

3-2-2015

Blotto in the Lifeboat

Paul Christiansen
paul.a.christiansen@gmail.com

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

BLOTTO IN THE LIFEBOAT

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Paul Christiansen

To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by Paul Christiansen, and entitled Blotto in the Lifeboat, 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

Jason Pearl

Campbell McGrath, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 2, 2015

The thesis of Paul Christiansen is approved.

Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts and Sciences

Dean Lakshmi N. Reddi
University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2015

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to offer my appreciation to the editors of the following magazines where some of these poems first appeared, sometimes under different titles and in slightly altered form: “Atlanta Review”, “Flyway”, “Hawai’i Pacific Review”, “Jai-Alai”, “Madison Review”, “New Delta Review”, “Off the Coast”, “Paper Darts”, “Silk Road Review”, and “Zone 3”.

I am forever indebted to my peers and mentors at Florida International, with particular gratitude to Campbell McGrath for his infinite wisdom and generosity.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

BLOTTO IN THE LIFEBOAT

by

Paul Christiansen

Florida International University, 2015

Miami, Florida

Professor Campbell McGrath, Major Professor

BLOTTO IN THE LIFEBOAT is a book of poems that investigates natural processes and idiosyncrasies of human societies. Ranging from the absurd to the scientific in tone, the poems in BLOTTO IN THE LIFEBOAT situate themselves on the blurry-line between fact and imagination, employing a style that Thomas Lux describes as “imaginative realism.”

The middle of three sections is comprised solely of the long poem, “A Compendium of the True and Wondrous,” which collages remarkable facts and anecdotes to highlight the strange realities of the world and the rapidity of change. The first and third sections contain shorter, narrative poems in which the surreal or comic is often employed.

The language of the poems in BLOTTO IN THE LIFEBOAT reflects a similar desire to affix the fantastic to the familiar. Metaphors in the tradition of Elizabeth Bishop and Charles Simic rely on wild leaps of imagination to illuminate the real world.

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I

1

AND ON THE EIGHTH DAY, GOD SETTLED THE DIVORCE

He awarded my mother all the world's rivers, streams, creeks and channels,
while my father got the lakes, lagoons, oceans, deltas, gulfs and swamps.

Citing her love of butterflies that float on stained-glass wings, the songs of tree frogs
and sweet juices sealed inside passion fruit, my mother requested the jungles,

to which my father agreed in exchange for rights to the cloud-shawled mountains
and the bluebird-filled hills scrambling at their feet.

Sorting through skyscrapers, aqueducts, Aztec ruins and the chalky pillars of Stonehenge,
every achievement of architecture was divvied up.

Even the smallest items had to be considered, and German drinking anthems,
Zen mantras, pancake recipes, and competing theories on the origin of the high five

were organized into separate *his* and *hers* piles.

As the day wore on, discussions grew tense. Lawyers came in to sort out

how my father could retain ownership of rock music

while God let my mother have all the drums and guitars.

Tempers flared, and the once-in-love couple nearly came to blows
when my mother demanded the sound a bullet makes blasting through the breeze,
knowing full well how much my father looked forward to hunting boars and bison
after she'd forbidden it as barbaric during their marriage.

In response, my father lobbied God for sole rights to every position in the Kama-sutra
while asking Him to leave my mother all the lice, welts and genital-plaguing warts.

Midnight crept closer and God sent the angels for Chinese take-out
as he trudged through the list of things my parents could no longer share.

The smoky hiss of a campfire doused with water, spicy waft of sizzling sausage,
Papuan verbs, pirate coins and all of Picasso's phases, there was still so much to divide –

even the tiny dust motes drifting in the courtroom's shadows
where I sat waiting for my own name to come up.

TO THE MAN WHO ORDERED THE PAD KEE MOW

There are 23 chairs in Sawadee Thai Bistro and 33 patrons, 20 of whom have empty stomachs, their water glasses sweating harvest moons onto tablecloths, while 14 take-out slips hang tacked above the kitchen's stoves, a line of white squares like waiting molars.

8,944 miles separate the neon-glossed slums of Miami from the soot-skyed boroughs of Ghungzo, where 10s of generations ago peasants learned to sliver slabs of condensed rice into thick, shiver-slick strips of noodle.

18 years, 6 countries, 3 careers, 2 children, and countless arguments after Gavino met ๓๘ ๖๓ ๘ while both were vacationing in Prague, the married pair are in their 3rd year as co-owners of Sawadee.

Before a chili plant grows a pepper with waxy skin, sticky exocarp cocoon sealing in 100s of sting-shelled seeds, it must experience 84 days of constant sunlight and absorb 100,000,000,000s of water droplets gravity-sieved through soil.

Each night over 500,000 sardines scuttle 3,000 feet to the ocean's surface to pluck plumes of moonlight-suckling plankton before the nets of Vietnamese fishermen swoop in so factories can squeeze, salt and ferment – a 24 month process to pour

8 pounds of catch into each 32-ounce bottle of fish-sauce.

1492 stitched open the world with trade routes threading Tenochtitlan to Santo Domingo to Lisbon to Cape Town to Bombay to Bangkok, and 17th century Missionaries stuffed supply crates with home comforts, carrots carried atop elephants weaving trails through Siam's vine-snared valleys.

Scrambling back from a supply closet crammed with 25-pound bags of unpeeled onions, ginger fists, dirt-grooved potatoes, peanuts, bean sprouts and hollow spring roll wrappers, *นง ฟ้า ส* pestle-grinds together an 8-part papaya salad while Gavino pinches the spines from shrimp with one hand, whisks a wok of curry with the other.

For 7 dollars an hour, immigrants remove 2,000 feathers per chicken so butchers can skim smooth skin off the flesh and slice slick meat from 120 bones, all because 85,000,000 years ago dinosaurs sprouted stiff quills for flapping across the scattered shards of Pangaea.

32 minutes ago, your voice pinged antenna to antenna, an instantaneous 7 miles to place your order, and I told you it would be at least 1 hour before I arrived with your delivery, and now you're calling back demanding your food?

Chill, Chill, I tell you over the phone. *There are over*

VULTURE

Mr. Congressman, thank you for finding a few minutes in your busy schedule to meet. Off the record, of course. I dare assume that your devotion to more important matters leaves you only partially versed in the particulars of your power to re-name our state bird. Did you know of all fifty states, there are seven cardinals, and not a single hawk? Five states claim the mockingbird, yet no one wants to be represented by an owl. Three robins but no blue jays? And overlap isn't even the worse offense. Florida ignores the flamingo, California eschews the condor, Nevada selected a non-native and Iowa's eastern goldfinch isn't even a real species. What's one more indiscretion? Its not like the wren-lobby (did they even donate to your re-election fund?) will firebomb your wife's Ford Explorer when they learn that their drab, dust-winged-shrew has lost its post. Worry not about why you'll be replacing it with the vulture. Don't trouble yourself trying to understand what's so admirable about a bird that buffets at landfills, endangers airport takeoffs, and vomits to evade adversaries. Read nothing into the use of its image in Mayan prophecies. Just focus on the suitcase that will be brought to your hotel room tonight. Picture the woman who will deliver it, the curve of her breasts, the tiny black bow on her panties, and the songs of birds you can't identify, chattering as she slips into the sunrise.

THE WORD THAT GOT AWAY

It defines that particular fish and salt stench
kept sequestered in a whale's mouth.

Waxy, gassy, oil-bulb belch, so odorous
sailors would follow it on foggy mornings
to locate the feeding leviathans.

While at a bar that barnacled the coast,
stirring my rum with eavesdrop,
the tide-eyed seaman seated next to me
used the word in context.

Something about a blubber hunt,
or a lewd metaphor in a tale of whoring.

I don't remember,
booze strangling my brain like seaweed tangled
in squall-bludgeoned coral.

All I know is it was a splintered scrimshaw
of shanty and flotsam,
magnificent shamble of syllables,
but by the time I stumbled
into the night-drenched streets,
I'd lost it altogether. Gone.
Fled back to the sea

to mingle with the swarms of sardines

swirling the waves like bubbles

rushing the top of a pint glass.