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Codemakers

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

by

Dawn Manning

B.A. West Chester University, 2009

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The Centrifugal Eye: "Oranges in Winter"

Mudfish: Hit, Run"

qarrtsiluni: "Birth, Labor"

Silk Road: "White Rabbit"

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Abstract

Codemakers is a book of poems by Dawn Manning divided into three sections: "Topophilia," "Goodwill," and "Women's Work."

Keywords: poetry; anthropology; archaeology; culture; mythology; women

Preface

In my work I find myself returning again and again to the past, a connection I feel strongly through anthropological research. I can't get enough of the interweaving of archaeology, mythology, and cultural customs from the past with the present. This collection is itself a multi-faceted artifact, a collage of personal experience and the secondhand experiences of others. These poems travel through the Sonora desert, Dallas, the Andes, and China, among other places, and have been written under the influence of the landscapes and people who both shape and are shaped by them. Together they map some of the ways in which tangible and intangible worlds have intersected in this one person, and how, as Octavio Paz succinctly put it, "Life is plurality, death is uniformity" (102).

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz defines culture as stories we tell ourselves about ourselves (448). Perhaps, then, the passion we writers have to tell our stories and to retell the stories of others is a re-visioning that hinges on what religious philosopher Mircea Eliade referred to as eternal return: the ability to not merely understand or explain the truths we find in myths, but to actually re-enter mythic time and experience them for ourselves (44). To return to the writings of Geertz, "man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning" (5). We enter these stories through our own retellings, both experiencing the web we've inherited and weaving our own meanings into the nexus.

As for the stories and retellings intertwined in this collection, I know I work in the shadows of the giants I have encountered through experience and education—realities thrice removed through time, space, and media—and yet I am accountable for these secondhand goods.

For what have I made, really? I've played with traditional poetic form and written under the influence of the Modernists, particularly Ezra Pound and the Imagists for their emphasis on the concentrated energy achieved through "direct treatment of the 'thing,' whether subjective or objective" (attrib. Flint 199). Hilda Doolittle's "Oread" continues to be particularly revelatory to me on this front, as do the haiku of Basho. I've also made some sonnets, though regulated by syllabics rather than metrics as in "The Archaeologist's Field Notes," "Cora in Philly," and "Still Life with Paleojunk." These I can trace to the direct influence of poets such as A.E. Stallings, who may be the most important New Formalist writing today, as well as to the blues sonnets and sonnet sequences of Natasha Trethewey. I've even made a sestina of sorts called "Salt Myth." Rather than a direct repetition of the six end-words, however, I've altered them with each progressive stanza, as Donald Justice does in his poem "The Metamorphosis," so that the words slant into completely different forms, like a game of telephone in which everything is misheard as it is whispered from ear to ear.

When it comes to rhyme in the sonnets mentioned above and elsewhere, I've developed an instinctual tendency towards envelope rhymes when I use it. Rather than sticking with the neat, squat envelope of *abba*, however, I often find myself elongating these into a sequence of *abccba*, which adds a softer visual and auditory echo to the sonorous notes of the middle rhymes. The first poem I experimented with using this elongated envelope scheme was "Gifted," and I often feel how profoundly writing this 'first' poem after years of not writing poetry at all has shaped the poems that have come along since. This is not least of all because it was the first time I began to be honest about the complexity of my relationship with my brother, and the anxiety I felt about being identified as a storyteller. But as I was writing "Gifted" I felt the need to define the form of the poem, because this particular story required a unique vessel to hold it, and hence

a poem of six stanzas containing six lines each set out in an expanded envelope rhyme opened the way for me back into poetry. Perhaps this tendency towards a more formalized structure is rooted in my teenage obsession with poets such as Alfred Lord Tennyson and Edna St. Vincent Millay, but by discovering this pattern as the poem unfolded, I began to understand how poems both define and are defined by their forms.

This breakthrough freed me to allow each poem its own shape within the greater web, whether through utilizing traditional forms, employing nonce forms, or exercising free verse. Often I combine these techniques with one another, a process which has led to several poem sequences. In the poem "Codemakers," the sections are meant to develop progressively like chapters in a novel, whereas the sketches in the "Millennium Gothic: Portraits of the Ellum Squatters," I hope, stand better on their own, though they still should benefit from being read as a unit. The former was influenced by Anne-Marie Cusac's book *Silke*, in which the connected poems develop into the breadth of a novel, whereas the latter stems more from the tradition of sequences exemplified by Natasha Trethewey. Both poets utilize the steady progression of the sequence to shape larger stories out of isolated instances while directing the reader to focus on each discrete image in turn.

I've divided the poems into three interlacing webs, each of which forms its own centralizing pattern while nevertheless remaining loosely connected with one another. The first section is entitled "Topophilia," a term that literally means "love of place," but that encompasses the deeper sense of affinity for a landscape found among certain peoples and suggests something of the sacred. As the philosopher Gaston Bachelard further instructs, topophilia encompasses both the real and imagined elements that "determine the human value of... the space we love," and that this is "eulogized space" in which we have lived in and imbued with "all the partiality of

the imagination" (xxxv-xxxvi). In "Goodwill," experience echoes through the rumors that have come down from the past, and provides a catalog of used up people, places, and things that I felt worth reclaiming. The final section, "Women's Work," contains poems that focus on the lives of women both real and imagined. These highlight ordinary people, as well as some of the 'odd jobs' that they've handled throughout history, such as serving as a virgin sacrifice, developing textile technologies, and ushering in the spring.

Here, I patch together these new and forgotten stories to see what configurations can be cobbled from their forms. I take my place in the web of intermediaries shuffling information from one place to another, both accidentally and willfully altering the messages whispered in my ear before I pass them along the telephone tag line. And so this comes to you, through me, secondhand. A relic that shows signs of wear, but still useful if you want it.

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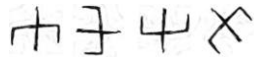
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The Archaeologist's Field Notes

*I am only a local collector of relics and history ...
and do not see what use I may be to thy investigations ...
- Harry Wilson, amateur archaeologist, 1938*

We call it Thunderbird, after Wilson's manner,
though it could be a tree or a man with arms raised,
or a trident. Just as Conquistador gold-lust
turned what might be the silhouette of a cactus
into Peru's gilded candelabra, and praised
the good omen as if it were their god's banner,
we too are guilty of amending history.
We admit that our tongues fail, and wonder what stripped
the glyph of language, caused it to tilt back its beak,
slip off its skin—the feathered blanket we can't seek
with our shovels and trowels. Earth and time encrypt
the deeds of ancestors, preserve their mysteries.
We sift stones in this inscrutable solitaire,
long for the cipher's tongue, but never doubt it's there.



I. Topophilia

Valley Nights

The desert is the least lonely place I know, though
the coyote's trickster voice carries for miles
after he's gone, and there are no rivers

to buoy moonlight along; but the saguaro's spines
glimmer like the dull winks of sand
in a storyteller's blanket unfolding down South Mountain,

until amber streetlamps flicker into the star-streaked sprawl
of the capital. Believe in the mirage:
in those foothills on the far side of the valley,

where the furthest lanterns of earth marry
the nearest lights of heaven, a pointillist
universe that undivides you and me from the stars.

Barry and I Commence Fifth Grade Heritage Negotiations

Barry Manygoats sits by me on Native American Heritage Day,
even though I am mostly white. The other brown children
crowd together at a different table. We make Native-inspired art,

split fry bread during a break. Barry trades his grandmother's hogan
for popsicle sticks, his family for tan felt, the sheep he herds
during summer break for cotton balls and toothpicks. And because I

am made up of people from somewhere else, Barry offers me blue vellum—
a good trade for the ocean my ancestors crossed, he tells me.
But neither of us have ever known the ocean, so instead we trade it for sky.

Saguaro Cinquains

Four spikes
and a nub (two
century's growth) appeared
in the neighbor's yard over night—
cactus

thieves!—we
all knew it. We
christened him *Verde*, watched
him tremble as if struggling
to breathe,

watched his
bellows ripple,
heave—the flesh between ribs
cracking at dusk like a Pinto's
vinyl.

With black
lights we watched skin
split, scorpions spilling
brightly from Verde's side: pincher-
pronged stars

tumbling
out of winter's
slumber, a shower of
bats snatching them in mid-fall like
wishes.

Thriftscape with Buttons

Our houses shared the same floor plan,
our mothers were alike: in their flat East Valley ranches
stuccoed with secondhand salvage—
ready as Mormon pantries to weather monsoons

and personal end-of-days. My mother
was a barricade of protocol: beaded moccasins,
church bulletins, and half made-up
memories; your mother just had stuff. So we dug

your mother out, and didn't talk about mine.
We carted out chicken crates,
sleeper-sofas, sheet music, and baby clothes,
then dragged the stained-

glass Jesus through the gravel by its hooks.
We bartered it all for a song,
crowded together in the last lawn chair adrift
in the Sonoran brine, downing shots

of Irish cream and caroling "We Three Kings"
to the tightly packed sea-pinks, sick thrifts
hobbling over beer cans, sinks, and dog shit, rooting
through penny-pinched buttons

flooding from jelly jars,
pickle jars, cookie jars—
a cascade of leaky life rafts
sent to save the horde.

Fables

I: Here There Be Dinos

Like most little brothers, you dragged a brontosaurus
around by the neck, slept on sheets scattered
with dino silhouettes, turned green-eyed

over the diorama I sculpted with a play-doh stegosaurus
at the center. In the days between myth and science,
we walked the forest-turned-stone, the dinosaurs

we were told roamed here proved by the scaffolding
of a triceratops ruling over a clutch of eggs
next to the museum gift shop—a pale anorexic,

her ribs a cradle emptied of heart and lungs.
We filled the void with our own flutter and breath,
a lullaby language we made up.

A few years later you left me behind,
fluent in a croon I could only fake, your awed accent
hardened into fear over how such heft

could just disappear. Soon after, you hardly talked at all.
So I didn't tell you when they exiled the triceratops
to the archives, dino lore shriveled

into a factoid about ancient crocodiles,
who lurked here shedding teeth
the way their descendants shed tears.

II: Fossils Are Forever

When you die it will be like this:
at the last second, before your body stiffens,
you will crawl through a chink of light,
scrape the stone-sleep from your eyes.

But you're at home in this gallery of trees—
this logjam of conifers and ginkgoes
that dreamed themselves into rainbows.
And you know how it is with trees—

how it's only the bark and sappy underskins
that are alive the moment before they go under,
the drought-ringed cores of them long dead.
Even fresh-scraped beams in a new house

carry a grave two hundred years in the making. Your body
and mind are curio cabinets displaying the fossils
our ancestors left behind; and if I scrape
beneath the surface, I know what I'll find. The truth is,

the light's already traced prisms
through your porous bones. Soon,
it will crawl through the soil of you,
seek out a different seed to nurture.

III: The Proof is in the Light

In the quiet years, we stood in the desert of toppled rainbows—
striated trees sliced into even segments like giant jelly rolls.

It happened so slowly, the way you buried yourself alive,
injected mud into your veins to smother out the air,

bones growing eyes in the dark, letting the rock-dense minerals in.
The sky collapsed on a Wednesday, and we saw the myth

only abstract painters from Sedona see: blue-grey streaks, purple sand,
and seven thunderbolts at once. I tried to capture the approaching storm

with my 110 camera, rain washing out the trail before us.
Lightning sunk its fangs into the desert, the only love strong enough

to carve your initials in this bark.

Forget What the Arsonist Took

Forget that time we lost ourselves
on purpose, aiming our high beams
past roads bleached by casino glare,
over cattle grates,

until gravel petered
into meadow—womb
of the White Mountains—soft belly
in a jagged-rimmed bowl.

Forget how we heard them first,
huffing mist, the hollow cupping
of hooves on grass, hides shuffling
husks; how we cut the engine,

wave-borne in the whinny and flicker
of moon-skimmed manes,
undulation of unbroken backs.
How a lone elk head

reared from the equine tide:
his antlers
a barren tree, luminous
above the sway, his body—

a silhouette
shifting black on black
through the herd—
a shadow rooted in light.

Topophilia

I'm always crossing horizons
I once believed in,

boundaries not as solid
as the borders these black footprints

map into white space
pretend. There's always a way

across, as though one place longs
for another—the asphalt dreams

of gravel, gravel of dirt,
and all of us dream of water.

We are always becoming.
This is not the wanderer,

but the poem,
though its blackened feet

stick out at right angles, silhouettes
like skeleton keys.

And having keys,
we look for what they open;

having feet,
we make a road.

No horizons,
just poems.

II. Goodwill

Pilgrimage

*A little light, like a rushlight
to lead back to splendour.
-Ezra Pound, Canto CXVI*

Even in the floating cemetery at San Michele,
I remember I was raised with certain traditions.
I know to spill tobacco for the dead,
to stain milk with nutmeg for those without rest,
to steep bay leaves in hot water to coax out splinters.

And the first thing archaeologists learn is to get tetanus shots
every five years, the membranes of forearms and knees
soaking up minerals like slow-sipping sponges
each time we kneel before the past. Here, I remember
what I've loved well as he invokes my name canto after canto.

I call back knowing *EZRA* means *HELP*, never able to untangle
the plea from the offer, and wish I had a cigarette
to split over his stone head, the dirt of his grave staining my nails sienna;
and there have been enough seasons between his death
and my arrival that I know it is a poet I absorb through my skin.

Birth, Labor

Even Pegasus wasn't born standing on his feet.
He fell out

in a pustule of embryonic fluid, the first breath
relayed through

the Minotaur's maze of biology to the sponge can of his lungs
drying out inexperience with

dangerous use. He landed thrashing the featherless wishbone
against minutes panged by

his legs unclenching from the tight fist of the womb—
the inertia of

having not yet imagined what limbs are for.

Hit, Run

The husk
of the orange tabby

seeps between the seams
of the earth a little each day,

a white picket
stuck down her throat to lob her

into the irrigation ditch,
stuck so deep it dislodged six half-circles

curled in her belly.
We keep vigil from our bicycles

as life scurries back into the cat,
ant by ant.

Oranges in Winter

We measure our lives
in cigars, in cups of tea, trips

to the video store,
in weekly spaghetti dinners;

we passe the time eyeing
stacks of used books, composing

messages on sticky notes,
masquerading our boredom

as cabin fever; and we
carry bitterness in our skin

like the Clementines
we peel together, carefully

pulling up the veins
with the rind.

Goodwill

Regulars flip through secondhand
jeans and blouses—hides of last decade's
must-haves emptied of flesh. Shuffling
past coiled ghost skins of silk scarves
and knotted tie-tongues, they wedge fingers
between half a century's trends, tightly
pack time along steel rods. Hangers
clack—their modest skeletons all neck
and shoulders—the erratic scuttle stilled
only when the living pause to judge
flaws exposed by use: loose buttons
dropped, weak hems fallen. That torn dress
betrays someone else's tragedy—
reclaim it with needle and thread.

Millennium Gothic: Portraits of the Ellum Squatters

I. Leftovers

On Ellum nights we throw bread from the backs of vans
to runaways feeding like ravens from trash bags.

Tales of how long they've survived on stale bagels
pass from vampires to gutter punks,

chapped lips rucked in awe, purple hearts
they've earned living hand to mouth. Even lost souls

know better than to break bread alone. They make tables
out of curbs, lift fists filled with donut crumbs in toast

until cops roll down Elm Street. Capes and hoodies
swoop down alleys; with both hands the red-cloaked pregnant girl

hoists bakery cast-offs, then herself, through a broken window.

II. Moonlighting

Peter works the eleventh hour, wound tight with insomnia—
burns like a bleached flame in the tungsten night of insomnia.

He keeps vigil in a desert vet's habit of fatigues,
army boots, and a shirt that looms white as insomnia.

Watchdog for hire, he keeps the street kids out, though they flop
like moths against the glass height of club Insomnia.

He rewards those who master obscurity with cigarettes,
lets the martyr's flame flare bright like insomnia.

He multiplies loaves, nourishes the strays on bread alone
until they grow numb to the bite of insomnia.

But the fish he keeps; he presses scales into chainmail as he counts
the hours until they all fall like ash in the dawn-light of insomnia.

III. After the Blues Track

She keeps returning, this girl held together with safety pins
and Manic Panic, to a place she can't remember, a name
that might have been hers and might have been Kim.

She counts on evangelists for her weekly ration
of tracts, counts on those squat pages just right for rolling dope
and cigarettes—calls them *tracks*, proof of the rut she's in—

needle rust laying crossties in her veins. It's easy to know
which warehouse she calls home, easy for a boy or two
to slip pills into her swill to keep her groanings low.

And it's easy for preachers to miss her slowed gait,
how her hands no longer talk because they're clutching her shirt
closed; it's easy to blame tread marks when she chatters late

about how real vampires get inside her, not just the ones
larping around in capes. When she leaves, she's running on
like a hymn; when she leaves she's dropping tracts and safety pins.

In dreams, I follow her out of town along the rails.
In dreams, she lays down her song to the hum of the rails,
calls her black and blue footprints the Exodus braille.

IV. The Krishna Bestiary

Beauty shaves his head, sleeps on concrete floors
in east-facing warehouses, flannel sheet anchored
by a clutch of singing bowls, salvaged bottles,
Sanskrit paperbacks, and natural histories.

He makes mute sketches of runaways
and rats alike, highlights the glow of their gestures
in the margins of books; and when the first screams
echo from the kids not used to the haunt

of fleas, the chatter of cockroach legs,
he teaches them to fill the room with incense—
tempt the little beasts out to the fresh air—
because the roaches, too, are God.

V. *Heart-sleeve*

If you believe Teardrop, then Dallas is a bus stop
and we're all just passing through.

The kids who come down on weekends
to piss off their parents dismiss him,
but the real vampires keep their distance:

they know the hollow ink balloon
he etched into his baby-fat cheek above a chin
that's yet to whisker is not a cliché. Truth is
if you're not careful, he'll call any kindness Mama—

shouts for her until the echoes off the underpass reply.
And he shows anyone like her the sailor's red-blue scrawl
carried on his chest—the pump-and-dagger scab
cloaked in the banner of her name skinned
across his heart. And when the echoes go silent

and the grief takes hold again, he lays down
on the warehouse loading dock. He'd stay there forever, frozen,
but Angel finds him, feeds him from a bag of stale bread.
With both hands, she holds his head to the heartbeat
in her belly, wraps him in her red cloak,
and hums the blues away.

VI. Self Portrait in Triplicate

Three new kids white out their skin, but their eyes and mouths
they wing with black—a smeared triptych of crows in snow.
They want me to take their picture in exchange for eating our hand-outs,

and the two girls stage a burlesque of what they think it's like to be lesbians.
But the boy widens his stance, crosses his arms, and mirrors
the downturn of his mouth by jutting out his jaw like a wishbone

towards the light. The girls call him by my brother's name, and it's been so long
that for a moment my own flesh and blood squares off
in the lens, the fingerprints of others trailing through the convex of his cheek.

VII. The Murderer as a Child

It came to pass that Dark Angel diapered the babe in newspaper,
left him on the sidewalk with the other squatters
while she went into Insomnia, just for a minute.
But when the cops came, the others startled like crows,
leaving the bundle behind. Social services took the baby,
but let the child-mother go. Dark Angel disappeared,
afraid they'd come back with the name that would take her home.

So it came to pass that Dark Angel took up a stick in the night,
attacked a man lost in the same sickness as herself,
who stumbled into her camp not knowing his own name.
With both hands she choked him with a chain,
and when he wouldn't die, she dragged him down to the river,
and baptized him with a rock.

It is written that he lingered as the sun rose again
over the city, the perfume of his life washing downstream,
the island of his skull forced into the air.
She testified she needed his skull for a candleholder,
as do all vampires. The papers say she's doing 24 years,

but they never got her age right,
so certain she must be older to murder that way.
But it came to pass that I could testify
she walked Ellum streets by fifteen—belly-bulge

of her father's seed sunk beneath her red cloak—
and how the vampires were the only ones
to make room for her in their inn.

They gave her a new name
and never asked about the old one.

Gifted

Brother was the storyteller, not me.
His chatter with fairies and demons
flitted through walls before he turned five,
without pretend. Our house was a hive
for hummed secrets strung between tin cans,
voices that caked his ears with honey.

I ignored them (I tried) and took down
our inheritance from the cupboard
to make him sugar bread for dinner.
We didn't starve, but he grew thinner,
his mind blurred by the drone-buzzing horde
tapping out Morse code with a tin spoon.

I ran away to Venezuela—
cast out then saved by missionaries.
He sent glyphs across the Great Divide
that translated poorly, though I tried,
but sweat from a thousand Hail-Marys
smearred the ink of the claw-hinged ala.

I made a poor apostle, but still
prayed mother would see he was gone, trace
beneath the jelly-skin of his eyes
others caught in resin, fossilized,
that bobbed within the mask of his face,
riled the teeth and probed with barbed pills.

I've returned to our childhood house—
never stayed long enough to get stuck.
I've pressed against the wall, but both ears
have failed. The hum that haunted those years—
that sticky undercurrent of luck—
pulled from within him, a divine dowse.

Brother was the storyteller, then;
but I swell with life, churn with bees, and
fear the murmur and the sting of some,
not knowing if they speak what's to come
or echo, not knowing if I stand
to bestow or unleash this boon on men.

O Tannenbaum

for Grandpa Breid

He who hardly spares a word
but for the weather, found the German
left in his tongue, and sang over the static
of ships filled with Midwest farm boys,
over the wails of Japanese mothers
burrowed into hills to warm
the naked atoms of their children; he sang
between barren mountains of bicycles
blistered thousands high, trees felled
under human snow.

III. Women's Work

Juanita

They say she spent her last moments kneeling—spine curved,
arms crossed over her chest, head bowed—an ideal posture
for the final blow. Ambassador to the gods, bred of royal blood

for one purpose: to die before puberty could take root, before
her breasts could stir desire, before Mount Ampato could smother the world
in ash. Footprints of DNA trail down the Andes—through Arequipa,

Panama, Korea, Taiwan—witness to how far her forebears roamed. Ice Maiden:
savior of them all. Dressed in crimson, drunk on chicha—a flawless
gift to the gods betrayed by the fractured skull, shattered eye socket,

loose braid dyed with hemorrhaged thoughts. It took a week or more
for her to freeze to the core, time enough for her organs to reshape
around her last supper. After six hundred years

she shook the mountain loose: an ancestor searching for descendants—scream
preserved in the shriveled flesh pulling at her jaw; her wide cheekbones
imprinted in the faces of girls lolling at bus stops, knitting alpaca hats.

Like all things Inca, they bent her under a Spanish name.
Put her on display within the sillar walls of the White City—
rolled her over, knees curled in prayer, hollow eyes cupping the stars.

Salt Myth

Somewhere along the road
from Cuzco, we trip through
two-way glass like Alice—
a microscope's curved lens
zoomed in on Maras—bright
cells, creek-fed membranes, silt-

scraped wounds welling with salt.
My mother and I read
patterns that etch this brine
quarry—rhythms that thread
tubers in terraced lawns,
quilt mountain with endless

corn steps, gridlock-and-lace
stones in snug patchworked stacks
that no quake can loosen.
This same wind's fingers raked
the hair of Lot's wife, threshed
her open, unbraided

the backward-glancing bride
from her own name. Here, loss
isn't a girl stilled through
sorrow into stela;
here, we learn to pool grief,
weigh the cost in labor,

ourselves the libation,
the poured-out spirits blanched
from weeping bodies, grain
by grain. The women dressed
in bowlers and heaped skirts
warn us, *don't look back*, though

the South wind's ghostly thrall
palms our cheeks, skilled looters
reaping sweat from our skin,
the whites from our eyes—blessed
wounds that remain undressed
weathering like ruins.

Codemakers

*...these softer things almost never survive
two thousand years, let alone twenty thousand.*
—Elizabeth Wayland Barber,
Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years

I. Gather

Let us contract the world.
As water takes ice into her womb,
and the skin of our mother

puckers into mountains, creases into valleys,
let us also draw together.
Let us gather flax as we've gathered

ourselves—root it in rows,
thresh fiber from stalk, winnow husk from seed.
Let us untangle

wool snagged by thorns: such softness
rolled against the thigh
compels us to shape what the gods

have overlooked. Those without flesh
can never discern how bodies
yearn for string.

II. Spin

How we live by the string! Our fingers are the first machines,
and as a single strand of silk from a Chinese worm bridges

a thousand yards, we take up the threaded spindles that leash
our waists and pull up earth's slender filaments—

desires we stretch with the *spin* of our labor into the *span*
of life. That twisting cord draws us down into our dying,

works our hands until they are rough as bark, though we swear
by the gods that we spin so fast we can remake our fate:

our fringed skirts sing with each swish of our wordless hips.

III. Dye

The words we make of our need, the buzz
of chores and children we must breathe
into forms, dreams that bleed language.

We crush crimson from insects, mash
purple from snails, and predict indigo out of woad
two thousand years before the plants hail from India.

Our names impart being: separate colors
from gods, obscure more than they reveal, narrow
like a prick of light in the altering dark of heaven.

We hide our rainbow in that deepest dye,
dissolve our bones in saffron clay. You'll never guess
how many hues we've conceived.

IV. Weave

The warp we weight with clay and stone, pull taut
the weft with the back and forth of our far
sickness. This yarn that binds us to our hearths
also binds us to ancestors, nomads
who still map wanderlust into our veins,
herald in the gods. We pattern their dreams
with twine, catch their fore-visions in our web,
learn to halt demons with red-bordered cuffs
and barbed roses around collars; and we
never neglect the spirit birds of girls
long dead before child-bearing—embroider
their white flocks with hands lithe as wings, invoke
the lozenge of our sex amid routine
chant and chatter, the flutter of shuttled sleeves.

V. Barter

The sleeves we sew design the code
that names the fate of men. We mark baker from butcher,
pauper from prince, and one faceless knight from his twin
by banners stained in the arsenic of dragon's blood.
We trade our words West, the tongues

of others hungry for the spell
that brings the gods to our spinning. We multiply by moving,
split language with our words for weaving as we are absorbed
by other lands, other customs, and the other gender.
We are not as silent as some suppose:

our ways encoded, not lost.
Old-fashioned brides still wreath doorposts in wool.
We layer 20,000 years into one garment; our robes
so precious they are christened for the robbers
who barter them for tin and jewels.

VI. Unravel

Tin and stone outlast stick and bone,
and the life measured by softer things.
Daughters learn recipes through song,
marriage through myth, child-bearing
through rites.

They know which mirrors
to sew into robes to reverse themselves
into gods.

Now let us
work the earth into a shroud,
swap aprons
for the first strings that fringed the threshold
of the womb.

Let these words ravel
and unravel,
tangle even as we, unwoven in streams
of history,
reshaped
in the muddle of retelling: like water,
our mother keeps our secrets
sheer and soft.

Cora in Philly

I hear crocuses pushing through asphalt,
and an alley cat curled like a moon snail
echoing the sea's purr through the sewers.
Snow drops bend, roots stretched to unlatch the vault,
as I feel my way out, read the rock-Braille
with fingers deft as mice feet, lithe as worms.
I tunnel to the Market-Frankford line,
board the A train, ignite weeping cherries
and forsythias down rows of brownstones
as I rumble through Philly—neon signs
flashing *Mom, I'm coming*. A breeze carries
my message out to sea, a balm of storms,
honey and exhaust. If only I could
eat that scent like seeds, undo sleep for good.

Eat that scent like seeds, undo sleep for good—
honey and exhaust—if only I could.
My message out to sea, a balm of storms
flashing *Mom, I'm coming*. A breeze carries
as I rumble through Philly's neon signs
and forsythias, down rows of brownstones.
Board the A train, ignite weeping cherries.
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with fingers deft as mice feet, lithe as worms,
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Snow drops bend, roots stretched to unlatch the vault,
echoing the sea's purr through the sewers
and an alley cat curled like a moon snail.
I hear crocuses pushing through asphalt.

First Frost

A desert girl can't read the signs of falling leaves,
she can't grasp the mourning rituals of maple
trees, whose yearly blood-letting feeds the worms of spring,
whose flaming fingers fill the mouths of Nor'easters
until all their stars are eaten. She's underdressed
for this premature frost, in a gauze of fatigue
thin as crepe, dense as cream, and she longs to bury
her head in a patchwork quilt—the warmest embrace
her mother ever gave her. She slips on black ice
packed tight as the tumor beneath her ribs, halts dazed
but still standing at the center of autumn's reel,
in this shaken snow globe of red and golden leaves.

Placemat Mandala

By the light of Olivia's crayons, we are bulbous:
the green circles of our heads bob like balloons
along the back of the paper placemat,
sky tangled in our hair, our arms

gestured in one long stroke so there's no telling
where I end and she begins.
And because we are cornered in this crowded cafe
by unseasonable flooding, Olivia conjures

orange trapezoids for our bodies, raincoats
that dangle beneath deep-dish smiles—
the thrum of love repeating *U, U* from face to face.
Our stick-figure selves are untamed

by gravity, we float above the green deluge
squiggled below, up through monsoons
transfigured into a manna of blue wax dashes,
as heaven trembles to earth, drop by drop.

And Olivia's yellow hair rains down,
the only sun we need
in this chrome-and-linoleum shelter.

White Rabbit

This New Year, dozens of White Rabbits slip down my gullet,
the warren of sticky good intentions wrapped in rice paper

increasing with each house visit. The grandmothers swear
I'm not as ugly as most foreigners—I have Chinese eyes—

and they offer up another rabbit as they plan whose son
to introduce me to, try to scour freckles from my arms,

lift my shirt to measure my prospects. I let them gossip,
take to the courtyard burrowed in the new moon's inky light,

and look to the shadow within the shadow: that celestial hare
brewing immortality for others, host to the world who throws

himself in the cooking pot rather than let a guest go hungry.
I bow to him, my stomach churning sickly sweet.

Cinder

I.

When the cinder blazed out of Eden,
her wings mistaken for flaming swords,
she first circled the earth in fire before her
dragon-body turned to ash. Millennia
passed before she could conjure another.

II.

*Cinder: an erroneous spelling for sider,
scoria, slag; bears no connection with the 'ashes'
of the French cendre, or the Latin cinerem—
an error reduced to ember—glow that ceases to flame.*

III.

The first time I recognized her mark was in Egypt,
in those ostentatious rose slippers. Six hundred years

before Christ makes it public and she was summoning
fires of resurrection. But, oh, how the Pharaoh's heart

broke when his cinder girl lay dead. His fingers still cling
to that lone slipper beneath the sand, as though he knew

she could have given him the keys to eternity.

IV.

*Grittier than ash,
powder residue left
after combustion.*

V.

I almost lost her trail in Psyche
(that was a gentle side I didn't
expect). Chasing Cupid like a fool,
Venus barring the way. In her rage
Psyche smashed her own sisters
against the rocks, then

let her broken heart smolder
for a thousand years until need
overtook her and she let it
fizzle out.

But she's a chronic.
She must have her flesh.

VI.

*She is Ouroboros,
eternal return,
the snake-dragon
devouring herself tail-first;
tail-first—herself devouring—
snake-dragon,
the return eternal,
Ouroboros is she.*

VII.

In China, a golden-eyed fish-mother
guides her well, and is dredged up

in the Philippines to serve her again
and again. The bait is still a shoe,

an impossibly small lotus fit for binding.
In Japan she is repentant, chaste; in Korea

she settles for the mayor's son. But in Vietnam
she turns unforgiving as stone.

From then on she prefers to rise through the ashes
of stepmothers and stepsisters.

VIII.

*Aarne-Thompson type 510A:
The Persecuted Heroine.
Born of ashes in every tongue.*

IX.

She's the patron saint of blended families,
always relies on magic as a crutch.

The pumpkin carriage was particularly over the top.
They nailed down her M.O. in Germany:

shoe fetish, daddy issues,
masochistic need for motherly approval,

an archetype given to nostalgia
for something that was never hers.

X.

*Cinderella dressed in yella
went upstairs to kiss her fella
made a mistake and kissed a snake
how many doctors will it take?*

XI.

Three hundred and forty times
she's roamed the earth
hampered by the loss of one shoe—
as many as fifteen hundred,
depending on who decides what counts—

but she bit into that fruit before time,
before counting, before memory,
the fireworm slithering down her throat,
opening her stomach with desire, as she ran
wide-eyed and barefoot before the fire.

Burning the Bodies

Dark night gave me dark eyes,
yet I use them to search for light.
-Gu Cheng

Dawn unstitches dark sky from dark earth,
a wound healed and reopened each day.

I watch saffron monks on the other side of the valley,
as on so many other mornings, preparing the way for the dead;

and I know this about the face in the paper and nothing more:
it took more than two hands to fill that dumpster

with six thousand bodies, numbered fetuses small as peaches,
and the bruised baby girls a few months old,

the names of twenty-one of them recorded on medical bracelets
buoying tiny wrists down the river, snagging fish lines.

Somewhere, even this face has been called mother. But the language
hasn't kept up with the times. It resists the generic word

for *sister*, but always that insistence of *mèimei*, *jiějie*—younger sister,
older sister—as if the world of One-or-Two-Child families

does not really exist. I stand vigil with the monks, all of us
without children of our own, smoke and ash filling the valley,

fluttering into my eyes and mouth like moths. The burning
in my throat is somebody you could have loved.

I carry their darkness in me, use it to search for light.

IV. Coda

Still Life with Paleo-Junk

Three layers down our trowels scrape hearth stones,
a charred ring embedded in clay for six
or seventy-six centuries (charcoal
alone will tell). We imagine the hole
into a makeshift kitchen: pestles, picks,
quartz-flake confetti, bits of nibbled bone.
The half-formed spear point chipped too deep for use
reminds us that most often what remains
was thrown out by others—middens, privies,
one-night campsites and abandoned cities—
these are the archaeologist's domain.
We await our turn under shovel, loose-
ly defined by plastic bottles, ashtrays,
unpaired shoes discarded along highways.

Notes

"The Archaeologist's Field Notes"

Harry Wilson was an amateur archaeologist who, during the first half of the twentieth century, collected and documented over 1200 pre-colonial artifacts mostly from Lancaster County and Delaware County in Pennsylvania. He identified the lone petroglyph carved into a pestle as "thunderbird," though he never explained why he chose this name and there is no known cultural or historical basis for this association. His collection is now housed at West Chester University, where research is still being conducted based on his findings.

"Thriftscape with Buttons"

Sea pinks, also called thrifts, are a species of flowering plant that grows in low clumps and thrives in dry, salty, and/or rocky conditions.

"Millennium Gothic: Portraits of the Ellum Squatters"

Ellum, or *Deep Ellum*, is a corruption of "deep Elm Street," a district of Dallas, Texas. *Insomnia* was a coffee house and music venue located on Elm Street during the late 1990's and early 2000's.

"Women's Work"

The title of this section of the book along with the epigraph for the poem "Codemakers" are from the book *Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years* by anthropologist Elizabeth Wayland Barber, whose research has made an incomparable contribution to our knowledge of the history of textiles, and thus to our knowledge of the lives of women in conjunction with this technology. Available from W.W. Norton and Company, New York: 1994.

Vita

Dawn Manning received a Bachelor's degree in anthropology with a minor in ethnic studies from West Chester University in 2009, graduating *summa cum laude* and receiving WCU's Outstanding Student award, as well as individual awards for outstanding work in both of her fields of study. She went on to pursue an MFA in creative writing through the University of New Orleans, where she has studied poetry in Mexico, Italy, and Scotland. Since joining UNO, her poems have appeared in *The Centrifugal Eye*, *qarrtsiluni*, *Mudfish*, and *Silk Road*, among other literary journals.