Disconnect

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DISCONNECT
by
Peter Hogan

A Thesis
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts, Creative Writing

Major: Poetry

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Abstract

My thesis manuscript is a collection of lyrical, neo-confessional poems entitled Disconnect. The collection centers on themes of connection and disconnection, the ways in which the world is both singular and multiple. The speaker in these poems explores not only relationships, but his own relationship with relationships and how that has affected the perception of himself. The manuscript relates these themes through the dynamics of a speaker’s romantic and familial relationships, as well as intentional reflection on the maturation process. Some lesser themes in the collection include social masculinity conceptions and the idea of persistent work towards a living wage.
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Three Theses for the Emptiness in a Gut

1. *Pangea*

Our island
behemoth our eyes
immense blue our
eyes belonged
to mosquito dragonfly
and what would become
robin blue jay warble
tectonic crash mountain
crumble rift this floating
sphere spits and howls
molten rock we learn
how one became many
and still the spaces
that grow between us

2. *The Book of Genesis*

we as man as woman
we as enchanted
and blanketed in ivy
pomegranate sunflower
willow making
in the yard and then
life as a closing gate
they built a home eve
had a bunch of kids adam
a closet of ties they slept
in separate rooms woke
early and forget a kiss
on the cheek goodbye
this work again again
again fleeting

3. *Split Cell Theory*

our universe cell
creates cell first
nucleus then what is
not nucleus splitting
there was one cell
then there were two
it is inherent to be
broken is inherent
to ignore our oneness
A Conversation with My Mother about Work

Son,
you can’t imagine the things you’ll take
on the chin because you love someone
and someone loves you. I’ve cleaned
cubicles at night, scrubbed staplers
and dusted screens and vacuumed the brillo
office building carpet. I was a steakhouse
waitress. Bought a bowtie, but
the dress shirt was your father’s.
Filled crystal glasses and bread
baskets and butter plates because your brother and you
needed new cleats. Your father
had a taste for non-store-brand-fancy
ice cream. So the gilded wristwatches
and sequined necklaces named my smile
warm and that meant the lights
stayed on. Sometimes, they asked for me
at the hostess stand. I was already home.
I had to teach the next morning, but not before
I toasted your frozen waffle breakfast, packed your
lunch-pail with a love note,
You better be in bed by the time I get home tonight.
Make good decisions.
I love you.

Mom,
yes I’ve graded
those papers. I’m waiting	
tables tonight. I just started
another book and sketched
a new poem. How did you make
it look so easy? Late at night, your
cooking oil and bleach perfume
hovering over the twin-beds,
the after-breeze of your kiss
on my cheek when I’d wake
to you singing from the tub.
You knew I was listening.
I didn’t know that was enough.
My friends are engaged
and having kids and I can’t
fall in love unless it feels
like work. Does that mean I’m working for the wrong reasons or that I’m not working enough? Can you buy me a suit? Is that office you cleaned still hiring? Where were you working when you first met dad? What kind of job gives you someone to come home to?
Pick-Up Game

Our night orchestrated
gymnasium woodgrain,

bar-conversation as pick-n-roll.
Dancefloor as in top-of-the-key

and I meet you there, martini glass
rim lipstick. Flash neon strobe flash X

like cross stich on lower back, upper thigh. I
need just a scrimmage of skin. A practice drill

and you practicing posting up
to me, our hips too, like an X. We

box out into streetlights and hardwood
asphalt. Stumble home, stumble corners

of sheets out from under the bed, our mouths
O. This is not love but a body as reminder.

I want to call you midnight
tennis-shoe-squeak, breath

swish against my neck. Call you
small power forward, center in the low post.

a rattle of rims if we hang on long enough.
After, call you baby as in under my arm,

as in tracing the hair on my chest.
Call you practice as in whoever-is-next.
Board Drill

On the football field, I am a boy crashing against a mountain and being pushed back, except the mountain is a man who is the trill of steel whistle, is coliseum bull except muddled fescue beneath his hoof. It’s not easy being young and a big-fella, so maybe out here a purpose for the cannonball in my gut. I know why he wants to bridge his nose, crack my sternum and bury me in a coffin of clotted dirt, grass clippings. If I blink he’ll press his cleat against my neck. Out here men are measured by the space they consume.

What good is another big-dude lying flat, while the other hoisted above the heads of boys, who pat boys on the back, whisper of thick mustaches and swelling shoulders. He wants this. I want this too. I pray this moment a breath, then straight through him, the other side unscathed, maybe him too, but that’s not how things are done out here.

A big-fella should be able to toss mountains like crumbs, clear a space to let others pass but also, know what he wants and know it’s good to be big enough to take it. I’m not talking about football but like how my tank is never quite topped off. Who among us really knows what they want? Who among us doesn’t try taking everything? I pace the breath of a man crashed against me now. I count if he blinks, know he sweats, know I sweat too. Out here I learn a step in becoming a man. Either he moves or I do.
A Good Offensive Lineman Never Washes His Gloves

The line of scrimmage is a trench.

A leathered pigskin digs his chin from mine.

He’s huffing and gnarling and baby-ram-bucking.

My eyes are locked, a rifle oil-slicked. Fire ready.

He’s not wearing gloves. His hands are milk.

My stench-scabbed knuckles stir and trigger to his neck.

I grate his calf and buckle his knees.

When he blinks, I smother the vinegar of my glove between his mask and mouth.

These are my filthy fingers and my blooded spit.

Let them shake his ground, cement a not-even-close-boy epitaph where he lays.

May he remember my cleat as blade-tip-to-cheek.

May he whimper from that mud and get a good look at my back.

If he gets in my way again, I’ll make his ribcage a windchime.

His heart, another story from deep-in-the-shit.

Get over it.
The truth is
love has
always been
my favorite
part of being
alive I’m
being melodramatic
but so was that
warmness
the first time
a girl leaned over
and kissed me
on the cheek
like I wasn’t
just another
body in this world
My most important
days have been
spent holding
someone but
that’s only
because when I’m
alone
I name myself
shattered pieces I
never ask myself
why I’m sick
of ignoring
the habit
Did You Get My Message?

I was in the middle of comparing your eyes
closing to a sunset-blink across the horizon

when the phone cut out. I’ve been trying
to get a hold of you all night. I’m sorry

for the voicemails, but I found your hair
on my pillow. That’s a sign, right?

Maybe you’d feel the same way
if you hear me say it, but the signal dropped

so I cusped skyscraper windows
with plunger cups. I found

a candy wrapper on the roof.
On the back, I scribbled moving on
doesn’t feel like moving
without you. I twined

the note to a rooftop pigeon’s foot, but
in case that didn’t work, I wandered

the fields in search of retired crop-duster pilots
keen to curling in clouds. None would let me

stand on the wings with my phone
to the sky, so I stole a rocket. I constellated

myself burning sun. I stuck my
phone out the window and stretched arms

Orion towards satellites.
The static cleared.

Everyone has the same advice on breaking up.
*Fill the days enough to ignore the pain*, but

what about the nights
when even my dreams are heavy

with the home I thought we’d make.
That’s not easy advice to take.

You broke me.

Come fix me.

Please call me back.
Packing

You wouldn’t believe the boxes at the new house. Coffee pots, bunt pans, pastel plated casserole dishes I’ve had since your mother was born. There’s a whole trunk full of frames and pictures. I can’t find them now. You should’ve seen your grandfather unhinge our family portrait off the wall. You remember that cemetery. The maples like robin wings. Reds and yellows, maybe some still green at that point. My clothes are in the strangest of places. Blouses on the kitchen table, linen pants draping bed-skirts, my shoes in the sunroom. I wake up early just to find a damn outfit in time for church. Even then someone’s always tucking my tag in.

My mind can’t be relied on. I don’t drive anymore. One of the worst things you can become in this life is a burden.

I’m not sure I picked the right paint for the walls. The shade is something like honey-milk or eggshell heron? Did I tell you about St. Anthony in the front yard? That statue leaning into the walnut where my hand swayed against your back. You swinging for branch-leaves and crashing down. I caught you. The trunk’s grown around St. Anthony, tiny roots filling the slate’s cracks and garden ivy gowning across his toes. I don’t think it’ll ever budge. I like knowing
it’s staying. I can find it.

Lately, my mind is a withering reminder of what life isn’t going to let me take when I die. I can’t live long enough to forget your name or this picture of us at the old house. You bouncing on my knee. Your mouth young pearls in an oyster. My hand on your back. I didn’t pack this one in a box. I wasn’t sure I’d see it again.
Empty Orchestra

Children shouldn’t sing karaoke. Age is a brass saxophone drone, shuffling our feet down the sidewalk portions of our days that don’t feel like living. Routine is how a soul begins to die, but what does a child know of that music? Eventually, a body rewards itself a space to feel invincible, even if it’s only as wide as a song.

When we’re singing, we are all children in the sense there’s hope these stones on our backs become clouds, these branches, playgrounds again, the things we’ve broken, glued back together, but a child’s soul is not bruised enough for karaoke.

We have tattoos of bicycles on our necks.

We all wish our first love never left.

Our fingernails grit scraps of bill receipts.

We do not need a screen to remember the words. Our eyes are racing down a hill. We open our arms like a prayer.

This song is a dedication to how fast we once were. It is a rare thing to spotlight the moment a body remakes itself.
That kind of stage means nothing
to a child. What are they nostalgic for?
Do they really know why we stand and clap?
Male-Pattern Baldness

1. Servants of the king
tasked with mining hay
for beetles, crouching
under calves at dawn
for piss are asked to take
a vow of silence. They are
asked to ignore his whispers
before bed as they lather
his scalp with lotion
they’ve made. They are asked
to forget the king prays
to wake much thicker than before.

2. As a baby, I slept with my fingers laced between my hairs.
My mother knows I’m tired when I reach for the top of my head.
I once loved a girl only to trace her curls between the spaces of my fingers.
I was sure it was more than this.
I fall asleep with my fingers wrapped in an empty pillowcase
I find strings of my hair in my hat every day.
I haven’t prayed in so long.

3. Historically, rich men
clicked their heels on town’s
cobbled streets, straighten
their backs to bounce sunlight
off gilded buttons, and knew
it was a good thing to wear a wig
in public. A wig plucked
for ticks and powdered
by candlelight. In the morning,
a wig stitched to thinning tops
like a tower and it was a good thing,
the way a wig became a wing
and caught wind of people
staring, like to be rich
is to be thick in hair.

4.
A good man is rich.

I was proud to be the first of my friends to buy a razor.

A good man is sure of himself.

I was sure I’d always have my hair to distract me when I’m alone.

A good man is a full head of hair, and I’ve lost most of mine.

I spend my time tugging at my beard.

It feels like a wig.

5.
The bald eagle should not
be a national bird. This is still
my personification. Like how
today, crowds flock to parks, fanny-packs
fumbling through the woods, peaking
up through branches
for a snapshot of a bird
who if he ever flaked his feathered
white crown and went bald,
he’d be renamed vulture, cast
out desert scavenger
on the highway roadside,
and from the blur
the children in the backseat
pointing that’s a bad
thing. Look away.

6.
I’ve always felt like a king when someone looks at me.

My hair is how I avoid being with myself.

When I’m with myself, I attack the ways I am not enough for myself.

My buddies and my mother and my first girlfriend use to complement my mane.
I pulled it back in the summers.
I was proud of this body
I buckled on the shower floor the day I found my first hair across the drain.
The brother of the man
who peppered his rifle
into a swaying crowd until
the life buckled and scattered
before taking his own now
stands in front of a camera
and complains of a burning
in his head. He cannot blink.
He cannot utter but a few words
and then his throat breaks.
He cannot fathom how these things
happen, why we’re asked to make
sense of the splitting like it hasn’t
been there all along. We cannot prepare
for what ruins us. But my mother asks me
to pray pray pray. So I pray
with my hands open. Pray these spaces
are filled. Pray for those that cannot be.
Pray for this brother’s burning
mind, our broken hearts. Pray
for the day we dance together
and are not torn apart.
No One Really Hears. We Gaze into the Night.

Sometimes, the boys and I
have loud afternoons on the porch
next to a rocket
that’s been gassed out for years.

If we could split the sky
open again, we’d write letters
home to our families
apologizing because they have not been
enough. It is not their fault.
As boys, we swallowed enough
effervescence under stars to believe
one day we’d hold one.

Now, our guts have become stories
of the men we would have made
with all that light.
Last time we took off,

we dropped fireworks out the rocket
windows to punctuate the sky

wild. Yeah, it was getting pretty-late.
Yeah, we were getting pretty-drunk-loud,

but we would not apologize
for the neighbors flicking on
their kitchen lights. We would not calm
their screaming cribs. Do you not remember

nights when time was all you had
so you took as much as you could?

Did you not think you’d do something
bigger? Didn’t bigger mean something different

back then? Back then,
we had more hair and loved

with a polished heart.
We never wanted to land.

Under stars,
we can’t believe we’re still here.
Disconnect II

Straight up
I feel
way older
than I
am I groan all
the time Most
days are
nothing but
work Nights
re-binge-watching
office sitcoms
Jokes I never
understood
before I
drift off on
the couch
It feels
like being
held
Capriccio Before Work

A blind man sings across the street I try to turn left on
He maestros his cane something symphonic desperation
drifting between notes the metallic clink of asphalt against
his staff The cars crescendo

An old woman in gilded buick waits the traffic light pitch
turns the radio dial crumbles behind steering wheel
shits baritone Blind man’s bow stroking across hood
she hears dissonance that smudge will never come out

He a Cellonic timbre a measure towards few beats to the curb
I should stop ostinato those last fixed tempo
Clock-in rings five minutes our silent duet
no time for my music his traffic cadenza the coda
Is There an Upside to Being Eaten Alive?

Hey buddy, do you know
what you got yourself into? Gods, legends,
men scraped across night sky. What happens

when you give part of yourself
you can’t get back? Do you learn? Realize
she only does this when she’s hungry?

How close is a bite to a kiss?
Was it raining? Did you forget
that all foreplay is hypnotic? Waltz

and swirls. Swirls and waltz and swirls.
And you’re there, lighting a post sex cigarette.
Are diamond rings made for pincers? Tiny homes

with toothpick fences? Did you take her
to meet your parents? What would you
have named the child? Is giving

the only death you know? Or
is it choice? Why do you always

say yes? Why do I?
Brother,

Your throat quakes against window pane. We are young and take haven in a porcelain tub, roof ourselves under a twin mattress, twine like branches and blanket yarn. You ask if the world should tear through this tiny space, turn the bathroom mirror into blades, *can I hold on without slipping?*

*Are you safe in my arms?* I washed over you like a storm, like living room television glow, like our synchronizing dreams in the same bed.

Isn’t a brother a way of admitting this life is too much to handle? The woman I love left a mascara map of her tears painted on my pillowcase. I threw it away. I need to start putting myself back together, but my making is always in other people, and Buddy you were the first.

Got a second? Are you alone? Yeah, it’s one of those days.
Stay

I never wanted
to disappoint you.

I’ve nailed down
infatuation and intertwining
toes on a coffee table, naming
binge-watch-sitcom-nights ours

and leaving notes
on the counter about your

smile. Every new love
is a poem about staying
together, but
love hasn’t a thing
to do with staying
together. It’s more

the nailing down
a mailbox post, my hand

on a child guiding around
coffee table corners, hospital

machines beeping
and I’m tracing your fingers

until your chest
stops rising.

When we were
together, I whispered pretty-words

in your ear because that’s the only
kind of love I’m good at.

I loved you until it hurt,
but how long does that last

in this living?
I wrote you a poem

about Sunset and Moonrise,
and how Moonrise only needed

a few seconds of daylight
to fall in love. Then,

a stanza about beginnings
and ends. Have you read it yet?

I left it in a card
on your doorstep.

I knocked.
You were already gone.
I Leave My Shirt Open on Nights I Go Dancing

Three buttons undone
because nothing else
catches her

eye. I say her as in
any woman, as in my
loneliness has grown past

the particulars, past the ideal
one who will make me
an ideal someone worth loving

because alone I’ve never
been a good dancer. Three buttons
undone because tonight I need a break

from the stirring in my gut. Another
body has always been the best
distraction. There are parts of me scattered

among every women’s gaze. I’d
shed the curve of my heart
like a fingernail clipping

if it meant they’d never look
away, even if what they are
looking at is a body covering

itself in a cloud of cologne
and pressed button-down shirt
There isn’t much body left

underneath, but my chest
still opens. Three unbuttons undone
as in here is my strobe flesh

and my sloshing whiskey glass.
Here is my I’ll love you forever
even if all I love is not dying alone

tonight. Someone anyone
everyone your eyes got me
dancing again, drunk
dancing, fumbling neon
footsteps all the way
home. Not just undoing

three buttons, but really take you
home, make you home, someone
anyone, everyone. These three buttons

undone as in please
find my eyes. Don’t look
away. I vanish if you do.
The Light Shines Pine into Puzzle Pieces

Beyond all this destruction, a promised valley.

Have I left enough of myself behind?

Or is that the point?
Ars Poetica as the Patron Saint of Interior Decorating

My God, your house is tidy! Quite a suave placement for the tabernacle. It glows. It really does. But there’s far too much marble in here. Listen to how the pew creaks.

What kind of mantel piece is this! An opened-arm man, nail bracelets, his face carved with every shaving of human weight upon his brow, this is not the stuff of dinner conversations. This is a sanctuary, is it not?

Shatter the podiums. Level the alter. Recycle wood into a grand pedestal. Prop the doors open with hymnals. Quintuple your challis inventory. Keep the organ. Flood the offering baskets with bread. Restring the harp. Melt down this gold a gilded servant dish. Let us feast! These acoustics cannot sing without song!
At the Popsicle Stand

That’s quite a long smile
flashed my way when I say
the yellow one

but there’s six yellow ones
and I want this girl
behind the popsicle cart
to choose. *Banana mango,*
*sunflower petal, dandelion lemon*
spritzer. Pineapple, as if she knew it all
along. I’m at the picnic table naming
our family dog, our children
dreaming, the wide porch where our wrinkled hands
will rock and I’ll kiss your knuckles
when the last bit of sun
lips horizon. I have written her gravestone
epitaph. Maybe she’s written one for me
too. Or maybe that wasn’t a smile.
So much of my mind is spent shifting
beneath a couch, combing
for a piece that ends up not fitting
the puzzle. Like, this old man alone
leaning over the counter, fogging
a cloud on the icebox glass,
*strawberry cheesecake or rose-stained limeade?* How much of his life
is an empty hand? Is he into puzzles,
making sense of the ways we make sense
of a maze of bodies,
and how those bodies,
despite all the hands and fingers,
can still feel alone? Is everything
he needs right in front of him
now, a chunk of iceberg resting
in the entirety of his mouth
and sledding down
the plaid of his shirt?

I want to tell you
I asked the popsicle girl
to dance. That she said yes.

And that making
of my plans saw their day
in this world, but

maybe the dip and twirl
is enough. The melting drip
of a mind in and not in

a moment.
Salvation Song

We are friends in that the same music makes us.
The bank accounts break us, diamonds we don’t have
in our pockets break us,
the cradle assembly instructions we’ve never read break us.
Our grandparents die and that breaks us.
We’ve both put on weight and become heavier.
Yes, those are two different things.
I almost hear you,
buried in sand your fingers
were fretboards,
ocean. Life
quiet. Maybe this washes
away, too.
Appalachian Prayer

In mudded jeans and straw hat,  
may I squirrel  
between crooked trails  
of petrified maple.

After a long day of trimming lowland  
yards for hands tender  
and unable to steady the numbing  
weed-whacker buzz, may I pluck a honeysuckle  
straight from the shrub  
and may tiny hairs tickle my nose.

Is there a space in the woods  
to sweep the brush against oak trunks?

How do I distill something sweet  
from corn-mash, spoiled yeast  
and buried bits of fingernails?  
What was that moonshine proverb?

*Half a potato heals any wound.*  
*A stick of butter for a burn*

*People are all acorn stems, spines cambering.*  
*The stuff on grocery store shelves isn’t strong enough*  
*to hide from all this weight.* Is there  
somewhere to pitch a tent in the woods  
and rest my head on a pillow-log?  
I’ve forgotten how to trace  
the stars a black bear  
paw, a mason jar, a willow bowing.

May this sky be just the beginning  
of a hand across my body lying flat.
Eggs as Almost Epiphany

I’m years from you
    awake at a table
hankering for eggs
    a habit of coating
the outside with the inside
    forgetting the difference

A yolk yellow plate
    a curl of celery leaf
    your hair
    your eyes
    smile your lips

Nights speeding streetlights
    our voices scorched
radio dial static
    the mess our mouths make

but you always stayed over
we played house

I made breakfast

You snuck up behind me

We lived a lifetime in those mornings

But at the table
    without you
loving you
    hating you
I’ve forgotten the difference

my chest a boiled shell
    our walks by the river
    stars blurred bridge rhinestones
    curved like a heart

We talked of children
    a room for my books
another with a lock on the door
our bodies could vine themselves
back together

But it’s a fine line
    between building a life
and just not wanting
    to be alone at the table

I’m still not sure which one we we’re doing
Front Porch Lightning

plastic wing
cicadas and electric
hums
and screened windows
you
cup a tiny thing
between your palms
fluorescent stroke
opened eye
waltz a magnolia
mountain-scaled

purple pasted evening stars
yearn to count the light
bouncing off your cheek
baptize your curls
unmistakable shades of yellow
lighting storm
a pair of rocking chairs

you ask to make
love in the yard
us and thunder
and you
brook pebble gloss
encircled light
recognition
your eyes
glow
they really do
Adonis and the Mountain Meadow

Adonis of river raft guides and recreational activity
lives in Telluride, Colorado. A box canyon town

where three mountain ranges meet and leave
enough space for a valley of tall blonde grass

to trace and pass the horizon. I’m here in this field,
not accustomed to open air slow hum or a monarch

wing rippling soft glass reflection, a sapling sycamore
banked by the creek that spines this entire place. A breath

from railway carts and traffic lights and how everyone in the city
is always on their way to something else. Like how I can’t stop

fidgeting on the picnic blanket when Adonis skirts his fat tire
mountain bike in front of me, glugs water from his bottle, swishes

some with his tongue and sprays water across me. He wears thin
blue shorts and nothing else. His body rooted in conquering mountain

face. His thumb grooved for plucking creek rainbow
tROUT. He apologizes and tells me of their fins like spoons

in his palm when they glided back upstream. He’s in route to a cavern
tucked between branches where locals spend their days

wading in rainwater puddled above pebbles. He will not show me
the way, instead pulls a joint from his pocket. I tell him I’m not

from here. Adonis says this is strong stuff, but it can help with the fidgeting
so if I ever stop fidgeting I should stroll the backside of Bridal Veil Trail.

Stop somewhere in the middle where the ferns
and maples spread sunlight into beams. Be still. Listen

through pine needle, purring porcupine, river rocks shifting
in the creekbed where I’ll find his voice and should follow

Adonis into woods, maybe more of that strong stuff
I can’t get back home. This is not a poem

about smoking weed, but I inhale the whole thing
at once. Wind strands my hair into grass. I gaze
a single flap of monarch wing and hear trout gills
smile beneath each creek ripple and what a thing
to do with the rest of my day, Adonis.
Find a cave and go swim in it.
Sedentary, Disconnect IV

I granite basalt schist my
mountain carvings riversculpture
sedentary blithe I skimming leaf
obsidian finger ridges chard mist
kingfisher’s wing my horizonspeck
amber foliage freckle I cement
spackle bricklayer gust whistler
my wrinkled chin gravel eyes
me eroding chest crater ore
fleck chipped diamond posture
statues mudded mantle crust between
toes pebble me riverskin native
mud clay dweller tiny rock bed
I all that grazes and is grazed