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# A Poetic Exploration of Landscape and Negation in Larry Levis's *The Dollmaker's Ghost*

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**A POETIC EXPLORATION OF LANDSCAPE AND NEGATION IN LARRY LEVIS'S  
*THE DOLLMAKER'S GHOST***

A thesis submitted to  
the Graduate College of  
Marshall University  
In partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

In  
English  
by

Cynthia McComas

Approved by  
Prof. Eric Smith, Committee Chairperson  
Dr. Sarah Chavez  
Prof. Nicole Lawrence

Marshall University  
May 2018

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract .....	vi
Introduction .....	1
On the New River.....	10
Forgotten Homes in Fayetteville, West Virginia.....	12
You Talk About Everything Except the Stars.....	14
What You Think When You Wake on Sunday.....	16
An Homage to Scott Disick’s Rage.....	19
Off the Coast of Milford, Connecticut.....	21
Alarum.....	22
Exploding Head Syndrome.....	24
Not Born at All.....	26
On Flight.....	27
Sunday Morning on Fourth Avenue.....	29
To an Empty Page at Dusk.....	31
Hurricane Season.....	33
Poem for My Father’s 1,000 Mile Drive Home.....	34
Merge Right.....	35
Honeymoon Youth.....	37
Fletching is Not an Action.....	38
If Words are Meaningless, Why are You Still Listening? .....	40
Sky Maps.....	41

Works Cited .....42

Appendix A: Institutional Research Board Approval Letter.....44

Appendix B: Vita .....45

## **ABSTRACT**

The following thesis contains a collection of poetry, which portrays an exploration of landscape through negation and meditation. These poems often describe the region of Appalachia via a speaker who seeks wisdom through thoughtful images of nature and its decay. Prefacing the creative body is a critical introduction which highlights my influences, craft, and methods of writing. These poems were written while studying the poet Larry Levis, who provides an imaginative and thought-provoking perspective of natural landscapes and the people who coexist among them.

## INTRODUCTION

This collection of poetry focuses on meditations and negations of landscape, primarily situated in the region of Appalachia. One of my main goals is to complicate traditional pastoral images of nature by highlighting unusual and unexpected visuals of the region. Alongside this collection, I include an analysis of these devices in the poetry of Larry Levis, whose book *The Dollmaker's Ghost* has become a prominent influence on my writing. In the poems, I centralize a speaker who reflects on a personal identity of growing up in a region that is largely misunderstood. In popular culture, the people of Appalachia are portrayed as under-educated, ungroomed, and uncultured, which led me to spend much of my adolescent and early adult life removing myself from this identity, constantly seeking a way to get out of West Virginia, where I have spent all of my life. This collection attempts to convey an honest depiction of Appalachia—a complex region and identity subject to equal parts pride and abandonment. By critically analyzing the work of Larry Levis, I am able to more clearly illustrate the motives of my writing, which are more complicated than can be explained by sole definitions of craft devices. This project explores how Levis portrays landscape through negation and meditations of images, and how his poetic styles have influenced my own.

In his essay, “Eden and my Generation,” Larry Levis discusses how writers have diverse experiences and portrayals of a particular place, stating, “it is the geography of the psyche that matters, not the place” (43). In his poems, Levis complicates descriptions of California’s Central Valley, among other locations, which initially attracted me to his work. His poems recall images of dead vineyards, littered rivers, and dusty, empty homes. Recurring frequently in his poems are mentions of ghosts and nothing; Levis describes a landscape that



erases itself. Levis emphasizes that people of a region may have differing realities despite living within close proximity to one another. This emphasis on region is especially true for my experience of growing up in Appalachia, but not in a rural area. The theme of landscapes, particularly desolate ones, recurs throughout the collection by means of images and metaphors that reflect Appalachia and its people. The deep meditations on images, beyond what is seen on the surface, are a main tactic that I have adapted from Levis in order to describe not only what is visible in these landscapes, but what was or could be there.

I am drawn to the craft device of negation because the desire to write poetry and to know how to utilize language effectively, but to lack a subject, is one that is seldom spoken of in contemporary poetry criticism. Rather than focus on truth-telling, negation requires that the writer imaginatively describes what is not present. According to Chad Davidson and Gregory Fraser, “negating, simply put, offers a technique for radically re-conceptualizing one’s subject” (73). By negating a subject, the writer allows for more possibilities and extensions of what happens in a poem. In addition to negations, Levis’s poems are often compiled of many meditations in which subjects tend to constantly evolve through natural images. While Levis does not fall into one poetry camp, these meditations are not uncommon when discussing traits of Deep Image poets, a movement which prioritizes “the emotive imagination” (Fowler). Deep Image poems are often very visual, but dreamlike. According to *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, in Deep Image poems, “the poet’s inner self and the outer world become landscapes described and fused by images that treat both as physical yet highly charged phenomena” (Fowler). This Deep Imagist characteristic is relevant to Levis’s poems, as he is not simply describing a landscape as he sees it; he is infusing the images with layers of his psyche.

To better understand and describe my own poems, I will analyze two poems from the collection *The Dollmaker's Ghost*, which is a hauntingly plain selection of poetry which meditates on life and death and what spaces exist in between.

In this collection, Levis uses ordinary language surprisingly, describing mundane details of life and nature with words that are familiar, but arranged unexpectedly. Levis's use of meditation exists in the poem, "Magnolia" (58-9) in order to illustrate the characters' daily suffering with drug addiction while beautifying the experience of the narrative through descriptions of nature. A meditation is exemplified in lines of the second stanza, which state:

Before the singing began in his veins  
and engraved them again  
there were even a few pure moments  
more honest than clouds, or sunlight, or any  
blossoming thing beside him.

The "singing . . . in his veins" aurally illustrates the effects of drug use, and the drug "engraves" his veins because the effect of drugs is permanent—not the highness (the "singing"), but the toll drugs take on one's body in the long term, which often leads to death. Levis uses the concrete verbs "singing" and "engraves" to describe the experience of drug use, which is not actually visual, while situating the reading in a natural setting through use of the words "clouds," "sunlight," and "blossoming." This meditation exists through an omniscient, ghostly speaker who does not only describe these characters as he sees them, but as someone who is able to understand them wholly.

A common extension of Levis's meditations is personification, which is defined as "a device that brings to life, in a human figure, something abstract, collective, inanimate, dead, nonreasoning, or epitomizing" (Fowler). He often describes elements of nature like one would a

person. A personification is casually packed into lines 27-29 with the claim that clouds and sunlight are honest. While honesty is not a trait one may immediately assign to elements of nature, I find it difficult to dispute. I might never have thought to describe clouds and sunlight as honest, but clouds and sunlight are exactly what they are; they are not able to deceive people. If something (a moment in this case) is more honest than clouds or sunlight, this may be, to the character, the epitome of pure honesty, and honesty is crucial to this poem because drug users (the characters of the poem) may not experience it often. Again here, an element of nature recalls dreamlike traits of Deep Imagists through meditation in lines 38-40: "I suppose he likes this oak tree, now, because / it doesn't judge him, and because it seems only / amazed to be here, in leaf, and still standing." The tree "doesn't judge him" and is "amazed," but the reader can still visualize the character lying beneath a massive oak. By assigning emotions and complex meanings to objective facets of landscapes, Levis allows this meditative impulse to add breadth to both characters and setting, and to illustrate a multi-dimensional experience of existing among nature. Because the human experience within nature is not only visual, Levis's poems do not only describe what one (the character, speaker, or both) sees in these images, but how they feel and what they are thinking.

Much like the amazed tree in "Magnolia," Levis's speaker humanizes the river in "Overhearing the Dollmaker's Ghost on the Riverbank," stating that it "didn't care" what the speaker did:

It was the fast, black river  
That didn't care what I did,  
That slowed when I looked at it closely  
And carried twigs and shoes  
And a rank stench like unwashed human hair and flesh (62-64).

In this example, Levis personifies the river, and even compares the river to the human body, equating the body of water's speed with its ability to care. We can all know rivers as things that do not care what we do because they are without consciousness. In this context, Levis implies that the river is capable of caring, but does not. He goes on to embody the river as something that not only can be personified, but literally smells like "human hair and flesh" (64). Marcia Southwick, Levis's ex-wife, describes his way of writing as childlike, comparing it to the way that their son could not understand objects' inanimateness as a child. Regarding Levis's imagination, she states that Levis "[desired] to impose consciousness onto objects" (27). This desire is an extension of Levis's meditations, and providing the landscape with human traits allows the reader to have a vivid, lifelike exchange with the poem so they better understand the speaker's experience as though they were there too.

The meditative consciousness at the heart of Levis's interaction with objects and nature extends to the strangers' lives that he continuously acknowledges are as complex and meaningful as his own. Levis describes this fascination in "Some Notes on the Gazer Within," stating, that when he sees a forgotten landscape, he is reminded that "someone or something has lived here; some delicate linkage is preserved through past and present. [He is] filled by, looked at by, the landscape itself; the experience is not that of a mirror's, but a true exchange" (73). Throughout these landscapes, it is apparent that Levis's observations of seemingly minor details find ways into his poems through his curiosity and imagination regarding what (and who) was there before. In "Overhearing the Dollmaker's Ghost on the Riverbank," Levis proves how the method of

gazing and meditating allows for poems to form through details of a landscape that most people would never contemplate:

And once, driving home, I saw a torn mattress  
High on a riverbank, and wondered  
Who had slept there, what love stains  
Might be drying on it in the late afternoon sun,  
And what lice might be sleeping inside it,  
Unaware that their hosts had moved elsewhere (72).

Levis's contemplative nature allows him to write on subjects, such as the mattress, which would otherwise go unnoticed and hold little meaning to most typical passersby. According to Floyd Collins, "the requisite ability to transcend the mundane through poetry depends upon a well-schooled imagination, which involves the painstaking development of a capacious idiom and a sensualist's love of details," (327) which recalls Levis's philosophy of the gaze. Levis's habit of observation as a self-proclaimed gazer allows him to discover subject matter in the overlooked details of mundane life, as he considers the past and present lives of other humans, objects, and nature, while associating them with his own life.

With this in mind, I completed the poem, "Forgotten Homes in Fayetteville, West Virginia," in which the speaker is observing someone taking photos of an abandoned house, while imagining what lives preceded hers there, through images that ultimately draw connections to the two characters' (the speaker and photographer) relationship. In my poem and Levis's, the speaker describes how they interact with something forgotten by others—in his case, a mattress, and in mine, a house. These images mix imagination and memory, and as the two are infused, the result is a poetic memory that is inferred from real images, the speaker's experience, and their imagination:

. . .I sit in the dry grass while you photograph

the homes, or really, the shells that they are,  
while I try to picture who was there before us.

Probably a woman hung crisp sheets on a clothesline,  
which from the road appeared to be a surrender.

Maybe a lone deer wandered inside and took up  
residence, bedded down on a nest of wallpaper,

the scraps fallen like petals of wilting lilies.  
Maybe, today, this place finally stops aging, vines clear

from the window panes, and you lead me upstairs  
to fresh linen and a hurricane lamp glowing pink, someone

else's portrait on the wall, so subtle,  
it becomes wallpaper itself.

In Levis's poem and my own, the speakers imagine something that was not there within the previous lines, providing examples of both meditation and negation. What is present in the poems (the mattress or the house) leads to questions of what could be there, too, or what was once there and no longer remains. In her essay, "What's Wrong with This Picture," Marcia Southwick offers a close reading of a selection of Levis poems as a person who knew him better than most. She states:

And in the process of finding its purpose as a witness, consciousness can value itself and find comfort in silence. Not the silence of inanimateness, but silence—in the sense of empty spaces between thoughts, gaps where raw uninterpreted data rush in from the outside world and are pulled into awareness by the senses once consciousness is quieted, at peace with itself (28).

In my poem, the speaker is gazing at a silent image, and looking so intimately at these houses that she can visualize what is not present and what could have been. This gaze is an example of how negation can live in poems through what is absent. Negation "destabilize the writer's

autonomy and authority with regard to subject [and] highlight the fact that nothing in the writing of a poem should be frozen in place” (Davidson and Fraser 74). What I find so compelling about this subject is that abandoned houses are so commonly still; this poem imagines life running through the homes, in complete opposition to reality.

Because many of the images in “Forgotten Homes in Fayetteville, West Virginia” are imagined, they are linked by the poem’s poetic memory. In his essay, “Poetic Memory, Poetic Design,” Ira Sadoff states, “poetry is associative, not dissociative: it proceeds neither by fact, nor chronological sequence, nor strictly reasoned argument. It follows the inexorable logic of the way we think and feel and what we notice (which is where the poem’s camera focuses)” (109). Sadoff describes poems as having subconsciouses of their own, meaning that images, narrators, metaphors, and other craft devices that infer a poem’s meaning are self-contained—these images will never mean the exact same thing in two poems. For example, Sadoff states that the color white has different meanings in different contexts—purity, nothingness, and more (110).

My poem, “On the New River,” highlights a personal memory of visiting the New River Gorge, which is how I discovered the images in the poem: “the hills / bruise to indigo against the lightless / water,” “cars scurry across / the bridge’s wingspan, / too soon swallowed by forest,” “Families splash in the glow / of pickup truck headlights. / Topless women drift down the gorge.” These are all moments I can still see clearly, but the emotional weight of the poem, a metaphorical description of a person distancing themselves from their lover, using the shoreline and base jumpers as symbols, came about through meditation. The poem’s memory zooms out through these lines, adding in more details of the landscape while the narrative becomes more complex, though it ends on a final, isolating note with the statement, “you are all I have.” This

statement negates the multitudes of liveliness and humanity that were previously discussed in the poem's images, zooming back into the focal point (the "you") that the poem begins and ends on.

Through the common themes of negation and meditation in this collection, I hope to help the reader better understand the speaker's complex relationship with place. By writing about Appalachia, I've learned that I am able to identify not only with its people, but with its landscapes, much like Levis does with California's Central Valley. Levis once stated, "poetry comes out of poetry often enough . . . [it] is like a huge living body in which a poet doesn't have his meaning all alone or in isolation" (Kelen 35). This collection, and the ideas that live within it, could not exist without his poetry. The influence that Levis has provided will live in my writing far beyond the works I've completed during my graduate studies, as there is always something new to discover through his layered and vastly descriptive language.



On the New River

*After Larry Levis's "To My Ghost Reflected in the Auxvasse River"*

You stare into the river until

you think of nothing.

The mountain's dewy breath spills

into your empty chest.

The river is not quite steaming,

but your skin still burns until the hills

bruise to indigo against the lightless

water. From here,

cars scurry across

the bridge's wingspan,

too soon swallowed by forest.

From here, I practice loving you

at a distance, and you, a base

jumper, practice loving

the fall. We are all at the mercy

of time. Families splash in the glow

of pickup truck headlights.

Topless women drift down the gorge.

The river will not empty

before November, tarnished

with dead leaves after

the hills grow small again.

When I look at you, I see yellow

parachutes in mid-air. Which is to say:

I'll always be the shoreline.

You are all I have.

## Forgotten Homes in Fayetteville, West Virginia

Most of the county is now abandoned.

Next is just decay: the green repossession

owed to forests. Across a mirrored creek, two white  
houses, so unpresidential and honest, inhale the woods.

The homes are almost trees themselves, though less alive  
and more forgotten. Trees at least breed shelter

and diffuse gasps of January light. From here, limbs fill  
with chatter like the hum of a distant auditorium. Rust cuts

through the late afternoon pool of warm  
sky. I sit in the dry grass while you photograph

the homes, or really, the shells that they are,  
while I try to picture who was there before us.

Probably a woman hung crisp sheets on a clothesline,  
which from the road appeared to be a surrender.

Maybe a lone deer wandered inside and took up  
residence, bedded down on a nest of wallpaper,

the scraps fallen like petals of wilting lilies.

Maybe today this place finally stops aging. Vines clear

from the window panes. You lead me upstairs

to fresh linen and a hurricane lamp glowing pink, someone

else's portrait on the wall. So subtle,

it becomes wallpaper itself.

You Talk About Everything Except the Stars

*After Larry Levis's "My Story in a Late Style of Fire"*

Don't be fooled: your parking garage

leap would not be bird-like. Please

don't ask where I am. Please, stay

in Texas this time (as long as

you're always on the ground).

*A year passes and his body is again a bright field,*

but someone else sleeps

beside me tonight

and every night. If you let light

in, I could have stayed. For years,

you kept my skin cold.

In Austin, August becomes only a gust of someone you try to forgive each  
night.

There, you waited for a small and empty  
landscape to fill with singing flames.

There, you found your way back  
to a sky full of nothing

and everything you'll ever know.

There is always someone who can stare

at the stars longer than you  
before you check over your shoulder

to make sure it is only the earth's  
breath on your neck.

What You Think When You Wake on Sunday

*After Larry Levis*

I.

Maybe you've been here before, like the woman  
who sits in the third pew each week. She finds

that every sermon sounds the same,  
walks home, and makes an apathetic lunch.

She doesn't need a husband; she would rather talk  
to herself all night, cook too much for one, find

comfort in tending the hyacinths, and keep  
the bottle of Merlot to herself.

II.

Because you haven't praised anything in months,  
you start your car at dusk and drive to an unfamiliar  
house. Your palms evaporate into the steering wheel  
and turn to fog beneath the streetlamps.

Before long, you wonder if you have been followed  
by moths or stray leaves or someone whose headlights  
bleed on an unmarked road and disappear.  
That hunt doesn't matter to you much anymore.



III.

On Sunday, you wake to a new ceiling, a dark room,  
someone else's dog at your feet. Outside, it is quiet

despite a highway nearby that he drove all night  
trying to remember why he would waste the gas.

Soon, you see him for the last time, then try to forget  
the sound of his sigh. You practice taking up more

space. You make coffee for one. You stay home from church.

Each night since, you sleep alone, or not, or you do not sleep.

## An Homage to Scott Disick's Rage

Suppose you are a man who punches  
mirrors in the early morning

& your wife sleeps in a separate bedroom.

Suppose you are the mirror.

Suppose your wife is actually the power line  
which lights the room with a balmy nectar.

The ceiling a rough tide of shadows  
& the crooked lampshade a shelter from flame.

Your wife wakes to the sound  
of your shattered reflection. You do not reflect

& you do not feel the leak from the window  
of your left hand.

You stand there as awkward  
as a bathroom stall, your hands clutching

one another in a muff of toilet paper.

You are lit by the glow of the space heater tonight.

These are the hands she forgot how to hold,

once electric currents, dimmed

by shards of glass & a concrete wall.

You have nothing left to give.

Off the Coast of Milford, Connecticut

Drive until the road itself becomes ocean.

Now, the hood of your car is finally  
a diving board into these tarnished waters  
which reflect nothing. This is where  
he taught you that the sign for *beautiful*  
is a gesture towards your own face.

Since then, you've learned that his pride  
is the only thing more sacred than a girl's  
bedroom. You are that girl.

On the shore, the precise blade of wind  
rises and means nothing. You wonder  
how you could do this to another woman,  
to yourself, and how his arms once seized  
anything other than cold November sands.

If she is his bed, then you are the passenger  
train's sleeping car, maybe just the steel  
vibrations of track felt through  
the sound of these tired waves.

Alarum

The space between each house erases  
several dismembered oaks.

Men in lawn chairs sleep under the shelter  
of baseball caps and wait for time to pass,

measured in the width of the clouds, graphed  
shadows of a rusted fence, a fallen brown

leaf which carries only itself.

Here, the hollow snap of a shotgun

shocks no one. Even when followed  
by wind-trailed smoke,

some contained fire is always to blame.

The only victim here is the brush-stroked

silhouette of a racing fawn

left alone and unpainted red. It knows

what it knows: there is always one floating  
day moon resembling a dessert plate.

There are never enough places to hide.  
It will soon broaden and bloom antlers,

but now, its legs are two thin and fallen branches  
in the sun-drenched and parting

creek, which you've forgotten  
is your own backyard.

## Exploding Head Syndrome

Justice, one of us didn't have  
steady nerves that day.

I've waited for the car to stop  
running, the waterfront fountains  
to reassemble, Paul & Abe  
to retreat back to the orderly room.

The doors open onto a wheat field  
filled with golden harp strings,  
the sweet cadence of grandmothers  
chiming our names in unison.

We call back out to them each night  
from tents that shelter us from nothing  
but a view of the stars.

We read your letters aloud and trace  
the outlines of your names.

On the way back to Rome,  
we see everything:

The U.S.S. *Missouri* in Naples Harbor. Mount  
Vesuvius dim in the background.

We never thought that Rome

would collapse again  
and again. We forget  
what a battlefield sounds like,  
replace our guns  
with ink pens, and imagine  
only your faces in the clouds  
of smoke. I have a brother back there:  
skin stained with roses  
and his father's pride.  
He tries to forget me, too,  
but each night his head  
explodes in his sleep—  
silence interrupting  
his own consciousness.



## Not Born at All

I've known so few fathers, a pattern of loss weaved  
with tablecloth delicacy and seldom spoken of.

When I think about men, it is usually in clichés.

I see them drowning in small bottles of whiskey,  
a cigarette smoke haze, constantly inching closer  
to death. They may board a plane and never return.

Sometimes one is lost in the dry hollows of coal  
and finally emerges still, with 3 a.m. skin, the pale  
German. A few have collapsed in their own kitchens,  
and soon after, their young daughters will try to wake  
them on Sunday morning. This leaves you, in a way,  
always prepared and always a bit panicked when the  
phone rings for too long, or snow falls quiet and heavy,  
or there is no one there to hide your eyes  
from the rising sand winds this time.

## On Flight

From my living room window, I watch low jets leap  
red mountains, the Kanawha River, one small city,  
a tangle of highways which shelters men, abandoned

cars, needles blooming from sidewalk cracks. Since summer,  
I had stopped documenting. Until now, there was so little  
I wanted to remember. No golden dome, tiny cinema,

or our own basement apartment with unforeseen light.

In July, I did not yet know my lover—  
separated by the turnpike and dozens of small towns.

I drove to Tennessee. Alone, I walked steep hills  
of a sandstone campus, tried to catch moths  
beneath a white cross the height of a ranch house. That night,

I made a pact with myself to stop missing out, which meant  
to do anything at all, which meant to read verses aloud  
in a cemetery with a stranger, lay on grave plots, ride

in an old white Volkswagen to a liquor store  
where we buy red wine to store in a canteen,  
then never see him again.

Soon after, ghosts rode in my backseat until I reached Kentucky.

West Virginia waited for me, stayed the same.

Now, I dream of hidden rooms and the hum of flight.

## Sunday Morning on Fourth Avenue

The last time you went out drinking,  
you wondered, if anyone was as bored  
as you, and probably, they were  
not. You make a note to stay home next time  
because home, at least, has backyard cats  
that stare back at nothing and a bedroom  
harvested of sleep. Home is more picturesque  
or less common than this landscaped silhouette  
of strangers who mostly all think it is okay  
to ask your name, their yelling less  
audible than whispers. The only thing  
more pure than your own breath  
is the way the December air feels on your  
face when, finally, you think to yourself,  
I don't have to be here, and the night bleeds  
into you, and then drains into dusk, quietly  
erasing the trail behind you, and those bodies,  
the drunken tumbleweeds that they are,  
stumble into the street, less like vessels  
and more like the frayed notebook pages

you let float out of your open window.

To an Empty Page at Dusk

My poem will keep running  
until at the end of its path  
of fading mossy tracks  
I find it, finally, in a graying  
evening field staring out  
onto a rough terrain of weeds  
lit by nothing.

It is now only some humming  
spirit among the bees,  
scanning lines of thistle  
and milkweed clusters.

Here, whole mountains are  
swallowed by thick grass  
and undrinkable creeks  
so everything begins  
to look the same.

A dog barks back at itself,  
a monarch lies flat on its wing.

Headlights pass  
as low-hanging comets. Poem,

tell me how we're alive again.

## Hurricane Season

Near the shore, my father is boarding up his windows  
as he does every year. He spray paints the date on plywood, and  
the phrase, "Bring it, Frances," to at least have something always the way he left it.  
He waits for the sky to break open into the ocean's own baptism.

This is a man who will shoot down the streetlight just to see the stars.  
As a teenager, he'd cling to the opening drawbridge and ride above  
the intercoastal. Girls lined up like matchsticks to stroke his shoulder-length hair,  
and he was a chainsmoker. During the nights, the familiar house turns  
a quiet maze. The rooms are steamy, unsuitable for sleep. The rain slows  
and he drinks whiskey on the back patio where a cat is clawing  
at the screen door. A mosquito hums in his ear and is a reborn breath.  
Where can you go to hear the truth spoken back to you?



Poem for My Father's 1,000 Mile Drive Home

Like youth, blossoms last a short time  
or not at all. The highway fields are invisible

skins of trespassing  
between columns of girls in pea coats

with kind voices. When they're gone,  
you stare back at nothing

until a silver plane returns south  
and fades into clover.

You prefer the road because you can  
light the last cigarette

you have and leave the flame  
for someone else's only breath,

breathe smoke into the windshield  
until you see your daughter.

Merge Right

Let me dream this city  
could be more like a carousel,  
  
more like your name if only  
you weren't so proud to disappear

like the invisible skyline you etched  
in the light of thieves.

What kept you burning behind all that soot?  
What slept on eternally?

Halos of gnats form earthly bridges  
without headlights. Merge right.

If I am as unholy as a thief's mother,  
the unwed backseat driver breathing  
  
smoke into the windshield, this is it.  
  
I know why she speaks her mind.

Unwritten. Memory. The bread  
she holds for ransom. Say this:

“Once a liar, always a liar.”

Photos of her son turned toward

her heart. I can only wish she would quit  
yammering his name.

## Honeymoon Youth

Darling, still, you  
wear those shoulders  
with a bored and  
terrified pose.

Beneath the arch,  
you looked as you did  
when you first tried  
your mother's dress—  
too loose in the bust  
at just sixteen.

Almost, it grew  
with honeymoon  
youth. In sepia  
tones, I saw where  
your ghost shone through  
layers of tulle.

The first time I hid  
beneath your skirt  
was that Sunday  
morning in June.

Fletching Is Not an Action

An arrow can only be shot  
by pulling it backwards

It is as archaic as it sounds  
blaming our own arrogance

on uncounted rosary beads

I will not be launched into something  
great and ambiguous

by an archer's arms  
or my own unwillingness

to align the oars and row

An architect once taught me  
to write with owlsh grace

to dismiss the allure of clockwise strokes

and counter my fear of naiveté

I've landed between the leap

year and the pile of ashes

left on my porch steps

by someone whose aim

was never off but faltered

## If Words are Meaningless, Why are You Still Listening?

we met between fluorescent clouds and sidewalk blooms      we met on the last day of spring  
sorrow    you spoke to me in street sign language    your breath a ghost chasing light    your  
breath the scent of my hair    my hair the budding shrubs    the shrubs a human shelter    in  
place of my own self-righteous posture    tell me it's not too late    to pass the exam of time  
where the sun is an analog clock face    in this world my words are trees and cognates    they  
throw punches at fireflies and guitar chords    they are only a whisper of limbs you will never  
understand    we are barriered by leaves and clouds and cigarette breath    I hope you water ski  
down the avenues    and into my arms where hair follicles become grass    grassroots becomes  
smoke    smoke becomes subtitles    and your words are unparalleled foreign flavors  
mistaken for flaming charcoals    mistaken for anything with roots or a pulse or an urge to chew  
ice    which is to say    I'll always listen if you'll always light what you mean on fire    and  
put it out with our glasses of scotch    glowing in the dark    ages and ages    or maybe just  
transcribe your thoughts onto my tongue    twist my words and later we will conjugate  
something up together    I hope we feel nothing forever    forever is nothing but an employee  
discount

## Sky Maps

Her words take so many roads—  
leaving us only to be lost,  
taking breaths with the girls  
who may not even fall asleep tonight.

I've never questioned whether I was born  
when my mother's luck was at a crossroads.  
In dreams, I had to curate the map  
which may be better in guiding stars.

There weren't enough stars for all of us  
but they made their way to our mouths  
Full-bellied, she left in August  
and headed towards the Pacific.



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## APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH BOARD APPROVAL LETTER



Office of Research Integrity

May 7, 2018


Cynthia McCormac  
9 Washington Court  
Martinsville, WV 25804

Dear Ms. McCormac:

This letter is in response to the submitted thesis abstract entitled "A Poetic Exploration of Landscape and Negation in Larry Lewis's *The Dollmaker's Gibnet*." After assessing the abstract, it has been deemed not to be human subject research and therefore exempt from oversight of the Marshall University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The Code of Federal Regulations (45CFR46) has set forth the criteria utilized in making this determination. Since the information in this study does not involve human subjects as defined in the above referenced instruction, it is not considered human subject research. If there are any changes to the abstract you provided then you would need to resubmit that information to the Office of Research Integrity for review and a determination.

I appreciate your willingness to submit the abstract for determination. Please feel free to contact the Office of Research Integrity if you have any questions regarding future proposals that may require IRB review.

Sincerely,



Bruce F. Day, PhD, CIP  
Director

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## APPENDIX B: VITA

Cynthia McComas  
mccomas102@live.marshall.edu  
9 Washington Court  
Barboursville, WV 25504

### Education

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M.A.	Jan. 2016 - Present, English, Marshall University, Huntington, WV.
B.A.	2015, Creative Writing, Marshall University, Huntington, WV.

### Professional Appointments

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Jan 2018 - Present	Brand Manager, Kin Ship Goods.
Aug. 2016 - Dec. 2017	Graduate Teaching Assistant, Marshall University.
Jan. 2016 - Dec. 2017	Writing Center Tutor, Marshall University.
Jan. 2017 - Dec. 2017	Graduate Intern, A.E. Stringer Visiting Writers Series, Marshall University.

### Honors, Awards, and Grants

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2017	MA/MFA/PhD Scholarship, Sewanee Writers' Conference
2017	Chase Adkins Memorial Grant
2017	Lamina F. Maynard Queen Memorial Scholarship
2015	William J. Maier Writing Award, First Place, Poetry

2014 AWP Intro Journals Finalist

### Conference Presentations

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Aug. 2017 “Improving STEM Students’ Writing.” iPed Fall Teaching Conference, Marshall University.

Oct. 2016 “Improving STEM Students’ Writing.” 21st Century Englishes Conference, Bowling Green State University.

### Teaching Experience

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ENG 101 “Freshman Composition I.” Fall 2016, Spring 2017, Fall 2017.

### Other Academic Experience

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Aug. 2016 - Present STEM Writing Center Tutor and Researcher, Hendrick Grant, Marshall University.

2016 - 2017 Nonfiction Editor, *Et Cetera Literary Magazine*, Marshall University.

### Publications

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“A Couple Laundromat Polly Pockets,” “High Tea,” *Et Cetera Literary Magazine*, Spring 2015.

“A Perspective from Mary Hatch in *It’s a Wonderful Life*,” *Et Cetera Literary Magazine*, Spring 2014.

## University Service

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Workshop Presentation: “Writing in the STEM Classroom: A Collaboration Between STEM Faculty and the Writing Center.” Third Thursday Faculty Presentation Series. Marshall University, Oct. 2017.

Workshop Presentation: “Constructing Effective Writing: Building Your Thesis From the Ground Up.” Graduate College, Marshall University, Oct. 2016.

Blog Post: “Planning for Success: Strategizing Your Thesis-Writing Process to Avoid Stress.” *Marshall University’s Writing Center Blog*, Nov. 2016.

Blog Post: “Don’t Forget You Have Options: Daniel Lassell’s Approach to Finding and Obtaining Jobs Outside of Academia for English Majors.” *Marshall University English Graduate Program Blog*, Mar. 2016.

## Community Service

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Co-founder & Co-organizer, Appalachia: Visible Reading Series

Volunteer, Underground Cinema, West Virginia International Film Festival

Reader, Poetry, *Best of the Net* 2018, Sundress Publications