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THE UNTHINKABLE BOTANICAL GARDENS: POEMS

A Thesis  
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts  
in the Department of English  
The University of Mississippi

by

TRAVIS OLIVER GREEN SMITH

May 2013

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## ABSTRACT

*The Unthinkable Botanical Gardens* is a book of poems in five sections. The first, third, and fifth sections present a speaker navigating a wondrous and often hostile world. The second and fourth sections are long poems: “Zodiac B,” a sequence inspired by obsolete or forgotten constellations, and “Elbow Island,” which tells the story of the beluga whales exhibited in Barnum’s American Museum.

DEDICATION

For my mother, my father, and Leah.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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I.

## Table Of Abbreviations

ARF	Artificial Rain Fund
BOP	Ban On Pyramids
BST	Boomerang Surveillance Training
C	Crizzle
C <sub>2</sub>	Cuckooflower
CAAW	Cautious As A Waterbug
DDA	Dictionary Decoding Algorithm
DOCCOTP	Dollop of Cream Cheese On That, Please
EDANSAIMY	Each Day a New Statue Appears In My Yard
EPM	Extremely Painful Memory
FR	Fox's Razor
GWOE	Global War On Eagles
HVT	High Value Tentacle
IP	Ice-Plant
JCRT	Jacobin Calendar Reinstatement Team
KEA	Kudzu Encoding Algorithm
LAG!LAG!	Launch All Ghosts! Launch All Ghosts!
LDF	Langage Des Fleurs
MAD	Mutually Assured Dinner
NVC	National Vortex Commander
OFCT	Observe, Flee, Cower, Tremble
PATLAD	Pity About The Leopards All Dying
QC	Quetzalcoatl Club
RP	Red Pimpernel
SP	Scarlet Pimpernel
SQD	Squellette Qui Danse
TP	Taupe Protocol
UA	Unsupervised Automaton
VIU	Vortex Integration Unit
WWRS	Walt Whitman Resurrection Squad
WWC-RS	Walt Whitman Counter-Resurrection Squad
X	Xebek
YB	Yam Bomb
ZPRTF	Zeno's Paradox Resolution Task Force

## Poem Ending with Gogol

Today I'm feeling  
like the suit and bandages  
an invisible man wears  
when he goes out in public.

At the track I keep betting  
on the horses  
with the most beautiful names—  
run, Esperanto Sunday,

run, Thermidorian—  
but the king's old camel  
keeps strutting to the finish.  
Race fixing:

one of his last royal powers.  
The storm clouds barge in  
like upside-down steamers.  
And back at home, someone's stolen

the cardinal directions  
from my weathervane.  
Just the cockerel remains.  
And in my mind I can see

the thief, East and West  
rattling in his jacket pocket,  
North and South  
clutched in his fists,

not caring about the rain  
as he turns down  
an alleyway, free  
as a new century—

Gentlemen, it is a dreary world.

## Thicket

Having listened to *This American Life*  
and finding I have not lived an American life,  
I wander into the thicket looking  
for something to eat. The thicket this time of night  
is forbidden, so only those in a mind like mine  
come here— it's like a singles bar just for melancholics,  
moon-people and comics.  
In the thicket there are berries I know  
and then there are otherberries.  
Outside the thicket my name is Travis Smith  
but here they call me Aubergine, that is  
to say "Eggplant," and I'm fine with that, that is beautiful:  
The moon is a vacuum tube  
that will zip down on us, soon.

## Island of Living Clocks

Short on water and food, we anchored off the next island we saw. Once on land, we were attacked by a race of savage clocks, twelve feet tall, with twelve black eyes arranged in a circle around their bone-white faces. Their arms were sharp and shaped like arrows, with the right arm twice as long as the left. They moved towards us with surprising speed on legs that were more like gears.

We found that, each time a clock landed a blow, you did not bleed but grew older, the severity of the change proportional to the force of the blow. I escaped with only a scratch, a few gray hairs. But some saw their hands grow arthritic, some saw their teeth fall out, and others became rheumatic, deaf, entirely wizened, curled on the ground, too tired to move.

Soon we discovered that the clocks could not easily turn around and face something behind them, so the still-young among us were able to sneak around and shove branches into their gearwork (which was entirely exposed from this vantage), arresting their motion and killing them. So the battle with the clocks ended in slaughter. We took what water and food we could, gathered the most wounded among us, and went back to the ship.

## The Compass-Plant

Do you know how compasses are made my uncle said    and I said no  
    there is a compass-plant       that grows in distant gardens he said  
it looks like the artichokes you've seen me clean    but grey like a magnet  
    you cut off the tough pointed leaves    and scoop out the bristly hairs  
until you have just the tender heart       the heart that knows true north  
    and you slice it into needles he said    and I believed him  
I was five    bad men want the compass plant he said    mariners  
    want it for guiding their murderships    mortarmen want it  
for aiming their mortars       so I am leaving he said  
    to find the compass-gardens and burn them       and I never saw him again

How to alter your face so not so much as your friends shall know you

— *Natural Magic*, Giambattista Della Porta

Among my gifts to you:  
the book of Renaissance magic, bound in green.  
It seems you weren't delighted

by its instructions for making eels:  
mix mud and wood and grass,  
let them sit in the rain. You weren't delighted

by the accounts of madmen cured by harps,  
or the scraggly, buck-toothed *leontophonon*,  
the one creature poisonous to lions.

You skipped the wondrous properties of lodestone.  
Instead, you boiled mashed sumac  
and walnuts, used that to dye your red hair black.

You smeared your face with a paste  
of bee stingers and wasp stingers,  
went incognito under welts. Who knew

you'd miss the chapter on causing pleasant dreams,  
that you'd skip the cure for melancholy?  
Who knew you'd find the chapter on how to disappear?

## Eyjafjallajökull

I.

While we were talking about the ash-cloud,  
a black ant  
made a filigree pattern on the floor.

The rest of the conversation is censored:  
little black rectangles  
cover our eyes and mouths.

How friendly is the ash-cloud?  
Will it reach the market?  
Will it coat the strawberries and kale?

Nature has a plan for all of us.  
You will succumb to the vapors.  
My plan involves gillyvors;

and the ant, if you've watched closely,  
has spelled out  
HELP ME on the floor.



## II.

I've got a personal ash-cloud,  
but the whole world is implicated in it.

I whisper part of its name in your ear,  
like an anagram of a word that wasn't a word to begin with.

Yet the whole word takes a lifetime to say:  
every word I say in my life is part of it.

I tell you how the closed captioning, set to Spanish,  
translated a phrase as "un gigante skwolfment": that is the ash-cloud.

I say the word "skulls" in my sleep? That too is the ash-cloud. I call you  
at midnight? Ash-cloud. I whistle "Dixie"? Ash-cloud, ash-cloud, ash-cloud!

(That night the weatherman says "pumulous," laughs,  
tries to correct himself, can't find the right word, moves on with the forecast.)

III.

Presuming I'm not in the ash-cloud,  
presuming my mouth isn't stuffed with ash,  
I'm free to walk along the esplanade,

where irrational thought balloons  
of cotton candy bob over the vendors' heads  
and a busker plays *Lonesome Day Blues*.

I'm sampling all the fortune tellers.  
I'm free to wander under the umbrellas,  
free to stop at the puppet show, to watch

as the Devil, for once, triumphs over Punch—  
presuming I'm not in the ash-cloud.  
Presuming I'm not made of ash.

## Portrait of a Dandy

The one thing I hate about my birdcage hat:  
wild birds keep attacking it,  
and in the ruckus the caged birds get free.  
You'd think I'd hate the notoriety  
but I love the notoriety.  
It is not the notoriety of that man  
who walks his tapir on a leash,  
that ostentatious, silly man.  
It is not the notoriety  
of the talking brass head at the center of town.  
When I tip my hat to you,  
I tilt a gilt world on its axis.  
When I ask, May I come in?  
I speak for many.

## Generalissimo

He welcomes me to his war room  
his war map's  
thumbtacks arranged  
in an infinity symbol

They will be defenseless  
against this formation he says  
and begins to list  
his many enemies

Warren Harding he says  
defenseless  
Galileo defenseless

There is something civil in his madness  
like a quiet town  
after a witch burning

Let's play a game of poker  
to the death he says  
and deals me a hand full of jokers

## On Azimuth Avenue

I walk past the corner  
where the man selling telescopes  
yells at the microscope man,  
scaring off the customers,

where the blonde-wigged girl  
rakes it in with her crate  
of plastic Easter eggs  
marked MYSTERY, \$2.50;

and I haven't yet gotten used to  
living in this city,  
in my bungalow  
where the mail still comes

for the previous tenant. Roderigo,  
I leave your bills unpaid.  
I read the letters  
from your creditors and lovers.

Why did you leave here?  
Why did I come?  
The city with the only  
black lighthouse in the world,

home to the largest known  
sculpture of a tear-drop!  
The capital of No  
Explanation, the start

and end-point  
of our drifting, where the kids  
row out most nights  
to get drunk on a junk-strewn

island they call Paradise.

## II. ZODIAC B

## PREFACE

Today, the constellations number 88, fixed in place by a council of astronomers in 1922. Centuries ago, though, the shapes in the sky were constantly being named and renamed. As the telescope made fainter stars visible, the star-mappers of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries set down a glut of new constellations in their illustrated charts. Some saw inventions in the heavens: the electrostatic generator, the hot air balloon, the printing press. Others saw a cat, a reindeer, a seahorse. These oddities never gained popular acceptance. What follows is a zodiac of the obsolete, the disused, those constellations not recognized in the official 88— the zodiac that might have been.

## ARGO, the SHIP

The stars that are now called The Keel, The Stern, and The Sails once formed this greater ship. Once, you thought you were one body— but your arm flew out and struck your friend, and your feet walked you, unwilling, to the house where you once lived and were happy. You, Ship-in-the-Sky, are you a life-ship or dream-ship? Speak, oracular prow! But the timbers creak no answer. Fear the Lesser Triangle.



## TRIANGULUM MINUS, the LESSER TRIANGLE

You take strength from your smallness. Look at a giant fern closely: see how it's made of smaller ferns, which in turn are made of smaller ferns, and smaller—closer— smaller. The largest river is prefigured in the dripped shower-water on the bathroom floor, the Lesser Triangle knows all others. Nothing to trouble you; you're in the sway of its calm geometry. Rest on the broad back of The Cat.

## FELIS, the CAT

You are like a drawing of a cat done from memory by someone who'd seen more rats than cats. Over time, given the warm inertia of home, given the flickering TV set of your mind, your memories can become more of yourself than you. Or have they already? A whiff of manchego sends you into an hours-long reverie: That year you worked at the dairy, and then there was the spur-of-the-moment trip to Spain—but your wanderlust days are over. Here is your grid to lounge in, 3x2. Here the Hot Air Balloon holds no allure.

## GLOBUS AEROSTATICUS, the HOT AIR BALLOON

Or, literally translated: “Sphere that stays in the air.” You thrive on the fantastic. You drove all day to see the hot air balloons with your father— just over the ridge, there they were, beings of benevolence and wonder. But they did not stay. Decorated with suns and kings and animals (is that a golden Reindeer near the top?) they rose past the realm of fire, past the sublunary world, into the fixed stars.

## RANGIFER, the REINDEER

Notice the rack on the reindeer's head, suggesting priapic abundance. Notice the one black eye, which seems not to see the buzz of stars and symbols like flies at its fur. This is the Zodiac poem about the imperturbability of the need to fuck: You who are governed by Rangifer, you are as blunt as I am, writing this. Rutting puts you in a rut. Look outside the radial lines of want that bisect you like so much insensate meat. The stars of Northern Fly will guide you.

## MUSCA BOREALIS, the NORTHERN FLY

Once these three stars were called The Bee. Then the Wasp, then The Northern Fly, then nothing. Your list of problems takes up pages (the first is that you made a list of your problems) but there is one in the pit of you that you cannot name. It makes you thud your head against the window. It makes you leave the lights on at night. If only there were more of you— you could cover the problem entirely, give it shape like a black sail gives black shape to wind. If only there were a Spider to catch you and keep you still.

## ARANEA. the SPIDER

When people say that you seem so “stable,” you know what they really mean. They mean “boring.” You wish you could be more spontaneous, but you love your routines. You love cooking your eggs the exact right way; you love your thrice-weekly jogs, your Saturday matinee. What happens when your web of habits gets blown away, Aranea? What happens when all you have left is you? Study the Earthworm well.

## LUMBRICUS, the EARTHWORM

Lumbricus and Gemini: the twin on the right regards it with affection, the other seems to look away in disgust. People don't know how to feel about you— you who take so much pleasure in simply being you. You crawl through the world with ease. What would be a mortal wound to others, for you is an opportunity to wriggle into a new self. Be careful not to let this self-reliance turn to self-satisfaction, Lumbricus. You may expose yourself to the Turtle's jaws.

## TESTUDO, the TURTLE

The Turtle looks up, but only so much. You notice details others miss: the cracks in the sidewalk, the small but precious coins trampled underfoot. How many of us keep our bellies so close to the ground? How many of us do this much with such horizontality? Your thoroughness will take you far— but there are striped lines beyond which you cannot climb. You risk being overtaken by the Toad.



## BUFO, the TOAD

Dear Bufo: We see you here, I think, at your best. In other moments, you could be accused of indecision, squatting, as it were, on the same lily pad for hours or days, belling out your deliberations for all to hear. Should I? Shouldn't I? Should I? But once you've made up your mind, Bufo, your execution is admirable. You leap from one quadrant of the sky to the next, too quick for any cartographer to ink you in. Yet beware the swift-diving Owl.

## NOCTUA, the OWL

An owl bathing in a puddle: a watery owl. An owl in the branches lit by the fire: a fiery owl. An owl flying: an owl of air. An owl diving to catch a Toad: an earth owl. You can adapt to most anything, yet you ally yourself with nothing— perching on the tail of a snake one minute, then flapping and coming to light on top of the Sundial. A government of one, you are ungovernable; an anarch supreme, you're tyrant, too. You'll make fast friends with the Seahorse.

## HIPPOCAMPUS, the SEAHORSE

So many mistake eccentricity for monstrosity. Chameleon-style, the seahorse's eyes swivel independently. Its monkey tail grips stalks of sea-grass. The male seahorse is the one who gives birth. You do nothing in the conventional way, and for you it comes easy. Those of lesser imagination will hate you for this, Seahorse: here you're pictured horizontal, you who, in nature, swim upright. There are those who would skewer you with striped skewers. Avoid them. Seek out that other oddball, the Electricity Generator.

## MACHINA ELECTRICA, the ELECTRICITY GENERATOR

You know that the charge goes into the jar through the brass knobs, the charge which is made from the spinning glass discs, the discs which are spun by the crank, but the crank, who turns that? Who set your brain ecstatic spinning? Whoever it was made you dangerous. Erratic hands, high-voltage heart: All of you happens at once. Yet sometimes, in the next room, you take comfort from the steadiness of the Printing Press: the *chunk chunk* of nothing spoken or thought.

## OFFICINA TYPOGRAPHICA, the PRINTING PRESS

The noise from the other room jars you. Procedure is your panacea: You feel an Old Testament thrill in the moment before the paper closes down on the type. Everything is in order: Each block of type held fast in its proper cell. Each letter sticky with ink. You tighten the page on the rows of text, then reveal them, pressed finished and fresh. It is a little like Genesis, a little like death— a complex joy, though you suspect it could be greater if shared. You want to feel another's hand while you press down the print. Perhaps the Pangolin will join you.

## MANIS, the PANGOLIN

No wonder you have those scales, Pangolin. Everyone wants a piece of you. Here, you're set upon by Lacerta (Lacerta meaning "Lizard," though this cartographer drew a dog). To many, your flesh is a delicacy. And anyone so armored becomes a prize. "Sting-proof," "serge-clad," "strong-shod" (or so says Moore), you long to leave your coat of mail behind. To stand aloof and bare, like the Sundial.

## SOLARIUM, the SUNDIAL

You often think about the day when all the watch batteries are dead, when the cell phone towers stop broadcasting, when the atomic clocks crack. When that day arrives, the shadow of a stick in the ground will still tell the time. You thrive on this pride— the pride of the disused, the pride of the sundial, its gnomon like a middle finger to the wayward world. Your day will come. The forgotten Ship waits for you in the harbor.

III.



There was Mr. Abrams the shoeblack seller

constantly mauled by his dancing bear.

The bear was named Cato and as part of the act

Cato would do a shuffle on the corner

while Mr. Abrams played the hurdy-gurdy and sang

how his blacking was the blackest you could buy, which it was,

and then Cato would wheel around and swipe him with his massive paw

and resume shuffling and when Mr. Abrams woke up

you would buy some shoeblack.

That went on for months.

And one day Cato gave him a really good one in the head

and from then on Mr. Abrams

would lift up his shabby bowler hat to reveal

the silver-dollar-sized hole in his skull

where the brain showed through.

It didn't seem to bother him.

Everyone thought his song was getting better.

## House of the Irrelevant President

When I'm having an off day, I like to walk  
to that nonagonal house up the hill,

spiky with lightning rods, barricaded by gardens,  
to listen again to the tour guide's speech:

how the President designed each room  
as the true expression of one of his many ideals,

how the windowless Periscope Wing  
represents the value of paranoia,

how the Gallery of Pendulums  
honors his belief in vacillation,

though chief among his ideals  
was the principle of refraction—

welcome to the Prism Room!  
A fusillade of rainbows riddles my eyes.

## A General Gloom Pervades This Community

the frogs start up with their *brekekekex*  
the planes scrawl their obscene messages in the sky  
the clocks ring the hare-brained hour  
and this gloom is no hors d'oeuvre gloom this gloom  
is a ballpark hotdog this is gloom with coleslaw  
and chili and abundant relish  
this is a gloom you've to get all over your face

\*

my friends it is said that Democritus  
sat under an apple tree one afternoon  
dissecting animals to find out the source of gloom—  
whether in the glands in the throat  
or the dark jelly of the brain—  
and it was under the shadow of that apple tree my friends  
that this community was founded

\*

dry hot nights we find the weakest watertower  
one with spindly legs a tottering one  
we come with ropes and empty jugs  
we ring it round we make it groan and creak  
and we haul it down  
and it spills its gloom  
and the frogs start up with their *brekekekex*

## Hircocervus

A field of chive and crocus.

A field where anything I say occurs.

In that field, a hircocervus  
grazes in the chive and crocus.

Half-goat. Half-stag. I make it occur.

I make the chive. I make the crocus.

I make the wondrous hircocervus.

But this making is a curse,

because all I can think of is the crocus—  
the crocus, the chive, and the hircocervus.

I can't make anything else occur.

This is the curse. There is no cure.

## Island of the Mirror People

The water began to turn a silvery color, and at length we came in view of a glittering beachhead, as if many mirrors reflecting the sun in our direction were placed on it. Drawing closer, we saw that the mirrors were people.

Once we landed, the mirror people approached us, waving so that that the reflected light flashed in what seemed to be a friendly manner. They had no means to speak, no eyes, or mouths, or features of any kind. The only way to distinguish them was by the objects they held, each unique: a piece of sea glass, a seagull's skull, or a musket-ball, perhaps.

In the course of a few hours, after becoming used to their flashing speech, we understood that no mirror person had an identity separate from his totem object, and if it were destroyed or lost, he would become despondent and harden into something like obsidian. As a result of this you see many darkened forms scattered about the island in various poses of despair.

That night the mirror people fed us handsomely, pouring us cup after cup of quicksilver and serving dishes of silver pears. Held by some vague unease, I sat apart from the group by the fire. There, I noticed that some of the crew found themselves gazing more and more often into the mirror person next to them, enchanted by the reflection of their sunburned faces in the smooth, featureless visages.

It was then that I saw one mirror man set aside his totem object and place his hand on top of the head of the crewman beside him, whereupon his eyes silvered over and his mouth went slack. I saw that we were all in danger: they were as enchanted with us as we were with them, and intended to make us their new totems. Taking a piece of sea wood next to me and lighting it in the fire, I was able to blind the mirrorpeople with smoke long enough to gather the crewmen who hadn't been enslaved. We returned to the ship in darkness, leaving behind the ones with silver in their eyes.

## Still Life with Quince and Fly

The painter of great still lifes  
now likes to comb donkey's tails  
and pluck the dead hairs out with his teeth,  
even though he has a perfectly good pair of tweezers.  
We can't criticize him for that. Give him  
some pity— he is a sad man  
who was too good at doing what he loved.  
When he painted a fly perched on a quince,  
someone ripped through the canvas, trying to swat it.  
A starving boy stole his painting  
of a lambshank,  
so next he painted a rotting lambshank, thinking  
no one would steal that,  
but public health got called for the stink.  
And the portrait of his friend's dead wife,  
which he warned him about, saying  
I'm not sure you want me to do that—  
he shouldn't have done it.  
Now he puts a pot of water boiling  
and watches it until it's nothing.  
Now he paints apple seeds to look exactly like tears,  
then plants them.

## Un-Words, or Moon-Dust

I like the un-words on the Scrabble rack better than the real words  
shall I repeat some of them    zaganu teelix nerk and roynsta  
shall I continue alzord and badaki    they are like dark matter which I  
hear so much about in the news    every time they have discovered more  
of it    the un-words outnumber all the real words in all real languages  
by a margin impossible to understand    when I was seven my  
grandmother taught me about the humors which are phlegm blood  
yellow bile and black bile    I learned how dryness and heat make fire  
how heat and moisture make air    and when I asked what lightning is  
I learned it is wind forced from clouds so fast it catches fire  
like orange-pips I shoot by squeezing them with my fingers  
and as for earthquakes they are winds trapped under the earth that violently escape  
I think about the un-words if they are trapped like wind    and what will happen  
if they burst loose all at once    snordic lusp and grooto and aemeyr  
my grandmother was a strange and noble woman  
she called me 'gros-tête'    which I later learned is broken French for 'big-head'  
she kept twelve jars of white ash on the mantelpiece  
she called them her 'moon dust'    the clock was behind them  
and I thought that each jar embodied an hour    I thought about stealing one  
or breaking one but never did    and what the ashes were from  
or why she put them there or who took them when she died I still do not know

## Tornado Event

The organizers start by making fists, spreading arms wide & spinning like crazy & crashing into the participants, who then have to spin until everyone is spinning.

When everyone stops, the participants get on Twitter & say that they have narrowly escaped a tornado. When people respond to the tweets, or call the participants in a panic, they are invited to the event & must once again start the spinning.

The participants refer to everything in terms of tornados. When someone joins the event, they say, “Looks like another tornado just touched down.” When someone leaves the event, the remaining people say, “Now we have to deal with the aftermath.” If they leave behind their keys or something, everyone says “The tornado strewed debris.” Everyone rates their feelings on the Fujita scale, like “I’m F5 hungry for a hamburger” or “I’m F3 embarrassed about what I said last night when I was drunk.”

Everyone feels dangerous. Everyone feels like they’re connected to the ground & the sky at the same time. Everyone makes train noises.

When the participants get so dizzy from spinning that they can’t stand up any more, they collapse in a pile on the ground. No one makes train noises. They can feel the rise & fall of each other’s breath & the warmth from each other’s limbs. They know that to be human is to be a tornado. The organizers declare the event over. Everyone goes away and feels lonely for a while.



#### IV. ELBOW ISLAND

Elbow Island

“Human kind cannot bear  
very much”— but of what  
we may disagree. If, as Barnum says, “in this  
wide-awake country there are more persons  
humbugged by believing

too little than too much,”  
then the birch-bark buckets tacked up  
to the trees to catch sap in the “frightfully filthy”  
Isle aux Coudres would be enough to hold  
our belief, or lack

thereof. Barnum went there, in 1861,  
first by train to Quebec, then  
ninety miles by the Grand Trunk Railroad to the mouth  
of the St. Lawrence, where the Elbow  
Islanders, “whose gibberish

was almost as untranslatable  
as it was unbearable,”  
agreed to catch two live white whales for him, which would be  
put in sea-weed-lined and salt-water-filled  
boxes and transported

to the dank basement  
of his American Museum.

\*

I've seen, in a movie,  
how the Elbow Islanders  
do it. Within sight of the island, the belugas  
in their pods send off eruptions of spray—  
Pliny, apparently,

never looked at them  
very closely: "Whales' mouths are  
in their foreheads," he says in the *Natural History*—  
and, since they have no dorsal fins, telltale  
signatures of sharks,

their turnings in the water  
look like the turnings of slick  
white wheels, tens of muscle-ridged slick white wheels turning  
in the porpoise-gray water. It's not hard  
to spot them. The island men

have cut down, stripped and hewn  
many birch saplings into  
stakes, which they thrust down into the water to make  
a "kraal," shaped like a V, with the narrow end  
pointed toward the shore.

When the whales swim into  
the wide end, which, on Barnum's  
trip, takes them days to do, they're wary at first,  
clustering always just outside the kraal  
until two of them decide

that it's safe, at which point  
men in boats close off the wide  
end, singing and slapping the water with their  
paddles, trapping the whales there until the tide  
goes down and beaches them

and all that's left is for  
"the slip-noose of stout rope"  
over their tails, and for several men to drag them  
into the sea-weed-lined boxes, and the men,  
in the movie, to slap

the thrashing slick white hide  
as if to prove to themselves  
that they'd really caught it, saying, "Hey, old man,  
you got caught, my friend! What brings you here?"

\*

The illustrator who  
drew the scene for Barnum's book  
*Struggles and Triumphs*, like Pliny, apparently,  
also didn't see them "Catching White Whales,"  
because the whales he draws,

though white, have black  
dorsal fins, which belugas lack,  
and black flippers, and, it seems, gills, and large triangular  
eyes, quite different from the true beluga's  
puckered pinhole eyes—

and the broad, scowling mouth  
and overall pointed-  
pumpkinseed shape you would not recognize if you'd seen  
white whales in an aquarium, with their  
upturned, beaky, slightly

porcine, slightly over-  
biting mouths, and their "melons,"  
the fatty convexity of the forehead, good  
for picking up each other's echoed words,  
the almost torpedic

submarine and fusi-  
form fluodynamic  
economy of their slick white lengths, porpoise-  
purposeful— but the aquarium you'd  
have seen them in, the kind

with water that doesn't kill,  
is not the kind that Barnum brings them to.

\*

“After months of unwearied labor, and spending

NEARLY TEN THOUSAND DOLLARS  
NEARLY TEN THOUSAND DOLLARS  
NEARLY TEN THOUSAND DOLLARS

in capturing and transporting them from that part of the Gulf of St. Lawrence nearest  
Labrador, the Manager is enabled to offer his visitors

TWO LIVING WHALES  
TWO LIVING WHALES,  
TWO LIVING WHALES,  
TWO LIVING WHALES,

a male and a female. Everybody has heard of WHALES  
IN NURSERY TALES and ‘SAILOR’S YARNS,’  
IN NURSERY TALES and ‘SAILOR’S YARNS,’

everybody has read of WHALES in story, song, and history, and everybody

WANTS TO SEE A WHALE,  
WANTS TO SEE A WHALE,  
WANTS TO SEE A WHALE,  
WANTS TO SEE A WHALE.”

\*

And it seems that Barnum  
got even the name of  
the belugas' island wrong, as I see later in the movie  
about Isle aux Coudres, when an old man reads  
in Old French the account

of Jacques Cartier:  
“On the sixth day of the month,  
with a fair wind, we made our way upstream  
for about fifteen leagues, and landed on an island  
off the north shore, about

three leagues long and two leagues  
wide. The land is good and fertile,  
full of big beautiful hazelnut trees that we found  
heavily laden with hazelnuts, and  
for that reason, we named it

‘Isle aux Coudres’ ” — which sounded,  
to Barnum or one of his men,  
like *coude*, “elbow.”

\*

Barnum said of his  
second pair of whales that “their  
sudden and immense popularity was too  
much for them”— this, after that first pair died  
a few days after arrival,

“but not before thousands  
of people had seen them”— after  
the original brick and cement tank was replaced  
with a tank “of slate and French glass plates,  
one inch thick, imported

expressly for the purpose,”  
and salt water pumped from  
New York bay through a system of iron pipes.

“Thus was my first whaling expedition  
a great success, though I

did not know how to feed  
or take care of the monsters.”

\*



For Barnum, it seems, belief  
was as capacious as that tank  
that whale after whale died in— “landsman that I  
was, I believed that I was quite as competent  
as a St. Lawrence fisherman

to superintend white whales”—  
but there were some who were  
so skeptical of Barnum that they thought  
his whales were just porpoises painted white,  
and since the whales were scared,

probably, of the gas-lamps  
installed to light their tanks,  
scared of the hundreds of blurry, huddled  
faces that pressed up the glass daily,  
tapping it, fogging it,

they rarely performed  
like Barnum wanted them to,  
always off “in some unlooked-for quarter of the  
huge tank,” vexing Barnum with their “persis-  
tent stubbornness in not

calmly floating on the surface  
for the gratification  
of my visitors.” In one case, even, a woman  
from Connecticut, “Mrs. H,” sees the whales  
and congratulates him

on “ ‘what a number of purposes  
the ingenuity of  
us Yankees has applied India rubber,’ ”  
meaning she thinks the whales aren’t even alive,  
but steam-powered machines,

and you can see how she thinks that,  
never having seen a whale  
before, if you’ve seen a picture of rubber tapped  
from a rubber tree— and it’s in this story  
where it becomes difficult

to separate notions  
of the capacity to  
appreciate wonder, and the capacity  
to understand what is real and what is not—  
because surely, as Barnum

suggests, we humbug  
ourselves by believing  
too little, we trick ourselves by letting in  
too little awe. But what if the awe leads  
to horror, to the whales,

so-called “sea-monsters,”  
dying in the filthy water?

\*

And when the fire comes, in 1865,  
when the defective furnace  
under the office of Barnum's American Museum  
sparks and spreads to all five stories,  
no one is asking if

the whales are real any more,  
because, along with everything  
else — the cage of live boa constrictors,  
the stuffed dromedaries and kangaroos,  
the steam engine made

of glass, wax statues melted  
to their wires, the scraps  
of cloth from coats of Revolutionary heroes,  
the dioramas of the Creation  
and the Flood— they burn

with everything else, their tanks  
broken to slow the fire.  
“The leviathan natives of Labrador”— this  
was the fourth pair— “when last seen, were  
floundering in mortal

agony, to the inex-  
pressible delight of  
the unfeeling boys, who demanded a share of  
the blubber.” No one is asking now  
if they are real. They are there in the street now for everyone to see.

V.

## Hangover with Mosaic of a Man Leading a Giraffe

Hard to feel a sense of radical  
connectedness to the universe  
on day one of the hangover. Hard to feel,  
as Carl Sagan said, “made of star-stuff”  
when I wake up in my clothes  
from the night before. But that’s the trouble,  
isn’t it, with being cosmic? The cosmos  
includes the Horsehead Nebula  
and the Magellanic Clouds  
and also box wine and cheap tequila.  
It includes the Sloan Great Wall,  
a string of galaxies one billion light-years long,  
and there’s also me, a blunderbuss  
firing in my forehead. I have never felt  
so small. I have never felt so anti-Sagan.  
And really, which is more cosmic: the Milky Way,  
or a guy doing hair-of-the-dog  
with warm Coors Lite? The trouble  
with being star-stuff, Carl,  
is that I’m not really star-stuff.  
I’ll gladly leave that to the stars.  
I’d much rather be the 5<sup>th</sup> century mosaic  
I once saw in a museum  
of a man holding a giraffe by a leash.  
I’d rather be its mortar  
or its small colored tiles,  
the white and red and chocolate-colored tiles,  
which, you might like to know,  
are called “tesserae.”

## Skype Love Poem

You said I should clean the mold out of my shower.  
I said But I'm trying to grow a tiny slimy mold homunculus  
to be my friend in the shower,  
since you are mostly not here  
and I don't often get to shower with you—  
which, I suppose, was not so much a request for you to clean my shower  
as a guarantee that you would.  
When you leave again, when you're back to being  
a 24-hour drive away again,  
you said, why haven't you written a poem about me?  
I promised I would, but I've been putting it off.  
The problem is, most of the time you are a shifting matrix of pixels  
on a 3x3 patch of screen. Most of the time your image freezes  
when the datastream gets interrupted  
and your voice goes choppy like a robot that's been sprayed with water.  
I can mute you. I can put election news right next to your face  
and read it and you only notice sometimes.  
Do you want to be in my poem? Do you want to be  
less real than that?  
Do you want starfruit to grow from your pupils  
and for me to pluck them?  
Do you want to be compared to a mouldiwarp,  
which was John Clare's word for "mole"?  
Do you want to be imprisoned in a cloud?  
That is what would happen  
if you were in one of my poems.  
I wish I could write a poem that could double you,  
put one of you here and one of you there,  
a poem that could double me. I wish I could write a charm  
to teleport us wherever.  
But the best I can do is stand in the shower  
trying to remember what your body feels like.

Distracted Translation of Hesiod: *Works and Days*

When the artichoke flowers and the grasshopper chirps,  
then the goats are plumpest, the wine is sweetest,  
then my friends and I cool our feet in a tarp-lined  
truck-bed filled with hosewater, which we call  
The Hillbilly Hottub. We gulp beer from an eight-tubed bucket  
called the Octo-Bong and sing “Livin’ on a Prayer.”  
Sirius hangs overhead and I don’t care.  
I tried planting a tree once. It died.  
Instead of gardening, I wonder: what if I built a piano  
only hummingbirds could hear? What kind of music  
would they like? I bet Philip Glass  
and free jazz. I bet not Bon Jovi. I bet,  
if it ever comes down to just me and the land,  
I’ll wish I’d paid more attention to Hesiod:  
What was I supposed to plant when the crane first cries?  
When did he say to winnow my grain?  
Yet even Hesiod loved a party—  
I’m pretty sure he’d write about this one.  
We’ve sucked the crawfish clean,  
we’re singing so badly out of time  
it sounds like a round. Someone lets down the tailgate  
and the water bursts out and we cheer.

## To A Lawn Deer

O my deceiver,  
O my turncoat,  
less a lawn deer  
than a lawn fawn,  
deep in my backyard's  
scrim and bramble—  
it's not an emerald glade,  
not even close to  
an emerald glade—  
but when I first  
saw you there,  
lawn deer, I really did  
have a few awe-filled  
hours when I thought  
you were a real deer,  
just enough of you  
obscured by vine  
and vetch for you  
to trick me,  
and I was amazed how  
still you could be  
for hours on end,  
I didn't want  
to get too close,  
I didn't want to spook you,  
until hours turned to  
an afternoon,  
and forgive me,  
lawn deer, I became  
suspicious of you,  
and I climbed into the bramble  
and saw that your eyes  
were plastic, your ears  
were plastic, your flanks weren't  
soft, but plastic,  
and I wanted to throw you  
on the curb—  
so can you explain to me



why I didn't,  
my lawn deer,  
my legerdemain,  
why I left you  
deep in the bramble  
as if nothing in me had changed?

## Island of Doubles

Fatigued, our numbers severely depleted by the battles with the clocks and the mirror people, and again desperate to find food and fresh water, in the morning we anchored off the next island, which seemed to appear just when our hunger and thirst were at their peak. Grateful for the blessing, we nonetheless came ashore with weapons drawn.

Before we had been on land for long, though, we were greeted by a sight more surprising than anything that had come before: out of a copse of trees walked a group of men equal in number to our own, and dressed in exactly the same manner. More than that, they were us. Each of us was greeted by his double, and seemed to look into his own unshaven and salt-chapped face, to shake his own hand and to have conversation with his own voice. Until now, we had been too shocked by the fact of our own survival to discuss the ordeals of the previous days. Finding no one more sympathetic to our laments than our doubles, we talked until the sun was setting, our hunger and thirst forgotten, and fell asleep.

I awoke sometime in the dead of night. Looking around at the sleeping men, I was unable to tell the originals from the doubles, if we were indeed the originals. Looking at my own double, for whom I had felt such brotherhood hours before, filled me with disgust. I woke the quartermaster and his double (or was it the double and the quartermaster?) and put to them the question of their daughter's name. Both answered the same. Both supplied the same memories of her.

I won't tell how long it took to kill both the quartermasters, and then all the other crew, or relate the identical pleas of each man and his double, the stories they shouted to prove that they were the original, that they should be spared. No detail would make me more credible: I am alone on the ship now, and no else is alive to confirm that what I say is true, or if I am I.

## The Unthinkable Botanical Gardens

Nature is just one  
disaster after another: flowering

quince, then lemon balm, then  
purple ruffled basil. Past the bamboo

grove, past the mammoth  
sunflowers, I wandered

in a controlled manner.  
I didn't want to become

a victim. That's what the giant sign  
on the garden gate said: DON'T BECOME

A VICTIM! SOME OF THE VICTIMS  
MAY ACTUALLY BE SUSPECTS.

I didn't want to become a suspect.  
I didn't want to become a Japanese

apricot or columbine  
or camellia or aster— merely

to observe, from the path,  
their intoxicating exteriors,

all the trellises bugged.  
The reflecting pools monitored.

More signs warned me:  
DO NOT PROPAGATE INVASIVES!

HELP US KEEP OUT EXOTIC WEEDS!  
and I wanted to help, so I kept on checking

the bottoms of my shoes, kept inspecting my bag  
in case seeds of torpedo grass

or chamber bitter had tried  
to sneak in with me.

I wanted to help, but then  
I felt the terraced ferns loom down,

I felt the blooming myrtles stare,  
seeing me for the invasive that I was,

but it was already too late:  
the buds and suckers and spores

were thronging me already,  
in my blood and my breath,

had thronged me from the start,  
and I was naked in the garden,

the unthinkable had happened,  
and every stowaway in me was free.

Thank You Anonymous Sponsor

thank you anonymous sponsor  
    for the alphabet like atoms  
for what you mixed in  
    with the wind today  
this higher-proof this aquavit wind

    I wouldn't be surprised to see  
shavings of light blown off  
    from magnolia leaves like shingles  
to see the e ripped from hello  
    out of a passerby's mouth

anonymous sponsor  
    let wind batter me like light  
let light shift down  
    on the book I'm reading  
the book about the millennium

thank you anonymous sponsor  
for double-sided sight  
as in I thought the letters on the side  
of the shipping container  
spelled UNGLORY

unglorious the grandees unglorious  
the simulacra unglorious the state  
of perpetual smoke detector unglorious UNIGLORY  
I hear a voice saying finish your bowl  
of sorrow-os thank you

for marking distinctly the things  
I should be afraid of for example  
a spider with the shape  
of a wheel on its back  
or was it an eye

anonymous sponsor it's not  
    in the gerrymandered-looking  
plots of sky the branches make  
    that I think I might  
manage to see you

but thank you for the grocery store's  
    neon letters newly  
gone blank thank you  
    for the new store P I L Y W I G  
you put in place of the old

anonymous sponsor you speak  
    by subtraction you wear  
a beekeeper's suit and veil  
    you pluck you zigzag and vamoose  
your m.o. is my planned obsolescence

anonymous sponsor why  
do I sometimes say thanks  
when I'm the one who deserves it  
thanks I say to the woman  
I just opened a door for

last night I dreamed that all  
my lost ones everyone I've lost  
were alive and well on the moon  
on the moon sleeping in craters  
on the moon sipping on dew

on the moon slightly  
silver and distant on the moon  
wearing masks not quite the same  
as they were on earth but they were there  
so who to thank for that my brain or you



## VITA

### EDUCATION

B.A. in English, Minor in Creative Writing 2009  
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill  
Thesis: "The Ballad of Kid Eclipse" Directed by: Alan Shapiro

### TEACHING

University of Mississippi  
Instructor: ENGL 302 Introduction to Creative Writing Workshop, Spring 2013  
ENGL317 Introductory Poetry Workshop, First Summer Session 2011

Duke University  
Teaching Assistant: ENGL 179 The Gospel as Literature, Spring 2010, Professor  
Reynolds Price

### EXPERIENCE AND SERVICE

Poetry Editor, *Yalobusha Review*, Fall 2011- Present  
Assistant Poetry Editor, *Wag's Revue*, Fall 2012-Present  
Reader, Bull City Press Chapbook and First Book Contests, 2010, 2013  
Publicity Intern, UNC Press, Fall 2009  
Editor-in-Chief, *Cellar Door* (UNC-Chapel Hill literary magazine) 2008-2009  
Reader, *Carolina Quarterly*, 2008-2010

### PUBLICATIONS

#### Poems in Anthologies

"Minor Ghost Hotel" "Thicket" *Another and Another: An Anthology from the Grind Daily Writing Series*, Bull City Press 2012

#### Poems in Journals

"Portrait of a Dandy" *Redivider* 10.2  
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"Thank You Anonymous Sponsor" *Parcel* (forthcoming)  
"The Unthinkable Botanical Gardens" *Crazyhorse* Fall 2012  
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“Underneath the Pier,” *storySouth*, Spring 2009

#### Interviews

"Everything Must Have an Edge: An Interview with Lynn Emanuel" *Yalobusha Review*  
17  
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“Thinking in Lines: Wilmer Mills” *Cellar Door* Fall 2008  
“David Roderick on ‘Blue Colonial’” *Cellar Door* Fall 2006

#### Reviews

"Flowers of Ennui: Ennui Prophet by Christopher Kennedy" *Carolina Quarterly* 61.3