THE ACROBATIC COMPANY OF THE INVISIBLE

POEMS BY GEORGE LOONEY
in memory of my parents and my brother
Also by George Looney

Poetry

*Birds of Sympathy: Correspondences* (with Douglas Smith) (2023)
*Ode to the Earth in Translation* (2021)
*Hermits in Our Own Flesh: The Epistles of an Anonymous Monk* (2016)
*Meditations Before the Windows Fail* (2015)
*Structures the Wind Sings Through* (2014)
*Monks Beginning to Waltz* (2012)
*A Short Bestiary of Love and Madness* (2011)
*Open Between Us* (2010)
*The Precarious Rhetoric of Angels* (2005)
*Attendant Ghosts* (2000)
*Animals Housed in the Pleasure of Flesh* (1995)

Fiction

*The Visibility of Things Long Submerged* (2023)
*The Worst May Be Over* (2020)
*Report from a Place of Burning* (2018)
*Hymn of Ash* (2008)
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Some of the poems in this collection first appeared in the magazines cited, often in earlier versions:

*Albatross*: “Palimpsest Vespers” and “Early Light in Erie”  
*Ambit (England)*: “Tattoo of a Road Runner”  
*Book of Matches*: “Despite Heraclitus”  
*Cimarron Review*: “The Romans Made Gods of Their Ancestors”  
*Cloudbank*: “The Hip Bones of a Woman as Runes”  
*Concho River Review*: “Studio Musician with Trembling Hands and Maker’s on His Breath”  
*Crab Orchard Review*: “Psalms on Sheet Metal with Margaritas”  
*Dispatches* (online): “Hummingbird and Window,” “To Die in Erie, Pennsylvania,” and “Before All Hell Breaks Loose”  
*Flying South*: “Wayward Guardian Angels” and “Rituals in Lingerie and Insomnia”  
*The Gettysburg Review*: “After the Carnival Closes Down”  
*Ilanot Review*: “Make It New, He Said”  
*Louisiana Literature*: “What Stone’s on Hand”  
*Nimrod International Journal*: “On the Eaves of the House Next Door”  
*Paterson Literary Review*: “Last Words to My Father”  
*Prairie Schooner*: “Swear Not by the Moon, th’ Inconstant Moon”  
*Prism Review*: “A Glissando on the Quietest Instrument,” “The Carcass of What Was,” and “Almost a Sonnet on a Train to Points West”  
*Raritan*: “A Study in the Opacity of Memory and Lingerie,” “Leaving a Place of Smoke and Dire Prophesies,” and “Stories of Blue Herons in Winter”  
*RCC MUSE Literary Journal*: “The Singing of Accidental Larks”  
*Slant*: “With Walt Whitman in a Couple of Hotel Rooms”
Willows Wept Review: “The Music Sparrows Add”
Voices Israel: “The Bestowing of Grace in Perry Square” and “Soundtrack for Mystery in a Field of Muddy Angels”

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These may be
the dead, the sick, those gone into rage

and madness, gone bad, but they’re our dead
and our sick, and we will slake their lips
with our very hearts if we must, and we must.

—William Matthews
The Bestowing of Grace in Perry Square

This could be the origin of pointillism,
this gazebo fractured by what light can do

left to its own devices. Even grackles
hop different in this light, stippled,

the misbegotten purple sheen of
their mercurial necks slipping from dull

to brilliant again and again. Everything
bejeweled this morning, as if remembered.

After all, memory bestows grace
the way this speckling of light

baptizes the gazebo and the grass
and the birds in the grass into a living psalm,

praise what everything was always about.
A Glissando on the Quietest Instrument

The mystical curve and angle of the bare shoulder of a woman asleep at four in the morning.

The light that gives this pale amalgam of flesh and bone its allure comes from outside,

from what remains of a moon through where the curtains don’t touch. The nearby, dimmer glow from

the streetlamp hums what could be mistaken for a lullaby in a foreign tongue. You’d swear it is

her shoulders themselves that are glowing, and this isn’t a lullaby but a classic blues riff. Loss, you’d say,

is a single malt elixir that goes down so smooth what it leaves in passing isn’t so much a throat

as a glissando played on the quietest instrument imaginable. Maybe this woman’s bare shoulder

illumined by a four-in-the-morning moon could be the perfect answer for any sorrow you’d sing.
Palimpsest Vespers

Wrens wring dirges out of a sky where nothing musical lasts for long, their innumerable bodies brittle notes,

embellishment for some sorrow we cannot bear. Such lift and flurry of feathers and grace is almost enough
to convince someone heading home in this bird-infested dusk to start to dance. Say it’s a woman.

Say a lover she left years ago has died and she is remembering a night when, naked and damp in bed,

they listened to the blessed varieties of evening birdsong, those winged vespers with furious hearts, and tried
to mimic each in turn between bouts of laughter and kisses. Say nothing for her since has matched

the music they made as his fingers slipped inside her and his mouth found hers again and the bird cries

continued out in the evening as if in accompaniment. Say the past is nothing if not a soundtrack for loss.
The Lyrical Prophesies of a Spanish Guitar

Late November. The bare limbs of trees
        want to deny
the scuttled urgency of clouds

that scurry and seem to compose ballads
        an old man plays,
remembering the nearly forgotten

scents of a woman who would sing damp
        beside him in bed,
the strumming of an out-of-tune Spanish guitar

a sad backdrop after love. Nothing
        can explain the harsh
unforgiving style of this fog, how,

despite it being no more than a dampness
        in what is only
the cool of an autumn morning,

it’s as impatient as something more
        solid, say this
woman in earth-tones with a son in tow

who can’t be more than seven, his frantic
        hand collapsed inside
hers, larger and more insistent. It’s almost
as if her hand's a Spanish ballad and his
the repeated phrase,
a delicate, familial theme. Missing

in his are the variations, which always
and only come
with time. Or is that come as time?

The morning fog takes on the images of
their passing through it
so that, for a frenzied instant, their being

in a rush hangs in a series of interlocked
and vague tropes
of her body that are shivered through

again and again by the irregular form
of the reluctant boy
enslaved to this headlong scurry of flesh

and fallen cloud. There's music in this fog,
though it's not
the lyrical prophesies of a Spanish guitar

in tune and strummed by a lover who knows
the sturdy instrument
like the inflections of his own body

but the hollow sounds of some weathered wind
instrument, a music
made by someone's shopworn breath forced
into the confines of a columned space and released
in fingered patterns.
The music you’d hear standing in front of

Hopper’s *Hotel by a Railroad*. Outside
it might be
starting to snow. Here there’s only

the indignation of late afternoon
light filtered by
residue that leaves a dour patina

on the sills of windows that can’t
be opened.
The forgetfulness of how the woman

in the slip curls into the inevitability
of her body
imbues the austere room with a scent,

maybe one the man wants to recall
through the stink
and nervous ruin of his cigarette.

Any music left between them—these
figures of lamentation
posed in this regret of a rented room,

one looking down at the pages
of a book she has
read enough to turn the words
into notes she hums lackadaisically
and the other
looking out at tracks that could be

staves for a music that could get fog
up and dancing—
must be an almost jaunty dirge

all about time and how to remember
any detail ends up
elevating loss to the level of the sacred.

Which is what the Spanish guitar,
played by a lover
to the beloved while, outside,

everything’s offered a kind of redemption
by the laying on
of a discordant fog, claims for us all,

even if the guitar’s out of tune
and played poorly,
a music to forgive everyone who listens.
The Music Sparrows Add

for Mark Doty

The oldest arrogance is to think
knowing makes anything
better. To let the dead
have a say

in what music the leaves dance
an elegant tarantella to
with sparrows on the edge
of the rain-soaked feeder

is to give in
to cliché. It was dark
when the rain started, the moon
new, no light

coming through the clouds, or from under,
power out for blocks.
Nothing to spark drops
into anything else. This can’t be

all there is. To whistle
the tune rain and leaves conspired
to fill the dark with
now, in this light

filled with the subtle
flitting hues of sparrows,
is to remember
and celebrate. To dance,

following the lead of leaves,
is one way to forgive
all arrogance. Don't
think. Remember

the music sparrows add
to the verdant fervor
of these fragrant and wind-jostled
leaves. Experience

is the sound within
every body. To hear it,
listen with the faith
that lets sparrows leap into air.