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Where there's Smoke

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Where There’s Smoke

by

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Miami, Florida

Professor John Dufresne, Major Professor

This thesis is a collection of thematically arranged poems that explore one of the significant ways in which we define ourselves as human beings, that is, through our past and present relationships with others, whether those relationships are familial, cultural, social or personal. Through the direct presentation of images, these largely narrative poems seek to refine perception and thus reveal some of the complicated truths inherent in our various relationships with others, all in an effort to find meaning. The form of the poems often reveals a process, a continual redefining of views on human experience in both its life-affirming and disappointing aspects. It is through such discovery and disclosure that these poems aim to affirm the process, passion, and meaningfulness of art and life.
Where There's Smoke

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

by

Elisa Albo

1992
To Professors John Dufresne, James W. Hall, Peter Hargitai:

This thesis, having been approved in respect to form and mechanical execution, is referred to you for judgement upon its substantial merit.

Dean Arthur W. Herriott  
College of Arts and Sciences

The thesis of Elisa Albo is approved.

James W. Hall  
Peter Hargitai  
John Dufresne, Major Professor

Date of Examination: November 6, 1992

Dean Richard L. Campbell  
Division of Graduate Studies

Florida International University, 1992
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I. Home Fires
Lessons

I was eleven
when my father led me
down the hall into the amber
light of his study,
when he took out a drawing of
the female reproductive system,
clean and bloodless,
the velvet of the orchid-
curves full, tubes
delicate as eggs glistening
on the picture’s laminated surface.
Do I look like that?
I thought. Does every woman flow
and connect in four brilliant
colors? He explained anatomy
but I already knew the basics—
rumors that spilled from
my friends’ o-shaped mouths,
facts from my father’s
fat medical texts, notions
from my mother’s
magazines.

Years later,
an egg rapidly and
perfectly dividing
stuck in the stem of
my tube and grew till it burst
like a shower, warm pools
gathering in the basin of
my womb, draining,
leaving me pale and empty
for months. My father
understood the tender balance,
the science of desire.
I didn’t need books or
diagrams to explain
the tight line of my mother's lips.
I'd grown, and bled—
something small and
ill-timed had died
inside me.
Burden

Mother sometimes feels her mother doesn't love her, not really.

Grandma lives with her, can't be left alone,

having survived two wars in Spain alone with nine young children.

(Mother was the baby. When the boys found an egg it went to the baby, the whole thing, but she couldn't keep it down.)

Now Mother feeds her mother with her own family, rarely goes out and feels guilty when she rarely goes out.

Seven grown children scattered over the world see little of Grandma, receive her daily panegyric with less guilt no resentment to hide and carry.
Mima

Without telling me, my sister turns off
the gray highway and into the cemetery.
Mima is buried here, and since the funeral
five years ago, I have never returned
to this earthly reserve. She’s not here,

my Turkish grandmother, who sailed
from Spain to Cuba and New York,
finally landing in a small central Florida
town with pretty lakes and no breezes,
my Mima who cooked with lemons and
olive oil, told stories of her girlhood,
how her young husband died of pneumonia,
how she pretended to be Catholic and survived
with the help of nuns who knew. Years later,
her greatest fear was to be forgotten—
“Don’t say such things,” I would whisper,
echoing her words and superstitions.

She’s not here among these stony monuments
and trees. She was never so silent. I hear
her voice in my mother’s. Mima speaks late
at night in our crowded kitchens, at weddings
and namings and graduations; she tells her
great-grandchildren fantastic bed-time stories.

My sister finds a small rock, places it on
the headstone, next to many others. I do
the same, whisper Mima, I love you, I remember,
but you’re not here, not just here.
They can't help but be delicate,
these porcelain figures from Spain,
these one of a kind Don Quixotes,
caravel at frozen sea, angels, geese
and ballerinas, China girls—lips
and eyes and outstretched fingers—
each figure in tender tints of pink
and gray, of blue and fleshy hues.
My Spanish mother and aunts collect
them, display them in curios and
cabinets. They give them as gifts
to their children and nieces
and newlywed nephews, in love with
the prodigious art of our ancestry.
Why It's Delicious

Because my grandmother marched out to the end of the yard, threw the white oval seeds on the ground and walked away, and almost overnight the tangle of vines wrapped itself around the clothesline pole, the fence and screened-in porch. Then small green pumpkins sprouted and brightened in places so odd we had to move them to give them room to grow, or to keep them from breaking through the screen. And when they were large and heavy, Mima ambled out, lifted the pumpkins and carried them in to carve and cook the chunks for days in soups, with rice, and with lemon. And except for a handful, she toasted the seeds and we ate them with salt, cracking the shells with our teeth to reach the slim green meat inside.

Because Jeanne's mom planted and tended a garden that grew peas we shucked on her new husband's farmhouse porch at the foot of a Pennsylvania mountain, and she steamed them and served them for dinner with chicken and mashed potatoes. Because that bicentennial summer Jeanne and I joined her mom, she arranged a net over blueberry bushes under which, like clever birds, we snuck to steal the dark ripe beads. Because Jeanne's mom took us to pick fat strawberries we boiled and stirred into jam in huge pots all day and slathered on thick slices of airy Amish bread, and carried home in mason jars sealed with parafin, souvenirs.

Because the fleshy grapefruit in the neighbor's yard overhangs our fence and personally announces the coming of winter in our central Florida town and is sweeter and juicier than store-bought fruit I would never pay for and reminds me of the time we lined smudge pots up and down the rows of groves to keep the freeze from killing the crop, and of how I welcomed my first kiss one evening in the crook of the arm of one of those fragrant trees.

Because the moon was full and teasing the tide with her shimmer when I caught a striped schoolmaster at midnight even though the fish weren't biting on our side of the party boat, and you scaled and fileted my keeper on the dock,
packed the pink flesh in ice for the ride home, and I cooked it with lemon and butter and wine, and with our fingers, we feed the perfect flaky morsels to each other’s mouths.
At Marco Island

When he saw it in the hotel gift shop, my nephew held the small seahorse in his six-year-old palm. Is it alive? he asked. Once, I said, placing it back on a shelf, it swam on the ocean bottom with the fish and sand dollars. When the weekend was over, I gave him the seahorse wrapped in tissue paper. He opened it searchingly, twirled it by its curled up tail. I kissed him, told him that whenever he spun the seahorse, I would be thinking of him. Tia Elisa, he said, when I’m sixty, will you be dead? I wanted to do the math, figure my life expectancy, regret ever shrinking from the sometimes prickly skeleton of everyday existence in a city centuries from Marco. But there was no time. No, Sam, I said, I’ll be everywhere with you.
War Story

After the car accident, the waiting
to get my bones x-rayed, my wounds
swabbed with antiseptic, I sat on your couch,
a blanket about my shoulders, asking
for socks and warm milk, caressing
the bandaged cut on my leg. My heart
careened when I closed my eyes, saw
the head-on collision, the car spinning
180 degrees before finally, mercifully,
coming to a stop on the edge of the highway.
My cousin, your wife of one year, had
bruised her knee, put her hand through
the radio. You were lucky—not a scratch.
I extended my New York visit another
week to calm down, to heal. Early
the next morning, from my bed on the couch
of your tiny apartment, I listened to you
get up, shower. I smelled coffee.

Folded into the wing of the couch,
I heard the front door open and close.
That evening, when it opened again,
you were angry and confused—someone
had broken into the store, stolen
expensive perfumes. I hugged you.

brewed some chamomille. I was fifteen.
During the day, I helped your wife
to dress. We took slow walks, composed
the evening meal, played at cards
and slept again. As the morning light
seeped in, I heard you rise and close
the bedroom door, I felt your weight,
the cushions sink beneath me and come
to rest atop the frame. I smelled
cologne, turned on my back. Your
fingers moved across my forehead,
brushed the hair aside, stroked my brow

and cheek. You were twenty-five. They
slipped down to my chest, then further
down between my legs and lingered there.
Somewhere, glassy streams of amber perfume
spilled from cracked and jagged bottles.
I didn’t speak, just felt the bones—

your arm on my hip, my rib cage with
the muffled banging of my heart,
the wooden slats beneath my back.
The white wall rose like a bone—porous,
shadowless. Meet me in the shower,
you whispered. Wait until you hear

the water run. And then the cushions
rose as they refilled with air, the cold
condensing in my lungs. I pulled
the blanket to my chin and burrowed
into the sofa seam. I heard the shower
burst, the water drain, the front door

lock click shut. Two days later I flew home.
My father took my bag, my mother raised
my skirt to the knee and frowned. Both
embraced my newly tempered shoulders. I took
their arms and we marched out of the terminal.
An accident, I said, just a scratch.
This uncle hugged me a little too tight, a little too long. When it was her turn, my sister's eyes widened—he was holding her too hard. Each time after the long trip, Dad would pull the Pontiac onto the trampled grass in front of their house. Our cousins and aunt and this uncle would hasten through the metal gate and into our arms. It was only natural as we kissed my aunt, natural as we hugged our cousins, until this uncle opened his arms like a vent and too warmly pulled us into the darkness of his embrace. It took my aunt over twenty years to leave him, an air conditioning man, who died repairing an American Standard in The Comfort Inn while servicing the units.
She sits on the center of her kitchen table, her head leaning into her palm. She has sat there for hours, the stillness of the house pressing in, the second hand on the wall clock prodding each minute forward. On the fridge, bright carrot and orange-slice magnets pin airline schedules, pre-school paintings and reminders to the avocado metal: “This week we’re learning the letter C—send Cookies and Cupcakes.” On the table the cold water sweat has left her glass, the scotch and soda diluted. The amber ashtray her husband stole from a Quality Inn cradles a small heap of ashes, the burnt ends of her Merits. She could empty the ashtray, wipe it with a paper towel, set it back on the sill next to the cactus. She could pack a bag for herself, call a sitter and a cab, fly off to that convention in Garden City. Outside, a cat wauls for its mate, sirens fade. Inside, the refrigerator hums, the telephone doesn’t ring. Her heart beats round and round the stillness at the center where she sits, drink and cigarette—no desire to pour another, no strength to strike a match.
At fifteen she is married to a man she had never met. Her family gives her up like a weak lie, her life chattel, sold to her young husband's fold. The couple work hard; they learn to love. She tries to accept her place, enjoys her ritual few minutes each day with a neighbor when she engages in the relaxing squeezing on and working off of one delicate bracelet after another, the friend pushing the bracelets on, tapping one to the next, ten or twenty transparent glassy rings sliding like shackles over the tight narrow bone of her wrist. The young woman recounts her troubles—the constant scrubbing, boiling, mending, waiting for her husband to return home to eat, sleep, wake and go so she can begin again—tedium old as the Hindu gods. Every few moments, the friend pauses, gathers up the bracelets, presses the slight curves with both thumbs, testing for cracks—hairline breaks that scratch or cut. Four years later, a train accident kills her husband, severs her bond with his family. She is put on the street to beg with hungry bands of women, thousands of widows in Calcutta like her who belong to no one, who own nothing, who recall when troubles could be counted on few glassy bracelets.
Near Quitting Time

A middle-aged hairdresser silently twists a customer's thin blue strands. It's near quitting time and her make-up has melted into creases, the tips of her fingers brown with dye, stained like a mechanic's at day's end. When the phone rings, she pads to the white formica counter.

"Cost Cutters, can I help you?" Above her head, shelves of shampoo, conditioners, sprays and mousse promise miracle cures, professional results, instant hair repair. "It's me, honey," she says, leaning on the counter edge. I've got one more comb-out and then I'll be home." Magda pauses, twirls the cord like a curler, crosses her leg and rubs her foot" The moon at the beach? It'll be full tonight. But the kids, dinner..." She tugs at the plastic apron straps tied around her neck, around her waist. "Not tonight, honey, too tired. Maybe this weekend." She returns the receiver to its cradle, herself to her station, grabs a comb, and watching the mirror, teases her elderly customer's blue strands into a stiff bouffant.
Smoke Rings

When people ask her why she smokes, she doesn’t justify the indefensible; instead, she tucks the truth away like a strand of stray hair, concealing her continual connection to heat and fire, her preoccupation with smoke and ash, flint, sparks and lighter cap snaps. For her, smoking is a break in the daily trade, a bit of grace under pressure, a wedge in the teetering edge of a modern divorcée’s life. Alone in darkened bars, she likes the way smoking takes up space, filling emptiness with a lingering haze. At night on her balcony, the smoke curls from her fingers; the cirrus wisps the wind spirits away leaving whole lives to consider. And sometimes, when the air is still, she blows a wobbly wreath and jabs her fist up through the ring.
Critical Mass

Driving I-95 to downtown Miami,
I lift my eyes to
a huge cloud. I don't have to
conjure up an image—
the vermilion glow of the setting sun's rays
lights up the unmistakable
shape from behind: the billowy head—

the explosion—of a mushroom cloud.
I don't see a mesa in the cloud,
one of those flat-topped rocks
that rises out of the desert and sits
silent for millions of years.
I don't see a silo or a water tower.
I see the clear and shapely outline

of my fear, clear as the brain
in the walnut, the tiny white skulls
in the flower-print bedsheet,
the blood in the punch. These days
it doesn't matter if I'm an optimist,
if I recycle every scrap
and count every sticky gram of fat.

The truth looms before me,
though not in the clouds, but in decisions:
to scrub my stove until it gleams,
to buy a house, to vote, to teach,
to marry again, to have a child
and raise her, clearly, to see.
Migraine

My mother closes her eyes to press back the pain, to push back the fist that threatens her face from behind. She needs no country lawns or dingy yellow rooms, just the darkness of her bedroom, the stillness of her bed, and a hand to guide her there and draw the blinds. She swallows three Advils. She has tried them all—aspirin, Tylenol, Fiorinal, Darvon. I carefully close her door and watch the kids play in the den—somehow they know not to quarrel or shout.

My grandmother got migraines—she would sit in her recliner and rocking back and forth, press ice packs to her forehead, willing the demons out. I read about the latest research, clip articles, tape documentaries, ignore headaches and wait.
Elegy to Zoila Franco

I dreamed my aunt woke up and spoke without her cough. She sat down beside me, cross-legged, in the center of the living room rug and smiled at me like she did when I was twelve and asked her for a cigarette and she gave it to me.

“What are you building?” she asks in the dream, picking up my Lincoln logs, criss-crossing them in layers, the notches on each end dropping neatly into place, her slim fingers working with mine until we have built a cabin, lit it with a red roof, sat back in the resined glow.

Her lips curve evenly, not the crooked line of lips which have drawn on Winstons for forty years and extra oxygen for ten.

In my dream I want to declare my aunt’s home in Spain a no-smoking zone, bless her with two children, a husband who works days, fame for the fine white lace she embroiders evenings.
Instead she and I run
through a pine forest,
hands clasped, laughing,
weaving in and out of trees
when we come to a clearing.
Pine trees rise all around us,
their trunks slim and scored;
needles tumble to our feet,
purifying the air, laying
patterns on the intricate earth,
and my aunt can breathe easily.
II. Signal Fires
The war memorial outside a temple in Kampong Thum is a playpen. Bats and balls rise above the high wooden railing in a heap that hardens into slim hollow bones, bleached or brown skulls—the ochre of dried blood stains the cracks. Facing the memorial, half hidden in shadow, a young man stares, arms loosely crossed, eyes black as holes. There’s no logic to the arrangement; skulls, many jawless, tilt down, away from the young man’s eyes and to the accumulation of jagged arms and legs—tibia next to fibula, ulna dissecting radius—limbs far from ribs, leaning on heads like exclamation points.
Horses

Even before the panzers appeared like black crabs on the horizon to scuttle Warsaw, horses were everywhere. They pulled wagons dripping water, carted ice, fruit to market, children to school—their muscled bodies strong or bent, burnished with sweat, the clips on cobblestone, snorts and neighs, everyday voices. And those Poles, who were young but old enough, recall how hundreds of horses were crushed, their ribs cracked like twigs, bullets breaking open wounds that bled red streams with the heavy rains. They fell like pride fell in the eyes of captured neighbors, huge corpses collapsed, their legs rising, pointing, as if the crooked streets had grown stiff fingers: Don’t do this, we are innocent, you’ve no right. In a few days, their legs folded and slumped. Horses not butchered or buried began to turn. The rotting smell filled the streets and alleys, seeped through windows, under doors—a smell dark as the lives everywhere gone.
Forced Right

Spain, 1948. On the first day of school, the nuns tied her left hand behind her back. At lunch, they rapped her knuckles with a ruler. At first, the written words of the Jewish girl wobbled, her fork trembled in mid-air. Over time, a subtle switch occurred in the brain—a creative neuron from one side hastened to the other, was forced to analyze, and got confused. Today friends rave over her dinner parties; her handwriting is refined, though n's and m's appear upside-down. Her two daughters are lefties, her son ambidextrous.
Passage to America

At the Havana airport, soldiers opened my mother's suitcase, rummaged through her slips and nightgowns, emptied her toothpaste into a bucket—in case jewelry was hidden inside. Then, she has told me,
she and my infant sister and I landed in Jamaica, courtesy of a Jewish agency who had secured our passage, paid for a bed in a home for the mentally ill, and for the food orderlies laid out on tables like manna only when agency officers came to check. For seven days we woke and slept with no milk, just the nightly cries of misplaced minds. On the third day, my mother pleaded for an egg, which she separated before feeding us the yolk. On the fifth day, she threatened suicide—a small jar of strained peas appeared. Each morning she went to the bathroom down the hall, a baby in each arm, and brushed her teeth with a bright white bar of Ivory soap.
Florida

1. Lakeland

In fourth grade I learned that our entire peninsula had once been under water; that swamps rose through swirling fog, seethed and settled; that we had never had earthquakes. Then people moved in. Now the lakes smell like swamp water; children swim in sinkholes, see scum sway greenly onto the rancid banks, moist dirt dank and bristling with weeds.

2. Winter Haven

As a child I watched flames like white orange blossoms flap wildly off a twenty-foot cross. Robed men pierced the citrus-scented air with pointy hats and fists. My parents explained the link between ignorance and hate as we quickly parted the central Florida night. I worried the six-point star hanging from my neck and stared out the window at the diminishing light.

3. Miami

Years later, from the balcony of my high-rise apartment, I watched smoke rise from the rioting streets of Overtown—a white hispanic cop had shot a black man, sparks from his gun igniting pent-up rage that made daylight from night, the smoke redolent as that of the wildfires that blacken the sky when the Everglades spontaneously burn.
4. Davie

Western facades mask McDonald's and gas station food marts. Horses strut down city streets. Stopped behind a ford Bronco at a traffic light, I watch a man punch the woman in the shoulder, in the neck. She stares ahead. When his fingers get tangled in her hair, she pulls away. In the back seat, a small boy stands up, thumb in mouth, to watch and learn.

5. Yeehaw Junction

The sun drops like a pink neon medicine ball over the scrub pine prairie northwest of Highway 60. Vultures gather and hop away from road kill as I drive past. Then they step back. At night, miles from civilization, cars keep their brights on, stereos loud, A/C high. Behind sealed windows, their passengers can't smell the land.
The previous tenant of my new apartment subscribed to Prairie Farmer. I leaf through the pages on my balcony in Miami. The boom of bass-swollen rap blares from the street below. The dissonant sounds of car alarms jar the tropical air. I glance at special features: fine-tuned fertility and farmers who endure; Erval Borgie, 1992 master farmer, overcame hard times with determination, hogs and faith. His wife Betty says she's driven more sows out of mudholes than she cares to remember. A conspiracy inhabits these pages, against weeds: foxtail, pigweed, lambsquarters—against rootworm, cutworm, the animal activist threat. The atrazine label has been amended to lessen groundwater contamination, the trend is minimum tillage. Did the old tenant leave here for parts midwest, to a prairie where people overcome and endure, where they heed the farmer's creed to serve conserve. If he learned to plant corn and drive tractors, perhaps he will return to the bray of the urban landscape, to our city, having mastered the art of jumpstarting this engine.
On South Beach an old woman, standing on the steps of her hotel, leans toward the ocean, listening to the waves. With one thin arm, she grips the rail, her body bowed outward—as if someone were pulling her from the waist into his arms, as if the wind that stirs the cloud of her white hair props her up in the balance while tightrope tubes of neon brand the buildings next door and claim the once dying, now thriving neighborhood. She knows it is only a matter of time before developers double her rent, before she releases the rail and enters the night like an arrow piercing the sky in a graceful arch that rises, slips, falls and quietly slides into the vast black waters.
African Rebirth

After a drought the first night of the rains
near the Tives River belongs to the frogs.

as if from the dead, they rouse, push their way up
through the parting soil and erge from

the damp dirt to descend the bank by the thousands,
a frenzied amphibian army rushing to sate

their lust in the bubbly mud. Their canorous croaking
an Orphean concert, rises from the moist darkness

and rattles the stars, their passion a primal song
to the waking Savo plains.
Hurricane Season, 1988

In Miami we’re used to the threats and sometimes the punch of seasonal storms. Weathermen warn of certain destruction while the blade of a hurricane slices the palm trees and houses of little-known islands thousands of miles away. Along our canals, frantic men in rusty machines prepare for possibilities, race to cut trees—their shady decay whittled to dust in a few loud moments. And most of the time, we get only the rains, but still the trees come down, houses rise up, office buildings, strip centers, malls; our new jungles march toward both coasts. Beyond the canals, fields brown with gentle cows disappear. Already the grass grows in patches where sheep once nibbled and clipped. Last August, weathermen determined that a hurricane was hacking the Mexican coast. Here, the maelstrom has been sawing us for years.
Offense

When the drunk in Coconut Grove
grabbed my breast that muggy summer
night, I stood still for several stunned
seconds before—through the gel of clammy
disbelief—I raised my arm and shoved him
off. He staggered away with his buddies,
snickering, while all around, tourists
seated at sidewalk cafes drank beer,
chatted, slurped oysters from their shells—
oblivious as I shrank into a doorway
and gasped for air. Then I walked
back through the crowd to my table, told
my two friends, who told the manager.
No, I didn’t want to call the police,
to attract attention—surely the drunk’s
addiction. Yes, I was all right. He
was gone—white, blond, medium-build,
casually dressed for this warm Sunday night.
Assumptions

I’m pumping gas at a self-service Gulf station. Two boys saunter by—one chubby, one blond. I’m wearing a full Indian print skirt, a blue short-sleeve blouse. “Secretary, right?” the fat one suddenly barks. Not the first time I’ve heard this. A man who lives in my building once got in the elevator, pressed a button, looked me up and down, said, “Let me guess—legal secretary in a downtown office?” I don’t recall what I was wearing. He needed a shave. I gave them both my stock reply: “No, nuclear physicist.” A lie. The boys laughed and walked away. The man keeps his distance, probably yells at his secretary, assumes too damn much.
Fat Ladies

someone wrote on the brown elevator wall.
Below it, next to the inspection certificate
signed by M. Self, a scratchy beige spot
where the maintenance man tried to rub off

Ugly Ladies.
They're ruining the building, these kids,
says a short man who gets into the elevator.
They break into cars, litter the parking lot,
pee in the stairwells and steal newspapers,

Dumb kids,
I'd like to write that on their foreheads,
hoodlums—no respect for no one. He gets out
on my floor, nods good night before I can
tell him that kids didn't break in or steal,

Dumb man,
grown men did, and women with babies—security
guards have been catching them. I follow him out
into the hall until he turns the corner; then I
step back into the elevator and uncap my marker.
Uncertainty

I have students who when they write, do not capitalize the word God, who when they think, fail to connect their thoughts, who when they laugh, the laughter trembles with uncertainty, who when they love, some reveal, cannot decide to give, cannot decide to take—how much of each? Where do they look this up? To look within, is the answer up there?
Scenarios

In case someone grabs
my purse in the street,

in case the boss questions
my decision,

or I need to break
my lease,

in case I run
into my ex at the beach,

in case I wake up
in a strange city

find myself alone
and liking it,

just in case, I rehearse
the scene,

chart the moves,
recite the words.

I've never played
them out,

but you just
never know.
Ovens

My fear of death is a fear of stillness, of veiny cold and blue skin turning... unimaginable.
I’ve always denied the details of burial—the airtight vault, the sealed coffin, the certain decay—but cremation in an oven carries its own facticity.

I’ve seen pictures, the dark brick arches of ovens in death camps. Half-moons like mouths or jaws or caves, one next to the other, one on top of another. They barely resemble a kitchen oven or the polished metal square of today’s final burning place—ceramic urns and wooden coffins neatly shelved in solemn air.

My eyes can’t blink away the coffin or my ear blunt the sharp metallic click of the door snapped shut, the rising roar of fire dying as soon as it rises.
And who will gather
and scatter the ashes,
dry white flakes now fine
and managable—someone
with a memory like mine?

An oven is an oven.
Already I cook no
once-warm flesh, I eat none.
In my mouth I can’t deny
the texture or my teeth
the tense white bones—
the fear of stillness
planted in the earth.
Power Lunch

Three women at The Quick Wok Chinese Restaurant discuss hard drives, toss programs and floppy disk pull-down-menu lingo back and forth. In turn they input fried rice and greasy eggrolls; jaws update, download, processing bok-choy and carrots, steady as cursors.

No one smiles. Faces blank as tractor-fed printer paper stare at each other as if at cool green screens, love and laughter stored in back-up files. Their meeting over, the women skip the tea, smooth their skirts and exit, back to work, their fortunes wrapped in plastic on the white linen tablecloth.
III. Appassionata
Between the Covers

Your books are everywhere,
heaped on shelves against
your walls, in your concrete
block and wood plank book-
cases; stacked on your floor,
in your bathroom and on your bed—
vertical crowds with horizontal
newcomers resting on top,
shelf after shelf of everything
I’ve ever wanted to read, of
everyone I’ve ever wanted to know.
I can hear their wordy silences
pressing against each other.
I spend hours scanning spines,
filing names, longing to know
the soft edges, slight wood scent
and seductive dog ears—to know
them as you know me, to touch them
and trace their outlines as
you trace mine—stretched across
the white sheet, print on the page,
eyes scanning rows of cryptography
as you pass back and forth from
self to self, deciphering who I am,
and finding yourself. We need
to know, to take notes, to read
books and keep them close and
compressed as individual leaves
drawn together, as separate pages
bound by a fine, valuable cloth.
December Apart

While you are shoveling hard-packed snow in New Hampshire, I am eating figs on your balcony at the beach in Florida. With every push of your shovel, I bite down on the sweet brown beads. With each of your muscle strains, I split the skin with my teeth. When you gasp for a breath of air, I swallow a cool stream of milk. The sun burns the bare tops of my feet, warm as your skin beneath layers of flannel and wool. I finish the string of figs and close my eyes. The taste sticks to my mouth like flesh to ice, binding my desire for the sweetness of your mouth on mine, for the strength of your shoulders rolling over me in the swirl of sheets on a snow-blanketed morning.
Ego

You
may
think
in
your
cocky
way
that
just
because
you’re
my
friend
and
my
lover
that
you’re
everything
to
me—
wring
that
thought.
Belly Ache

You always loved my rounded belly. It has earned its toned and untoned contours—the binges and purges no therapist could cure for long, the shock of new life ignited, then doused. I dance to re-shape it, with Latin gyrations; you say it excites you, laying your head on the soft pillow of my middle. I’m not pregnant. I was once, remember? but it never left my belly whole, and sometimes I can feel it breathing within—you’ve heard me sigh.
Comforting Rituals

I push myself beneath your arm, snug as
the tight black curl
of your body hair
I find on the sheets when I make the bed
or pressed to my chest in the morning.
There is something congruous about this motion, something comforting about rituals brief but binding—
like a keen kiss,
like the harmony of whole words that pass soundlessly through the sum of our skin.
This morning, sipping coffee in the kitchen, 
I waited for your refrain—working late again—
for the door to close, for silence. But then,
something unfamiliar—a scratching sound. I
looked out: on the balcony screen hung a squirrel,
spread-eagled as if stretched on a rack, tiny
nails hooked into tiny holes, the light underside
of its soft gray belly smooth, revealing no sex—
a female. She hung there, suspended, as if bored
or caught. I hesitated to open the sliding door,
disrupt her, or cause a fall. I stood up, moved
closer and watching her, waited. With a scrape of
nail to metal, she scrambled to the ledge, one foot
pushing the screen, the other tentative. As quickly,
she was gone, to scale another screened-in balcony
or slip down a wall to cross the golf green and climb
a live oak—instincts pressed to explore the depth
of every surface, to test the skin of longer limbs.
She watches him slip out to the kitchen and open the freezer door. The cold air like vapor from dry ice streams out around his body, his hips and legs, all she can see, the half not hidden by the half door. He stands there, motionless, hungry or thirsty or unsure. Lying on the bed, watching him, she imagines that everyone is wrong about hell—fire, sooner or later, burns itself out. Hell is frozen. The wind chills and dries out the bones; ice traps and preserves forever.
Travels

Today as I clipped the dead leaves off the Swedish ivy you gave me last year for our anniversary,

I recalled our trip to Jamaica soon after we met—the lucent water of Montego Bay, the white wicker furniture of the Royal Caribbean Hotel, the curried lobster and apple tart in Negril; the red, green, black of flowing skirts and flags at market, the deep honeyed voice of our driver, who at the mention of a leak in the roof of the bus, sang out with the wisdom of an oracle: "It's raining all over the world, man!"

I recalled the sailboat built for two you were bent on maneuvering, the shockingly cold waterfall at Ocho Rios, the surefooted guide with seven cameras around his neck who snapped our shivering teeth into a smile, the grip of your hand when I slipped on a rock or went blind in the dark of a nightclub.

Our honeymoon was my first time to Europe—in the coldest winter in forty years. With you I stood in the glowing light of Spanish stone cathedrals, explored the narrow streets and crumbling Roman bridges of Salamanca, mused on the corners of Mona Lisa's mouth as intently as on the spectacular violets, roses, lilies in Monet's wildly ordered garden.
And after our trip, as we rounded
the corner back to our new home
in Miami, you whispered that we were
slipping out of a time warp, as if
we had never left, our travels
frozen on film in a faraway land.

Now I travel around town by car
and read about Ayurveda, Shambhala,
Zen; I attend lectures and seminars
on growth and spirituality, weave
large wicker baskets, drink filtered
water and unfiltered apple juice.
You take out trash, put away dishes,
sit through foreign movies, make love
with efficiency, but stare with blank eyes
when I try to explain my swollen lids,
my therapy sessions, why I can't get up
in the morning or sit in a cramped,
windowless office every day,

or why today I threw the ivy,
whose leaves yellow and dry up like
corn flakes fast against the wall.
wakes up, scans the papers, calls
the office, checks the foreign markets,
feels the heft of fractions & abbreviations,

rolls with the volley, the rally,
buy, sell, trade... HEY! (It's the wife.)
Buy me out, take me over, wrap me in your acronyms.

In her dreams, the electronic ticker tape
flashes across the rafters, drops down
the wall and onto the beige carpet. She feels it

slide up her leg and spine, up over
her shoulder blade and down between her breasts;
it slithers around her waist and tightens

its grip, the heat of red crystal letters
branding her skin. During the day, she calls him
to protest her diminishing returns, the splitting

of shares. He doesn't hear. He works the phones,
promises to labor like this, day in, day out
and weekends, for three, no, four more years

and then, he says, "We'll be set." For now,
past dinner time, he eats, showers, saves the shave
for morning, gets in bed and whispers, "Don't call

me before four—unless it's important,
and honey, the market was down today;
the market is emotional, you know." She knows.
Night Vision

You and I were in a house with twenty-foot ceilings and many narrow rooms, with wooden floors and three or four people in each room, laughing, lounging, talking. I couldn’t make out what they were saying, these people, mostly women with curly hair and either flowing or tight-hipped skirts, and they were everywhere, chatting, giggling in that house, the walls slanting, shifting upright, the chandelier tilting, chatting. And every night you were with a different woman, a beautiful or ugly woman—white, black or bronze—tangled in the sheets, hidden in the tangle and paisley sheets and blankets of your four-poster bed. And once when the water flooded under the wall, when it slipped from the molding in flat flowing waves, I knew your bed had burst, from the next room I knew and ran and rolled up towels and pressed them under doors and trapped the water. and you and the current one sat up in bed—surprised and
grateful and content.
You didn’t care about her.
I could tell. I knew
as one knows in dreams
she didn’t matter
to you, and you smiled
at me—you and I
are such good friends,
your Buddha smile said,
just wonderful friends.
Not just friends,
I thought, that’s not
what I want, standing
here at the foot of
your bed—my hands and
feet and hems wet—
I want to be yours, even
in this tall narrow house
with wet wooden floors
and so many women. But
I couldn’t tell you—not
when your desire got soaked
up in your caution and
trapped behind your face.
Whenever our gaze locked,
lingering like lovers’,
the walls shot higher,
iron bars crashed from
doorframes to the floor
which froze and shifted
under our feet; you slid
away, slipping through
the cracks in the door
to the next room.
I could hear laughter
and chatter in there.
These women didn’t matter,
none of us mattered—
you were waiting for
the one true one.
And I was waiting,
furiously waiting,
when I woke up
in a different house.
I thought I could get by, step over
the hole of the loss without falling
into its darkness, without flailing like
a pitched chick in the empty arms of
space, get by the sharp eyes of a judge
who dissolves unions in the afternoon
from a high wooden bench in his own
borrowed inner sanctum. "Were you
coerced into this?" the judge asked.
"No," I said, no, unless, I wanted to say,
the heart, the mind, the red of the soul
can be guilty of blind faith, of clutching
the moment like the front of a shirt in
determined handfuls. Ask me more questions,
I wanted to say, make my case different
from all the ones before me even though
I'm the eighth or ninth today, one of
hundreds this month. "Who is your witness?"
he asked. "My sister," I said, but there
were others I could have said, my family,
my friends, my God—they witnessed our love,
the happiness, can attest to the trust
we placed in each other. Still, we never
saw the end. But from his bench, I thought,
surely the judge could see more clearly,
say a few words... "This marriage is
dissolved," he said, and "good luck," voice
soft, echoing in my ear as I walked out
of the courtroom and through the revolving
doors of the justice building.
Hindsight

Even Monet's lilies,
up close, are nothing
but color, flat against
canvas, formless, incoherent.
You have to step back
and peer at a distance
for their beauty to emerge.
How red was my heart,
how smooth or scarred
the rounded palmfuls?
How does it look now
that time has given you
distance as it gives
others perspective? How
do all the others look?
Three Months after the Break-up

What you didn’t know
    is that my heart
        is the spiny arm
of a starfish,
    the large claw of
        a stone crab.

the missing tail of
    a green lizard
    who could lose a part
of herself
    in the branches
        of the brightest

royal poinciana
    and still
        keep her balance.
The Moons of Jupiter

The gardenia bush grows wildly—unpruned branches stab outward and down, white flowers glow like Jupiter’s moons on a clear night, the fulsome perfume adrift in the humid air. As I leave your house, you walk to the bush to pluck a flat-petalled bloom. I protest—you break one off anyway, careful to leave unopened bulbs on the stem; you hand it to me. I take it without looking into your eyes, the whites red-rimmed like mine—after nine months your wife wants you back. You hug me. I grew up with gardenia bushes in my yard, learned early about their petals, how easily they bruise. At the corner, I look at the flower—the white flecked with insects, brown with thumb prints—and let it fall from my fingers to the street. I turn and circle your block, drive past your house, circling again and again.
Interiors

When we finally moved in together, because the distances had become too wide and moments together too strained with partings, we took several weeks to hang all of our pictures, remnants of past marriages: your Erte with a beast draped like a dress around beauty—a study in perception—my Paris primitive of Montmartre, painters poised to draw tourists, the inevitably misspelled marquee of a sidewalk cafe. But the air ached when you insisted pictures hang high on the walls, museum-like; I wanted them at eye-level. We dropped one down, raised another while some ancient Mephistopheles circled, straining to squeeze the life out of our newly forged creation, of our attempt to get it right this time.
The Next Room

Do walls define
my current space,
contain the furnishings
that decorate this life?
Are words useful chairs or
flowers in a vase?
Is art the hand
that tidies up,
that beats the dusty rugs,
that pries the window up
and airs the room's
smells out?

Or is art more than that?
Not the pattern in
the quilt but the warmth
that wraps the heart,
the hand that pats
the child's head
but points its fingers too.
It spills the milk,
unmakes the bed;
it mourns the dead—
art remembers,
especially when good intentions
are lost or stalled.
With the tug of a cord,
the flip of a switch,
the strike of a wheel,
it lets the light in.

It's this and that.
With art we make
life the home.
We must—
before stepping
into the next room.
Appassionata

My aunt dressed me on my wedding day, expertly securing the white satin-covered buttons dotting my spine, smoothing my lace collar, puffing the sleeves—her fingers working the fabric as if dressing were an art. When she lifted a teacup or a cigarette, the slow movement of her hand, the arc of the line to her lips, held a grace that could answer prayers, or dreams. I didn’t know then that my marriage would not last, would end in the same year as her life, a life that taught me to fasten buttons, lovingly, into place.
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Where There's Smoke

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This thesis is a collection of thematically arranged poems that explore one of the significant ways in which we define ourselves as human beings, that is, through our past and present relationships with others, whether those relationships are familial, cultural, social or personal. Through the direct presentation of images, these largely narrative poems seek to refine perception and thus reveal some of the complicated truths inherent in our various relationships with others, all in an effort to find meaning. The form of the poems often reveals a process, a continual redefining of views on human experience in both its life-affirming and disappointing aspects. It is through such discovery and disclosure that these poems aim to affirm the process, passion, and meaningfulness of art and life.