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# Hallelujah Shoes

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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.

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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.

## EUCCHARIST

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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Tony Hoagland, Donkey Gospel

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James Kimbrell, My Psychic

Nick Flynn, Blind Huber

Laura Kasischke, Fire & Flower

Doranne Laux, Facts About the Moon

Joshua Poteat, Ornithologies

### Concentration List:

#### The Sublime in 20<sup>th</sup> Century American Poetry

Elizabeth Bishop, The Complete Poems: 1927-1979

James Wright, Selected Poems

Sylvia Plath, *The Collected Poems*

Charles Wright, *Negative Blue*

Lynda Hull, *Collected Poems*

Mark Doty, *My Alexandria*