

TOMB SONG

by

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A Thesis

Submitted to the

Graduate Faculty

of

George Mason University

in Partial Fulfillment of

The Requirements for the Degree

of

Master of Fine Arts

Creative Writing

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Spring Semester 2015  
George Mason University  
Fairfax, VA

Tomb Song

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at George Mason University

by

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**DEDICATION**

*for my family and friends*

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An earlier version of -portrait as flooded field has been published by Verse.

An earlier version of self-portrait at gleaning has been published by Proost.

An earlier version of Instructions on How to Bury a Feeling has been published by  
TheInnerLoop.

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## **ABSTRACT**

TOMB SONG

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This thesis is a meditation on loss. The first section looks at various forms of loss, while the second, third, and fourth sections focus on an individual's coping with and processing this new reality. The poems involve image driven meditations on how people get on with life after loss, the afterward, the next day and the next day after that.



▪

Within a Person Lives Water, and It Seethes  
By Mikhail Aizenberg (trans. Merifield)

Within a person lives water, and it seethes.  
It can be heard analyzing everything,  
saying, water.  
With each passing day  
it is more and more difficult to ignore.  
It never sleeps,  
is never silent.

And try to force it to not be this way,  
that is a long lifetime of labor.  
Have it become hot ice,  
have it become a fluid stone, water.

## You've Learned to Call This Home

it is one of those real bars  
the kind where you can carve your name  
in the wood post by the payphone and your stool  
with its worn and cracked vinyl seat  
is still your stool when you return  
each day after work for happy hour  
1 dollar domestics (there are no imports)  
2 dollar liquor drinks from the rail  
that feel metallic in your brain at 4am  
when you can't sleep  
and your stomach still burns  
and the day refuses to start

## Collection of Empty Spaces

who sat on benches in parks that overlooked cities  
by rivers on banks watching boats  
ate sandwiches on blankets in shade  
saw stars peer out of night

who eavesdropped the many secrets the wind has heard  
and carried silently tucked away into its folds  
as their weight added drag to its flow  
overtime making it harsh

who loved my heart before it lost its romance  
shut its doors and opened a museum  
placed bleached vertebrae on display  
collected dust in empty urns

## Instructions on How to Bury a Feeling

When it comes to burying a feeling, what the feeling is matters very little. Crumple the feeling up as if it were a sheet of paper and place it into your mouth. Do not chew or hold it there very long, as most feelings are very bitter. Swallow it whole. This helps to ensure that no bits linger. The feeling will seem to get caught in your piping just level with your collarbone. This may cause you to want to panic, but relax, this is a good thing, for what is happening here is that your body is recognizing that this is a feeling, and not nourishment, and will at this point push the feeling out of your digestive track and deposit it, like a coin through a slot, into your body cavity, where it may at times cause a slight discomfort, being neither absorbed nor processed.

## Wheatfield

After Van Gogh's *Wheatfield with Crows*

what is it wheatfield  
that has your crows scattering  
into the late evening sky,  
is it something natural,  
a fox moving through your grasses  
or is it my presence here again

i see myself reflected in their flight of wings,  
shimmers of black, their flash  
a path into night,  
fighting against the wind  
that would scatter them,  
like seed, from this fertile soil to some  
trodden path of rock  
to be crushed under foot,  
under the weight of each  
new caw birthed into gusts

wheatfield, like them,  
do you also want to flee,  
take to one of these dirt paths,  
choose to uproot, and wind away,  
to hide, deeper into this night.

## Of Warmth and Its Absence

and then there is the love affair we never had,  
the one in which we wrapped each other in cadenzas,

designed bridges to span  
our way to the brayed dust of the moon,

grew sunflowers and peaches,  
daffodils and orchids in window gardens to hide us from the city.

and that this love affair never happened is of no fault  
of ours. it is how at times a cloud can hide the sun.

## High Rollers for a Night

casino crickets  
drone on the same sound,  
ka-ching ka-ching.  
my party waits,  
by the flashing, dancing  
one-armed bandits  
for enough space to open  
at a ten dollar minimum bid  
craps table.  
the geriatric beside us  
with his oxygen tank  
and cashed pension check  
waves off the cocktail  
waitress with a spotted hand.  
she takes our order and moves on.  
a middle-aged hooker  
in purple jellies drifts up  
to the old man sitting atop his stool,  
“do i have the right face for you?”  
her smile not shining through  
her nicotine stained teeth  
and frizzed out, gray streaked hair.  
he glances at her reflection  
in the pokie’s glass, there  
is worn out glitter in both their eyes.  
“i don’t play the sluts,  
i play the slots.  
jokers’ wild!”  
he yanks down the arm  
and cackles as the machine rolls  
its numbers, its pictures.  
fours blur cherries,  
spades and nines.  
she adjusts her pink tube top,  
gives him a parting finger  
and saunters on in  
a tiny sparkly piece of cloth  
moonlighting as a skirt.  
the waitress brings our round.



we cheers and wait  
for our turn to roll the dice.  
the glitter still bright in our eyes.

## Between Acknowledgements

The singer of the band croons  
“reason, won’t you put your blue dress on?”  
and I step away from the barstool

beside you, before you  
notice I have arrived  
through the door

your back faces. The drink  
you have already ordered  
for me sits waiting, yours

is half gone and clenched  
in your hand, hovering  
above the salted napkin.

As the horns fade in-  
to a jazzed up drum solo,  
I feel my hands ache

from folding, from not holding  
those I love, from this wasted bet  
that I thought would win them back to

me. I realize, tonight,  
I need sidewalk,  
city blocks, and forty states

-

And with such a thought  
you walk out, without  
even having said “hello.”

Didn’t notice me see you  
in the mirror in front  
of me, behind the bar.

So now with the drum solo

ending with a trumpet  
speaking Coltrain's

Acknowledgement,  
I finish my drink  
and take yours in hand,

understanding your need  
to return to family,  
to leave this mirage,

and as I drain this  
glass down to forgotten ice  
chips, I'll imagine

that by now,  
you are farther down  
the street, headed out of state

## Cartography

on the table  
a telescope opens  
to the truth

circle the words

the maps are musk  
fastened to the folds  
recites rendered remembrance

circle the words

pages leaf  
turn stories and light  
shed shed

circle the words

## Arguments that Ended

the conversation is rain  
soaked and standing on the curb  
at the corner where franklin crosses  
5<sup>th</sup>, you look downhill  
south towards where the river is,  
but cannot be seen.

-

i drink wisdom by  
the fingers only to later  
pass out in a puddled stoop  
as all things sinking do,  
drowning in the leathered depths  
of things learned.

-

the music and voices  
bleed in through the wall,  
finding cracks in the wood,  
and I, finally finding a chair,  
break it, in an attempt at comfort,  
too small for my weight,  
pressure, and the couple in  
the corner will not stop talking  
even though we are at a poetry reading,  
and my arm is now resting  
on a damp spot on the tablecloth  
as I write this, with the bourbon  
not supplying the goods  
my body desired from the glass,  
and the glass just trying to be  
the vessel it was shaped  
to be.

## For an Artist

:

Threshold in the middle of a wall:  
looks into  
a room with a bed,  
a chair, a sink, windows  
with sheer curtains;  
looks out to  
a hall, wooden floor  
that creaks with time,  
walls lined with family photos,  
and stairs  
that lead down to another room  
and another room,  
one with a stove,  
one with a fireplace,  
and another door,  
that leads out...

Why did you paint this vision:  
a house never lived in,  
this picture titled  
*the tergiversate between us*,  
titled *apostate*;  
where the colors equal the looks  
from eyes that know,  
from eyes that do not know  
how to continue on  
wishing that this was  
more than a scene.

:

Look down inside  
and see the splintered  
bone of legs, ribs, emaciated,  
without calcium,  
  
red blood clotted brown

crisp to flake, dust,  
veins no longer marbled  
into flesh, but now  
tough strings hung loose,

a cavern ruined,  
left for rot,  
lost notes  
of memories turned  
mud and moss.

Look down inside,  
there are answers too,  
answers whose questions  
are the missing mystery,

at which, an empty skull  
stares vacantly.

:

With snow still approaching, I know  
it is ash that is now lying down  
grey, falling remnants of our bridge,  
just burnt.

You stand statued,  
paint brush in hand,  
looking at me, sea salt sky eyes  
staring, set. Casting,

your breath in the air, floats  
unsaid and disappears, you say  
nothing,

I drop my words in the water  
and drift.

## Nuance

a cherry blossom petal falls  
drifts delicate like breeze  
your face arrests my gaze  
and i am held by dueling graces

we breathe each other's  
held breath for beats  
air and our lashes  
entwined

-

moonlight over half the bed  
wake to find i sleep alone  
late october stirs what leaves remain  
front door unlocked  
driveway empty  
no note on the nightstand  
no letter on the table  
only the orchid by the mirror is missing

-

the sun rises at your head  
and sets at your feet  
you lie stretched out in the grass  
face up to watch the sky

in the back garden  
at your new place  
you buried the orchid  
under the magnolia tree



## A Blue Note in a Minor Key

I wish you were here  
or rather we were together  
in a place that was ours  
you laying on the couch outlining your next essay  
me sitting in a chair reading journal submissions  
Sil Austin on the record playing deep sax  
windows open to the early days of spring and sun  
we could catch glances of each other deep in thought  
as the sway of Summertime croons the speakers

in the evening we could drive into New Orleans  
catch a show at Preservation Hall or Tipitina's  
and you know how we are with crowds  
so it will be which ever one has less people  
on the table there might even be a candle  
your wine my beer but definitely our hands  
tapping out the beat of the drum or bass

and if on the way home we stop  
near Manchac to watch the moon hover  
over Maurepas to talk about stars  
and whether to start a family  
and if this is the place  
or would the rising heat and gulf push us north

## The Recent Days of Winter

crows  
not gold-  
finches  
nor blue-  
jays

crows  
and by the fish-  
market sea-  
gulls

## Sea Foam

See winter painting the dark  
out of light, the blotches  
out from cold lives.  
Face the warm look  
of inquisition,  
the eyes of injury.

Feel wind biting the essence  
out of peace, the glint  
out from empty eyes.  
Seek the humble face  
of acquiescence,  
the voice of devastation.

## A Story about You

I wrote a story  
about you and read it  
to my therapist  
and to friends and strangers  
at an open-mic-night.  
You were alive,  
six, you were climbing  
a tree, our favorite one,  
the one that offered shade  
in the afternoon to the creek  
where it pooled shallowly before  
the bend, it was the time  
unlike all the other times,  
it was the time when  
your ribboned pigtails streamed  
up behind you, behind  
your face, in fear,  
the time in the summer  
when i was still,  
frozen. You were in the tree,  
i was on the ground,  
you were in the air,  
had we both been on bikes  
or foot, crossing a street  
i would have stopped  
a speeding car, i had slain  
fairytale dragons for you,  
my sister,  
and would have threatened your boyfriends  
for your safety and good treatment,  
but you were in the air.  
One branch struck,  
broke two ribs,  
another gashed  
and bruised your thigh,  
but your green eyes glazed  
when that third bent  
your head and body  
in different directions

and i learned that a cracking  
branch sounds like a life  
being broken. You were  
wearing a white shirt  
with small flowers printed on it,  
pink shorts, denim, and barefoot,  
there was a small bounce  
when you landed  
next to your sneakers,  
light blue chucks  
or were they pink too.  
You were still,  
i was screaming,  
yelling, you were  
still, i was  
crying, running,  
arms, legs pumping  
across the field,  
scattering insects  
in the tall grass,  
dry and browning  
in late July heat,  
i tripped once  
greening my elbows,  
scraping my palms,  
my knees, and lay there sobbing,  
small,  
helpless on a giant world  
until the red ants let me know  
their house of a hill  
was not a place of condolence,  
peace or comfort,  
then i was rolling,  
screaming, up again  
and running, legs jerky,  
arms tugging, scratching  
at my shirt, my shorts,  
my skin red dots of fire,  
i ran finally through the yard  
we camped in behind our barn.  
We would sleep  
out from under the oak, the pines,  
out from under their shelter,

letting the grass tongue our elbows,  
our calves, as we lay still  
watching the Little Dipper move  
across the night sky, the constellations  
our tent, its dome a void  
and glints. They found you  
where you fell,  
and now i find you  
where you lay,  
every year returning  
to your side.

## Willow Tree

whether inside  
in clung air  
piling up  
requests  
that twist  
distort  
in search of...

or outside  
under silver  
exposed by velcro  
soft flesh spent  
under grey eyes  
behind the tree  
and no more,

always  
too young  
for the cigarettes  
tired smile  
the ashtrays are full  
the camera without film  
and the yard  
    on fire

## On Seeing

A paper cut to the eye, or perhaps  
a blade of grass lying trapped under  
the eye like a slipped contact. Vision  
is what you make it, reading a word  
sentenced to a scene. Brought image  
to light but not seen.

Where physical view meets mental  
picture. Is it a mistake or a daughter.  
A bad decision or a son. Maybe  
Neither. Maybe both. A hole or  
break can be the difference. Both,  
or a gift, or just unaffordable.

What does the growing collection of  
cells want to be. All of the above. Or  
nothing at the moment. Except alive,  
maybe. Pressure, and lack of, can cause  
vision problems. Pressure like gravity.  
Gravity is a real thing.

Invisible. Gravity is a mental thing,  
weighs one thought superior over  
another. A daydream at night sees  
things less darkly. A question without  
the mark, did you see it. One view  
leads to another.

Or clashes with. Daydream  
about memories never made,  
and in their glory there is mourning  
that they will never be. As one year  
grows another. Vision, like memory  
blurs.



## Of a Shadow

the child is a bloodstain  
on the carpet that nobody  
talks about, instead giving preference  
to the view out the window, gold  
daffodils, a lark in an oak tree,  
the hill, and I cannot stop grinding  
my teeth and evacuating my stare  
once I realize my gaze  
is fixed upon the sole  
of a shoe or wine glass  
in my hand, no one is  
playing the piano, it just waits  
like the stack of paper  
plates on the kitchen counter  
between the punchbowl and macaroni salad,

younger, I had learned  
to avoid silence, now I sit  
in it, unable step away  
or unmute the volume,  
and what light visits me  
at night through the window-  
pane is a more natural reflection  
than the image in the mirror,  
all shadow and worn thin

## Empty Nest

but we never had these pictures painted  
that now hang centered in our mirrors

it wasn't until wind blew the shutters closed  
that we saw each other's eye deep and grazing

a turning from the rain this storm and fierce  
a lash of gusts and trees splint or dip

and you walk out grey sky hair alive  
electric medusa all lightning and crack

no bones bend a fire wages within your breast  
and shout to mountain move ah no gentle thing

conceived and gone without age moved on by  
gripping hands that drip out blood and moon

over hilltop down to valley gorge more shadow thick  
all the weight all this for the crush of stone

rock slate compressed of years no flowering  
a harbored lighthouse long dim these cliffs

where jumpers go and though the falling  
air surrounds the last breath is still alone

## In Mourning

three months  
and I have not written to you  
to anyone  
not even God has heard from me

yet it is that God has heard  
my silence  
has read my inability to articulate  
my internal

has even translated this wordless longing  
this empty  
and come to sit beside me silent  
in mourning

## Ghost as Occupation

i saw her in her sleep pass  
through the gate and into the garden.  
her dress woven of angel hair and silk.  
she was iridescent laughter and in the sky.  
a pattern emerges. shimmering quills of sunlight.

## We Both Tangent

that night we both  
thought over the distance  
of the same memory  
hibernating next to a shed  
in the must of old  
sawdust mingled with earth

a fox an owl  
both awake  
and near

the clouds had descended  
the rain had been  
in trees for days  
the woods a soft leaf-down  
punctured by bone branch  
and scrabble brush

both wanting to tear

## Of Sleep and Its Reprimanding Glow

the cloud of children in heaven is at play in God's yard.  
down here in the city I do not go out at night.  
the grass is not matted down by my lying to fish the sky,  
nor tickled by my feet,  
bare to the earth and chuffing with dirt.

and further, the arc of the missing day says,  
"the reason the moon is still  
full is fear." no one has put their hand in  
and grasped its locked jaw  
to shake reality awake. so chaotic,  
stuffing each drawer full and disheveled.  
sleep holds my dreams bureautic.

Leafless

the boulevard at night.  
the smear of people.  
stumble in the snow.  
stand in front of a train.  
say *January, December.*  
float out of a ghost and say,  
*This is what, a day?*

this is what the day is -  
a ghost floating out of night:  
a week in winter, a month:  
a train lying derailed:  
snow blind, snow blind:  
groping eyes and leering breath:  
empty streets radiating the fallout.

Pale Moon

sliver of bone  
in the winter sky

-

sometimes in spring  
i want to be  
the one pulling the plow

my heart yoked  
my hands  
my feet planted

-

rooted  
as an  
old oak



## Instructions on How to be a Ghost

return as an ache  
or a spider-web

a thread thin crack  
in the bedroom window pane

## Sorry for the Shower

as this spittle  
flies from my mouth  
as i babble on  
my false apology  
You take it  
and so much more  
that i do not see  
and You forgive me  
just the same  
and on that day  
when the scales of selfishness  
fall from my eyes  
i will be true  
when i say to You  
“sorry for the shower”

## The Earth Remembers

The broken body of a fallen angel,  
left forgotten on the ground in an old cemetery,

Spilt blood runnels, seeks the lowest point, before pausing to collect itself,

The depth created when shadows intersect,  
overlaying each other.

Poem as Video Installation Loop Titled:

Progression

: a horse trailer packed,  
not with horses, but all your belongings,  
traveling down the highway, wind whipped.

: scuffmarks on the linoleum,  
distorting and maiming the reflection of  
light and world come in from the open window.

: repeat



Lazarus

I

i feel as though i am not  
really here, but rather passed  
out in a bathtub, the shower water  
still falling on me, water  
no longer hot, headed  
steadfast to cold.

but i am here, and still here  
no sunlight drifts across me,  
my face does not shine, only hides  
shadows behind its matte sheen,  
my skull skin stretched tight,  
set to split if not for being stitched  
so well, a knit together  
cloth wearing thin.

fractions of a heart beat pass by,  
buying yet another hour of minutes  
spared and parsed out like  
a foreign tongue, slowed for precision,  
accuracy, so that there is no loss  
in translation,

come forth.

## II

Time holds you in communion,  
a shuttled processing of bending,  
relocating, back and forth  
behind skin and blood,

moments of blare blur past  
the underside of eyelids,  
slicked with years of other  
moments, moving farther  
along,

nonlinear,

episodes play out,  
jumping incongruent  
to perceived presence,  
like a daylight of home  
nestled in a burial cave,  
echoing,

come forth.

### III

He is bathed in the scentless  
breath of death, that clung  
air, without musk or cinnamon

He does not hear the mourning  
or wept prayers, carried in the wake  
of silent thunder he hears the command

come forth.





self-portrait as vacant space

insert self to negate  
wash hands do not use lye  
encircle the rain bare skull upturn

a pond in the eye  
each veneration a whirl-  
wind in each unvocalized sigh

join the empty collapse  
whisper dust bite through  
step back view each crater

separate mosaic

-portrait as flooded field

the mud it eats  
and in the middle of summer's  
wrap winter's grave still

cradles the seed

so distant the return of the image  
from the mirror all paced  
and certain in its placement setting

so much like midnight

crows awatch from the tree that edges  
the woods light a star-  
pointed reflection in their eyes

-portrait as riverbank

a heart an ash can  
sentenced to sit on  
cracked pavement  
at the base of the south-  
facing brick wall

abandoned tile  
factory overlooks  
weeds growing up

the last left  
to mice and floods

-portrait as pier

come to this spot  
where the sea  
rolls its sleeves on the sand

listen to the return  
and rhythmic sound the waves  
the tide

join the endless  
the slow swoosh  
that flat even horizon

-portrait as surface tension

delicate awrithe  
and calm across  
each globe adrop

-portrait as child's sock found on the side of a road

left here where cloud is shelter  
over leafless branch

where a creek is more than the sum  
of a sunny day  
dreaming into the breeze

where there is no road sign  
that directs the curve around  
this scene chalk-less where

once a streak  
showed the untold

-portrait as question

in the corner  
of the dream destruction

a loss  
a pause



-portrait as ocean

a skull is a face  
not remembered

all a figment  
a fragment

adrift as dust  
in a sunbeam

-portrait as grief-sewn scarf

first night of frost  
streetlamps fade

to big dipper bright  
full moon ghost

breath hangs in the air

-portrait as 36037ft

the ocean under  
this moonless night  
but the stars here stark  
in the void as guides homes

where God is known  
both mysterious bright

where there is so much more where  
clouds that tulip harmonies  
to be heard oh with the unmoved  
rocks sing out a fountain

-portrait as hummingbird

to sit by small songs of wind  
air breathe tonight  
persists a stone  
waits centuries

abandoned names  
picture a song no longer  
candle doubts never translate  
into this breath desire a secret talk

-portrait as water molecule

the path the plane  
tries to divide the sky

but its slow trail fades  
is only but a ghost

lost in the wisps  
of clouds a slow dissolve

-portrait as heat

dim the night  
with its fire inside

blue flame leafing  
matchstick branch

shrunk back to ash  
or ember

-portrait as answer

in the corner  
of destruction a lark

a breath

-portrait as morning light

again the sea waves still  
come ashore

effortless so hold  
cling as they lap  
the earth as the tide  
pulls the future out



-portrait as breath

look for the living among the dead  
expect to find one dressed  
in ashes forgotten to ruins

as dust creeps into each  
pore cell chant  
silently into the decay

the passed lie silent but still  
when the dead like Lazarus  
leave their tombs the world

marvels their chests heave  
breathe in catch life  
on the winds and time

moves on to other corpses

-portrait as communion

close the distance between

a gap of belief or politic we break  
and bridge with bread

self-portrait at gleaning

gather the stars into your eyes  
for i am clearly too blinded

gather the seas into your arms  
for mine cannot seem to hold them

gather the fields into your organs  
for i have turned them to dust

gather the light into your ears  
for mine are clogged with grief

gather the wind into your lungs  
for i have no breath but smoke

gather the seeds into your palms  
for mine have become stone

gather my heart into your mouth  
for i do not have the stomach

gather my life into your plans  
for mine have all been scattered

gather my thoughts into your verse  
for i have no tongue to recite

gather my days into your being  
for mine are memory and past



rain on torn linen  
    clouds heavy the sky  
    wash clean

each time diluted  
    the fade      sharp  
    the stain

all is static here, a churned sea

horizons merge  
the distance, unseen

a distorted topography answers the wrong question

there is the why  
    staring  
its extrapolation into dust

forego the parable, rush headlong at the wall

my breath casts the same reflection as my eyes:  
stale shadow and ash



erosion erases,  
forms

a leaf stain on the sidewalk,  
I fade

autumn leaves monarch, kamikaze, at my feet

and so again I wash my feet on this dusty path

circle the dawn  
as one would an answer

nets nested with light shine  
dew caught

sun drips down,  
noted chords of a new song

from here I go by foot



## BIOGRAPHY

James Merifield is a native Virginian. He attended the George Mason University, where he received his Bachelor of Arts in Russian Studies in 1999. He went on to receive his Master of Divinity from Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond in 2006. He then returned to George Mason University to receive this Master of Fine Arts, Creative Writing, Poetry degree.