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HOLY LANDS

A thesis presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of Western Carolina University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English.

By

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ABSTRACT

HOLY LANDS

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On the surface, "Holy Lands" seems to be simply a collection of poetry examining the relationship between people and the land. The poems' subjects all revolve around family or nature. However, within these poems, two narratives emerge that deepen the connection between these two agents. The main narrative of this collection is two-fold: there is the story of my family and our land; and there is the story of First Snake, the snake from the Garden of Eden. The importance of recording history, and the acceptance that we change as our reality does, tie these stories together. Both stories chart the changes in land and the people/creatures who interact with that land.

The collection is divided into two sections reminiscent of the Old and New Testament. The first section presents the story of the farmland and introduces a family, much like the Old Testament told the story of a people and their land. The first section ruminates on the farm and its decline. The second section introduces the voice of First Snake. First Snake offers the possibility of redemption through understanding the process of change; we must accept and embrace change, move with it, and not regret its occurrence.

“Holy Lands” consistently uses Biblical imagery and colloquial language to seat the poems in a thoroughly southern reality. By using common and regional language, the poems are able to humbly approach issues of faith, family, and the importance of interacting with out world.

THE BIBLICAL AND SOUTHERN COLLOQUIAL IN "HOLY LANDS"

In "Holy Lands," I create a dialogue among my poems that explore issues of faith, family, and place: the poems focus on finding balance between accepting personal loss and embracing the idea that the world is always changing, always in motion, always waiting to be edited. Though it may be a bit blasphemous, the intention behind "Holy Lands" was to look at the world as holy because of its mutability, through the free will we (arguably) have to change it.

The main narrative of this collection is two-fold: there is the story of my family and our land; and there is the story of First Snake, the snake from the Garden of Eden. The importance of recording history, and the acceptance that we change as our reality does, tie these stories together. Both stories chart the changes in land and the people/creatures who interact with that land.

Each section is preceded by an epigraph from the Bible that divides the collection into an informal Old and New Testament. The first section begins with a verse from Joshua. In this verse, Joshua is about to die and is instructing his people in how to live in the promised land: "But just as all the good things the Lord your God has promised you have come to you, so he will bring on you all the evil things he has threatened, until the Lord your God has destroyed you from this good land he has given you," (Joshua 23:15). The character of Granddaddy Tom serves as a Joshua figure in my poems. In "Granddaddy Tom Speaks From the Dead," he warns that the land is important and must be treated as holy, something we sacrificed to keep. Though the rest of the poems in the section honor the land, Tom's warning is not heard. The poems chart the loss of the land,

not through development or natural disaster, but through neglect. "Owning the Old," describes how the family knows how to take care of all old things, except the family land:

> …There are rules
> for owning the old, they say,
>
> though none of us knows how to own
> the old farm. Kudzu has crawled
> in through the chimney and shaken
> loose the kitchen sink. The ceiling,
>
> too, is crumbling (11-17).

The love of this farmland is apparent in all the poems; however, there is also a sense of hopelessness that comes through as the "I" character is unable to do anything to preserve it. This surrender is evident in the poem "Salvage," where the narrator walks around the broken land and pulls out a few pieces of scrap wood, commenting, "if this is all that's left, then this/ is all that's left" (33-34). Like the Old Testament, the first section charts a family's history and their interaction with the land. The section is not triumphant. It does not capture an arrival to the promised land, but rather shows the decline of it.

The second section serves as an answer to the loss depicted in the first. I focus on the place of the snake, a character actually pulled from the Garden of Eden, to attempt some redemption. The epigraph is from the Gospel of Mark and marks the signs of those who believe in Jesus. It says: "…they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes in their hands…" (Mark 16: 17-18). This line is traditionally invoked by those who take the evangelical path. However, it is an apt introduction to the second section since the poems so frequently pair snakes with uncovering new understanding, new language, and new hopes.

First Snake serves as a figure of redemption, a savior of sorts—struggling with loss but able to reinvent herself and pass on wisdom using her own form of creation—her own learned language. After being sentenced to move along on her belly, she uses the loss of legs or feet to rewrite her world, to find beauty and truth and wisdom in all things. She is not a stand-in for Christ, but is her own type of savior, an animalistic female form who both nurtures the land and accepts the natural progression of the world. She neither offers advice on resurrecting the farm nor changes the experience of loss, but urges the importance of understanding of how to work within changes and make the best of the world around her.

First Snake was not originally female; however, the gender is an important distinction. The first section is marked by frequent appearances of the mother figure and the idea of mothering or taking care of things that surround the speaker. First Snake creates her own language, her own method of communication. She does this by moving her body over the land, essentially birthing words through her body. First Snake shows that the only path to redemption and the only way to move forward is by caring for this world in all its imperfection. In the poem, "Rightly," First Snake speaks and says, "We're all everything's Mama," (14), to which the narrator muses, "but what did she mean other than/ the world deserves love? I don't rightly know. I can't rightly say," (15-16). First Snake is the New Testament redemption. She brings with her peace and shows the way by which we should live in this world.

Through these poems, I shine light on the dark and hidden aspects of everyday experience and disturb accepted views of what is considered holy. In "Such Things," I show the image of a dogwood, a tree associated with Christ's resurrection, crawling with

ants. In “Marking,” a dog’s urine mixed with dirt becomes the means through which the speaker may annoint herself. The doves featured in “Mourning Dove and Six Snakes: Dove” are bullies and cannibalistic; the doves in “Dove Hunting,” and “Owning the Old,” are hunted pests. However, it is the snake that best moves from evil to holy; the poems cast off the snake’s image as a wicked, tempting serpent in favor of a more accepting view of the snake in its place in nature.

In my poems, I frequently aim to unmask the beauty and sound the resonance of the holy in often overlooked situations. This desire to grapple with topics such as snakes, dead animals, and my dog marking his territory can best be attributed to the influences of Walt Whitman, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and A.R. Ammons. More than any other poets, these three echo in my mind as I write. Though their poems are all profoundly more formal than mine, I frequently pull from their teachings to inform the ways I interpret the world around me. Whitman, Hopkins, and Ammons embrace mundane and traditionally ugly bits of our world in ways that make them almost glow. In “Song of Myself,” Whitman introduces his understanding of the world by saying that a “kelson of the creation is love,” (5) setting us up for his unyielding romp of praise to everyone and everything around him. He leaves no corner of his world untouched, praising even “the scent of these arm-pits” as being an “aroma finer than prayer” (24). Ammons, too, unveils the divide between the beautiful and ugly in “The City Limits,” by noting how “the radiance” (1) shines on everything and even “illuminates the glow-blue/ bodies and gold-skeined wings of flies swarming the dumped/ guts of a natural slaughter or the coil of shit and in no/ way winces from its storms of generosity” (9-12). To Ammons and Whitman, everything is worthy of praise. This is a sentiment I repeatedly acknowledge

in such poems as "Granddaddy Tom Speaks from the Dead," "Such Things," "Marking," and "Dove Hunting."

"Marking," in particular, lauds—of all things—my dog marking the yard. Like Whitman, I embrace and celebrate the gross and mundane, but natural, occurrences of everyday life. Like Ammons, I catalog the things around us: "jasmine mess/ all tangled up a pine, green bean cans left stranded from some/ little cousin's play, wren feathers, bones, stray shit, leaves and brush/ and fertilizer bags that never got burned." This poem does not shy away from acknowledging my Ammons, Whitman, and Hopkins influences, but instead lauds them. The subject of my dog marking his territory is not out of sync with Ammons and Whitman's poetry topics. The style, too, echoes their choices. The poem scans the entire yard, taking in each particular aspect of the whole much in the same way that Whitman does in "Song of Myself" and that Ammons does in "City Limit" and "Corson's Inlet." It then uses these small individual observances to create a scene that is holy and beautiful due to all of its parts.

While Ammons and Whitman's influences are readily noticeable, "Marking" is perhaps most influenced by Gerard Manley Hopkins, and it includes an epigraph from "Pied Beauty." I have not extensively studied Hopkins; however, "Pied Beauty" and "God's Grandeur" both echo through my mind whenever I pay particular attention to the small foundlings in nature. "Pied Beauty" praises God for all things, particularly those that are "counter, original, spare, strange," (7), while "God's Grandeur" is an exuberant prayer that lavishly praises the wonder of this world as it exists alongside the unhappiness and toil of man. What resonates most in this poem is the line, "There lives the dearest freshness deep down things" (10). Indeed, this idea of what is "deep down" occurs

frequently in my poems, and I use that exact phrasing in "Marking," "First Snake in Holy Land," and "Book of Snake," as a way to pay homage to and invoke Hopkins' understanding of the workings of nature and man.

Hopkins, Whitman, and Ammons may color the manner in which I reflect on my world. However, southern writers such as Flannery O'Connor, Dorothy Allison, Ron Rash, George Singleton, and Maurice Manning inform the style choices I make with subject and voice. I admire the ways these writers are able to loosen language from its proper manners, seating it in the natural and often colloquial cadences of common people. Their uses of dialects and colloquialisms invoke a sense of place and a feeling of authenticity.

O'Connor, Allison, Rash, Singleton, and Manning all use colloquial voice to add a measure of depth to their lines. Manning brings this to light in his poem, "That Durned Ole Via Negativa." He expresses the resonance that echoes within rural and southern ways of speaking:

> You ever say a word like *naw,*
> that *n, a, double-u* instead
>
> of *no*? Let's try it, *naw*. You feel
> your jaw drop farther down and hang;
>
> you say it slower, don't you, as if
> a *naw* weighs twice as much as *no.*
>
> It's also sadder sounding than
> a *no*. Yore Daddy still alive?
>
> a friend you haven't seen might ask.
> If you say *naw*, it means you still
>
> cannot get over him. But would
> you want to? *Naw…* (1-12).

While I instinctively felt that colloquial phrases and words added an honest and heartfelt depth to writing, it was not until reading the above poem that I understood the natural tool that I already possessed tucked into my own lexicon. By embracing and attempting to record the southern patterns of speaking that surrounded me as a child, I am able to add the weight of human experience to my writing.

In the case of Rash's poetry, his manner of speaking is not only deep-seated, but deep-seeded. Colloquialisms are buried in his lines almost seamlessly with such phrases as "Nothing's on the level" ("Elegy for Merle Watson, 1) instead of simply saying, "nothing's level." In this case, the use of the preposition "on" changes the line from being a simple statement to an invocation of a region and a manner of speaking. The preposition also manages to make the line serve double duty, commenting on the landscape in a casual tone while also referencing the colloquial phrase, "on the level," meaning transparent, truthful, or honest. Rash is able to add a colloquial connotation to his line. After observing the way a preposition can mellow a line's tone, I chose "on" as a favored preposition. In the Coral Snake section of "Mourning Dove and Six Snakes," I write, "It was all laid out across the concrete steps,/ kept me from walking on inside." (1-2). In "First Snake," I use "on" again: "Adam and Eve were thrown on out," (3) and repeat it several times in "Sending the Bones." In fact, the entire collection closes with a similar use of "on" that is not grammatically necessary, but that gives the voice resonance. "Book of Snake" ends with a memory of First Snake's song: "*Go on*,/ it goes, about as deep down/ as I can feel. *Go on. Go on. / Ain't nothing ever done*" (47-50). By using the word "on" as a hidden dialectic cue beside the colloquial "ain't," I aimed to end the poem with a southern echo.

While Rash's use of language can be subtly southern, Manning flaunts his southern style as a humorous counter-balance to the deep and pensive wells he hauls his poems from. His colloquial phrases are often exclamatory, as in "This one's about half-crazy!" ("Thunderbolt, My Foot," 1) or "A mind unhitched to a heart?—Shuckies!" (Old-Time Preachin' On a Scripture From a Tree," 1). He peppers his poems with these over-the-top southern phrases to give momentum to what are often quite sad and reflective pieces. For example, in his poem, "Three Truths, One Story," Manning begins with "Well heck-o, Hoss, I can't make up/ a name like Turnipseed! (1-2). He begins with a jovial and humorous expression before moving to introducing folk and tall tales about rural people. By beginning with such an upbeat phrase, he earns the right to make a simple and dire statement at the end: "There are words and there are deeds, and both/ are dying out, dying away/ from where they were and what they meant./ God save the man who has the heart/ to think of anything more sad" (34-38). He pairs the two tones strikingly well; by the end of the poem, we are able to see the first remark as both meaningful in its tie to the past and important in its recording of a phrase and way of speaking that are soon to be lost. I attempted to imitate this balance by giving voice to such characters as First Snake, Granddaddy Tom, and Aunt Patsy.

Though a prose writer, Flannery O'Connor has perhaps affected my writing the most. However, it is not her quintessentially southern language or dynamic and tragically conflicted characters that lead me back to her like a bee to a wildflower field. I am most taken with the way she uses her stories to struggle with good and bad, damnation and salvation, human and holy. She conflates such binary notions, exploring not the ways in which both exist but the ways in which they are never separated. Whether telling a story

about a child who drowns attempting to baptize himself or a murderer who arguably sees the world clearer than a God-fearing woman, O'Connor's tangled view of this world is honest and true, complete with hope and surrender.. I attempt to copy this confluence in the character of First Snake. First Snake attempts to rewrite God's world in a way that is authentic to the way in which most live their lives, pooling through problems the best way they see fit. In First Snake's world, there is no outward salvation. There is only salvation through a person's ability to move forward through his or her world.

When I began working on "Holy Lands," I envisioned a collection that captured an entire community. Much like the way in which Faulkner created Yoknapatawpha County, I wanted to tell the stories of Hartley, a town that I would loosely base on my own hometown of Florence, SC. I began this with the poem "Sending the Bones." My intention was for the poem to be my own version of Robert Frost's "Directive." Just as Frost's poem follows a path into a secluded part of the woods, so "Sending the Bones" includes a path to a secluded part of a swamp. At the end of both lie the ruin and hope for life. Though "Sending the Bones" is set in a swamp, I could not shake the feeling that, while reading Frost's "Directive," I could only see my family's farm. I began to explore this part of my landscape and realized that I was too invested in writing about our farm to focus on the rest of the town.

Still searching for some cohesive theme to pull the poems together, I sought out Biblical stories that might serve to focus my writing. I frequently explore and question Christian imagery in my work, so the move seemed natural. I quickly adopted the story of Judith, a book found in Jewish texts as well as in the *Apocrypha,* as my cornerstone.

Judith's story is of a widow turned warrior; with the Israelis' land threatened by an approaching army, Judith joins that army, claiming that she has switched her loyalty in the face of her people's inevitable defeat. After she wins the general's confidence with her tactical insight and beauty, she kills the general and cuts off his head. The enemy's army, having no leader, retreats, and Judith returns to her people a hero. I thought to use Judith's story as a metaphorical grounds for exploring the story of a woman who seeks to save her family's farmland from development. The poem "When the Circus Comes to Town" was the first move I made in shaping my thesis towards this story. However, the last stanza was considerably different. In the Judith-aligned version, the "I" cracks open pecans with her palms and claims that she'll be "the strong man."

While I still believe that Judith's story is a wonderful frame through which to talk about the threat of land development, pushing my poems in that direction felt unnatural and forced. I wrote many poems about farm life; however, I could never make the turn to talking about land development. It did not feel honest. In truth, my family's land has not been developed. It has been left to ruin. This, I realized, is what was underlying in all the poems I had written. The sense of loss in the poems such as "Granddaddy Tom Speaks from the Dead," "First Snake, She Had Some Love," (which earlier featured a horse and not a snake), "Such Things," and "Owning the Old" was rooted in neglect, in surrender rather than in a political statement of the state of small family farms. Once I realized this, I wrote "Salvage," a poem that ends with the resigned statement: "What I mean is,/ if this is all that's left, then this/ is all that's left."

The poems in "Holy Lands" are realistically nostalgic. They look backwards, wanting to freeze time, aware that nothing can be relived or remade. The character of

Granddaddy Tom stands as a stark figure representing the importance of my tie to the land. While other characters are complacent with the ruin of the land, Granddaddy Tom fights for preserving it, at least in memory. In "Granddaddy Tom Speaks From the Dead," he preaches the importance of a relationship with the land. The land is to be honored and praised. He urges the reader: "Don't forget what you've mothered here:/ our cotton, soybeans, and ditch grass," (23-24). Though I never knew my Granddaddy Tom, I use him as a figure to represent a time when the land was farmed and the house was in good repair. He is a character that represents the past. However, through all their whimpering nostalgia, the poems also accept that history cannot be rewritten. First Snake is integral to making sense of the way the world—the farm—is. First Snake uses loss to learn new ways of experiencing the world. In "First Snake," she develops a language that was only possible through her loss of limbs; in "First Snake Speaks," she changes the world around her and uses her language to create and edit a new existence for herself—a life with wings. History cannot be edited and changed, but it does not mean that we cannot edit and take control over where we are and how we relate to this world.

As clichéd as it sounds, the idea for First Snake came to me in a dream. A portion of the poem, "Rightly" retells this dream. Up until this point, many of my poems featured snakes. This may be because I was raised in swamps and fields where one always needs to keep a keen eye to the ground. Still, snakes kept inserting themselves into my poems. After dreaming of a snake suckling on my right hand (yes, my writing hand), I realized that it was time to bring these snakes to the forefront. From there, First Snake came to me in a frenzy. She carried herself from Eden to my family's fields and brought with her thick lines of religious imagery that, until that point, had only surfaced

occasionally and with no real direction. First Snake brought with her themes of free will and creation. Without her biblical position, Adam and Eve would never have experienced the full impacts of making their own choices. This choice then set the course for a new world outside of Eden to be experienced. Similarly, First Snake uses what could have been considered her damnation to build a new life for herself outside of the confines of God's Word and creation.

In the collection, "Holy Lands," I eschew the traditional imagery of the dove as a Christ figure and instead adopt the snake as a holy being. In alignment with the image of Christ, the snakes I present are persecuted because of their very nature, their very "snakeness." Save for Granddaddy Tom and the narrator, the characters in "Holy Lands," view the animals as, at the least a nuisance and, at the most, a dangerous threat. Just as the Christ figure comes as hope for man, First Snake offers guidance for how Grandaddy Tom and the "I" character should interact with and understand the land. In "First Snake in Holy Land," First Snake plows field rows. In "Rightly" and "Book of Snake," First Snake offers sage advice on how to live in this world—take care of the land and realize that nothing is ever complete, nothing is ever finished. In "Book of Snake," First Snake sends the reader out as a disciple, saying "*Go on. Go on. Ain't nothing ever done."* In addition to the actual messages that First Snake conveys, the snake imagery used throughout the collection likens snakes to Christ figures: In "Mourning Dove and Six Snakes: Copperhead," the albino copperheads are described as white, as pure; in "Mourning Dove and Six Snakes: Black Racer," the snake shines holy purple; "Mourning Dove and Six Snakes: Coral Snake" features the snake wearing "a halo or a crown;" and

"Granddaddy Tom Speaks From the Dead," describes the practice of praising snakes for keeping vermin at bay.

The poem, "When the Circus Came To Town," accepts First Snake's challenge of discipleship. The "I" character stands apart from all other people. While everyone else sees the circus tent for what it is—a circus tent—the narrator changes it to a holy place, a revival tent. She says, "I stepped up,/ breathed deep, said/ show me to the snakes," (18-20). By deciding to embrace the snake, she is also embracing her place as potential redeemer, someone who can return to the land and write a new story about its importance. The final poem in the collection, "The Book of Snake," echoes this type of discipleship. The poem ends with First Snake saying, "*Go on. Go on. Ain't nothing ever done."* These lines echo with resignation; however, they are also a sending forth into the worth. They are a call to action, a call to move forward in the world.

Above all, "Holy Lands," is a collection about longing, about the need to make sense of the world and create meaningful expressions when the world seems lacking. It is about reaching down into the dirt and shaping what we want to make of this world. It is about understanding. It is about reinventing. It is about making the most of our lot.

HOLY LANDS

I.

But just as all the good things the Lord your God has promised you have come to you, so he will bring on you all the evil things he has threatened, until the Lord your God has destroyed you from this good land he has given you.

-Joshua 23:15

Sending the Bones

Listen. You know you got to go down there
sooner or later, follow that bogged road
where there are gate posts and no gate, crosses

shaped like power lines. It's some road, a hell
of one, some say, though this here is holy
land. Take off your shoes. Throw them to the swamp.

Let cottonmouths pocket themselves down deep
in the footbeds. Keep on trudging the road
until you see that shed bursting with bones.

They're all there, every last bone, every name
you tried to hush out of your town, every
story you swallowed, hid from your daughters.

Make something useful with all this, too much
for you now. Gather up those bones. Fasten
something together with legs, an arcing

back, a head that lolls on from side to side
and knows how to sing its own lullaby.
Breathe life into this thing. Straddle its bleached

rigid back, curl your toes into its ribs.
Make it pack you on down the hellish road.
Make it bog down its hooves in that haunted

swamp. Make it lumber under the power
lines and leave you there at the highway's edge.
Tell it to go on, now. Tell it to walk

away from town, move a county over,
maybe a whole damn world. Listen closely.
You got to send it on. Don't let it haunt

these rooms, this old swamp. Tell it to go on.
Tell it to not look back, to let you rest.
Tell it to go rest anywhere but here.

Cotton Fields

Eli Whitney never knew what he'd started. As quick
as he thought of it, the factories started jigging

out interchangeable parts—a gun barrel that was a barrel
that was a barrel, a bolt that had the same flat

head as every other bolt, a trigger and its twin
for when the metal got all marred. Hello, savior,

all those folks said, and stopped their bending,
their soldering, their saving hold metal scraps.

Oh dear Eli, savior indeed. How many stories
are there about the cotton gin? How many hands

got caught up in the rollers, dyed the cotton red?
The next day, there'd be a new set of hands

unjamming the combs, pulling on the levers
and whatever gears they could grip. The boss

would keep it all rolling, hell or high water,
until bale and bale and bale lined the field

looking, in the dusk, like monstrous sheep,
stock-still and silent in the dying pink light.

Granddaddy Tom Speaks from the Dead

Well, I guess I ought not blame
a soul for letting this all go.

That's what people do. They work
to make an easier life for themselves,

their children. They move on
into the city, away from their land

so they can take vacations by the water,
not worry about weeds taking seed.

They forget things like how we praise
black snakes for keeping out mice,

how you little young'uns used to wave
tobacco leaves like hailing Hosanna.

There's a lot of prayin' that happens
out here, whether or not you see it.

We've both given blood to the dirt,
our cotton, soybeans, and ditch grass.

I seen you cut your palms on the fence,
pierce your foot on a floor nail.

I bet you never thought prayer
would look like that, you bending

over and crying *Holy Jesus*, your blood
sinking in the ground, feeding our fields.

Marking

"All things counter, original, spare, strange;"
-"Pied Beauty," Gerald Manley Hopkins

Sweet Boy woke me gnawing fat fleas off his tail. I knocked him
a good one where he was chewin, set him out. Good Lord,

I wasn't game for early morning waking, and that sky,
well it blushed so deep down you would have thought I'd shone out naked.

Sweet Boy circled round, marked our narrow world: jasmine mess
all tangled up a pine, green bean can left stranded from some

little cousin's play, wren feathers, bones, stray shit, leaves and brush
and fertilizer bags that never got burned. Oh Jesus,

there must be something good of you in everything, huh? Cause
when Sweet Boy pissed that stone dry dirt into mud, I wanted

to cake it into a cross on my white forehead, kneel down
and sing that hymn my mama taught me about earth's holy

beauty, though then she would have thought me nothing but a damned
dirty fool, so turned in my ways, so odd and yup, so strange.

Such Things

The day before Easter, Mama worked
the hem of my dress. Aunt Patsy stitched
roses onto the white bib collar.

I sat on the kitchen floor and picked
ticks off our collie's back, collected
them in a Dixie cup.

The fat ones were too blood full
to move. The ones that hadn't yet
latched were still wrinkled

as raisins, flat backed and wanting
for feast. They scrambled about
the cup, scratching off wax as they went.

I walked outside to empty them
into the azaleas, saw the dogwoods
blooming their old stories

about salvation. Sunday School
pamphlets swore those trees
were once straight, straight

as truth, straight as pines.
But then, they say, Pilate's men
tied two together to make the cross.

Since then, nothing's been the same.
The dogwoods curved their backs
like dowagers, dwarfed short and opened

wide, reached out their arms again
and again. The inside of their petals
hint red, the centers circle like thorns.

Ants lined up one of the dogwoods' body
and I brushed them back down. I'd heard
ants could burrow deep, eat a tree dead.

There is so much to care for in this world—
the ticks, the dog, the spirea flooding the yard.

The hydrangeas refuse to be ignored.

I tell them how pretty they are
and cup their heads in my hands.
They need me more than the dog,

who still can’t pull his own ticks.
The grass shoots up like a hymn
and the car tires bow it down into prayer.

That morning I walked barefoot, careful
of the gumballs, looked for the grass
to bend down around hidden snakes.

Inside, my mother and aunt laughed
over my dress. My mother told
about how I woke, worried that it wouldn’t

be done in time for church. She told
about how I had already checked
the fridge twice to make sure

our Easter corsages hadn’t browned.
They laughed softly, sighed. Aunt Patsy
tied French knots into the rose’s center,

smoothed out the ribbons that would tie
it under my arms, said she had never
met a child who took such things to heart.

Stone Soup
For my aunts and uncles, dead and alive

Miriam's husband went down over the Atlantic.
She raised three children on hambones and rice.

Lamar had no children so took us all as his,
trucked us out to the farm to help him stir up soil.
He dug up peanuts and set them on the stove to boil.

Birdie died at eighteen. Polio, I think.
My mother still drank milk like a calf.

Doug died too, a few years later. No one
ever told me how. My mother remembers
the cold chicken she ate after the service
better than she can recall his voice.

Leon kept butter mints in his candy dish,
sometimes hid soft peppermint sticks
at the bottom. He grew mustard greens
and cabbages that the deer pecked down.

Betty keeps her crock-pot on all day,
drowns her rice in gravy. She had to spoon
feed her husband mashed potatoes when
he couldn't remember how to speak.

David ate thin gray burgers heavy filled
with grease. He gave me my first Moon Pie,
cussed me when I said it was too sweet.

Richard won't eat in quiet. He laughs
while he chews, grunts over chicken
pot pie and slurps up stew. He blesses
his food and thanks God again and again.

Patsy remembers how to make Grandma's
fritters, fries the cornbread in a seasoned pan.
She likes patina because it makes broken things
distinguished. Her kitchen tiles are broken.
Her good silver is tarnished black.

Mama hosts Sunday lunch for whomever

will come. The pressure cooker whistles
over mustard greens, the oven is heavy
with a ham. Rice and rutabagas boil
side by side on the gas-cook stove.
Miriam brings the green beans; Patsy, baskets
full of biscuits. Betty brings platters of fried
chicken; Richard, fresh Georgia peaches.
There are pecan pies and lemon tarts
brought over from a friend who wishes
us all well. Everyone helps set the table.
The children say grace, we all whisper Amen.
Amen for our lives. Amen for our food.
Amen for the dead who we always still love.
We all sit down. Mama busies herself
in the kitchen, tells us to eat, by God, just eat.

Owning the Old

My mother, my aunts wash the silverware
by hand, use old cloths to free the potatoes
from between the fork fingers, hollow
out the spoon heads, the gravy ladles.

They line the counter with towels
and lay out the silver to dry.
This is how their mother taught
them to keep away the tarnish.

They have these same domestic doings
for lace, for fine linens, for keeping
clothes for fifty years. There are rules
for owning the old, they say,

though none of us knows how to own
the old farm. Kudzu has crawled
in through the chimney and shaken
loose the kitchen sink. The ceiling,

too, is crumbling. I like to sneak in
when I feel brave, imagine them all
crowding the kitchen, my grandmother
shooing them out the back door,

my uncles taking up their rifles
to pick off some doves before lunch,
my aunts setting the table, my mother,
the youngest, scrambling for a place.

Salvage

It’s easy to miss--that skeleton
house all sun-bleached
and crisping away.
Its doors fall open at the hinges,
and the wide-slatted floors lean
towards rot. There’s a floral-carved
mantel, though it’s not so fancy
as it sounds. Under it,
a fireplace. In that fireplace,
a bottle of cigarette butts.
Who knows who left them.

Outside, ivy strangles out
the azaleas. Bedded in the weeds,
there’s a tin bucket of nails
all rusted and crooked
from being pulled out
by a hammer’s hook end.
Beside the bucket is what’s left
of a bedside table. It’s missing
a drawer, water-curved
and pinched all up the sides.

No tractor in the tractor barn,
just a small stack of wood
that I might could turn
into a shelf, a coat rack,
or something. Who knows.
Who knows. Maybe my
granddaddy laid these out—left-
overs from the porch or some
repair on the barn. I might as well
take one home and see
what I can do. What I mean is,
if this is all that’s left, then this
is all that’s left.

Dove Hunting

Two dead doves lie between us, their stout chests
touching, gray heads turned towards nothing
in particular. Soft down feathers have scattered
slow as last breaths, have laid bare breast wounds.

The feathers fall on cracked soybean pods, pods
drier than the devil's eyes, some might say.
The down tangles in our boot laces, rests on red
shell casings littered from my nephew's last load.

This was the tobacco belt, where my mother was raised,
where folks climbed barn rafters to tie the sticky crop.
They braided the dried leaves into bunches called hands,
carried them more careful than good china or children.

They had stopped all that by the time I came around,
but I still knew the smells of plowed dirt and tractor
barns, though I never stayed long in those barns,
more scared of ghosts than snakes in that cool shade.

Crouched in scrub brush, we scan the sky for doves.
We are in a field that is no longer a farmer's
field outside a house that is no longer a farmer's
house. To him, these are only hunting grounds.

The fields are baited with corn. The trees are drenched
in scent. Motion-sensing cameras nest
in the trees, catch pictures of deer and wild
pigs, mark the time of day they feed.

I guess there's not much left in the soil, no crops
rotating in and out to fill it back up. Down the road,
folks built a factory that landed the county jobs.
In the other direction, brick houses with stucco

sides sink slowly around a man-made lake.
There's not much land left for keeping us
steady. I guess it didn't have a choice, that dirt,
but to let us go to town on its back.

He holds one of the doves by its wing tops,
clotheslining it between his small fingers.
Did you see how this one went down?
He lowers the body so that it hovers

just above ground like settling smoke
then tosses it into the air. The bird lands,
head bent under its iridescent body, blood
coaxed out onto its breast by the fall.

Holy Lands

You know, I’ve been bending down a lot
and praising my family’s dirt, hammering

out hymns on tree roots, saying *amen*
when tobacco palms empty pooled rain.

But what else ought I do? That farm is the story
of our people, how Granddaddy Tom walked

into the fields, how his children slowly bowed
on out and left grass to raise up like the devil.

I’ve watched that farmhouse fall, seen the barns
tilt away from sturdy. Everything is rotten

but the dirt. That dirt, that dirt. You’d be a fool
to think that dirt could go bad. Leaves and fruit

have been bedding down in it for years,
but then again it’s hard to say how things go.

I’ve heard tell that during the depression,
folks ate dirt when their ribs started spindling

out their chests. Maybe they stooped on down
for the minerals or for filling that wide yawn

in their guts. My God, you’re supposed to eat
what grows out the dirt, not the dirt itself.

But I guess there’s not much difference, if you think
about it. I wonder how much life I could hold

in a handful of dirt. There’s got to be something
of truth there, caught in the grit between my teeth.

HOLY LANDS
II.

…they will speak new tongues; they will pick up snakes in their hands.
Mark 16: 17-18

When the Circus Came To Town

The whole county
went out to watch
them raise those tents,
bigger than anything
ever grew from that field.

Outside the fence,
little girls practiced
their arabesques,
drew lines in the dirt
to walk like tightropes.

The boys lashed
imaginary whips,
and took turns
being tamers,
then lions.

I thought it some revival
tent where people prayed
and cried. I stepped up,
breathed deep, said
show me to the snakes.

Mourning Dove and Six Snakes

1. Mourning Doves

They perch on the telephone lines
that reach across the field. We take
them as game, or—sweetly—as signs
of peace, as if Christ himself made

them blameless. But you can't deny
the way those gray bodies hold
together, gang up on even blue jays flying
too close to their large folds.

I've heard tell that some doves even eat
their own kind when provoked, heard it said
they'll peck out the eyes of any bleak
body, will keep on till they're safe, or it's dead.

2. Garter Snake

You know, most folks are scared of dying,
swear all snakes are the same, even these
little green garters that don’t do more than lie
around and rustle up trees, stir dried leaves.

My granddaddy never said a word against
the big old worms, but somehow the rest
of my folks took to *get it before it gets*
you, and *better safe than sorry*. Even the best

took to killing them. Those poor snakes never stood
a chance on the farm. Uncle Lamar
would scarce stop his sentence before he would
swing down a hoe, split that fellow apart.

3. Rattlesnake

My uncle once found two rattlers laying
up under his truck. “Each was at least five
feet,” he said, “with so many beads, praying
wouldn’t even drown that noise, make it die.”

My mama laughed when I first told her, said
“Not five feet but two and your uncle yelled
when he saw them. He liked to raise the dead
the way he was carrying on like hell.”

For awhile, he thought he saw rattlers everywhere
and made me walk behind him even when
the fields had just been plowed. He would even swear
they were in the shed, beating against feed bins.

4. Rat Snake

Most farmers like to keep them around
for—what else?—keeping vermin away.
Granddaddy Tom always let them round
about the corners of the barn, let them lay

in wait out back of the house. He didn't care
what they were up to, except for that day
he found a nest inside the tire swing where
us children used to spin around and play.

He cut down that rope just as quick
as he could, watched it hit the ground, shake
those snakes on out. The grown ones hissed
then shot themselves fast across the grass, away.

5. Copperhead

My old dog, Sweet Boy, saw them first, growled low
in his throat. There were five of them, a damned
family camped out under blueberry boughs.
The babies were no bigger than my hand

and all coiled up, circled tight in themselves.
Two snakes were that same rust and sand I've seen,
but the other three looked like they were glazed
over with glass, near white as curdled cream.

Sweet Boy stopped his lowing, stood still beside
me. I picked the few berries within close reach.
We moved on along and gave a good wide
berth to that strange and dappled family scene.

6. Black Racer

There it was, all free-wheeling through fields,
racing quick between weeds and tall ditch
grass before my brother caught it, wielded
his shovel like an ax, unstitched

the snake's head from its body. My brother held
the racer by its tail, lassoed it around
his head a few times, let that black body sail
to the woods just past the fielded ground.

Old timers used to hang snakes on fences
to coax rain. This one blew a bit in the air,
caught on a branch. Beyond my good senses
I saw it shine black, silver, then purple, I swear.

7. Coral Snake

It was all laid out across the concrete steps,
kept me from walking on inside. I knew
there was a rhyme—red on yellow?—that kept
track of what's got poison, some little tune

to help mark the coral from the king. Red
on yellow or yellow on black? Who can remember
these things? But there it was, all colored
up like Indian corn, like leaves, like embers.

It lifted up its black-tipped head and eyed
me before moving on, feeling itself down
the steep steps. Its stripes circled its sides,
a yellow band around its head like a halo or a crown.

First Snake

And what of First Snake, if we hold
that old story as gospel?
Adam and Eve were thrown on out.
First Snake only lost her legs, which is no worse
than some soldiers coming home from war.

Knowing all God's secrets, maybe that snake
learned a thing or two about the world.
Maybe she flicked her body, newly low
on the ground, felt the dirt beneath her belly
until she had carved out letters, then words.

Maybe she wrote a book on Eden's back,
picking out metaphors like field mice,
erasing her poor phrasings back down into the dirt.
These are words she starts as if writing her own
book of life, *not like The Word, cause that ain't ours.*

I've started these words for you,
but you can change them on around.
Erase what you want with your heel.
Rustle up new truths to your liking.
Shape new words as you see fit.

First Snake, She Had Some Love

And her words for it grew up in her like a trumpet vine, cracked
open her chest, spindled around her heart, rolled straight up her dry
throat and traced the edges of her teeth. They pulled down on her mouth

and filled her with sweet and loamy fields. When they pushed off her tongue
she thought herself to blossom, expected those vines to reach out
and find something to draw near. But do you know, that poor old snake,

when she opened her mouth, all she found was air and some sound
like *shhh*? *Shhh* like hush or *Shhh* like I ain't listening.
And that was all she thought she'd ever say. *Shhh* to the towhees

pecking in the grass, *Shhh* to the burro penned up and braying.
Shhh, she said, hoping for it to echo about and find
anyone, anything who'd swish it around, shoot it on back.

First Snake Speaks

After First Snake read
all of Eden's straight lines,
she got to seeing how
the world should be
rewritten.

Call it the first step
in evolution or a way
she changed her own lot.
She didn't sit with the saying
that landscape is destiny.

She pushed against the river
banks so they were sway-
backed and slow, all full
of pools and safe shelters
in the elbows.

She sent smoke signals
way across the straight-
lined mountains to tell
them to cluster together
and let wild things grow.

She wrote over God's strict
rules and orders and let
the weeds go to seed,
stalking up fields of sweet
grass and poppies.

She read this new earth
like braille on her belly
but still wasn't sated
so she stitched up her split
tongue for speaking.

Now, how things happened
is how they always happen:
there was a word,
a first spoken word,
one that grew feathers.

It picked itself up off
the scrub of Snake's tongue
and set on out for to find
its own way. It was good, then,
Snake thought, not to shape

but make something that called
back to her, more alive
than anything she'd ever
known. Nice, then, when
she figured out what all she could do:

speak herself into a pair of wings,
fly out that tree, and sing
praises, for the first time,
to herself, to her own
hollow bones.

First Snake in Holy Land

After she made herself that set of sturdy wings,
I guess First Snake flew the whole world over.

She caught honeybees in her mouth and whispered
them back to life over the sweet vines and peonies.

She spent time watching the ways people move,
across our whole history, watched them trudge

across lonely deserts, sail hateful seas until they got
where they were headed and kissed the ground.

She hovered over graveyards and counted the dead
buried deep down with wedding bands and kin's tears.

She let the wind move her about over cotton
and swamp where the air was so rich with dirt

she could almost taste it again. So she landed.
And you wouldn't even believe where, but I swear,

she grounded herself right down in my family's
field and crawled on up to my granddaddy's boot.

She shrugged off those wings that were no good
for nothing but flying and started carving

out rows quicker than my granddaddy could plant.
Well, hell, he said, *you're right good to have around*.

She stretched out long under a tree and sighed,
Sure as flesh crawls over bone, I reckon this is home.

Rightly

There's that old Pee Dee River that waddles on slow,
heavy with black mud so you can't see the cotton-mouths
curling just below the water's warm skin.
That's where they used to swim—my mama and her kin.
The girls toed shallow water so as not to get their hair wet;
the boys jumped from a tree rope tied to a tangled live oak.
Once, Mama went out to her knees felt that loose mud
squeeze up between her toes, felt it swallow her to her ankles.

One night I dreamed about that First Snake. She took my whole
hand in her mouth, her rows of pin-thin teeth rolled around
my fist, almost suckling. Maybe she was looking for some good
or something almost good, something that wasn't scared.
Who knows the needs of dark things—coal black snakes,
the hungry river bottom. *We're all everything's Mama*,
she looked at me and said, but what did she mean other than
the world deserves love? I don't rightly know. I can't rightly say.

The Book of Snake

It'll all be down soon—the house, the barn.
Everything that once stood on its own.

All us cousins have talked about taking
crowbars and wrestling down the old

house. It's all but fallen in as it is.
We'll take what we can save

for our own homes—floorboards, mantels,
the bead-board siding in the closets.

We haven't done it yet and still
things around there keep falling.

So I went out there alone one day,
walked the property line and counted

how many doves hovered over the field,
waiting to get shot down. I shuffled through

the house, marked out where furniture
used to sit, noticed how the rooms

seemed smaller than I remembered.
I thought the dining room a banquet

hall, but it was no bigger than most.
Other rooms were fading too, the porch.

A dollhouse used to be set up in the corner.
Screens used to stop most of those flying bugs.

I walked over to the downed fence
that once kept out forest from field.

Honeysuckle had tangled it beyond
any use. I lifted up a trail, all heavy

with blossom, and there I saw her,
that First Snake. She was all curled

up and bedded down in shade.
She opened up slowly, coil over coil

and flicked her tail across the dirt
a time or two before rolling back

further into the woods. I knelt
on down to the ground, traced

the marks she left. It was nothing
I could read, but my hands felt

it like some kind of memory.
There it was, that Book of Snake,

but for all my trying, the only
things I knew to preach from it

was a little like a song, the voice
mellow as aged tobacco tannins,

oak barrels, moss hanging
from hundred-year old trees.

I've sung it over again and again,
but the only bit I can get right

is the sigh at the end: *Go on*,
it goes, about as deep down

as I can feel. *Go on. Go on.*
Ain't nothing ever done.

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