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The University of Southern Mississippi

ORNITHOLOGY AND APPARENT MAGNITUDE

by

Sarah Michelle Wynn

Abstract of a Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

May 2013

ABSTRACT

ORNITHOLOGY AND APPARENT MAGNITUDE

by Sarah Michelle Wynn

May 2013

Ornithology and Apparent Magnitude is a collection of poems with a critical preface.

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2013

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May 2013

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my dissertation chair, Dr. Angela Ball, as well as the other committee members, Dr. Rebecca Morgan Frank, Dr. Monika Gehlawat, and Dr. Charles Sumner, for their advice and support throughout the duration of this project. Special thanks go to Daphne Daugherty for her time and energy spent editing, and to Dr. Susan Bourland and the staff at the McNair Scholars Program of The University of Southern Mississippi for their support.

Several of these poems are published in earlier versions: “Google Sky” and “In three to six months” appear in the October 2012 issue of *Sundog Lit*. “Sequoiota Park: Springfield, MO” appears in the October 2012 issue of *Emerge Literary Journal*.

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INTRODUCTION

I am an avid bird watcher, as my poems attest, and this activity may stand for this collection. I enjoy the juxtaposition between “instinct” and “categorization.” I value any bird in its natural habitat, but I also have an objective in mind on these expeditions. I target *specific* birds, and my ultimate goal is to see as many bird species as possible. Thus, there are two separate events that come into conflict. First, I see *a* bird.. I intuitively appreciate the bird’s coloration, its unique shape and attributes, and its behavioral patterns. I enjoy it for its instinctual image. Of course, that moment passes, and categorization begins. The classification of the bird—what is its *species*—either elevates or lowers its value to me as the observer. This is particularly apparent with species that are almost identical in appearance. Take the Laughing Gull and the Franklin’s Gull. I have seen the Laughing; I have not seen the Franklin’s. Thus, if the observed bird is correctly identified as a Laughing Gull, I am disappointed. Its value diminishes, because of its common status. If the bird is identified as a Franklin’s Gull, however, it suddenly becomes grander, better.

I observe the clash between instinct and categorization throughout the world and it is this tension that drives me toward poetry. I am interested in the natural view of a thing—the forest before we say it’s a forest, the moons and stars before they have names, the relationship between people before it is defined as a relationship—but I am also intrigued by the classification of that view. After all, Jupiter can be beautiful on its own, without any prior knowledge. But knowing the history of its name, the grandeur of its size, and that its brightness outranks Halley’s Comet, Alpha Centauri, and Andromeda elevates it in power. But, of course, the power of observation can also remove instinctual

gratification. To see Jupiter as a bright image is very different from observing it as a mass that has an apparent magnitude of -2.94, .06 brighter than the faintest object visible by the naked eye when the sun is less than 10 degrees above the horizon. The apparent magnitude may be interesting; it may even be *useful* in describing Jupiter's light. But it does remove the initial image of a bright, powerful mass.

This collection lies at the very critical intersection between instinct and categorization. I approach three subject matters: the environmental versus the urban, the past versus the future, and human relationships. I use carefully defined structures to emphasize instinct, classification, or both. A quick glance through *Ornithology and Apparent Magnitude* shows that I do not only write in forms such as the sonnet or villanelle, but I also include free verse and prose poems. Each work emphasizes sound quality and the appearance on the page. I portray instinct and categorization differently, however. I use imagery for instinct—focusing on colors, shapes, and visual actions—but when I turn to categorization, I use scientific language and processes that are more intellectual and less imagistic. Ultimately, I seek for my work to both describe the beauty of the world around us and to expose how observation and knowledge work on that world—what it means to catalog images, objects, and relationships.

The best examples of how the warring instinct and categorization modes come into conflict are present within the poetry itself. So, to describe my mechanisms and the goals of my poetry, I turn to an in-depth analysis of several poems within the collection, starting with “Diana,” a prose poem found in the second section. It may seem odd that I classify myself as a formal poet and that I begin with a prose poem. The question may also arise as to how I decide which poems within the collection will become prose, which

will become free verse, and which will become highly-structured traditional forms such as villanelles. I believe that the structure of a poem is instinctual and that a “formal” poet is simply someone that respects a structure. Each poem determines its own form as it is being written and not before the fact. Therefore, I never sit down to write a sonnet. But a poem I begin to write can easily become a sonnet through the writing process.

I always begin my poems in prose format. Perhaps this is because I began as a fiction writer. As I write first-draft poems, I am extremely conscious of the language that I use. Some poems fall into iambic pentameter fairly quickly, and each important phrase ends at around ten syllables, or after each ten syllables a strong noun or verb is present. These become sonnets. Within some poems, I find myself constantly repeating certain phrases, so I turn these into villanelles. Other poems, however, do not instinctually nor intuitively repeat one or two phrases. If the lines of these poems break evenly and on strong nouns or verbs, they become free verse. If, however, the attempt to break the lines becomes uneven, or if the ending words are weaker, or if the poem loses a visual momentum that is at the heart of the subject, then it is left a prose poem. “Diana” is such a poem.

The poem begins “You don’t own the moon. The astronomers didn’t name it after you, like they named Io, Titan, Nix—and now there is nothing to name.” Any attempt to break the lines would render the poem weaker. I could, for instance, break the poem on what I feel are the strongest and most important words:

You don’t own
the moon. The astronomers didn’t name
it after you

like they named Io, Titan, Nix—and now there is nothing
to name.

The central conflict in the poem is between the act of naming and the act of owning; thus “own” is important for a line break. So is “name” and “after you.” “Nothing” provides a contrast to the list of what is actually in existence, and “name” ends on the central subject. Yet the lines are distractedly uneven, as is the syllable count (3/10/4/14/2). The form of the poem does not make sense visually or audibly. I could, then, break the poem following the first phrase:

You don’t own the moon.

The astronomers didn’t name...

Breaking in this way, however, is arbitrary. The beginning sentence is quick and strong, and rightfully so. Yet the poem is not only focused on Diana's anger. It also examines what Diana represents: natural image such as the moon and the “Great Egret of a winter-bare tree.” Beginning the poem so directly gives weight to Diana's anger, and the softer image of the egret loses weight. The poem becomes unbalanced. If the sentence cannot be its own line, then, perhaps it could break in this way:

“You don’t own the moon. The astronomers

didn’t name it after you like they named Io...

These lines are more appropriately balanced, but the ultimate impact of the poem is still lacking. The prose poem gives momentum to the speech directed at Diana. The lines describe anger at the lack of the naming process. The breaks here, however, do not emphasize what is ultimately important: the naming. The first line breaks on “astronomers,” a strong noun, but one that is secondary to the poem’s purpose. The

astronomers are an instrument in the poem, but they are not a central facet. It would be possible to break on the first “name,” making the line longer:

You don't own the moon. The astronomers didn't name
it after you like they named Io, Titan, Nix—and now there
is nothing to name.”

This, while better, scatters the repetition of “name.” “Name” does not end every line, nor is it placed at the end of a syllable count. Likewise, the impact of the list (Io, Titan, Nix) is lost, since it is embedded within the middle of a line, instead of at the end or between lines. Furthermore, the “it” and “is” at the beginning of the second and third lines are distracting in their similarity, and the ending word “there” is weak. If the line break were longer—perhaps ending after “you” on the first line, then it becomes cumbersome to read and is almost a prose poem. When we return to the prose poem, however, the poem is more clear, concise, and direct:

You don't own the moon. The astronomers didn't name it after you like
they named Io, Titan, Nix—and now there is nothing to name.”

The prose gives even lines and does not focus too heavily on the beginning sentence. The secondary words such as “astronomers” are not given additional weight, and the list serves its purpose within the prose. Most importantly, the repetition of “name” is present to guide the reader to interpretation without being distracting. The prose form is where the poem should be.

The poem describes the conflict between instinct and categorization. It portrays the old-world character of Diana—a stand-in for instinct as the goddess of the egret, the winter-bare tree, and the moon before it was named—who has been denied participation

in the categorization of celestial bodies. Furthermore, the ending stanza reveals an instinctual object: “But elsewhere, a moon burns in a fever of sulfur. It slowly implodes, writhing. It is barren, unknown, eccentric in an orbit that grates its surface with anger. It is waiting to be named, told why it burns with such force, such heat.”

The natural elements of the moon—its bareness, heat and sulfur, and eccentric orbit—come into conflict with what it is waiting for—a name, classification, an explanation for its force and heat. The ending of the poem implies that this unnamed moon will eventually be named “Diana,” and this name gives the “why” of its natural elements. Through categorization, Diana’s anger is transplanted onto a celestial body. Whether that is a positive—giving the moon a purpose and a history; or negative—corrupting the natural being of the body into something it was previously not—is left to interpretation. Regardless, after the process of naming, the moon will change forever.

Within my speculative-fiction poetry, the clash between instinct and categorization becomes more apparent. Speculative-fiction balances between two separate times—the future and looking back on the past—and, often, two places—a new planet and the familiar Earth. Instinctual images surface from past Earth and speakers fight to classify the past world, the present world, and the difference between them. The tension between these classifications highlight what we can potentially gain or lose as society moves forward. A good example is “New Earth.” The setting is clearly speculatively based: “the stars are different,” “we came here on ships.” Yet, the images of the poem are familiar: “the Little Blue Heron/hunts frogs in the reeds,” “there is sky, grass.” Within this poem—as in many of my speculative-fiction poems—instinct fights categorization through both place and time. Instinct becomes the old world—the Earth

and the past, described through familiar and natural images. Categorization becomes the current world and the future, described through the impact of technology and scientific language and process.

In “New Earth,” the clash between the old Earth and the new, futuristic world is highlighted through a series of haikus. During the first draft of the poem, I realized that I had defined snapshots of the future. The snapshot mode was the natural, intuitive form of the poem. I didn’t want to explain the world in detail as a short story would do, and I wanted to focus on images and thoughts. The haiku was perfect. It was soft enough for natural images and strong enough for forceful phrases. Each haiku-stanza gives one image or idea that contrasts with other haiku-stanzas within the larger poem. For example, the first stanza—“The stars are different,/but the Little Blue Heron/hunts frogs in the reeds”—emphasizes old world familiarity through images. The fifth stanza, however—“This time it will be/different. This time, we will learn/to forgive ourselves”—is time based and focuses on a future learning (a type of classification—to learn of something is to understand and catalog its properties) of forgiveness. Throughout the poem there are things lost—mountains, the moon, history—and things kept—“the common names of clouds,” wood, reeds, souls.

What is kept, however, is often what has become categorized. Compare the fourth stanza with the sixth stanza. In the fourth stanza—“The moons are less bright/than one, if the one is large,/illuminating”—the remembered moon is a clear image. It is large and bright, and it invokes the reader’s own memory of the moon. Of course, the imagistic moon has been left on the past Earth. In the sixth stanza, the poem describes the familiar things that have been transported to the planet—“There is sky, grass. Wood/still floats.

We have not lost the/names of common clouds.” Here, though, what would be an intuitive natural beauty is replaced with categorization. The sky and grass are not given adjectives to make them into images, the wood is described only through its property (it floats), and what has been kept of the clouds is not their shape or their image, but rather their classified names. The old-world familiar has become a new-world classified. The poem hinges on the fifth stanza in the middle of the poem—“This time we will learn/to forgive ourselves.” The implication that the old world has failed is clear, but the new world is not safe. The ability to learn, to classify and categorize, could help the people of “New Earth,” but the loss of instinctual gratification could be their undoing, as well.

In these poems, instinct versus categorization combines with natural imagery verses technological process and scientific language. But how does the juxtaposition translate to human relationships? I often focus on autobiography. I have been deeply affected by my grandmother’s death from cancer in 2012. Many of these works surround her diagnosis, treatment process, and eventual death. In addition, the poems focus on relationships between family members. An example is “Four Months After Easter.” My grandmother died around Easter 2012, and there was an awkward period afterwards in which I and my step-grandfather learned to relate to each other without her. The poem describes this awkwardness, but also a healing.

“Four Months After Easter” is free verse, as are many of my more autobiographical poems. During first drafts, my autobiographical poems tend to be less structured and more scattered. The poem is divided into two sections. The first describes the awkwardness of the relationship: “Things are awkward/now, between us: three

person/memories missing an image.” The second describes the healing process through a trinket: a two-inch turquoise box.

The box appears in the second section, in line three, and it forms the catalyst of the healing relationship. The speaker first wrongly assumes that the box belonged to the grandmother, but later learns that it is owned by the *grandfather*. The end of the poem states “I find it expanding/in my hands, large/enough to hold both of us.” The box becomes the catalyst because it is of significance—“He asks me what/matters. I find this” —and because its ownership forms a bridge between the speaker and the grandfather. The significance of this box, however, lies at the intersection between instinct and categorization. It is first, simply a box without significance. Its appearance—“Small. Two inches, but it/opens. Blue. Turquoise./On the top, a dragonfly”—might, indeed, be instinctually beautiful. But the significance of the object comes from categorization. Inside is “whatever young me had placed there” and it is memory and the use of the object that accounts for its value. It is an arbitrary object used by a child, but when that child has become an adult, the object gains value as *a memorable object*. Furthermore, the object continues to gain value when it is classified by ownership: ownership by the grandfather. The classification turns it from a small object to something expanded and “large/enough to hold/both of us.” Here, categorization promotes the object to something grand and wonderful.

Regardless of the subject matter, instinct and categorization affect us all. Our world is observed: we name objects, we use language to describe processes, we attempt to explain phenomena, and we assign value to events and items. Sometimes, it is the instinctual beauty of an image that is most valuable. We appreciate the simplicity and the

intuitiveness of a bird not classified, of a process not understood, of an object not yet named. Other times, however, it is the classification that gives purpose, history, and value. The knowledge of a process allows us to appreciate the image, an unknown moon is given a cause, a simple box becomes a token of familial love. The poems in this collection seek to expose these intersections, juxtapositions, and combinations. It is my hope that the readers of *Ornithology and Apparent Magnitude* will take time to appreciate the simple beauty of natural settings and relationships, but that they will also foster their curiosity and let the examination of those settings and relationships elevate them to something new and great.

I.

ENTROPY

Everything decays linearly:
the tendency to consume
even you, my young Killdeer,

screeching into your first morning,
your parents' distraction display
decaying linearly, forging

broken legs, bruised wings
that mark the mudflats
that corrode even you, Europa,

tidally locked satellite, smoothest
moon striated by cracks decaying
linearly and increasing, always

increasing the energy conversation,
the waste heat, the heat blue to yellow
to even you, rock salt road, dense air,

hail-iced, snow iced, inferior mirage
in which everything decays linearly
even you, conglomerate of particles
and light.

BETWEEN GRENADA AND JACKSON

The pine extends forward and the car moves toward
Mississippi, while somewhere still in Tennessee,
my grandmother has squamous cell nestled in her lung,
buried down against her spine. Tonight, the trees
are glowing from the beam of headlights, lines
reflecting onto bark that lights up the shadows
like scans in the road, patterns without shapes
that extend to the darkness of pine, full with winter.
The stars are hidden above clouds that move in, then
out. The moon. Not the moon. The pine extends
and the light in the trees looks like sunlight, broken
rays descending from pale glowing trunks, flashes
of cone, needles. I wonder if the car's headlights
are too high, if there will be traffic in the next town,
if it will snow, if I'm close to a nature reserve,
if I'm shining my brights, if the pine stops.

SEQUIOTA PARK: SPRINGFIELD, MO

The pond is empty because the city has taken it.
They've removed the rocks, the water, the geese,
the one mallard that lived here until she died,
the cave drawings from 2007, the fish.

We are left with the residue of algae that lies
at the bottom of the crater, blue-green, reflective.

They will replace it. The city has said. But now:
uprooted trees, cracked concrete, our parking
pass, the beetles that scurry to walk
the machines that dig sidewalks, the praying
mantis colored to blend into the Nissan
Sentra, the rock we found Thursday.

Eventually, the city will return the water, the trees,
the mallards, the path with even lines of dirt.

They will not return the fish. This is out of budget.
This has been spent.

THE EXHIBIT

The white branch
of the birch tree
covers the black mountain,
its bark indented, knotted,
split into smaller twigs,
the mountain half visible
behind it.

The others move on quickly,
but for a long time, he stares.
He has never seen anything
like it. A guide tells him
about the birch, how they found
a picture once and spent thousands
replicating it to show how the place
was different back then.

She tells him it grows naturally
by water and he asks *what is water?*
She tells him it runs within each
of them invisible. She says it is living.

He tries to speak to the birch, hoping
for something. She smiles,
but her eyes ask a question.

So he asks her about the process
and the encasing, the cost, steps
taken to produce it when he really
wants the coolness of the bark
pressed against his hand.

THYLACINE

His knowledge of the living is random,
 nature having died out before he was born,
 before even his grandfathers. Once he found
 a book of pictures that showed four legged
 things in captured motion, bodies lifted,
 walking through colors that haven't survived

in this sky-length city that by sheer force survives
 in will and wire, breathing limbs a mesh of random
 elements pushed together, glass lifted
 into new places to build on new levels born
 of man. The city's cells of people move on sure legs
 but slowly, barely lift their feet from the foundation.

He sees the thing that moves in pictures, stalking, finding
 other things like it, stepping fast, surviving
 with movement, large jumps, spots, random
 patterns on the coat, on the tail, the legs.
 Its body tensed and prepared, next picture lifted
 into the air, muscles stretched, the spirit born

in him through the image of an animal born
 from these spare pages found
 lying discarded. He keeps the pictures, left
 in a bedside drawer, pulled out so that he can survive
 another day, learn a new movement for his legs,
 feel more like himself in the cluttered, random

city. For years he searches for the name of it in random
 books, articles, asks people he feels were born
 with the want to know (like he is), limbs
 more soft in the world. He has found
 no one who knows, and weakened, must survive
 until he finds the answer. So he lifts

the pages away and stares at it at night, lifting
 it toward his eyes to memorize its random
 lines, the crinkles in the page, the paper surviving
 barely in the hands that have worn it, birthed
 its picture into life again—he thinks if he did not find
 it, his eyes would never have learned to see, his legs

would stiffen, not survive. He might never be born
in this random life, might never have moved his stricken legs,
lifted his limbs and eyes up to be found.

ALCHEMY

To make the Northern
Mockingbird, combine
wire and song.

For wire: copper,
silver, plastic. A frame,
uppertail coverts,
distinctive wing pattern.

Hollow the body.
Twist into shape.
Paint the eyes
delicately.

For song: anything.
Alarms, bat sonar,
the closing of a car
door, the lyrics of
others:

Whip-poor-wil,
pick-up-a-real-
chick, kill-deer,
who-cooks-for-
you?

Once combined,
let set to solidify,
let set to wake.

MONTH THREE

To avoid talking of her cancer, we begin
to recycle, sort through milk jugs, cans,
shredded paper, ink cartridges, mason
jars from unfinished lantern lights,
batteries, old bottles of codeine, prednisone,
amoxicillin, salt, cocoa powder. We untie
six-year-old bread for twist ties and organize
piles of brick, phones, memorized letters,
and the wood from a collapsed trailer roof.
We cut buttons from jeans, whittle down
arrowheads for the stone, gut the insides
of collectable bells, scrape the butter
she churned from jars. We peel the inside
of the handmade screen door from its hinges,
break the iron railings she was given,
the propane tank bought ten years ago,
the ceramic pots made from the clay
of Tennessee. Exhausted, we sit,
stare out over the place where the stairs
used to be, the fence, the car, the motor home
driven to Jackson, the pathlights, the road, breath.

SUMMER REUNION

We drive seventeen miles through farm land, cow ponds, wire fences to view the baby vultures. This was after your family reunion, folding chairs placed in water, the rain in Florida, the fire in Marked Tree, the hooded merganser.

This was, of course, after they wiped the graffiti from the Jackson exit. It was after the purple martins and the funeral, Louisville, the third gecko, and especially after we found the dead catbird next to the unleaded.

We listened to them hiss, tucked down in their barn, full of new feathers. We called it cute. We took pictures. Later, we posted about it. We showed it off. We hissed like them, shaved our heads like them. We wondered how we could return to that, find that barn in the heat of June and nest.

SNOWY EGRETS

are skinnier than other egrets, whether
by design or follow through. I know after
the Pensacola egret, the Bayou Sauvage,
the Rockefeller Refuge, the highway 45.

I know they are not other egrets because
their legs are black and because they sadden
me in this place without snow, in this place
without ice or company.

I have never seen two snowy egrets together.
There is no name for their flock. They are not
a murder, a kettle, a flight, a charm. Nor are
they gaggles, sedges, knots, chimes.

They are only white birds with black legs
and nothing else to show for it.

OBSERVATORY CHANDRA FINDS NEW EVIDENCE TO SUPERNOVA

RCW 86, Chandra has detected you, has recorded
 your high blue energies in mirrors, your medium greens,
 your rapid expansion and light. Chandra rewards

you old titles of shells and core-collapse, identifies,
 records ring debris, magnetic fields, red heat, and—
 RCW 86, Chandra has detected your

star material wind that cleared a cavity to board
 you up and hold you. Your evidence of iron
 in the expanding remnant of light has rewarded

you with Type 1A classification, distorted
 the rarity of your existence, but
 RCW 86, Chandra cannot unrecord

your guest star, your first recorded
 sighting, your eight months of sky.
 Your expansion and color reorders into

greens, red, 8000 years of light,
 your low dim temperature fades its remnant.
 But, RCW 86, Chandra still watches your
 infrared light, your heat, your unimpeded expansion.

SANDWICH TERN: BILOXI, MS

He's lying on the beach, black yellow-tipped
beak angled to the road. White feathers blend
into white sand, glaring light. His black crown
marks him different. He bends forward to sand

while all the Laughing Gulls are standing. Sound
brings the gulls to flight, shadows cast against
the sun, changing with the wind, carrying
them onward over rough seas, dead jellyfish,

posts with standing pelicans, dolphin fins,
swarms of small silver fish. They dive to catch,
then lift themselves against the wind, strong currents.
They fly past the tern, then to him, calling.

The tern stands on one foot, falls, lifts wings, angles
to a gust that brings him skyward, carries
him past other birds, sand, and shells,
then drops him against the tide, alone.

WHAT WE HAVE TO LOOK FORWARD TO

A thousand thirty new miles of road, four
point one million births, ten thousand extinct
species and ten thousand new to restore
what's lost. Also: depleted tin reserves

bionic eyes, bionic eye tattoos,
an interstellar message that will
arrive at Gliese 777, carried through
a half-discovered area of space.

Also, Ted. There is Ted to look forward to.
He is our future, even if he is flawed.
Ted will step on Saturn, Ted will misconstrue
the rules of science. He will rename sparrows,

he will have other Teds and Teds after that
and those Teds will finally understand what
it's like to see new sparrows, to arrive at
new roads, to live tin-less.

GOOGLE SKY

This is an urban poem. This is a poem about bricks, architecture, the reflective skyline. Also, Dollar General, Winn-Dixie, the BP. This is a poem about more than one bookstore, about three museums, about the grid layout of well planned streets and the color of the convention center.

This is also a poem about Jupiter. I have seen Jupiter every night for twenty days. Jupiter has followed me from St. Louis to Olive Hill to Jackson to Memphis to Yellville to Gulfport. Jupiter is with me. Jupiter is the only celestial I can see because Jupiter has an apparent magnitude of -2.94, which is better than Halley's Comet, than Fenrir, than Alpha Centauri, than Andromeda, with .06 more light than the faintest object visible by the naked eye, during a day when the sun is less than 10 degrees above the horizon. In other words, Jupiter is bright.

And this is a poem about brightness: the brightness of the Arch, the brightness of the bank swallows, the brightness of highway 45, the brightness of Memphis industrial center, the brightness of the backlight of my HTC inspire, the brightness of a sky with no stars.

II.

YESTERDAY

she was thinking of her mother, counting
the fiddler crabs as they moved in circles
away from her, her feet printed in the mud
from where she had just been. Yesterday,
she was missing her. Everything was the smell
of the bayou, the presence of swamp rabbits,
clapper rails, snakes. Yesterday, the boardwalks
shone their cracking planks in the light.

Today, however, she is courageous,
pensive. Today is a funeral in the hills and she
wears the bodies of the fiddler crabs, their
torsos extending from her skin. Now, she
is the whiteness of the egret, the black of the deep
salt marsh. Now, she is the red of the setting sun,
the light across the boardwalks. She is the crevice
of the Bayou Sauvage, the ripples are of her making.
Now she can dig, dig, dig.

DIANA

You don't own the moon. The astronomers didn't name it after you like they named Io, Titian, Nix—and now there is nothing to name. They have taken Cyllene, Janus, Hyperion, Sao, the cantenas, lines of craters, the tectonic ridge dorsa, the terra between seas. There is nothing left, and on Earth, no one needs you to hunt. You have been replaced with street lights, neons, fluorescents and blacklights. The gunshot is enough to rouse the Great Egret of a winter-bare tree, enough to leave the rails hidden in the marshes and the waters devoid.

There is nothing here for you. But elsewhere, a moon burns in a fever of sulfur. It slowly implodes, writhing. It is barren, unknown, eccentric in an orbit that grates its surface with anger. It is waiting to be named, told why it burns with such force, with such heat.

HWY 45 NEAR TUPELO, MS

The chipping sparrows vacate the tree
that housed them, escaping from the limbs
like stale air, rising on high drifts. Winter.
They fly over cotton fields, broken stalks,
exposed dirt and gray concrete speckled
with dried leaves, twigs, fallen feathers
of brown and white. North, there is snow
blowing in. To the south is warm brush,
fields without frost. But here, they stop,
descend in droves toward telephone wires
that vibrate minutely as each lands, become
heavy with the weight of bodies, tails, beaks.
The yellow lines lead passing cars below,
break the dull colors. The road is quiet,
except for the rush of trucks. A horn blows.
One bird lifts its wings, rises into the chilled
air. Hundreds of shadows follow.

GLANCE

He can see himself, a blurred reflection, a third of what he really is—he can't tell the shape of the jaw or the height. But he sees the eyes. People walk past and blur reflections with reflection. Taller, wider, longer and all of this is making him feel small and somehow separate, the images passing him, not integrating like they'd integrate with others if they all stopped and stood together. His eyes are different than the eyes that pass. Perhaps because of their color, their shape, their clarity. Perhaps, also, because they are the only ones looking.

THE FUTURE OF SKIN

A mesh over his body, it obscures
color and light, fades the darkness
of his hair, makes vague his 43V5
hue skin. Pastelling neons,
fading brightness.

He wants to remember the color
of his natural self.

Right next to the skin, up against
the flaking cells, the shield curves
against the shape of his eyes.

He has learned how to cut it
and whispers thin a sharp
point, hovering above the skin.
If he feels it, he will bleed.

In the moment, he memorizes
the color of the inside of his elbow,
temporary red against it.

The shield manufactures cotton,
webs it into a solid piece, and wraps
the spot, spitting antiseptic.

THE FUTURE OF SKIN II
After Finding a Book on Fashion Design

He is obsessed. Begins to search the city
for fabric and finds little of anything raw,
clothing sewn by needles and pins attached
to metal arms attached to metal bodies the size
of houses. Arms of the house, jutting from the wall,
steel fingers knitting. He finds chiffon
a level down and hides it next to the bed.

He turns off the protocols and cuts
where it hovers over the skin so that he can
feel the translucence of the cloth, stretch
it to see his hand thinly through pastel blue.

Seventy seconds later the shield mends.
He cuts to find his eyes different, lighter.
Cut over the toe, colder. Cut over the arm,
shiver. The smell of copper. But it's alright.
The air adjusts to the temperature he set last
week, the dark room hues are replaced, his
blood pressure steadies. He is no longer
cold, but still hungry.

CLOUD SEEDING

Below the plane, Arkansas:
winter after a summer
drought. Still, there is
something left: Little Mingle,
Crooked, White River.

The plane descends,
weather modification:
dry ice, silver iodide
scatter against the ducks
in fights, pepper harvest
gold leaves with supercool
liquids that reduce hailstones
and hiss of temporary
incapacitation, residual
injury. But still, the silver
is so much less than we
are used to and North Fork
needs water.

CURIOSITY

About the twentieth of May he turns
his chair around and looks out through the house
and decides he will change his life, burn
the floorboards, wall, and let the fire rouse
the dust from foreign things he's known for all
this time, the letters, blinds, teacups, the suit
his father gave him, mail scattered and sprawled
across the floor and *Trivial Pursuit*.
To set alight, inflame, fire the home,
engulf the ceiling, blaze the kitchen, ash
the foundation, light polyurethane foam,
ignite the interior paint gashes.
To extinguish, to fade, to have die down,
to quiet, to turn the chair back around.

ACCIDENTAL ENCOUNTER

Two women fight in the gravel road, voices
high, sharp, long fingernails jabbed to street
signs, trailers, chained dog. This headlight,
this curve, this dirt. One steps forward,
scatters gravel.

Behind them, the cat jumps from the dumpster,
breaks the line of ants on the rim. The sound
echoes against the green metal. The gestures
stop. The cat is calico, some lost to the wire
fence—spot on the shoulder where color meets.

The sun is low. The ants pause. Insect
body lines form again. In the distance, the cat
darts from brush to thick line of trees.
The woman turns, clears her throat.

EXPERIMENT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS

Beakers, white walls, hands under blacklight.
What is she getting paid for this—washing
other people's hands in the darkness
of a backroom, bending to notice what
remains, counting small bacterial lights
patterning over the freckled skin of our
hands? Quietly, she cleans our fingernails,
our thumb prints, knuckles, asks our age.

We respond that we feel so small
here, enclosed in the brick basement
of a building with so many windows
it rivals the orange glow under glass.

SNAPSHOT OF THE NEW MEDICAL TECHNOLOGY

I.

She flips through the fashion
catalog for the perfect new skin hue,
instead decides to get her teeth removed.

II.

Only major surgical procedures
are not given through the skin.

III.

When he recharges the suit,
he asks for an increase in the acid
blockers, his stomach too active
for the liquid food given. Nothing
to break down.

IV.

Without the suit, some cannot
see.

V.

He's been sitting in bed
for three months and he
hasn't moved. His muscles
do not atrophy and he doesn't
get hungry. Eventually, when
the suit diagnoses the cause
of his depression, he will get up.

VI.

The suit stops before an overdose
and, panicking with the pain, she
tries to cut it off. The protocols
call the security building and she
is taken in.

VII.

The suit is put on the infant and within three seconds it diagnoses her allergy to food compounds and a common medicine. It finds a chemical imbalance within her brain that stimulates aggression and equalizes it. In later years, she is happy.

WAKING

She wakes to the sound of her own
breathing, something she's become prone
to in the last six
months. She can predict
it, the tick, the well known

feeling of four a.m when all
is silent, still, shadows crawling
over the wall in
signs, over her skin.
She has been recalling

noise, the sound of feet, the new light
of the sun. It's the dead of night
she cannot stand. Soon
comes the afternoon
the day strewn with soft light

cast, but now all is unrest,
the quiet dark room too compressed
in its stone chipped walls,
her body too small
and the draw of her breath.

FOUR MONTHS AFTER EASTER

I.

The electric has gone out from
 the pressure of heat, so we sit
 outside, on brick steps while
 the cat eats honeysuckle
 from the edge of the house. I
 mention her. But that's all.
 A mention. Things are awkward
 now, between us: three person
 memories missing an image,
 the plural of grandparent.

II.

They are dividing her
 things. He asks me what
 matters. I find this: a box.
 Small. Two inches, but it
 opens. Blue. Turquoise.
 On the top, a dragonfly.
 Inside, a broken doll's
 arm, but what used to be inside
 an arrowhead,
 a ring,
 a polished creek stone, a marble,
 whatever young me had placed there.

I tell him this matters.
 I ask him if it
 was hers. He says
 no. He says it is his.
 I feel it expanding
 in my hands, large
 enough to hold
 both of us.

III.

NEW EARTH

The stars are different,
but the Little Blue Heron
hunts frogs in the reeds.

We came here on ships
stocked with DNA, stocked
with supplies, with souls.

There are no mountains.
This place is flat valley, swamp,
desert, savannah.

Two moons are less bright
than one, if the one is large,
illuminating.

This time it will be
different. This time, we will learn
to forgive ourselves.

There is sky, grass. Wood
still floats. We have not lost the
names of common clouds,

though we have no history
and the neighboring planet
is tidally locked.

DEER WOMAN

This place does not exist, but stay. You have nowhere left to go and the deer woman implores you forward, her pupils fawn spots. She has eyes of stone, feet of felt. Stay with her, learn her joys. You have never known joy, but the deer woman has lived through moons much brighter than yours. She is more serene than any dying star, any declaration. The deer woman is fast and she will not allow you to approach her. She is a distant statue of herself, much like you are. This is why she likes you, the keeper of so many objects, the presence that will not stay, the new deer woman.

URBAN ECOLOGY

We are not disparate. This is what's here: the brown thrasher, the loblolly pine, the eastern fox squirrel, the great egret in ditches of concrete waterways, wires of kingbirds, kites, kestrels, kingfishers. Even the mockingbird sings of drills, car backfire, alarms.

Forget that metal and glass extend the travel of the opossum. Forget that coyotes are bigger threats since industry. Forget that roots grow under concrete. Proclaim that the ironweed, the switchgrass, the red buckeye, the buttonbush, the Jacob's ladder, the white false indigo are out of place. Pretend that they are not, in fact, part of us.

THE TRADITIONAL MEANING OF TATTOOS

The astronauts have swallow tattoos, which is stupid because 5,000 miles (9,250 kilometers) is a different measurement in space than on sea. And besides the issue of nautical—spacial—expertise, they are neither valuable, nor trustworthy, nor a sense of status. You cannot count spaces like you can count seas and there is no horn, neither of African, nor of Saturn, nor of comets, nor of moons.

And besides, the beauty of the swallow is half air, half ability to fly. Without movement, the shape of the wings has no power. Without light, no color. The swallow has nowhere to go in a directionless void and it cannot bring you home.

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT

A closet with two sets of clothes,
a female Orchard Oriole, half
a jar of churned butter, power
during the waxing moon, study
during the waning, a dash of salt,
three fourths cup of milk, crystal
quartz and also obsidian. Also,
carnelian. Also, peridot.

Also, the time we spent in Kentucky
in the hotel lobby, where the man
across the room stole glances
from his seat in front of the one
hotel computer, trying to comprehend
the bits of our conversation: *Harry
Potter*, Missouri, our aunts, *YouTube*
in the classroom.

And, too, the way Kentucky nights
feel after hours of karaoke, after
hours of taking care of drunks,
after hours of conversation, burritos,
taxis, cigarette smoke, tricolored carpet,
cellphone alarms and the beginning of days.

CARBON

At the self-checkout, I swipe
the sun Visa, buy nature CDs
in bulk, Florida Orange, and wires
for the broken laptop. Today
the tarot kept changing, cropping
up the ten of cups, the lovers,
the tower like a broken compass.

The sun is directly overhead and I'm
late for lunch. Heat mirages fluctuate
the wind, reflect off my sun-colored
car. The parking lot is empty, except
for me and the grass growing between
cracks in the concrete. My car is northward,
the cart tilts eastward, eventually knocks
against the driver's door.

Below the car, sudden rattle. Hissing
in the hot wind. A opossum, mouth
open. She looks at the cart, yellow eyes,
small replicas clinging to her
white belly. She's dug into the car,
nested in the wires, made a bed underneath
the hood. I pull the cart back slowly,
but she strikes, bites the metal
bar. One baby hisses. Her fur moves
in the wind, soft to touch.

THE SHADOWSCAPES TAROT: THE WORLD

You have called to the unidentifiable bird flock and they have come. You have gathered the skirts, pressed a headdress from rounded gold and orbed creation. You have woven this safe space, this all green leaves, this spherical light. Here is completion, the journey moving outward, but beyond the round, green enclosure is a city of steel. Beyond, there are things you must return to, like employment and relations. Beyond are light bulbs to be changed, memos to write, wires to unfray. Beyond is electricity, voices piled upon voices, the dark deep of cement, the first hard clicks of steps moving linearly forward, forward, forward.

A NEW CITY

The city is the length of the sky,
seven miles long, layers, built one
on another, insides crowded and white,
nothing touching. Space between
the things that move like cells
over steel skin, one skin, one tower.
Limbs of stone and steel, smooth.
Symmetrical. Not curved or cut.
Still. Electric beating organs, peopled
blood moving. Feet of concrete resting
on ground. The ground is not still.
The ground is liquid. The ground
is for burying. The city will not bury.
No one can dig glass.

The city is not made of the tongues of walrus,
the primrose willow sepal, the eye
of the seagull, the sagebrush stem.
It is tungsten, boron, chromium, dysprosium.

AN OPEN SONNET TO THE SALTWATER MARSH

Thank you for your custom, your tide and sedge,
your reeds and rushes. Thank you for your low
topography, your mixed and brackish edged
water, your salt-tolerant plants, free flow

cordgrass, black mangrove. Thank you for the birds,
the herons that skim the mudflats, the wrens
and rails, the bitterns slowly stirring
sediment. And we must thank you again

for land reclamation, conversion from
marsh to upland driveways, bridges, locked gates.
Thank you for the sedimentation's harsh
rate that exceeds the slow subsidence rate.

Thank you for the birds migrating
north. After all, we have use of you.

RITUALIZATION

Every 4,332.59 days Jupiter rotates around the sun. This is a constant, defined ritual like the constant that every 4,332.59 days, we are 11.87 years older. Perhaps, we will live through nine Jupiters. No one has lived through eleven.

This is unfortunate and Jupiter tries to keep up, moving at 13.07 km/s, which isn't fast enough, even if it is decent for a body of its size. But who can blame Jupiter for its 11.87 years? After all, there are many other things we won't see:

four billion seconds, the Chinese River Dolphin, 137 and negative 129 degrees Fahrenheit, the Bulldog Rat, the sun's explosion, Pangaea, the arrival of the Gliese 777 message, the Mason River Myrtle, the memories before.

THE STING-RAY POOL

He waits. Behind him, his father talks to someone. Outside, a blue plastic pool, dark shadows over the water, passing cars, passing birds. Whispers from behind him. The shadows look real, something below the water, like the sting-ray pool he saw at an aquarium once, leaning over the railing with the other children, reaching in to touch. The sides of the rock pool cold as he lay against it. His father behind him, rustling of clothing. His pinky to the water, break the smooth surface. Dark shapes float past, materialize into something real, sharp, sting ray. He wants them to cut through the surface, solid, ice that doesn't melt in salt-water, foot-long pin needles. But all there is his father's voice lowering in the hot room, a response, two smiles, two touches and him, leaning against the glass, looking out over the plastic pool.

FAMILY RELATIONS

In honor of your Irish/Indian heritage, here are some fun socks and a \$20 for snowcones. These are things good people send. When are you coming to see me? When are you going to clean out that house? When are you going to take that dog you said you'd always take? It's waiting for you, but it's starting to get attached to me and I don't have time for dogs. Also, Pig Latin. You need to brush up. You're starting to slip, which is why I sent you the note . "Inay onorhay ofay ouryay Irishay/Indianay eritagehay." I want to be close to you again. Are you going to the family reunion? You should. After all, I've spent the time digging up the names of your great-grandparents, so I think you owe me one. Besides, we have a history. A blood history, shared memories: the snake in the ceiling, trailers, days that didn't rain, cat fights, winter baking, lessons on skinning a mink, you putting on my socks, unsnowy winters, folding chairs in the creek, shared voices saying "I'll be in touch."

THE RITUAL OF CAR MAINTENANCE

The check engine light says
everything has been done, this
is a lost cause, error code “junk yard.”

Instead, sprinkle white salt on the inside
corners of your designated parking
space, scrub the pavement with sage.
Open the hood, tape red jasper
to the battery for energy,
obsidian for stability.

Fill the backseat with plants: Spider,
English Ivy, Weeping Fig—sit closed up
in the presence of a jungle with a working
heater, a CD of animal sounds,
a rearview mirror. You are not
suffocating. In fact, you are
in service, with air to breathe.

IN THREE TO SIX MONTHS

you will die. Here are your warning signs:

- Turning to points of light. Heat lamps, the CVS, the catnip laser mouse, Venus.
- Upon pressing the top of your eye to protrude, you cease to see color: the skobeloff of your sister's sweater, the ecru of your dresser, the exact hue of your five-year-old parking space.
- You lose wisdom. Likewise, you eat.
- Seeing past people you no longer want: your old hairdresser, your sixth cousin and her third child, the man that lives on 4th and Washington.
- Not salivating, no longer hearing your inner ear, continuous hiccupping, unexpected alertness, restlessness, a shrunken tongue.
- Breathing cold air, ice air, that embitters your hands. Your hands don't listen, instead halve apples horizontally, redial nine-year-old calls, clench at night.

Toward the end, you will notice something missing. You will check your bird list for the Eastern Towhee, your city map for Indian restaurants, your ecological soul for greenness. You will hunt for knee socks, your Norwegian heritage, plastic soldiers. Finding nothing, you will gather energy, set all the lamps facing you, turn the AC to fifty, begin.