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## Codemakers

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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.

## Notes

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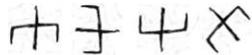
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## The Archaeologist's Field Notes

*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  
smear 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.