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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

The University of Memphis

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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 stitch 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.

Disconnect I

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
cobble 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.

I Have This Headache Now

Written October 2, 2017

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
He maestros his cane
drifting between notes
his staff

across the street
something symphonic
the metallic clink
The cars

I try to turn left on
desperation
of asphalt against
crescendo

An old woman
turns the radio dial
shits baritone
she hears dissonance

in gilded buick waits
crumbles
Blind man's bow
that smudge

the traffic light pitch
behind steering wheel
stroking across hood
will never come out

he a Cellonic timbre
I should stop
Clock-in rings
no time for my music

a measure towards
ostinato those last
five minutes
his traffic cadenza

few beats to the curb
fixed tempo
our silent duet
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?

I Have No Use for Empty Hands

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 chalice 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.

Disconnect III

For David

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

fidgiting 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 fidgiting
so if I ever stop fidgiting 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 skimmingleaf
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 diamondposture
statues mudded mantlecrust between
toes pebble me riverskin native
mud clay dweller tinyrock bed
I all that grazes and is grazed