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# Ghost-Jet

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

GHOST-JET

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Alexis Sellas

2011

To: Dean Kenneth Furton  
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by Alexis Sellas, and entitled Ghost-Jet, 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.

---

Campbell McGrath

---

Bruce Harvey

---

Denise Duhamel, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 9, 2011

The thesis of Alexis Sellas is approved.

---

Dean Kenneth Furton  
College of Arts and Sciences

---

Interim Dean Kevin O'Shea  
University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2011

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

GHOST-JET

by

Alexis Sellas

Florida International University, 2011

Miami, Florida

Professor Denise Duhamel, Major Professor

GHOST-JET is a collection of poems rooted in the lyrical tradition, often juxtaposing images of the natural world--the human body, insects, the Florida terrain--against images of surrealism--ethereal spirits, monsters, dreamscapes--in order to create metaphorical leaps of the imagination. In these poems there is the world as we know it and the world on the peripheral--zombies and babies turning into crocodiles, portraying the anxieties of the contemporary world we face as parents, children, and citizens. Written primarily in free verse, the collection also contains more traditional forms: pantoum, sestina, and haiku. There are no section breaks in this collection. Instead, the poems alternate between the personal and the political; between the particular fears of parenting and the more abstract fears in a new, post-September 11th America; between the violence perpetuated by family members and violence committed by the unknown, faceless aggressors in the world around us.

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## THE HISTORY OF WOMEN

We begin with bald knees  
smashing inside our mothers,  
  
snapping cheekbones against pelvis,  
eyelids scraping off into little wet moons.

Forget rib.

Forget mud.

Our history has settled into rumor:  
we are voodoo, we are sticky witches.

We built cities out of these names,  
our flaming hair curling lanterns in the dark.

Cities of rattling kitchens.

Cities of smoke signals.

Bare backs pressed thin like bats;  
we will be merciful to strangers,

drop pearls into the ears of sailors.

Our beds are trampolines,  
  
catapulting bodies into cities  
of haphazard tents. Using our thumbs,  
  
we spread our jaws into halves,  
turning them into boats, ready  
  
to disappear into the trembling ocean.

## IN PRAISE OF FEVER

A little conquistador,  
the virus shimmies into my daughter.

I watch the rise,  
fall of her chest,  
the fat hum of liquid bulbs  
as the sickness tries to work itself out.

I watch the nocturnal bobble of her head  
as she curls in my arms and praise the fever,  
its pink giggle flush in her pores.

A junk blood sickle,  
the fever wets her skin with salt-nectar  
and terrestrial burn.

I press her against the cool drum  
of my breast, press her through  
to the wings of my ribs, and allow the embers  
from her veins to root and shudder in my own.

## SUMMER PRAISE POEM

Because Babylon is in the bodegas of Miami.

Because the merchants are sweeping doorways  
littered with half-dead prayers,  
slapping the theater of insects and panicked citrus.

Because we are far from the desert, wandering still.

Because the sea air clings in beaded  
gasps to sailors and jetties.

Because the messengers cannot breathe in this air,  
the thick moss in their lungs.

Because this season, a half-turn from autumn,  
the concrete curves and angels sweat,  
swinging from tangerine hammocks.,

Because we live in the docks  
and scattered mangroves,  
we sing in tattooed voices of half-truths  
and televised sermons.

Because the ventriloquists cannot sleep.

Because I've had god riding my back since I was twelve,  
sliding his tongue along my teeth,  
while the rabbis rocked on clay avenues.  
Their curls bounced on their ears,  
the scent of morticians nearby.

Because the mechanical pillars of sea  
cannot hold this peninsula steady,  
to let us taste what is good, what is holy.

## RECIDIVISM

My father is sixty-five, wrecking  
the yard with his prison-issue white slippers,  
a cloud kicking up dirt.

His skin swings loose from the bones,  
as if gently hanging around the frame of a doorway.

Once a week he teaches inmates all about rehabilitation.

A room full of men dressed in blue cotton uniforms,  
ready to leave behind  
their envelopes full of bad news.

You don't want to come back here, do you?

he asks, a repeat offender himself.

The men respond, kissing teeth.

They can smell sugarcane burning in the fields,  
they know that air will never taste this sweet.

Outside of this prison these men will flop  
like goldfish spilled from the tank, gills waving.

When he cannot sleep he watches the spiders moan,  
stringing their black bodies across the ceiling.

The heat competes with the swamp  
hammocks and razor wire.

Alligators hum  
in the shallow pools off US-27,  
where wrecked planes and abandoned dinghies  
are invisible even to thunder.

Occasionally, a train shudders  
past and he waits for the falcons  
to return for the season.

He returns each night to his bunk,  
shrinking into the coils of his mattress.  
The officers beat their batons against the bars,  
splitting the blue light from bug zappers,  
so many dead moths  
even god wants to spit them back.

## ABU GHRAIB

They said "We will make you wish to die and it will not happen..."

-Ameen Saeed Al-Sheik, detainee No. 151362

Surrender your name for a number, this hood for your face.

The fear spreads as a tarantula in your throat.

Remember your skull is one click away

from scattering like bats in a cave,

the bones, little cups clapping the cement floor.

Death is a curious neighbor, his umbrella perched on the rim of each room.

Press your tongue to the rubber bottom of my boot.

I want you to taste our bombs and barbeques.

I want you to taste the knuckle cracking your lip into an open orchid.

You cannot see, but will remember me from the scent

of wire, of the cold whisk as chains lock under jaw.

Pull your clothes off, your bare skin a scalpel to the dark.

I will photograph your dead, each mouth twisted like an urn,

turned, and exposed to the camera.

Pile your naked body on top of bodies,  
mouths against thigh against groin.

I want to show you America.

POSTPARTUM FLORIDA DREAM #1

After Elizabeth Alexander

Soon, the tickseed will dominate the earth.

This season pushes the baby  
out into its sharp, damp air.

Winter in Florida is green, is green, is green.

Dream of nulligravida. Dragonflies kamikaze  
their dagger-bodies into my hips.

The baby is a crocodile, pale and mean.

She lodges a few teeth into my wrist.

Pink flamingos shiver.

## HOUSE POEM

Today I am the ruler of cardboard tubes

and it is only Monday.

Layla tells me that the clouds are sleepy,

the sun an anvil and a housefly is thumping

his dimpled head on the window.

The porch attached to this room is empty

but the neighbor-dog watches it anyway.

An egret is skeleton-still on the roof of a truck,

the morning a glacier sliding off the length of my skin.

I believe in the possibility of being both exhilarated and terrified by small things--

a shirt cuff waves from the closet, change lingers

in the pockets of jeans. I move through the house

and the dust bunnies hold court on my heels.

I sit on the floor where Layla has spread her toys and boxes,

and I wonder at the joke of it all, when the hero in the coloring book

is the one with the black jagged marker through his head,

death by doodle, and it's all in good fun to poke our felt tips

into the paper because he can't feel a thing.

There is an unfinished puzzle on the table, each piece brilliant

in its continent shape. On TV people are crying

because their spouses won't touch them.

My husband has left his wrenches and electrical tape on the counter again.

I drain the bathtub and the plumbing creaks in the walls,  
choking on rust and ghost water.

When I drop our shoes near the foot of the bed it mimics  
the exact sound of everything rubbing against each other  
and I want all of this:

the sink stacked full of porcelain and metal.

The iron pot boiling over, the rain.

## NOCTURNE

One day the sun admitted,

I am just a shadow.

-Hafiz

In the blast of television pixels

my nanny sucks pulp from a mango

as she watches a horror movie:

killer bees attack a small Mid-American town,

invade the ears of a woman in an elevator,

a cloud-blade of transparent wings.

The city is breaking.

A baby is made into honey.

I begin to sleep with blankets sealing my body shut.

I won't risk letting them in.

\*

Lamp off, the shadows perform kabuki on my face.

\*

Alone in the dirt, I play with blind earthworms,

roll their long bodies between my palms.  
I don't tell them about the sun,  
the way it might sever their delicate heads.

\*

Most lives are created by small accidents,  
and our name is certainly the first one.

An accident: I discover a news article,  
a young girl in Petaluma named Polly  
stolen from her home.

A man named Richard used a kitchen knife  
and his voice, punched commands into her ear.

The paper was covering a table in art class,  
half palms denting clay into childish bowls,  
waiting to be fire-hardened,  
my hands banging the breath right out of me.

I am twelve and I imagine this man entering  
my home like a wrecking ball.

At night, her name comes to me sailing

through the locked window, splits  
its vowels along the wooden crossbeams.

\*

In the dark, each letter is a fading lighthouse.

In the dark there is a tomahawk in my chest.

In the dark my mother calls out for me,  
my name a green crane circling the room.

\*

What bright animal has taken residence inside me?

I have become afraid of everything.

This room, this room.

\*

The shadows visit me often:  
some pull me straight through an afternoon,  
a stray Labrador tugging my sleeve.

With them the night is thicker,  
clinging like seaweed,  
so many mouths that open and close.

\*

An accident: a truck folded

into itself on the highway,  
angled and cricket-like in the steam.

Troopers urge onlookers forward,  
shining their high beams, seatbelts in position.

\*

I want to grow an eyelid around my entire body.

\*

I discover I can't breathe on highways,  
death a lumberjack in the trunk of my car,

axis of steel and coincidence propels  
this little box forward and inside the box

of my brain an audience is clapping,  
faces of jackals, awarding my encore.

Because there is no dress rehearsal.

Because I'm called back to perform again and again.

\*

It's February when I give birth to my daughter,  
her amber knees clapping out of a ringing bell.

Florida trumpet trees begin to drop  
their shriveled yellow flower necks,

and the sun with its edges,  
hot blades peeling back my hair,  
is a bald star scissoring our planet.  
Her hunger breaks the night.  
I run to her, blouse opening, new milk.

\*

Brown tarantulas in Oklahoma  
walk en masse across rural roads,  
when the season of cool dust begins.

The prairie is full of warriors.

\*

Another shadow:  
a mimeographed anchor  
hooked onto the zero  
of my ankle.

\*

It's not the pain that I am afraid of.  
Pain is a scorpion inside a mason jar,  
breaking its claws against the glass.

\*

I have been lying.  
I have been watching the evening news

hoping to see a spaceship touch down  
and gather everyone into its blinking hull.

After all, this planet, this lonely rock,  
is the problem,  
not us.

\*

I describe these shadows to a doctor.  
Get over it, he says, clicking a silver pen.  
Click, click.

\*

The headlines:

Iran has nuclear power.  
Wall Street is on life support.  
  
Thousands picket the capital.  
Honey bees are disappearing.  
In Afghanistan an elephant  
is wandering the desert,  
African tusks picking red poppies.

\*

There is an earthquake in San Diego.

My sister tells me it's a rolling,  
under the feet, not shaking,  
fiery mantle rotating inside an ornament.

Afterwards everyone claps.

I want to be like this, celebrating  
near disaster.

\*

I admit I've become angry with my feet,  
tripped up by the thunderclap in my walk.

I admit I have been careless with my worry,  
an anonymous caller ringing an abandoned payphone.

I admit I want to impose my will upon the ocean,  
pull back the foam from the shore with one finger,  
one blink, create black glassy jetties.

I admit I want the barracuda to surrender mid-stroke,  
every phosphorous fin a scale on my throat.

\*

The shadow curls into my daughter,

a quiet, terrible love.

\*

Before bed I will bend her head into water,  
bow to rising steam, our faces wet,  
white tub and dipping shoulders.

We are plunging monsters with ships, with gold;  
we drown cities of fish scales, a song in our mouths.

Imagine: wolf in heart, lumbering hounds.

For you: the night is lightning, locusts  
all shaking off their husks in your eyes.

For you: I am the dark.

BIRMINGHAM, 1963

At last, we can tell you about Birmingham,  
when the summer sank into September like a hot ship.  
We can speak of the leather moons in the magnolia trees,  
the easy slip into song in the basement of our church.  
We can speak of the earthworms,  
their shiny globed heads knocking at our toes.

We know the men in blue jeans and revolving jaws.

The men who scrunched their knuckles  
and left explosives at our feet.

The pews clacked like new teeth  
rising at once from the roots.

We dig into the earth.

Our curls, fists of brown,  
beat at our temples and dance  
as we wear our bibs of soil and dynamite.

The glass nestles like little snails in our ears.

We want to tell you about the sticky nature of souls,  
how each final scrap of skin  
cart-wheeled with pigeons and stained glass.  
How we can sing louder than any Hallelujah,

any ripple of concrete or fugitive stones.

We watched the sundresses of the girls  
who tumbled into the daylight,  
who coughed and sputtered air.

We watched the hems above their knees  
tackle scab and white church tights.

We leaned in, pressed our tin can-babble  
against the executioners who could not sleep.

We watched the night extinguish itself with a thousand tiny fires.

POSTPARTUM FLORIDA DREAM #2

Taxis spring on the highway, aluminum crickets.

The baby crawls on green docks,

cooing to the black water below.

She sticks her fingers in the spaces

between wood, popping barnacles

into her mouth. The splinters

are barn owls that peck at her scalp.

I toss quarters at the birds, scattering

their white feathers over the swamp.

She laughs at their flat faces,

the hammering wings in the glass air.

## ON HOMICIDE

Imagine their surprise to find her there,  
discarded among mushrooms, blooming.  
The men carry their halogen lanterns, stale coffee,  
smoke and bone hidden under cedar branches,  
the urgent pulsating of beetles,  
their feverish black bodies scattering  
along her arm made of gold bands and shrieking bracelets.  
I watch the men catalog heart and marrow, spare change,  
the wound bunched at her neck like a scarf.  
Imagine their dispatch of prayers: the names of mothers  
and daughters, the uneven breasts and sad limousines.  
Imagine that we all know these monsters:  
the men that carry pocket watches and rubber thumbs,  
distracting the saints and opening the zippered  
torsos of the dead. I watch the ash and fury  
of ambulances, the tug of cellophane lock boxes,  
the uncontrolled shudder of skin. Her strange  
clavicle, white-hot and cinched, unfolding  
moth wings. The coroner lifts the girl,  
one arm curled under her neck,  
allowing her fingers to brush his knee,  
to render warmth in a looped silence.

It's the same way I hold my daughter at night:  
the gentle rocking, her tongue searching,  
tasting the opening of my pores, impatient and hungry.

## MANEATER

Her first was a boy whose skull broke apart  
like a flurry of pigeons, gray bone just everywhere.  
She's loved every one: the chef with the blind mother,  
brown eyes stubborn under the tongue;  
the personal trainer who chipped her molar.  
She is tired of fishing out bits of fingernails  
from the pockets of her cheeks.  
The undigested shirt buttons always click in her belly.  
She showers often in order to remove the scent of them.  
Each man with his own aftertaste:  
orange peel, mushrooms.  
She wants to give it up, stop gobbling elbows,  
get rid of the half-chewed ears, parading purple figs.  
She wants to be the one consumed,  
feel the shiver of spit black  
throat pulsing the length of her body.  
But the evenings always end the same way:  
she keeps their pretty mouths in a shoebox  
in the closet, all lined up in row.

## ZOMBIES

We lend our bodies to hunger,  
master the swish-thunk,  
swish-thunk of our walk as we rumble  
in our voodoo cloud, flurries of scab  
and shivering purple bellies.  
Swollen in our suits and shoestring drool,  
we bob past billboards and shopping malls,  
grumbling round sentences.  
Clumsy monsters, you think,  
while huddled in basements, peeking  
through slats, eyes wide-open pennies.  
You forget you're one good  
chomp away from becoming  
one of us, with our split lips,  
our blood-panicked wounds.  
Pummeling windows and doors,  
we shuffle closer, with bloated  
elbows, tongues rolling like eels.  
We reach and tear an arm from torso,  
muscle from rib, and swallow  
each glistening red pinwheel of skin,

until there is nothing left  
but our frenzied mouths  
screaming for more.

## PROSE POEM

There are many drunks whose addictions are spectacular: fiery car crashes, bloody fistfights, handcuffed encounters with cops. All rock and roll. Your mother is not one of those kind. She spends most of her time in her room, nodding off watching infomercials, a lit cigarette smoldering into the carpet. What good, you wonder, would a new blender do if she burns the place down?

Your mother is afraid of birds. She keeps the vertical blinds closed in the apartment. She can't stand to watch their fluttering and pecking. In Miami they are bright and everywhere. Look at those beady eyes. Little dinosaurs.

Miami, 1984. Your father is drunk on a couch in a high rise overlooking the beach. The tourists are pushpins in bikinis. Your mother, eight months pregnant with your sister and a lit cigarette between two fingers, the ashes drift into clumps on the carpet, little white churches. Her feet are bloated half-moons propped up on a table.

You find her outside on the small patio attached to the apartment, among small growths of struggling weeds and beetles. She is slumped on the concrete pavers, passed out, but alive. The next morning she tells you she discovered blood in her hair, that she must have thrashed around during the night. Another bad dream. You don't tell her about helping her into bed, about switching the lamp off, about how the sight of her half-dressed body reminds you of some terrifying, quiet war.

You are born unable to breathe. Right after sliding out, the doctors begin slapping all six and a half blue pounds of you. There is fluid in your lungs and you've come into this world silent. Your mother tells the nurse about feathers, how they must have clogged your tiny new throat. The machines for all the sick babies in the room blink and beep and click.

She is trying to peel herself off of the bathroom floor, weak and unsteady, her body a museum. On her shoulders are freckles--the same ones she would count while putting you to sleep. One, two, three, dark.

She ends up in the passenger seat of your car, agreeing to the hospital, because you've threatened her with sirens, embarrassment. She is turned towards the door, hands on the handle. The silence a penny lodged in your spine.

Your mother is hooked up to an IV and the doctors explain that withdrawal from alcohol can cause seizures, death. You leave the hospital with her dirty clothes in a plastic bag, return to the apartment and open the blinds. During the first few days she sweats and screams at the grackles pacing in front of her window.

After detox your mother is moved to an inpatient rehabilitation center. Thirty days of step-meetings, confessions. You visit her once and she gives you a photocopy of a bible story--the one about footprints in sand and god carrying you; beaches and helpful ghosts. She is looking at you, trying to meet your eyes. You want to feel forgiveness trembling

into your body like a great big radio signal. She is nursing a cup of coffee, lumps of powdered creamer floating on top, her chewed fingers tapping the Styrofoam rim. I'm sorry.

You watch your daughter, two years old and wobbly, chase black fat pigeons in a driveway, laughing at their bird-hopping. At night, when you are tired, body-heavy, and she pulls on the legs of your pants to follow her, there will be little resistance. You sit in her room together, counting the plastic stars on the wall, glowing green in the immutable dark.

She asks you to join her at a step meeting on the second floor of a church next to Federal Highway. Bikers with gray ponytails and slouched college kids sit together in a room full of metal collapsible chairs. A man in a polo shirt asks: Who wants to share? You wish she wouldn't but your mother raises her hand. She starts at the beginning.

## PANTOUM ON BAGHDAD AND FISH

We hammer the Tigris, uncork the belly of the river.

We spin the fat fish, searching for the plume  
of uranium bombs, missiles exposing their large white throats.

We eat the desert. Tear it apart, tooth by tooth.

We spin the fat fish, searching for the plume  
of empty mosques. The shrouds of women speckle Baghdad like coins.

We eat the desert. Tear it apart, tooth by tooth.

The fish forgive us.

We empty the mosques. The shrouds of women speckle Baghdad like coins.

We are good people, god's cheering our names.

The fish forgive us.

We are uncomfortable in this heat, our boot straps melting.

We are good people, god's cheering our names.

We carry our dead back in cedar, pin lilies on statues.

We are uncomfortable in this heat, our burqas melting.

We disappear from our headlines. The black ink turns war into conflict.

We carry our dead back in cedar, pin lilies on statues,  
exposing their large white throats. Uranium bombs and missiles

disappear from our headlines. The black ink turns war into conflict.

We hammer the Tigris, uncork the belly of the river.

The fish spread out onto the banks, shocked confetti.

POSTPARTUM FLORIDA DREAM #3

Summer is heavy metal--  
thrashing sparklers and saw palmetto.

The baby and I sleep in my bed, drown  
in cotton sheets and sweat-pressed pillows.

I dream of an open window:  
there are hundreds of mosquitoes,  
brown nervous stars.

They swarm the baby, lifting  
her up, mouth parts clacking.  
Fuzzy antenna knock off lamp, alarm clock;  
wings red in the glare of digital numbers.

She is nectar, rocking.

## THE ACCIDENT

You will want to climb into the wreckage.

You will see your daughter, a blue  
flag folded in the backseat of a car,

and pick the glass from her forehead,  
cure the sharp fever.

You will try to pull her out by her hair,  
hair that will keep unraveling, strands

of gold lava spilling from the burst snail  
to your spinning palms.

You will not be able to take her,  
you are not there.

This is your fear,  
the phantom ship in your belly.

You will often taste salt and seaweed,  
and listen to the swollen dead knocking about in the hull.

You will see her in fire,  
watch her neck melting into a dark wing.

Or she will be drowning,  
each breath tightening the black hooks.

You cannot stop the screaming  
elevator snapped from its cable.

There is no handbrake, no executioner  
to barter the weight of a guillotine.

You will remember her green rubber ball  
near the entry to your home,

ready to be bounced on the pavement  
by her small hands now waving back at you,

the light cut up in her hair,  
bodies of blackbirds and dangling laces.

The sound of the concrete sliding vertical,  
the sound of a fist opening inside your chest.

## WHITE SEQUENCE

Crumpled prom dresses,  
boys unbutton white collars--  
pelicans take off.

\*

Lightning bug  
clapping against my window--  
leave me alone, moon.

\*

Moon breaking  
into a bed of silver moths.  
I am not important.

## FALLING MAN

After the photograph taken by Richard Drew on September 11, 2001.

Because he'd rather fly than burn  
he tossed himself into the ghost-jet  
of the morning.

The silence a fist to his ears,  
he thinks about how Tuesdays  
aren't good for dying,

how the burnt coffee  
from breakfast  
still bites at his tongue.

Who knew seagulls could  
make such great halos  
with the way they choke out the sun?

He begins ticking off the floors,  
as he plunges past the windows sputtering  
on their mirrored rods like earrings  
on the torso of the building.

He passes the floor where Maria  
with the long legs would spin  
in her cubicle, keyboard chattering.

Where the nameless  
accountant would glow before numbers  
in his fish tank corner.

Where the kid janitor plunged  
his wrists into plumbing, slicing  
his finger on the porcelain.

Mouth open, he can taste the hot suck  
of wind, slapping his skull  
with dizzy invisible gloves.

His white shirt  
peeling back like an eyelid,  
hurtling towards the sky.

## MARRIAGE

Wake up the husband

singing in a cardboard tube--

this is just a test.

POSTPARTUM FLORIDA DREAM #4

The hurricanes fizzle  
into small whirling teapots, breaking  
over Puerto Rico. El Yunque forces its ridges into the eye.

All the brown houses settle into marsh porches.  
Ceramic lawn gnomes and leftover pumpkins,  
mold-spotted, crush the shadows of bougainvillea.

The baby is a woman, wearing a sari,  
black hair curling around the shoulders.

Her toes are painted with lightning.  
She burns the crab grass with each step towards me.

Hello, she says. Hello, I answer,  
extending my open palm. Her fingers curl into my own.  
Her hand is a blue starfish.

## CRASH

A full day passes before his body is discovered,  
half-naked, torso nicked by aged scars, swimming pink eels.  
His arm a rigid hook from the shoulder,  
mouth opened into an umbrella of teeth.  
His television is still on, the twelve o'clock news  
shouting about war and plummeting stocks.

And somewhere in the Atlantic a plane crashes,  
the sudden vacuum from lungs exploding,  
filling with water, a collective urging  
of organs to blister and seize.  
The moon breaks open into a bloom of jellyfish.

Together, they die as quietly as the man on his couch:  
the passengers gripping the shocked knuckles of strangers  
or the singular heart giving out.

What difference is there between a cough and a flame?

Outside the apartment,  
stray dogs worry the pavement,  
fur stretched thin by fattened ticks feasting.  
The mangos are heavy and green,

each waiting in trees for its turn to snap off,  
sweet pulp bursting onto the earth.

## WORK

My husband often wakes up before the cypress expresses  
its roots into the black water of Florida.

His shop sits off US-1, in between a gas station  
and a demolished Traveler's Lodge,  
where mosquitoes create buzzing chandeliers.

With steady, clinician hands he uses a razorblade to strip  
old glue from a dashboard, cleaning, not cutting.

An air gun whirls its metal socket  
and lug nuts loosen chipping rust and heat.

Electricity, or the small spark of electricity,  
illuminates the chassis over his body.

The noise turns my head into a chainsaw.

Air coolant smells sweet and pools onto the spotted concrete,  
invaded by rampant, runaway chemicals.

When it rains, his shop floods with water,  
always on the brink of extinction.

Oil hoses, transmission hoses, drop lights weave down  
from the ceiling, long hanging tubes, sifting  
through columns of tobacco light--this room like of the heart of palm,  
shoots from the green fibrous muscle.

Grease-stained, gray buttoned work shirts stitched  
with first names: Raymond, Julio, Marcelo.  
Names from not-too-distant cities: San Juan, Santo Domingo.  
Men all hunched over into bucking,  
steaming engines, silver thrusting everywhere.  
His fingertips are grooved with deep lines of oil, skin browned by the sun,  
gamma-ray suicide, illuminating old shining scars.

He tells me the primary rule for mechanics: if you can't fix it, hit it.  
Jammed signals from busted radio speakers,  
bleeding green wires, blue wires.

There is an occasional grunt as he levers  
his weight against a stuck engine bolt.  
He digs his work boot into the ground,  
the black bottom of the boot pressed like a jewel,  
cool rubber on sand and grit.

The brake lathe carves out metal wasps,  
picked up and carried away by pigeons.  
The earth could burn from so much patience.

A red shop rag is tossed in the corner,  
a little monk, prayer for the end of the day,  
when we will all travel home to our little yellow houses.

Large metal fans blow caked dirt across the floor,  
coal-dark, dispersed exponentially like sea spray.  
He keeps his work in the interior, his back turned  
away from the strip malls and unconquered mangroves.

## THE MOONFLOWER

I often mistake light for teeth.

I don't sleep. I only taste  
this eruption, a blooming tuxedo.

My vine crawls ordinarily along fences  
while I dream of click beetles  
and spotted moths circling my roots.

The night is a room of hungry clocks  
and each morning I will be done with it.

You, afraid of the dark, ignore the illuminated.

I have little patience for the unbuckling  
warmth that will urge  
me to shrink into my own wet throat.

I leave you to your chattering:  
so many voices to distract you from the dying,  
so little time to watch you praise the dirt  
with your open hands.

## AFTER THE WAR

Fear has a taste...like you're licking a nine-volt battery.

-Cecil Ison, Vietnam Veteran

GQ Magazine, January 2008

Fear is a radio,

a cluster of parades, rice paddies and junk elevators.

It stays fixed in your ribs--

a salute, a second heart,

keeping you up at night:

the tightening grip of Miller Lite, ex-girlfriends' nicotine spit,

the wet heat burst of parking lots and bus terminals.

This is war.

Post-napalm dolls, post-torched villages.

Your mother leaving messages, speaking of apostles,

their impatient flapping and solemn choirs.

You try to tap dance through laundromats and tax returns.

The streetlights bend and turn in your direction.

You kiss pretty girls, spinning slow fires in the pocket of your coat.

There is nothing you can do to stop the muffled voices,

the static witnesses, except to bite the backs of these ghosts,  
these furious pearls in your palms.

To shave and sleep and get up again.

To stack obituaries in careful pinwheels.

To shiver and swallow and let it burn.

## THE MOTHER

There's one bad fluorescent light flickering on and off, an orange tongue in the kitchen. She listens to the irregular hum of electricity from the bulb as she pounds the steel meat tenderizer into the thin steaks on the counter. Her husband stares at her, waiting for a response. I think the steak's been beat up enough. She looks up at him, then past him, to the pictures on the refrigerator, before she began to dream of dirt in her throat, waking her up, choking for air. Just the two of them with nothing left to say to each other. A wooden circular table. Two ceramic plates. Two clear glasses with half-melted ice cubes. Stop. She ignores him, slams the mallet again and again, keeping her eyes on the window in front of her. The grain elevators rise up in the field like a couple of worn leather boots and there are cars, husks of old Fords in rows of insects and gravel. Stop. He places his hand over hers, tries to force her palm down, but she keeps pounding, pounding until all she can see is pummeled flesh, bleeding despite the absent body, bits of muscle sprinkling the faucet, red spit on the toaster.

## BOUGAINVILLEA

My mother is exhausting herself, tangled in the task of reduction,  
in the cluster of long, dusty elbows locked into a brittle cage.

The blossoms shock the lines of her face, plunge  
their tongues into her hair, scrunched into angry ladders.

Bishop of soil, drag your swaying black apron away from our windows.

The wasps hover nearby, heavy and jealous,  
of the sticks' sharp brown horns, pickaxes at attention.

Each vine blooms into veined paper lanterns,  
transparent, flame-colored gondolas,  
as if igniting its own flesh,  
as if they have known what is growing inside of them.

I can taste the mulch tossed into the air.

And after we pull the thorns from our wrists, we ask  
what poison heirloom has attached itself to the rising red igloos on skin?

To find the root, if there ever was one singular, wooded fist--

hear the bougainvillea's pink-shriek at dusk.

To unhinge the clinging vine from chain link, green bladed loops

locked around the thumbnail-hearts of iguanas.

## GIRL WITH NO HEART

Fourteen year old D'Zhana Simmons lived for 118 days without a heart in a Miami hospital.

What sound does the body make without the boom-bah-boom  
in this tin-boat of a chest, without the suck  
of chambers and valves? There is the woosh of tubes,  
the enjambment of pulleys and pumps.  
The doctors tell her: This is your body,  
live in it. Nurses sling

needles into her skin. Hold still. She slings  
her eyes to the back of her head, counts every boom,  
every tick of the fist. Her body  
is a taxi with the meter running. She follows directions: suck,  
swallow. This is easy to do, machine pumping  
for that deadbeat of a muscle. She trusts these tubes

to get the job done. She expects these tubes  
to deliver small gold gods, slinging  
blood into this bucket of bones. She imagines her heart pumping  
in a jar, in a dark room somewhere, every bastard boom  
shaking the glass. All four chambers wildly sucking

leech-like, hungry for body,

any body.

Unable to sleepwalk plugged in, she can dream of tubes

sliding out, the reversible suck,

kissing mechanized boys as they sling

their eyelashes open, skin pulled back to see the booming

veins, blue robe. It is these dreams that keep her pumping

away. This is all she has: machines that pump

despite sweat, despite vomit, into this body,

all ankles and egg. She misses that boom-bah-boom

that trolled in her thumbs. Pull the tubes.

Pull the sheets. She lifts her legs, slings

them over the side of the bed, pulls the machine that sucks

straight into that noiseless teacup in her chest, sucks

every last cell, a loose kite in her blood. Wandering corridors, pumping

her fists against the doors of sleeping patients. Halogen lights sling

yellow while nurses guide her back to bed. Her body

wants this: the cluster of plastic tubes

at the bent arm, waltzing with doctors, pulse booming.

## PORTRAIT

"Mommy!" my daughter shouts and points  
to the drawings in front of her, plastic markers in hand.  
Twenty months old and she's assigning my body  
to paper--scribbling red, red monstrous circles.  
Mouth, she tells me, tapping her finger  
on my face and then back to the picture.  
I am a yellow cloud, a purple leaning house.  
How lucky to wander in this landscape,  
bleached sky, accidental green spots for stars.  
My hat is an orange buzzing triangle  
falling apart, a stray line or two dropping  
into my own inscrutable happy hands.

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