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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

HALLELUJAH SHOES

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Laura Richardson

2010

To: Dean Kenneth Furton
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by Laura Richardson, and entitled Hallelujah Shoes, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

Denise Duhamel

Kimberly Harrison

Campbell McGrath, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 4, 2010

The thesis of Laura Richardson is approved.

Dean Kenneth Furton
College of Arts and Sciences

Interim Dean Kevin O'Shea
University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2010

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

HALLELUJAH SHOES

by

Laura Richardson

Florida International University, 2010

Miami, Florida

Professor Campbell McGrath, Major Professor

HALLELUJAH SHOES is a collection of poems, many grounded in the landscape and vernacular of rural and coastal North Florida, and steeped in a sense of place, loss, and the difficulties and mysteries of the human condition. Written mainly in free verse, the collection also contains poems written in traditional and nontraditional forms: abecedarian, haiku, sonnet, noun, and theatrical play. Section one is dominated by the narrator's relationships with family and culture—their demands, dramas, and allures—and the conflict they create with the narrator's desire for autonomy. Section two focuses on the narrator as she makes her own way in the world, exercising independence yet still subject to the emotional undertow of childhood experiences. Section three locates the narrator in the present, back in Florida after many years away, with knowledge of the transience of life, but taking joy where she can find it.

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I.

ELEGY

There was the land, the seventy-two acres my father bought in 1965, a peninsula jutting into a shallow lake with cypress trees and wild grasses.

At the end my father lived in a house surrounded by kumquats and camellias, and pens for dogs and horses.

In the beginning there was nothing but the dirt road and the long bellow of a bull gator.

Then there were dawns of wild ducks and shotguns, camouflage and breakfast for twenty.

There were midnight walks under a vast moon and a field where fireflies by the thousands shimmered at dusk.

There were white-tailed deer kneeling under the lucent dust of comets falling.

There were nights my brothers poled the kayaks by lamplight on the winter lake, sliding over tangled roots and sleeping fishes, the whole world hibernating.

My memory is like the older abandoned house on the point with the rotting deck and lichen creeping over the roof.

There was the spring I lived there and slept with all the windows open.

There were feet of animals passing in the dark, sighs of owls, sudden chill breezes, thunder and rain pouring hard down the pines.

There was the night the black bear, drunk on rage, crashed through the underbrush trying to reclaim the land.

Then he was gone.

MY FATHER COMES BACK AS A BIRD

You come to me when I'm in the garden,
scalping the mat of ferns from under the river birch.
Scruffy and black, you hunt centipedes and worms
with precise and deadly aim, pulling them
wriggling and helpless from the ground.

You walk right past the cat without looking,
your steps sure and wide. So you were in life
when you brought the cougar home, your arms
wrapped around him in the back of your Lincoln,
while he hissed over the seat at my brother's neck.

You won't look at me when I talk to you,
pointing out a succulent slug or fresh patch of earth.
So you are in my dreams, where always I find you
in some deep wood, the boys gathered round the table
for supper, your eyes sliding past me like I'm sin.

Did you know I prayed for your death,
sounding each shoaling breath?

So it is in my dreams where, slurring from
the stroke, you accuse me. You're alive again
and demanding things I can't give: your land
bought by enemies, your guns fought over
and sold, your children snapped like old bones.

Did you see we brandished torches and knives,
finding them more certain, more substantial than love?

So it was as we wandered through your trees,
building camps and burying your pots and pans.
The claw marks in the bark have welted
into scars, but sometimes I still feel the shiver
of panther screams from across the lake.

O Blackbird, the horizon is filled with burned
branches reaching for the sky. Won't you tell me
to come in the house and not sleep outside
by the old iron fence amongst the graves?

LANDSCAPE WITH MALLARD

I watched him fall,

shot from the underlit sky.

When the dog

brought him back

to the kayak

he was still alive,

a young drake mallard

beating a crooked wing,

perfect feathers askew

and trembling.

The retriever

gratefully delivered him

to my father's waiting hands

and labored into the boat.

Firmly held,

the useless wing stilled.

His eye, a black and desperate

pearl, fixed on me.

He flew in from another age,

cloaked in a hood

of iridescent malachite,

his lined bill carved

from yellowed ivory,

feet fashioned

from coral.

I wondered at the feathers,

each delicately painted,

the coverts flecked

and vermiculated,

the tertials and primaries

gently shaded

from ash to raw umber,

the lapis lazuli secondaries

tipped in the purest white.

My father held him close,

breast against breast,

a skittering,

elegant heart

under a strong hand.

The hand fastened

around the glistening

head and twisted

fast and hard.

The mallard's eyes closed then,

the graceful neck fell.

My father laid him down

with the others,

warm as an infant.

We turned the boat

towards home,

back to the baroque shore.

A flock of ducks

mounted the winter sky—

a Venetian sky,

faded and marbled

as old plaster.

NOCTURNE

After George Oppen

Solitary in the brooding marsh

a great blue heron standing—

that I am here!

His wings

graceful, the long legs

slow walk and the severe bill

spears the unlucky, the slow

The water

runs from the crested head

scattering rainbows over the restless sea

And I am here.

His path

wings towards the clouds, the tallest mast

hangs in the distance

of dusk

The small

exclamations of fishes and crabs

cry out above the disbelieving grasses

and the nodding tides

Here.

EUCHARIST

In the first dusk of the first year of the new Christmas eve
tradition, my father intones the gospel
from black-clad King James, while near me the Christ-candle
drips hot wax onto the aching table.

In the black behind my father's eyes,
there is turpentine cooked in backwoods stills,
there are brawls and road crews, hardscrabble men
who drank hard and died young.

Across town, the first cups of rum-laced eggnog
are poured at a party I will not be attending
in a new dress, and a black-haired boy in a tuxedo
will not play guitar for me in his room.

From the wall, Robert E. Lee looks down. He can't help,
nor Stonewall Jackson, nor all the others mute
under glass, endlessly marching or charging on horseback,
forever surrendering.

The table is set with armaments and white flags.
Stemmed crystal guzzles German wine

while blood and honor seep from the prime rib,

a crusted pyre.

Outside, the land gives way to the wild lake,

the night gives up its breath

to a ghost column of Christmas trees past.

Here, we are all orphans.

LAKE IAMONIA LODGE

And though I was called here,

the books curl their lips at me

and snigger behind my back,

merely pretending

in regimental rows and rows.

Around and around,

bureaus and cabinets

stand about

like encamped generals

after a mutton supper,

belching linen and china

through buttoned vests.

O rough cut heart,

little closet

of weapons and shotgun shells,

you’re a box lined with broad pine,

double-barreled chambers

afire.

AFTER THE FIRE

(GIRL on a rural road, at night, under a canopy of oak trees. Spanish moss drapes across the blacktop. The GIRL is barefoot, and her hair is dirty. An African Grey PARROT is perched on a low-hanging limb.)

PARROT:

(Makes sound of telephone ringing.)

GIRL:

(Looks around, frightened.)

PARROT:

(Whistles.) Bart, Molly!

GIRL:

(Looks around expectantly. No one comes.)

GIRL (to parrot):

I thought you died in the fire.

PARROT:

Fuck!

(Sound of a sliding glass door. A MAN enters carrying a shotgun. He points it at the sky, pivots as if tracking a bird, then lowers it till it is pointing at the ground. He turns to the GIRL.)

MAN (to girl):

Where are you going?

GIRL:

(Doesn't answer.)

MAN:

You're barefoot and your hair is dirty.

PARROT:

(Wolf whistles.)

GIRL:

I couldn't take the furniture.

MAN:

You're breaking the cat's heart.

GIRL:

I move every two months in a cab!

MAN:

By God, I've spent my life in a Ford!

PARROT:

Son-of-a-bitch! (Makes sound of telephone ringing.)

MAN:

It's time!

GIRL:

Yes.

(The GIRL dissolves. The MAN takes his gun and steps out the sliding glass door. He walks down the canopy road, pretending not to look for the GIRL.)

MY MOTHER SAYS "TAHMARAH"

My mother doesn't say tomorrow,

she says "tahmarah*"* as in, "Tahmarah

I'll go to the grocery stower."

Not the store in Crawfordville, Florida

where they stopped on Saturday mornings

when her daddy took her fishing—

the crickets and worms kept

next to the Saltines and Vidalia onions—

when "tahmarah" was fried bream and grits

under the oak trees by the lake,

and peach ice cream after supper.

My mother says, "I'll go to the doctor

and see how my lymphocytic leukemia

is coming along tahmarah.

It's the best cancer you can have—

might be all right for ten years."

"But no," she says, "no" to resting

in dirt under a cold stone.

My mother wants to hiss and burn,

trail her ashes like foam

down the river to St. Mark's.

My mother says, "Don't worry.

You'll find me in a strum of dragonfly angels,

in an Alleluia chorus of frogs.

You'll find me in a steeple of light

against an open grave of sky."

THE DIVORCÉE

looks like Connie Francis

with her brunette bouffant and pin curls.

By day she teaches elementary school.

In the evening she sits on her porch

drinking Jack Daniels and smoking

Pall Malls. She crosses her legs,

rocks her foot idly to the rhythm

in her head. The divorcée's ex-husband

said she was no fun. Now she throws

steak and baked potato dinner parties

where everyone winds up on the living room

floor yelling and singing Hank Williams

while she plays her four string guitar.

She wears lipstick of sunset red, walks

her children through the neighborhood

on Halloween sipping bourbon cocktails,

has petitions drawn up against her.

("She leaves her children unattended

with liquor in the house. And the men!")

The divorcée makes husbands dizzy with her

aura of White Shoulders and Aquanet.

They lean over hedges, in doorways

and dark halls, against kitchen counters,

towards the bruised mouth, so close

you'd think they'd see the faint

spray of freckles across her nose

or the stricken look on her face.

FOUR HAIKU

Tender winter sun,

pink Touch-Me-Not Impatiens,

reluctant grasses.

*

Spider in a web

of eyelashes, proposing—

how the day is long!

*

Reckless summer sky,

fat, black belligerent rain—

abandoned blossoms.

*

Winter portrait: horned

spider wrapping a dead bug,

Mom eating oatmeal.

AUNT MARTHA EXPLAINS IT AT THE CRAB BOIL

Crabs getting restless, can smell the boil.
Get ‘em from behind they don’t see you coming.
How we do it down here is ham hock in the butter beans,
cracklin’ in the corn bread—give it a little flavor.
And it ain’t gumbo without okra. Country ham,
cold grits fried up in some egg, corn pones
with cane syrup makes a good breakfast.

Working $15 an hour at the Mercedes Benz
my husband gets hungry. Women these days
don’t know how to take care of the men.
Girl came around my husband one time,
I took a gun to her house. She didn’t come
round no more. Grew up on a farm wringing
chicken necks when I was ten—I’d a shot her!

Throw them crabs in the pot, they won’t feel
nothing. Won’t seem so mean when you crack
the claw, pull out the sweet meat.
Put some more butter on that corn, baby.
Can’t have too much butter
if you like your corn on the cob.

ARMADILLO HIGHWAY

Armadillo on the road like cracked watermelon.
Baby laying on the seat – nobody on the bus
care to hold him. Lord, sometimes I pray to
die, I get so tired. I been working since I was
eleven. Ain't nobody ever took care of me the way
family ought to. Mama shacked up with near every
grown man in town, left me home to raise Eva.
Heavy load for a girl my age, but I never let on.

I guess it was my insides all bunched up that made me
jump when Jackson came calling, promising to take me to
Kansas City and make me a singer. Ain't much to
look at, but I know I can sing. Never did leave Georgia.
Maybe he never meant to take me. Anyhow, that
night I run off, he took me to his place over in
Old Town and pressed himself up between my legs. I
prayed and cried, but Jackson told me to be
quiet, said he had me picked out to be his girl.
Rutting and grunting, he sound like an old pig.
Sure enough, next thing I know I was having a baby.

Trouble is Jackson don't come home no more. Keep his ugly self down at the bar, then give me chapter and verse like he done wrote the Bible himself, saying a woman supposed to come unto her man. Shoot! Old "X"-signing, whiskey drinking coot! I packed my bags yesterday, grabbed up my baby, and we getting outta this zoo. Hit the road like that poor armadillo, long gone.

O CLOUDS—

with all these people walking,

why turn the backs of your heads

to the ground?

II.

HONEYSUCKLES

No one notices them

draped over the wooden fence

delicately yearning,

trembling at the heavy footsteps of bees,

slender white petals curling open,

surrendering sweetness

to the air.

They are like young ladies in silk dresses

on a lush summer night

under a cool slice of moon,

the air trailing

a hint of perfume,

arms straining

into the mysterious dark,

delirious and dreaming

of wrought iron balconies

and jazz.

THE LOVER

On the road, at seventeen, even June

bugs whirl through the sky like they, too, are stressed—

by remorse, by the bewildering moon.

Highway ahead, like me, blackly obsessed

and dreamy. O tangle of coiling snakes,

with your little fangs full of poison, moot

the evidence, the ring, the wedding cake—

why should it look like every dusty butte

in New Mexico? Like Greta Garbo

in "Torrent, Flesh and the Devil," I played

"The Temptress," "Mata Hari." My hobo

Romeo was the firing squad today.

Tonight every star looks like a rhinestone,

and the desert air smells like cheap cologne.

BOTTLE 151

Combustion engine,

smoky loco-

motive, slippery

blues,

you.

BLUE

On a velvet
banquette,
in a candled
restaurant,
over swordfish
with fried sage
and crème
brûlée,
through two
bottles
of Chablis,
and all of
Miles Davis'
"Kind of Blue"
you kissed me,

and as we left
a waitress
looked hard
into your eyes
and said,
"Come back."

Then you took

my hand

and walked me

into the midnight

STIGMATA

When I think of you,

I remember Valentine's

Day and those killer shoes,

the red suede high heels.

You said, "It looks like rain.

Those shoes will bleed

all over your feet." But you

followed me in your Timberlands

and we walked hand in hand

across the blacktop, broken

glass crunching under our soles.

Under the platinum moon,

you said my hair was a halo

of industrial blonde, my lips

warm and stained as though

I'd just eaten some small prey.

Across the street the junkies

were lined up at the red door,

all veins and appetite. “I love you
even more than that,” you said.

We were walking by an alley
when we saw the man,
crouched and swinging
a wooden bat over his head.

Startled, he looked up at us,
like a soul at the Rapture,
his blackwater eyes
and translucent skin

glowing under the streetlight.
You looked at me that way
sometimes. Then a rat
made a run for it, and the man

was gone. We lost him
to the rat he flattened
into the pavement, splashing
blood on his steel-toed boots.

It started to rain,

and after a moment

of silence we walked

on home, and I had to step

into every puddle.

Upstairs, you took off

my shoes and washed

my red feet. “I told you so,”

you said, kissing my animal

mouth. “You just can’t help

yourself, can you?”

No. Really, I can’t.

THE TATTOO ARTIST

The girl is lying on her back, T-shirt pushed up
under her breasts.
The tattoo artist is draped over her, etching
a peony into the space
between her hips.

His free arm rests on her bare torso,
fingers spread as if
to hold her still.

The artist sits up, glances at the girl,
asks, “Are you okay?”
She nods, and he returns to his work.
It hurts,
the constant piercing,

but she likes the raw pinks and fuchsias,
the concentration on the artist’s face,
the weight of his arm.

When he is finished, the peony is lush
on her welting belly.

To her friends the girl points out the delicacy

of its petals, the colors

that range from blush

to magenta, and how the flower is low-lit

as if with light reflected

from a banked fire.

She doesn't say she imagines she and the artist

are before the fire,

and he is tracing ginger lilies on her neck

or honeysuckle vines

along her inner thighs.

At a restaurant near his shop the artist

wants to talk peonies, but all

the girl can speak

is hummingbirds. At his parlor window

she watches him bending

over another, and the girl remembers,

again,

the way he looked at her,

the feel of his arm.

She wishes

she had an offering,

some perfect crimson or azure blue

she could bring him

in cupped hands. The tattoo artist

lifts his head for a moment,

sees her outside,

then turns to the new girl

to ask,

“Are you all right?”

THE GARGOYLE

I am carved in stone, a homely beast

dreaming Notre Dame, a voyeur

du sacré coeur clinging

to a medieval façade.

Once I was divine and nested in towers

with angels.

We practiced falling for centuries,

spinning light across the Seine.

We got drunk in damp places,

ate roses with warm honey,

traced our lips with thorns.

We have been cast out

of incandescence.

We are dirty and worn.

The saints are speechless,

and even the angels

have lowered their eyes

and hardened.

Papillon Nocturne, we see

you tread alone these streets

of ruined beauty.

We want to bring you into our dark house,

take away your shoes, feel the air stir

as you glide down our aisles

and ambulatories.

Our confessionals are straining

to hear your solemn admissions,

our chapels are yearning

for your kneeling.

We want to see you in jeweled tones,

a holy stain on your face.

We want you to fly

to our vaulted heavens,

find us there, lay luminous wings

around our frozen arms

so we can love again.

SMALL THINGS THAT FLY AT NIGHT

Squish them they ooze light goo,

so Mama taught me to catch them

with two hands, and when we got

our jars full, we took them to my room

and let them go, blinking on

and off over my bed. I didn't know

then about the red to yellow ignition

or the rarity of the chemicals,

the wingless females

glowing in the grass outside,

the urge to blink in rhythm,

one chance to mate before

the light dims and the body fails.

To me they were tiny beacons

I would follow anywhere,

like spotlights or the fiery hearts

that lured me unknowing

into lipstick and short skirts,

slow dances and car seats.

They drew me to microphones

and city streets. They made

promises they couldn't keep.

Like wisps of smoke, they curled

away and faltered under the neon glare,

falling, dying,

each one a small wish.

HOW I KNEW

I see the funerals of my childhood

in black and white,

my little shoes

in a long line of feet shuffling

past an open casket,

but this night is blue and candlelit

with curving glances

and her fingertips just brushing

the inside of your wrist,

and later, you lying beside me,

luminous and faintly smiling

at the empty TV,

and somewhere the small child

looks away.

III.

SOUTH FLORIDA HAIKU

Walking the June beach—

urgent periwinkle tongues

beneath the surface.

*

French cars zoom under

glass towers, plates whispering,

"Je me souviens."

*

Unexpected cold—

no black Chihuahuas allowed,

Hollywood Broadwalk.

*

Grackles at Le Tub

stealing straws and Sweet n' Low—

even the dog laughs.

HAPPINESS

Because my big worries

are the land crabs

and pirate duppies

that scuttle up the walk.

Fishes samba lemon

and violet on the reef,

and when I laugh in my snorkel,

I sound like a baby tug boat.

A blue heron

is practicing tai chi

in the pomegranate sun

while sandpipers play

hysterical tag with the surf.

The mango slice

glides over my tongue

like a silky kiss.

When I lie on the warm blanket,

the palm tree shakes his naked

fronds over my body

and I am his.

CONCRETE BUNNY

My friend Liz has a concrete bunny that sits on a stool in the kitchen
to keep the stove from exploding. And the dog lies watching
the space behind the fridge where ten years ago he saw a mouse.

My psychiatrist is having one of his bad days, I know, because
as we round the corner to his office, he rams his shoulder
into the wall to make the turn. Now he is trying to hand me the drugs—

"These are anti-psychotics, they're good for insomnia if your mind is racing"—
but his hand is jerking wildly, and I wonder if that isn't a sign
I shouldn't take them. I'm not psychotic, though I'm not sure exactly

what that means, but it makes me think of the guy who lived
on the warehouse loading dock across from my apartment
in New York who yelled at me and my neighbors as we left the building:

"Hey! You're getting fat! You're never gonna make any money!"
So maybe being psychotic has something to do with reading minds.
I can't read minds but I do feel the throbbing nebula of thoughts

that follows each of us, and don't we all see the air sometimes?
Still, when have I ever refused free drugs? So I grab the pills
just in case. That night my mind is not racing, just frisky, but I decide

to take the drug anyway, which feels a little scary and wrong,
like I'm fifteen at a party where people are passing out mystery pills.
An hour later, my mind feels like a fainting dog, but my legs are jumpy,

as if all those thoughts have simply moved to a new location where
they're having ecstatic visions of treadmills and elliptical machines.
This make my Chihuahua crawl out from under the covers,

saggy-cheeked and droopy-eared and in no mood for apologies.
And why should I apologize anyway? It must be nice to be a dog
with nothing to obsess about but squirrels and steak. Sometimes

I watch her sleep. She twitches and squeals, and I think
she might be chasing squirrels, but what if
she's having a nightmare? What if it's dark and there's someone

there and she's trying to run and, oh, she can't see his face?
I always wake her. I wonder, am I like a helpful husband
who wakes you before you climax to tell you you're having a bad dream?

I'm afraid I'm like the psychiatrist bludgeoning myself on every
sharp corner, a dreamer pursued by her own ruthless shadow,
a concrete bunny sitting by a stove, who just wants to break out

into a garden with sweet baby carrots and purple cabbages.

POSSUM HOTEL

The possums under my house thump mysteriously

beneath the bathtub, and every night my Chihuahua

flings herself from bed into the gloom

to bark at the shower curtain

until I get up and shut the bathroom door.

Now this summer I'm house-sitting for friends, possum-less,

until one night I hear a familiar bump

and the dog throws herself into the dark,

only there's no door to the bathroom alcove to close

so I pick her up and tell her, "There's nothing there,"

and we go back to bed.

But after hours of whining and leaping and barking,

I finally turn on the light

to show the dog, but there's a possum in the tub!

All I can manage is, "Why?!" to no one in particular

because I'm cranky, and no one is there to see it anyway,

and who do you call at 5:00 a.m.

to get a possum out of your tub?

It doesn't help that the dog is looking at me like, "See?,"

especially since she has literally scared the shit out of it,

and I'm gagging at the thought of cleaning it up.

I figure I should catch the possum, but how?

What if it bites me and I get rabies?

It's scrawny and small, but with its ghastly hair and prehensile tail

it looks like a disease and I don't want to touch it.

So I do the responsible thing and leave the possum in the tub,

close up the bedroom and sleep in another room,

stuffing pillows under the door to keep it from getting out.

I feel kind of bad, though, because I know possums

are nocturnal, but I left the light on to make him

stay in the tub, and maybe that means I'm cruel.

I couldn't read the expression in his eyes—

they were too small and dark—

but I thought there was a kind of sadness in his blinking.

The next morning the possum is gone

and maybe he was pissed because there are pillows on the floor,

books are down off the shelves,

bottles are kicked over on the vanity.

I think to call St. Frances Wildlife Association,

and they promise to come catch the possum,

but when they show up, it's just a girl about 18 years old

in shorts and flip flops with no gloves, no bag,

no handling equipment at all,

and she laughs when I worry about her getting bit.

She finds the possum curled up on a low shelf

and picks him up, holding him like a kitten,

his ratty tail wrapped around her arm.

I feel silly now, but I still can't bear to touch him,

though the girl offers, and he is smiling long rows

of needle teeth, and it seems like he is laughing at me

in a hissy kind of way.

The girl tells me he's at the age when young possums leave home.

When a possum gets too big

for his mother's pouch, he rides on her back.

If he falls off or gets lost, he sneezes

and his mother clicks until she finds him.

Then one night the baby falls off

and she doesn't come back, just leaves him

sneezing all alone in the dark.

And he's on his own.

And now I'm house-sitting again and there's a new possum.

This one has been all over the house, eating apples and crackers

and knocking things down in every room.

I can't bear to stay overnight this time,

but there's a Havahart trap set in the kitchen,

and the next morning when I open the front door I'm praying hard

I've caught him. I'm also thinking

these possums are like recurring nightmares.

Why do they keep coming when I loathe them so much?

In the living room the possum has knocked more books

off the shelves. This time they're from the poetry section,

and as I get closer it almost looks like they've fallen into the shape

of a lotus flower, and each book is a petal.

Two are by my teacher, Barbara Hamby,

and I can't help it, I say out loud, "Whoa."

Now I'm not saying the possum did it on purpose,

but what if he's an accidental Buddha

with some divine syncopation in his feet?

Is the universe trying to tell me something?

Why is everything a metaphor, and do I think too much?

I'm still dreading the possum

when I walk into the kitchen and see the trap doors

are down. Sure enough,

there's my cosmic messenger standing with his head down,

looking at me from one little seed eye.

He's rocking from side to side as a string of drool

slides out of his grinning mouth.

Worse, he's standing in some green liquid funk

that would make a buzzard sick, so maybe one thing

this possum is saying is, "Don't eat me!"

It's barely dawn so I sneak my possum over

to Lafayette Park, far enough away I hope he won't come back.

I'm shaking so much I can't get the trap open

and you'd think the possum would fall into one of those comas,

but this one doesn't, and when finally the doors open

the possum falls out, and after picking himself up

and wincing at the sun he takes off running,

which for a possum is a trot at most,

but this guy is hunched down like somebody's after him

and he's got to leave town fast.

I stand and watch him, feeling sorry—

after all he's just a kid—

as he disappears into the rising light,

leaving nothing but tracks in the dirt

like tiny signs.

ODE

O Gulf of Mexico, give me your

silt and carcasses, a swash line

of rotting seaweed crawling

with flies, tangled mermaid purses,

necklaces of sea pearls, sulfurous

pluff-mud sucking at my feet—

a salt water marsh packed with worms,

snails, green crabs, silversides,

mummichogs, flings of sandpipers

running down the surf line

on hysterical feet, chasing

periwinkles and sand fleas,

feathers ruffling, everything,

everything feeding—

tongues probing, proboscises

sucking, thousands of tiny mouths

chewing, jaws working up and down,

side to side, a wicked kiss from

the ravenous mouth of the sea.

TABLEAU

Florida. July.

Too much rain-

water in the pool.

The oak trees,

the scuppernongs.

Black and white

photographs.

Bulbs burned out

on the Hollywood

mirror. A baby

possum curled up

on the vanity shelf.

Feathers

from a fledgling bird.

A lost son.

A hand gun.

A telephone.

Black belly

of the night.

THE CRAB

The sun is drifting from this beach

where I lie careless on a warm blanket.

A snowy egret stalks the tide line

and fiddler crabs bob and wave

their claws like tiny armed skeletons—

all white bones and black eyes.

I offer a capful of Amstel Light

to a crab who watches me warily

as he scoops the beer into his mouth

with his larger claw, lifts

the cap upright, drains it

and slams it onto the sand.

I raise my bottle in salute

and pour him another.

Buzzed now, I have to lay

my sleepy head down.

The sun droops.

The egret measures

its steps towards us.

The crab is staggering,

straying too far from his burrow,

drunk, not feeling the coming

of the egret, which snatches

him in its beak, throws

its long neck up and swallows.

I lift my bottle to the egret

as it steps into

the vanishing sky.

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