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Coyote Made Me

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Coyote Made Me

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 Fine Arts
in
Film, Theatre, and Communication Arts
Creative Writing (Poetry)

by

Whitney Mackman

BA University of Puget Sound, 2006

May 2013

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Acknowledgements

Thank you to my parents for loving me despite my sarcasm and my weird way of seeing the world. Thanks, also, for loving me despite my desire to be a writer because, as Campbell McGrath says, “this poetry gig / is like feeding chocolate donuts to a hungry tiger / or planting sunflowers on the moon.” Without your support I wouldn’t have the courage to feed my happy wolf.

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Apalachee Review: “Let It Be” (now titled “Enough”)

Furious Season: “Getting Through”

Sliver of Stone: “Chippendales”

Ellipses: “Isle de Jean Charles”

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Labels Are for Jars: A Preface

And so I go on to suppose that the shock-receiving capacity is what makes me a writer. I hazard the explanation that a shock is at once in my case followed by the desire to explain it. [...] It is or will become a revelation of some order; it is a token of some real thing behind appearances; and I make it real by putting it into words. It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me; it gives me, perhaps because by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together. Perhaps this is the strongest pleasure known to me.

Much like Virginia Woolf, once I write a poem, the subject of that poem no longer has power over me and I can put the issue to rest. I experience the weird, horrible, beautiful, etcetera and I capture it, process it, and share it. I will hear yet another anti-Semitic joke and write a politically slanted piece. Or, I will drive by a rotting dog in the gutter outside a church and write a religiously slanted piece. I carry a strong desire to bear witness and am haunted by whether or not I succeed. Because of this desire, release is the driving force behind my poetry. With the stroke of a pen, or the tap of the keyboard, I regain the control I wish I had in my life. It is my nature to fight for what I believe is right. So, if all I can do is record the moment in a poem, then I'm going to write a poem and I'm going to take my power back.

Three years ago, I moved three thousand miles away from my friends, my family, and my jobs. My entire life changed and these poems reflect that metamorphosis and that new life in New Orleans. The poems also respond to the never-ending struggle with love and loss, societal norms and politics, anti-Semitism and xenophobia, and, of course, the quest for identity. I hope to offer a glimpse into the life of someone in transition or experiencing a transformation – a glimpse into the world of a person who hates labels but whose very labels give her such a strong identity.

My goal is to entertain and to reach some semblance of a plane of understanding with my audience. I do not want to tell the reader exactly how to feel; I want to relate to the reader's life

in whatever way she interprets and to inspire a new way of thinking and a new way of behaving. If not, hopefully just reading these poems requires a concentrated effort to see the world through a different lens.

During childhood, I often found myself the lone Jew among gentiles except at Sunday School. In regular school, I was the only one who missed class for the High Holidays; on my soccer team, I was the only who didn't carbo-load before games during Passover. On the playground, multiple kids asked me, "Are you Chanukah?" I wish I could call many of the negative moments in my life misunderstandings because I just don't want to accept the anti-Semitism. No matter how dirty society makes "Jew" sound, I will not discard that label. Due to the diligence of my grandparents, I cannot escape the weight of the "inheritance" I must bear because I am Jewish ("Valley of the Communities, Yad Vashem"). And after learning about the Holocaust, a logical, yet somehow irrational desire to ensure that our people survive, that other people understand, consumed me.

As an adult, I often defend how I live my life. I don't fit under one label, and we are not a world that embraces people who don't fit exactly in the boxes that make society most comfortable. And now, living in the south, every day I struggle to remain proud of who I am and how different I am, but I want to feel like being different doesn't make me any better, or worse. It is increasingly difficult to sustain a positive identity when society's norms and laws tell me that I'm wrong. How do I filter what I know of Jews with all the nasty jokes people make about us? The only person to ever put this concept into intelligent words for me is W.E.B. DuBois, when he discusses the black man's battle with "double-consciousness" in *The Souls of Black Folk*:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a

world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

Double-consciousness creates a fracture in identity, a doubting of truth, and a general bitterness toward the question of and quest for true self. How does a person live sanely while straddling what she knows/thinks of herself and what society claims to know/think of her “type” of person? In no way am I comparing my plight to that of the black man in America, but I do know what it’s like to be white, female, and Jewish in America. My quest for identity feels endless, sometimes futile, when I seek the right words to explain myself in a vocabulary I do not fit in. I know what Lucille Clifton means in *Mercy* when she says, “We / who have not been / human / have not learned / to love it / more.” I feel it in my bones; it offers me peace because it proves someone else knows; it proves I am not alone.

My love of poetry began in first grade, when my teacher read from Shel Silverstein’s *Where the Sidewalk Ends*. Silverstein introduced me to rhythm, rhyme, and the fact that poetry can be fun. Then, I received a book by Maya Angelou. She taught me how powerful poetry can be and how to bear witness. I will never forget the first time I read “Still I Rise” or “Take Time Out.” Countless times, after being bullied, I calmed myself down by whispering: “You may shoot me with your words / You may cut me with your eyes / You may kill me with your hatefulness / but still, like air, I’ll rise.” Studying Angelou further developed my love of rhythm, rhyme, and word play, and showed me how to (attempt to) use those devices to pounce on the reader, to deliver a message so powerful the reader doesn’t even realize she’s been smacked in the face.

In graduate school, I found strong, “take-no-shit” female poets and filled my Amazon cart with the likes of Louise Gluck, Adrienne Rich, C.D. Wright, Ariana Reines, Catherine

Barnett, and Audre Lorde. Louise Bogan and May Swenson also delighted me with their irony, especially in their poems, both titled “Women.” Using irony exposes their disdain for gender inequality and society’s perception of gender roles and female worth. These female writers undermine such inequalities and stereotypes by indirectly mocking them in their work. In “Women,” Bogan dares to say that “women have no wilderness in them,” and “they should let it [life] go by.” In her version, Swenson claims, “women / should be / pedestals,” and should be “moving / to the / motions / of men.” Clearly, there is something subversive happening here (if females are writing this about their own gender), and that makes the reader look at the poem from a different perspective. These women taught me that I could release my rage and that I could rage better by toning it down with sly wit that stings much more.

Further schooling enabled me to devour more female poets who thrive because of their voices, and sometimes, their irony. I want the tenacity of Marge Piercy (“ugly, bad girl, bitch, nag, shrill, witch, / [...] / why aren’t you feminine, why aren’t / you soft, why aren’t you quiet, why / aren’t you dead?”); the honesty of June Jordan (“neglecting to enumerate every incoherent / rigid/raggedy-ass/disrespectful/killer cold / and self-infatuated crime against love / committed by some loudmouth don’t know”); and the audacity of Sandra Cisneros (“I’m an aim-well, / shoot-sharp, / sharp-thinking / foot-loose, / loose-tongued, / let-loose, / woman-on-the-loose / loose woman”). Poems such as “Private Time with Sherman Alexie,” “My First Beaver,” “How to Make a Racist,” “Names Are A Consequence of Things Which Are Named,” and “Saved” reflect that kind of tenacity, honesty, and audacity.

Exposure to powerful female writers inspired me to start playing with form. I used to write just one kind of poem, but now I experiment! I write longer poems, poems in second person, poems using controlling metaphors, poems made only of images, poems with line

restrictions, and poems that read like stage directions. I attempt interesting line breaks, double syntax, word play, and rhyme. I messed with space (landscape) and narrative cohesion in “After Trying to Calculate the Strength of a Dorm Closet Door.” I tried another landscape poem and experimented with larger caesuras for “Getting Through,” but later edited it back to portrait. Such revisions to shape and form helped me edit the connective tissue. However, field composition in two columns makes “After Trying To Calculate the Strength of a Dorm Closet Door” inescapable and claustrophobic.

I usually follow some sort of restrictive pattern I create in my head, like the repeated, yet diminishing line in “Trigger.” The refrain, “It only takes one to trigger the gene,” loses a word or two between each stanza and connects to the following stanza through enjambment. Sometimes, I restrict the number of lines per stanza (tercets in “For Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary for Science and Technology, March 2006”) or the amount of internal rhyme per line (“Transport,” “Space Services Inc.”). I even tried a few Swenson-inspired, iconographic poems for “How to Paint a Woman” and “Scars.” May Swenson’s manipulation of form inspires me to play with space and caesura. Her poem “Bleeding” haunts me: a conversation between a knife and a cut! What? A visual “cut” running down the length of the poem! Swenson blows my mind, but still has not convinced me that shapes are best for all subject matters. The shape of a poem determines the way, or many ways, the reader can enter and move throughout the poem — it removes the comfort zone and demands risks. Those risks have to be chances I’m willing to take with each poem, with each subject. But making shapes did challenge me to find the perfect word choice within the limits of the poem’s visual confines. Needless to say, I now pay much more attention to each line.

Born in the desert, I frequently encountered coyotes while running or while chasing them from my yard. Regardless of my Girl-Scout-urge to be good, I admire coyote because I ultimately regret the things I haven't done more than the things I have. In *poemcrazy*, Susan Goldsmith Wooldridge urges us to realize that "we all have a troublemaker inside," one who is a "trickster/antihero/animal delinquent who, like poetry, is both naughty and heroic at the same time." This troublemaker could only be coyote, she says, "tricky, magical, and often a hero in spite of himself." I am not perfect, I am no hero, but I must keep coyote alive if my poems are to matter. I must keep coyote alive if I want to break boundaries, if I want to "sneak up on people, shock them and disappear, laughing." Coyote represents a paradox: a clever, yet reckless fool. His foolishness gets him in trouble and his creativity gets him out. Wooldridge claims coyote is crucial in poetry because "There's nothing appropriate about coyote [...] If we're appropriate or dutiful in our poems, they'll have no spark." So, my coyote craves spark and skin because as Olga Broumas told me, "If it doesn't rip the first three layers of skin off, it is not a poem."

*“Do you know why the Indian rain dances always worked?
Because the Indians would keep dancing until it rained.”*
— Sherman Alexie

I.

Private Time With Sherman Alexie

*I can't believe the US government
considers gay penguins
more dangerous than (part-time) Indians.*
I shoot you a stare that says: "I'd like
to spend the evening with you."
See, I was an Indian too, for five years,
at Cherokee Elementary.
I took our mascot seriously.
I wore a braided headband,
and demanded to be called Squanto.
No need for shame
before I knew the weight of that name.

*Yes, I have often battled grief,
and both of us used our teeth.*
Your language washes over me.
I'm jealous you know just what to say.
Fancydancer With Verbs, I heard you
have many names, Indian names, names
you call yourself. I won't give them away
but I wonder if you'd name me
Stilted Goon Who Stumbles Words.
Regardless, I'm almost sure we'd get along.

*They think because I'm funny
that I'm less than serious.*
I get that too. It's easier to ignore truth
delivered with a smile. Like what you said
to Harvard: *Yes, I'm really happy
to come speak, for free,
at the college you built
on my people's bones.*
I doubt they took that seriously.

*My father was a pine tree,
my mother a winter storm.*
While I had a cactus,
and a summer monsoon,
it seems we were raised by the same
metaphor. But I felt this before —
when you questioned vegans
and said *gas is made of dinosaurs.*

I wish you were with me at Cherokee.
We would've made quite the crew:
curlicue Squanto Jew and stick straight Indian,
with matching feathers in our hair.
They'd never mess with us —
The (Indian) Breakfast Club you always dreamed of.
If only you were there.

Saved

On Marc Chagall's "White Crucifixion"

A talis around his waist,
a menorah at his feet,
he is finally a Jew again!
People panic in the streets.

My homeboy Jesus, martyred
on a big white cross, inscribed
Yeshu HaNotzri Malcha D'Yehudai:
Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.

It's Jewish Jesus
on a big white cross.
Jewish Jesus nailed
over Kristallnacht.

*Rachel and the rabbi-
angels can't believe their eyes.
Smoke curls to the sky.*

It's Jewish Jesus
with payot, covered head,
and crotch robed
with a prayer shawl.
And no one notices
the ladder, propped
so gently
against the crucifix?

God's Pianos

When it thunders like this,
hitting the hardest notes,
I think of grandma
and how she said thunder
is god throwing his piano,
and I wonder why
god has so many pianos,
and I wonder why
god is so angry.

That night, that coma: I put
headphones on her ears, played
"Take Your Medicine." I just wanted
to set my skeletons free. I just wish
I told her I'm sorry.

Still I want to tell her, talk with her,
confess to the dirt that becomes her.
After putting a stone on grandpa's grave
I stood by hers and imagined her playing
god's pianos and I prayed she knew.

*Pull my fist from my mouth.
I beat myself for a quarter century.*

So I tell her now, when I make kugel,
or put onions in ground beef. I tell her
with each mitzvah I complete, each time
I stick up for the Jews.

I tell her when I go to Temple, and
when I don't. When I light Hanukah
candles and wear my Star of David.
When I'm proud of my curly fro.

As the thunder dies,
I picture the kind of mess
god made up there tonight.
And still I wonder how
god has so many pianos,
and if Grandma is playing
or helping him throw.

Isle de Jean Charles

Too quiet. Nothing
but the wind whipping
through stilted bones
someone once called home.

I look over my shoulder.
I'm trespassing on sacred land.

Behind the sugar cane,
behind the levee system,
deep down in the swamps,
a quarter mile wide,
mile and a half long isle
surrenders to sink.

Too bright. Squinting
to stay inside the cones
on the shrinking
one-lane road.

It's only a matter of time
until the Gulf swallows it whole.

Marsh becomes bayou,
becomes a new backyard.
Look away, lose an inch.
Just build it higher.
Just balance on stilts.
Just swim.

Are You Chanukah?

“Wherever you go, there’s always someone Jewish. / You’re never alone when you say you’re a Jew. / So if you’re out there and somewhere kind of new-ish, / the odds are, don’t look far, ‘cause they’re Jewish too.” — Jewish camp song

Are you Christmas? I spit
at the bewildered gentile
child who retorts *how can I be Christmas?*
I say how exactly can I be
an eight-night festival of lights?

*So, your dad’s Jewish,
but your mom’s not Jewish?*
questions the self-appointed Jew Patrol.
Then you’re not really Jewish, are you?
I had a Bat Mitzvah, I say. *Oh! You
had a Bat Mitzvah. You really are Jewish!*

The speaker at the tolerance assembly opens with:
What’s the difference between a pizza and a Jew?
He follows with: *How many Jews fit into a VW bug?*
I don’t remember what he said about tolerance,
but I remember his answers every time
my pizza doesn’t scream when I put it in the oven.

In statistics, my teacher uses *schmuck*
three times in thirty minutes. I raise my hand
and ask her if she even knows what it means.
It’s a Jewish swear word, she says.
I say, first, our language is called Hebrew,
second, this word is a vulgar word in Yiddish,
and third, maybe you shouldn’t use a word
if you don’t know it means
the discarded foreskin of a circumcised penis.

Do you know what this poem reminds me of?
says my poetry professor, *that joke — about Nazis.*
It does just what this poem does.
*Have you heard it? One Nazi is quickly shoveling
Jews into the oven and the other Nazi says,
“slow down man, or we’re not going to have a job.”*

While discussing a poem by the only Jew in the room
about the grandparents she lost, that same professor asks,
Do you think Jews experience Holocaust fatigue?

After my students read “Somebody Else’s Genocide,”
one raises his hand and asks, *What’s the Holocaust?*
Half the class doesn’t know.

I believe that you’re going to Hell
says my Jesus-loving, Bible-thumping
childhood friend, *but as a Christian,*
I forgive you and we can still be friends.

My dear friend, lovingly, but entirely serious
says *will you stop being such a hippy*
and start being more of a Jew.

And when I bring a flask to a bar,
another friend jokes how
I am *such a Jew.*
A week later our gentile
friend does the same,
but he is called
a fuckin’ genius.

I slept with a guy last night she said,
loud enough for the whole bus to hear.
He was Jewish. I mean, really Jewish.
He like, had a mitzvah and everything.
Her friend said *what’s a mitzvah?*
And she said *I think it’s like, a big party*
when you turn sixteen or something.
He even wore that circle thingy on his head.
What’s it called? A torah? Yeah!
He wore a torah on his head!

I’m the H1N1 virus for Halloween
when sexy Hitler walks in
wearing four-inch heels, slutty black
spider web tights, a tight green military shirt,
a homemade, red, swastika armband,
a Sharpe-ed on Hitlerstache,
and bejeweled panties.
I’m the only one who doesn’t think it’s funny
as her friends hail her arrival.

The Day I Tried to Repent

I don't pay dues at a temple,
but I'm told they don't check
membership on High Holy Days,
so some friends and I decide
to crash Yom Kippur service.

Today is the Day of Atonement,
and if I go to temple, I will be forgiven
at the conclusion of the service.

My gentile friend thinks my obsession
with guilt *sounds so Catholic*.
But Jews, we only repent once
a year — that's a lot to hold on to.

My Jewish friend sits next me,
the friend who sent me naughty
Yom Kippur pick-up lines
the night before, in case we wanted
to sin before our fates are sealed:
Do you always look this good, or are you fasting?
But everything we do will be forgiven soon.
I'd love to open and enter your gates.

The Rabbi surrenders the Bima
to the Cantor, who is pepping up
his songs. I start swaying, kind of
dancing. People are looking at me
but I don't care,
it's the new year damn it,
I'm going to dance.

Not even five minutes into the memorial
service and the congregation reads:
I will enter your gates with thanksgiving.

My naughty friend chokes back a laugh,
making it worse. The silent,
in-the-middle-of-class laugh,
the I-swear-I'm-not-laughing laugh,
manifests as dramatic body heaves.

I try to compose myself, but then
we read *Give yourselves to the Lord*
and enter into God's holy space.

It's over. I laugh so hard I cry.
I cannot stop. The harder I try,
the harder I laugh. I hide my face
in my hands and my friend rubs my back
so it looks like I'm grieving.

In Which We Make Alliances Among Strangers in Strange and Temporary Places

“A good story should be the perfect woman’s skirt: long enough to cover the subject, short enough to keep it interesting.” — My high school English teacher

We lounge on the riverbank.
I’ve known you 5 days.
I tell you that I don’t trust people
who don’t eat cheese.
You pass me the joint,
confirm your love of cheese,
and say you feel the same
about mustard. I love mustard.

We meet at the drink station.
I’ve known you 10 days.
I tell you I don’t understand people
who don’t love milk.
Tell me about it, you say,
it’s a deal-breaker. Like pickles —
you have to like pickles.

We ditch fish night together.
I’ve known you 20 days.
You tell me you only trust people
who put filters in their joints.
I say I’ve done that for years.
You say that’s how you knew
there’s no goodbye
in an alliance like this.

We’re back on the riverbank.
I’ve known you 25 days.
We share poems, make art,
exchange addresses.
I tell you I will miss you,
grateful for the presence
of someone I don’t know
I won’t hear from again.

How to Make a Racist

I.

Here in New Orleans,
everyone sounds the same:

The city is violent, seriously flawed.

Late last night, an intersection,
a red light: two black guys
got out of their car, simultaneously
slamming their doors, looking at me.

Avoid Gentilly; No biking on Broad.

They crossed the street.
They were getting dropped off.
I'm an asshole, I thought
I was going to die.

II.

In front of the projects on Basin,
I watched a boy pick up a girl,
slam her backwards
on concrete, smacking her spine
with such an earthly thud
I felt it in the ground.

Watch your mouth

I just stared, mouth agape,
along with everyone else.
I started to yell, but

and don't get shot.

III.

I wave to a group of black men on Magnolia's
lawn and you tell me you don't want to bike
this way again. I wonder if I'm stupid for not
being scared, for thinking those men probably

laughed hard watching two skinny white girls
pedal faster through the hood.

Stay alert, and don't get lost.

Next time I choose "safer" streets
and black men yell *little white girl*
riding her bike through our town.
Snow white! White devil! White bitch!

Trigger

Each weekend I fear
what Mother always warns.
No beer cracked, no shot sipped
without hearing her voice:

It only takes one to trigger the gene

that convinced my cousin
it'd be beneficial for business
to mix cocktails and landscaping,
til he sawed himself off his branch.

It only takes one to trigger

the gene I joke about in bars,
deny in the liquor aisle,
fear at the doctor's office,
and swear could never happen to me.

It only takes one

gene lurking, locked inside DNA,
triggered by tomfoolery, chased with whiskey,
waiting to make me stubborn and sloppy,
waiting to tear my family apart.

It only takes

one too many to unlock decades of drunk
cousins, drowned livers, stalled hearts.
One too many til I slip and fall,
hang myself from the family tree.

II.

Enough

The horse on the balcony is getting to be a problem. Come to think of it, the whole balcony is becoming a problem — with its wanting-to-be-a-porch attitude. I'm not even sure how the horse got out there to begin with, but I know how to get it down. I'm going to let that balcony be a porch. I'm going to let it be.

Right. Just look what happened to the trees. They pulled themselves up by the roots and walked away. I wonder what made this street, this oxygen not enough. They were so well planted, so well intentioned. That is why they have roots, so no matter how hard they sway they stay fastened to their convictions.

I've convinced myself this is good for me; I tell myself at least this horse is healthy. But we get on hands and knees, roll tumble bite claw hiss bite tumble roll claw hiss. Much more gratifying than a make-up kiss. Much more gratifying than figuring out what to do about this horse, this porch, and all the goddamned missing trees.

Scars

You trace my scar as if it will tell you
a story, a secret, a tale of origin. I suggest
you find my eyes but you trace the next
scar, like Braille. As if, somehow, linking
all my wounds will write my life story,
will tell you a history I am unwilling to
unearth, unwilling to un-stitch. You think
you are learning but really there is so much more
than pain to these chapters these dots you are
convinced you are connecting. You could
just ask me, but I do prefer you just keep tracing
outlines, outlining traces of who you think I am.
I prefer to stay sealed tightly behind the sutures
in my skin, trying to out-race my timeline.
I prefer to keep them scars in the present tense
so I can keep convincing myself, I am over them.

How to Paint a Woman

*Draw what you see
not what it looks like,*
he says, as I scribble
a stick figure meant
to resemble a woman
bent, on her knees,
face on the floor,
butt in the air.

But what I see is what it looks like, I tell him.

And I couldn't draw her or all the things
she could possibly be without
excusing it as cubist, or another
skinny, naked woman.

So I just stare, study
her lines,
her curves,
her moles,

while artists hold up charcoal,
close one eye, measure her
ribs, her thighs, her waist.

I take notes & wonder
why they bother.

There are so many
ways to capture
dimples in skin,
bounce as breasts
settle, surrender.

Make her how you
want her. Interpret.
Perfect. Perfect.

How to Paint a Man

I shake his hand,
he drops his pants,
like nothing of it.
He asks for poses.
I have no idea how
to direct him, I hope
an artist gets here soon
before it gets weird.

I'm surprised how
silky his skin looks,
almost hairless
and so white.
Not my white.
A muted, baby
white, and smooth
from taking on/off
clothes — like my father's
ankles from 35 years
of business socks.

From the back
he could be a lady
with those curves.
His is splotchy,
and red,
and his balls
are oddly distracting.
He has no pubic hair
and a small penis,
so the mystery thickens.

I don't care about
his re-creation
and no one measures
his dimensions
since he is a man,
has place in the world
no matter his actions,
for he is a man.

“Names Are a Consequence of Things Which Are Named”

Parrotfish can change
gender multiple times.

Goldfish, kept in the dark,
eventually turn gray.

Eels, oysters, worms,
guppies, frogs, and shrimp

change their sex
and sexual functions, naturally.

And yet we proceed
with such definite names.

My First Beaver

There's a beaver
in the river
Look! A beaver
in the river
I've never seen
a beaver before.
You look at me,
eyebrows up
smirking *Really?*
Never? You?
Fine.
I've seen a few
"beavers,"
but not real
bucktooth
flat tail
large, wet,
rat-coon looking
beavers,
in an actual
river,
asshole.

Space Services Inc.

It cracks me up to think we have a star up in the sky reserved solely for us. Prime real estate built on a lie. I laugh at “we,” as in, you *and* me. And if I could remember the name of your anniversary gift — something gag-inducing and including secret nicknames — call Space Services Inc. and have that star reinstated to the universe

because now I’m told you’re moving to town, *my town*, and I can’t sit with this. In fact, I can’t keep still. I’m reeling with “oh no” and “holy shit” and “who cares” and “what if” and you’re affecting me, already, like you always did. And I think about “we,” as in, you and me, and it makes me nauseous.

I already lost everything once, so I’ve kept myself from fantasies for months. But now you’re here and my parents said I shouldn’t dare, but you keep emailing for coffee, you keep prying back in — you under the stars of Jackson Square where you glided right towards me. And I knew it would happen — just a matter of when.

Chippendales

Big red barn hovering next to I-5. Each time the roof reads: APPLES or CIDER, depending on the season, such different shapes for the seasons. In the blur I can feel the warmth of wood, smell the ripeness of earth, see piles piles piles of apples bursting to the seam, making me drop in from the chimney to pick my fruit as I roll down a pyramid of apples.

--

Last time we passed I thought I caught the name Chippendales, and in the blur I see tan, chiseled beefcakes dance on top of apples, crunch apples in perfectly aligned teeth, grip apples in perfectly flexed biceps, hand apples to me because I am too busy drooling to choose, too busy sliding sexily down the pile of apples. What isn't sexy about a pile of apples and beefcakes?

Then she says, *It's Cottondales*, and brings me from blur to reality she located on her smart phone. I tell her, *I prefer Chippendales*, as blurry beefcakes drop apples and become puffs of cotton without glorious pectorals, without glorious piles of apples, and when she suggests we stop for some cider I hit the gas pedal because I can't, I just can't see the reality of my big red apple barn dream.

Getting Through

You say *concrete is just rocks and water*.
I wonder, then, why rain can't get through.
Why would water not
recognize its own kind,
recognize the need to seep?
I like to think all impenetrable objects
are just combinations of permeable ones,
so if I break them down in parts
 in parts
 in parts
I might get through. So, I examine you.
Examine your parts. Look for wrinkles
in skin, cracks in joints, holes in defenses.
It's not looking good.
You do not recognize
your own kind, your own need
to seep. I must re-examine
my position on impenetrable
objects. Or, at least, you.

Finally the World Feels Poetic

I see smoke and trace it along the bayou,
wanting anything but home.

Firefighters shoot water in
through broken windows, water squeezes
back out through buckling wood.
Flames curl out attic corners, lick
the rooftop, taunt the firefighters.
Nothing left to burn but up up up
and the fire won't give up and reporters
weave *do you live on this street* trying
to be first with *how did it happen,*
who caused it, and *how many times*
did you complain about
the abandoned eyesore it became?

Firefighters tag team, move between
hosing water, drinking water, dumping
water on heads, sitting on the curb with
water on necks in this May blaze. I feel
like I should help. Tag in. Grab the hose.
But when they use huge metal poles
with giant fish hooks at one end to rip
off the side of the house, I can't breathe.

Orange orange orange as the sidewall
disintegrates, the fire sucks in our oxygen,
the paint on the neighbor's house melts bubbly green.

No matter what they do, the attic burns,
finger flames still curl to the roof, still
try to climb, try to win. The soaked
wood smolders so stubbornly
the firefighters finally kick the front door in,
barely dodge the collapsing porch roof,
and the crowd sucks the air back in together.

When I drive by the next day, the charred
skeletal frame is leveled with the demolition
machine on top of the pile, giant fist
knuckles-down on the bones.

III.

For Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary for Science and Technology, March 2006

Tendons of splintered piano
baring its teeth as keys grind
the mud on the sidewalk.

Spines of soggy books
covered in soot rotting
in a slimy library reef.

Flanks of wilted doors,
hinges busted from eruption —
a classroom named “Promised Land.”

Tongues of moldy ceiling
tiles flap like white flags,
wilted with defeat.

Legs of desks tossed,
arms of chairs mangled,
buried with seashell binders.

Mouthfuls of lethal brown water
framed in glass block windows —
a toxic quilt in the stairwell.

In the stairwell, a huge fish!
Dehydrated, suffocated,
eye socket gutted, gaping.

This is a place of learning.

Big, Not Easy

I never knew
the smell of death.
Not just any death –
bloated,
left for dead death.

I never knew
mold made patterns.
I never knew
New Orleans.
I never knew
how to leave

1504 Congress,
in a Tyvex suit,
throwing a sledgehammer
against a sagging wall,
dumping toxic water
from light fixtures,
shoveling a family's
entire life to the curb.

MLK Elementary,
in a respirator,
prying a library
out of thick mud,
picking a fish up
off the second floor,
shoveling an entire
school to the curb.

In Which I Go Running

Sunny, cloudy, rainy, windy,
soggy, muggy, deadly hot.
Right, left, right, run bayou,
meditate, breathe in, out,
in, out, left, right, pick
up speed, kick up heels
make it worth it.

In, out, in, run, meditate,
breathe. Don't think. Right,
left, right, holy pelican! Circle,
dive, gulp, fly, circle, dive,
gulp, slow down, distracted,
canoe loose no captain, run,
do mitzvah, meditate, breath.

Floating shoe, baby oak, dead
nutria. Curious to stop, inspect,
make friends. Run mail, meditate,
breathe. Water level high, water
level low, whoa: tearing down,
building up, new porches,
new houses, new roofs.

Grass length long, grass length
short. Never better roads, never
better planks. Water never clean,
Lindy Boggs never "coming
soon," chairs dangle, shattered
windows, soggy mattresses,
god damn

dog poop.

Right, left, in, out, run, meditate,
write, breath. Waving neighbors,
say hi stranger, find surprise gator,
sinking kayaks, lazy fisherman.
Most nights nutria splash dark,
dingy ripples reflecting bright
basilica moons.

Transport

Sometimes, when I drive, I have the sudden urge to veer left and slam into the car next to me bumper-car style — but then I remember this is real life and I can't disobey traffic signs like I do when I ride my bike because taking alternative transportation puts me above the law is always chasing me cruising on my longboard wondering if they'd rather I smoke pot instead of skate this thin line between what is right around the corner and down the block I run to get away from the stress — I'm a mess before I fly because I'd like to have a fighting chance to keep myself alive I learned to stay out of the subway in the early dawn and out of cabs in unfamiliar towns I'd rather walk than trust a bus is much less nerve-wracking than being at the mercy of the waves in a little catamaran about to play bumper boats with the coast of Mexico and I'd like to teleport myself away.

After Trying to Calculate the Strength of a Dorm Closet Door

Went to the library and stared at books,
lost in shelves of blurry titles,
dizzy with decimals and chemicals.

It was busy, computers clicking fast —
three days to Spring Break.

~

Dyed my hair a red so bright.

Her face, they say, ballooned into bruised blue.

~

I stare while students skate,
walk by, adjust backpacks,
throw Frisbees, talk.
They never notice
the lights:
the red, the white.

~

We miss it
and live it
at the same time.

~

They say her face ballooned into bruised blue.
They don't say anything about who found her,
about how she was changed.

~

My roommate said maybe
it was decided before,
long before,
she kicked the chair because
everything must be decided.

~

I stare at the closet door.
I inspect hinges.

~

See, even if you double the distance
from chair to air,
you shouldn't get enough air.

~

One girl,
one rope,
a short drop,
a long strangle,
a strong door.

~

Busy night.

Valley of the Communities, Yad Vashem

I sit on white steps in silence,
in shade, dizzy from sun
and from thousands of names
carved into faces of stones
cut out of bedrock, rising
like the smoke plume
from the ashes they became.

Budapest, Bucarest, Vilna, Minsk

I trace my Russian history
across a hundred walls,
through a towering two-acre
eruption from earth — stone
skyscrapers of evidence
of communities lost.

Kiev, Warsaw, Tunis, Lodz

The wind hums prayer
as it dips through the valley:
*to them will I give
in my house
and within my walls
a memorial and a name.*

Bratislava, Paris, Berlin, Lvov

It's endless.
I keep looking,
trying to read
all the names —
all the names
just don't stop.
Shipped off.
Nothing left.
A body count
and a name.

Munich, Amsterdam, Frankfurt, Wien

I sit on white steps in silence,
dwarfed by my inheritance —
the names just don't stop,

Oradea, Krakow, Kaunas, Koeln

but they are written in stone
so I sit in silence and listen,
so their story is told.

Memorial to the Deportees, Yad Vashem

Steel bridge erupts
from Mt. Herzl's
western slope
and stops.
Mangled steel
at the end,
one boxcar
at the very end,
a long plunge
to Jerusalem Forest
and evergreen oblivion.

26 feet long,
7 feet high,
8 feet wide:
space for 50
stuffed 100
deep for days.
Most died
in that box
before
they arrived.

Engravings
in filthy wood
from Jews
never seen again
remind me
of Birkenau
and miles
and miles
of track
and barbed wire.

*That box
spit out
human beings
to their deaths.
Those people
lived
their last hours
in that box.*

To hold your head

above the stench,
above the heat,
above the evil
lurking, hoping
to exterminate
every last one
at random,
or by sick design:
One for slaughter,
one for keeps.
Repeat.
Hailing Hitler
the whole time.

Under the steel,
I add a stone
to hundreds
people left
on this makeshift grave.
It's the only way
to tell you:
we are here,
we know,
we remember

because of this boxcar,
still, with filthy wood,
holding the last moments
of loved ones in its grooves.

“A Man Screaming is Not a Dancing Bear”

Thousands of bears dance,
right arms, red swastika
extended up. Black boots
stomp in unison, left right
left right, left right.
Brainwashed, bandwagoned,
built to ignore the truth:

A man screaming is not a dancing bear,
but a man screaming can make thousands of bears dance.

One man thought it would be easy.
It almost was.
But he needed more than hate
to squash supposed swine.
He needed more than lies, laws,
gas chambers, forced labor,
starvation, and war. More
pogroms, Gestapo, ghettos,
and guns. More trains,
camps and crematoriums.

The Master Plan failed,
but life takes its toll
as the last tattooed survivors
fade lighter than their ink.

Soon it will be he said, she said.
Soon it will be up to the books.
Soon it will be another man screaming hate,
and who will stop the dancing bears?

Reckoning

The sun put a gun
to his own head,
then fell splat
on my porch.

I knew if the eternal
torch could falter,
I'd better alter
my dreams.

I cleaned up
rays and debris,
took his body
to the sea,
so that Mother Earth
could rock him
as he sleeps.

The moon sensed
the doom, spying
through the clouds,
crying, the sun
got it done first.

Mountains mumbled,
rivers tumbled,
trees twirled right
off their roots.

So stars aligned
a rescue to shoot
the world peace.

I lay down on the land
and swore to start fresh,
but I still can't seem
to burn these memories
from my flesh.

References

The Virginia Woolf quote that opens the preface is from *Moments of Being*. The Marge Piercy poem quoted in the preface is “For strong women”; June Jordan’s quoted poem is “[Why I became a pacifist]”; Sandra Cisneros’s quoted poem is “Loose Woman.”

Native American coyote myths consulted on the Native Language of America website:
<http://www.native-languages.org/legends-coyote.htm>

The quotes in “Private Time With Sherman Alexie” are from Sherman Alexie, an award-winning Native American writer, during his 2011 appearance at Tulane University.

“God’s Pianos” uses lyrics from the Cloud Cult song, “Take Your Medicine.”

“Isle de Jean Charles” borrows a quote from *The New York Times* article “In Louisiana, a Sinking Island Wars With Water and Government,” by Dan Barry.

“Are You Chanukah?” mentions “Somebody Else’s Genocide,” a short story by Sherman Alexie.

“Names are a consequence of things which are named,” is from Dante’s *Vita Nuova*.

Yad Vashem is Israel’s official Holocaust memorial and museum. Yad Vashem means “a memorial and a name.” The prayer in “Valley of the Communities” is from the Book of Isaiah and from where Yad Vashem takes its name.

The quote in “Memorial to the Deportees” is from Helen Handler in the *Arizona Republic* article, “Out of death, a journey into hope” (April 15, 2012) and the dimensions of the box car are from the official website of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (<http://www.ushmm.org>).

The title, “A Man Screaming is Not a Dancing Bear,” is from Aimé Césaire’s poem, “Notebook of a Return to the Native Land.”

Vita

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