

BRACKISH

A Thesis

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in

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by  
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~ I ~

## Pursuit

After the storm, we flew balloons over the Potomac.  
The shore moved with driftwood. I wove between ospreys  
dragging rafters and dumped my sandbags on the point's  
neon light. You disappeared in the high water line,  
leaving a wet trail of books, red leatherbound and soggy  
paperbacks. A mud toad puffed himself on Johnson's  
*Lives* and along the shore old wells filled like mirrors.  
Behind me I could see our bright silk shadow in the sky.

## **Photograph, Marina**

in the trunk of a car  
pulled up to the edge  
of the grey pier  
sits an Igloo pulled open  
revealing its proud  
mountain of ice  
the cubes glistening  
and beginning to melt  
around the edges  
the brown and green  
necks pushing up  
silver caps throwing sparkles  
onto the lid of the trunk  
sits a handed down carseat  
sits a baby buckled  
who sees wide strip of blue  
the white spines of masts  
with their sails furled  
and the great red-cheeked faces  
leaning close  
then gone

## Love for Three Cantaloupes

The summer we grew them in the backyard,  
tilled, furrowed,  
dumped out the 99¢ Safeway seed packet,  
spent June mornings pulling inkberry trees.  
And they all came ripe at once,  
dolls' head humps on the vine  
that spread over the lot behind the forsythia bush  
like a blacksnake across asphalt,  
its last meal swelling its sides,  
shiny surges of slick skin.  
My mother cleaned them in the sink,  
split and scooped,  
pulled mud and strung guts  
from the kitchen drain.

My grandfather at breakfast,  
bourbon and water and the *Rappahannock Record*  
by his bowl, shakes out the front page  
and sends me his stern sidelong glare.  
Spoon, salt and pepper— he says—  
like a true Tidewater Virginian,  
scooping up soft divits while  
juice wells in scalloped puddles like tide pools,  
rain caught in an upturned oyster shell.

But on the front porch we swing our legs  
and cut slices like trophies,  
great weeping wedges;  
we slide knives along the curve of rind,  
proud to touch the pad of thumbs  
without cutting through.  
We sketch a clinical crosshatch,  
quarter soft fruit flesh,  
and spear each bite, delicate,  
let it drip a moment suspended,  
before tongues touch summer sweetness  
and the soft pointprick of steel.

## Crabbing

On good days, the sorting took hours  
and the crabs began to dry in their baskets,  
spitting in the effort to wet gills  
a white froth that heaved  
through the slats of the bushel.

I learned to wield the tongs,  
separate clinging couples,  
crack the claws of hardshells  
so they wouldn't fight.

I learned to inspect backfin joints  
for cerulean bled to rosy pink  
and tell a peeler by the darkening  
segments of her slick, white belly.

I tossed leathery papershells  
off the pier into brown water.

They sank like leaves floating from poplars,  
kicking sideways and spiraling down.

Some afternoons I stood above the shedding tank  
and watched the struggle play out  
like a soap opera or war documentary.

The shell splits and the meat of the back  
pushes out, quivering, barely solid.

There is no return:

the body a death to pull slowly away from.

Dimpled green carapace slides from its shell  
with the speed of growing grass, barely visible,  
effort without sound, total captivation.

At the last stages, two crabs twist before me,  
the delicate unfolding of soft claws,  
limbs loosened from the trapping husk.

I carry a pulsing new thing like an organ on my palm,  
run bare-legged up the hill to the refrigerators.

## Coles Point Light

Come morning, all I see is fishing boats,  
lines cast among the rocks  
for plate-sized flounder, croakers, spot.  
On a clear day the new sun paints white hulls red,  
sizzles away fog on the Maryland shore,  
strikes bare joints of the steel frame  
hulking like some great aquatic spider.

My father, showing off, threads  
between stone and screwpile,  
the Evinrude spitting like a cat,  
crests slapping hollow against aluminum sides,  
a sound like a rainy Sunday  
in the tin-roofed Methodist church.  
I lean against the thwart  
to watch shadow bar my father's face  
and spread jungle gym reflections on the waves.

He remembers, he says—  
laundry flapping in a fall wind,  
the constant whitewashing,  
muslin curtains drawn at dormer windows.  
Now cormorants perch on stripped scaffold;  
a herring gull circles the reflecting panel,  
lazy, a fish head in its beak.

At night, mosquitos drift  
through rents in the screening.  
I swing on the front porch glider,  
stare into gridiron darkness.  
Off the point, a light blinks  
small and sure where it floats on the edge of sight.

~ II ~

## Considering Roommates, Early Spring

cold spell and the spider that shared my shower  
preserved till now by cowardice  
and my vain desire for peace on earth  
has succumbed

leaving its sticky cone in the windowsill  
unremarkable, netting no fly  
as if its black poet lived on moisture  
the margin

between web and weather, only sill's flaking paint  
these splinters, soft entrances for beasts  
that sidle and crawl, baby roaches, ants  
lizards

at night press up against the sun-warmed bricks  
tiny fingers thrust into pockets of mortar  
finical skins turn faintly rose, their lumpy forms  
throbbing

impatient for planter's moon, peach blossoms  
carrying the season against their spines  
their regimental heartbeat crumbles stone, conquers  
my silence

## Luna

Linnaeus must have thought  
the moon this color,  
but I have never seen  
the sky so green and bright.  
Sometimes I think it the color  
of a nearly-ripe lime  
or the neon highlights  
of the Corona parrot  
in the bar down the street.  
I am never persuaded.

That spring I was eight  
and married to the blonde boy  
who already knew algebra.  
Every day the blacktop  
was a different locale,  
a stop on our honeymoon safari,  
the kids playing dodgeball great apes,  
on Tuesday giant pandas.  
We were still surprised  
to walk into a world of wings.

He would have shown me  
the nearly imperceptible feathers  
and thick brown antennae, explained  
the cycles of death and metamorphosis.  
But I would not touch or look  
too closely where they had fallen  
thick over the asphalt and sidewalks,  
though it burned: two green wings  
caught in the chain-link fence.

## **Farmed**

mantis belly beats my window  
crossbar glowing  
shakes mica  
off my blinds  
I started with one  
you with black lips  
at my window say  
they eat wings  
& plastic bags I kept  
in my pocket  
said thank you  
my carapace eleison  
growing claw hooks and  
aphids (in large numbers)  
all young insects in your  
green glass box

## Love Poem

At night, ladybugs find  
the ceiling lamp, chime  
against the opaque glass  
with elliptical, buzzing  
insistency, writing rhythms  
like a gamelan choir,  
a rock fall sliding  
down a long, shale slope.

A kid, I thought they all  
must be like rubies.  
Now I know the gamut  
some brown, some yellow  
faded copper, the exact  
color of her hair—she always  
had something to prove about  
being a redhead.

After too many nights or minutes,  
she burns, with a scent  
of musty leaves, scorches those  
soft and jointed segments underneath.  
Ochre shells empty on my bedspread  
as if our insides could sublimate,  
instant, leave nothing to shelter.

## **Lizards**

In September after two days  
of clouds, the lizards start  
to slow.

I find tails on my path  
still spinning lonesome  
neon blue pinwheels.

Yesterday under the peach tree,  
a chameleon spilled  
intestines from its side,  
loop on snow white loop.

The landlord's cat  
sleeps on my doorstep.  
I write only of summer.

~ III ~

## **Stopping in Warsaw, Va.**

for a half gallon butter pecan & bloodworms,  
I raise my head from the sun-warmed plush  
of the back seat. The mutt knocks her paws  
against the rolled-up window,  
watching my father's back retreat  
across the dusty parking lot.  
A man sells cantaloupe  
and Silver Queen by the bushel  
from the back of a truck.  
I can see his broad teeth  
beneath the rusty bristles of his lip.  
The mutt makes two, sharp sounds.  
I slouch and watch the impress  
of my toes on the soft ceiling.  
Slow maroon bubbles move  
and refill empty egg spaces.  
Outside, the last noisy crop duster  
lowers to its landing. Red sun washes  
and leaves behind the fields.

## **I Play with the Colander**

dark kitchen cabinets and the knees of a woman  
    those cords of blue, those bony ankles,  
    my mother's mother's  
the narrow aisle between sink and countertop island  
    unlike her, such awkward geography  
    this must be the house on Diane  
and the straight line of a hem on the upward edge of sight  
    what arms and faces are missing, what voices

olive drab, the colander makes a good hat  
    each hole punched through into a four-pointed star  
    no one considered these small sharpnesses dangerous  
the rim of the colander touches my chin  
    but I can see this foolish hybrid child  
    is this even me, or a cousin, a sister  
the world is a thousand dancing spangles  
    the small, spinning lights of memory

## Manicure

My great-uncle had  
perfect fingernails,  
long eggshell ovals, fingernails  
that really tapered.  
Untouched by yellow when he was young,  
filed to smoothness: even  
when he began to forget  
his glasses, his bathrobe,  
my father's name...  
a lifetime of care left them strong.  
My mother never noticed,  
transfixed by his milky eyes,  
sour breath, straggling beard  
that filled with phlegm.  
But my eyes,  
on our rare visits,  
could not escape the bedrail  
closed under his folded fingers,  
each tipped white like candy corn.  
His hands were always so still.  
My mother never saw,  
but she would have loved them,  
loved them for their graceful curves  
and refusal to snag or shatter.  
She would have painted them  
in her million pinks and reds  
that she keeps in such neat rows,  
arranged in groups,  
from Blush to Blazing Cherries.  
She would have stroked them  
with her tiny brushes  
and all the coats would lie  
thick and smooth, not  
splotched and lumpy  
like the time she held my hand,  
too fat to be graceful,  
and tried to turn me Pretty in Pink.  
She saw me biting down the lacquered layers  
spitting blood and sharp edges.  
Now she talks of bad habits. As I  
strip up the cuticle with my teeth,  
gnawing patiently against the quick,  
I think of my great-uncle,  
alone with his file.

## Locks

1

For three years my hair has hung straight  
despite my mother's gifts—  
hot curlers,  
a sheaf of Quik Cuts coupons  
from the Sunday paper.  
Take Pride in my Appearance  
she says.  
Declare War on Split Ends.  
She stockpiles hair sprays,  
volumizers, and mousse.  
She has not given up  
on grandchildren.

2

Nights cold and faintly sour,  
lips vulcanized  
tasting smoke and Guinness  
on a stranger's tongue.  
I run fingers behind his ears,  
twist them through strands  
that glow in the amber stage lights,  
turn to brass in the morning street.

3

My mother cut hers at 30.  
At 40 my father let his grow  
missing the barber's appointment  
month after month.  
It took a funeral  
to win his grudging submission,  
but dusting the bookshelf one December  
I uncovered it in a cedar box,  
the six inch length  
still clasped by a rubber band,  
curled in its small compartment,  
a child sleeping and forgotten.

## **Babysitter**

The first time he kept us  
after my grandmother died,  
he watched PBS downstairs,  
Brünnhilde singing on a blue stage.  
In the kitchen  
I made Waldorf salad.  
It was white, so I knew to use  
lots of milk,  
laughing, unreeling paper towels  
to mop up what spilled  
over the sides of the crystal punch bowl.  
It seemed hours later,  
my sister asleep on the floor  
with a soggy apple,  
I stamped our return address  
on the linoleum  
with inkpads I found  
in the drawer of the dry sink.  
I never remembered after  
what he said,  
his face turned slow shades of tomato,  
only how he stood  
at the head of the stairs,  
silver hair glinting  
like the ring he still wore,  
rough hands loose at his sides,  
silent for a long time.

~ IV ~

## Family Business

There is something about sneezing blood into a Kleenex  
that reminds me of how Grandpa gave all my father's comic books  
to the Children's Sanatorium  
while he was away at VPI. That was the Christmas  
he never came home, and no one knew  
he had gone to Jersey with his wrestling roommates.  
Grandpa says, *he'll never learn.*  
My father studies the displays  
in collectibles shops and sighs.

Grandpa worked in the Sanitary,  
two blocks down from Marshall High School,  
waxing floors and swabbing cabbage.  
He wasn't paid overtime,  
but every day after closing  
he sliced himself a fresh bologna sandwich.

Grandpa tells me this in the post office.  
What he made an hour wouldn't buy a stamp.  
*In those days, we knew the meaning of hard work.*  
Once he came to see me after school;  
I was stocking lawn fertilizer.  
For weeks he told everyone he met  
about seeing me up on that ladder,  
but I don't think he really approved.

Coming home after midnight,  
I leave my employee badge on the mantle,  
move the pile of classifieds from my father's chair  
and watch paid programming.  
I know from the neat way  
the gravel is raked in the driveway  
that Grandpa has been by.  
Last week, while my father watched  
and muttered low deprecations,  
he sharpened our lawnmower blades  
in the height of the afternoon sun.  
*A man's got to do something, if he isn't dead.*

## **Circuit Court**

Deeds in the dark. Mellow clerks in sunglasses bury you  
in olive cabinets and heavy three-rings. Feathery red ants  
claim the peaks of working lunch. Crumbs flattened for  
posterity. Gossip blankets mimeographs and manila.  
Divorcée with million dollar home and DUI conviction.  
Love notes slipped in with court costs, remittance notice.  
Expense account dates in the county caf. Salad bar with  
history of tort, rubbery bacon bits. Salisbury with side of  
civil code. Lawyers tap glass, fight dull lampshades for  
the spectacled eyes of round-shouldered women. Jan  
squints, smiles into fluorescent hallway. Fist on desk,  
Frank stapling the land-disturbance permit.

## Celebrating Solstice with My Father

these slow paths the heart of city park  
each footstep prayer I must not place too quick  
must feel the age of the tired day, the present winter  
those who walk behind me not for the first time

ribbon of worshippers who wind this skein again  
inured to the eyes of joggers, come not for sport  
move solemn our separate silences into those coils  
fed one by one to the mouth of the maze

the cold is not enough to see our breathing  
a cloud of smoke rises from a fire  
a candle in my hands, a winter tree  
and all the black birds singing in its branches

the sun goes down; the people walk their dogs  
I watch the others from the fold-out table  
where my father watches, the Coleman lantern  
torches, tea lights, all his jurisdiction

the Dixie cups in which the candles shine  
the waxed bags weighted with damp gravel  
*luminary*, each fifteen cents at Whitman's Bakery  
and enough butane to last through equinox

## MESFLY

Every morning, head bent over the Jumble  
(silver comb-over swirl, faintly yellow  
from some old-fashioned product)  
hunched in the plastic arms  
of a mall food court's stackable chair,  
he solves the day's mystery  
and watches the young mothers  
with their children.

He would tell you, if you asked,  
of years spent in other places,  
dancing at Tantilla Gardens  
with Coot and Junie Hove,  
40 years safe driving for AT&T.  
He'd tell you of Dot, whom he taught to drive,  
a manager in the shoe dept. when they met  
and pretty enough to model dresses.

He'd show you a pocket of change.  
(He walks the drive-thrus before they open.)  
A penny saved is a penny earned.  
It amazes him, the things people throw away  
but even more what they come up with.  
A homily for every occasion,  
he keeps a dictionary for the toughest cases  
sure there's no word he can't unscramble.

## Poem on an Idea Stolen from Thomas Mann

The terraced courthouse steps  
are grey, limestone devolved  
to shades of wet concrete,  
the almost purple of the stratus  
that has pressed for six days  
on the finials and crowns  
of these stolid buildings,  
streets of pulped newspaper,  
graveyards quiescent in their cages  
of cast iron. On the portico,  
a stranger in a yellow raincoat,  
his black umbrella folded,  
spike-tipped, gripped around  
the middle like a sceptre.  
I long for airports,  
for the black grime of bus  
and train stations, tracks  
vanishing south into light  
that is heavier than water.

~ V ~

*for my sister*

## **My Sister Reads *Poema Veinte***

in the lap of the Lazy Boy,  
her knee drawn to her chest,  
book propped below her eyebrows  
and the half moon of her forehead.  
Words are fluid and thick  
like the undercurrents of black water,  
as forceful and inconsiderate of meaning.  
At full stops, she lowers the book,  
meets my eyes with wide brown ones,  
dropping *yo la quise* and *ella me quiso*  
over the precipice of pages.  
Her lips are dark and shine with spit  
and the book presses against her tanktop,  
under which she wears no bra.  
For me, she translates  
with a rough speed that admits no poetry  
and accepts no questions,  
brief stumblings resolved into firmness  
that strips sentences to a diary of truths.  
She claims the living forms of love,  
closes the book with a smile that defers to no one.

## Poem on Kate's 19th Birthday

It was good of me  
to call she says  
her voice stretched  
a kite string pulling  
against the knot  
the plastic spool.  
She's on the road.  
The spaces around  
her words crackle  
her news— she's been  
visiting Jimmy the guy  
in the photo— losing  
to the radio's stubborn  
electric guitar losing  
to static losing  
to the hum of tires  
the constant battery  
of wind.

## Happy Birthday

In the front room, the twins cut the cake  
and we've eaten it, or mostly, and Troy  
says what's left is like a fudge-covered pith helmet.  
Deb says more like something a bear left in the woods.  
She moves the giant pine cones around on the table.  
Nate readjusts the scented pillars by height  
and says maybe he should have used baking powder  
or soda anyway, and we all say it's just fine.

So Yuki says what we need is a little happiness  
and she turns on the lights, those Christmas whites  
that wind up the stair rail, and I pour myself  
another drink from the magnum, pinot grigio,  
which is sophisticated and cost efficient, and Deb  
arranges the candles so the whites face off  
against the pinks across the dark lumpy remains  
and Nate says probably it was the oven.

And now Deb is flipping through cards, but no one's up for a betting game,  
and Nate throws the dice from the Monopoly set again and again.  
Troy and Yuki are in back playing *100 Keyboard Classics*. Troy's taking bass  
and Yuki's running a long string of triplets down the treble  
in something that might have once been Beethoven but isn't anymore  
and the candles flicker and the wine in my glass glows and throws back  
the light from the Christmas stair rail and the smelly candles and sloshes  
and even the floorboards rock a little and Troy stamps the peddle  
and their four hands race toward each other and for a moment everything comes together.

## Venus Tazorac

In the morning, she rubs her face  
with tazarotene and by evening  
it peels away, bright mica sheeting.  
She worries, a little, but smiles.  
There is always more.  
Someone has told her, and she believes,  
in ultimate density.  
I tell her, you are not woman,  
more than everlasting.  
Hold your skin tight and sail with it.

## Notes from a Summer Mission

Kate writes from Juarez.  
Dust makes the sky more blue though  
less approachable.

She crosses left to  
right, bareheaded and sinful  
in the cathedral.

Only granite in  
Barrio Lavallo is  
grey baptismal font.

Flies settle on the  
knifeblade-ribbed adobe dogs  
who find no shadow.

Kate buys bright blankets.  
Yellow toothed concertinist  
breathes soft corridos.

El Paso snow cones:  
Kate chooses blackberry topped  
with chili powder.

~ VI ~

### **Prayer to Thoth (I)**

Moon-god, scribe, our alphabet  
is the second-hand of life.  
Ibis-god, invisible  
in the deep places when I call,  
Fly free, give me the vantage  
of your long-limbed height.  
Teach me to fish elegantly  
not to regret the things I pierce  
and swallow.

## University Church

No services today, it seems.  
It's spring break after all.  
The reverend's at home  
hiding eggs for his children  
and the light's on  
outside the church office  
(matthew five sixteen)  
but it's like they say—  
on the sidewalk in front of the holly bush,  
a waxwing, breast egg yellow  
flies rising up from its eyes.

## Eleousa

The Theotokos looks out from my wall  
at piles of unsorted laundry,  
congealed pizza, and the line of half-crushed cans  
contorting along a shelf's edge,  
hiding the spines of books.  
She says nothing, but her eyes sink  
through the room,  
bore past the drawn curtains  
into deepening darkness.

– I have walked halls where dark-haired men  
bend under a gallery of eyes.  
I have felt the sighs of a hundred foreign martyrs  
and watched George wrestle multiform worms,  
black, green, red,  
some with wings,  
one with the jowls of a wolf.  
In a room no living woman will ever see,  
above me, someone dipped his brush  
into egg whites salted with gold,  
traced my garments and the curve of my skull.

The eyes I meet hold more space  
than these cinder block walls,  
the TV, the corner of disheveled mattress  
I allow into her view.  
Somewhere in Russia she gazes  
with the same impassivity,  
leaf flaked from her nimbus  
to bare dark patches above the cheek  
she presses to her infant's curls.  
I am held by black pupils  
in a contest I cannot win,  
knowing there will be no rebuke,  
no softening at the corners of her set mouth.

## Vow of Poverty

these things you left me:

your kneepads stained  
with the red mud of Bath County  
where we camped and crawled  
through darkness and slept under stone

three cardboard picture frames  
patterned with sunflowers

candles  
not the long yellow kind you'll learn to make  
fat pink pillars scented  
with cinnamon and hibiscus

T-shirts too bright  
for traveling or novitiate  
the fringed blue shirt I always admired  
with its wooden beads  
and batik zebras

your calendar marked  
with feasts and fasts

you must have sold the viola  
on which you taught me a scratchy scale

where you go there are no *sisters*  
only *mothers* and you a spelunker  
in the stone home of women and God

you leave me in a parking lot, your possessions  
in the department store bag at my feet  
the stores are closing and the electric lights  
come on all at once

## Psyche

*after Susan Seddon Boulet*

The angle of your shoulder, bare,  
cast of your eyes and smooth, tilted forehead,  
like the wing of a shearwater  
over the archipelago,  
reflect summer's end blue.  
In your hands, the pale arc of egg  
you stole from a seaside nest  
or found, tossed and orphaned by the wind.  
You clutch it like your bridal posy.  
Do you peer beyond the frail shell  
to something deeper, pulsing?  
Do you sense the faint pressure  
of your fingertip,  
the shatters already beginning to spread,  
nearly invisible, radiating,  
making dark paths in the whiteness,  
a tapestry waiting to be revealed?  
Can you imagine  
the journey to hell?  
Here, the blue of morning  
seals your face like marble,  
perpetual maiden on the promontory.  
Eyes sear the distance:  
the flash of his wings,  
the heat of hatching.

~ VII ~

## **Dredging Rudee Inlet**

Land never ends at night,  
or sea, stars are only passing ships  
no farther than the blinking  
red green channel marks  
or running lights hung  
on the cutter's whitewashed stays,  
thin lines vanishing in air  
deny the hidden bulk of hull.  
Sun shows the spewing black tide  
pouring from shore to sea,  
dark with ulterior fluid,  
the pipe's mouth crowded  
with dirty gulls, squabbles  
over glaze-eyed fish,  
the rare blue ovule  
of an unopened mussel.

## **Cormorant**

At first, I thought it  
driftwood, a branch  
bored through  
by sand, smoothed  
and thinned in surf,  
a found poem,  
a work of modern art.  
Now I see the lattice  
is bone. Ribs curve  
around a shred  
of green weed.  
That dark burl its head,  
still feathered,  
beak polished abalone,  
and tide moving in  
to bury or expose.

## **Oceanfront Room, March 2000**

On the fifteenth floor, painted railings  
blacken into night. On the other side  
of the glass my mother pours cabernet  
into glasses she never travels without,  
deals a hand of gin rummy and waits,  
reading the menu from the Mariner Lounge.  
There is no moon, only a dull shimmer  
from the nightspots down the strand,  
below, a pencil sketch floodwall  
and pale, skirling ribbons dancing up.  
A northeaster keens and stirs the breakers,  
loosening spume: something white  
speeds past my face on a salt wind,  
tight like a knob of surfworn concrete,  
but soft, a clot of meringue.  
It strikes against the window door—  
the sudden arrest of a wood pigeon  
that lasted a week in my shoe box—  
but slides, one more streak on the cloudy glass,  
to the crusted outdoor rug as I watch,  
evaporates even to the last quartz grain glimmer.  
Inside, bulbs yellow stained comforters  
and the worn backs of cards.

## **Dream of Losing**

I woke with the years  
of another life,  
a hazel-eyed lover,  
a room with square windows.  
I fought in a doomed  
and noble revolution,  
learned the rabbit's sense  
for bunkers and caves.  
I ran through seasons  
and buried brown boxes  
sealed with wax.  
Today at my desk  
I forget all faces,  
the words  
of my clandestine letters,  
counsels whispered  
and received.  
I only see a cliff  
of yellow sandstone,  
a bright green verge  
of trees, how a hat  
brown and rumpled  
floats a moment  
on the soundless wind  
and falls.

## Phone Call from 900 Miles North

It's snowing here,  
heavy clots that dimple  
on the wooden dock  
and melt. The old wood  
turns spotted, then darker  
than the sky.

It's just cold enough for snow  
but the wind is icy.

It dives down each trough  
and kicks up white spume  
as the waves crest and break  
onto heaps of oyster shells  
smashing them to dust.

The snowflakes dissolve  
without even touching water.  
Wish you were here.

~ VIII ~

*for Sarah*

## **Tonight I am awake**

though you snore softly,  
two green and brown lumps  
under my grandmother's afghan.  
This evening, arranging  
squashed, square pillows  
on the couch  
so your head turns now  
toward my open door,  
you do not say,  
Since she left I cannot sleep  
alone, I walk  
past lighted windows  
and record the hour of moonset,  
drink bad coffee  
in the allnight diner, and wait  
for the five a.m. rush  
of traffic and birdsong.

## **Pet**

You said the squirrels—  
their brown bodies bunched  
among clover or sunk  
in the obscene cauldrons of cypress knees—  
remind you of rats,  
that you want to lift the furred fat of their necks  
between thumb and finger  
and stare into the igneous sheen of their eyes,  
to watch those quaint five-fingered feet  
give up swimming.

In the wet air under evergreens,  
you shift your hold,  
drop that bushed tail against your elbow,  
bring those buckteeth to your breast.

## Diademata

Today I read a Southern novel about siblings who are separated at birth and fall in love dooming three generations to incest and miscegenation in Mississippi and I wonder about you and the nights you spent on my couch that was really an army cot and how you and she and I found ourselves in the suicide ward eating sushi. And I brought you lilacs tied with a blue ribbon that I had to take back in my pocket and give to the nurse with my shoelaces and chopsticks. The wasabi burned my fingers green like the cones on the magnolias knocking at the grate on the game room window while we sat at the out of tune piano and sang.

## A Visit

*i*

I wondered at directions you did not write  
did not say follow me from tarmac to stone through red earth  
follow me until hills turn blue

I came along the weathered wood of your fences  
your dogs sniffed my fingers at the gate  
Gelert with his tail like a bone-carved scythe

how you have gardened your wasteland of walls  
these tulips by a local artist framed in town  
where shops line the brick-paved pedestrian zone

it's a twenty minute drive but we will go  
for a taste of India and to see the statue of George Washington  
with his three-cornered hat and surveyor's sextant

later we watch war films in your dining room  
with your porch light off not even distance  
is visible past the French casement

*ii*

in your room  
a wooden shutter  
bars the window  
presides over your  
strangely navy sheets  
you take the couch  
the greyhound covers my feet  
ribs  
digging in the round hill of my ankle  
redbud hills curling  
through my sleep like lilacs  
how they turn inward  
browning  
after a few picked hours  
a transient warbler  
beats his song  
through the shuttered slats  
August dreams  
in your bed

*iii*

in the morning you serve omelet  
you have forgotten  
I only eat the white

### **Prayer to Thoth (Lambent)**

and so you sheep-creeped through my nights, quiet, unairconditioned  
the summer waves sighed as if never rapacious  
and the moon-opening flowers thanked you for the easiness  
of slipping into your cold and exemplary eyes  
my curtains brightened the black sand and salt sheathed the long, quiet grass  
minnows danced their pavanne through the shallows  
everything you polished, and my snoring cracked against it  
with the stern, irreparable blows of a feather

~ IX ~

## Old Friend

*“And what would you say if your friend disappeared and his head came into the market in miniature?”*  
*~Kon-Tiki*

Late August and watching  
the wind in the peach trees  
lace together slender limbs  
with their soft green spear points,  
you can't help but think  
of whipping,  
the springiness of a switch  
still live with sap.  
And reaching to touch  
the just ripened fuzz  
of a globe on a lower branch,  
the pads of your fingers  
press leather, strangely dry,  
as if all flesh had rotted away  
leaving unmistakable his face,  
though no raisin was ever  
so bitter and you know  
that nature breaks away,  
the metamorphosis of mold,  
the crusted scars of wounds  
left by birds, this preservation  
is nothing so clean as rot.  
And he looks at you,  
you know the slope  
of his cheekbones, he squints  
and his eyes are moving,  
two black ants, and the wrinkles  
of skin are twisting, fierce,  
the head spinning on its limb,  
the dry lips working but can't  
force sound past blackened gut,  
the sloppy crosses of stitches  
for they scrape out the skull  
and pour in burning sand  
and you watch the jumping,  
writhing head and imagine  
his last words of anger  
or love or despair and press  
your thumb across the tough

ridge of his mouth, he's still,  
and later you'll say  
*he was quite unchanged*  
*except that he had become*  
*so very small.*

## **Dream with Crucifix**

The man and the woman are throwing bowling balls  
down the long red-carpeted aisle in the church.  
The people in the pews don't seem to notice.  
They sit with programs folded in their laps.  
Only one man in the balcony squints and turns through the pages.

The woman holds a ball like a dark plum.  
The man's is a leathery orange peel.  
The balls never reach the end of the aisle  
(those glass doors) or leave the bowlers' hands.

The woman's ankles are looped  
by the gold-plated rims of offering baskets.  
The man grows out of a floral arrangement.  
His toes are sunk in green decorator moss.

When he steps from the altar,  
gladioli break like felled cedars.  
When her soft sole  
moves from its circle,  
the choir begins its psalm.

## **Ursus Major**

At night, the bear gnawed at my shutters,  
ran long claws down the doorframe,  
battered the screen with a persistence  
I slept through like thunderstorms.  
The deadbolt was hail, rattling,  
the way weather can beat a channel  
into dirt long past dreaming  
of streams or silver mines.  
He took over the den, first,  
fortified himself in the armchair,  
wedged the footrest into permanent tilt.  
I suspected him of smoking while I was at work  
but had to admit the odour of charcoal and tobacco  
had clung to his fur from the beginning.  
Now I can hear him at the head of the stairs,  
wrapped in his terrycloth robe.  
Soon he will break a trail down the dark hallway,  
come for me with blood and honey in his teeth.

## **Dream with White Rabbit**

In the basement of Hotel Skyscraper,  
the train pulls out from the elevator shaft  
and runs its half loop over the track  
in the lobby again.

The little blue engine's steamstack  
reaches the bellhop's knees.

The guests queue behind the bellhop  
to watch the train's slow journey,  
its thrumming mechanical rainbow  
swallowed by the second elevator.

No one follows the thin black rails  
or stares back at the elevators' empty grin.

A man peers at a gold watch.

A woman rustles a palmetto fan.

With a billow of blue smoke,  
the engine spills into the room.

If a woman stepped up to the glowing tracks,  
she might see into those colorful boxes.

She might reach into the cherry red coalcar  
and pull free the warm life she finds there.

She might clutch it in her arms and bound  
for the stairs.

## **And the Tongue is a Fire**

My dream ribboned  
like kelp through the halls  
of another woman's house  
and caught in the kitchen,  
spun through the bars of chair legs,  
held by the wicker caning  
that closed its grate between  
the dream and the glowing oven's caress,  
though the light from the oven  
sparkled through the gaps in the withies  
like a constellation with Mars ascendant,  
so that when the gate fell away  
in the sudden white incandescence,  
the dream fled, seared and blinded,  
trying to piece itself together  
with the faint wisps of smoke  
and the puzzling smell of fish fry.

~ X ~

## The Summer Country

this is the dream where the jewel swims up from the sea  
many-limbed and climbs the sandy hillside into my fingers  
this is cancer, the house of my childhood  
feeding its layer by blue-green layer into my chest  
gorging its bits of bright white meat  
onto the black and grey *Waterman's Guide*

pulled apart– the tiny hooks, miniature hammers, dissecting needles  
paraphernalia of the front porch, the sweet bottom feeder smell  
smears over playing cards and bottle caps  
(all the time it was growing)

later, I could see it, the June we sanded the porch furniture  
uncovered red and white, hunter memories under years of turquoise green  
(I gave up seafood)

on the yellow beach, their shells, empty, blushing  
were not unlike those others (scent of Old Bay)  
before boiling, you must strike with an ice pick  
to keep the water from building inside  
I treasured the ones I found, wrapped in tissue  
their hulls pure art without chelae or fins  
dry memories of life's gelatin  
even then I knew how we eat each other

I saved what I could, the remnants, sheds  
from the hill I looked down at the flat blue sea  
under its lid, where we are growing

## **Branson's Cove, August**

Sharp-edged grasses curl  
from the sun, dying in  
dry patches that crackle  
with the salty wind.  
Weeks will pass  
before rain turns the hill  
to a blaze of russet  
washes the smell  
of baking fish  
and soaks black  
the wooden planks of piers,  
weathered now  
to a brown that is almost gray.  
The river is clear  
like beer bottle glass  
clouded in spots  
by zipper jellyfish, hugging  
their extravagant moistness  
in the shallows  
drifting toward  
the blinding shoreline sand.

## Pipefish

When the blacksnake came  
to live in the sunned stack of shells  
and tunnel his secret way  
through their iridescent bivalve husks,  
I got the spade

and let it fall like a piling driver,  
snapping the humpbacked oysters,  
silting his salty burrows  
with chalk and rusty iron.  
I drove that blade

through his flat, seamless scales,  
speared the sleek, fat roll of him.  
Everything essential leaked out  
and dried on the oysters and mussels  
like seaweed.

One morning I found his bony fish cousin  
driven up in the brack, curled  
and thinner than a winch cable,  
still wet with the slime of sealife.  
I scooped it

in my palm, its eye like a drop  
of black roe above the bugle snout,  
the limp triangle taper of tail.  
Into the quiet brown shallows  
I waded

and held that fish under, waiting  
for its cord of a body to whip  
and straighten, for it to float free  
and nose its needle self into dark water.  
I let it drift

safe, just behind the breakers.  
And when the river returned it, twice,  
I spread its narrow length out  
over the sand, where it emptied and dried,  
lovely little snake.

## **Granddaddy's River Ghazal**

It's a lot of work, keeping a place on the river  
Oysters and mussels, battered open by the river

I poured this concrete, built this whole damn porch  
Five miles out, tugboats toil up the river

Wouldn't have nothing without this porch  
Surf spits bones, sucks bricks into the river

Built the shower, too. Hung that aluminum  
The blue crab squats in mud, gives its back to the river

I run the flag up every morning, take it down when it rains  
Toothy bluefish kiss croaker under the heavy river

This place is a lotta work, a lotta work  
Nettles stretch their arms and drift down the river

## Potomac Ghazal

After weeks of rain, red blossoms in the river  
Glass-eyed croaker in the sand, choked by the river

Broken glass on the porch, ants in pools of wine  
Your voice louder than the wind lashing the river

One ruby throat swoops to drink from the gallon jar  
Tea steeped sienna, deeper brown than the river

Once upon a time in the black-and-white  
Ice made a bridge, we walked across the river

Spring tide, the moon pulls her skirts so far back  
The mouths of drowned wells gape along the river

Snap beans fall in an enamel bowl  
The lighthouse blinks in time, across the river

Slipping through wave crests, three black humps  
Dolphins, returning after years to this river

The night fog settles like a captain's bad dream  
Not even stars see what I see in the river



## Vita

Hillary Dalton Major is a native of Mechanicsville, Virginia, and has spent much time in that state's Northern Neck region. She received her Bachelor of Arts from Hollins University and her Master of Fine Arts from Louisiana State University. She has served as managing editor (2003-2004) and poetry editor (2004-2006) of the literary journal *New Delta Review*. Her poems have appeared in the *Potomac Review* and in the Norton Critical Edition of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*.