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OUT OF CHAOS

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree in

Master of Fine Arts
in
Drama and Communications--Creative Writing

by

Jennifer Nichol Stewart

B.A. Emory & Henry College, 2001

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And finally, this is, now and always, for Catherine Edwards, my one and only Ma-Maw.

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Introduction: Out of Chaos

The poems in this collection represent a variety of poetic techniques and themes. They have been written over a period of years, and consequently represent a chaos of mental, emotional, and poetic preoccupations. These poems are about change and the unchanging, dogma, childhood, patriarchy, place, God, sex, fear, and history in terms often specific to me as a person and author, but that I hope will resonate with readers. There are poems in a traditional free verse form, prose poems, mathematical formulae, and line clusters.

I believe poetry can serve a practical purpose as well as a philosophical or spiritual one. Poems can instruct, provide diversion and intellectual challenge, and entertain. Poems can also lead us to discover truths. It invites us to question the universe or the nature of reality. It leads us to the contemplation of the idea of God and the problems of religion. Poetry can be a springboard for ideas. It can also be aesthetically beautiful, and lead us to better understand the nature of our physical surroundings. Hopefully, at some point within the poems the two subjects or approaches, the practical and the philosophical, find conjunction, or synthesis, rather than flowing along parallel lines.

It is impossible to describe in detail one's own influences, for so many things affect us that we take little heed of at the time. A peculiar look on the face of a person passing on the street may strike a writer's fancy and spawn a series of poems. Or, we might read an article in a newspaper that triggers a memory and that in turn triggers a poem or series of poems. Or we might see a particular combination of words that inspires or haunts for some inexplicable reason. Or then again we might be influenced by what we are used to thinking of as influences: world events, other writers, etc.

Students have the luxury and the curse of being exposed to a wide variety intellectual influences. In particular, I have been fascinated by the mythology of religion and the course of feminist studies over time, as well as the ways in which the two are connected. Ezra Pound, in particular, provides a plethora of ways to examine these elements within his work. Consider the following excerpt from the *Cantos*:

The female is an element
Is a chaos
An octopus
A biological process
(Pound 29/144)

The etymology of the word “chaos”, which Pound would certainly have been familiar with, is Greek, and it means literally “gaping void.” It is hard not to view this “gaping void” in sexual terms, as it seems itself an exaggerated vision or representation of the vagina. Indeed, it is from this void, or chaos, that the first gods and goddesses, such as Gaia and Tartarus were born,. Chaos, then, is that state and source of matter from which the universe, and life itself, are derived. This relation of the female to chaos is the philosophical underpinning to my poetry.

We can also read Pound’s statement against modern chaos theory. Of course, Pound predates chaos theory, for the most part, but would have been familiar with Hegel and the process of dialectics. Hegel saw all of human history and development in light of the dialectical process of thesis meeting antithesis and forming a synthesis,. Similarly, chaos theory deals with order and chaos in quantifiable, mathematical terms. David Steenburg offers a succinct synopsis, in a paper entitled “Chaos at the Marriage of Heaven and Hell”:

The essence of chaos theory is the interpenetration of determinacy and randomness, order and chaos. Order gives rise to chaos, and chaos in turn admits surprising degrees of order. A simple,

orderly, deterministic process can generate complex, unpredictable results. At another level, however, random processes admit remarkable order (Steenburg 449).

Note the similarities between the two theories: thesis (order) meeting antithesis (chaos) dissolving into a new order (synthesis), and so on, ad infinitum. These congruencies make it easy for us to understand how this theory represents a point where scientists and philosophers, perhaps even theologians, can eventually meet. This is true also of certain studies in quantum physics, which are beginning to explain the nature of reality in terms philosophers are quite familiar with. The implications are fascinating, for one can hope that as this kind of discussion continues science and religion, or philosophy, will begin to meet on common ground.

Hutchinson states, “It is the common purpose of the arts to bring order out of chaos, and to make real to the finite imagination of man that which is, in its essence, non-temporal” (706).

Gordon E Slethaug discusses this artistic assimilation of scientific inquiry and understanding, tracing it back to early philosophers, and links it to the Modernist movement of the twentieth century: “Aristotle’s suggestion in *The Poetics* that the function of art is to imitate reality assumes that reality and its mimetic counterparts are easily recognized over time, whether in a script, a picture, or a dramatic production. This principle of mimetic representation was challenged by Modernists who saw themselves as being true to a very different notion of what constitutes “the real” (1). Slethaug also notes that Pound was “One of the first to announce the importance of the technological to modern letters,” and that he was the “chief spokesman for the Modernists, who in *Patria Mia* (1913) not only said that science, technology, and industry were worth incorporating into fiction, but specifically linked the machine to the novel” (2). Further, “The values of modernism, as he and others knew, claimed kinship with those of engineering—functionalism, efficiency, stability, utilitarianism, design, and construction” (Pound, qtd in

Slethaug 2). Slethaug points out that William Carlos Williams also commented on the subject of writing, technology, and reality:

in his 1948 speech entitled “Poetry as a Field of Action” [Williams] maintained that though literature continued to be mimetic, the human conception of reality itself had changed because of recent technological developments...He argued that poetry, if it was to keep pace with discoveries about the mind and advances in human perception, knowledge, and understanding, should reflect this reality based upon the new physics. (2-3).

Slethaug further quotes Williams as he discusses the ‘relativity of the poem’:

How can we accept Einstein’s theory of relativity, affecting our very conception of the heavens about us of which poets write so much, without incorporating its essential fact—the relativity of measurements—into our own category of activity: the poem. Do we think we stand outside the universe? Or that the Church of England does? Relativity applies to everything, like love, if it applies to anything in the world (qtd in Slethaug 3)

The theory of relativity rippled throughout the world, but had a special effect on literature. As Slethaug argues, “the “explosions” in scientific thought generated by Einsteinian relativity and quantum physics demolished the traditional novelistic form: “the modernist novel . . . is, then, the corollary of an exploding universe, of pluralism, of relativism, and of indeterminacy” (James Mellard qtd in Slethaug 4). The same can be said of the Modernist, and certainly the Post-Modernist poem, which take for granted the ability to create an “all-at once apprehension . . . congruent with the visual principle of Einstein’s special theory of relativity, which states that at relativistic speeds an observer can see separated points in space at the same time” (Leonard Shlain qtd in Slethaug 4). This last statement was made in reference to Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake*, though the same may be said of Pound’s *Cantos*, or even the mimetic and minimalist approach of Williams himself. Indeed, Slethaug conjectures that “Experiments with artistic and literary forms— pointillism, cubism, collage, pastiche, fragmentation, disruptive language, and more—these were the techniques that set the stage for the defining moments of the emergence of postmodernism and chaos theory as important artistic, literary, and scientific movements of the ’80s and ’90s” (6).

This experimentation with form and substance is a critical emergence in poetry. Though as we can see it emerges from the scientific discoveries of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it has affected writers in much the same way studies of philosophy, religion, and the nature of humanity have in the past. My poems, at some level, reflect an attempt to absorb this theory as well as being informed by teachings from the different religions of the world. To me, the point is to engage in the discussion, and my poetry is an active pursuit of that process.

Within these poems you will also find instances of personal drama, and a preoccupation with refuting certain aspects of what I consider a stifling childhood growing up in the southern United States. As a child and young adult I encountered bitterly negative attitudes, like rampant racism, sexism, and classism, and mostly from my own family. I have faced sexual molestation and incest, also from my own family. And I have had to reconcile the existence and persistence of these demonic traits with my own family, which was not all bad, and, in any case, was the basis for my early conceptions of reality and belief systems. I have asked the question: “Is it possible to love someone you neither admire nor respect?” I do not know if I have answered it. I do know that the phrasing of the question represents an attempt to redesign my own conception of my life and place in the world, and has also resulted in a new view of what constitutes family in the contemporary world.

I mention this troubled relationship with my nascent region and my family, but there are places besides the South in this collection. These places serve as a means of both orientation and disorientation. I’ve always been fond of saying that each trip abroad has changed my life in significant and lasting ways. My father, when I returned from my first trip abroad, listened to my stories, and laughed, saying that they had a saying about what I was experiencing when he was in the Navy: “Welcome back to the rest of the world.” I recently read a passage about travel

in a novel that struck me as getting at something akin to what my father said, “Going to Europe, someone had written, was about as final as going to heaven. A mystical passage to another life, from which no one returned the same” (Hazzard 37). Similarly, Mary Suzanne Schriber writes in an article in *American Literature* entitled “Edith Wharton and Travel Writing as Self-Discovery” that “In these small dramas within the larger drama of European adventures, the miraculous sacred object is Europe, the sought after cure is the discovery of an identity, of history, in the sense of the past that Europe offers” (264-5). These women seem to be getting at the profundity of the experience and the power a change in location has over individual identity. Historically, Europe was the destination for artists and writers for this reason, though I think the specific location is not important in the contemporary environment, merely the act of traveling to someplace foreign. Indeed, a trip to Europe these days is often disconcerting, because we always embark with expectations, both of the people and places and these are quickly destroyed when we really begin to explore another culture. This is, though, a potentially beautiful experience. It aids in attaining a global understanding, one in which you gain respect for not only the foreign culture, but your own as well, and provides a template of experience for how to approach future relations with other peoples and cultures. As my father intimated, it makes you a small part of a world, and not a citizen of a single nation. This is part of the order I see emerging from the chaos of abandoning all familiarity.

We discover when traveling those things that are true for us everywhere, and those that are not. It is a way of envisioning reality and identity, over and over again, relative to your situation and place, or, as scientists would say, your vantage point. Gregory Clark says of Fredric Van de Water’s nonfiction book [The Family Flivvers to Frisco](#) that:

It is only when Van de Water travels “humbly away” from the certainty and control of identity that is enabled by his familiarity with elements of a home territory that he can recognize in himself a commonality, and, more importantly an interdependency with others whose lives and home places

are very different from his own. That recognition is unavailable to him until he has crossed the boundaries that circumscribe his Manhattan and ventured well into what Dean MacCannell calls the “Empty Meeting Ground” of transient space. There, on the transcontinental road, Van de Water locates himself in a collectivity of people whose commonality lies not in the place they call home but in the project they find themselves sharing – of traveling independently across the same space” (164).

When you change locations you change your preconceived notions about the minutiae of life.

You no longer have any idea of what to expect from the day. You no longer have a good idea of how people will react, or even what the weather will be like. Every expectation you have on waking up at home is called into question, particularly if you are traveling in or to a place where you don't speak or understand the language. Judith Adler reiterates this point in her discussion of “Travel as Performed Art” in *The American Journal of Sociology*, “the traveler whose activity lends itself to conceptual treatment as art is one whose movement serves as a medium for bestowing meaning on the self and the social, natural, and metaphysical realities through which it moves. Performed as an art, travel becomes one means of ‘worldmaking’ and of self-fashioning” (1368). It is basically a way of destroying your individual reality and making a new one, ironically, hopefully in a less self- or culture- centered way.

Call it inciting chaos, or creating antithesis, travel is a vital step in the process towards truth. Schriber points out that this was an aim for Edith Wharton as well, “Her metaphors turn the discovery and assimilation of Europe into a religious imperative” (264). This religious imperative, then, is why Wharton often speaks of the journey, or quest, as an end in and of itself. She even compares it to the Quest for the Holy Grail, the difference being that for her, and for me as well, the holy part is the journey, and not a destination. Also, Schriber's diction is interesting, to me, because it calls to mind the potential outward effects travel can have. Schriber uses “discovery” and “assimilation,” words we cringe when hearing because of their patriarchal and colonial connotations. However, here they are being applied to the very place from which

those colonizers came from, Europe. While I don't think Schriber intended to imply that a kind of reverse colonization was taking place via Wharton, a female working in a field that was still almost explicitly male, I do think she touches on something we could call cross pollination.

Travel increases awareness and understanding not just for the traveler, who hopefully is traveling with some hope of increasing understanding of the world, but also for the residents of the areas that are being traveled to, in this case, Europe.

Both Wharton and myself, however, are visiting places we can trace at least some of our ancestors back to, and this provides a dual level for our understanding, that of our own origins and histories, and that of the culture in the present day. It also provides an opportunity for interaction between different peoples and languages, which results in a new kind of order coalescing from the chaos of contact.

I have found it difficult to put to words that which compels me to write or to discuss "my art" in an impersonal and introductory way. In one sense such a discussion seems entirely too stiff and formal to have merit, and in another sense it is as intimate as walking naked into a crowded room. The more I think about this, however, the more it seems to mirror the process by which I create poems. Sometimes they happen quickly and are put to page exactly as I would have them be. Sometimes, however, they require intense cultivation, or design, even if the design is that there won't be one. For example, in the poem "To the Conqueror Go the Spoils," many of the lines are quotations or pieces of quotations of conversation I overheard during a month long study in Madrid, Spain. As a certain line or phrase struck me I would scribble it in a journal I carried, where I also kept notes from classes and wrote original scraps of poems and story or essay ideas. By the end of the month study I looked back over the notes and jottings, which were in different ink colors and from various times, locations, and states of sobriety, yet a

single line of Pound's Cantos kept running through my head, as I read over the "gibberish" – "It coheres all right / even if my notes do not cohere" (Pound CXVI 55-56). There was something about the way all the disparate elements seemed to blend together that captured me, as it seemed to speak to a larger truth, and I began trying to recreate it, or arrange it, if you will, in some sort of poetic form. They each had the truth of their own moment, or place, and yet they seem disjointed, perhaps having nothing in common but contact with me. I chose the form I did to show a sense of these elements occurring simultaneously; together, and yet also separately. I hope that the poems in this style reflect that there can be order or truth even from seeming chaos, or that the form and content function together to create a moment of that synthesis of the esoteric and mundane.

The process by which I created "To the Conqueror Go the Spoils" is strikingly different from, say, the process by which I created "Mississippi Messiah." This poem was created during a class, and about a story idea I had brewing in my brain after hearing Alannah Miles version of "Black Velvet." It was put on the page much as it is now, and still reflects one of my main poetic techniques, in that it is lyric and energetic, and hopefully evokes a bit of the same energy and rhythm as the song that originally inspired me. Yet another method I have used is to create a poem using lines from different texts. The poem "Ovidentially" reflects this approach, as it is a collection of lines taken from a magazine *Real Simple*, and Ovid's Metamorphoses. This method of creation is fun, for the challenge is to select lines that will ultimately work together, even if it is by starkly contrasting each other. I did not set out to write these poems with a particular theme in mind, yet find that through random searching and my own selection themes do emerge, and often reflect those that I regularly visit even in my works where I create each line. Different

though these approaches might be, they are ways to try and achieve my goal of using the events in my life and thoughts to achieve some sort of understanding.

In many ways I mean the poems in this collection to be an antithesis to certain dogmas. Even the format of some of the poems themselves is challenging. Essentially, however, the poems represent my attempt to synthesize ideas from the chaos of my own life. It is a stab at truth that I hope will have some appeal even to those from different backgrounds and places.

Formulae

Let any instance of place be read as the cultural imprint (y) developed or developing along the stationary elements of location and nature (x).

- a. However, any appearance of the South, or any of its subject matter subsets, should also be indicative of:
 1. the subsets of Baptism and Patriarchy (p)
 2. the author's general upbringing

Let any reference to math (or sometimes logic) = or be read in terms of any or all of the following:

- a. the author's own failings and inabilities
- b. the author's childhood depression
- c. a certain degree of maleness
- d. reality approaching spirituality
- e. vengeance, pride, history, religion, failure, and martyrdom
- f. a practical application and exploration of | truth |, sometimes known as God

Let Patriarchy (p) be read as:

- a. unquantifiable arrogance (a) multiplied by | fear |
- b. or the historical subjugation and disenfranchisement of women and cultures, often by white males, and often by the economically successful class, but not strictly.
- c. Violence, hatred, anger, or other subversive qualities
- d. Negative emotions

Let any appearance of a God be read as:

- a. a human character
- b. the Σ of all Myth
- c. | all beliefs | / | all fears |

Let the subset [Jesus], also known as | A+O | be =

- a. dogma
- b. | maleness | / transmutation of spiritual passivity
- c. see also Baptism
- d. the essence of a radical

Let the Virgin Mary, or any reference to Virginity, = the female / the male patriarchy (p).

Let the essence of | male | and the essence of | female | remain unquantified, however, let the equation | male | + | female | always = ∞ , except when divided by violence, anger, or other variables associated with (p).

Let any monster represent:

- a. the personification of chaos

However, if the monster should be described as female, see also Patriarchy (p)

Let any reference to Baptists, Southern Baptists, or general Baptism represent:

- a. the author's childhood
- b. | dogma |
- c. an obsession with, or refutation of any of the following:
 1. Sex
 2. Sexuality
 3. Sexual Intercourse
 4. Pleasure
 5. Dancing
- d. A reference to such may also indicate any of the following:
 1. asceticism
 2. monasticism
 3. racism
 4. sexism
 5. and specifically the strictures governing women's dress and hairstyle.

Let any unidentified "you" be thought of as any or all of the following:

- a. you yourself
- b. you, in a confessional or non-fiction sense
 1. any previous romantic interest, usually symbolic of philandering or abuse
 2. Jesus (see above)
 3. A general audience
 4. An unknown or unquantifiable subject or object

Let the "I" be representative of:

- a. the author
 1. {the experience of the present moment} raised to the power of {the Σ of all experiences past tense}
- b. the reader
- c. a universal character or protagonist
- d. God/the individual

The Florida of Youth

I come from a land that is over ripe.

Where fish don't have enough silver to go around and so float flaky gray scales instead of flashing, flirty and glittering at the sun.

Where the trees walk on water with knobby knees and long limber legs that stretch down under the water and the mud to? and the animals have teeth so big and sharp they can tear flesh into bits in a bite but are so often overfed they wait for the plenty of prey to swim inside. A suicide brought on by hedonistic delight.

A land that's such an orgy for mosquitoes that perpetually plague the people biting and plastering their black bodies and blood on every white surface they can find, which isn't many, because here even wood sweats into rot in a few short months so that gradually the people and their things withdraw into a climate controlled environment that expands, like a big bang of concrete and barbecue grills.

A land where flowers bloom in thin feathery shapes and neon colors but crinkle and fade within hours of being placed in a vase. Where the sweet smells of velvety creamy gardenias blend with the loamy scent of decaying wet virgin yellow green things.

Where bright birds blend into trees which harbor bounties of sweet acid fruits in oranges and yellows and hide spiders of ridiculous sizes and frightening colors that won't hesitate to suck the blood of a stray lizard, or a toe.

Where the sun hovers tauntingly high and frighteningly hot and the air tastes like salt and metal.

Where you can almost believe the water you dip from the spring out back will keep you young forever – at least if not for the big black smoke stacks spilling acrid blackness against the thin blue of the sky.

Where the manatee, the mother cow, floats lazily in the water, tossing and turning near the spring, the propellers of the speed boat approaching.

I come from a land that is over, ripe.

Una Respuesta de “La Soltera en Misa,” or, The Single Girl Goes Back to Baptist Church, after Lorca

I sleep in church because I can't think of
any better place for it because I'm sick of the droning
the same reason you linger over me and you should know
that your eyes on my bodice or no I'm like as not to give my body
to the mass of bulls who drool holy water in the pews but
if you can think of a way to catch what I rain from my
rosary then I will let you fuck me in the baptismal font if
for no other reason than I am sick of Virginia.

Hymn #146//

I'm tired of going to see religion behind a wrought iron gate/the lord is good isn't he/do you go to church/do you see what I see/is x-ray on the top floor/can I see a cell please/if there's nothing left to do we've got to let her go/if there's nothing left to say we've got to say it/get it over/can I please just leave/can I have some more money some more money please/in the offering plate there's change/pass it on/ there's no such thing /can I have you for dinner tonight please/and thank you for the flowers/I spent the last I had left of my personality here last time/they were lovely the only flowers I've gotten since my grandmother/I knew all about it before it happened/the sacristy's in the basement/the feather fell on the plane that day/she rescued me even from/can I please be cured from the anxiety of being lost or do I have to wait until I am no longer lost/the black Jesus and the black Virgin removed for.... Sake/edited by Franco's Department of Homeland Security/and yes, we all sang hallelujah/because there's power in the blood/inside my body, her blood.

Mississippi Messiah

Mississippi is your home girl
Said the woman whose dark wrinkles
Shivered in the heat
And seemed to ignite a desire
To speak
As she rocked like a pendulum
Back
And forth
In Mississippi.

The woman's breath rattled through the stillness of the house.

Baby's here.
Asleep.
In the kitchen.
In Mississippi.

Mississippi is your home, girl
And that's you there
In the fields, sighing
And that's you there
In the kitchen, cooking
And that's you there
In the bedroom, loving
In Mississippi.

Baby's waking up
To kitchen noise
And Crazy, her Mama
Screaming out the window
In Mississippi.

The old woman continues.

Mississippi's in your blood girl
I know you feel it
Walking down those streets
You see shadows, hear echoes
Of Mississippi.

The house settles
Moans into the ground
As the old woman cracks another nut

And sends it skittering across the floor
That once was wood
And now was like one big white scratch
On the floor of Mississippi.

Mississippi ain't a place girl.
Not like you think.
Ain't no place can haunt you
Like Mississippi can.

Cries slither through the sun dark house.

No, Mississippi's more like a lover
Not your first and not your last
But everyone in between.
You know, the ones who know you better than God.
And darker than god.
Yes. Like Mississippi.

When the baby's cries hushed so did the old woman.

Her face remained impassive, her rocker still
Until she heard the baby sucking away at her mother's breast.
It seemed strange that such small sucking sounds
Could echo,
Resound even,
Through such a large house
And it seemed to me that Baby sucked
Mississippi.

Dry.
Her eyes were dry and dreadful.

Baby knows her home.
Girl don't know her home.
But her home know her.
Knows she come home for a reason.
For a reason she came to Mississippi.

Blank screams and dark dreams fly from the kitchen on hidden wings.

Girl feels them tickle and tap her body
And the old woman knows she feels them
And her face moves toward a smile more garish than a gargoyle's.

She speaks one last time
Softly
Underneath the cacophony from the kitchen
And underneath Baby's cries.

Crazy's gone and done it. Done it right.

Girl you don't know
What it means to be chosen

By Mississippi.

Witch

I want to be a witch. To know secret things passed down from woman to woman through ages upon ages. To remember what it was like to be an honor, you know, pre-priest. To know what it feels like to heal someone's mind, body, and spirit. To have the choice between power for good and power for evil. To have long hair and comb it back and stare into a silver mirror with drops of water on it that I alone make holy. To go to an old tree and wrap my nude body around it so that all the knowledge and peace it possesses flows into me like sap in the spring. To divine the future not in crystal like a movie but in the eye of my mind. To chant spells. To mix herbs and oils into potions. To remember the pain of the pyres. To walk out into what's left of the forests of the earth and know the names of things that look like weeds and wave them under a strange man's nose so that he desires to follow me, to give to me a girl that I can then whisper the names of those plants to in her sleep and teach to cull and cure when she begins to grow breasts and legs that catch men's eyes like glue. To be part of this great chain of being, of this world and its history instead of just any girl who remembers, but doesn't know how, that bat shit doesn't ward off accidents, but if applied in the right measure and under the right moon, can make even a man like a God more potent.

Vacation//

Green fell in every form and was carried off in baskets/ does the Rape of the Sabines mean anything to you?/ going to Europe/ going to heaven/ no one returned the same/ the bull by the horns/ the word quotidian/ duende comes to mind/ sounds that vibrate the chest/ so Don Quijote/ it sells better/ Pamplona in their minds/ take people's faces as values/ from Sunrise Cabin, to sunrise service, to sunset/ the mountains of North Carolina/ I need, deeply.

Cc Preschool

a four year old boy licked the bottom of my shoe. have you ever seen. rest time. wiggles. no mother. what mother could. junk yard. father who can't read. write his own name. can you do it for me. color my cat. a camel with a camera. the boy. asks. can i please hug you. will you be back. joe licked the bottom of my shoe today.

Mother's Little Helper

My mother is an addict. She likes pills. She used to like booze, like her own abusive father, now its just pills. She has pain. Seven times they've sliced her open trying to fix what's wrong with her back, and seven times she's needed more pills after the surgery than before it. My Dad, not my real Dad but the only one I've ever known, divorced her because he blamed everything that's wrong with her on the pills. Even when I was 13 and he put her away for addiction I knew better. Knew that he was hopelessly naïve when he brightly promised that when she came back we'd have a new mommy, the kind who didn't need to take naps all afternoon long every afternoon. But the clouds were only just beginning to roll in.

In His Grip

I swat mosquitoes and crunch cicadas
I am the Amazon of the Sewanee and my stature is not in
Size but in the breath and breadth of my hips
And they sway, they sway, they sway
Like a tree, or a fish, or a day and
I go down
I go down
I go down to the river
Praying all the way
And I walk in water
I breathe in water
I bathe in water
My brittle body fills with water
Like a chalice squeezed tight in God's hands
My hips fracture in his grip and my eyes pop in his grip
And I explode in his grip
And I float sin to the top of the water
And peace is still
At least twice a day.

To the Conqueror go the Spoils//

I am in need of a conquistador/I don't see (write) myself in poems/I know that birds can not be trusted/on the thorns/we're all stuck in black & white pictures/giving each other a Spanish kiss on both cheeks/of my/all language is political/did she say to me francais or French/and did anybody else get bombed today/if I ever have a son I'm going to name him Thad, (pre(insert hyphen)shortened)/joseph was right and there they are angels/a watched door never boils a Thad/she looks how she if she were when she will be old/and does the baby look like her daddy/should we shun shunga in Barcelona/and who will take the ruby from my mouth/into (certain) space we might go but build no longer a space that will any longer than us last/is a Bush in the hand worth two bombs in the other/the Spanish cross and the dirty rotting gold/electric cables through Gothic heads/cobwebs on the altar/Torcello, Torcello, the Gods and the azure air/so we go, we look, we genuflect, we're out, paraphrased by kristie/tourist fingers in holy water/the virgin is closed today/my knees out of practice/do you think they sell conquistadors at the Corte d'Ingles/a corpuscle in the body of a man/the crinklier the better/world without end/can I get an amen/and fuck all men/there's an elephant in the room sipping Starbucks/there's no Giudecca for me in Spain/its all about Audrey Hepburn/about a Doug Bradburd moment/swingin' time/ about going home to tell it with a ruby lodged in my throat//

Revelations

What if the things you never told your parents weren't nearly so significant as the one thing they never told you? Imagine this with me. It is January, named for the God whose head faced two directions. You are in a bathroom, leaning against a very long, pale counter scattered with products and sticky with hairspray. You are facing a toilet, directly in front of you, and a huge dusty bathtub to your right. It is a white bathroom, with a thin gray thread running through the marble tile of the tub and cold, cold floor. Your feet are bare, and the cold seeps through your skin. You don't move, not even to pull the short, sleeveless, faded, thin pink nightgown with blue and green flowers scattered all over it tighter. Imagine that this nightgown was your grandmother's, and that she was the person who loved you best in all the world. Now imagine that you buried her today. Put her in a freakishly freezing Florida ground. And left her there. Can you taste that? Roll it around your mouth. Swallow.

Now picture your mother on the toilet in front of you. Notice the way she's bent double from back pain, head almost to her knees, but don't dwell on it. She's saying, "I just don't want you to be mad at me." You are so curious aren't you? Promise you won't be angry. Make your mother say it out loud.

"Daddy isn't your real father," she says. You are not surprised are you, because you can remember how much you hate the man. Remember it now with the blurred vision of that time he slammed you against the wall. Remember when you were small and he chased you and hit you and scared you so much you threw up a copper penny in the bathtub.

"I was so young...I was at a party, I'd been drinking. I didn't know what was happening until it was too late." Just let her talk. You'll want to stop her. But you mustn't. She goes on, and on "scared to tell your Pa-Paw...kill me or you...wanted me to marry him, tell him who...didn't love him...and he knew..." Turn your head.

Follow the trail of crumbs with me now. This means he's only your half brother. They're not your uncles, not your cousins. Which I suppose means you can now feel better about that crush you had when you were 13, right? But they weren't your grandparents. You have relatives you don't know. You have a father you don't know. A man out there somewhere with a claim on you. A genetic brand. You don't know who you are, or where you came from. Pull the nightgown tighter around you. It's all you have left of unconditional love.

Nanny, At Pickin Time

I sit on a low brown stool across from my great grandmother in the late afternoon Carolina heat underneath the shade of six pine trees, my feet resting on a carpet of brown needles. I am in a daze – my little fingers are working furiously pulling husks and silk from ears of corn and placing them in a pot at Nanny’s feet as she takes an old simple black handled knife and slices off row after row of milky corn kernels into another pot. No matter how fast I work that knife works faster than me.

“This is supposed to be my vacation!” I thought to myself, annoyed. But I keep working because, already at ten, I’ve become labeled as the lazy one in my family because I didn’t know how to shuck corn till now and I didn’t cut my fingers along with my teeth on the nettles in the cotton patch, and it’s a label I despise.

One of the pots fills and Nanny takes it and sets it aside, replaces it with another one she pulls from somewhere, turns her head to the side and spits tobacco juice into the napkin lined Styrofoam cup at her side. I marvel, for the millionth time, that she never confuses the pots and the cup, and that she has such deadly aim. I avoid glancing at the cup though because its gritty black brown stained napkin never fails to turn my stomach.

I blink several times trying to keep the thin vein of sweat out of my eyes.

I shriek suddenly in the heat as my hands pull apart green sheaves to reveal a fat fuzzy brown worm sliming its way along the sweet corn kernels.

Nanny reaches over and spears it with the dull knife and flings it over her shoulder. She says casually, with a wrinkled, confused brow arched in my direction, “Ain’t nothin but a worm. Ain’t ya never seen an old worm before?”

The Ancestors

My professor tells me one warm afternoon in the foothills of the Virginia mountains about an Indian tribe in North Carolina called the Lumbee Indians. Supposedly they are part Cherokee, part African American, part general mestizo. They are not recognized by the Cherokee, or the US government. As he talks, I remember a story my grandmother told me once, about how my great grandfather and grandmother had to move because they had married. Supposedly it was because she was Indian, and this was frowned upon by the surrounding South Carolina/North Carolina society. But later, as I discovered that my great-grandfather had more than a little Cherokee blood himself, the story made no sense. Suddenly, on this warm afternoon in college it did make sense. I imagine telling my uncles, showing them proof, but before I can manage it, my Dad chides my uncle with the discovery over the phone. My uncle Joe says, "Now, the ancestors knew better than that. The ancestors might have diddled them darkies in the field, but they sure didn't bring em home to Momma." When Joe gets drunk, he looks just like a little wild Indian, as the family always says.

Amen Omens in Almond Time

Four great grey herons
Bodies long and slick with
feathers wet with pond were
perched on the fence in the early
morning fog and flood light flare.

I bent knee and begged for mercy
nose to the cool tile floor, finger nails
breaking, scared. These birds and
I were not strangers.

But by noon the hawks had come.
Twelve years had ruled the owl but
then his time was done, without a bye
Your leave ma'am he was gone.

The hawk, he stole a squirrel corpse I
couldn't save from the dog and he
and his mate feasted on it, beaks
like fangs biting and shredding
before me and my unstoppable stare.
I could see my reflection in the yellow
circle sliver of his eye.
He didn't fright away all day.

At sunset I walked close by the waters
edge and took off my jacket to let the
warm resin from the sun sink into me
like sap, and my eyes narrowed the
sky to an almond sized slice of amber.

Reality shifted in my head.
She was quite simply gone.
And she will not be coming back.

Beginning in Asheville//

speaking in infinitives/is new Orleans still there/ravens overhead/no words in common/stretched
like a funnel to some recent point, can't name/she was CzechoSlovakian/I wanted to get on a
horse and ride instead of staying contained in the lyric form/the floating bullet/ music blaring/
dowry seekers need not apply/the men in your family have interesting prefixes/I don't throw
around words like prefixes/I don't really like apples/an old world war II song/ we're from new
Orleans, and jesus, where can we get a drink/more sinned against than sinning/three apples on
the table/is this heaven/its thicker than a southern accent/its etta james most requested song/did
you lose your keys here or there/oh baby, up tempo/on route to Cana/its jazz or blues or
something/that bike will never sell/do you like to mountain/she gave me the book of golden
apples he left when he died

Ovidentially

Sophistication promises well in bed.
And his leg shanks lengthened
She can be softened out with a little sex
Or the liquor

I always like summer
If you'd ever fallen in love your attitude would be different:
At the church picnic
A spear in your hand would look out of place
And be warm.

My sex life runs the entire Mythological gamut.
He was my cousin, blood brother, bond of felicity.
I feel like death whenever I recall
They hewed him, hacked his head off, then watched TV
In which a nice girl would peck at her prissy brother
The party was his garden of Gethsemane.

The Sum of all Fears

This is the beginning. This is a list. This list has no rules. Observe.

Ten Ways of Looking at a Psycho Path*

2. I learned to read when I was three but didn't tell anyone till I was four because I thought four a more appropriate age than three for a child to know how to read.

12. I still can't count. At twelve I was placed in regular math which means I didn't get to take pre-algebra that year so I had to take it the next year in the eighth grade, which means I had to take algebra over the summer before ninth grade International Baccalaureate classes which means I spent every summer taking a math or making up a math until I got to college where I had to take math again and so I didn't take another foreign language and so may not get into a PhD program next year. If x then why.

8. Stop that. You're thinking about sex again aren't you?
I lost the right to have sex when I sat small on his lap arms held tight against my side while he ran his lips over my neck and his free hand across my bare chest. This is not why I will never have sex. It's because I watched it all in the mirror and couldn't even cry.

21. Aw. Twenty-one and never been kissed. So when he dares me to take my clothes off in the back of the car I will but make it clear that nothing will happen until he kisses me. I'm lying of course, because he's helping remove my bra and touching my nipples with his fingers but keeping his full lips far away from mine. After one gasping breath I put my clothes back on.

- 3.5 The only man I ever loved who loved me back died when I was three. Sit with me here on this chair as I stare at blue and white and red flowers draped around the shiny black and silver coffin. Go on. Touch him. You know you want to.

21. Addendum: You've got to try this one. Plow head on into another car and spend months in bed, months grabbing the sides of a steel gray lightweight walker. Punish yourself endlessly because in spite of the pain it has brought him to your side. You will never forgive yourself for this.

18. This is Florida. You can smell it can't you - that wet whet smell. See all the green and the squirming moving things? You have a mosquito on your shoulder. Don't slap it – bad karma, just move around a lot. No, don't do that. They love the smell of your sweat. Just go ahead and let it suck and suck, while you concentrate on the image in your rearview mirror.

24. This plan has a purpose after all, you know. Me in a cage of causal elements.

21. Where shall we go? Ah yes. The gardens at Newnham College in Cambridge, England. We are snaking our way through perfectly trimmed hedges under cover of roses and pretty heather (remember not to touch the thistles) and lilac and lavender for poetic purpose. We have our journal in our hand. We stumble upon an octagonal gazebo, wander around to the side facing the garden wall (for seclusion's sake), take pen in hand. We determine to come here every day, but we are lying. We will spend more time in the pub down the street than in the gazebo with the little brown birds whose names we don't know and the squirrels who feast on tart apples that fall from the other side of the garden wall. Still, we think of that line in that movie about Paris and Paris's bridges and how the character went to one and Found Herself. We think here we have found our self, and must make a note to remember not to leave ourselves here when once we leave.

Conclusion:

If we are more than the sum total of our parts, and I am missing parts, am I simply the sum of me, or am I some sum divided?

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Vita

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