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## Leitmotif

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Leitmotif:  
Poems

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 Fine Arts  
in  
Film, Theater and Communication Arts  
Creative Writing, Poetry

by

Alexandria Ashford

B.A. Pepperdine University, 2010

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*For Elainea*

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Preface: *Leitmotif*

My first mistake with this manuscript was choosing a title so early. The first working title for *Leitmotif* was *Songs for Bernie Taupin*. I chose the first title because one of the first things I knew about the collection was that I wanted to talk more about my father who raised me on Elton John's music, a large majority of which was written by Bernie Taupin. When I found out that Taupin had done a spoken word album, I searched furiously all over the internet searching for a copy. A month later, I mentioned it to my father, who said, "I have that album on vinyl." It was the kind of "coincidence" that always drives me to write poetry. My dad had had those Bernie Taupin records my entire life. In fact, *Taupin* was released in 1971, and my father had purchased it fresh off the shelves. It had been, all this time, waiting for *me*. Though the collection was just barely beginning to take shape, I knew that the importance of Bernie Taupin's presence in the book was that his music was a symbol of happy times between my father and I. Prematurely, I pegged the collection to be a dedication to my father, and only my father. But the collection had its own ideas about what it was to become. I spent two weeks listening to Bernie Taupin, both the spoken word and the songs performed by Elton John, and began to see my entire childhood through the lens of the music. I saw a procession: My father blasting the music on Saturday nights; my little sister and I in bed telling ghost stories and laughing as Elton John's music began to blare from the living room, the bass beating through the walls. There were other images, still, of me at my grandmother's house, where I found myself singing the songs aloud, my cousins having no idea what I was singing or who Elton John was. Initially, it was unclear to me how the Bernie Taupin motif would connect to anyone other than my father. Then it dawned on me, for the first time, that my own body was the body that connected this music and these



people and that they could exist together in a collection. More importantly, I discovered that the second book did not have to be a departure from my first, but, perhaps, an extension. *Danke Schoen* had been about death, family, and love, motifs common to the lives of human beings. *Leitmotif* decided that it would do the same, though I had planned for it to be totally different.

Thus, the working title for my second collection was changed from *Songs for Bernie Taupin* to *Leitmotif*. I began to realize that I was not yet done with some of the themes that were present in the first book, and this collection would be a sort of excavation—me daring to look deeper at the themes and motifs that have carried over into the new work. I came across the word “leitmotif” itself as I was studying one of my father’s old music theory books. The fact that the word was German, just as the title of my first book, was another little sign I couldn’t seem to ignore. Thus, *Leitmotif* will be the second of four operas (The first being *Danke Schoen*), modeled after Wagner’s cycle of four operas *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, in which Wagner uses dozens of different leitmotifs. Some of the leitmotifs occur only in one opera, but others appear throughout the cycle. My first book, *Danke Schoen*, was modeled on some very specific recurring motifs, the most obvious being my grandmother, called “NaNa” in *Leitmotif*, as well as other broader themes like ancestry, feminism, colonialism, and the complexities of Afro-Diasporic identity. My trouble with creating a second book was the idea that the second should be different, more exciting, more daring than the first. I wrote a chapbook called *Lantern*, that I filed away until recently, and I wrote many smatterings of poems here and there, seemingly unrelated. But when I looked at everything, closely, I realized that the themes present in the second collection were also present in the first—though in different “clothing.” For example, The “Dreux” motif in the second collection is a tragic, brooding, black male figure constructed from several of the characters that showed up in the first collection; in poems like “West Cape,

In Memoriam,” “Wanting,” “Elegy in Broken Stanzas,” “Leroy,” and “Of Newness, Of Ghosts.”

In many ways, I’m still preoccupied with the same figures and themes from the first book. The title of the first, *Danke Schoen* literally means “Thanks, pretty,” (popularized as “thank you”) in German and is also the title of a song by Wayne Newton that my grandmother happened to like listening to when putting up peach preserves. She played the vinyl over and over all evening, and we sang along to it, never even knowing what the words “Danke Schoen” meant. Since my grandmother taught me to read dreams, and signs, and omens, I can only suspect that though we had no idea, we were saying “thank you” while putting away peach preserves, a tradition directly connected to the necessity of preservation in communities where every morsel of food was precious, were, inadvertently, part of a sort of primitive praise ceremony—a grandmother and her granddaughter, the elder teaching the younger something of tradition, ancestry, and the art of preservation. While *Danke Schoen* was loosely connected to music, since the title poem was based on words to a song, the term “leitmotif” is directly connected to music, its original meaning being “a musical term referring to a short, constantly recurring musical phrase.” As it pertains to literature, a leitmotif is “an often repeated word, phrase, image, or theme in a literary work.” All in all, the idea was to make the collection a sort of opera of images, relying less on sequence to connect the poems and more on the recurrence of the common themes.

Wagner’s *Der Ring des Nibelungen* operas were written to be performed in a single week. It doesn’t quite work this way with poetry, but the idea of writing four connected collections that somehow form a whole was an exciting idea for me. In *Danke Schoen*, the poems were longer and denser. The subject of male / female love appeared more implicitly in poems like “Vertigo” and “Bien- Aime.” Bernie Taupin’s 1971 spoken word album *Taupin* consists of eighteen poems—nine on side one and nine on side two. The first side is called

“Child” and the first poem is called “Birth.” The first side is sentimental and nostalgic, but the second gives way to more political matters. For example, the poems “Today’s Hero” and “Sisters of the Cross” appear on the second side and are much more rooted in the poet’s present than in the nostalgia of his past. I think it’s an interesting transition to make because it is such a simple one. In much the same way, *Leitmotif* is divided into two sections that go from nostalgia and memory to the realities of adulthood. If it makes any sense, I *want* this collection to have a feeling of fragmentation because memory really is fragmented. I want the fragmentation I inherited from my ancestry to be embedded deeply within the collection. With my first collection, I had no idea the poems would even fit together until I sent the manuscript to a publisher and they approved of the poems and thought they were worth publishing. I had felt when I first began to put together *Danke Schoen* that a collection should start with a general theme or governing idea and stick to it for the entire duration of the collection; but that’s not how it has worked for me.

Though I began with very specific intentions for *Leitmotif*, the manuscript looks quite a bit different than what I planned; and I am happy with that. Though I initially wanted the collection to be heavy on implicit and explicit references to my father, he only appears in one poem in the collection, “Tiny Dancer,” which is also the title of a song written by Bernie Taupin. And though both sections of the collection, “Side One” and “Side Two” begin with epigraphs from Bernie Taupin’s lyrics, Taupin appears far less in the collection than I thought he would initially. I envision the Taupin epigraphs at the beginning of the sections as doorways into the poems that follow. The thing that pleases me most about this collection is that the poems wrote themselves, then graciously gave themselves to me.

I no longer believe that I write poetry. On the contrary, I believe that poetry writes me. My job as the poet is simply to be receptive to the muse and use my editing skills to piece together a unified story with the poems given—no matter how fragmented the story may seem. I'm not a poet who writes well objectively. I write because something inside me burns until it is written on a page. In the tradition of my ancestors— from NaNa's West Indian heritage, to her half German grandmother who hated her for having dark skin, to her part Native American father—everything my grandmother taught me was about survival. Not just physical survival, but mental and spiritual survival. Survival as a black woman. NaNa, who had fourteen children, was a connoisseur of fragmentation. She took old, worn scraps of clothing and made beautiful quilts for her children (and baby doll dresses for me). She took scraps of food no one wanted and made gumbo and succotash. Claude Levi Strauss calls it "bricolage," making something out of nothing. Na a called it "art." I am her granddaughter. Art is in my blood. I call it "survival."

## Side One

The roses in the window box  
Have tilted to one side  
Everything about this house  
Was born to grow and die.

-Bernie Taupin, "Funeral for a Friend"

## Letter to NaNa

I looked for you  
near the pecan trees  
and couldn't find you,  
not the smell of hyacinth  
engraved in your palms  
or the weary sigh as you bowed  
to say your prayers.

Only the memory  
of your voice

once  
at the end of a tune  
between the pop  
of one song ending  
and the next beginning

*before it's all over*

*the song will tune*

*itself.*

I hear this in my sleep  
despite the floor model  
left blaring on purpose  
or my quest to always  
stay awake.

## Lessons in Lavender

Lavender sugar and primrose

spread out on the table.

You used it for everything:

to kill the cat smell in the carpet,

in the lotion to make it pop.

Your wedding dress was purple

and so is the gown

you were buried in.

It was ageless

on your body,

a rim around the moon

sugar plum shadow,

Tchaikovsky at Christmas time—

the year mama wore the purple chiffon

and looked flawless.

You had dreamed of fish

and losing a tooth:

a birth

and a death.

We ate neck bones and black eyed peas

for luck,

then after dark

you boiled the lavender.

The house smelled too much  
of chaos, you said,  
so much coming and going.



## What NaNa Sings of Autumn

Light the old

gas heater,

watch the dandelions

burn.

## Home Again

Thirty seconds into dinner  
and my cousins  
already have me  
speaking southern.

Long vowels  
heads thrown back  
in laughter,  
it's all here:

the Cherokee hair  
from grandfather  
Caribbean bones  
from NaNa.

We pass the pig snouts  
and collards,  
cracklin' bread and succotash,  
recipes passed down

from women  
born with a gift  
for taking scraps  
and feeding the multitude.

## Reading Signs

This December

the roses bloomed.

NaNa believes

it is a sign.

*The world is ending*

she says,

*the whole earth*

*is full of His glory.*

Memory

Even

with Alzheimer's

she knew each cat

by name.

Glamour

It's evening.

Wheel of Fortune blares

on the floor model.

Antennas with tinfoil

catch the best

signal.

Grandpa lights a Cuban,

tomato sandwich and milk

for supper

tonight

when Mississippi

turns cool,

moon breathing

white ice

through its gills.

We learn life

in little flits,

tiny memorials,

these torturous

little glammers.

\*a glamour is a magic spell.

## Cousins and Me

We made mud pies  
in Aunt Lula's yard  
sewage  
flowing by us  
like a stream.

We grew up  
never even fazed  
by our childhood  
playing in shit:  
it  
was all we had.

Dead Yard\*

When

Aunt Isa passed

we fed

the duppy\*

fried fish

and rum.

Then NaNa

read the scripture

*let the dead*

*bury their dead.*

\*Dead Yard is a Caribbean funerary tradition also known as “Nine Night.”

\*Duppy is a Jamaican Patois word for “ghost.”

## Middle Passage (Interlude)

I wish

I could rule

the sea

dismantle

the passage

that made

a slave

of me.



## Ritual

Tonight there's a storm.

Channel Four says 15

already dead in Kansas,

Dorothy's ruby red slippers

not enough to save them.

Funny how Katrina

spared the inland

and swallowed Waveland

like Atlantis.

*In the end,*

mama says,

*it all comes down to rain.*

Tonight there's a storm.

Slugs stretch across

the threshold,

mama draws the salt line

silent declaration

wordless kill,

*to keep away the slugs*

*to keep away the ghosts.*

## Elegy

In NaNa's backroom

twilight pours through

lavender sheers,

a short tune glitters

on the victrola

destined to end

in two minutes' time.

I tune the needle

small silver helm

at the end of a knife,

if a camel could enter

its bottom I would enter

oh un-smudged tune

pure as sunlight,

lucky

like dodging a bullet

on Canal street

a boy named Glover

killed two feet

ahead of me.

## Mama

I feel naked  
having traveled this far  
not having spoken to you  
for days now.  
Nightshade. Ozone. Lamplight.  
I learn to endure without you:  
the coarse whispers  
and wide laughs.  
Corkscrew curls  
and headscarves.  
I live on channel 4 news  
and camel shorts:  
Everything you've taught me.

(Passage) or (Rite)

While Auntie Lula pressed  
your hair with white rose  
and cast iron comb,  
you frowned like a cuttlefish,  
a snake spurning winter.  
The heat seared your curly  
strands slippery blue—.   
That night  
you smelled of ginger root  
and exile  
as you said to me:  
*Soon, my love*  
*your turn in the fire.*

## Chanty

They covered her body  
in a gown the color  
of spring. She was quiet  
lying there. Still. The birds  
in the ceiling were new:  
small wrinkled creatures,  
beaks open with longing,  
still screeching their song  
as grandmother slipped away  
beneath a ceiling as gray  
as tears.

What I have always hated  
about death is its wideness,  
the way it sweeps a room  
and holds it. Even more  
its subtlety: the way it leans right up  
against you, the brush  
of a passerby, blushed  
cheeks of a newborn.  
Gone again before  
you know it.

## Dirge

Some nights you fall  
against me,  
an airtight laughter  
purple rimmed moon.  
It's September,  
the days are getting shorter  
like your breaths  
in those final hours,  
the edges of autumn turned down  
like the corners of your mouth,  
or a most sacred song.  
I miss you,  
more now with the leaves  
yellowed, elvin,  
falling around me  
like a blanket,  
sky dark as Rama's skin.  
And above me now  
a firefly  
spelling out farewells  
with his wings.

## Smoking a Cigarette in Thirty Degree Weather

I want to be warm now,  
but I want a cigarette more.

I've become my mother's daughter  
though she has forgotten  
to love me now.

I watch the news at 10  
because she's watching too,  
from her bedroom,  
trees rustling  
to her window.

The leaves will ask her  
where her daughter is.  
And if she calls,  
It means she heard them.

## Holiday

You're here to remind me

what's lost:

best friend

first child

gone before it had eyes

or a whole heart.

## Christmas

mother recalls

the smell of apples in the attic

where her father hid them.

Silver bells roll like marbles

across splintering floors,

NaNa knits a doll dress

fit for the sugar plum fairy

her favorite what-nots atop

lace doilies,

paper dolls

left to sun

fade on the windowsill.

Last will be the immaculate drink

of mint and ginger

after the soul food



will not wear off,  
small reminder  
you are here  
more able to read the paradox  
than you knew,  
shaking leaves from your coat  
the Christmas the baby died  
death grip on a crucifix:  
You too  
will die young.

## Cotillion

You learn to be a woman  
gliding across the floor  
long gown of jacquard and lace  
train of golden hair  
flowing prettier than any stream  
de gas ballerina.

Beneath our moon  
craters splashed wide  
like peony blooms  
we learn how  
to wriggle free from sweaty hands  
old men drunk with moonshine  
we learn in welfare lines  
what you learn in needlework:  
patience to survive  
patience to endure.

## What I Hope to Tell My Granddaughter

When the ghosts come  
after I have become one  
myself,

honor the things

I have taught you:

cod liver oil

for colds,

salt

for mean spirits

and slugs.

Ginger tea

for man troubles.

When they stone you

take the blows.

There is nothing

more honorable

than laying

your life down

(one day we all

got to die

anyway),

and you'll only

have *HEART*

after you've had yours

broken,

been crucified

by those

at your table

and on the third day

still manage

to rise.

## Sicily

Angel hair and pinot grigio

for breakfast

under stars

the sky still so dark

they twinkle

in Morse code

to my folks back home

on the inland

ham and grits

for breakfast

under sunlight

under heat.

## Tiny Dancer

Daddy gave me

whatever he could,

cinnamon bread

for tough mornings

neon pink

and 80's rock bands.

Daddy loved me

the best he knew how,

leg warmers

and ballet class

music box

for the twirling girl,

his one and only

tiny dancer.

## Side Two

“Love is a cannibal.”

-Bernie Taupin

## Dreux from the Concrete Bayou

You drove

a green Chevy,

won dice games

in Algiers all summer,

*Free Boosie*

tattooed

where a stray bullet

entered

and barely missed

a lung.



At First Sight

Lightning

struck the sand

and it was glass

beneath

our feet.

## Baltimore Love Song

At the very least  
my body is in love  
with you. I watch 33rd Street  
stretch out like long  
brown legs—  
the Riviera in a straight line.  
I discover that *Yes*:  
this is the nature of things.  
And I miss you as hard and as far  
as the lights that glint across the harbor.  
They blink furiously  
like lightning bugs in the country.  
They want to find each other;  
me to find you.  
Oh, nothing makes sense to me  
besides this heartbreak:  
this pounding in my fingers—  
this urgency to be near you.  
You see, love has already brought  
me *here: to my knees*.  
I am (of course) alone,  
with this song that plays in my head:  
*where will you go*  
*little heart*  
*now that love*  
*has failed you?*  
I tell it that  
I want to go  
to you:  
into your arms  
fingers in your dreads  
lips against your dimples  
your whole body  
between my legs.  
You and I are  
(the both of us)  
broken.

## Love bugs

You wait for the night to end  
so you can sleep.

I kill love bugs the lamplight  
has called in.

There's no morning between you and I,  
no bright, even light.

Just this slow waning one  
ebbing. Uncertain.

No moon out tonight. The one,  
lone star says:

*This is how much I want you to love me:  
The whole black sky.*

While I wait for the night to end  
You kill love bugs the lamplight

has called in.  
A faint starlight between us.

This is how much I love you:  
The whole night sky.

## Insomnia

By lamplight you glow like Polaris.  
If I stare at you long enough  
You become my lover,  
You grow fingers.  
If I lay here, open, for too long  
You'll see how engorged  
My heart has become  
With a light  
That if given to you,  
You may never return.

## Good Luck

For Dreux

I miss you

and Algiers

in the summer:

daddy long legs

Making love to my windowsill,

air heavy with dandelions,

gumbo. Heat.

Around the corner

from Lilly who foretold death

through baby teeth

and tarot cards,

and Lemuel

the Haitian activist

who wrote about the killings

and home invasions,

Maurice, the old bootlegger

whose brains

were scattered

on the kitchen walls

of the house

right beside us.

## Nine Night

When your grandpa died

I brought ganja and rum

fried fish with bammy

and my shoulder:

preparation

for the long night

between grief

and letting go.

## Blues

Killed a white boy  
on a back road  
once  
when you were young.

Told the judge  
that while you killed him  
you hummed  
your favorite song.

Two years later  
got shanked  
in the shower:  
ten blows  
to your back.

Got buried  
in the prison  
peach orchard,  
blight tipping  
each leaf  
in black.

## Susannah's Song \*

I am making my way  
to the prison  
to see my Judas  
gone down.

\*In the film *Legends of the Fall*, Susannah goes to the prison to see Tristan, the lover who abandoned her.



## Lantern

*For Derrick*

Because you need to know  
there's another way out.  
Because this journey  
this path  
is not dark  
it is *impossibly dark*.  
When you sleep  
you dream a far off twinkle  
a possibility  
a lantern in the distance.

## What Lovers Say

*After C.D. Wright*

Let's make a mess  
of the bed tonight.

Pull your palms  
across my skin.

Comb the blues  
from my hair.

Write a poem  
on my back.

I'll never wash it off.

## First Fight of Summer

Streetlights hum, flicker:

Burn out.

*This is the ghetto, after all.*

Rena walks outside

With all the elegance

Of sassafras tea

And petit-fours,

Twilit parties on the panhandle.

She's got a soda pop walk,

(Her voice ALL sex)

And a tight-ass weave

Felicia finished last night.

Refrain: *He beat her like a man*

*And she never shed a tear.*

She's got three babies,

a fourth on the way.

Cum on her

drawers, same ones

from last night.

*He beat her like a man.*

*She never shed a tear.*

This is the gutter, after all.

## Nocturne

It's always night  
when you come to my window  
past the crickets' bedtime  
before the moonflowers open  
their petals to the moon's  
cryptid light.  
You hand me a bowl of embers  
and whisper to me  
that all death feels this way. The  
taking of the sweet center  
feels like rape / violation / ingestion.  
So I learn to lay still. Let it happen.  
Stop fighting.  
In my periphery there is always  
this same lamplight, the same  
glow: warm, soft around the edges  
starlight reincarnated.  
It is this moment  
each night that I am  
killed and reborn  
to say these words,  
sing to this bowl of embers  
as if it will become love  
*Oh careless love*  
bleeding from me  
like oleander sap  
purpling my legs  
drowning me in the sweetest oblivion.

## Vita

Alexandria Ashford is a poet, ethnographer, and hip hop critic. She received a Bachelor of Arts degree in creative writing from Pepperdine University in 2010. Her first collection of poetry, *Danke Schoen: Poems* was published in 2010 and received the Prize Americana for Poetry. Her poems have appeared in literary journals such as *Chopper*, *Silk Road*, *Review Americana*, *South Jersey Underground*, and *The Rose and Thorn*. She is the editor of *Ethnografis: A Poet Reads Rap*, a blog that conducts critical analyses of music and literature using the tools of ethnography, anthropology, and literary theory.