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The University of Southern Mississippi

DAIMON

by

Miranda Foster Merklein

Abstract of 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

August 2010

ABSTRACT

DAIMON

by Miranda Foster Merklein

August 2010

The following creative dissertation is a book of 57 poems.

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2010

The University of Southern Mississippi

DAIMON

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Miranda Foster Merklein

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

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August 2010

DEDICATION

To Victoria and Anthony, who have patiently waited.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Angela Ball and my major professor, Julia Johnson, for their guidance and inspiration in the composition of this manuscript. The other members of my dissertation committee have been extremely valuable as well: Dr. Martina Sciolino, Dr. Luis Iglesias, and Dr. Ken Watson. Many students from workshop have provided critical assistance in the redrafting of these poems, especially James Clinton Howell, Deja Earley, Dan Morris, Richard Boada, William Wright, and Rhonda Lott. It is equally important to thank Dr. Jacqueline Wiebe for her support, understanding and confidence. Thank you also to Dr. Taylor Hightower for helping me to better understand how to perform the reading of my work, and to Amy Houghton, my guitar instructor, who helped to compose music for the poem and song, *Forsythia*.

The following publications have printed previous or current versions of poems from this collection: *Concho River Review*, *Crucible*, *Earthships Anthology*, *Epicenter*, *Grasslimb*, *Iron Horse Literary Review*, *Kokako*, *Town Creek Poetry*, *Meridian Anthology of Contemporary Poetry*, *Natural Bridge*, *Neon*, *Oregon East Magazine*, *Oxford American Magazine*, *Permafrost*, *South Carolina Review*, *Southern Poetry Anthology II*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, *The Binnacle*, *Vision Magazine*, and *Word Riot*.

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INTRODUCTION

“Daimon” is in many ways a book about travel, through physical space and by interior transformations or gestalts of consciousness. The poems are set primarily along the American Southwest, the Deep South of Mississippi and Louisiana, and up to Asheville, North Carolina, where I was born, along to the Florida panhandle and keys, and out to the British and American Virgin Islands where the prose poems “Flight” and “Royal Blood” were derived. I also lived for a time atop Moonstone Beach in Cambria, California when I was a child, then in Santa Barbara in my late twenties. Santa Fe, NM is where I primarily grew up, though, and sometimes a feeling of being trapped or landlocked is pervasive in many of the desert poems, as can be seen in “Drought,” “Thunderhead,” and others. The titles themselves give some indication of this longing for water, and so does my frustration with stagnant waters and lakes, both physically and in their representation of the subconscious. For instance, in the poem “Jornada Del Muerto”: “The lake forages ambition; / the ocean is a retriever”: this is almost a bitter renouncement of my time spent living by Elephant Butte Lake in Truth or Consequences, NM. It was only after being away from the enchanted desert for a long period of time that I could really learn to appreciate the qualities of the magical landscape I know well, primarily the northern part of the state. After being away from Santa Fe for so long, I soon began to miss the smell of piñon burning in the dry winter night under the completely translucent sky with every star and comet fully undressed.

My recent experience in the South has been a type of spiritual return to my childhood origins, as for many years I had to draw on my 6-year-old self's memory of fireflies, humid air, the abundance of greenery and flowers, and the Southern dialect;

therefore, I was tremendously happy to recover these visions in the flesh, and was further surprised by certain words, phrases and inflections of speech erupting from my voice like lost friends. Before this time, I would laugh at my recorded southern drawl as I sang “Skip to my Lou” on a tape my parents made when I was four or five in Asheville; then I soon discovered that I could sing the song verbatim without any further reference source. Of course, all of this remembering and re-invocation of previous selves soon made me experience a new expansive yet fractional experience of identity, and I wrote about this feeling in the poem “Parallels,” where I imagined myself following through any number of selves and career choices. I soon began to wonder if I could be all of these people at the same time and pay tribute to these parallel worlds. I also speculated that each prematurely halted identity was entitled to their continued separate destiny.

In a similar way to my understanding of identity as multi-factional, I simultaneously began focusing on the ideas in my poetry from a multitude of perception points. Geometrically speaking, this might be similar to what the cubists did with painting, yet the underlying goal of my work was intertwined with the belief that the expression, the *thing*, or idea in the poem could not be complete unless it was considered from a number of vantage points: spacial, conceptual, and via the alternating values of a person in constant reflective evolution. I began to see the poems themselves as options and alternatives to a single outcome, which resulted in a search for coherence that demanded of each poem a balanced account of many correlated images. For example, in the poem “Nola's Nightcap,” although the setting is in New Orleans (NO, LA), I did not feel restrained from picking up images and occurrences that took place outside of New Orleans, but had New Orleans *inside* of the perception, which came together in a shared

territory. “Two women in nightclothes / sip hot drinks on the curb”: this image was built from more than one experience, in addition to the trip to the store for boiled peanuts, and the pear ripening behind glass that comes to represent a woman's head in rollers, which then becomes reminiscent of a traumatic personal relationship that causes the speaker to intercept the poem and throw a wine glass at the image. No real injury takes place, though, because the diageic world the poem depends on is shifting imagistically and conceptually.

“Tabula Recedo” illustrates the meshing of physical and psychological elements that make up the consciousness of the speaker. The speaker finds herself standing along Mobile Bay where the yearly Jubilee of seafood is gathered after the oxygen level is depleted in the water and the fish, eels, and crabs all float to the surface to be collected. “Nightbells / ring. Grass stirs around my ankles” signifies the traditional alarm rung by the first gatherer who observes this occurrence. The transformations in the poem are meant to take place on multiple levels beginning with the speaker, who is introduced as originating from a philosophical concept, perhaps its own kind of myth, namely Heidegger's conception of the human being as experiencing a sensation of “thrownness” into the world, which I interpret as being pushed by a villain into a “leviathan of poisonous toads” where the immediate perceptions and machinations of reality are conceived as, “bolts, cogs, / and muscle throbbing on a ripe, / molding peach.” The individual is caused to take action. “With my hand on the knob, / I both open and shut.” Yet there is the dilemma of Kant's moral imperative, where the speaker considers the impact of every choice and action before it is made, which renders the speaker at once dualistic, stunned, and gravely responsible for everything that occurs. The seacloth is

unraveled by “Blue needlework crabs” when the individual speaker is torpified by their own amazement and lack of grounding, so when “the jubilee / surrenders the surface,” the speaker finds herself thrown back out of the world like the oxygen-deprived fish.

The title poem “Daimon” best alludes to the reasoning behind this process of understanding identity. Although I am unable to offer a distinct prescriptive formula for the composition of the poems in this collection, there is a guide or intuition behind this process that is unique to every poem. This method is largely intuitive while also derivative of personal experience, emotional intelligence, and the impressions of form and spacial relationships as perceived by the mind. The word comes from Socrates's apology or defense before the Athenian court where he explains his personal thought process or guiding force behind his choices:

You have heard me speak at sundry and divers places of an oracle or sign which comes to me... This sign, which is a kind of voice, first began to come to me when I was a child; it always forbids but never commands me to do anything which I am going to do. This is what deters me from being a politician. (Plato 207)

The Greek word *δαίμων*, meaning divine operation, or to be instilled with knowledge, is also understood as a channel between the mortal and the gods, a source of guidance. This *listening to* can be explained as a particular faculty of consciousness, which can be exercised and strengthened by the artist who shares the understanding that consciousness is made up of partially overlapping categories of intelligence and awareness, including moral decisiveness, psychology, metaphysics, subliminal messages and elements derived from the subconscious. In the above passage, Socrates is focusing

on the critical attributes of this daimon, which holds just as much significance for composing poetry. The poet has to be the judge of what material is relevant and irrelevant to the poem as well as decide which form or non-formal elements to employ. Decisions also have to be made concerning spacial relationships and how the poem is meant to appear on the page.

“Daimon” begins with a hostess opening a door, after which the speaker is served goat cheese and wafers. The goat symbolizes the stubborn and willful part of the conscious persona, where the wafer has spiritual connotations, like a blessing or a sacrament received by the devotee. The speaker makes a toast to “the mangrove killifish,” a strange subspecies that can live on land and in water, in soda cans or other discarded and natural enclaves. The fish, as well as the speaker in this poem, is capable of drawing on conscious as well as subconscious material for their use. The speaker is also a devotee of Bacchus, “Gorging on cud and brine,” the sustenance of land and water, taking full advantage of both environments. Because this communication is taking place between two worlds, a channel is created, or a passageway for the daimon to travel, and this is where artistic creation occurs: “A flitting shade [messenger of Hades], the red word / breaks through the world, will not spin fast enough— / Flickers under the skin...” This spinning, of the world and the word, is the gateway where the shadow-self or darker daimon (daemon) can slip through. The dual being manifests itself in the body of the speaker, who perceives a tail “whipping / from the corner of my smile.” To define this simply is to say that the speaker has become possessed and has lost control of their body and soul, yet the poem is not meant to be read in this way specifically. To invite a less-understood presence into the persona, as the hostess does in the beginning of the poem, is

to give a voice to a part of the self that has previously remained unknown or hidden. The ritual, which is also a psychological transformation, is to unhinge the edges of the sliver of personality that is outwardly dominant and to invite the foreign aspects of the self in order to create art and more fully experience life.

The original avant-garde filmmaker, Maya Deren (1917-1961), engages in a related process of exploring multiple frameworks and perceptions of the mind, which is why I have dedicated a poem to her work, "Meshes." Though you could say there is a confessional strand in Deren's films, the permission taken in her art is not for the purpose of exhibitionism. Her films are more of an investigation into the areas of conscious and subconscious thought, using symbolism, shifting perspective, and narrative recontextualization. There is also psychological element to these explorations, and Deren's work has been interpreted and even criticized for being psychoanalytical, in a similar way to how Anne Sexton's poetry was criticized. However, it is important to acknowledge the intellectual achievements these artists have contributed, as literature and film at the time called for such an investigation and interpretation by female artists. "Sunday With Sexton," a poem in which I try to invoke the poet, I attempt to manifest in myself these similar voyages into the psyche. Regarding my own psychological make-up, well, I was told once by a professional that I seemed to have a lot of content, but that I simultaneously lacked the appropriate canister to organize this information. This revelation, whether it is true or not, led to the construction of the poem "Gestalt," a meditation on this blending of categories: "To walk without a container, / dripping potions, rubies and felt, / violating each other's categories, converging / into a sea of smashing bulbs." In many ways I find this to be a crucial element in the method I use to

juggle many pieces of information at once. I realize that sometimes I build aesthetic connections that may seem absurd or unrelated, but that is not a problem for me; it is a liberating experience for my poetry. I consider this intellectual and spiritual blending of categories to be both a blessing and a curse, due to the fact that this predicament has lent a helping hand to my poetry, but not so much for my traditional and academic prose attempts, which calls for an approach that feels rigid and restrictive to me. In these attempts, I usually end up struggling with the sentence structures themselves for a long period of time, and I find it near impossible to appropriately transcribe all the information I find relevant to the investigation. With prose poems though, and with genre-bending fiction, I have been more successful. The prose poems “Flight” and “Royal Blood” are demonstrative of one of the only kinds of prose I can manage to effectively compose.

The process of composing poems or blended fiction takes a significant force of inspiration for me, which can consist of a single stimulating idea or group of ideas that come together in a single instance or over a number of days and even longer, or it can be a specific problem that I am dealing with and want to make sense of, or it is a question that I attempt to answer or make more complex. If I am ever forced, gun-to-head, to write anything traditionally prose-worthy, or if I try to force myself, the result is usually not very impressive, or I go through so much anxiety during the event that I can become physically ill. Looking back, I can see this was a serious issue when I was a journalist and freelance writer, and the reason behind my break with the profession. Luckily, when I am not being forced to write the more restricting type of prose, I am capable of producing a large quantity of work by the force of my own drive and curiosity. Though I have never felt tortured when asked to produce poetry in a short time frame for a publication or

reading; it is just not the same kind of pressure and anxiety that I experience with the former.

Poetry became my main occupation through a series of related obsessions. The visual arrangement and line breaks of a poem are very important to me, and sometimes it takes many drafts to bring a poem to a place where I am visually satisfied with its balance and expression of space. The obsession first asserted itself when I was a child. My parents actually found it quite humorous when I would create elaborate structures with the toys and blocks I had to play with, but had absolutely no concern for the rest of my room, which was always a complete disaster area. It is funny when I think about my mother suggesting to me that I might consider going into computer graphics or design when I grew up. In a way, I guess I have. The visual make-up of a poem has a lot to do with basic concepts of design and visual structure, which is the same concern of painting and other visual art: unity, variety, balance of composition, discordance. These aesthetic concerns carry over to the sound-scape as well, which can compliment or even work against the visual composition to create a type of tension or visual/auditory disunion, as I think is evident in the poem “Tidepools,” which has a peaceful visual structure, resembling three separate tidepools formed in loose syllabic haiku, yet they form a larger story that is almost traumatic, at least from the perspective of the creatures living in and around the water.

Readers of this collection will notice that the ocean is a common area of concern, perhaps another one of my fixations, though a more primal one. This is probably because I spent part of my childhood living by the beach, and because I have been drawn back to the source many times in my adult life, which contrasts with where I have spent the

majority of my life so far, in Santa Fe, NM, a high desert habitat nestled in the foothills of the Rockies. Perhaps my longing for the sea is partially due to the collaboration of my parents, who named me after the sea-gazing princess in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. The crashing rocks on the wild coastline, continues to be a magnetic field of attraction for myself and my work. It is interesting to me now to consider the first official poem I ever wrote and published in 5th grade, a contemplation on the cyclical interchange of the waves along Moonstone Beach in Cambria. It is not so surprising that I continue to be fascinated by the same source, though I have been exposed to many other beaches, bays, and oceanic bodies since then. The book itself has been divided into three sections, meant to represent the experience of a riptide, which carries personal significance for me as well, since I was almost killed in one when I was eight. This experience left me with a great respect for the power of the ocean, and with more of a fondness for submarines over rowboats or the treacherous beach walks I took into the sloping sand where the undertow catches all the tumbling shells.

I.

QUESTION FOR THE ARTIST

When painting the field,
how did you learn yellow

lines superseded blue,
that the farthest oak

is chalk,
the crescent shadows

of negative space—

all colors keyed in
an expressionless white mask?

You say spring's fallow
leaves have fallen.

I say it is the beginning
of gray

when ferns splinter through
the electrical box,

escape under the lattice
crawl;

this is when it changes:
our weight,

the height of our wool collars.

The rave mentality
of swamp insects;

soon they deplete their storms,

and the tumbling
downdraft of leaves

begs the wall cloud to spin.

TIDEPOOLS

Abysmal eye
 in the rocks—
a plucked wave I clasp
 my claw around.

Opal ridges, broken
swells under the hurricane
 pier. A buried summer
 conch.

Stiletto herons,
picking apart the sand
 trap—Take everything back!

A STRAY THUNDERSTORM
IS POSSIBLE

I grabbed the panhandle,
knowing the sauce had boiled

for over an hour. In the gulfstream,
live oaks shake in a puddle

of urine. So, I am at fault here?
At least you can identify

your problems,
while I struggle to keep my place

on the shelf, careful when staggering
around your plantation mantle.

Rolling pin astigmatism—a crow
pecks through funnel clouds.

(The bigger the eye,
the smaller the particle.)

We have survived every tornado so far.
I cannot find my glasses.

PERENNIAL WEED

Melon of the beginning song.
Your rind is too pale;

there is no thump when I knock
your pot, your leaves.

Grow, stop, blow, freeze;
how do I know when to give up?

You stand still for months,
the same withered

tips like tinsel left blowing
on a wreath, off-season.

Desolate heath, then a lime
green fan splits the shoot in two.

And when you do not bloom,
I harvest you, the worm.

DAUPHIN BAY

Mallards graze island drainways;
brick blossoms resound
the sticky-gum fall
while one rubber boot

laps against
 the resurrected sandbar.

Rebar tentacles sprout and curl.
 Oyster crowns, armored
clams, a headless conch.

Refrigerator contents
spill from uprooted piers:
ranch dressing, a bottle
of fresh spring water
 and oil,

the blue mold, half-sunken
 commode.

MONROE WEST MOTEL

Walking the sham-grass
plastic providence—

a Putt Putt carpet in barefoot glory

under the radiation rose, chemical sky
the insects are drilling

into FEMA-roof foreclosures.

An opossum creeps by unnoticed
while the tree frogs bark

in unison,
“get up” or “shut up”

in a mangled chorus of will—a fence,
obedient metal twigs.

THE LONGEST RIVERBANK

In the morning, you ask
what I did last night
with the fireflies tickling my
lips—you were too far
to listen. Fantasies, I confess,
offerings of Bacchus.

But mine are different—
finally finding The One
man or woman
responsible for sewing
the irremovable plastic

tags behind my neck,
digging in the flesh of fellow
travelers, the nymph that says,
Yes, that's the best place.
Brand it right into the spleen!

ORCHID TONGUE

Plum Sahara dusk.
Honey Island Swamp waters rise
under broken cypress knees
 wading cross the coast lanes.

The cardboard and plastic
window blows apart. A love
bug pelts my face and tumbles
into the back seat—I would not think

an embryo to root in this acidity.
90 miles per hour. Road slime,
highway patrol; just pluck the stem and
swerve right.

GESTALT

To walk without a container,
dripping potions, rubies and felt,

violating each other's categories, converging
into a sea of smashing bulbs.

The soft skull of a baby—let it roll
without a cradle!

Bursting in splendor,
tripping millions of innocent bystanders.

Your boy or mine, girl.
This is the only explanation,

the vital differences that matter,
not the content but
 the canister;

somewhere is a box called Christmas.

MS. KATHY'S ART CLASS

Asheville, North Carolina
1985

To build a chimney, origami
cardinal swooping down,

the prime cutter
with her green star stickers.

Cutting: *Needs Improvement.*
It does no good

to be angry with the scissors
for being scissors.

Fabric, hair, tissue. A snowflake
sprouts legs and a trumpet.

Shrapnel collage;
the grenade will not burrow.

Will the paper
blow or saturate?

Universal fiber, left-handed
mule—*A slip of the crayon*

and nothing will blue.

Dead limbs, felt, paste and spill.
Scissors do not know

or regret; if they could
not cut, the bird never flew.

NEEDLEFISH

The waves spread like bed sheets over the bay.
We were pilgrims then, staked our prize

with a flagpole in the sand
that blew over in the breeze,

and I woke to find the beach
rearranged its shoreline.

Yes, that's the problem
with wild beaches, you said.

You combed the grit from my hair,
and I taped your ribbon words to my waist.

The waves spread, I plunged in,
swam past Antarctic sinkholes

hiding deep in tropical swells.
Only fire coral survived your reef, not my skin,

but I didn't listen.
The waves spread and, barely visible I became

an iridescence of self,
scattering in a thousand new directions.

AMNIO

From your window I see
 a potted plant in the freeze.
Through white cross and panes,

it sheds hanging-bell flowers.

You taught me to remember, harmonize;
be the strong instrument that amazes—

so I played the notes,
my manic metronome ticking, pressure-cooking
the sped-fast time,

while you believed in everything coming together
at once, like loose ends winding
 into a single golden cord.

Two nubs on one stem, the reaching
bud has withered along

the knotted thread of trusting
 estrangement,
 resurrection,

and the pangs of your brainstorm—
a premature egg,
 the disappearance of an arm or leg.

SUNDAY WITH SEXTON

Imagine the Internet and your death
a zillion more times. Forsythia, wormwood,
now are you cured? My metal heart
tea-steeper, mangled by the garbage disposal.
Your chain, jamming the drain neck.

Can my fingers press clean the wrinkles?
Twelfth disease, my last fingertip
pushes out the crumpled metal screen
submerged in a bath. When I touch
the water, it is six percent holy.

My hand dips between your folds of sand.
Back and forth, the wave, neutral to the moon,
trance-like round the stomach.
Row toward the bay of tea rings
under the lip of my fiberglass tub

where a packrat crawls through hay.
Needles splintering. Teeth chisel a stale
crouton. Or, she is grinding to powder
the bones of her offspring
because there isn't enough food to share.

OH, NEVER CODDLER

How swatted nest flies linger
lone in Mother's stare—

the copy of a copy,
lost in regeneration:

SPRAIN

My ankle, a fledgling's blue eye. Hairline
veins, a primrose knuckle. DUE
FOR SHUT OFF, the brick mailbox

threatens, but the yard work is flawless—
your hunched body, capped with straw,
steering the leaf blower I study

from the studio window, a pack of frozen
peas on my head. Perhaps I can sell
something online, mingle

with offensive ads, flashing diet
mongers: *Click here to become an artist
and quit your boring job!*

I know many people who don't
operate machinery, but not in Mississippi,
where Weedwhackers and black

widows congregate in cross-weighted barns,
and lawnmowers pulp a dog's favorite ball
every summer morning.

TABULA RECEDO

As the story is told, I was pushed
into this world by a villain. A leviathan
of poisonous toads—bolts, cogs,
and muscle throbbing on a ripe,
molding peach. With my hand on the knob,
I both open and shut. Nightbells
ring. Grass stirs around my ankles.
Dog River splits into a kinked
net of hair, snaps around the bay
and strangles Bayou La Batre's
everglade thumb. Blue needlework crabs,
unweaving the seacloth. The jubilee
surrenders the surface.

CRANDALL CANYON

Dive down black quaking city,
Sewn stretches forcrown,
Collapsing forest,
Stone pillows cased below,

Circling sulfur down the shaft
Of the longer-wall tower,
Coal-parched and sinking

In the milk-snuffing bite,
Dawn's sundry breath leaking
White basket-lacquered stems,
Dropping gently heaving sky.

II.

NOLA'S NIGHTCAP

I drove the back
way back from the store,
refilled your cup
with boiled peanuts. Summerflea,

I need to be commended,
despite the wine glass
that threw itself
at your sister's head

of rollers. Imagine a pear
in the deli meat aisle,
ripening behind glass,
while at the Texaco station,

two women in nightclothes
sip hot drinks on the curb.
Seven in the morning,
watching for the blue sedan.

OYSTER REEF

Witnesses wash ashore, fingers
tied in a bun. Spine unhinged,
my harvest soaks in tangled

lemon veins. Under Fairhope pier,
the gulf saunters out from behind
fists of butterfish, urinal prisms
and algae-clogged rigs.

Bobbing ornaments, bayweed—
Roll backward with the tide and fold
into the brackish mirror:

No Swimming / Khong Tam.
Retrieve your bullets from the shore and be
the magnet you align, Sundial,
guardian heiress of The Hunt—

Iron pockets and a honeyglass palm,
knobs of marrow gathering
the jubilee I dredge.

GREENBELT

Charred horsehair highway,
pottery shards left too long

in the oven's plowed rows, turning

fields of sky. The hawk's harvest eye
opens and sets.

DROUGHT

I tread over the overgrown
park easement to find
a single seeding oleander too dry
with no idea of the blossom's color
I was convinced by
the bare tragedy of this plant
unwatered and burnt so

neglecting to fight I picked
a slender pod parachute to fly
and in a red clay pot outside
I waited

for a wee shooting sprout to rise
grown not into its parent
but a healthy strangled weed
that I could not destroy
such a perfect motley youth
to be replanted in the yard
behind a bone-coyote fence.

FORSYTHIA

If I asked you,
out of respect
for my well-
being, Rosalie,
not to say the word
forsythia,

If I asked you,
by the Lilies
of the Valley, Rosalie,
never to water
forsythias,

that you did not
need to know
the reason
why, just stop
saying the word
forsythia, please;

if I begged,
you for the sake
of my life, Rosalie,
to no longer speak of
forsythias,

would you
wilt my carolinas
in the bottle,
Rose, and dry me
upside down?

IMMORTELLE

How the body sleeps,
spark-pressed and dried, purple
strawflower on a hilltop trail.
Cambria winter—

Waves brush the scales within
mildew folds of husk
and shell, neither male

nor female—a parasite
of mind and anemone grip,
strumming green leaves in the musk
of a seraphim's wilt.

QUESTION FOR THE SLEEPER

Would you think it unkind
if scattered thumps against the window

were not the landlord bringing
notice to the lawn maintenance

and your delinquent rent,

but a squirrel, thrashing
on an empty plate of bird food,
chattering,

Time is Up!

when the sky has grown September,
and you haul the bin of seeds

to the window and see

three palmetto bugs, big as mice,
who do not run,
but are expecting you?

ON FREQUENT GOODBYES

for my daughter, Victoria

Regarding the concern you could not
yet name,

*Does not express
a full range of emotions,*

try to picture a canyon
of levees, each falling rock
caught by a woven raft

we will someday use
for our escape,

a distant place called Island
you may remember,

pulling the tide
from our mount
under siege,

and if our storages
are filled
with too many belongings,

we will never make the sea
by sunset.

TWO BIRDS FALLING
FROM LIME TWIGS

Gliding toward the bottom I await
a sanctuary-smooth
silt floor with a solid ending

the border following all lightness and floating
where all lie together
at rest.

Turning to you
my thoughts escape an open ear:

How funny your form is, and mine too
like strange dogs swimming

in a school of fish.

Your beauty stands with no reference now.
My eyes veer.

This begins my promise to you—

a flower without prospect of pollen
and I a wingless bee.

You will have all that you need
and I would hold you if my arm weren't so

heavy.

Does it mean anything when I say that
to crush you would mean a death for me?

SPILLWAY

Dragonflies begin
as black opal scorpions,
pond surveyors tapping
the surface at every pass,
taste, unfold.

Water is a jealous
god, says the forest cabin,
says the kerosene
lamp and Shiraz—Just go.

But how to trim the ivy
without moving the fence?

Once the periwinkles
unclench, they will wind
down the road and some
trespassers will dry;
some follow Arklamiss
downstream.

ANONYMOUS

Rebecca staggers home
from the corner grocery once a week.
If she makes it

to the door she will
unpack her goods, take a knife and
haphazardly chop

green peppers for the freezer,
cubes of mozzarella for the fridge.

She hangs bananas on the banana tree,
so they don't bruise

or brown early. If she doesn't,
someone will find her
on the sidewalk,

unconscious, with hosed legs
sprawled apart, her auburn hair uncoiled,
and they will call the police,

who come blaring down the street,
riffle through her purse,
uncover her name.

39 MILES TO TUPELO

Golden rod sprawls
in ponds across the prairie,

shadows of the sun's afternoon
kite. The road sign, Egypt,

marks a farmland of grain,
wafts of tilled soil,

newly shaved grass. A market stand
sells home-made fruit pies,

fried pies, and fried
green tomatoes.

The cows in the nearby pasture
look the same as anywhere else.

HYMN TO MAGNOLIA

We rebuilt the barn in seven days.
Echoes of shotgun blasts
explode like early fireworks
on the Fourth (or the First). Oh,
lovely Scenic Drive, remember me!
And the spring frog, too early,
flattened in the driveway;
the gray-haired possum
fallen trees and debris,
the giant catfish skull in the yard--
on whose hook do you pine?
Em-eye-es-es, Eye-es-es,
Eye-pea-pea-eye;
you've picked your
flowers; now leave.

THUNDERHEAD

Creosote rain seeps into the brush

as electric pink veins
disclose the sediments of horizon,
a fatty blue cream creeps in clotted boils—

abysmal milk

yields to lack and the mask of beetle trees
where, like wooden poles, we stand and are seen.

by the wolf spider, legs curled,
draining poison from the world

under prints of ancient birds.

MOUNTAIN CLIMBER'S REVENGE

My enemies, strong and numerous,
lack in organization; post-contemporaries form teams,
fight for a small piece of ledge,
but this is a left-handed mountain,
and all this time they've been cutting through
these ropes and threads
using the wrong scissors;
diligently to build a Trojan Sisyphus
in my temple mound; I stuff them
in adobe niches, broken tools and bone fragments,
before the archaeologists arrive to pay me for the land
and these stubborn relics, my opposable spade.

DUTY-FREE

Adoquine stone and moss
forge the fortress of Old San Juan.

Plastic bags trespass the watchtower bars
where houses barnacle the open
bow of *El Morro*: sun-bleached
hibiscus and Naples yellow

balconies overrun by shriveled bougainvillea
vines and abandoned geraniums,

remains of migrating trades
that crash city streets,
empty shot glasses and tear screens
at the Poor No More clothing shop.

Over concrete fissures, a baby doll
sleeps naked on a rust cream
washing machine, her tangled
hair caught in the lid.

FLESH STUDY

My left arm in the morning
teaches me that nothing is symmetrical.
Muscles, pigment, even lightning

at two is never coherent. Today's storm
folds into yesterday's, or the other way.
One question is certain:

will someone please remove
the branch from this electric wire?
I must, at least once a decade,
hide under the live oak in the woods,

twigs split from the evening's spare
trunk, take these knotted arms
and one fractured knee to be mine,

knowing I am preordained to stumble
into wild blackberry bushes
where deer huddle at dawn,
their ears like conductors

stretching toward the milk bowl,
where the stranger meets my tangled body
in the brush with a fierce kick,
mistaking me for a stump.

THE HUDU'S QUARTER

Flying overhead, a fleet of conjured mothers,
each with different traditions,
clashing holiday dinners

and a phone book of tooth fairies
with similar names and faces.
The children speak about ghosts

from an earlier life
while I listen to their laments
from a faraway bedpost

that I found that night
when I left my shoes outside
that witch's house,

to satisfy her new religion,
emptied my pockets of so many shells;
I hardly knew which coast.

PARALLELS

She wakes up
at dawn, sleeps until noon
in a three story house
in Asheville,
sprinkling y'allisms
over torn open bags
of rat poison
littering the crawl spaces
beneath.

Her parents, now divorced,
are married again.
The lawnmower is still broken,
and she's probably an attorney
by now, with an impeccable
temporal lobe,
boarding a flight to Palo Alto.

She did get hit by those
random bullets,
didn't survive rolling down
the ski basin, forever
entombed with a Hopi
drunk driver and several other
prison-bound delinquents.

Or, she is sitting in a small office,
on an uncomfortable, black
futon couch
belonging to a dead veteran
she has never met,
surrounded by unraveling
wicker furniture,
bought with Columbian drug money
several lifetimes ago.

DAIMON

The hostess opens the door,
passes a glass and plastic
plate for the goat

cheese and wafers, a toast
to the mangrove killifish!

Gorging on cud and brine.

A flitting shade, the red word
breaks through the world,

will not spin fast enough—

Flickers under the skin,
behind the lids: a slight shake

in the gait that stalks me,
flash wick of tail, whipping
from the corner of my smile.

EMBODIED

Construction on Main
Street again. I veer to the shoulder
to avoid a collision, my right
tire snags a pothole

and I bounce into the middle
of the blocked-off intersection.
An orange-vested man
snaps his arm, No! Back!

before the city pesticide
truck breaks my concentration...

and now I'm buzzing
through the muggy air
behind fireflies and night
bugs, whipping my gauze
wings in a blur of minimal
intention: to find a red-eyed

beauty to lie with on the rotting
surface. But some small fry's
trying to divebomb us from above,
so I threaten him with my
feather bristle.

Larvae on a trash can
lid, hatching nymphs, constantly
being pressured to rake more
eggs—It's too much for me.
There's something burning
in my stomach and I have to go
where the air is stronger—

On the porch, a small hole
in the screen where a woman
sits on a peeling wicker chair
with a glass of zinfandel;
I plunge into.

PIER AT GOLETA

Where the ocean draws up over
itself reaching nearer

assylums of the past,

the gulls drop and fly
above rising fog, descending

planes and every passing aim
strides farther past

the dock.

HUB CITY HANG

Roosters do not only holler
at dawn. They get bored
during the summer, like children,
and everyone knows the red fox
checks for loose women

at least twice a day. At Strange Spirits
liquor store, a satellite network
has outcast single-digit Dr. Phil,
lecturing about addiction
from his Alaskan blizzard warehouse.

Leaning over the counter,
Blonde Elvira flips through
the Alcohol Bureau Control
Division's regulation packet,
Mississippi ordinances

making it impossible for Jesus
to sip red wine on Sunday
without performing one additional
miracle that day.

When mockingbird diplomats
sing broken loops, mis-tempo,
the deer busts mounted
on the high walls of Jiffy Lube
lock eyes with Leaf River
boat ramp, their enamel lobes swelling
with brake dust and grease.

ANOTHER FLIPS
OVER THE SWINGSET

We heard the stories
from the kids in the corner
trailer, how one boy swung too high,
 despite the warnings,

jumped the bar and plunged
into the cattail patch. Whiplash
was the most mysterious
form of death then,
 aside from spontaneous

combustion. (Did we want to end
up in the same dank casket
with all the nightcrawlers
 and basement flies?)

Yes, it was possible to go so high,
and without forewarning,
consume my own spring-loaded
 momentum.

FLIGHT

The seat is wet at the Harbor View. Through the window, dusty evidence of a gull hitting the glass, wings spread into a wide quarter moon traced in shockwaves where she struck. Her beak—an angular void in the center; this is enough to ruin everything, enough to press stop and rewind your song indefinitely—but then you start thinking: If you were a bird, you would be a frigate made of lead, no, titanium. You would dive in unrestrained, smash through people's double-panes, into their screams, pick clams clean, lap up leftover wine and tear through their tedious hallways, explode the western wall.

III.

RETURN

I do not fear
it is safe now -
my tigers are lined up
on the shore

JORNADA DEL MUERTO

My boots consume the dust.

Shaky desert toe.

Sea feet earthen and I sink beside

a lake of elephants

with ducks, carp, and freshwater clams

verdigreed by algae stagnation

lost plans made finally to settle,

and why I crave constant

upheaval.

The lake forages ambition;

the ocean is a retriever.

PASSING CARS

You posed in a yellow Lamborghini
last night, parked by the sidewalk.

I took your picture
from every angle,

and people were getting in the way,
your friends,

so I asked them, politely,
to move. Let me work.

Across the street,
cornstalks sway together in a fire.

A farmer pulls weeds
from rows of green flames,

vines that twirl up shoots and hum
bloom.

So, tell me.

Is this music I hear,
or your new fan belt?

THE SOUND

I used to think it was blood vessels bursting in my brain
being forced from their path by a tumor, or
high blood pressure causing the vessels
to balloon against my eardrum;

this terrified me for most of my life.

Yet today I was outside (watching the mountains recede) and I realized:
the noise I hear is not “tinnitus.”

It is the sound of the universe

of all motion happening at once—the sun
boiling lava lamps

auroras reflecting, swirling around
my bounding sockets. I hear
Saturn's rings whipping about the nexus,
the deep rumble of Jupiter turning

on its axis, spinning electrical storms and some
infinite number of pulsars, blinking on and off like clocks,
all radiation between

atomic particles, smashing and colliding against each other and think:
this might be disturbing for some but

I feel a lot better now
that I know what it is.

VIRGINIA

She sent candy from her city
tower, my name in loops
of shaky black Sharpie,
the reused appliance boxes
wrapped five times over with duct tape,
a precaution against mail thieves.

An X-Acto knife unleashed
my Fort Worth Christmas.
Ponies, dolls and dress clothes
piled to the ceiling.

You can barely see the gold star,
someone might have said.
We celebrated her presents
long before that sacred morning
when I began my lifelong acting career,
flawlessly simulating joy.

On the phone, Mother tried
to justify our lack of Christianity
while I severed the heads
of Barbies in the garage,
ran their bendable legs and arms

down the rubber band
conveyor belt, stacked their limbs
and countless accessories
in color-coded mail bins
we would lose in the move
to California.

STORM THREAT, AGAIN

The news alarm blares
Imminent, Imminent. Pressure drops

and the caged animals pace around the house.
Power lines flicker and pop,

and I'm folded in the bedroom closet
with my husband and black dog

with the shoe shelf that's survived
every cross-country move, so far.

Shirts and dresses pet our heads
and a burgundy pump jabs my ribcage.

The entrance, blocked

with a piece of West Coast driftwood,
before I realize:

the stick can be used as a weapon
against us.

YARDWORK

for Anthony

Here, by the rain-filled storage
bins and weeds,

mosquitoes prepare for dusk.

Four corroded bicycles
lean into the flower bed.

Man, woman, child
one and two.

The red racer
has bleached to pale mango.

The brake pedal stuck open,
it digs into the burnt

Japanese Spider Lily

leaves that sprout
after the flower dries.

EYE OF NIGHT

In the early evening lavender sky,
the half-lit moon keeps space
from the only star or planet

tacked to this final
movement of night.

On the ridge below, lights
from an adobe home
gather in tiny bonfires

as juniper limbs split
their black-tip fingers,
taper and point.

There are no other homes
with lights on this evening,
no coyote songs to share.

The trees will be fully entrapped
soon; the camp will scatter.

MESHES

for Maya Deren

If the door doesn't open
at trail's end, drop the key
and presume you were never
locked out. In the living room,
the woman in the chair, sleeping,
with black, feral hair, is not the same
one sitting at the table, stumbling
up the stairs into the white
unmade bed. You look inside
an ocean—erupting tide; the key
falls into the water and pulls
back the sheets, unlocks the tunnel
between home and sea. The stem
dips down, corsages the sidewalk,
twists the edges of hills rowing sky.
Maya, weaving silk in frames.

WOMAN

*If we all feel as ugly,
who are the most beautiful?*

I lay here in the lamplight, afraid to be seen. Or--
if my arm were to fall off the bed and wander to the door
then maybe we could meet
outside,

and the coyote with birch wings would not seem so strange
as she winds around these stone-bedded trails.

Through the combed desert landscape
we would use this driving song
to guide us

away from that prickled fruit.

We would follow the musky trail of recognition
to what was forgotten
worlds ago.

Ensnared in twilight, we would smile at each other,
knowing why it never felt right
to be caught.

Apart from ourselves, we see worn and weary
what was woven to opaqueness
by our own bound hands.

It all lies torn and tattered before us,
these fraying unravelments;

it is hard now to imagine how they fastened like a skin.

PLYMOUTH CIRCLE

Something must open the eye when young

at your birthday party
when your seven candles are blown out by
 “the retarded boy
who just doesn't understand”

strawberry angel food cake with fresh whipped cream
soured by the Unitarian minister who

inspires you to share your Easter eggs
with those who are not hunters.

ROYAL BLOOD

Mosquito pox are evidence to many lives no longer in existence. 2,000 miles out to sea, I am fresh cattle on this British Virgin island. Thin violet skin, a lack of B-vitamin immunity, and with no potions strong enough to dissuade the masses from these lady-fingers and breadfruit, I am the most important plebe in the commonwealth. Zipping down from every direction, they draw witness to this tropical swell. And I donate, relenting to their hypodermic proboscises, swollen bodies, radial wings—seeing they could have died without ever tasting.

RIPTIDE

A weekly paycheck, wedding dress,
every woman's typical stone—

I have wanted and resisted these,
tried to comprehend

what grain I have traded
for which mountain,

or if the reverse of this is true.

As a child, I believed tides
were scheduled by the clock above the stove,

that if I pressed my body
close enough to the earth,

my hands would be protected
from what drags me across

the seafloor
and casts me back, degloved.

SPROUT

We thought you were

full sun but you were not
full sun.

Even in a humid climate
you grew distant
as a fern,

mis-packaged as cilantro,
you lean sallow
into the sky

where the ravens dive
and steal
this morning's sparrow eggs.

ORIGIN

I commend the bird who,
having the fortitude to bear the first feather,
causes the paleontologist to curl around
his question by the fire, who does not listen
to the critics or pond

when they burp and bicker,
and if the turkey is our common ancestor,
the dinosaurs stretch and rise
after a long, frozen winter

to herald the small-brained ocean,
a yellow butterfly must
follow the cracks,
this fossil caste,
on the first
warm day, fly!

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