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A Cast of White Crabs

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
English

by

Jessica Suchanek

B.A. University of New Orleans, 2004

December, 2011

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Preface

When I think of poetry, Eliot, Pound, Moore, Williams and Cummings are the voices I hear in my head, particularly Moore's "The Fish" and Pound's translation of "The River-Merchant's Wife." The Modernist tendency to incorporate text and ideas from a number of sources helped to shape my ideas about the nature of composition. Also inspiring are the writers of haiku, such as Basho and Buson; I often consider the beauty of imperfect, everyday objects that many of their poems embody so elegantly. However, while working on this project, I wished to expand my knowledge of poets and their work, particularly contemporary authors. I am intrigued by Kenneth Goldsmith's theory of conceptual poetry; though I am not as "uncreative" as he is, reading his theories certainly spoke to feelings I harbored about the potential for the random and dissonant to become poetry.

In many of the poems in the following collection, the speaker experiences nostalgia for or imagined memories of something she herself has never experienced. I hope to explore the imagination as a mode for explaining the world and metaphor as a means for connecting language to physical objects. I have tried to capture the process of how a mind leaps from one subject to another and how this is spurred on not only by what one physically observes but by the words one uses to describe it. These poems attempt to make the everyday uncanny to offer a new perspective.

Stylistically, I have chosen to work in free verse with occasional prose poems. Lyrics tend to give a sense of organization and rhythm to the random or disparate. Prose poems often contain unexpected beauty or connections within their seemingly ordinary

lines. David Lehman states in his *American Poetry Review* article, “The Prose Poem: An Alternative to Verse,” that the prose poem often “moves at a speed faster than verse” and can “make the extraordinary seem somehow routine.”¹ I am looking to Stein and Eric Baus to try to develop my voice in prose poems. Both of these writers tend to work associatively, particularly Stein in *Tender Buttons*, a technique useful in creating evocative prose poetry.

Subject matter for these poems has been provided by the natural world, both past and present, by the lives of animals and also by the lives of individual people, how they are built and maintained in a harsh and disordered environment. To compose these poems, I have collected words and phrases from a number of sources, including overheard conversation, road signs, TV news, documentaries and Internet chats, with special attention to ephemera. In a few poems, I have worked exclusively within a group of words from a certain source and tried to arrange them in such a way as to bring out the mood or narrative I felt was suggested by the words themselves. In “The Trials of Civilization,” the poem is composed mostly of anagrams of two of the poem’s lines, “Neanderthals all” and “A nefarious few.” When browsing the words and phrases, many of them seemed to suggest objects or actions I associate with the prehistoric world and the dissatisfaction its inhabitants may have felt; I tried to arrange them in such a way that they might also suggest that to the reader. For others, I try to incorporate this data into the framework of narratives and descriptions I have conceived separately to create unexpected contrasts and relationships.

In my revision process I have found it necessary to work specifically on lineation

¹ Lehman, David. “The Prose Poem: An Alternative to Verse.” *The American Poetry Review* 32.2 (March/April 2003): 45-49.

and strophe breaks, as a history of handwriting poems in notebooks has not prepared me well for this. I have tried to use punctuation to create lines that can be read in multiple ways. The lines of “Something like Paul Bunyan” could be read in many different combinations because of the lack of commas or periods. I have also paid close attention to the responses readers have to the meanings or narratives of my poems; it has helped me to locate images or lines that are problematic or confuse the direction of a poem. In “Jaw” at one point I had used “glass clogs” in a way that was meant to be metaphorical, but when one of my readers tried to make sense of it as a literal phenomenon I realized that it was unnecessary and only detracted from the action of the poem. I replaced it with a literal image. This has led to the cutting out of superfluous material to make my poems more streamlined and focused.

At the beginning of this manuscript I worked briefly in persona, something to which I hope to return in the future. A number of authors have reading material to offer which utilizes this technique. One book I have found particularly interesting is *Lawrence Booth's Book of Visions* by Maurice Manning. Though his poems include more recurring characters and scenarios than my work, the way each poem builds toward a stronger whole, even poems that would not necessarily be very strong without the context, is useful to study. In addition to writing in persona, I intend to continue working with this group of poems, filling it out with more material. Poems in the style of “For from Garments Cometh a Moth, and from Women Wickedness” and “Jazz Age Dress Up” would work well. “The beauty of the idea that you can write a single poem is a lie,” according to poet Robin Blaser (qtd. in Conte).² With this in mind, I try to place every

² Conte, Joseph. “Seriality and the Contemporary Long Poem.” *Sagetrieb* 11 (Spring & Fall 1992): 35-45. Retrieved from http://www.acsu.buffalo.edu/~jconte/Seriality_Sagetrieb.htm.

poem I write within the context of my work as a whole, to see where it fits and what it may offer that is new.

Section I

A Toast

Here's to you, Ethel Allison,
The lakeshore like a garden party,
Coon-ringed moon over gator tail river bend--
The debutant-gloved crab catcher, the parasol-twirling pig slayer,
A skirt-hooped, dog-bayed sportsman's paradise.
And Ethel, the duck gun queen;
Copper-jacket slug struck straight through to my dumb heart.
Knee deep, mired in luxury,
Possum stole and Real Tree tux,
Deer skull buried treasure out back with the Mason jars.

When the waters rise, the one thing you prop up on the hill:
A velvet-Elvis portrait of Jesus Christ
Wrapped in neon and Christmas lights,
Nestled in God's plastic-letter proclamations.
He makes demands of me
While you shake and cry in your Levi's Sunday best.

Dead stale swamp gas smell down the pine bark beetle trail,
The home of an enceinte rattle snake
That broke its back thrashing when they went to drag it out
For a fee of 500 bucks.

It's too much, Ethel--
You heap it and pile it on me.
C'mon, Sugar, you know I can't leave you now
So you can take that boot off my throat--
Gen-u-ine cow hide and tar-proof sole.
I've had enough, Ethel,
So get off my back and keep your damn feet to yourself.

Something Like Paul Bunyan

400 square inches of orange
Flow like a cape from our hero, ox-bodied
He stalks stealthy
Through the trees in the blue tick morn,
In slick black hip boots
Through the mud with slither hounds,
Over tulip-crimped 410s
But he's after bigger game,
Packed to the gills with straight-cased nitro
He's going to shoot
A bristling hundred point buck,
Head as big as a 440
Iron-hoofed and rebar-ribbed
He's the wild man, the legend,
A tree-stump muscled, fire-bearded
God of the swamp
Whose tale whispers through the cypress knees

But meets with unbelievers
Where the land dries up

Honey Island

The heat, the wet, the breeze scattering
my hair. A smell of midday grass.

Past the alligators, past the turtles, stepping over
the brown-burned leaf patterns on the bridge.

Fingertips smooth over aged steel, ninety-six
today. The toss, press of the button

the metallic slam,
fingered
so delicately
then *Bam--*

The shock
right through me
with the sun against my eyelids.

The breath an ache in my chest that spreads.
The plum-speckled bloom across pale skin.

At the Broken Bar Ranch

It was their goal to breed the rankest bulls-- the ones who bucked highest and spun fastest-- and to breed the most of them. "I don't mind when they ride it," he says, "But I'd be lying if I said I didn't like it when they get thrown." I watched them funnel up the ramp into the trailer, each trying to mount the one preceding it. I saw one's ear tagged "Muckraker." Blue-white with a black-splattered belly. Crept up his sides, all the way to the folds on his hump. They told me he weighed 2045 lbs and he was famous. He had his own action figure. Perfect except where he lost his right horn to infection.

At Angola I watched a man ride a bull whose name I didn't know. He made one full rotation in the air before he broke his cheek bone coming down on a horn. I stood by the gate to the ring and watched as the ambulance pulled out of the dirt. A young man, an old-fashioned cowboy, looked from his horse. A webbed brace on his right hand that parted his gnarled fingers. He said, "That's when you find out what God gave you for a heart." Riding home on the road that twists through the compound, my brother-in-law told me "They raise their own bulls here" and then I saw. Grazing in the fields of endless yellow flowers. They seemed to envelope it, the island cut by the serpentine river.

Jaw

Thirty-three in all
That they cut out piece by piece
And after that his mouth
Was always stinking so bad
That even his chowchow
Was too disgusted to
Stay in the same room
As him. The rot contained
By a stilted prosthesis
In black, put in and took out.

It rattled until he would
Tighten the screws
Then it would pinch
And leave bloody gills.
Even that didn't stop him
Placing a bit behind the lip
Before where teeth were
To taste but never swallow
The spice of red tobacco,
Blue mint Kentucky grass.

He said it would bring back
That dizzying rush he
Felt as a kid and never quite
Felt again. Still, he was hoping,
Welcoming the glue that sticks
The tongue, the sputum
Discharge, a fluid mass
In the ears. Even when
It slips back past the gums
He tastes the blood,
Tastes the lure.

The Cul-de-sac at the Edge of the Woods

Nowhere else to go this November.
We find refuge in stress pockets where
The gaunt hoot owl stalks shadows.

May Day streamers limp down corneas,
Sandbags in eyelids with turtle-green rings,
Braided pastels flagging, folding like dry hair.

Shooting leaves before they fall, a twitch squashed.
Shooting empty cognac bottles, curdled
Milk fumes and coconut cheese. Shooting

Broken pigeons from each other's hands.
A sour north wind winds down from the mill,
Chunked pulp rot wafting in. We take our time

Lining up the shots, pumping little lead bells
Curled in on ourselves keeping drunk-warm.
The flat sound circles around the damp air.

The fog's already caught our breath
In puffs like thatched pine pushes back
White mushrooms. No more slick bills

To crack in the cold, worried colorless
And soft in the creases. Blunt hands in
String pockets, paper clips and one straight
Pin, brown head bent.

Old River / Lost River

Stranded at mile marker 4 in the company of a raccoon
That died palm out, we watch the sun set
Reaching. Still reaching while we're making plans for our rescue,
While we're leaning on the guard rail
And thinking of the river.

The point at which they converge, without boundary.
The swarms of eddies flow black
And enter a giant moth-mouth with a shudder across the uvula,
A whisper down the cilia, tip to tip,
The chill like fish-flesh.

The Town

Tentacles around the county line

You stare
Always from the doorway
In flannel and threadbare calico

These dirt floors
Molded glass panes, every third shattered

Toasters, sofas, dolls,
slung around and heaped

Scorched weeds' leaves

The square-stamped
DeSoto, Edsel, Pontiac,

Chrome-shone whales
Stacked on each other

Once they would roll away from here

An abandoned slaughterhouse floor
A grating

Offal fell through
Skins, bones, bile,

Like your love
A string of maybes who strung you out
Pushed you along

You didn't know why

A gas station
Scrapes

Pulls and spits
On every cylinder

The only thing that's full of life

It burns through all of your days

The ground
These people
Termites

The octane
Disposable lives

Section II

For from Garments Cometh a Moth, and from Women Wickedness

Within stoves, more than a hundred cosmetics fled Boston Harbor for Canada, each with a sewing bag, a bag to cover their eyes. And where was the poor water? Poor supporters who read French and paper thoughts and other artists' bickering. But she ignores them and her ex-boyfriend native-of-the-ward and files concerns for the embroidery patient, for temptation, depth, and community. What's after marriage is iron, copies of third motif candies, children indeed taught to still cook. She excises want from her face and all mention of her father, forgets the lathe-turning design by an allergic adolescent. She wants to embrace the tagged pocked millions. Lamb handbags were replaceable, no singular patterns manifest, the flax seeds show in flyaway strands, in owl smoke. Determined jars she'll use to wash her heart.

Loviette

She counts the steps from
here to there, fitting each
foot into each linoleum

brick and stops when she
reaches the one before the
one that seats the table

leg. Some days she doesn't
make it past the refrigerator;
she sees the screen door

as a light box where
silhouettes form, drop out
to the cutting room floor.

And they greet her: a
sweet thing, a pretty young
thing, but always a thing.

And they bring her gifts:
they stock her table with
beef and fish with guinea-hens

and laced mutton, offerings to
the queen with a jade
bag and cream taffeta. She

turns every plate with oval
dishes long-ways and patterns
parallel to the edges. Sometimes

she spins unmarked ones for
hours. She wonders
what they think about what

she thinks about when they
touch her, what she thinks
about the way they smell.

She soaps herself quick and
follows the arrows in the
floor grain back to her

chair at the table near
the phone on the wall;
the cord takes three twists

exactly. She waits for the
call that comes sharp at
six but when it doesn't

she stops spinning and sits
straight up, allows the twitch
of her toe to keep the time

'til it does.

A Rough Night on the Edge

With everything showered in slag.
You bring it home, aching.
Let me sooth your wounds in bacon fat,
Kiss your palms, put you together with clothespins.
I'll mend the cigarette holes in your heart
With my heart,
The pieces cut out by a crescent-shaped punch.
I'll use my salt box secret, my peach pincushion,
Smooth you over with country-blue mitts
Singed fresh from the oven.

Go ahead and take a crack at me, Tiger
Use a little brute force,
Some elbow grease.
Put your weight into it
Like pounding rivets and feel me
Real as the cold tile floor.
It's no use using booze to scrape loose flesh,
The cracked rubber edge of a dust pan
Like blood down a broom handle.
I'll spend the next day picking splinters
From my red meat rib eye.

Jazz Age Dress Up

With my whippet
Flipped up on one shoulder

Lopped off at both ends.
It's got a spread wide

But I won't worry,
I've got that big ball double-ought.

Dressed in pleated
Sky blue parachute

Pull on grogram sweater
Tossed on veal skin seats.

Knocking knobby heels together,
Pinch two fingers across my brim

I'm razor sharp.
Riding a deep cobalt

Angled coach, wedged knife
Cutting through the countryside

Barrel down hills
Like oak-stuffed pine top

Bursting at the seams
Tearing up the night

And churning gravel
On the old bootlegger's road

To a coyote's keening tune.

The Sexy Deer

Has all the amenities of a cuckoo clock
Birds made of mushroom
Mushroom made of sugar crystal
Wooden leaves slit-veined to the bone
Ruffles blue, red grosgrain
Fluffed charmeuse in concentric white
But mostly brown, every brown sensual and soft
Tan, taupe, chestnut
Molded to flocked antlers, fist-blunt
Down smooth legs hooved in coal
Hands with ten bright pink pinky toes
A bushel of blushing grubs folded over
An obsidian-cleft twat, waist
Wrapped in saw tooth leather lace
Eyelet arrayed in pendant buds
A blank face over the round sound
Of a spiral gong mouth

The Bee Yard

to locate caterpillars
in blue and velvet gold
 blooded barbs
saddled on

cactus evergreen picking

through magnolia debris
 resin cups and rattles
dead oak branches
 in tail fans

I have sores on my hands
 my fingers taffy twists

swollen like fresh abdomen
what clears is a pause
 in the brush
an apiary

 for the tent-man
because
 seldom seen
his secretive habits
busy him

the vibration a glow
 in my ear
my teeth pressed to taste
 soft and aluminum

 the sound is natural like
smallpox and nightshade
 are natural

the carillon call
 of the lush bug fuzz

Sonnenizio on a Line from Edna St. Vincent Millay

You loved me not at all, but let it go;
I didn't love you all that much either
To tell the truth. I liked you alright
But most of all I liked the feel of you
On my arm and in my bed and when you called
Me over to whisper, small and dear,
"Let's leave all this to chase our mercenary calling."
Then you stalled your '67 Mercury twice driving
to the coast. I still see the tall pine trees
We passed and the night we spent out in the salty
Air, and tears, how they'd fall when you first left,
Not for you but for all the coasts we'd never see.
I didn't love you, no, but all too soon
Time will clear a space for love to bloom.

Pete

She spent her youth in the fields in a big straw hat
just like the Vietnamese, she would say,
picking soy beans or digging sweet potatoes
with dried mud on her hands like concrete dust.
She'd tell me stories about her old dog Ben
and how once he saved her from a copper head,
about chasing down chickens to wring their necks
and draining pigs into thin tin buckets.
I don't even know where to start over a tasse à café
in her tiny kitchen,
the big furniture choking the hall,
her rosary and bobby pins in a dish on the table
over a wasp-patterned floor.
A doorbell that would clunk instead of ding.
The lady from the hospice says she might see
people who aren't there but don't worry
that's normal.

In that kitchen just like the old farmhouse kitchen
and the ragged row houses imposed over
the grey furrowed dirt, it's sometimes hard
to remember, or not to remember.
When she tells me she saw Jamie today
I nod and ask what she said
and she says well nothing, of course,
because the dead have no time for talk.

Section III

Below Sunlight

Below the floating multitude,
The tell-tale flotsam, a trail
Of littered scales that catch a sparkle
And descend, settle slowly

To the lower midnight.
The barrier to the abyss like the shore
Of the cosmos with suns shut out—

The drifting predators, the larva that propel past, corkscrew-like.
The ambush predators with milky cataracts,
Permanently gape-mouthed.

The fang-tooth tracks a pair of enormous yellow lenses
That vanish in a streak, the after image lost
Among a spectacle of jelly membranes,
Beacons showy in a vacant room.
An array of photophores.

Green and yellow and maroon sea stars
Devour a rotting seal on the seafloor.
A sprinkling of the many echinoderms.

A cast of white crabs over red worms and white fish,
Chimneys pouring out water as hot as molten lead.
The gathered feed off the sulfides and methane
On the shores of a brine lake,
Darker still in the prevailing dark.

A Shadow on the Lung

the wa-
ter moves
like
the crea-
tures

move in the water sear-suckered with lace cucumbers and not-the-blue-ringed octopi that
round their tentacles and filigree all in the same swell

pull in
a boot
a tire
a cl-
am

a croaker anointed and purpled with pectoral fins curved palm up in hallelujah hands
while he dangled from the lip gills flaked white paint when

he pushed
the
air out
with a
ribbit

with a struggle and splashed back past the eyes straight to the throat *out of the air does he
still make that sound* filling a sponge or jug with weight

where the
alveoli
are
fish
eggs

and a fish is a sheepshead I think *oranda cauliflower face, sleep's head thinking of
caliper brains* do we wake under the water to the fawning hair

that mer-
maids
take
the
time to

comb in streams but it all lies flat when we wake to shallow graves even cephalopods
shoot away in atramental trails that curl and dilate

out of
the wa-
ter to
the
at-

mosphere moonstained but who sings there who tilts back the chest to wash in more to
choke on silt turned ash and we remind ourselves

to
breathe
til
we
drown

take all we can and chance to see the nautilus the pecten the anemone all swirl to their
cadence back to the beginning the anaerobic algae we are

like
you
we want
to
breathe

An Encounter, Briefly, an Occasion for Hope

He zooms in on the sled head,
 Sees her perfect plastics superfly.
He pulls the bayou chub, her power bait
 the lazer sharp eagle claw.

She, a shiny cocahoe minnow.
He, the strike king gambler,
 Works his bass magic.

He gulps her Y-not,
 a salt water assassin;
He loves her bitty bite bitsy bugs,
 her coffee tubes,
 storms her turbotail, a rebel.

He croaks the culprit's ribbit:
 A sudden buzzit brings the popper crème.
She's left with the slider garland,
 Mark of a Scumfrog's shame.

Her glare for him is ultra-point,
 Who should have been a "specializer".
A deadly Dudley, he slinks off,
 the secret D.O.A.

Styrofoam Splits on the Beads like a Seam

“They say if you’ve got enough and a bucket of gasoline you can make napalm”
And we talk about maybe saving the corners when we buy a new television.

The dirt ripples through the rows in the fields
As we pass; south of here the flood plains are filling up.
“This morning, they were buying tackle and bait, filling trucks with it”

Amazing they say on the news.

They say it’s moving 1.2 million cubic feet per second.

Soon the lake will see a fresh water intrusion,
Algae blooms and dead zones
From nitrogen and oxygen absorption.

Winking underwater flowers
And an inundation map in beautiful neon.

They say a man came down from Memphis just to watch
After the water chased him out and he went to his cousin’s.
The cousin says *When they let squatters live here, on the levee, we had ‘bout four or five families.*

Wobbly, the single pins lifted on a taught line.

Morganza and Bonnet Carre
Like two stately, lounging women
One dressed in black and the other in white
Eating grapes, giving each other a nod over the distance
And waiting.

Swimming Felt a Different Way Once

When you say *snails always follow the cold currents*, you miss the way a belly felt inverted, perpendicular to the surface. We sat on a silt beach with brown daisy sacks and tar balls nesting like soft black eggs. While you climbed between waves and tracked needle fish, I only watched. I'd always hated the clammy mood you were happy to assume from my stagnation. Last night you dictated more of your jargon, stretched somewhere between the smudged shores. That was dangerous when I almost let *brown* leech into the idea of the sunrise. To discredit the moment you X'ed the boxes for GALLINULE, RAIL and SNIPE on the entrance slip. You're impatient for smothering under your hood on the borrowed land. By now even a ghillie suit would grow over.

Lips

Fly, mud bird,
a brick fowl
it spins out end over end,
sails out, smaller, rubber
flyers, red like water,
blood-water saucer,
2 in 3, 4 in the back
-- not another miss--

kleptomania in full swing,
--don't think just toss, don't even look,
just toss--, down to one
on one, are you ready,
call your momma,
she'll set you straight, like she did once when she caught you wearing
her lipstick, but you weren't putting it on,
you were eating it,
it tasted like flowers and for years the word AVON made
your mouth water, you kept the old bottles just to smell,
down to the cells and it'll be one, the air and your nose, the dust and the hair, the skin
and the membranes that mark the melding
of worlds, that's how we come
home, we know through the nose, an orifice wedding, a mending,
sinking back to the tree
the blue curtains and blue pillow shams,
blue bed spreads and
blue rugs, -
white doilies

The Trials of Civilization

Neanderthals all,
Her anal dent
In a tall
Backside
Cupped like a mouth
To drink
And to slander,
Adrenal Thens,
Sandals and tanners
The head lanterns
Bow and are
Healed,
Handlers fighting the shade
Then lashed,
Laden and
Snarled
Leaden lands
In ant turns,
They nest
Herding tens
Of turd hens.

A nefarious few,
Latent ram's horns
Shirking the ewe
Outside of
A fine porcine ear,
The onus
A fire,
Fear in us
With her nice
Aeon stuff,
Anus Roe
Sour and rife with
Oaf's Urine,
Sire ours,
Rouse us and
Make the
Ruse mine
Arise and
Return
To the
Sea.

An Immense Longing for the Ocean as if that's Where We Belong

The living
The children of lobe-finned fishes
We're foals drying out on the tops of spindly things
Cracked and salt crusted
In temporary respite from the endless
We come from

The love of fishes
We know the form of teeth, the irregular circles
Drowning each on the other
We trace back the time by lines, we

Are goslings, are beige and strange
Hairy, armless reptiles,
Those fat, squat things from the ice age
With legs like four-part pedestals buried in their hulk
Of dead stones

While "oceanic horrors" move
With the snap of calligraphic lightening
The Coelacanth upon you in a
Blink

Vita

Jessica Suchanek was born in New Orleans, Louisiana. She obtained her Bachelor's degree in English from the University of New Orleans in 2004. She was accepted to the University of New Orleans' graduate school in 2005, and, after a break from her studies, returned to pursue a degree in 2010. She has a particular interest in creative writing and poetry.