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## A Cast of White Crabs

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A Cast of White Crabs

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts  
in  
English

by

Jessica Suchanek

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## Preface

When I think of poetry, Eliot, Pound, Moore, Williams and Cummings are the voices I hear in my head, particularly Moore's "The Fish" and Pound's translation of "The River-Merchant's Wife." The Modernist tendency to incorporate text and ideas from a number of sources helped to shape my ideas about the nature of composition. Also inspiring are the writers of haiku, such as Basho and Buson; I often consider the beauty of imperfect, everyday objects that many of their poems embody so elegantly. However, while working on this project, I wished to expand my knowledge of poets and their work, particularly contemporary authors. I am intrigued by Kenneth Goldsmith's theory of conceptual poetry; though I am not as "uncreative" as he is, reading his theories certainly spoke to feelings I harbored about the potential for the random and dissonant to become poetry.

In many of the poems in the following collection, the speaker experiences nostalgia for or imagined memories of something she herself has never experienced. I hope to explore the imagination as a mode for explaining the world and metaphor as a means for connecting language to physical objects. I have tried to capture the process of how a mind leaps from one subject to another and how this is spurred on not only by what one physically observes but by the words one uses to describe it. These poems attempt to make the everyday uncanny to offer a new perspective.

Stylistically, I have chosen to work in free verse with occasional prose poems. Lyrics tend to give a sense of organization and rhythm to the random or disparate. Prose poems often contain unexpected beauty or connections within their seemingly ordinary

lines. David Lehman states in his *American Poetry Review* article, “The Prose Poem: An Alternative to Verse,” that the prose poem often “moves at a speed faster than verse” and can “make the extraordinary seem somehow routine.”<sup>1</sup> I am looking to Stein and Eric Baus to try to develop my voice in prose poems. Both of these writers tend to work associatively, particularly Stein in *Tender Buttons*, a technique useful in creating evocative prose poetry.

Subject matter for these poems has been provided by the natural world, both past and present, by the lives of animals and also by the lives of individual people, how they are built and maintained in a harsh and disordered environment. To compose these poems, I have collected words and phrases from a number of sources, including overheard conversation, road signs, TV news, documentaries and Internet chats, with special attention to ephemera. In a few poems, I have worked exclusively within a group of words from a certain source and tried to arrange them in such a way as to bring out the mood or narrative I felt was suggested by the words themselves. In “The Trials of Civilization,” the poem is composed mostly of anagrams of two of the poem’s lines, “Neanderthals all” and “A nefarious few.” When browsing the words and phrases, many of them seemed to suggest objects or actions I associate with the prehistoric world and the dissatisfaction its inhabitants may have felt; I tried to arrange them in such a way that they might also suggest that to the reader. For others, I try to incorporate this data into the framework of narratives and descriptions I have conceived separately to create unexpected contrasts and relationships.

In my revision process I have found it necessary to work specifically on lineation

<sup>1</sup> Lehman, David. “The Prose Poem: An Alternative to Verse.” *The American Poetry Review* 32.2 (March/April 2003): 45-49.

and strophe breaks, as a history of handwriting poems in notebooks has not prepared me well for this. I have tried to use punctuation to create lines that can be read in multiple ways. The lines of “Something like Paul Bunyan” could be read in many different combinations because of the lack of commas or periods. I have also paid close attention to the responses readers have to the meanings or narratives of my poems; it has helped me to locate images or lines that are problematic or confuse the direction of a poem. In “Jaw” at one point I had used “glass clogs” in a way that was meant to be metaphorical, but when one of my readers tried to make sense of it as a literal phenomenon I realized that it was unnecessary and only detracted from the action of the poem. I replaced it with a literal image. This has led to the cutting out of superfluous material to make my poems more streamlined and focused.

At the beginning of this manuscript I worked briefly in persona, something to which I hope to return in the future. A number of authors have reading material to offer which utilizes this technique. One book I have found particularly interesting is *Lawrence Booth's Book of Visions* by Maurice Manning. Though his poems include more recurring characters and scenarios than my work, the way each poem builds toward a stronger whole, even poems that would not necessarily be very strong without the context, is useful to study. In addition to writing in persona, I intend to continue working with this group of poems, filling it out with more material. Poems in the style of “For from Garments Cometh a Moth, and from Women Wickedness” and “Jazz Age Dress Up” would work well. “The beauty of the idea that you can write a single poem is a lie,” according to poet Robin Blaser (qtd. in Conte).<sup>2</sup> With this in mind, I try to place every

<sup>2</sup> Conte, Joseph. “Seriality and the Contemporary Long Poem.” *Sagetrieb* 11 (Spring & Fall 1992): 35-45. Retrieved from [http://www.acsu.buffalo.edu/~jconte/Seriality\\_Sagetrieb.htm](http://www.acsu.buffalo.edu/~jconte/Seriality_Sagetrieb.htm).

poem I write within the context of my work as a whole, to see where it fits and what it may offer that is new.

## Section I



## A Toast

Here's to you, Ethel Allison,  
The lakeshore like a garden party,  
Coon-ringed moon over gator tail river bend--  
The debutant-gloved crab catcher, the parasol-twirling pig slayer,  
A skirt-hooped, dog-bayed sportsman's paradise.  
And Ethel, the duck gun queen;  
Copper-jacket slug struck straight through to my dumb heart.  
Knee deep, mired in luxury,  
Possum stole and Real Tree tux,  
Deer skull buried treasure out back with the Mason jars.

When the waters rise, the one thing you prop up on the hill:  
A velvet-Elvis portrait of Jesus Christ  
Wrapped in neon and Christmas lights,  
Nestled in God's plastic-letter proclamations.  
He makes demands of me  
While you shake and cry in your Levi's Sunday best.

Dead stale swamp gas smell down the pine bark beetle trail,  
The home of an enceinte rattle snake  
That broke its back thrashing when they went to drag it out  
For a fee of 500 bucks.

It's too much, Ethel--  
You heap it and pile it on me.  
*C'mon, Sugar*, you know I can't leave you now  
So you can take that boot off my throat--  
Gen-u-ine cow hide and tar-proof sole.  
I've had enough, Ethel,  
So get off my back and keep your damn feet to yourself.

## Something Like Paul Bunyan

400 square inches of orange  
Flow like a cape from our hero, ox-bodied  
He stalks stealthy  
Through the trees in the blue tick morn,  
In slick black hip boots  
Through the mud with slither hounds,  
Over tulip-crimped 410s  
But he's after bigger game,  
Packed to the gills with straight-cased nitro  
He's going to shoot  
A bristling hundred point buck,  
Head as big as a 440  
Iron-hoofed and rebar-ribbed  
He's the wild man, the legend,  
A tree-stump muscled, fire-bearded  
God of the swamp  
Whose tale whispers through the cypress knees

But meets with unbelievers  
Where the land dries up

## Honey Island

The heat, the wet, the breeze scattering  
my hair. A smell of midday grass.

Past the alligators, past the turtles, stepping over  
the brown-burned leaf patterns on the bridge.

Fingertips smooth over aged steel, ninety-six  
today. The toss, press of the button

the metallic slam,  
fingered  
so delicately  
then *Bam--*

The shock  
right through me  
with the sun against my eyelids.

The breath an ache in my chest that spreads.  
The plum-speckled bloom across pale skin.

## At the Broken Bar Ranch

It was their goal to breed the rankest bulls-- the ones who bucked highest and spun fastest-- and to breed the most of them. "I don't mind when they ride it," he says, "But I'd be lying if I said I didn't like it when they get thrown." I watched them funnel up the ramp into the trailer, each trying to mount the one preceding it. I saw one's ear tagged "Muckraker." Blue-white with a black-splattered belly. Crept up his sides, all the way to the folds on his hump. They told me he weighed 2045 lbs and he was famous. He had his own action figure. Perfect except where he lost his right horn to infection.

At Angola I watched a man ride a bull whose name I didn't know. He made one full rotation in the air before he broke his cheek bone coming down on a horn. I stood by the gate to the ring and watched as the ambulance pulled out of the dirt. A young man, an old-fashioned cowboy, looked from his horse. A webbed brace on his right hand that parted his gnarled fingers. He said, "That's when you find out what God gave you for a heart." Riding home on the road that twists through the compound, my brother-in-law told me "They raise their own bulls here" and then I saw. Grazing in the fields of endless yellow flowers. They seemed to envelope it, the island cut by the serpentine river.

## Jaw

Thirty-three in all  
That they cut out piece by piece  
And after that his mouth  
Was always stinking so bad  
That even his chowchow  
Was too disgusted to  
Stay in the same room  
As him. The rot contained  
By a stilted prosthesis  
In black, put in and took out.

It rattled until he would  
Tighten the screws  
Then it would pinch  
And leave bloody gills.  
Even that didn't stop him  
Placing a bit behind the lip  
Before where teeth were  
To taste but never swallow  
The spice of red tobacco,  
Blue mint Kentucky grass.

He said it would bring back  
That dizzying rush he  
Felt as a kid and never quite  
Felt again. Still, he was hoping,  
Welcoming the glue that sticks  
The tongue, the sputum  
Discharge, a fluid mass  
In the ears. Even when  
It slips back past the gums  
He tastes the blood,  
Tastes the lure.

## The Cul-de-sac at the Edge of the Woods

Nowhere else to go this November.  
We find refuge in stress pockets where  
The gaunt hoot owl stalks shadows.

May Day streamers limp down corneas,  
Sandbags in eyelids with turtle-green rings,  
Braided pastels flagging, folding like dry hair.

Shooting leaves before they fall, a twitch squashed.  
Shooting empty cognac bottles, curdled  
Milk fumes and coconut cheese. Shooting

Broken pigeons from each other's hands.  
A sour north wind winds down from the mill,  
Chunked pulp rot wafting in. We take our time

Lining up the shots, pumping little lead bells  
Curled in on ourselves keeping drunk-warm.  
The flat sound circles around the damp air.

The fog's already caught our breath  
In puffs like thatched pine pushes back  
White mushrooms. No more slick bills

To crack in the cold, worried colorless  
And soft in the creases. Blunt hands in  
String pockets, paper clips and one straight  
Pin, brown head bent.

Old River / Lost River

Stranded at mile marker 4 in the company of a raccoon  
That died palm out, we watch the sun set  
Reaching. Still reaching while we're making plans for our rescue,  
While we're leaning on the guard rail  
And thinking of the river.

The point at which they converge, without boundary.  
The swarms of eddies flow black  
And enter a giant moth-mouth with a shudder across the uvula,  
A whisper down the cilia, tip to tip,  
The chill like fish-flesh.

The Town

Tentacles around the county line

You stare  
Always from the doorway  
In flannel and threadbare calico

These dirt floors  
Molded glass panes, every third shattered

Toasters, sofas, dolls,  
slung around and heaped

Scorched weeds' leaves

The square-stamped  
DeSoto, Edsel, Pontiac,

Chrome-shone whales  
Stacked on each other

Once they would roll away from here

An abandoned slaughterhouse floor  
A grating

Offal fell through  
Skins, bones, bile,

Like your love  
A string of maybes who strung you out  
Pushed you along

You didn't know why

A gas station  
Scrapes

Pulls and spits  
On every cylinder

The only thing that's full of life



It burns through all of your days

The ground  
These people  
Termites

The octane  
Disposable lives

## Section II

For from Garments Cometh a Moth, and from Women Wickedness

Within stoves, more than a hundred cosmetics fled Boston Harbor for Canada, each with a sewing bag, a bag to cover their eyes. And where was the poor water? Poor supporters who read French and paper thoughts and other artists' bickering. But she ignores them and her ex-boyfriend native-of-the-ward and files concerns for the embroidery patient, for temptation, depth, and community. What's after marriage is iron, copies of third motif candies, children indeed taught to still cook. She excises want from her face and all mention of her father, forgets the lathe-turning design by an allergic adolescent. She wants to embrace the tagged pocked millions. Lamb handbags were replaceable, no singular patterns manifest, the flax seeds show in flyaway strands, in owl smoke. Determined jars she'll use to wash her heart.

Loviette

She counts the steps from  
here to there, fitting each  
foot into each linoleum

brick and stops when she  
reaches the one before the  
one that seats the table

leg. Some days she doesn't  
make it past the refrigerator;  
she sees the screen door

as a light box where  
silhouettes form, drop out  
to the cutting room floor.

And they greet her: a  
sweet thing, a pretty young  
thing, but always a thing.

And they bring her gifts:  
they stock her table with  
beef and fish with guinea-hens

and laced mutton, offerings to  
the queen with a jade  
bag and cream taffeta. She

turns every plate with oval  
dishes long-ways and patterns  
parallel to the edges. Sometimes

she spins unmarked ones for  
hours. She wonders  
what they think about what

she thinks about when they  
touch her, what she thinks  
about the way they smell.

She soaps herself quick and  
follows the arrows in the  
floor grain back to her

chair at the table near  
the phone on the wall;  
the cord takes three twists

exactly. She waits for the  
call that comes sharp at  
six but when it doesn't

she stops spinning and sits  
straight up, allows the twitch  
of her toe to keep the time

'til it does.

## A Rough Night on the Edge

With everything showered in slag.  
You bring it home, aching.  
Let me sooth your wounds in bacon fat,  
Kiss your palms, put you together with clothespins.  
I'll mend the cigarette holes in your heart  
With my heart,  
The pieces cut out by a crescent-shaped punch.  
I'll use my salt box secret, my peach pincushion,  
Smooth you over with country-blue mitts  
Singed fresh from the oven.

Go ahead and take a crack at me, Tiger  
Use a little brute force,  
Some elbow grease.  
Put your weight into it  
Like pounding rivets and feel me  
Real as the cold tile floor.  
It's no use using booze to scrape loose flesh,  
The cracked rubber edge of a dust pan  
Like blood down a broom handle.  
I'll spend the next day picking splinters  
From my red meat rib eye.

## Jazz Age Dress Up

With my whippet  
Flipped up on one shoulder

Lopped off at both ends.  
It's got a spread wide

But I won't worry,  
I've got that big ball double-ought.

Dressed in pleated  
Sky blue parachute

Pull on grogram sweater  
Tossed on veal skin seats.

Knocking knobby heels together,  
Pinch two fingers across my brim

I'm razor sharp.  
Riding a deep cobalt

Angled coach, wedged knife  
Cutting through the countryside

Barrel down hills  
Like oak-stuffed pine top

Bursting at the seams  
Tearing up the night

And churning gravel  
On the old bootlegger's road

To a coyote's keening tune.

## The Sexy Deer

Has all the amenities of a cuckoo clock  
Birds made of mushroom  
Mushroom made of sugar crystal  
Wooden leaves slit-veined to the bone  
Ruffles blue, red grosgrain  
Fluffed charmeuse in concentric white  
But mostly brown, every brown sensual and soft  
Tan, taupe, chestnut  
Molded to flocked antlers, fist-blunt  
Down smooth legs hooved in coal  
Hands with ten bright pink pinky toes  
A bushel of blushing grubs folded over  
An obsidian-cleft twat, waist  
Wrapped in saw tooth leather lace  
Eyelet arrayed in pendant buds  
A blank face over the round sound  
Of a spiral gong mouth





Sonnenizio on a Line from Edna St. Vincent Millay

You loved me not at all, but let it go;  
I didn't love you all that much either  
To tell the truth. I liked you alright  
But most of all I liked the feel of you  
On my arm and in my bed and when you called  
Me over to whisper, small and dear,  
"Let's leave all this to chase our mercenary calling."  
Then you stalled your '67 Mercury twice driving  
to the coast. I still see the tall pine trees  
We passed and the night we spent out in the salty  
Air, and tears, how they'd fall when you first left,  
Not for you but for all the coasts we'd never see.  
I didn't love you, no, but all too soon  
Time will clear a space for love to bloom.

Pete

She spent her youth in the fields in a big straw hat  
*just like the Vietnamese*, she would say,  
picking soy beans or digging sweet potatoes  
with dried mud on her hands like concrete dust.  
She'd tell me stories about her old dog Ben  
and how once he saved her from a copper head,  
about chasing down chickens to wring their necks  
and draining pigs into thin tin buckets.  
I don't even know where to start over a tasse à café  
in her tiny kitchen,  
the big furniture choking the hall,  
her rosary and bobby pins in a dish on the table  
over a wasp-patterned floor.  
A doorbell that would clunk instead of ding.  
The lady from the hospice says she might see  
people who aren't there but don't worry  
that's normal.

In that kitchen just like the old farmhouse kitchen  
and the ragged row houses imposed over  
the grey furrowed dirt, it's sometimes hard  
to remember, or not to remember.  
When she tells me she saw Jamie today  
I nod and ask what she said  
and she says well nothing, of course,  
because the dead have no time for talk.

### Section III

## Below Sunlight

Below the floating multitude,  
The tell-tale flotsam, a trail  
Of littered scales that catch a sparkle  
And descend, settle slowly

To the lower midnight.  
The barrier to the abyss like the shore  
Of the cosmos with suns shut out—

The drifting predators, the larva that propel past, corkscrew-like.  
The ambush predators with milky cataracts,  
Permanently gape-mouthed.

The fang-tooth tracks a pair of enormous yellow lenses  
That vanish in a streak, the after image lost  
Among a spectacle of jelly membranes,  
Beacons showy in a vacant room.  
An array of photophores.

Green and yellow and maroon sea stars  
Devour a rotting seal on the seafloor.  
A sprinkling of the many echinoderms.

A cast of white crabs over red worms and white fish,  
Chimneys pouring out water as hot as molten lead.  
The gathered feed off the sulfides and methane  
On the shores of a brine lake,  
Darker still in the prevailing dark.

## A Shadow on the Lung

the wa-  
ter moves  
like  
the crea-  
tures

move in the water sear-suckered with lace cucumbers and not-the-blue-ringed octopi that  
round their tentacles and filigree all in the same swell

pull in  
a boot  
a tire  
a cl-  
am

a croaker anointed and purpled with pectoral fins curved palm up in hallelujah hands  
while he dangled from the lip gills flaked white paint when

he pushed  
the  
air out  
with a  
ribbit

with a struggle and splashed back past the eyes straight to the throat *out of the air does he  
still make that sound* filling a sponge or jug with weight

where the  
alveoli  
are  
fish  
eggs

and a fish is a sheepshead I think *oranda cauliflower face, sleep's head thinking of  
caliper brains* do we wake under the water to the fawning hair

that mer-  
maids  
take  
the  
time to

comb in streams but it all lies flat when we wake to shallow graves even cephalopods  
shoot away in atramental trails that curl and dilate

out of  
the wa-  
ter to  
the  
at-

mosphere moonstained but who sings there who tilts back the chest to wash in more to  
choke on silt turned ash and we remind ourselves

to  
breathe  
til  
we  
drown

take all we can and chance to see the nautilus the pecten the anemone all swirl to their  
cadence back to the beginning the anaerobic algae we are

like  
you  
we want  
to  
breathe

An Encounter, Briefly, an Occasion for Hope

He zooms in on the sled head,  
    Sees her perfect plastics superfly.  
He pulls the bayou chub, her power bait  
    the lazer sharp eagle claw.

She, a shiny cocahoe minnow.  
He, the strike king gambler,  
    Works his bass magic.

He gulps her Y-not,  
    a salt water assassin;  
He loves her bitty bite bitsy bugs,  
    her coffee tubes,  
    storms her turbotail, a rebel.

He croaks the culprit's ribbit:  
    A sudden buzzit brings the popper crème.  
She's left with the slider garland,  
    Mark of a Scumfrog's shame.

Her glare for him is ultra-point,  
    Who should have been a "specializer".  
A deadly Dudley, he slinks off,  
    the secret D.O.A.



Styrofoam Splits on the Beads like a Seam

“They say if you’ve got enough and a bucket of gasoline you can make napalm”  
And we talk about maybe saving the corners when we buy a new television.

The dirt ripples through the rows in the fields  
As we pass; south of here the flood plains are filling up.  
“This morning, they were buying tackle and bait, filling trucks with it”

*Amazing* they say on the news.

They say it’s moving 1.2 million cubic feet per second.

Soon the lake will see a fresh water intrusion,  
Algae blooms and dead zones  
From nitrogen and oxygen absorption.

Winking underwater flowers  
And an inundation map in beautiful neon.

They say a man came down from Memphis just to watch  
After the water chased him out and he went to his cousin’s.  
The cousin says *When they let squatters live here, on the levee, we had ‘bout four or five families.*

Wobbly, the single pins lifted on a taught line.

Morganza and Bonnet Carre  
Like two stately, lounging women  
One dressed in black and the other in white  
Eating grapes, giving each other a nod over the distance  
And waiting.

## Swimming Felt a Different Way Once

When you say *snails always follow the cold currents*, you miss the way a belly felt inverted, perpendicular to the surface. We sat on a silt beach with brown daisy sacks and tar balls nesting like soft black eggs. While you climbed between waves and tracked needle fish, I only watched. I'd always hated the clammy mood you were happy to assume from my stagnation. Last night you dictated more of your jargon, stretched somewhere between the smudged shores. That was dangerous when I almost let *brown* leech into the idea of the sunrise. To discredit the moment you X'ed the boxes for GALLINULE, RAIL and SNIPE on the entrance slip. You're impatient for smothering under your hood on the borrowed land. By now even a ghillie suit would grow over.

## Lips

Fly, mud bird,  
a brick fowl  
it spins out end over end,  
sails out, smaller, rubber  
flyers, red like water,  
blood-water saucer,  
2 in 3, 4 in the back  
-- not another miss--

kleptomania in full swing,  
--don't think just toss, don't even look,  
just toss--, down to one  
on one, are you ready,  
call your momma,  
she'll set you straight, like she did once when she caught you wearing  
her lipstick, but you weren't putting it on,  
you were eating it,  
it tasted like flowers and for years the word AVON made  
your mouth water, you kept the old bottles just to smell,  
down to the cells and it'll be one, the air and your nose, the dust and the hair, the skin  
and the membranes that mark the melding  
of worlds, that's how we come  
home, we know through the nose, an orifice wedding, a mending,  
sinking back to the tree  
the blue curtains and blue pillow shams,  
blue bed spreads and  
blue rugs, -  
white doilies

## The Trials of Civilization

Neanderthals all,  
Her anal dent  
In a tall  
Backside  
Cupped like a mouth  
To drink  
And to slander,  
Adrenal Thens,  
Sandals and tanners  
The head lanterns  
Bow and are  
Healed,  
Handlers fighting the shade  
Then lashed,  
Laden and  
Snarled  
Leaden lands  
In ant turns,  
They nest  
Herding tens  
Of turd hens.

A nefarious few,  
Latent ram's horns  
Shirking the ewe  
Outside of  
A fine porcine ear,  
The onus  
A fire,  
Fear in us  
With her nice  
Aeon stuff,  
Anus Roe  
Sour and rife with  
Oaf's Urine,  
Sire ours,  
Rouse us and  
Make the  
Ruse mine  
Arise and  
Return  
To the  
Sea.

An Immense Longing for the Ocean as if that's Where We Belong

The living  
The children of lobe-finned fishes  
We're foals drying out on the tops of spindly things  
Cracked and salt crusted  
In temporary respite from the endless  
We come from

The love of fishes  
We know the form of teeth, the irregular circles  
Drowning each on the other  
We trace back the time by lines, we

Are goslings, are beige and strange  
Hairy, armless reptiles,  
Those fat, squat things from the ice age  
With legs like four-part pedestals buried in their hulk  
Of dead stones

While "oceanic horrors" move  
With the snap of calligraphic lightening  
The Coelacanth upon you in a  
Blink

## Vita

Jessica Suchanek was born in New Orleans, Louisiana. She obtained her Bachelor's degree in English from the University of New Orleans in 2004. She was accepted to the University of New Orleans' graduate school in 2005, and, after a break from her studies, returned to pursue a degree in 2010. She has a particular interest in creative writing and poetry.