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Vacancies

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Iowa State University

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Vacancies

by

Benjamin David Tonak

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Creative Writing)

Program of Study Committee:
Debra Marquart, Major Professor
Neil Nakadate
Jonathan Sturm

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2004
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Graduate College
Iowa State University

This is to certify that the master's thesis of

Benjamin David Tonak

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

________________________
Major Professor

________________________
Committee Member

________________________
Committee Member
Poetry. I refuse to write an abstract. They all sound so self-indulgent and flat. If I told you what the poems were about, why would you want to read them? Instead, I will tell you what they are not. They are not landscape poems. They are not poems about some great cause. They are generally not narrative. They are generally not lyric. They are not flat images. I will tell you that they require something from the reader. Maybe they deal with aphasia, silence, solitude and negative space. Read them and find out.
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Vacancies
Laws of Motion
Echo-Osmosis

On cloudless nights I sit up for hours
sending Morse-code messages
into space with my flashlight.

The blink of my only hope
is refracted and collected by moisture in the air,
which condenses into raindrops

that fall back into my life on a Thursday.
I hear them mumbling on the roof
and chattering in the downspouts.

I see them against the backdrop
of lights in neighbors’ windows
and in flashes of lightning

they are a gray veil in the distance.
They wait for me in reservoirs
and follow me in riverbeds.

They block my path and pursue me
until returning to my mouth.
On that day I will swallow everything

I have ever wanted to say.
My tears will soak into the ground
and when I lie down

I will hear what I've already said.
The Passenger Seat is Empty

Driving east, I think of you
like portions of the sky
and fingers of vapor trails
expanding into clouds
wrapping the landscape in blankets.

I think of touching
the curves of the horizon
and it is your silhouette
my hands remember.

There is nothing but the road
to where you are.
Lights in farmhouse windows
are warm, but they are not in rooms
filled with your laughter;

they are not the color of memory
pulling me through the night—
the dream of sunrise
where we stand side by side

looking out the picture window
to where light begins
and frosted branches
are paths of our futures.
Laws of Motion (Retrograde)

iii.)

When you stand face to face with someone and both tilt your heads to the left they go in opposite directions. You kiss, and for the first time you understand the concept of equal and opposite reaction, like the ground pushing back on your feet every day to keep you from sinking.

ii.)

Losing your grip and letting go produce exactly the same results: 9.8 meters per second squared (m/s²). Your body pushes back against the wind, and the words force, mass and acceleration mean nothing to you, but you understand the concept of terminal velocity.

i.)

If you move seconds to the numerator you get seconds to the negative second (s⁻²). This concept is exactly the same as trying to remember the moments after the news of a car wreck told over the phone, and for the first time you really understand the concept of things at rest tend to stay at rest.
The Knowledge of Trees

When you are a kid you don't understand trees. You don't know about the roots keeping the tree from blowing over in the wind, holding the tree in one place. All you know is what you see when you look up and the branches reach out to hold up the sky.

Somewhere in between it occurs to you that everything has to do with branches and roots—the tree is a conduit between earth and air. You hear whispers of leaves confessing secrets and think of the way the tree takes light underground to tell the roots about the sky.

When you are old and you know about roots, you think of the slow descent of a yellow leaf. The trees don't hold up the sky anymore, but when you look up you remember the tree knows better. It knew about roots all along, and it will still hold up the sky when you are gone.
Algebra One

to Kate, who I tried to help with math

A year and 4 countries plus
6 weeks with no phone and 6 bottles of alcohol,
2 new addresses and 9 songs the color of blue

Add it all up and divide it by 2 and it comes to:
13 months without sight of you.

Plotting it out in terms of y
I am still walking away along the hyperbola
down the slope of the logarithm of loss.

The limit as x approaches infinity
is the memory of you.

The distance to zero is shorter
the further I go, but I will never arrive
because the other half is what I gave to you.

This is the way it is with exponents:
even when you have become infinitely small
you will be infinitely there

you will be infinitely gone.
Revolver

Preferably a .38 from Super Wal-Mart because it is overwhelming with options but difficult to find the thing you came for. All my loser friends get married. The girl upstairs dates a poser. The archetype goddess—Aphrodite, Queen Mother—is behind the concept of tangible love, which most people never think about but proceed to have children and then divorce because they met someone new and start stupidly over. Everywhere sex before the bloom kills. My latest infatuation just walked by while I waited for the bus. I can’t decide if I believe in coincidence or soulmates, and while I consider she keeps walking, which is just as well. Most girls don’t believe me when I tell them I’m egocentric, leave whiskers in the sink. Someday one with wide eyes open walks in, but I don’t approach attractive women; it is so transparent to talk to an archetype. She knows why you are there. Meanwhile, a constant parade of mortals.
How to fall off the Face of the Earth
with your Feet Still on the Ground
for Shaun

1. Let her pretend you’re not in the room.

(Did you feel the epic proportion of the silence when she walked by with her eyes fixed on the vacant space four feet in front of her, the way she never looked in your direction but her friends did?)

2. Carry on as if it didn’t really matter to you.

(Did you hear the desperation in your laugh when your friend joked about things you could say if you sat down across from her, the quiet voices of your own self loathing, the sound of stale bread turning to chalk in your mouth?)

3. Disappear from common social circles.

(Did you feel yourself begin to drift when you let go of each hand you shook on your way out the door, the way they were looking at something two feet behind your head and talking as if you weren’t there?)

4. Keep your eyes fixed on the sidewalk exactly two feet in front of you at all times.

(Did you notice, when turning the corner, how the whole world turned the opposite way as if trying to stay as far away as possible?)

5. Lock your doors and always sleep alone.
Euclidean Geometry

If the shortest distance
between yesterday
and tomorrow
is a horizontal bisector
through the square on the calendar
signifying today,

then there are exactly
as many ways to get somewhere
as there are to leave it.

The only direction is forward.
Even the road I arrive on
is not the same in reverse,
and when I think of a front door
I don't know which way to stand.

I cry at the movies
and don't really know why.
When I go home,
I lie on the floor
of my bathroom
where I am the hypotenuse,

my feet in the corner
by the tub and my head
intersecting with the angle
of the sink and the door.
I try to see myself
as God sees me.

All I see are triangles
on the floor.
I am always in the space
between somewhere
and somewhere else

a tangent
with no end points
and no width,

touching the circle
at one inscrutable point.
Poem

It starts with a title
like *Little Kids in Autumn*
It has life based on that idea

and it continues with an image
but kids could care less about that
they just want to make a pile of leaves
and jump in it

Then the theme develops
and it must have something to do
with the most beautiful October
and all the people on the sidewalk at 10 a.m.

No matter what
it has to say something
that can't be said
like describing orange
to a friend born blind

Sometimes it takes a turn
and you find yourself
in a strange neighborhood
wondering how you got there

When the end comes
it's supposed to resonate
which means it has to stay with you
like the idea of your parents
or the warmest days of summer

long after they have gone.
Empty Set

A girl in white, on days white
with snow disappears except for her blond
hair climbing down from a fuzzy hat.

Someone says to me what have you got
to lose, and the obvious answer:
everything, which is what we all lose
eventually. He was talking about obligations
to the woman living in his house
and the children, but I lose them every day
when the girl in white comes into rooms
full of warm colors and sits down
to lunch three Fridays in a row.

She leaves, and a girl with bad hair
takes her place, which means nothing
and everything are exactly the same amounts.
When you travel at night sometimes

you don’t know which way you’re going
all you know is the distance from here
to where your headlights meet the darkness

and the road comes to meet you.
Maybe it’s taking you to St. Louis,
maybe home. You forget and ride it out.

Sometimes the moon illuminates the fields in silver
and there are wind rows in the ditch. Sometimes
it is pitch black with lightning in the distance,

but the smell of summer night air is always there
in the vents, sometimes cool and clover,
others: humid, hot and asphalt.

Passing by the houses somewhere in Missouri,
lights in kitchen windows are a multitude
of stories—left or right turns you didn’t take.

Your story is a journey through the dark,
the road only as long as you need it to be
to forget the dreams you didn’t have.

Sometimes the light of pre-dawn dusts the horizon
and you come up over a hill and take in the view:
fields full of hay and corn and clover.
A Valentine in Red and White

Red

Like a martyr bleeding in the street
I would tell you how beautiful you are
and not worry about the traffic
or the scissors that cut deep
when I fall on my way to you.

I would ask you to marry me
and taste the blood in my mouth
after I have eaten the glass
that was a window between us.

In crayon, I would draw you
a picture of death so terrible
to remind you to live.

White

On the night of the first snowfall
I would lie next to you
listen to you breathing
and try to remember
the first time we met.

I'd wake you up,
but you would keep your eyes closed
and say something
I couldn't understand.

I would forget how to kiss you
sometimes it would be like little kids
talking to strangers.
Porcupine Sex

*Love would hold no dream
if it wasn't for the pain* - Steve Earle

I think of you on the bus
with all these people falling asleep
and so much to say.

You are in the everyday eye contact
with the girl who got on at 6th street,
and in her look-back-three-times.

I wanted to tell her something,
like the name of a flower
or the words to Let It Be.

I know you would have liked that;
you'd say I had nothing to lose.
I'd say *nothing* is so absolute,

and I would be right because
I could have lost this argument.
Then I would smile and tell you

everything in the world is so
soft underneath it makes me bleed.
I can't look away. Even in love.
The Wedding Dress at Goodwill

The remains of sweat at the altar,
the imprint of Daddy's arm around the waist,
Mother's tears on the breast,
and cake-stained fingerprints
from frantic grasps at the buttons.

She left it at the back door
of the strip mall, knowing
pain is the memory of happiness
in the absence of hope.

She could have burned it
or thrown it in the dumpster,
but she wanted to leave something
of herself for someone to find—
a warning or a cry for understanding.

A giggling girl, deaf to the ominous rustling—
dead leaves and regret,
feels the satin touch her skin
and sees herself in a dirty mirror.
Long Play

Sometimes you don't even care
for the hit song
mostly because you've heard it so many times
out of the context of the album
that it just seems to crash
like a meteor
into your kitchen making all the dishes
rattle and
break
and all the lemmings who only want to hear that song
tread heavily
on your last
nerve.

Sometimes you live for the transition
between songs
that moment of silence
after something is done
and the anticipation
before what you know is coming.
That space is as good as the songs
themselves, and maybe better.
Good musicians know
the rest
is the most powerful note.

The next day
you hear the song on the radio
or some lemming's mix CD
and in that moment
when the song is done
you hear the reverse-echo
of the song that should come
and no matter what else comes
it is never as good
it is a meteor
in your consciousness.
Liner Notes

There have been so many songs
and so much blue

since I wrote in the liner notes
a self-fulfilling prophecy:

K for lost time and much more.
The vacancies between these words

have filled in with so much time
and so much blue

like looking in the mirror
when my face is not my own

a yearbook version of myself
and it reminds me how far
I see your blue eyes sometimes

_to Annie_

I am coming home for summer
I don’t have a job here anymore

I’ve got to make some money
I don’t have a job there either

and there are other issues
old girlfriends I still love

and youthful naïveté
but the movies are good.
I'm Sorry

to Annie

I have thumbholes
in my sweater

life is better
today.

I would kiss you
but I never
can remember
your face.

I would watch you
when you're sleeping.

I would miss you
before you leave me.

I would love you today

I would cut you
just to keep you

I would fuck you
just to bleed you

I would need you
I would need you

I would need you.
Please Take my Virginity

to Annie

Where is the beautiful?
Why are the silver linings
so far out to sea?

I know you are a thousand
miles away
and are not the nymph
I dream you to be,

but the edges of the fabric
have begun to fray
so quickly

it is all I can do
to keep from freezing

when I put myself
into the world
where everyone is a granite,

obsidian, marble
statue, unforgiving
of my temperate flesh

shivering as I wander
rows of unswerving stares.

I show films of myself
naked to rooms full
of misanthropes

who tear down cathedrals
to stand on the rubble
and keep pulling
at the threads.

Where is the warmth?
Why can I never breathe
enough air?
As if all my respirations
were blows to the stomach.
I feel so empty
for having swallowed so much.

This solitude ripens
in your presence

when you huddle in the corner
and cast glances
that remind me to stay

where you can see me
but I can never touch you.

In this labyrinth
of one way streets

how will I ever find you?
Giving Blood

_The Lord said to me, "Go show love to your wife again, though she is lost by another and is an adulteress. Love her as the Lord loves... " _

-Hosea 3:1

You won’t take out the needle and would never give me a kidney should I fill with toxin.

Why do you use your arms only on strangers? Have you forgotten your legs will follow different streets?

Will that epiphany come only when you stick your arm through the seedy space between the jamb and the chained door of a paranoid, strung out dealer to prove your trackmarks?

My sobriety and my need for you is more than you can bear, to the point of fingernails on cement and vigils through retching, sweat, cold-turkey struggles when you curse me, call me motherfucker, tell me whose dick you sucked to get your last fix. When I stand in the doorways to the night you bruise my forearms with your fists and smash the lamps and the dishes until everything is broken. But I will not close my eyes.

I will not let you go.
The thing I most wish you could understand

is how hard I have been running.
I have been running,

running so hard, but it is relentless
in its pursuit, this thought.

In its pursuit, this thought
is a bloodhound. This thought

that nobody cares, I can hear it
breathing; I can feel it.

I can feel it there behind me.
It never tires of following

and sometimes I can’t run
anymore. When I can’t run

anymore, I fall in a heap
and it rushes in; a pack of wolves

rushes in and devours my entrails
while I lie helpless

while I lie watching.
When I Heard the News

I thought about sending you money
offering you my place at the table
or coming to see you.

I would sit next to you in the dark
and hold your hand. I would not say a word,
except to whisper something inconsequential.

I would stay as long as you wanted.
These are my ambiguous gifts
and small assumptions about your needs.

I am sure you are tired of pity
and want only love I don’t know how to give.
I am afraid it would all be so patronizing.

Maybe you would like to give me something
without me crying. I will wait here alone
wondering what it might be.
Kinsmen

When they stand behind you
and their knives are not for your back
their eyes shine in the fading light
looking to the horizon.

You will bring your fight to another day.
The fires are being lit.

There will be food and solemn faces
as darkness settles.

There will be stories and talk of home.
When you lie down on your bedroll,

you hear quiet prayers
and the snap of burning wood.

They take turns outside your tent
in the watches of the night.
Obituaries
Suicide Epidemic

In October two people killed themselves in my small home town in Wyoming.

One of them came to my dad’s house a few weeks earlier to show us the rifle later used to make his departure from this place of impending winter where the objects of love withdraw their hearts like trees gathering life into trunks leaving us to fall like leaves.
Solitaire

If you lived alone how long would it take
until someone noticed your absence

you lying backward in the tub
your neck that impossible angle?

Would your mother collect your things
after you didn’t return her calls

and the cops found you sleeping
through your alarm for days?
Determination

He left a note and drove fifteen miles out of town to Inyan Kara Mountain where Custer looked out at the landscape that would lead to the Little Big Horn.

He went all that way in the autumn night to shoot himself with a black powder rifle.

No small feat to measure out the powder and pour it down the muzzle, like the weight of his own ashes into the octagon barrel extending open-mouthed. One last question and a reply that would not come. Nobody knows how he got the hammer to fall.
Choice

I can’t decide whether I would choose the gun or the wrist.

Splattering brain against the wall would be quickest, its punctuation an emphatic blooming period. But it would leave little to the imagination so if I could cut deep and true enough I think I would draw a candlelit bath

leave the faucet run slowly with the drain a sliver open

and fall into the deep white sleep rising in steam from pale pink water.
Finders

My sister's friend had an asthma attack
suffocated while her parents slept in the next room.

The sister of a kid I worked with at Higbee's
hung herself from the rafters in the garage.

Think of the ones who find them
the images burned into their memories

and of those with no words for the finders
flashes of our own daughters and sisters.

All of us move quietly
onward through the heavy air.
The Tunnel

The tunnel ran from one end of town to the other under the interstate

channeling the drainage of spring down off Sundance Mountain.

I could get in through the steel bars spread just enough to pass through

where the tunnel was only big enough for me to walk bent over

an inverted L moving through the center of the blackest O.

Toward the golf course it opened out so tall I couldn’t touch the ceiling.

My neighbor hanged himself there after he molested his daughter.

It reminds me of the futility of opening my eyes in the dark

to the sound of water the tunnel filling with me inside.
Nostalgia

The way you miss people when they die
makes me wish I could see your tears at my funeral

but you shed your tears for me while I lived on
trapped in this house—my body of forgetting

where the pictures have fallen from the walls
faded beyond recognition beneath broken glass.

This is what it is to be a ghost: to live
knowing every day you are forgotten by increments

to walk the halls chasing after memories
each day remembering a little less

until love is just a postcard
from a lover gone so long you can’t recall her face.
Penance

He was a terrible father and a drunk
when his children were young

and eventually he abandoned them
the divorce a formality years later

after he sobered up
when the kids had kids of their own.

He lived miles away from anyone
on a horse ranch in Montana.

One day some visitors found him
his last journal entry on May twenty-second.

They figure he died the following day—
a heart attack against the side of his cabin

looking out to the corral where
a pony ran in circles for days.
The End

The small western town of your childhood
fades and fractures into thousands
of strobe flashes frozen in realtime.

Tombstones in a thunderstorm.

The endless homecoming
procession marching from right to left
across the memory-marquee:

the girl next door falling
in love, marrying a stranger
and bearing children.

Everyone bearing crosses bearing names.

You are the lonely hero of the western
standing in silence at the end
alone in a crop of granite
breathing the damp after the rain.

The saturated gray of the grave
reflects your blurry shadow
between letters and dates of a new epitaph.

The sun burns water from the stone.
Trails in the Woods

I.)
A meadow with two straight rows of pine trees:

He planted them along the path to the cabin for her.

She worked in the garden in the summer and knit sweaters in winter, watching down the rows for his return.

Now there is only a path to a clearing.

II.)
Four log walls with no roof in a canyon:

She waited for her husband who worked in the mines all winter.

She wasn't expecting him until late March when the snow melted and someone finally got through with word that he died of plague in January.

Now there is only space for a door.
Afterlife

The Tao that can be named is not the true Tao.

Turn the corner
onto a street where every body has a light,
white from the center.

Look down and see nothing:
no torso, no legs, no hands.
No longer need them.

Walk without feet,
not knowing whether you move
or the universe moves around you.

Let the stars come to you.
Know that they always have.
It was you who was far away.

Become a word not defined:
not shame not individual.
Stop breathing in

as a mode of existence, find life
in an endless exhale. Let the rivers stop
and the ground flow upstream.
Postcards
Bus stop, 10 a.m., I decide to speak

*Your eyes are amazing.*

Moments later
her friends drive up
and she rides off.
Interstate 90, 5 p.m., I stop at McDonald's

I order a double cheeseburger
from a girl with Minnesota hands
that are thick and soft
when she gives me change.

She smiles and wipes tables
with a seventeen-year-old walk
and a heart never broken
as I sit and eat fries.

She is wearing tight, black pants
showing the hem of tucked-in shirt,
no pantyline, and curves
she has begun to contemplate in mirrors.

Her thick, blond ponytail sways
over the back of her visor,
and her nametag, reading Kyla
dangles when she leans over.

I see dark curves, flashes of red lace
and can't decide if she is innocent.
I am her baffled father separating satin thongs
from socks, thinking of the day I named her.

As I leave, I wonder if it was wrong
to notice her that way. The sunset is cold—
brittle pink, winter has been dark
and my feet are never warm.
My apartment, 2 p.m., I am reminded of Nancy’s salsa

Sunday afternoon naps on the couch,
evening meals with the family,
sneaking out of Kara’s bedroom
before dawn, shivering home
to a futon in a one-room apartment.

Fall evenings in the kitchen,
the red smell of stewing tomatoes,
the pressure cooker sealing jars
of salsa to be stored on a shelf
in the basement for winter.

The last time I stopped by
I sat at the kitchen table with Nancy
and talked, over chips and salsa.
Before I left I noticed the pictures
that were no longer on the piano.

Two years later and a thousand miles away
the click when I open a jar of salsa
is the sound of round characters
returning to flat in my consciousness.
On the sidewalk, 11 a.m., I pass a stranger

In the negative space between
glances meet
press against the window.

All of history
culminates in this moment
and flows from it.
Listening to a song we wrote in high school,
9 p.m., I leave a message for Jason

It's been six months
since you put me on hold
set the phone down
and walked away.

I'm just calling
to see what became
of the dream you once had.
The ways you wanted
to change the world
made me a believer.
If you've given up
I wish I'd never met you.

I hope you still believe
in yourself. I take it back,
I hope you found something
bigger than yourself.
Back porch, 8 p.m., I watch Melissa pick flowers

A silhouette in the fading
light. The sun makes a halo
in wisps of her hair.

I embrace the shadow that falls
in the place where she is not
to the sound of dusk
moving quietly over the skin of the land.
Downtown, 10 pm, I pay $1\textdegree for tea

There are too many after-images
in the walls at home, and I can't think
of anything new. It is like looking at a tapestry
for a long time and closing my eyes.

The pattern is still the same.
There are so many new patterns
in the rain when I go out.
There are new windows to look out of.

The angles are all different
and there are thoughts that don't belong
to me swept into corners that I find
and dust off like a lonely dime on the sidewalk.

On main street there is always the chance
that the most interesting person in the world
will not see me passing by and run
into me as she stumbles coming out of a deli.

When someone sees me from across the room,
It is good not to be home to hear the phone
not ringing. Far better to overhear
conversations that have nothing to do with me.

I look back for the span of a blink.
On the loveseat, 7 p.m., I leaf through a photo album

Three lonely buildings
in the middle of the desert
at the intersection of two strips of dust
leading different directions
through the sage.

An old rusted stove
in the debris of a burned house
on a September day
spent exploring back roads
between Deadwood and Sundance.

In the dry cornstalks
as daylight faded
Kara looking at me
the way autumn light touches the land
after the sun has set.
Computer lab, 8 a.m., I think of home

When I get depressed I go to the WYDOT webcam and watch trucks at the port of entry. Today it is raining which makes it worse and better. It never rained much in the fall so it was that much more wet. Sometimes you have to say fuck it and go. The concept of roads and sidewalks while helpful in the winter just makes me look strange when I don’t follow everyone else. There is only so much I can hold in my mind until I start to forget like the words that were supposed to go here. So I start again from the beginning.
On the road, 3 a.m., I turn left

Driving off the edge
the razor blade of leaving
feel the overwhelming
sense of dé ja vu.

Out into the desert
sense of dé ja vu
the rhythm of the roadcracks
like rocking chair and fever.
Afterword.

In creating this work, I have struggled with issues of aphasia, silence, solitude and negative space. Some of the poems deal with acute pain associated with feeling alone. Other poems are more at peace with solitude, and a few seek to reach for the hope of connectedness and communication.

In terms of style and content, I am very interested in things done by Frank O'Hara. Though my poems tend to be more linear than O'Hara's, I find myself attempting to do some of the things he did. I am especially interested in O'Hara's idea of "Personism," which he described as realizing that "instead of writing a poem I could just pick up the phone." Many of O'Hara's poems are so intentionally directed at a specific person that the references and inside language render them somewhat inaccessible to a general audience. However, I find them compelling. In them I am able to construct hypothetical situations and project my own situations onto the images.

In this manner, many of the poems in this collection are what my colleague Debra Marquart calls "I/you" poems. In helping me with issues in some of the poems, she often suggested "opening them up" by changing them to third person and filling in more narrative detail. I don't think I did that to a single poem she made that comment about.

What I hope to accomplish in these "I/you" poems is create a conversation or situation between two people that readers can view from outside and find interesting or meaningful. I hope the experience is somewhat like overhearing an intimate conversation that causes the listener to reflect on his/her own situation. In a way, I am inviting readers to be voyeuristic. I hope to show readers situations that are so personal that they have no
choice but to evaluate their own lives in light of them. I hope this is an acceptable variation on O’Hara’s “Personism.”

I stole the title for this collection from an album title by my former band “Room 212.” I was the lead singer and guitarist for the band. The “vacancies” described on that album were self-fulfilling prophecies of a sort. Many of the songs spoke of feelings of aloneness. In the liner notes to the album, my dedication to my girlfriend read, “To Kara for lost time and much more.” This was meant to be an apology to her for all of the time spent apart from her that I devoted to music. Little did I know that the time spent with her was also about to be counted as lost, as our relationship ended only a month after the album was released.

I took the title from that album for this collection because I think that the themes had only begun to germinate during the time of writing the music for that album. In this manuscript, I think they finally bloomed. The time after my breakup with Kara was one of the most painful times of my life, in which I felt more alone than I ever have. It was largely due to my pain that I returned to poetry, having done little writing other than song lyrics for four years.

In the section titled “Obituaries” the negative spaces described are in the form of death and the ensuing absence. Though Kara did not physically die, I mourned for the absence of her in my life as if she had. In the ensuing years as I hear from her less and less, I have come to realize that much of the person that she was will never return, as if that version of her is truly dead.
The section “Liner Notes” deals most heavily in “I/you” poems. The idea of this section is to be something like reading the liner notes inside an album cover. When reading liner notes, one rarely has any idea who the people are or what their relationship to the musician is, but there are often clues and inside language that invite imagination. This is the section that is meant to most closely resemble personism.

The section “Postcards” offers small “slices of life” in which the speaker experiences something profound in the mundane but loses the meaning of the experience before it is even over. The poems are intended to be much like a postcard received by the reader. With only a few words and a picture, the reader is offered sparse details and images out of which the imagination can create whatever it desires. This is another variation on personism, using a postcard of sorts instead of O’Hara’s phone.

The section “Laws of Motion” is mostly made up of the newest poems. This section deals largely in using math and physics metaphors for existential questions. It also has some poems that take a somewhat more optimistic turn and often do this through some tendencies of magical realism. I hope these poems are the beginning of a personal transition to new themes and subject matter. Most of the poems in this collection were shaped in some way by the experience of the termination of my relationship with Kara, but it is in the magical realism of poems like “Echo-Osmosis” that I feel the influence of that experience waning. Even these poems deal with issues of vacancy, but I feel them taking a more positive turn.