

# HEAVY LEAD BIRDSONG



poems by Ryler Dustin

Heavy Lead Birdsong

Ryler Dustin

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# Dedication

For Bob, for Graham, for Jessica, for Bellingham.

For my friends there, the best I've ever had.

For Denise.

For Jason.

For Karen, with deep gratitude.

For Aliesha, who I'm never alone with.

For Jack Gilbert, Li-Young Lee, James Tate, Sharon Olds,  
Ralph Waldo Emerson, Carl Sagan.

For Robert Penn Warren's "Masts at Dawn."

For the poets who tithe with sleep.

# Foreword

**The other day I saw** an article on the National Public Radio website about a violinist named Julia Fischer. There was a live recording of her playing Bach. About halfway through one of the songs, it struck me: she wasn't putting her energies into playing, she was putting them into listening. She was listening harder than everyone else in that whole silent auditorium – she was hearing something the rest of us couldn't hear – maybe that perfect rendition of Chaconne, that one that is impossible to achieve, that exists only in the mathematical perfections of the imagination. Maybe something more like rainwater. Maybe her childhood, maybe all of our childhoods.

She was acting as an intercessor.

I started writing because I thought it might preserve my name, and all the things attached to it – might prevent the past from swallowing up so much that has happened to me. Many poems in this collection, the ones I wrote earliest, come from that place of desperation; many were written afterward from a place of mourning, as I learned that nobody's name or history lasts forever. But the better I became at listening, the more I began to hear something beyond my own name: another name, maybe, or a current, a song, something worth study.

One of my favorite poets, Li-Young Lee, said in an interview that he thinks religion is “fossilized poetry.” That strikes me as true, and I like how it implies that perfection and “completeness” are unnecessary in a poem; that the prayer of poetry is fluid, still alive and moving. It makes

me feel better about releasing such a substantial collection containing so much old work. Though I have taken care to create continuity in *Heavy Lead Birdsong*, it is still a moving creature, created from all the styles and ideas I've explored in the past four years. These poems, like their author, are works in progress, the way all poems remain as long as they are alive. I can only hope that a poem, like any other prayer, does not have to be perfect in order to be worthy.

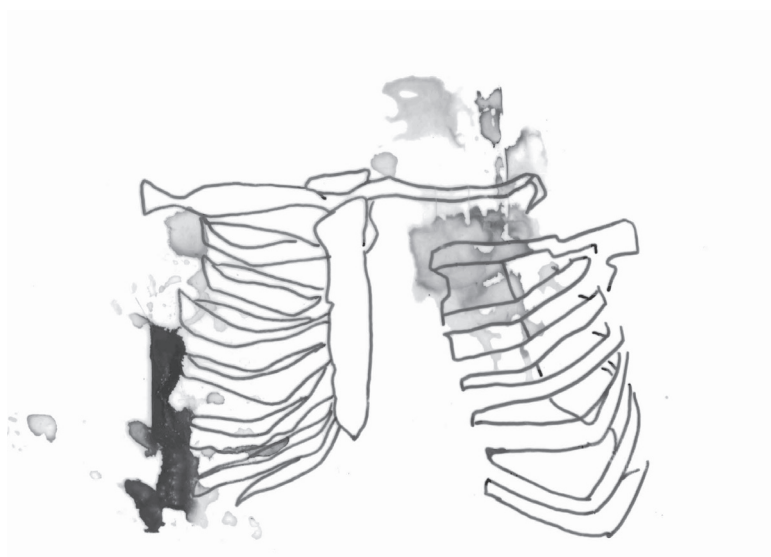
— Ryler Dustin

*Medieval stonemasons  
carved swallows on the walls  
to symbolize escape...*

*the masons' champion  
gone up the rays of light  
to plead their case to angels*

— **Malcolm Kenyon**

# BOOK ONE



# Seven Codas

Some of us will die from hearing too many cars  
pass the road near our homes.  
Or the sidewalk trees rustle too many times.

Our brain keeps track of these things, like an abacus,  
and when the last bead is moved  
a web of nervefire rockets off transmitters  
that tell our body, *Rest, stop, it's alright,*  
*I've seen enough, I'm full now.*

Some of us will die from sketching wet red self portraits  
down our forearms, from wanting to escape life so badly  
that we do.

Some of us will die from wonder.  
Some of us think too much about Phineas Gage,  
about which part of us is us  
and what, if anything, will remain of it.  
We are consumed finally by the overwhelming,  
expanding width of the universe.

Some of us will die kissed by tubes on hospital beds  
being fed intravenous math that adjusts our consciousness,  
our level of pain versus disorientation.  
We'll have to struggle harder than we've ever struggled for anything  
to look out the window between breaths of saline solution

and thought-bending morphine  
to realize  
that's  
*rain*  
outside.

Some of us, like my mother,  
will break the windows of our nursing homes  
and run into the forest to starve like rebels and heroes.

Some of us will die holding a comrade's head  
in the ash of a battlefield,  
thinking in the very end about everything  
except killing.

Some of us will die in our sleep.  
Some sleepyellers like me will jab a sword  
down the throat of a familiar bad dream  
and be tangled up in the deaththroes of its tentacles,  
uprooting our blankets in private nighttime spasms,  
dragging our fears with us into black, secret glory,  
wrestling with the bird skeleton of our boyhood nightmares  
over the last sunset hill,  
down the cliff of ending,  
like Sherlock and Moriarty  
into the freedom of dark.

That is how I have believed I would die

since I was young.

But sometimes,  
wonder  
seems just as likely.



# The Country of Her Lungs

Every day, my mom watches *Day Star*.

The Billy Graham reruns in faded blue light  
make me feel like I'm underwater.

Her house is a perpetual baptism.

Today, the TV is offering a book called  
*God's Answers to our Deep Hurts*.

Outside, for free, the snow is falling.

My mom is a country with lots of rivers  
and bridges falling into them.

She is the only person I love so intensely  
it feels like a sickness, like fear.

I can't wait for her senility to kick in.

Then we'll be able to talk in poetry  
and finally agree about the shape Christ's wind  
should take in our lungs.

# Allie

Baby girl,  
you're big.

Big like all those times  
you balled your fists  
and told some boy *no*.

Big like the teethwide smile  
that split your happy ten year old cheeks  
when I bought you that plastic ruby  
in a checkout line  
with my own money.

Big like your crying  
that filled our empty house  
after Dad got married  
without telling us.

You're big like that propeller toy  
I got tangled in your hair  
when you were three,  
big like my fingers  
trying to work a splinter  
out of your skin,  
big like that fifth grader  
I beat into the bushes with his bicycle

after he touched you.

Baby girl, you're big  
like our five foot mother.

Big like the cars  
that roared past our blue house  
when you were four and I was six,  
big like the job of keeping an eye on you  
while we played,  
big like the thrashing in my ribcage  
after I let you get too close to the end  
of the driveway.

Big like my sleepyelling  
when it cracks through our sleeping house,  
big like the thick bright tire-mounted bullets  
in my recurring dream,  
big like my six year old hand  
grabbing your tiny shoulder  
to spin you back  
from the noise of the street.

Baby girl,  
you're big.

You always have been.

But old instincts die hard  
and I still remember when you needed  
a big brother  
while I sleep.

# Heavy Lead Birdsong

Dear reader, we are the same, our eyes sit  
like heavy windows in black stone  
like widows sewing by lamplight  
in houses that are too small  
to hold their heavy lead birdsongs.

