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Parliament of Owls

Allison Renee Riddles

University of Southern Mississippi

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The University of Southern Mississippi

PARLIAMENT OF OWLS

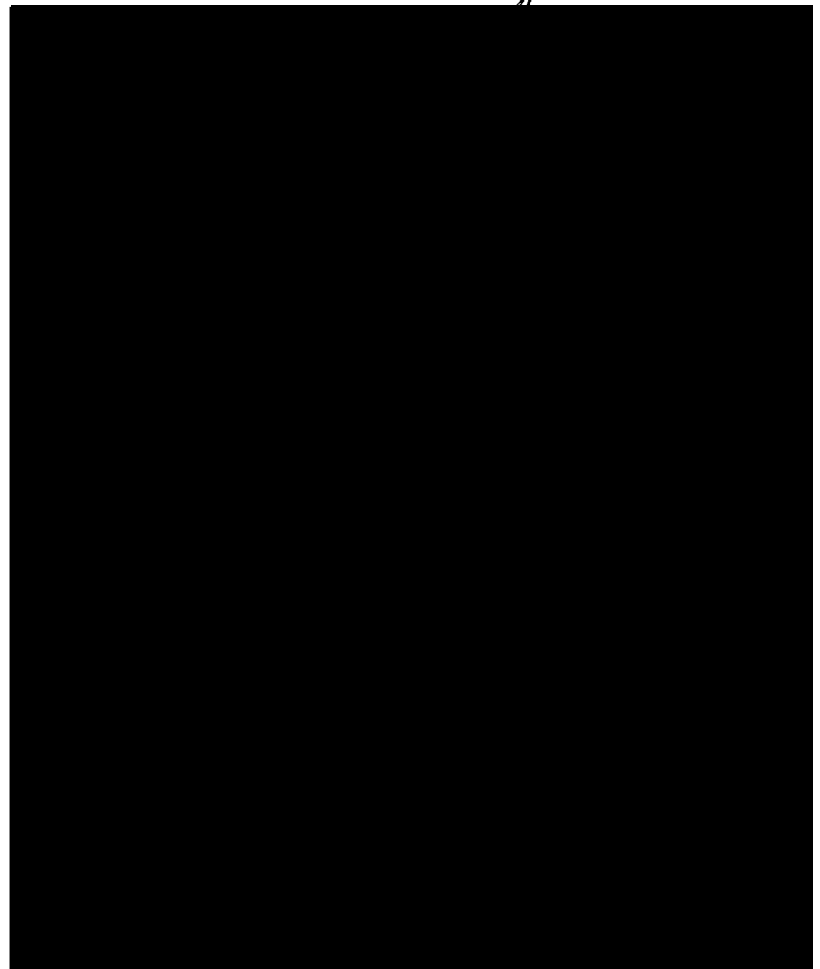
by

Allison Renee Riddles

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Studies Office
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Approved:



May 2008

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2008

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PARLIAMENT OF OWLS

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Abstract of a Dissertation
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ABSTRACT

PARLIAMENT OF OWLS

by Allison Riddles

May 2008

In this work of poems, I experiment with different forms (villanelles, sonnets, cinquains, sestinas, prose poems, and free verse) to create an original accompanying space for the existence of my speakers. I also use many of my poems to illustrate moments, feelings, and scenarios of relationships as well as place new perspectives on poems based on the work of other poets. *Parliament of Owls* provides an array of vistas on relationships, loneliness, and triumph.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

I believe that poets are born poets, that this specific creative aptitude always exists. Alan Shapiro writes in his book *The Last Happy Occasion*, “We no more invent the forms we live by than we do the forms we write by. The forms of life, like the forms of language, or more specifically the forms of poetry, are inherited and general--legacies the dead bequeath to us, for good or ill” (23). I have the drive for writing poetry, that impetus to write about our lives, our families, or an everyday sunset. I use the ghosts or shadows of every situation that has caused me to feel something, whether it be positive, negative, or the acute apathy in between, and use them to produce a neat package of words on a page which somehow conveys the experience. The experience becomes accessible to the reader, and I am therefore able to share the moment of something that caused a stir among images in my mind. This residue of experience becomes an adhesive, affixing poet to reader.

Of course the craft of poetry is not without its eccentric qualities. Poets create their own systems of and rituals of creativity. Some poets cannot write without music, or conversely, absolute silence. Quirks, rituals, and maybe even sacrifices in some cases, are all an integral part of what makes our writing possess qualities unique to each poet. I know some poets who paper their office walls with rejection slips or store them in shoeboxes, and it is all a part of the offbeat game we play. There exists a process in what we do, but that process differs from writer to writer. Mine is not particularly interesting. I play music and stare at my laptop screen for awhile as the

blinking cursor mocks me, and then resort to flipping through the *Oxford English Dictionary*, plucking out words for their sounds and/or meanings. I usually have an idea in mind, but sometimes it takes awhile, and some outside influences to see around the corner of my own design.

Perhaps the poet with the biggest influence on my work would be Elizabeth Bishop. I became acquainted with her work in a contemporary poetry class as a senior in college, and I felt, and still feel, a connection to Bishop and her ways of writing. I, too, feel somewhat displaced in the world, as I have lived in a lot of different places, yet I take what I can from each location. I think I share some of Bishop's eye for the simple, true details of an environment, an ordinary occurrence, or a feeling evoked from either. I believe I also share Bishop's pervading loneliness, her sense of alienation, and her obsession with perfecting individual poems. Although Bishop and I clearly led two separate and different lives, I can see her, and sometimes her voice, in my own work. I tend to place a lot of responsibility on the speakers in my poems, and often they, and they alone get themselves into or out of situations. Water and natural imagery are two things I employ on a regular basis, and the combination of the responsibility of the speaker and the environment of the speaker, to me, echo Bishop. In her poem, "Florida," she calls it "the state with the prettiest name" and goes on to describe the wildlife and natural environs of the place. However, the speaker is by herself and relies solely on herself to provide apt descriptions with careful detail for the reader. I, too, am meticulous in detail and illustration.

My home state of Florida is indeed one weird and fascinating place, and easy

to write about. Bishop, too, was very taken with this state, both for its natural environment as well as its oddness which passes for normal.

This poem, "Table for One," reads:

Alligators curl against dusk,
ridged tails fencing in full
stomachs, their dulled
hearing catching every other
hiss of ocean spitting
two blocks away.

Sand grains pearl
into onions as I walk
this hunger off, strip
my suit like blades
of a banana, phosphorous
skin the only votive burning.

In this tiny poem, I incorporate sounds, imagery, and feeling, particularly loneliness, much like Bishop does in much of her work. While serious in subject matter, I think the language and experience is original enough to keep the reader's attention. No matter how unique the experience or how esoteric the dictionary, there is always room for improvement. I also still struggle with being a perfectionist. I will spend a lot of minutes of mortality that I will not get back simplifying, condensing, and finding just the right words. Verb choices are crucial, using few articles is necessary, and although the subject matter of many of my poems is anything but structured and neat, I am addicted to symmetry. I do not care for ragged line breaks or concrete poems, meaning those poems which are shaped like their subject matter, such as George Herbert's "Altar." Even lines and even stanzas keep my blood pressure regulated.

Making my work uniquely my own by making just the right line break, or ending in the best place remains important to me. Writing in form has also become a favorable way to construct a poem, and the attention to detail and precision to detail and sound fascinates me. Attempting to confine what I want to say and what I mean is sometimes a conflict, but the duality is becoming more seamless.

Other established poets have had ample time to hone their approach, and therefore the appearance of writing seamlessly, to their poems. The raw, uncontrolled emotion in Ai's work feels chaotic, yet she also contains this chaos with ease. Her refined rants have bolstered many a poem of mine, and I like her ability to be brash and explicit. Poems such as "Why Can't I Leave You" and "Child Beater" candidly display a harshness and anger that is electrifying because of how she states them with a stinging coldness. While Ai is a bit rougher around than edges than myself, she still manages to impress me. She will rage in a poem on abortion or rant in another about a one-night stand, and each poem contains the same amount of cunning and intensity.

What remains interesting about Ai's work is the characters she employs to evoke her voice. She creates personas, yet these personas speak with the voice of Ai. She becomes the woman having the abortion and she becomes the child beater. Commenting on her use of dramatic monologues, Ai states, "I feel that the dramatic monologue was the form in which I was born to write and I love it as passionately, or perhaps more passionately, than I have ever loved a man" (*Modern American Poetry*). She describes her relationship with the dramatic monologue as a "happy accident" and the form works quite well for her. It is her quirk, her ritualistic way of creating

poems. By doing so, Ai has been able to write many successful poems, and has done so for almost thirty years. As in ritual or superstition negation, the method is the same every time. Ai just happened to find one which works well for her. I do not make use of the dramatic monologue, but I do share Ai's intensity of feeling and desire to draw emotion out of the reader. What is interesting about my own work is that I am influenced by both Ai and Bishop, two poets who could not be any more different in voice and style, yet these opposing influences work for me. In my poem, "Pretend Revenge," I write in form, the villanelle which Bishop was fond of, yet I boldly state "I will pound out a sonata on your teeth." I attempt, in this particular poem, to use Bishop's quiet precision and Ai's anger.

However, I opt most for the quiet control of Bishop, and so Stephen Dunn is also a constant as one of my poetic influences. His quiet style and narratives about seemingly ordinary things take the edge off of the intensity of poets like Ai. His poems are simple, revealing, and speak on things like insomnia, waiting for his family to come home, and of course, lost loves. Dunn's reassuring style and his intimacy with his readers is something I strive for in my own writing. He makes solid connections with people, whether it be a seasoned poet or an undergraduate Engineering major, and both can read a Dunn poem and come away with the feeling of having a secret pressed in their palm, of sharing a moment with a complete stranger. Dunn excavates his life for readers to see, even the odd or jarring moments. For example, in his poem, "The Routine Things Around the House," Dunn describes an experience he had as a boy just becoming aware of girls and their changing bodies,

which he calls “separate countries.” To satisfy his curiosity, he asks his mother to show him her breasts, which she does. He makes such an event seem so natural and beautifully generous that the oddness of the experience quickly dissipates. This talent is one which I strive to display in my own writing, as making an odd event seem ordinary and aesthetically pleasing is quite a feat.

I do not have to analyze or think hard with Dunn’s work. It is all there for the reader on the page, written with an honesty and openness that is comforting. In his poem, “Because We Are Not Taken Seriously” he writes, “I’ll be the American poet/ whose loneliness, finally, is relevant/ whose slightest movement/ripples cross-country” (*New and Selected Poems 1974-1994* 112). This quiet style that says much more than the lines actually have printed on the page is amazing. In my own poem, “Somnambulance,” I say, “As the morning shakes itself of sleep/ we sit and watch the greening fields,/ the empty sky, and the day begin to breathe.” My ending is not nearly as affective as Dunn’s since he has long since mastered quiet affectiveness, and I am jealous. My lines are somewhat overstated, a bit dramatic even. However, I do think I am improving, and have improved, at subtlety and quiet murmurings in my poems.

Another one of my Dunn-esque poems is “Appetizer.” It is a short poem, part of a larger sequence, but I think I attempt to use the same playful easiness of Dunn.

The poem reads:

Her shoes thumped a rumba, turning
over in the dryer, and a fresh lettuce
core lay on the counter next to a red
snapper reclining, eyes cirrused white.

He pushed his face against the door
frame, watched her peel new potatoes
in rhythm with whatever bounced
and flooded through her headphones.

She turned when she felt motion
in the kitchen, smiled when his
purpose was told in the length
of his stride across red tiled floor.

This poem does not contain any bells, whistles, or gimmicks, yet I attempt to make it interesting in its language, but quiet in its meaning. Relationships, whether fleeting or lasting, good or bad, can be difficult to capture because their components are always shifting and moments zip by fast. Originality can also be a concern when writing about relationships, as well as melodrama. I think I successfully avoid the latter and create the former. In a simple poem, making verbs out of nouns and other little nuances can make all the difference.

I think my own work exhibits facets of many poets who have influenced me along the way. I tend toward writing poems that contain a wry honesty and openness with the intention of making what I write accessible to all genres of readers. I have had many of the same experiences and felt the same feelings as most other human beings, and I try and give these happenings an original twist that not only relates the experience easily for the reader, but also leaves a lasting image or impression. I also keep a whole mental closet full of experiences which are probably unique to few people. My former stint as a surfer allowed for quite the array of interesting events, conversations, and a restless sense of place, as travel was constant. Not too many people have had their foot tasted by a shark, or island-hopped so frequently in Hawaii

that it became disorienting. However, I possess these memories and therefore I can present them any way I choose, and readers will find the poems interesting.

In order to this, language and syntax are so important to cultivate and watch. I find that I do not allow any extra space in my work, and the tightness of my lines leaves little room to negotiate. I enjoy this control, and I do not want my readers to have time or space to waffle over the meaning of my poems. Details are so critical to me because if the word or even the placement of the punctuation does not seem accurate, the whole poem changes and with it its meaning. My dissatisfaction with the non-exact stems from my own need for perfection. The non-exact appears lazy to me, particularly things like using “to be” verbs or too many adverbs. It seems as though there is a cache of words in the English language that everyone knows and uses on a regular basis, so much so that they become almost redundant. As a poet I have the option or options to choose every word on the page. For every experience and detail, language provides a specific word or words, and when experience and the right language marry, the union is striking. I begin writing poems with a specific emotion and idea in mind, one which I want to convey to my readers. I do not want my readers to misread my poetry or somehow garner a different meaning than the one I intended.

By paying so much attention and care to the words I use, I make the language in my poems survive any other attack or misunderstanding brought on by the reader. One way to do this is to write in form. I appreciate the rigid structure of forms such as the sonnet or villanelle, much like Bishop did, and using a specific form forces me

to weigh my options for language even further. For example, one of my villanelles reads:

I want to be sewn into your pocket
by an old tailor with a crooked stitch,
convinced I am as healing as boneset.

The itch of tweed would be hard to forget
but in the warm lining I'd find my niche.
I want to be sewn into your pocket,

use threads to fashion a pair of fishnets.
Then I'd work the corners, make the seams twitch,
convinced I am as healing as boneset.

You'd start to think, your pants the prime suspect,
declare to your friends the pair is bewitched.
I want to be sewn into your pocket

and murmur threats under your hip inlet
during work hours, interrupt your pitch,
convinced I am as healing as boneset.

My voice will grow louder, your own martinet,
calling orders for your mind to unhitch.
I want to be sewn into your pocket,
convinced I am as healing as boneset.

In the villanelle, the choice of language becomes even more acute because the repeating line must be one which can take on multiple meanings or provide differing results in order for the poem to build on itself rather than seeming flat and calling attention to the repetition. I also enjoy form because I write about scenarios that are often despairing or painful moments. Using a form to explicate these gives the illusion that the subject matter of such poems is also structured, which is anything but correct. It helps to relieve my mind of these things within the walls of a form because

it contains the chaos of the experience.

My aesthetic, as I am developing it, becomes more and more vital every time I write. I rely heavily on the narrative form, presenting moments or longer spans of time, usually in chronological order, with as much attention as I can pay to each word and each placement of words. I do not hold back emotion, one of the foremost things I take from Ai. In my poem, "Boarding School Girl" I manipulate the language, and take care to choose each word to give the poem an air of unforgiving finality. The lines are:

A century plant began to bloom
my last day of work in the east orchard.
They took a picture, my face bent
toward the hesitant crown, and I thought
of her head grazing in my lap last year
when I barely noticed the terminal gray
of the Midwest. "Never relocate
for fun," my friends had cautioned.
"Places leaves marks." Now
the mysteries in her blue plaid skirt
are cold, the honed sharp pleats,
shuttered slats, angled and closed.

I take the image of the skirt, a familiar image at that to anyone who has either known a girl who went to boarding school or has perhaps seen one in a movie, and make it cold and dangerous. This poem is neither long or in form, yet my own version of the narrative is clearly apparent, as whole experience is shared within a small space which contains tight lines, and no extra perks. To me, this poem displays my aesthetic as I see it: tight, controlled narratives with carefully chosen language which leaves no fat to trim.

Although I may have arrived in a place where I can begin to see my own aesthetic as it develops, I believe that the craft of poetry is all in the drafting and revision process. Just when I think I have hit a static place in my writing, my style continues to change slowly as I look again and again at my work. Going back and reworking my poems is difficult, but it feels like a pleasant difficulty, and one I can manage. Occasionally, I will look again at an old poem and the best change of a work or phrase, or sometime a whole line just comes to me. As I continue to progress, evolve, and mature so does my writing. I am always learning new techniques and ways of tweaking words this way or that. My peers and professors have provided me with such a wealth of knowledge and support, and without their guidance, suggestions, and ruthless editing, my poems would struggle mightily in the world. I am working toward the resonance which the poems of Ai or Bishop contain, as well as hoping to gain the ability to hold it all together in the quiet and majestic way of Stephen Dunn. This stage of my development has proved the most serious, and I gladly accept that challenge.

BOARDING SCHOOL GIRL

A century plant began to bloom
my last day of work in the east orchard.
They took a picture, my face bent
toward the hesitant crown, and I thought
of her head grazing in my lap last year
when I barely noticed the terminal gray
of the Midwest. "Never relocate
for fun," my friends had cautioned.
"Places leaves marks." Now
the mysteries in her blue plaid skirt
are cold, the honed sharp pleats,
shuttered slats, angled and closed.

DIAMOND HEAD

Any wave in Oahu swells then breaks
with the weight of concrete, but the success
rate of rides is high this afternoon. Memories

of wipeouts and warnings disappear, replaced
with the bass line of adrenaline as I bob
in the row of surfers. When the girl to my right

smiles, dips the lip of her wave, I am distracted,
paddle late, and as I stand to ride, sky and ocean
become reciprocal. My ribs dent and splinter,

a fireman's axe in a front door, as I slam and land
on the reef. I wake up in the smiling girl's bathroom,
manage to kneel as she stands in front of me, calling

for an ambulance. The walls blur in this room,
a tiled confessional, and all I can think is pain, holding
her calves, pain, seeing how they fit in my palms.

DINNER DATE

At the bottom of Cemetery Hill,
winter pursued the Kalamazoo night
in each slush of rushing cars,

fog lights translating the topography
of salted asphalt. Deep in the false
warmth of whiskey, I kissed frost

glossed across his eyelashes, insisted
we walk home to check the stew
left panting on the stove. Instead,

we leaned against broken headstones,
both of us tipsy monuments bent
against the edge and fold of flurried wind.

SUNSET INTERFERENCE

In quick painter's strokes
veeing the last colored clots,
these kestrel of flight.

MISSING YOUR ACCURACY, WILLIAM TELL

Jimmy walked the quarter mile home
with the arrow scored in his left eye,
feet clapping wet ground, as we marched

behind, disturbed, but full of a purpose
we could not name. Jimmy wanted
a volunteer, pleaded to us to pull the shaft free,

swinging his head, the arrow a compass needle,
but we backed away in a clatter of elbows
and disgust. When his house came into view,

Jimmy ran up the walk, missed the door, and fell
over in a dead faint. That night his dad shot
fireworks to cheer him up, and he watched

with the left eye wrapped in white, trembled
at every bottle rocket whistle. Each flash colored
his face, his neck muscles, taut, like bow strings.

HELENA, ALABAMA

The county showed up to get the dead
cow, two days late, the bovine's carcass already
puffed in the colors of an aging boxer's bruise.

Men wrapped the wench strap around its middle
with peculiar tenderness, their pants lowering
with the effort of the weight. Gears keened

and rumbled with strain as the cow began to rise
from the mud, and I wondered if we could get it
all back Now, flies hum, scale the outside

of the cow as it swings. Almost to the top
of the pulley, the body bursts in a bang
of blood and bone. I sat on the porch

facing the wet yard speckled with dead
precipitation, long after the truck hurried
away with two halves of a cloudy whole.

ALASKAN STRAIGHT

Shirtless, with dirt in his dimples, he
exited the back of the truck, all shadow
and cheek bones in the wane of dusk.

Summer had taken his weight in sweat,
made his ribcage layer like closed blinds
under the thin curtains of sunburned skin.

Our fingers met, scattered like deer
at the sound of a footfall, and we plied
the awkward moment with cigarettes.

The porch planks never protested his
step and we sat and talked about legends,
how the two of us will be translated tomorrow.

The Northern Lights moved in greens,
slid over sky corners like the unhindered
spread of a spill to the table's edge.

OUR HERO TURNS INWARD

The path of crushed oyster shells in the hallway
were only for the sound, cut his bare feet.

She'd called at 4 a.m. to say, the walls
are bleeding, could he bring tape and gauze?

He did not resist asking how she knew.
"I tasted them, in every room, to be sure."

She fell asleep with her face pressed
against the wall like a cheek tourniquet.

He rehearsed a speech for the breakup
breakfast, certain she'd march her

eggs across her plate, mumble something
about duty towards the prostrate bacon.

RECEIPTS FROM THE ATM

\$78.34

Ever since the new Parkinson's pills smoothed his quaking fingers, No Limit Texas Hold 'Em became his forte. He flipped poker chips over knuckles, an illusion of movement in steady increments. All in, with less than one hundred, the adrenaline absent, stilled by mixed luck.

\$6.66

She tries to act busy, in a hurry, like a Baptist would, but the traveling Satanists slink around the corner, and their arrival dims the day. The tall one hovers like evil things do, and he asks in a monotone, for a drink, and she offers a liter, knowing she'd keep the bottle, wishing she was water.

\$.29

The Wagons Lit Motel had taken most of it. He thought about the kid, the duct tape, the pictures, and remorse tightened in bands like weather breaking wide across his chest. Not even a phone call was possible, and so he walked, with urgency.

\$8, 513.13

Maybe it's a sunny day, with a picnic and a tryst, a steak and a potato, or a surfing trip to Tavarua. I feel so good and my name spelled out is a city skyline, complete with towers and those low-rise pawn shops, waiting for regular customers.

URBAN BOWLING

Taped to the refrigerator: Coco, the world's largest chimpanzee, pictured sitting in the back of a police car, gripping a bottle of Far Niente in each hand.

Every morning she grabbed the milk, grinned, wagered a guess on the blood alcohol level of the tipsy chimp. Once, she stopped next

to a dead armadillo, placed a beer can between his front legs, left him on his back to sleep it off. She placed a loose triangle of empty Absolut

bottles in the street, urged me to roll the frozen turkey for a strike. Left with a seven-ten split, I understood her need for broken glass. Porch

lights clicked on, provided enough flash for her lens to capture the shards, as she set the timer, posed in her own design.

WHAT BREAKS US WE END UP BREAKING

I.

Persistence is screwed and he knows it.
Driving a gray car on a rainy Wednesday,
he pulls the wheel bridge-side, ponders
getting fired and Envy, grinning through
the boardroom glass, glad to see him go.
A victim of Peter's Principle and politics,
Persistence let the wind make the leap
for him, felt the plunge as a new tenacity.

II.

The Malaysian fisherwoman stalked
the boards of her canoe, homemade
harpoon high like a baton. Sunset saw
her slice the bottom of her foot and dive,
tread water until a shark began to circle
too close. She wound her legs around
its body, cut its heart out and watched
it swim away, a long shadow always moving.

ONE NIGHT AT A PARTY AT SEA

And I found myself braced against the rail
of the boat, licking your fulgent, slick skin.
Unchurched and hot, heaving with six cocktails,
I went to my knees to give you the spins.

Understand I won't stay past the last waves,
place my hand in the crescent of your hip,
or clutch you close with a committing gaze.
The privacy is thin so make this quick

but quintessential, and I will succeed
in returning to alive, yet aloof,
because any sign of lingering need
wiggles in you like fun sin on the loose.

I'll leave us here on the hurricane deck,
bright but faded, like a worn discotheque.

HEM ME IN

I want to be sewn into your pocket
by an old tailor with a crooked stitch,
convinced I am as healing as boneset.

The itch of tweed would be hard to forget
but in the warm lining I'd find my niche.
I want to be sewn into your pocket,

use threads to fashion a pair of fishnets.
Then I'd work the corners, make the seams twitch,
convinced I am as healing as boneset.

You'd start to think, your pants the prime suspect,
declare to your friends the pair is bewitched.
I want to be sewn into your pocket

and murmur threats under your hip inlet
during work hours, interrupt your pitch,
convinced I am as healing as boneset.

My voice will grow louder, your own martinet,
calling orders for your mind to unhitch.
I want to be sewn into your pocket,
convinced I am as healing as boneset.

MIXED TAPE

Side A

In Soho, with the girl wearing a t-shirt saying, "I Blow," he cheated at pool all evening until she took the eight ball and smash-twisted it in his face like a lemon. Anger shook and shone on his sharded skin but someone jiggled the plug on the jukebox as the house lights clicked on. Two bouncers observed her exit, the night ending in a crash of static and Fleetwood Mac tambourines.

Side B

The front field drummed with Karner Blues dining on wild lupines. He stirred the okra and tomatoes, slotted spoon chiming against the pot as he perched by the kitchen window, hoping for headlights or a heavy-handed honk. She'd come back because guilt is seasonal and affairs in seaside hotels never last. Spine hunched in a lower case r, he carried a rifle to bed and slept all night with a finger curved in memory of the trigger.

FLORIDA

My friend's mother grew pot by the pool.
On sunny days while I trailed, taciturn,
she explained spacing and pollination rules,
placed aloe on my deepening sunburn.

She liked my focused silence and preferred
to confide in me, a girl, nine and slight.
I thought of her secrets like a soldier,
gripping his dog tags on a cold, blacked night.

We'd jackrabbit in her red Expedition,
travel the coast gleaning stalks of sunflowers
and nightshade to guard our indiscretions,
held humid, safe in those terraced hours.

We posted holes in the afternoon calm.
I miss my small, dirty but useful palms.

AN INVESTIGATION INTO FOUL PLAY AT THE MERMAID GYM

Detective Two-Leg's inaptitude at swimming is an embarrassment of riches, but she just flips her red hair, a burning flag, and leads him to the sauna. In the heat and steam they grow pensive and thin, all conversation files under

evidence. "The bruise of this can last weeks, even cause death if placed accurately," she admits, thumping her lower body once against the cedar floor. He crosses right leg over left, asks about possible enemies. Wiping delicate

sweat from her nose, she answers, "Humans may be a happy coincidence, but their priorities lack empathy." Getting drowsy, he writes down her whereabouts in clumsy sentences, as she slides closer, his ears confusing her words into rants

about Kafka or coffee. "Have you even glanced at the skylights? The frozen tree tips could be used paintbrushes, but where then, is the canvas?" He puts his head back, feels the mistake in movement, the heavy slap of skin and scales.

SECOND DATE

The double-headed dolphin story is true,
and it circles the fingertip of Lake Michigan,
unable to decide on the right direction.

The summer heat steams from our shoulders
in scrawny curtains, blurring glints of sand
into thorn tip points of light. He wears

a ketchup stain in a surgical slash across
his shirt and gathers bees drawn to him
in a Mason jar. We navigate the boardwalk
planks by the tenor of pop and crack.
On the way home, the bee jar sings between us
as the radio plays. Wary, our fingers fret the notes.

APPETIZER

Her shoes thumped a rumba, turning
over in the dryer, and a fresh lettuce
core lay on the counter next to a red
snapper reclining, eyes cirrused white.

He pushed his face against the door
frame, watched her peel new potatoes
in rhythm with whatever bounced
and flooded through her headphones.

She turned when she felt motion
in the kitchen, smiled when his
purpose was told in the length
of his stride across red tiled floor.

NEW RECIPE

The chorizo chatters in the pan
as he says, "Never eat in anger."

I want to lather his face in sour
cream, freeze the twittering

corners of his mouth, doves
muted under ice. But if his eyes

become green olives, the red-tailed
pimentos will wink themselves away.

PICNIC

Neither treaty nor tools can fix
the damage or remove your screws.

Now ants surge toward sandwiches,
scale the melting mesa of cake.

Their invasion swarms too late--
I am already occupied.

Take a hammer, strike metal sky,
make it ring itself open. Trust

these dark clouds to rain

PRELUDE TO PICNIC

Cattails bend and bow--
wind pushes us
along the rim of lake.

This is what we've done--
circle and circle back
to a concrete dam.

I cannot plug the holes in you--
or patch the ones you've
cored. Leaks will

progress from walk to run--
follow the gaps out
and through my cupped hands.

TABLECLOTH TRIALS

1.

Why is plaid so offensive?
The Highlanders were angry
and the loud crosshatch
shouts in red and blue.

2.

Lace flaunts its elitist filigree,
drapes white swirls that curl,
arabesque. All wrong
for the warranty of maple wood.

AFTER THE AFTER PARTY

Coffee and country music usually
sober these mind-eraser nights
enough, but on this sweltering Tuesday
her vision still tilts all things to the right

as her frame crooks a critical angle,
slumped against an oily diner window.
The synthetic glow of three a.m. spangles
her reflection, blurred over wall deco,

and emptying highways stitching themselves,
gray needles idling. But, unabashed
she gets back to the half-done crossword, twelve
across slow to solve, so she fills in *trashed*.

When the waitress remembers to check in,
she sleeps, pen still poised over *Ho Chi Minh*.

CHEATING WINTER

Stark nets of trees loop
a noose of autumnal light

on her covered collarbone,
pulling tighter as she walks

east along the river levee.
This river, deep enough

to swallow the view of a '62
Buick on the bottom, parked

there by a directionless drunk.
Snow echoes quietly off

chilled, reaching water, makes
the sound of nothing as she casts

shoes off, lets them fall to hit the surface,
and join other still, dropped stones.

PRETEND REVENGE

Let me admit the things I've thought about
committing over the last four Sundays,
but not to worry, I have a conscience.

Maybe I'd purchase a hammer, pound out
a song on your teeth, keep it on replay.
Let me admit the things I've thought about,

like covering your car in sauerkraut,
hearing the hiss of paint bubble away,
but not to worry, I have a conscience.

You'd be forced to drink from a waterspout
spewing sewage, lick clean a full ashtray.
Let me admit the things I've thought about

since I'm feeling better now, a devout
believer in skirting karma's parlay,
but not to worry, I have a conscience

which stops me from reaping a real payout.
So in the good spirit of verité,
let me admit the things I've thought about
but not to worry, I have a conscience.

TRICKLE DOWN PHYLUM EFFECT

The rooster pauses in crowing
to answer a text from the blinged
out bovine two fields over, while
somewhere in busy California,

chihuahuas carry their mini Paris
Hiltons in one paw, triple lattes
in the other, and curse in Spanish
at a distracted cat wearing a blinking

Bluetooth, oblivious to the light
change to green. Death rates rise
due to tragic stops in the middle
of highways to switch playlists

on ipods when armadillos get tired
of bringing sexy back, but deer fair
much better with bullet-proof fur
because of clever stem cell research.

Tearful lions shave their manes,
and once bald get new tribal tattoos
before checking into rehab, only
to check out the next day. A lynx

posts a reward for his stolen pimped
out Lexus, which can parallel park
itself, and after all, real spinner rims
aren't cheap once he's out of the game.

DANGEROUS MARINE LIFE

"Life is the Titanic, underestimate
and swim." She paddles past the shore

break, the click of tourist and sponsor
cameras punctuating the moody morning

in furious fast frames. Waiting on the water
for the first heat, there is subtle movement

beneath her hanging feet. A hooked
fin rises on the right, sinks, as some

bulk slides down her skin, puts its teeth
to bone. Her left foot is trailing color,

calling others, and she wants to trade
with the long gray body shifting away,

propelled only by instinct and taste,
heart absent of its engine rooms.

REGRET

That dusty porch, a setting for absence,
and I wish we would have stuck, forgotten
ourselves, eaten lobsters sans prejudice,
clinked glasses with every bite of chagrin.

Instead, I toasted myself with butter,
wadded the napkin with a final squeeze
clenching away the edible affair,
and walked to the distant line of pine trees

to ask counsel from a tight parliament
of owls. I sought advice on how to
observe what betrays us, the small movements
that cleave the face and tic in my hands you

used to trace to the tips, reading my pulse,
impatient for your misconstrued results.

ORIGINS OF INHERITANCE

You taught me the clattering of a rhinoceros beetle, crossing a pillow next to you in the night. The clicking of legs and wings still wakes me when I can't quite place what has caused me to jolt sleep, searching my own sheets out of habit, for a shiny,

dark carapace. In Alabama, a black widow presented herself, and you flipped her over to expose the hourglass, red and seared to each iris, visible even after you smashed

it with a hammer and cautioned me to keep my distance. A young cotton mouth slipped

out of a jar before its beheading with a block of wood you had just chopped. At the Gulf,

a catfish spine ripped my hand, surprising us both. As my color dripped onto the dock,

you looked dismayed, only remarking that sharks would soon show keen interest.

AFTER READING BISHOP'S "A DRUNKARD"

Fade to the remember ender
when you sit up fast, legs swinging
over the navy-sheeted cornice

of your bed. Do not see someone
who statues, caught straddling
the carpet imbrex and tegula

of bedroom to hall. Blame
the irresistible sleaze found in bars,
all corners where you recline,

those crevices painted pitch, solid
shade for a stir and loosen of limbs,
furtive forgetting. Fail to recall

the blush of pulse rush when coming
awake in a white and woozy apollarium,
burnished by the morning glut of sun.

BECOME YOUR OWN ATTRACTION

You want to be the coquina
body of Castillo de San Marcos,
unable to shatter, proud of your
cannonball-punched holes, abuzz

with every fingerprint pressed
to trace the ridges cracked across
your back. Mumble *build your own*,
precisely navigate St. Augustine's

cobbled avenues. Stonecutters
on a smoke break in the reportedly
haunted Tolomato Cemetery
watch you scale the wall, sift

through their discarded green
marble and cleaved granite chips,
place every shard with a letter
or number in the bottom

of your t-shirt. One man whistles
a forward invite, and your answer
arcs in a declining rush of rock
past his left temple. Back over

the wall, landing askew, all you
gathered clatters in a shrapnel
pattern around your splayed form,
and now this square of road

is your own mosaic, a paved
terrazzo floor. Quartz flecks
flash in the polish of streetlight
as tourists take your picture.

MAKE THE SUN YOURS

After spending the summer calescent
and pent, minus the occasional oil-slicked

rain, crack a laugh at fall's helix tumble
of leaves, spread of picked branches

from a frayed brushstroke. Walk warily
toward winter, expecting its usual

dead zone of ill-burnished monochrome
days. In December, surprised by the long

torch line of a watchful sky,
accept the sun's winked implication

to stay, smile when it ceases to sink,
will it more than just seasonal.

MARKING TIME IN CINQUAINS

I. I Do This

Wake up,
call the cable
guy, request a new box,
wait to hear mine already works
just fine.

II. To Fill

A long
joke gets told next
door in Vietnamese
and I listen for the laughter
to break.

III. Your Absence

The heart
will make itself
a hypochondriac
when it has nothing else to do
but flex.

THE FLOORBOARDS HAD A NICE PERSPECTIVE

Most houses are forgettable really,
one stock door opening to another
slamming, so it's out a window
and she's in Miami then Detroit.

Or, she's lost and loitering over
the loam around Lake Champlain,
with just enough rusted disappearing
light, a tongue tip of sun rapidly

retracting. The water sits smooth,
shadowed as hardwood, while her
breath churns a wake in the dark
she is sure she can follow home.

WITH YOU, I WANT A SQUARE

There are those who temporarily ruin
us, break the simple spine of suspicion,
leave the body to twitch and flop.
I am still recovering with leg lifts

in physical therapy, still doubting
the sincerity with which my neighbor
waters his grass. I know she's seen herself
through similar accidents, feels the same

weight trying to drag itself across linoleum.
I let silence get busy when I wait for my phone
not to ring, watch it hustle by with options
shaped like faces folded at their corners.

I don't want to live within this circle
of dread, where the weather can turn feral
with one snap of teeth, her heart's drum
really just an echo from nearing thunder.

CRAZY TOWN

I.

Diabetic and on a hunger strike for two days,
he demanded three red things in a bag. I
offered a marble, toy fire truck, and licorice.

At the mental hospital, intake was full.
We hovered around the lone ashtray,
shared a cigarette. He spoke in letters:

"The R's are killing the Z's! Don't worry
about the B's, though, the F's tied them up.
Will you please bring me a cold cup of K?"

A week later, the nurses walked him out,
made bets on the exact date he'd be back.

II.

Before he held my hand like it was terminal,
we laughed in a hot mirage of contentment,
shared an orange, remarked on its ability

to hold the weight of sections, and watched
a duo of young boxers sparring straight
through until the stars and street lights quit.

Months later, a boy staggers home
in the fuzziness of a knockout,
gloves noosed around his neck.

NIGHT SWIMMING

We met in the lake, both fans of night
swimming, each mistaking the other
for a corpse, our naked bodies conspicuous
and ashen. Lying head to head, we drifted

like hands on a clock: ten and two, grazing
skin at twelve. In my bed, I strained against
three fingers on my lips to ask her name. She
traced letters on my chest, murmured,

"Sometimes sins trail their own penance."
The soft blanket of her weight held questions
five at a time, and I wanted answers to grow
out of my sheets like cattails, tall enough to read.

She flicked conversation away to gently bite
my ear, refocus my attention. I missed the rocking
metrinome of the lake water that tricked me
into thinking only in slow measures.

WHEN THE POWER COMES BACK

**How to
say you mean as
little as the zeros
which flash on the microwave clock?
Just did.**

LOCALS ONLY/AN INVITATION

Come with me to A Street to surf the break,
but do mind the boundary of pier and pilings.

Pelicans do occasionally misjudge, but foreheads
look better with a few craggy lines of black stitch.

Be wary of the fishermen who want to hook
the crook of your smile for a trophy, toss cans

at our finless backs. Resist the urge to treasure
hunt. Barnacle encrusted watches do not make

good substitutes for currency. The salted blurry
pages of that *Ulysses* paperback will not aid in

its translation. Seaweed will sometimes brush
your feet and feel like tongues. Ignore the colorful

aesthetics of jellyfish. Lineup always to the left,
like pills on a countertop waiting to be swallowed.

STRETCHED AND QUARTERED

My inbox has 63 new messages,
62 of them invitations to enlarge
a piece of the body I do not carry.

The refrigerator changes its hum
to plaintive, unhappy with the leftover
contents in containers left to congeal.

As the cat tells it, my attentions
have been divided, and the tuna
cannot fix our growing distance.

To repair the things I have broken
requires knowledge of blueprints
kept secret in some sadist's kitchen.

Maybe I should look up connections
in the *Poor Man's James Bond* index,
how to spark them, make them light.

TETHER'S END

Because botox delays emotion in the face
I wait for an hour to see her in to anger.

Her nails catch the ugly tablecloth, fingers
and paisley fabric curl into manicured fists,

a clash of patterns to further irritate her loss.
“For you I would have worn a fish hook

suit, inside out, in the Atlantic”, she says.
I use the salt and pepper shakers to show

her, buttressed on my back, schooling me
in fragility. White and black flakes scatter

and swirl with the dizziness of a tornado,
settle in a Rorschach inkblot, a butterfly.

A pulse taps in the flexure of her neck,
as she tilts her head, expecting me to speak.

“You are the one who gave the axe to me.
I am the one who chopped the Judas tree.”

CIRCUMLUNAR/CIRCUMSOLAR

And with the sun it starts, glutted with light.
Maybe she wants me to consider her
later, at home, in the shower. I have.
The intensity, however, is fierce.
I burn easy, all day, I do insist
we go again, please make me sweat with glow.
Our day is shifting down toward soft edges.
The moon offers the ambience with shade.
It is the shadows I aim to please, watch
that face on Luna smile like a voyeur.
And our viewer will quicken her breath,
hitch and jerk through my turning.

WHEN THERE IS NO CURE

Basically, I caught a very familiar
condition, and the waiting room, empty,
except for the ventriloquist's dummy that sat
clumped in a chair, seemed fractured

with a silence I wished to decorate.
I thought I heard its voice, like raw silk,
flaws and all, force muffled talk from somewhere
deep behind the bowtie. A nurse, lipstick

too wide around her mouth, chuckled behind
parted glass, amused with words marked
confidential. Everything was wrong,
and I listened to what could be typing

or stuttering rain beneath my ribcage. I felt
the longing in my lungs, and saw my organs
as gray ponds pressed against un-irrigated skin.
Outside, the pulsing air of the day was reassuring,

and I wanted to say, "Tie down this horizon
for me." But, you and your hollow anchor
have drifted, left only in the stencil
of an absence I cannot fill. Discarded cups

and receipts skipped down the street, rushed
by the slight blaze of an iris, almost white,
that bloomed beneath a single spruce tree,
in quiet, in a shade that was a sort of twilight.