding it
between our fingers.

I

So timid and
Separate from you

This body
Will shrink
When you
Push in

Despite desire
For unity

Insect

In my bed
the touch of a small, black ant
on the delicate translucent skin
of my forearm reminds me,
“I can feel.”

Variation of a Sermon (Pet Ownership)

To own a dark wardrobe
And love a blonde dog
Is to know futility

But how I laugh
When those same yellow strands
Decorate the black socks of door-to-door salesmen

To that which I love and hate
This dog hair
Clings equally

This Pessimism

Is a fear of the future
based on the past?

Move forward
into the Chaos
of the unknown;

do not taint
perfect uncertainty
with imperfect doubt.

Green Velvet

You warned me before saying
that hopelessness is the natural state of things.

Doing anything repeatedly
expecting a new result
is called insanity. I am okay
with being crazy.
I believe in chaos,
The Great Anything!

Do not fear: the unknown is exactly like the here and now!
Release your fearful foresight
and watch closely. Look! The world burns just for you!

Expanded Iris

At an old friend's wedding
I lie in a field of irises
genetically-modified to smell like grapes.
I wonder what it's like
to be loved by someone.

Irises look best in the rain,
not the sharp relief of summer sun.
Crop them out of the photos.
Use them to sweep up the tears
of the bridesmaids, middle-aged
and stupid with fear.

I want to see the fragrant cornea
swallow the foolish bee who
endlessly seeks
the stuff of honey.

I am a confused winter bee.
Daylight warms cool skin.

Relentless

The Stone Man's feet are heavy.
He walks on in spite of it.
His senses press him forward.
Green sunrise over purple waters,
The skyline calls to him.
No Gatsbian light.
In solitude he plods on: "We Are, We Are,
We Are."
A magnificent bird
With feathers made of glass
Alights on his shoulder,
Shits, and leaves.

Vestigial

We learn in science class
About why we have tailbones
That ache and pinch when we sit.
What would we do if we still had
Limb-gripping,
Happiness-wagging,
Ecstasy-curling
Tails?

There are times I miss my tail.

Growing

Let the blackberries die on the thorny vine!
Wizened by the scorching sun,
let them return to the Earth.
May our bones be heaped together as a monument,
bathed for brief season under August moon.

That's Me in the Corner

Last year I had visions
Of pious conviction.
I would never again
Question God.

This year I will not write about
Good Friday. I've picked the steak
From between my teeth,
I've got nothing to say.

Chameleon Study

A chameleon is always
regarded with suspicion.
Proficiency in fluidity
is unacceptable!

Trained to crave integrity
and coherence, will she
perish to the myth of
purity?

Happy Madman

I need you
to want me.
I know you
own and desire
nothing.

Go ahead!
Trample through my garden.
Let your heretic prayers
fall from the pockets of
your worn-out jeans.

I marvel over
what will grow here next year.

Empty

Two things can spell salvation
For an empty vessel.
The first is exceptional beauty.
The second is the distinction of antiquity.

I am no Grecian urn.

I clutch a plastic water bottle.

'78 Chevy Nova (In Praise of a Junker)

The sun has started its descent
We won't have to stay here much longer

I can already hear our Chariot
Coming up the steep dirt road

The small block engine
Carries me home
Asleep in its arms

Cemetery

How strange to appreciate
The lushness of the grass
As I walk among the dead

Hardy Azalea

Both sunburnt and drowned
Can she recover
To bloom again next spring?

Idol

so many depend
upon

the red wheel
barrow

that they've forgotten
to

feed the damn
chickens.

Hi-C

Early spring

Light glints

Steady red drip

Broken soda machine

Loving Gaze (Triumph)

Salvation Army
Porcelain doll, though battered,
Smiles eternally.

I too have found love before death.

Church

Everyone is sick
Stay away from me
Buzzing fly

Michitsuna no Haha

As I read your words

Survived so long

I grieve for you

Who is long-dead

For Yosano Akiko

Forgotten amidst
the natural shock of war,
I remember you,
pacifist female poet,
cursed by the timing of death.

For Fumiko Enchi (ナゲキ *nageki*)

In English to grieve
Means to be heavy

I do not grieve in my native tongue

Far from being weighted
I throw this energy around

Low Man

(For Dr. Church, teacher & scholar)

Swallowed!
Hook, line,
And sinker.

I cannot admit

I have been naïve;
I have wasted time.

A suspicious gift of love
Is the only thing
I am able to give.

Futurospect in Retrospect (Fortune Cookies)

(For Tore, brother & friend)

Back when I believed
In the idea of a Christian God,
You told me you were worried
About going to Hell when you died.

Quickly
And assuredly
I said

“When you show genuine concern about your deeds
there should be little cause for moral worry.”

Back when you were happy
About where you were in life,
I told you I was worried
About all I lacked at 23.

Slowly
Like God
You said

“What we long for distracts us
from the importance of its pursuit.”

Female Wisdom

(For Gayle)

You advised,
“Never let another person determine
where you ought to live.”

Too much trust
can put you up in a mansion
infested with fleas.

Love (Departure)

The people we love the most
Are those we never tell.

As I lament
The things we will not do together
I feel Beauty between us
As a child.