Still Life Drifting

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Still Life Drifting

A Thesis

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University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

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in
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Creative Writing

by
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For Barbara Esch Shisler
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Striking the Bamboo Chuk-bi: In Deliberation of Poetic White Spaces

In Buddhism meditation is key to attaining enlightenment. Some practitioners are known to meditate four times daily: pre-dawn, morning, afternoon and evening. In Korea a hollow, bamboo rod, or chuk-bi, is struck three times to commence a seated meditation interval then struck again fifty minutes later to signify a ten minute walking meditation period that leads into a final, seated meditation. The chuk-bi concludes the entire session with three additional strikes.

In my mind, the use of white spaces within a poem is as deliberate as the strike of a chuk-bi with the purpose of invoking contemplation just as the chuk-bi invites meditation. Poet Georgia Heard supports the overt use of white spaces by declaring that they not only "slow a poem down" but also "encourage the reader to stop and think." While true, I would go further in explicating the contemplative potential of white spaces. To me, contemplation is a deeper state of deliberation than thinking. The white spaces that surround words or phrases in a poem hold the power, like the chuk-bi, to focus the reader so that she/he may more keenly deliberate and contextualize the poem’s imagery. For example, in my poem "Field Notes,"

White-naped Cranes     acrid smell
of murky silt

although a comma could provide the syntactic pause that allows the reader to consider the relationship between the cranes and the smell of the silt, the extra spaces create a more deliberate juxtaposition between the elegant birds and the pungent odor. This is meant to invoke a deeper deliberation or contemplation of the two images than if the phrase read "White-naped Cranes, acrid smell of murky silt" which presents itself as more of a list.

This kind of invocation is not unlike how Asian poets have, with their poetry, sought to evoke a specific meditative state known as emptiness, or as in Sanscrit, sunyata, or as in Korean Buddhism,
gong-seong, or in Chinese Taoism, *wu*. Here, the implementation of white spaces becomes more abstract than literal. For example, in David Hinton's translation of Wang Wei's "Deer Park," no subject is offered, only a location of "empty mountains:"

No one seen. Among empty mountains, hints of drifting voice, faint, no more.

Entering these deep woods, late sunlight flares on green moss again, and rises.

As the poet's persona dissolves into the mountains it becomes a guide for the reader moving towards a meditative state of emptiness. The absence of an "I" is suggestive of a consciousness void of a self. The result is a poem woven with a stillness that engenders contemplation. In tone, my poems "*Wu-Wei*" and "The Tumen's Sunyata" intend to convey a similar landscape as that of the empty mountains. A landscape that is both tangible and transitory, that enables the reader to stand beside the aging ascetic, feel the brisk river, then flow with the water, becoming one with the curving bank. In these poems—employing white spaces and parallel phrases or images—I hope to invoke the essence of emptiness found in "Deer Park."

Having drawn my own connection between the use of poetic white spaces to invoke a reader's contemplation, it has not been my intent to argue that this connection can only be found in poems whose syntax and diction directly call upon the reader achieving a meditative state. I believe that even poems with sparse imagery, found in collections such as Myung Mi Kim's *Under Flag*, can provide a kind of spaciousness and intangible white space that begets a reader's deliberation. For example, in her poem "And Sing We:"

Voice

It catches its underside and drags it back
What sound do we make, "n", "h", "g"

Speak and it is sound in time

Although the pronoun "it" which we assume to refer to the "voice" in the first line, unites the subsequent images, the spaces that indent the first line and the sense of space around each, sparse image phrase results in a poem that reverberates beyond just a voice. The poem seems to expand into larger concerns regarding language, identity, and belonging. This expansive process lends a suggestiveness of the poet's choice of "n," "h," and "g" as intimating linguistic particularities, characteristic of voice named in the first line. The final line grounds the quatrain as it marks the pronunciation of the consonants in time. Without what I feel is spaciousness around its images and in spite of the syntactic pauses provided by the commas, "And Sing We" would run the risk of becoming finite.

Even John Asbery, who work has been characterized as free flowing and disjunctive seems to employ a sense of spaciousness. To this purpose he states: "My intention was to be after . . . kind of . . . taking language apart so I could look at the pieces that it made up."

In continuing to address poetic works that are inclusive of a sense of spaciousness, I believe that Imagist poems such as Ezra Pound's "In a Station of the Metro" and William Carlos Williams' "The Red Wheelbarrow" offer room for contemplation in spite of their objective approach to the image. In truth, an early submission of "In a Station of the Metro" was to include additional spacing between the image phrases on Pound's request. In addition to Pound, Williams and fellow Imagist Marianne Moore all experimented with white spaces in their poetry.

To be fair, there may be occasions when the use of white spaces or spaciousness may hamper the reading of a poem, when the awkward use of either white spaces or sense of spaciousness may cause undue fracturing affecting the consistency and strength of the poem's tenor.

Writing for me has always been a solitary task committed in quiet rooms. My poems are
annotations to the stories of others’ and my own survival. Certainly my adoption and upbringing in rural Pennsylvania illuminate the settings and nourish the scope and subject matter of my work. I want to provide white spaces and/or a spaciousness that enables a reader’s contemplation. This intent informs the spatial, non-linear aspect of such poems as "In Dreams" in which the archetypal dream life and waking life of the speaker, while inhabiting different planes of the speaker’s consciousness, undoubtedly affect one another.

Although I am most comfortable with free verse, I believe in the burgeoning potential of more structured, poetic forms. For this reason I chose to compose three of the poems as sijos which adhere to a fourteen-syllable to sixteen-syllable limitation, divided into three or six lines. I believe that the sparsity of this form and the bucolic, metaphysical nature of this form’s scope best convey the meditational aspect of "Wu-Wei," the sharpness of "Faded Sun," and the declaration of "Mugunghwa." Though drawn on a different verse tradition than the sijos, it also feels appropriate that sapphics inspire the narrative in "Ungnyeo," a tale of a woman reborn.

Critics may observe that poems such as "American Portraits" do too much by trying to bridge both the objective approach of Imagism and a more subjective poetics. It has not been my intention to create awkward gaps within the poem. Rather, I wanted to create a space that invites the reader’s contemplation somewhere between the poem’s precise descriptions and the qualities that distinguish the two photographs. For example, in describing a gaze in the black and white portrait as "heavy" as opposed to "even," while maintaining more objective descriptions, the reader is meant to discover the irony implied by the juxtaposition of the impersonal wording found on the form and the emotions projected by the girl in the second photo.

Early on, I fell in love with poetry which seemed to embrace what I felt were white spaces within its versification. The white spaces surrounded the poem’s form and imagery with subtle
nuances that enticed me to contemplate their meaning more deeply. These covert-spaces-between-the-text appeared a variety of poems from different poetic traditions. At times, it felt as if the spaces emerged from an underlying silence that was Mother to the poems themselves. Maria Luisa Spaziani speaks of this connection between silence and poetry in her epigraph to her collection *Star Of Free Will*: "When I use words, it is to pray that you hear the depth of my silence. A language does not exist (or has been forgotten) for what I have to tell you." Therein lies a challenge to poetry: to invoke an exquisite language that articulates the intricacies of the human condition even as it grants the reader pause to consider the poem's implications. And so we strike the *chuk-bi*. 
'Maternal Silence' is what I like to call it.
Life before the coming of language . . .
   Poetry is the orphan of silence.
   - Charles Simic
In Absence of Land
Along A Crooked Line

January in Namyung
arrests the Tumen until its shallows
suspend like beveled glass.

In white drifts,
embedded in the frozen river,
smooth stones mimic
small, gray loaves.
But here is something else:
a woman lying among the stones,
fallen on her side.
Her tranquil pose, her face turned
towards the riverbed,
suggests sleep,
conveys dreaming—
perhaps of scores of Yellow Amatas,
of obsidian wings
with ivory daubs
like eyes turned upward.

Eyes turned toward the light
fractured by the jags of ice
upon this glacial bed.
The Tumen’s Sunyata

This river curved like a woman’s back
sustains life as the senses
nourish perception.

Wading across its brisk shallows
once an aging ascetic released from his robe a hatchling
of Yellow-headed turtles while from his heart
trilled the song of a thrush.

As White-naped Cranes flew toward the south
he stepped with the current
until he flowed with the water
joined the curving bank.

No more did he sense the finite nature of things:
the stone’s shape
the water’s bite
his own heart beat
his even breath
or beneath the trees
the leopard crouched.
Night Crossing

Shrouded,
my warm breath moistens
the coarse linen; swaddled,
I cannot see, cannot hear.

Two coins secure
my lids; a third's
beneath my tongue.

The drifting boat
suggests a journey.
I arch to tear
the shroud
as firm hands
hold me down.
A blade I need
its flashing arc
to split this cloying
grave-cloth.

Crossed upon my chest
my hands ache to pierce,
before I reach the other side,
a tattered, rended gap.
Morning Puja

1

What river is this that lifts its voice with the trill of Olive Bulbuls?
Godavari, I am a traveler without a home.
I stand on your ochre shores as Dhow boats pass with lateen sails
and skirt your moss-green waters.
The flapping sails become beating wings exalting all my senses.

Blow southern winds! Blow now!
Stir Arrow-leaf in thanks
for the risen sun above the river
where we two sisters have come together
where we two sisters have come to gather spotted, yellow lilies.

Oh, salutation, lift
on the breeze, towards the sun.
Rise up and up
and up,
then softly fall around.

2

Through the swaying blades of Arrow-leaf, I glimpse two slender women steadying spiral baskets upon their hips.
Still concealed, I move in close to hear the rise and fall of their song.

Tenderly gather the blooms
then quietly kneel
on the river’s bank
to set them gently adrift.

Oh Lakshmi!
Oh Mother!
Our showing of honor,
a flower entreaty,
a desire for prosperity.

So long a man without a home,
I owned a restless spirit.
Now these two women, a cappella,
present to me this sun, this sky.
No longer fitful nor malcontented,
I'm calmed by their delicate voices.

The voice of the river
—the trill of the bulbul—
drifts with the blossoms
and brings us together.
We come to the river,
to offer flowers
and to sing with the songbirds
who always lead us home,
always lead us home.
**Boto, Boutu, Nay**

I churn brackish water  
in absence of land.  
Though the cloying silt  
resists each slip,  
my coral flesh  
penetrates the murk  
and silence.

Singing, she wades  
the shallows.  
Her pale hands lift  
delicate crescendos  
to the sky.  
Like a distant sonar,  
her voice guides me  
toward her black hair  
adrift in the water,  
toward the push  
of her body  
against the current,  
subtle and deliberate yet  
so weightless.
Ungnyeo

Enter, she, the blackish and gaping maw to be reborn. Thereafter one hundred days kept from the sun, consuming Felon and garlic. Like an urn pulled from a clay kiln, though fired deep within the rock, she emerges febrile from the cave in search of the sacred Betula tree with leaves as jagged as panther’s teeth. What desires reshaped Ungnyeo from a beast, then enticed the woman from the comfort of her darkened lair?
Faded Sun

By the weathered gate, beneath our tree, I pray for you to come.
Anticipating your sun-warmed skin magnifies my heartbeat.
As shadows grow and sunlight dims, this hallowed ground becomes my grave.
The Mirror Porcelain-Smooth
Through Beveled Glass

To pierce my own reflection yet leave the mirror porcelain-smooth, must I become the White Queen's pawn?

Fractured memories, like tea cups broken, have severed me from childlike awe & frozen the looking glass.

My moments suppressed are my Wasps in Wigs stored in my dusty, empty mind. Might a Jubjub bird, a Bandersnatch, a bitter drink or honeycake rejuvenate this chalky, dim reflection?
Jung Jun-Sook

I am old woman
made tiny,
rice-paper skin
over fragile bones.

In March,
when songbirds sing of spring,
I dwell
on that fragrant day
when my dark hair
brushed
across my smooth shoulders.
My arms, sash-thin,
encircled
the waist of a slim American
soldier.
His tour was completed.

Would be send for me?

His promises,
like sugared, fruited ice,
cooled
the sting of his leaving,
a hope offered,
beneath
the spreading shade of a Bodhi-Tree
while in my womb,
our baby slept.

After years of silence,
distilled
to matchstick bones and translucent skin,
I’ve become
this diminished woman who surrendered
her only daughter
to adoption, to America.
Each March I hesitate
and wonder, if in America,

will Daughter and be ever meet?
American Portraits

A color photo of her naturalization
depicts her in a scarlet pinafore,
laughing, between two, new brothers,
a baby-teeth grin beneath eyes,
dark & bright, her small hands frozen
in a clap.

The 3 X 3, borderless, black & white portrait,
taken one month later,
reveals her in a patterned blouse,
chin-to-chest, a turned-down mouth
anchoring her heavy gaze.
This portrait suspended, forever,
on citizenship document N-565,
between Country of Birth
and Name of Person Who Claims Her.
Mother Tongue

Annyong haseyo.
Good Morning.

Within silken amnions,
consonants flutter
toward tiny ears.

Yojum Ob-toe-Shim-nee-ka?
How are you?

Double vowels tumble
marble-smooth.

Jeon sagwa reul wonhaeyo.
I am looking for apples.

Portioned syllables
mingle and whoosh
with Mother's steady pulse.

Piga ol goht katabyo.
It looks like rain.
Yin Yang

Simple farm wife, you are me
yet not me,
perhaps
born of the same mother:
two eggs released
then separated
by half a world at birth.

Just as the ceiling
parallels
the floor, in my mind
you hover above me
like another self,
though indigenous, unfractured,
at peace.

In dreams,
you are the curving hem
of a cotton hanbok,
brushing
my knots, open-mouthed,
in the wooden floor
taunting me to unravel
my tight, dark gnarls.
With Seed and Spade

Dark soil sifts through my hands, allowing my mind to drift. Seeds shaken from tiny packets provide a gentle percussion to the work.

My mother kneels beside me. Her small, pale hands rock the spade to loosen the violet from its too-small pot. Bending towards her task, her broad, straw hat exposes a crescent of chin and cheek to the morning sun.

    Years of gardening, beside her, have eased my curiosity about the other woman, the one who gave me life.

Now Mother centers the violet into a larger pot, tamping down the soil snug against the roots.
Spring winds stir the Rose of Sharon and turn their vivid faces east.
A thousand blooms, blue, white, and red, colors of my adopted home:
though cut from the bush, the *mugunghwa* still outlives all other flowers.

*Mugunghwa*
A Gathering of Wings
Still Life Drifting

For JD

I cannot define
the shape of currents
that lull me into
nothingness
though emerald
waters teem
with painted fish
like fluttering
hands,
among the roseate coral.

With eyes stark-blue
you stand not safely
ashore with me
but tread these
pushing currents.
In silence I watch
you drift:
sleek    agile
and strangely aquatic.
This *Nuevo Orleans*

They are Caçaos concealing pink calyx flowers, rooted under century-oaks. They are Mesoamericans among Creoles and Cajuns—their corn preferred as *masa* not *pone*. *Silente y invisible* they rebuild our houses while scaffolds obscure their faces, their hearts.

Prepare for salsa-filled Mardi Gras, the clave-cousin to second-line beats; revel with Garifuna dancers gyrating to the cadence of Indian chants. Beckon to floats alive with *Punta* vibrating with fuchsia shades. The time draws near—though now without words they watch and wait, like ripening seeds within the pulp.
Summer Turns to Autumn, 2001

With purpose, they paraded down
Columbus Avenue, each on
their own trailer, fifteen in all.
John Deere, Caterpillar, Bobcat—
a menagerie of heavy equipment—
buckets and backhoes raised like trunks.
The stoic drivers stared straight ahead.

Amid the sidewalk,
everyone stopped to watch
their progress through uptown traffic.
   I remember the silence.
   I remember the absence of chatter
as the slow procession
of green then orange then gold
rolled toward lower Manhattan.
Meus Locus de Memoria

This sapphire sky, star-filled
gathered around
a gravid August moon.

To fix the North Star
among mnemonic pricks
of light, requires a sextant,
a crescent of brass.

Then it’s all about latitude,
alitude and angles
to journey beneath
this diffuse heaven.

Hauntingly candescent,
like dim-lit bits of memories,
the Milky Way thwarts me
with its celestial billions
stretched across
a darkened vault.
The Dream

The house was burning
so I ran
as hands-of-flame
grappled
for my tinder-clothes.
As the seconds split,
frustrated
and short
of breath,
I threw aside all I could not take
then the charred & blistered
walls became
(the) ash
& maple trees
that stood in groves
around my childhood home.
Now empty
these woods
fill me
with a heavy grief.

Next in tears I find myself
submerged within
a viscid ocean
embraced by faceless spirits
who sought my eyes
my mouth
my sex.
I had begun to dissipate,
plunging
towards the oily depths
until I shook myself
awake.

Now with eyes open and mind at ease
through the bedroom window
   I see swaying
      winter-branches
         backlit by the sun.
An intermittent warmth
sweeps across my face
   as pointed shadows play
      along these
         light-washed walls.
Five of Thirteen/Thirteen-Five

I

fitful thoughts
flitting words
like birds
deserting
winter roosts
of alabaster pages

tiny carillons chime
chime two even tones
inside the silence
morning birds have yet
to fill then swordtail crickets
trill
their lunar exaltations
as through the window
night-blooming jasmine
beckons with its scent

II

abandon
brittle
strophes

festoons for an empty desk

go out
into
the night

III
festoons abandoned
brittle
strophes

go out
through the windows
broken
swordtail crickets lurk
with a lunar exaltation

morning tones chime in twos
over
alabaster birds

winter words
desert roosts

like
fitful
thoughts

while night
beckons jasmine

IV

night thoughts
beckon
roosts

winter birds
trill
alabaster tones

lunar crickets
broken
swordtails

festoon-strophes

V

brittle
flit-
ting

    fit   ful
    trill

winter
night

lunar
roosts

birds
abandon

beckon

go
Il Rinascimento

Pale & lightly veined
as an adolescent leaf,
his right hand
skims the fragile pages
of ancient text.

His fingertip, lightly moist,
draws back across
the inky words,
then lifts to touch
his blackened tongue.

These archaic letters,
like fruits suspended
in forbidden arbors,
are as enticing as
a sumptuous feast.

As morning bells chime dawn,
his watering mouth
renders the parchment blank
as his skin turns gray as bark.
If Only in Sun-filled Rooms
On Reading Lolita in Tehran

Long, black chadors,
concealing like the covers
of hand-bound books,
obscure their vibrant blouses.

With movements deliberate
as silence, their hands
draw the opaque folds
across their mouths.

In the sun-filled rooms
of their professor's house,
they unveil themselves,
dare to read and even dare
to speak.

Their lips, un-rouged,
articulate Nabokov
as their tongues savor words
and mouths consume the script.

Mingling with their voices
in a strange duet,
distant shouts of morality squads
permeate the room
with a subtle, smoky perfume
that tells of another
library burning.
The Alchemy of Silk

A shrouded chrysalis,  
a pupa dormant  
whose becoming  
engages both weft  
and warp:

your tenement broken  
your body discarded  
for gossamer reeled  
into glassy threads.

A sacrifice for  
hanging bolts  
of earthy saffron  
and heady crimson  
that bear still  
your luminosity and  
the subtlest rustlings  
like the gathering  
of wings.
Wu Wei

Staircase waterfalls descend from misty, hanging catchments. Though they cascade gently, don’t repudiate their power. Every stone, in quivering pools beneath the falls, is smooth.
Private Field Notes

White-naped Cranes      acrid smell
   of murky silt

marsh grass interred in muck
   the waving blades
   stilled & crushed

   viscid sludge beneath my feet

absent chirps   of the *Teleogryllus yemma*

   or Golden Frog’s throaty gulps

cranes lift off then disappear
   in twos
   in threes
long beaks pointing
   towards the sun

   all around me   silence
Vita

After growing up in Telford, Pennsylvania, Kari Shisler received her undergraduate degree in Goshen, Indiana then kept moving west. She lived in San Francisco before returning east to Manhattan's Upper West Side. She feels fortunate to have finally settled in New Orleans, a city she has long felt a kinship with, where the music, the arts, and the cultural traditions are infused with everyday life.