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Still Lives

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Still Lives

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English from The College of William and Mary

by

Claire Lewis Pittman

Accepted for ________________________________
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

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Carey Bagdassarian

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Introduction

When I proposed my honors thesis project in May 2012, I thought I would be writing narrative folklore poems set in Appalachia and coastal Maine. I wrote a proposal explaining how I see stories like Möbius strips and how I wanted to preserve the cyclical, timeless nature of provincial folklore in my poems. But I wanted the poems to surpass the subject matter, I wanted them to be unsettling.

As I traveled this past summer, the project began to take on a life of its own. I wrote notes on everything I saw, took photographs, and even collected rocks from every place I stayed. Once the fall semester started and I had returned to Virginia, I traveled around Williamsburg and Richmond. I focused on my non-fiction writing, applied to MFA programs, and wrote the early poems in this collection. During the latter part of the spring semester, the poems seemed to crystallize on their own. I have honed my personal craft of writing throughout this process, but the ease with which some of these poems came cannot be attributed only to an improved technique. It was as though the collection reached the shape it desired on its own.

Still Lives became a collection about space, time, and things with and without skin. The witches and ghosts and creatures became mediums for theoretical concepts lifted from my academic classes. Beyond the theory, I wanted my poems to have an emotional and physical weight, but also to transcend their locations and occasions. I wanted the poems to have a tactile, visceral quality.

I have been collecting phrases to serve as a framework for this collection. The Jawbreaker song "Sluttering (May 4th)" reminds me I am allowed to be "neither sweet nor bright" as a poet. Roderick A. Ferguson quoting Chandan Reddy's work on "remembering and rejecting" ideas of home provided a phrase for me to sink my teeth into as I wrote. I know I want my poems to remember and reject. Elizabeth Povinelli’s mention of "teetering into the sublime” suggested a liminal space I could inhabit. I hope my poems teeter into that sublime realm where the terrible merges with the terrific, the awful with the awesome.

When it comes down to it, I don't think this project is quite done. I think it stands by itself, but I have not yet exhausted the well of information and ideas that inspired me. I look forward to the continuing evolution of these themes in my work.
I. Acadia

The Down East coast of Maine encompasses cities such as Portland and Camden, as well as islands such as Mount Desert Island. Mount Desert Island and several surrounding islands are part of Acadia National Park, and Cadillac Mountain in Acadia National Park is one of the first places the sun rises on the East Coast. I spent the first week or so of July 2012 in Acadia and the surrounding area. Summer up there is temperate, with a bit of a breeze out on the water, and the air is full of biting black flies. These poems have Maine in them: bugs and cryptids, lighthouses and dark Atlantic water, and the feel of an old New England town.
Familiar Witch

They say she attracts
bugs, familiar-like.
A buzzing halo,
bluebottles and mayflies.

At night she comes to me,
wings folded, cloaked.
I want to touch them,
feel the sticky softness,
the topographic veins.

She waits at the foot of my bed
repeating my name
into the stained-glass night

and leaves at dawn.
Fever

I have real thin eyelids
cobweb veins
beating with the sun
pulse me east

voices
bleed through rhythmic heat
eardrums rise to kiss
the outside rolling in
Creatures

Keep away from windows.
Trust me.

At night we are backlit
shadows pulsing through curtains,
the blood behind the sweet skin of your throat.
They can see us.

You can hear them padding,
the restless gravelly purr.

They are patient.
We will make a mistake.
Witchcliff

My feet cannot keep from the edge.  
The itch of her gaze  
rolls pebbles underfoot.

I do not waver  
under her instruction.

She promises  
company, filmy hands, slim shapes  
brushing shoulder to shoulder  
    after the slip-step.

I will join her under the pitched waves  
with ghost-kin girls:  
    long dark hair, seaweed uncoiling,  
    the porcelain glint of scores  
    of unseeing faces.
Upon Encountering A Witch At The Portland Head Light

Her spine lays rocky
against the fog's thick skin.

She can hear black-eyed susans
at the base of the lighthouse's
brick corpse

humming, the echo
of breakwater waves,
my rasping in her hand
tight around my throat,

the sun like buttermilk
curdling.
II. Appalachia

Western North Carolina. Specifically: Graham County, the only dry county in North Carolina, a place with roads named Sweetwater and Slaybacon. The Nantahala National Forest, Fontana Lake and Fontana Dam, and the Qualla Boundary. In the morning, mist rises like chimney smoke from the Great Smoky Mountains and my father used to tell me that it was from the rabbits making coffee. These poems are full of childhood ghost stories, Southern summer humidity, and the haunting presence of a place with family roots.
Instructions on Ghost-Hunting

Cross the swamp at night
into a slick fog.

Hear car tires reverberate
in your teeth,
in the creamy air.

Watch for the triple moons,
one rising before you,
two clinging to your back,
waiting.
Hagridden

Loose skin melts
from her back, pools
on the floor.

Leaded veins crystallize
on the surface
of her new face.

The eyes are the only thing she takes with her.

Slick flesh reflects
the knotty pine floor,
sleepworn sheets,
cold smoke curling
over my body.

I remember her in fragments,
eyelashes like a moth's wings,
knobby knee joints,
teeth like a child's
    small dirty bones.
On Assuming a Witch’s Skin

Begin by opening all the doors, the windows.
Remove the blueness, the water.
Sheet the mirrors.

Focus
on the external fullness of the room,
the air inside itching,
the tidal pull of bodies through space,
the full moon.

Forget the waiting, the inversion,
your heart in your throat,

not the long gullet of the sky
opening for you.
The First in a Series of Theories on Ghosts

The girl and her ghost
occupy the same space
give or take a ten foot radius
in a lost cove
high above Tennessee
where the black woods curl
round an angry river.

One night he appears
in the arc of windshield wipers,
in the red reflection of a buck’s eyes
in the frozen smoky breath before
the crash
tenderly, eagerly
waiting –
The Second in a Series of Theories on Ghosts

The girl and her ghost inhabit
the same moment
which is not this one.

The displacement requires
an assortment of calories and joules.

It is exhausting,
the process

of spending time together.
The Third in a Series of Theories on Ghosts

The girl and her ghost
occupy the same dimension
which is inconvenient.

It is a space roughly
the size of a shoebox.

Ghosts,
it turns out,
tickle like the dust
on a moth's wing.
Upon Encountering a Witch in the Car

She likes them before the blood cools.

I turned the corner to a green sky
stacked with clouds,
the crunch of vertebrae
under car wheels.

She appeared
in the passenger seat, pointed
teeth and sly smile,
still-blooded hand urging me forward.

Unwilling accomplice,
I was the gory one.

She knows me now.

When she is hungry,
she crouches by the roadside,
sends rabbits and possums before me,
wants for the kill,

the clean relief.
On the Phrenology of Bruises

Topography, diffusing yellow,
bleeding into humours,
raw under-skin prickly
with heat and gravel.

The knee will take eight weeks to heal.
It will scar, pale pink keloid,
a talisman against fear.
Where to Live

1.
A railway tunnel collapses into a fleshless man
his mausoleum is a study in ash and surfaces.

You tell me the sky has a good texture,
I think it's grainy light and chilled skin.

2.
There is a dead raccoon in the road. I can see the glint
of its teeth in the headlights. I want them in my mouth.
I want to run my tongue across them, to taste the shock
of salty blood. How did it get there,
dead and intact? The beautiful
composition, ringed tail perpendicular to the dashes
on the road that rings the mountain and supports
so many of the living and the dead.

3.
I live in flat places now
but once had smoky places,
the familiar ache of a mountain road arcing
into thin air.

It was easier there:
pick a curve and brace for the impact
of trees or nothingness.
That high, everything is deadly.

Here in my swamp of ashed trees
rising low out of the water,
I am too deep to sink further.

I will not die by drowning.
I will not wither.
III. Neither

Perhaps Williamsburg, or the places where I grew up, or even my near-future-home in California. Spaces, rather than locations.
On Ghosts: Four Poems
An Introduction to the Ghost

Are humans domesticated ghosts?

Theory One: Ghosts are attracted to mad people.
Theory Two: Mad people are attracted to ghosts.
    The difference is directional.

I am a ghost writing myself.
Remnants

Dream One:
black asphalt winding, stately columns of evergreens, forest paths where gunshots
echoed all night and I was not allowed to walk alone.

the thing with claws chases me. a paw reaches, claws my shirt, pushes me to the ground

i awake to five red scratches down the center of my back.

Dream Two:
low ceiling room, a honey-colored wicker bed
that slivers anyone who touches it,
a mirror reflects the bed, my pale body,
and one small casement window

spindly fingers close around my throat

i awake to a necklace of black fingerprints.
Considerations

A ghost is what happens when you move through space
(also time)
    which is why home video is so strange.

One is not haunted,
    one is partnered.

A ghost is a Möbius strip.
Ways to Die

Poltergeists: German “rumble-ghosts”

that break things,
that gaslight their human companions
    into madness.

There is at least one reported instance of death-by-poltergeist.
    The victim was a bulldog.

A television medium came to investigate.
He believed a water-based spirit-portal attracted the poltergeist, Jim, to the house.

*Ghost-water sweet-water
the tidal push and pull
keeping spirits in flux.*
Fibrodysplasia ossificans progressiva

stone man in your lacy second skeleton
connective tissue churning
towards something firmer.

*in the end, you could only move your lips...*
  but your jaw? your tongue?
  *in the end you could only move your lips...*

i hope you screamed
Articulation

The speech of square-palm hands and chipped teeth
rasps against my skin.
I am fragmented, collected.

When removing a pelt
with the intent to preserve,
invert the skin delicately.
Skin each digit separately.

The fleshless paws are clean and dry.
Notice how the fingers joint as expected,
curling slightly inwards,
resting.
Heliotropism

What is the word for turning?
Not the sun-pull but the slow tension
of unintentional desire.

I am married to the familiar
twist in my spine, muscles and ligaments
craning, the consideration
of fear.

There is nothing behind me I haven’t seen.
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