

BRACKISH

A Thesis

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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 Lavalle 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
smearred 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*.