

3-4-1997

Firefly curios and sundry lights

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DOI: 10.25148/etd.FI14050443

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

FIREFLY CURIOS AND SUNDRY LIGHTS

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

IN

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Maidel H. Barrett

1997

To: Dean Arthur W. Herriott
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by Maidel H. Barrett, and entitled *Firefly Curios and Sundry Lights*, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgement.

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

John Dufresne

Mary Jane Elkins

Campbell McGrath, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 4, 1997

The thesis of Maidel H. Barrett is approved.

Dean Arthur W. Herriott
College of Arts and Sciences

Dr. Richard L. Campbell
Dean of Graduate Studies

Florida International University, 1997

For my father, John Herbert Barrett.

And my mother, Lida Kittrell Barrett.

And for Ronald James Dziubla.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank the community of professors and writers at Florida International University. I especially want to thank my defense committee: Campbell McGrath for insight and humor, and for passing on practical procedures for becoming a teaching poet; John Dufresne for his example that poetry is not limited to poems; and Mary Jane Elkins for her eloquent and inspirational teaching.

Thanks for the humanity and enthusiasm of Les Standiford, Jim Hall, Dan Wakefield, and David Kranes who helped me to see how my own experiences can be plotted and shaped. Also, many thanks to Lynne Barrett for her support and for the opportunity to observe and benefit from her formidable editing skills.

Special thanks to Barbara Murphy and Marta Lee for their exceptional advice and help.

Further thanks to Jeffrey Knapp, Cynthia Chinelly, Teresa Dipasquale, Barbara Watts, Marian Demos, Ramon Mendoza, Richard Sugg, Marsha Sinagra, Catherine Bowman, Michael Hettich, Michele Baker, Iris Gersh, Howard Gengarely, Margo Harakas, Valerie Kenyon, Richard Blanco, Meg O'Brian,, John Bond, Preston Allen, Liz Sentz, Chris Gleason, Sally Naylor, Nina Romano, Mitch Alderman, Andree Conrad, Miriam Frances Abety, Liang Guo, Steve Harris, David Beaty, Tony Thomas, Stephen Benz, Pete Collins, Marjorie Klein, Judith Matz, Ian Vasquez, Jack Nease, Joe Walpole, Robert Flinn, Alex Lytton, Yago Cura, Dean Swinford, Nikki Moustaki, Lydia Webster, Ellen Wehle, and RJ Gibson.

To Patrick Gleber, who gave me friendship and my job at Tobacco Road, and so sustained me through two degrees, I am grateful. Appreciation and love to Magda Hiller and Hayley K. Downs. Thanksgiving for the grace of other friends: Teresa O'Rourke, Emilio Perez, Conrad Lamm, Trudy Cunningham, Mary Lee Adler, Lydia Bredig, Graham Wood Drout, Sue Janes, Sacha Paans, Caroline Ramkissoon, Beth Yedwab, Ira Margolis, Juan Sanchez, Jack Pakonis, Matt Anderson, Mark Weiser, Delroy Ezekial Gibb, Bill Belair, James Morsut, Chanchai Veerawat, Sheri Walker, Doug and Cathi Leibinger, not to mention the company of my two house-muses: Spike and the Murf.

Great thanks to Gerald Costanzo for his approval and encouragement, and finally, gratitude and love for the Seaside gang from Summer Place: Jesse Millner, Lyn McDaniel Millner, Blythe Nobleman, David and Marnie Karpel, Leonard Nash, Andrew Golden, Mark Martin, Emma Trelles, and Justin Petropoulos.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

FIREFLY CURIOS AND SUNDRY LIGHTS

by

Maidel H. Barrett

Florida International University, 1997

Miami, Florida

Professor Campbell McGrath, Major Professor

Firefly Curios and Sundry Lights contains 33 poems and 55 pages, mostly free verse lyric narratives issuing from various geographic, emotional, and temporal landscapes. The book is divided into four sections which might roughly be titled: “before,” examining themes of childhood and death; “on-the-road,” relaying the compulsion to travel, “odd-and-ends-limbo,” including pieces which have no context within the time line; and “in-one-place-for-now,” reflecting modes of communication, ordering, and longing. Other concerns include speculations about existence, observations of nature, and the importance of science as a means of apprehending the world. The work reveals a belief in the interconnectedness of mind and matter, combines seriousness and humor, and displays a sonic sensibility. These poems of solitude and observation are themselves vehicles, their motion a means of dislocation in order to find the self. *Firefly Curios and Sundry Lights* is smaller than a bread box and you can dance to it.

Firefly Curios and Sundry Lights

Contents

Bibelot, 1

I

Firefly Curios and Sundry Lights 3

Rib Cage, Pelvis, Fragment of Hand 6

Rumpelstiltskin 8

White Horses 9

Below 11

Disappear 12

Angelology 13

Specks 14

Cotton Candy on the Midway 15

II

Transitional 18

Exhibit 19

Thither 21

When the Planet Quits Spinning, Gravity Lets Go 23

Sand, Creosote, Cyan 25

III

The Last Las Vegas Leaping Frog 30

Jacaranda Rondelet 31

Beef Jerky 32

Mummy 33

Eavesdropping at the End of the Olympics with Commercials 34

The Come-On 38

Mint 39

IV

Gratuities	42
Stars? I Rub Elbows with Them All the Time	43
Eureka	44
Blues for the Following Moon	45
My Backyard Is Not Brookgreen Gardens	46
Florida Room	48
The Finch	49
Cosmology	50
Insomniac	52
What Marks Upon the Earth Are These?	53
The American Institute of Polish Culture Presents an Evening of Poetry and Music	54
Scattered	55

Bibelot

Gone, the grape-grey dragonflies of day, blue neon
eyes lit by sun, hawks tumbling behind the pines.
Night layers its sounds closer to the earth,
and fireflies strobe the tea waters of Lake George.
The bull alligator flays a path
through marsh grass and lavender hyacinths, among
the staccato of frogs, whose palpitations still
when the reptile bellows and the answer booms.

I

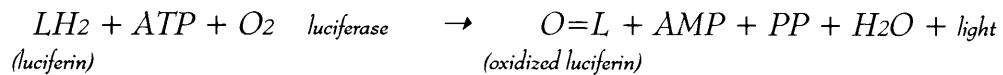
Firefly Curios and Sundry Lights

One winter night, a young shizoku saw a firefly over the canal. He stared at the light, surprised at the summer creature out in a season of snow. Suddenly, the light shot toward him. He struck at the firefly and it darted into his fiancée's garden. A cry came from her house, and he rushed in to find her still asleep. When he woke her, she said, "What a strange dream. I was flying above the canal, floating nicely. Then I saw you, and flew to you to show you I could fly, but you struck at me. It frightens me to think of it."

—legend from Izuno

Sometimes in summer we captured honeybees
from the holly bush's tats of lace,
clapped the buzzes into Mason jars with petals
shredded to a luscious balm
when we screwed the lids on,
hands stung by the dark leaves' barbs.
Twilight had a barbecued-cut-grass-smell,
crickets, and cooling air
punctuated by fireflies.
I learned that in the dark
things can't be seen directly—the eye
must move sidewise to clarify them.
Constellations in that earthly field
attached to darker bodies, whose beams,
when scanned, would crystallize
to singularities of lightning bugs.
So we released our bees and turned
the jars into organic lamps.
The belly of one insect cupped from the air
mashed in my palm's crease
and liquid light leaked on my skin.
I wondered why it didn't burn.
My father wore film in his ID badge
at Oak Ridge Labs to guard against
overexposure, and I asked him
if the glow was radioactive.

He wrote out the bioreaction:



For each luciferin catalyzed, one quantum of light is emitted.

How inviting, that flicker,
the lure of night illuminated;
cages of fireflies strung for festivals;
city lines and curves demarcated by windows,
traffic signals, bridge beacons,
neon necklaces of stadiums and concert halls;
fireworks; Christmas trees;
our ornamentation of the world
modeled after nature's eerie shining:
St. Elmo's fire (the corpusant);
foxfire; marshfire (ignis fatuus,
will-o'-the-wisp); aurora borealis.

My family used to sail the bay-side shallows
out to Nest Key's beach of white sand—
oddity in that chain of mangrove and coral.
One night underway, I saw the wake spark,
wondered what organs might flare
in my own dark blood, if my lungs pulsed
when I breathed, or thoughts glinted,
as long ago one night on the Santa Maria,
Columbus forestalled mutiny with the promise of land:
Look, on the horizon, that streaming of light.

Was it land? Or did sunlight kindle the water
which flashed away its warmth at night?
Could friction between salt waves
and air have caused the glimmer in the sea?
Answers replace answers.
What begins as mystery gets explained away

in progressive stances of complexity.
If fireflies were once vessels
for the souls of the dead or of dreamers,
now they are bioluminescent, naturally selected
for or against,
and backed by empirical proof:
*one species lost its light organs
living in bogs too cold for the metabolic reaction
at the edge of the retreating Wisconsin glacier.*
But usually, it works the other way—
nature's love for the sun carries vision into night.

All the firefly has to do is want to glow.
He luminesces with desire, blinks
an advertisement to females
who use their torches as landing lights.
Sometimes, they swarm into radiant balls
and hang like chandeliers against the sky.

They must still be there every summer,
flashing against the pea hedge
in the almost-dark of my old yard,
where so many questions
still to be answered meant endless possibilities.
I had almost forgotten
my childhood envy of the fireflies' luck
to have both flight and that citrine lantern,
nearly lost the belief
that I might duplicate their magic
if I willed hard enough.
And for a moment, I try again
to find the secret balance or tension
that will cut me loose from the lackluster ground.
As if all it might take would be the right remembering
of the beginning. A firefly's tail signals
connection to the primal light,
and a child, to possess the inherited glory,
captures its echo in her Mason jar.

Rib Cage, Pelvis, Fragment of Hand

In that moment when she first knew,
the tilted mirror on the mantle reflected coffee-table journals,
her bare feet crept the wood-creaked floor,
hand searching the wall, touching the unfolding corner
of the corridor as she drew closer to the words,
to her mother and brother in chairs like wing-backed coffins,
her father's name suspended in their exhaled voices.

So she climbed into the Land Rover on the cover
of *National Geographic* and went on safari,
weaving a potholder from loops of rag
through the flimsy teeth of a metal loom, remembering last night's *Daktari*.

Family friends materialized from the den, girdled with sympathy.
She pictured Katherine loosening up in the *African Queen*,
helping Humphrey pull off all those leeches.

She imagined Africa as death, stolen ivory, salvaged bone,
the lone, ratchet-eared elephant homing in on the graveyard
to add to testaments of pelvis, arks of rib, and catenary tusks.
At the funeral she made herself cry
with images of the tribe which subsists on blood and milk,
leaving the cow alive, opening the vein a little at a time,
her grief dislocated by oceans and continents, oddly proportioned
like bone-breasted women with plate lips, and necks stretched by rings of iron.

Years would contribute *kalimba* and gourd, hornbill and gnu,
python draped from the canopy, and Mbuti,
with filed white triangles of teeth, crocodile-bright in shadowed mouths,

waiting for the forest soul, *molimo*, to sound in the night.

In a gully on the moonscape of Hadar in Afar,
a baking desolation, eroded and blown,
Johanson and Gray named some fragments Lucy (after the Beatles song):
oxidized tibia, bowl shard of skull, and one fossil finger
pointing the way out, over the adamantine and down the Awash.

Rumpelstiltskin

About our lunch in the Miracle Mile Cafeteria:
you said, “We are here rehearsing our lines.” For *life*, you meant,
for the times you will spill your guts
to the woman you find to share your life with. What was
on that table--macaroni & cheese, carrot-raisin salad,
turnip greens, all the good southern food—we shared.
“I am comfortable because you acknowledge black-eyed peas,” I said.
Since I was unavailable, the words were rehearsals for future confidences,
but I took your stories as they were meant, in their own full presence.
When I was a child, my family vacationed in Europe
because my father was going to die.
On a beach in Wales I braved myself into the ocean,
gaining something as I relaxed into the icy shock
of that cold water and practiced letting go.
In the restaurant my family went to later, a secret seemed shared by all the diners;
the water in my glass tasted strange; there was the usual expectation of tourists,
but something else—as if we’d all been together before.
That Black Forest pony I rode the week after—
I still can’t remember the details—and I loved horses.
What happened in the forest?
Those first feelings—desire
or grief unnamed for years—forever obscured.

White Horses

*

The game was to find white horses,
one hundred points per sighting; white pigs didn't count.

At highway 191, a shift in pitch, from concrete
to macadam, furrowed vibrations through the *Blue Goose*,

a corrugated hum that covered my parents' murmur
in the front until my sister screeched and hit my brother.

*

In the Caverns of Wonder the guide doused floodlights,
said, "You're now in utter darkness folks,"
which made me think of cows, which made me think
of horses. Leaning against my father, I breathed
into the cotton weave of his summer shirt.

*

Still piloting the highway after dark,
Dad shared coffee with Mom from the plastic Thermos cup;
I stared at our reflections
extended at impossible angles into illusional space
like wings projected through the windows of the *Blue Goose*;
Kit and Mary Lou on quilts in back eating small boxes of *Apple Jacks*,
me car-sick in the hurtling atmosphere of smell:
damp cotton, caffeine, sugar-frosted cereal.

*

At Antelope Flat I played with my bucket of neon dinosaurs
at the firelight's edge in flicker and shadow
until Dad took out the guitar and taught me
how to put my fingers on the fret-board.

*

Underway again the next day, I played *White Horses*
by myself until he tapped my arm and nodded
toward a pair of mules tethered to a roadside fence—
two albinos with heavy-lidded eyes,

the way his own eyes flagged
one winter years later, head hollowed in a pillow
printed with the hospital's name,
arm hitched to a steel box by tubes of circling blood.

*

Driving to Arlington by way of Cherokee:
a billboard plastered to a silo
heralds the underground wonders of the Lost Sea;
two girls riding Western on the road's shoulder;
cows in the pasture. Utter darkness.
I try to remember my father's face
as clearly as I saw it
in that other cave: after-images
of his smile, of his kind, tired eyes;
horn-rimmed glasses he could move with his ears;
the chilled internal hues of stalactites;
slick deposits of calcified limestone,
fading from distinct into absolute black;
a flash of white, a milky pony,
calla in a field.

Below

In the dark of the crawl space, the ear
gives up its desperation to see, blind witness
to what has seeped into the grain beneath the carpet
and trickles from the rooms above.
You can hear her step-beats at the side door,
jangle of keys crossing from kitchen to closet,
dropped pot cracking a tile.
Below the floorboards, hidden
in a hollow of calm regard,
you embellish the silences with imagined gestures:
her hand on the arm of the sofa, thumb
circling against the nap. No. Wiping the mirror
with a soft cloth. That squeak:
ammonia on glass. Tinker-toys fall
from their cardboard tub, bright timbre of scattered
pencils. Perfume stem slides
into the bottle, lips purse, clasps snap.
The mirror has been kissed: trace of a red mouth.
Sounds drop into the calm as a hook
or diver enters a body of water.
Solving the origins—kettle, gabardine, cabinet, broom—
you could be reclining on the tongue of a giant clam,
air escaping from the corner
of your lips, infinitesimal bubbles
rising to the surface, pearls in blackness.

Disappear

Out of the cave which reveals its small mouth
at our feet after the sweltering
hike up the mountain to Cade's Cove,
cold air blows like winter
all over us. Your penchant
for linking chance phenomena to your emotional life
should be gratified by this swallow-hole of synchronicity,
echoing the ice between us.
We belong underneath, dissolving, as calcium
carbonate hollows limestone,
to shuffle passages between stalag-
mites and ooze through catatonic pools
as our blind skin turns translucent and the seams
of our closed eyes disappear.

Angelology

I grew up with angels
everywhere: Raphael on the back of the brush
mother used to loosen tangles
or plucked up in anger to thrash

my palms; banished to a corner, I'd stare
at lucent Gabriel on the plastic night light, count penance
from my chair, God's messenger glaring back, and fear
I'd used up all last chances.

In Sunday school I recited the orders:
seraphim, cherubim, virtues, thrones,
angels, archangels, principalities, powers.
I could never remember dominions.

Madonna of the Rocks hung above the mantle.
I imagined androgynous Uriel
turn in the grotto from where he knelt,
pull me in with his hand, call me beautiful.

Mother stitched angels through my trousseau,
envoys of my future wedding knitted on the night cover,
Michael sewn to the bodice of a camisole,
and at night I dreamed of falling with Lucifer.

Specks

On Saturdays the kitchen shone, wet-mopped
with gin-sharp Pine-Sol, fumes rising
from the silver- and clay-speckled
hard-yellowed linoleum.

Up-ended, chrome-legged chairs
mirrored the matching table, a furniture anarchy
transforming the floor, abandoned flecks
tremulous, ready to vibrate.

A black crack split the Formica
counter, swept with crumbs and spilled residue,
a soft space that gave under my fingernail,
darkening the crescent with grit.

Turquoise cabinets almost matched
the blue-green stove. The red-handed
clock I learned to read time by
stopped, as all stove-clocks inevitably stop.

When mother put her hand in the garbage disposal
to pull out a mangled spoon, I stared
at the on-off switch, willing
the cream-yellow walls to keep the idea
from escaping, as speckles
rose like carbonation through the chrome chair legs
along the slender crevice
to effervesce at the top of my head.

Cotton Candy on the Midway

Behold! The Human Pincushion!

See Roland! Half Man! Half Blowtorch!

The Amazing Ludlow! Swallows Thirteen Swords!

Begin with sewing needles in the cloth tomato,
its green piping and sprig of felt leaves
porcupined with metal, thistled with pins.
Remember boredom and the car cigar lighter
as you waited for your mother to return
from her errand in the farm store?

There are easy and hard ways of learning
about pain:
accept the examples of history,
or make empirical discoveries
with your own digits and the electric socket,
stove burner, safety-razor blade,
sliding glass door,
mousetrap—how lickety-split
does the wire bar whack?

Proceed: switches, cavities, bees;
handfuls of milo shoved
into your pants by Jamestown cousins
in the back of a grain truck;
the hollow throat
when the words from a letter
or yellow telegram or someone's chapped lips
rise like calliope notes

to play across the keenest layer;
the rest of your brain is sugar,
powder-blue, dense, just spun
by a carny with a dirty amethyst earring.

On the Zipper all your money slips
out of your pocket, clinking through the metal cage
like the coin dropped by his hand, horse-tooth
scar on one knuckle, at the Hoover Dam.
White flecks in the hazel iris of his eye;
Hadn't he once worked as a barker?

What would it take, you wonder,
to keep from learning the hard way?
The sugared cloud dissolves: your tongue
unspins the layers to reveal a paper dagger.

II

Transitional

If you drive fast enough at a red light it'll appear green

Ninety minutes past Cotulla the truck broke down; already she'd hiked eight miles of nothing but crippled mesquite. A word had risen to the rhythm of her steps: Omaha, Omaha, Omaha, always imagining the borders she'd never crossed, adding Idaho, Florida—all the three-syllable states, one beat for each lone vowel or consonant bundle until they scattered into other words: I, ten, owe, gone, Ma, flow, ska, alas. Finally, she leaned in the shade of a chinkapin grove, frog-leather boots in hand, studying the vanishing heels and her own spotted skin over thin-arched tarsal bones. Nearby, a prickly pear reduced to skeletal ash—lightning, or some kid's idea of dry summer entertainment. But had any kid ever been out here? Or anyone? Someone built the road. Would it lead her out or deeper in? No telling where that thrown rod had begun—one grit of sand left on the dipstick by a dirty Whataburger napkin—or where it would end. And if she turned up a rock there might be pill bugs, just like the ones she rolled into the cracks of Houston sidewalks, or held in her palm for stock-still minutes until the armored capsules irised open and hundreds of cilia-legs tickled over the edge, coiling to BBs mid-air, prepared for the impact of earth.

Exhibit

-for C. Bowman

Night. Texas. At the edge of a lake a woman
has pitched her tent near a lone nopale cactus.
Her fire casts shadows from a stand of thorny mesquite
into fluttering spikes on a stretch of limestone.
She waits for a man who is coming from Waco.
Each day, the man is another day overdue.
The only other people here have staked out the site
most overexposed—the one next to the wash-house.
Music from their radio expands across the lake's granite,
flickers to the opposite bank and fractures.
Each evening, the woman carries a circle of silence
through the click of the lunatic crickets.
Beyond her radius, a drone builds like static.
Now and then, within the zone of quiet,
a bold cricket mimics a Geiger counter's tick.
A break in the trees reveals the sky
shrugging apart. Dark clouds diffuse like hair in water.
Stars reach out. She imagines an astronaut
traveling through clusters, paisley bursts, whorls,
like fractals Mandlebrot plotted on X and Y axes.
Behind her, the complex world recedes
from a future less frequently asked for.
Each day the man doesn't arrive and the camp dog
barks at the campground deer--a placid herd.
She used to put crickets in doll houses made of matchboxes.
Her science projects depicted Orthoptera
pinned to panels of cardboard, labeled

“(subterranean) mole cricket,” “bush cricket (arboreal),”
“variable field cricket,” “tawny cricket,” “scaly cricket,”
“cooloola,” “raspy,” “lubber,” “splay-foot,”
“hog-bush,” “katydid,” “locust (extra-acoustic!),”
“carnivorous white-faced dectitus.”

Every day the man continues not to arrive, and every day
she hears them, bowing tibias across tegminas, grinding mandibles
in thickets out among the prairie flowers,
cosmos bipinnatus, petalostemum purpureum, phlox coreopsis.

Thither

1.

To attract bats, build a box
shaped like a book, with a slot for getting in,

daubed with guano
harvested from caves or bridge cracks.

A small wheel of wings,
glutted with midges and far from their roosts,

might be lured
to the book-box nailed high on your colonial,

stained the same bat-auburn shade.
Each evening, then, they will roll

from the slot to spin over your garden,
flick about the yard,

sonar bouncing off the neighbor who stands
flipping burgers on his portable grill.

Everywhere, sugar-cured leaves and bats like confetti
in the kinetic promise of autumn.

2.

I will have bats when I move to the town

nobody's ever said anything bad about,
far from the reiterating weather of this tropic,
where the planet's resonations match my own.
The impossible here will be possible there,
and I'll drive the underbelly of the country,
past Apalachicola, Pascagula, and Anahuac,
telling myself it's more than a place
where a window widens the shaded lawn
and no mistakes have been made—
with few neighbors, less traffic, more vegetable
gardens than anyone knows what to do with—
that destiny prompts me to the perfect alcove
where I can slip in through the crack.

When the Planet Quits Spinning, Gravity Lets Go

After four years together, wayfaring roads,
we abandoned the *Beast*—our '69 oxidized-red
VW camper—and quartered aboard *Rain Dog*,
a twin-keeled sailboat twenty-one feet long,
anchored in the tangled mangroves of the Keys,
where we finally ran out of space.

We'd had every landscape and all the open space
of Canada and Mexico when living on the road;
there was never a note off-key
between us. I didn't believe what I'd read
somewhere—that it wouldn't take long
for a boat-bound couple to become dog-

tired of each other, but even our faithful dog
grew snappish in that cramped space.
That's when I began to dream of highways, longing
to drop ten thousand feet again down the road
from Lassen's snow-blown volcano to Redding's
heady swelter. In the end I grabbed the keys

off the bulk-head nail, took off from Long Key
up A1A with the road maps and the dog
while the sun kissed the outer islands and reddened
the bay. Maybe if we'd had a more spacious
craft, or even if we'd sailed the boat we had—rode
some windward passage—I could've gone along.

But I'd realized, one torpid night, not long
after moving on board, that momentum had been the key
to our success, and the static death of riding

anchor through the breathless dog-days,
an interminable summer in one season's space,
poisoned the partnership like a mysterious red

tide; cells massing to bloom their lethal red,
as habits become loathed with prolonged
exposure, and toxins burgeon in stagnant space.
The perpetual sting of that mosquito key,
your tiresome one-captain-per-ship dogma...
What happened to democracy and flashing roads?

Now I'm searching through an atlas, dog-eared already,
not looking for a place, but for a road, keyed to motion,
where this longing can be eased in the solitude of space.

Sand, Creosote, Cyan

A lot of sand covers the world—the grains
gust in veils across this California desert road,
asphalt cracks blown clear then filled
with bits of rock and shell, fossils
of an interior sea. Memory sifts out
the causeway to a South Carolina barrier island
as I turn this souvenir stone in my hand, cyan
as the great glass jug lamp which lit
the jigsaw castles and gardens
assembled each summer vacation at Ventor's—
our cottage which years ago burned to the sand.

Since then I have lightened the load,
discarding possessions in favor of easy departure and motion.
You can only stay in a place so long—
I'm camped at the side of a bare rest-stop near clumps of creosote
whose smell blows surf spray; one drop stings
a shell-cut foot treading desert and shore,
landscapes folded in memory.

States away—New Mexico, Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi,
Alabama, Georgia—storms reform that South Carolina shore,
alter its southernmost curl, where my family once waited until low ebb
to ford the inlet, mainland beckoning
from the other side, the current turbulent with a retreating sea.
To stall erosion wooden breakers ribbed the island--
signs warning: *Danger! Do not walk on groins!* Laughing,
we balanced the vertical two-by-eights, girded beams
bolted to massive pilings creosoted against the surf's salt,

heat releasing waves of tar-ambrosia,
and at the groin's end we dove into high, slack tides,
then swam back, wet feet squeaking
fine sand, then tip-toed out again.

Now, the islands's south end almost touches
the other side, each shore reaching to become a bight,
and sand shrugged onto beaches by years of waves
overwhelms decks that once towered with white-lacquered steps.
The breakers eroded and pilings rotted, replaced
by mounds of jagged granite boulders.

When I was older, in the middle of a quarrel
I fled and drove eight hours to the island,
paced the winter sand, then slept the chill night
ocean-side in Vantor's screened-porch hammock,
dreaming an unchanging dream:

*At the back doors
of these summer-rentals
beyond a two-lane blacktop,
fingers of the wetland
empty into the tideway;*

*crabbing docks
stud the banks: hugging
the southerly shore, elaborate,
double-
deckers with cantilevered rails;*

*but north, on the marsh,
cross-tied, weathered planks
taper
into flats, out to square,
private worlds*

*graced by egrets and grass,
undulating river
tendrils traversed by the stilt's
beeline, now washed,
now bared to barnacles,*

*with forgotten strings
looped to bent nails,
chicken necks
dragging the bottom,
rotting delectable lures*

*for blue crabs
fated to be dinner,
orange-tipped
claws and blue chitin
pinked in pots of crab boil,*

*while fiddlers mass
on the mud flats, until
footsteps shudder the pilings,
then at once,
all violins*

*nip down bullet-hole
burrows,
to skittish eye
the world from the brink,
wary of re-entering the light.*

At dawn, when the picture window lit up with sun
boiling from the morning ocean, focused
by the even brighter cyan gem of a glass jug,
I walked the altered shoreline, to the burned frame
of someone's rental, picked up a souvenir shard of charcoal—
compact ash, light as air.

Shake up the sand with tar and blue; still there's blue
and tar and sand embodied in this self
who passes through geologies of sand,
sand embossed into my palms by arroyo walls
in the Santa Catalinas, Mead sand sifted in my boots, and Hoover
sand, sand painted and Vegas,
Mount Desert Island's grey-fogged sand,
right-angle-slapped against crags startled from the surf's blown skirt,
sand witnessed on the Sex Waxed board of Malibu,
lethargic sand dumped into *Golfo de California*
from Mexico's corroded edge.

Sand whistles in my sleeves, peppers my skin
at an impossible rest-area keening below the Mohave.

III

The Last Las Vegas Leaping Frog

*The Vegas Valley leopard frog is thought to be extinct
as of the early 1980s.*

—The New York Public Library Desk Reference

It started with the mob, their dream
to plant a glitzy empire in the desert,
that left our frail niche ruined,
the hummocks, prickly pears and cozy
Joshua trees displaced by casinos,
consumed in bounds by glimmering lairs
where gangsters hoard their pelf
and lure the dupes with wiles,
plying dealers, slots, and roulette wheels
to bilk the suckers of their most prized resource,
their moolah, their bucks, their green,
dough, jack, scratch, loot.
I call for another frog who might remain,
listen for a croak, a colony's piping, a bull's grum—
searching past hoodlums shooting craps
in empty service station bays,
through gutters sooted with exhaust,
by neon and chapel, dodging the shuffle
of loaded bettors, vaulting a crumpled Pearl can,
I land near a bracelet, clasp broken,
and imagine the desert, the hesitant rain.
Framed by irresistible odds,
I mark time until fortune deals the last hand,
take my chance past the treads of unbiased tires,
evolution's lost wager.

Jacaranda Rondelet

Jacarandas
and jack beans have violet buds.

Jacarandas
often harbor anacondas,
but not jack beans, whose sharp pods put
them out. No, nothing will do but
jacarandas.

Beef Jerky

for the ugly dog
napping next to pump 5 at the Citgo,
whose fur grows black spots
where wounded skin was, tail
curled over like a ragged party favor.

Mummy

Lemon, lost behind the veil
Of saffron kitchen window hem,
Resigns its glaze—the gamboge chrome
Dims to ochre, sprouts lace-gray mold.
And pungent zest, once linen-white,
Shrivels like ancient papyrus,
Will never spritz straight gin or fish.
The peel adheres to marble ledge,
In amber resin, final sweat.
A last attempt to plump the rind
Exudes the juice and leaves behind
(tang of ineffable craving)
A puckered skin and dessicated lumen.

Eavesdropping at the End of the Olympics with Commercials

Olympics

U.S. vs. Korea.

Shoot all threes! Dunk it!

That's a wacky hairdo she's got going there. Who's that dyke?

Oh, that's the coach.

What *is* that?

A bouncy little hairdo most of them got going.

Wow! They're really good at passing.

Too bad they can't shoot. Is that a white chick?

They can't get inside with those big mean chicks.

I wouldn't!

Look at them passing that ball around.

They can't rebound; they've got to do something.

How tall are they? Five-seven?

I can't believe they're going to show this whole game!

Give me some discus!

commercial

Dragster. Top fuel.

Awesome! Sign my tube top! They're havin' a sale at McFrugals!

Olympics

Ooww! Beat the crap out of him! C'mon!

Just tagged 'im there.

Are you allowed to knock them out in the Olympics?

How can they tell what punches really hit?

Y'know? 'Cause you can't really tell.

Knock him out!

weather bulletin

Predictable. Hot. Humid. Probably rain.
Where's Jackie Nespral?
She's not a weather girl.
She was cookin' at the food fest on the beach.
Did you talk to her?
No, I just longed.

commercial

What's up with this? Is it a real song? Figures. Some ancient redneck theme.

Olympics

AHOhhh YEAH! Who made the call?
He didn't even fall down.
Whoah! Jesus. Keep it simple...it's boxing, *amateur* boxing.
Why, it's the *discus*!

commercial

Think it'll be good? Wanna go? Wanna go tomorrow?

commercial

That one guy ran. I saw. He lost; didn't do good.
It's gotta suck--go back to UPS after losin' the Olympics.
Here; here's your package.

Olympics

Georgia fan.
White chick. Best of the white chicks. She's wide open. She's wide open.
They've lost three of five.
That's what they said. That's right, girlfriend.

What's a no-abuse clause?

Probably the coaches are bastards.

The coaches beat up the players? What the hell's that about?

You over there. You typing. You have no choice but to pay attention to us.

They're not gonna win. Look at her, like it all matters.

Thinks he's gonna beat her?

Slam. Slam dunk. Haahh Hah Hahhhh Hah.

Just chuckin' it. If there's no one near, just chuck it.

commercial

I like this *Get Shorty* stuff.

Never saw it never want to see it.

This carpet smells wonderful.

At least your dog's not movin' around;

When she gets movin' around she really starts smellin'. Probably makes herself sick.

Olympics

No shot putt—not this year.

The boxing's no good 'cause they've got some helmet on.

It's hard to keep the Olympic fever up when they have such lame events.

commercial

Blind Willy.

I never want to get a blues groove on.

You like the Shadows, Melon?

Never heard of them. They probably suck.

Olympics

U.S. vs. Cuba after this.

commercial

You like that Hannah.

I know...I don't know.

Hell, you'd buy Aunt Bee a chicken sandwich at this point.

I know. She don't look bad...she can cook.

Olympics

I'm thinkin' floor mat.

Yessir.

What? They have a class for every weight?

One twenty-two? One twenty-three? One twenty-four?

No, they've got classes.

What's with one twenty-one and a half, then?

I like those welter weights. They're quick little buggers.

Oh, he can hit there. Kidney punch?

Wahoo! Sweet!

Look at those fancy pants he's got.

He's got to get in there and swing if he wants to win.

commercial

Chew gum. Chew gum. You're crazy.

The Come-On

Leaving Taco Bell, we embrace.

I kiss the place where earlobe meets jaw,
inhale your hair. We part. You cross the lot to your truck.

Two spaces away is my sixty-eight bug.

The evening star is there, over the rush-hour
traffic on the boulevard. A red Mercedes inches by,
honks. Inside, a man in starched shirt and loosened tie
ducks to get a better view, beckons through the windshield.

I freeze, amazed at the invitation.

The man in the red Mercedes idles, one hand strokes
the passenger seat. He plans, when I get in, to take me
somewhere, roll the windows down, leave the AC on,
let the wind tangle our hair.

Do my baggy jeans, my bare arms, tell him I'm available?

Weak to an expensive car, the authority
of a business suit? Is he cruising for prostitutes?

I turn to note your response to this presumption.

You wait for me to reach my car, head keeping time
behind tinted windows to that new Los Lobos CD, unaware.

The red Mercedes man gives a last glimpse
and the angle of his shoulder coasts away; rear window
winking the parking lot's cadmium beam across me.

Mint

A penny tumbles from a book and spins
behind other volumes on the shelf:
Great Expectations; Treasure Island;
To Have and Have Not. The text
I've picked up, *Ancient Numismatics*,
isn't one I plan on reading, only want
to look at the cover—profile of a Roman's
eye focused beyond his circumference.
The coin—a marker? memento?—
drops from between pages
which open to scales of perfection:
“worn, but pleasing,” “slider,” “scarce,”
“fine,” “extremely fine.”
Loose change falling. What *changes*
about it? Is it *less* than before,
or *more*? How much
for a thought? Penny?
The chime recalls
another penny, one which rolled
on its third side to your foot
and tipped, obversely, onto its back.
And a penny saved is a penny earned; nothing
ventured nothing gained.
As I retrieved the small currency,
my eyes rose the length of your leg,
hesitated at your chiseled hand and billon-
banded thumb, tracked
your arm and fine-edged neck, ringed
ear and diamond-sided nose, then
as your head swung,

stared at penny-colored eyes—
dark cartwheels radiating
to the iris's keen bevels.
You know when the heroine sifts
her hands through a glorious collection,
a cascade of ingots, a rain?
Like that, I keep your souvenir
proof in my mind's pocket,
stroke the warm, *fleur-de-coin* surface.
Your representation sometimes does things
you might not do yourself. For instance,
while I was driving the Fiat to work last night,
your likeness and mine had the best sex ever.
Afterwards, I ate penny candy,
you smoked; patina'd breaths curled
around the luster of your eyes—copper
planchets struck with my twin cameos.

IV

Gratuities

I deal the bottle at the Diamond Tooth Cabaret,
Wicked Ales and Citron gimlets
served to faces I know, not by name, but by drink:
“Booker’s, on the rocks, right?” Bordello-red
walls box the thicket of bodies, mingled
cologne, and the notes of Anson Funderburgh’s Rockets;
the crowd inhales each others’ cirrus exhalations—
miasma of burley, broadleaf, Turkish, Havana.
Men hold out their hands to take my hand.
Farid from Damascus turns up my palm,
fills it with Marlboro coupons,
rose-water pistachio confections, beryl eye
winking from a gold charm. “Tomorrow night
I bring you spinach pie. I bring you contact lenses. What size?”
The upright jazz bassist offers heavy loaves
of buckwheat bread; a lawyer scribbles
verse on cocktail napkins—
paper tributes tossed like dollars in my tip jar.
But the wealth of Sense-
milla buds and twists of powder tucked in matchbooks,
Zombel’s hand-painted silk hair ribbons,
a one-inch edition of *Celestial Mechanics Made Easy*
carried from the smoke and soggy blues,
become uneasy tokens of pretended affection,
granting consent to lingering hands,
goodnight whispers. Against my cheek,
a kiss slips, the spit cools. Cold morning air
revives smoke-sanded lungs, tokens line my pockets,
and the men dissolve behind a vain, tobacco haze.

Stars? I Rub Elbows with Them All the Time

Ask me who's playing at Tobacco Road tonight--
"Booker T," I'll say, "But did you hear?
Cindy Crawford was in here. Had steaks.
Didn't talk to her, but
Everyone saw them—her and Billy Baldwin. My friend, Downs,
Filled his tequila shot too high; it slopped.
Gave her a twenty spot, anyway.
Hell, he's much better looking than Alec.
I swear, every man who came in said,
'Just can't see what's so hot about *her*.'
Kangaroos couldn't hop over each other as fast to say 'So what?'
Lord knows...what I wouldn't do for that
Mole, situated barely
North of that
Oh so
Perfect lip. Hell, I'd
Quit having to serve Buds to you greasers if I could
Roll my sweater in
Some tidal wave like she's got.
The only thing is, do you think she's really happy? I mean
Underneath her millions and her Scientology
Vows?
What do you think she'd give for a little anonymity? No
Xenophobic tabloid features, none of
Your drooling. Only a
Zone of private contentment.

Eureka

All the moons scratch in my head,
Pall-Mall-voiced as a Tom Waits song, loaded
with 5 AM yellow-fringed-lamp-shade emotion.
Is there any room left in our poetry for moons?
For the flipped coin, chalk-tipped cueball
in the corner pocket, knuckle-busted shiner,
Stax-labeled jukebox 45s, and one more round before
the blue plate poached egg and Alka-Selzter,
the moon like an incandescent idea solving the night?
Early morning offers up a perfect cup of moon,
cumulus steam rising from the rim, brewed
strong enough to wake Endymion.

Blues for the Following Moon

I miss the following moon, bright angel
hovering at the edge of vision,
pacing me out of Thibodaux: glowing yellow ○
constant at my eye's periphery.

When I drove—half-face in shade, half-lit by bayou
moon that strobed the cadent clouds,
hands, pale heralds at the wheel revealed in flashes—
blacktop buzzed beneath my tires;

tangled braids of ashy moss
graced the summoning boughs of oaks,
and armadillo eyes in culverts along the highway
reflected the steadfast moon.

My Backyard Is Not Brookgreen Gardens

*

When a diamond of the plastic-coated,
green, chain-link fence
frames a blue jay in the bird bath,

where the silted mud of summer
scums the concrete basin, clouds
the water, and particles of mulch

sift past his feathers to the down
until shivered from the bird
in a sneeze of motion,

I think
of statuary and topiary in a garden
my mother loved and took me to.

*

From my Florida room the dry lawn extends
until bound on all sides by a waist-high fence.

The fruit trees were felled by a previous tenant.
Grass fanatic.

Dryads roam the property, hardwood
stumps where their feet used to be;

I can hear them sighing—no passages
along boxed hedges; no live oak canopies of Spanish moss—

circled by Diana and her leopards gilt gold every tourist season—
grace that first fountain .

No shade-cooled
pathway leads to the stone-floored
out-kitchen.

*

Voices uttered from other parts
of the garden
enlarge the silence,
the distance between now and when
I examined the hearth
and shells displayed there:
tulip, conch, nautilus, scallop,
olivine, whelk, cowry,
and egg-sacks—
black pillows with delicate corners,
brought to Brookgreen
by Anna Hyatt Huntington
from local beaches: Lichfield, Myrtle, Pawley's.

*

Once, a bluebird perched on the bronzed head
of a cherub who surfed a leatherback:
real bird, metal boy, metal turtle, bird feet frozen
to the cherub's locks by a sudden fall of sleeting rain.
Bit of a bird, madly flapping azure wings,
as if it would rise, lifting
the cherub, the turtle, the garden.

Florida Room

Gallery of dead lizards, belly up on the ledges
of carnival glass, snail shell and opal;
white-painted rafters, kerosene lantern hung on a nail;
origami cranes in a row above the lamp
shade's warm peach-pleated glow;
under the black antique Royal typewriter—
Hartt's art history, slip-covered in Sistine-
restored Michelangelo; blue cobalt
seltzer bottle, tea tin packed with marbles:
Bennington pottery, homemade clay, aggies, puries,
catseyes, steelies; a verdigrised ship's bell
woven in the wicker of a hurricane etagere;
Hula Hoop, Lava lamp, Etch-A-Sketch, Slinky;
brass-topped wood blocks from old printing presses:
owl surrounded by moon, etched initials, scrolled
unicorn, girl in a bonneted polka-dot frock;
double frame of parents from the black and white
forties, twenty years old, mother with grandmother's
nose, father's paisley tie; paisley revivals
of the sixties and eighties, cultural yo-yos
and resurrected questions: will I ever be half
of a double-framed photograph, twenty years
younger than a daughter imagining other lives,
noticing the patterns, looking for her father,
turning into her mother, inheriting
aggies, a ship's bell, the nose?

The Finch

Dun-bellied dot of a bird
balanced in the chain-link's mesh
flicks up to a frond of the potted palm,

tail feathers fanned with sudden yellow
suddenly disappearing
when the bird lights down,

first on the fence rail,
then on the pot's rim, between
fleet acrobatic passes,

never landing
on the palm's green fingers,
smoothed feathers umbrellaed

open, flashing
their lemon against the gloom
like a jewel-ringed gesturing hand or blossom.

He's gulping rain
in flight, swigging beads
that trickle the palm's broad blade.

Just beyond the fence the bird-bath squats
full to the lip
in water echoed with rain drops—

too mundane.
The finch stitches his design;
but how does he drink when it doesn't rain?

Cosmology

*It is of the essence of matter to be intelligent;
It is of the essence of intelligence to be material.*

—Ramon Mendoza

Silk brocade kneeling pads along the altar rail's
wrought-iron scrolls of grapes and vines,
gray-block archways cooling the air,
I push against the bishop's hand
to tip more wine from the chalice, wash away
the thin communion
wafer pasted to my palate.
Arbor-blood mingles with the body in my mouth.
Each sonorous word of the sermon
lulls me to sleep until the creaks
of the pews, blue hymnals' rustled pages,
and the pipe-organ's introductory chords
jerk me upward into tremolo sopranos off-keyed
from the coral lips of chiffon-hatted ladies.
I memorize the Apostle's Creed, chant
melodious doxologies, but I cannot believe
in transubstantiation, never cannibalized anyone,
not even Jesus, and for all I know, the Holy Ghost
might be cousin to Casper. *Lettuce spray.*

*

For years, I trusted only senses:
Saturn's rings, Jupiter's great red football-spot,
the canals of Mars, whips from willow trees,

golf-ball-sized hailstones, crayfish,
humans, water-skaters, caves, and dinosaur bones
could only have resulted from random
vortices, collisions, recombinations,
not to mention natural selection.

In college, a course called *Mind and the Cosmos*
introduced proofs for the immanence of mind in matter:
synergy and the self-regulation of systems;
evolution in the face of entropy;
salamanders and violets struggling
for their own versions of frontal lobes;
convergence reflected in identical structures,
same particles, same stuff,
governed by the same force—
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of thought,
And rolls through all things.

*

Vestments, spirals, cloisters, naves,
altars veiled with callas and iris,
bells, incense—to glorify
a being with no body, no senses.
A sermon would be welcome
just before sleep, to anesthetize the dread;
I hold myself to the bed with mimetic beats—
numbers, days, names.
From window-squared panes
the street's arc-light casts a sycamore
in relief. A wind,
whose *why* has wrapped the house all night,
gusts the leaves' skirts up—white
slips sparking in the darkness.

Insomniac

Instead of sheep I count extinguished sounds.
The cumulative noises of the house
damp down in stages. Each new lull surrounds
the bed with layers of silence and a pause
that waits for breath--then magnifies a snore,
a wheeze, and amplifies the spigot's drip,
the whistle in my nose becomes a roar--
until, by bits, a shroud of quiet wraps
the house again. Imagine: an after-last-
hiccup-suspense, cicadas cycling drone
withheld, a startled ear cocked for the next
footstep. I lie awake and wish for one
last beat to break the stall and fill the room,
the resolution of a sonic boom.

What Marks Upon the Earth Are These?

On *Unsolved Mysteries* the aerial photographs reveal imprints like biscuits cut from rolled-out flour in fields all over England. Somehow, overnight, the wheat relaxes, lies down clockwise and counter-clockwise in whorls of different sizes. The voice-over pauses while footage of Stonehenge is shown for good measure. What Easter Isle or Druid dance might be at work? I think: “expression;” or *Contours Left in the Wake of Design*; template scraps; maybe a desire of the material world to show itself; cereal art: Wheat-Os; a shy and secretive code. What earthbound vision could conceive these flattened twists of grain which, viewed at great height, become vast pictographs, ideograms of helix and volute? Other geometrics emerge: lines connecting disks, rings in orbit, constellations of spheres, and five fingers cockscombed from one arc—a hand waving for attention. There have been lights reported in the sky. Do stellar drives from engine vents press the grass in manifold patterns until the bodies rest, as lovers lie on the rushes of an unmown bank, then rise to go before daylight? What vehicles of transport or transformation might have passed this way, leaving the indentations of diverse years—motorcycle and Model-T, catamaran and caravan, camel train and human? What marks upon the earth are these?

*The American Institute of Polish Culture Presents an Evening
of Music and Poetry*

Aliens would not be so recognizable.
They would, perhaps, flash subtleties of luminous communication
from various appendages
or sections of eye or face or emit
scents in range from hydrangea to methane.
If, on a gas giant, life evolved,
talk might be solely tactile—
sightless atmospheres and gale-winds overcome
by insistent nudges, disbelieving squeezes, or even messages—
biochemical newscasts, neurotransmitted recognition—
pricked by tentacle or spine or tooth into the receiver-being,
arcing the barrier of air and skin.
On this planet Wislawa Szymborska wins another
Nobel prize for Poland.
In the wine-dark room, Teresa Kaban
coaxes frog-din from the black grand,
and sheets and sheets of rain across the surface.
I listen to Chopin, to the slippery “zh” of Polish conversation
animated by the same practical gossip, familiar gesture, affect,
as universals of weather or ancestor transcend the known word,
because paths after all, are paths,
like prairie or brain fires signaling between points of origin,
animal, mineral, human,
grasses treaded, synaptic routes cleared,
strata to strata, or nest to nest, town or burrow or idiom.

Scattered

All things were together.

Then the mind came and arranged them.

—Anaxagoras

In the light of a low moon
the tracks in beach sand
could be stamped in snow,
fine, white grains
crunching like ice-crystals,
how crystals impacting at the edge
of constellations might sound.
Emerging from furrows—
corn or sea oats; and at each
burrow or spoor
I bend to label
the surface with my finger:
horseshoe, fiddler, ghost, blue.