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Living Without your Skin

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LIVING WITHOUT YOUR SKIN

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
The Creative Writing Program

by

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B. A., Spring Hill College, 1998
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For Marguerite Magdalene Allenbach Miller

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Ellipsis, Issue 32: “Kite Flying” and “A Tiny Hole Becomes Most Important Under Great Pressure”

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PREFACE

Eyeing the Gap Between Experience and Language

If one agrees that poetry is an attempt by a writer to relate experience or thought in metaphorical language, one is confronted with a rather large problem. Language, words, speech – these by their very nature are separators from experience or internal thoughts. Once a thing is conveyed, it no longer exists as it happened originally. The utterance itself alters reality. Language is a filter, a matrix of a distorter, of internal as well as external experience. Recall, for instance, trying to relate to someone a dream you have had. Then you understand the frustration, the inadequacy, the ultimate and certain failing of language to convey first meaning. Bare events, objects, scenes can be relayed with some elemental level of truth, but the overall essence as was experienced by the poet is impossible to convey. Often a person is working with only one language, only one filter. If you have ever learned a second language – not superficially, but from really digging into another language, to the point where the once-foreign terms were sometimes more familiar than your mother tongue – you know that certain things said in one language simply cannot be translated into another. There is an uncrossable gap. It's a problem.

Why write, then, if relating the original experience is necessarily impossible in this medium? It can drive a writer to despair, this question, because it causes the act of writing to appear futile, pointless, like trying to tie your shoes with one lace. It is indeed pointless if you make original meaning your goal. Say I write a poem. Say I write twenty or so poems, such as the poems contained in this manuscript. Each person who reads these poems will glean meaning from them influenced by her own personal experience, how she was raised, what she heard on the radio that morning, her dreams, her last relationship. Each individual will read meaning where she sees it. Certain referents, certain images and a combination of words that restrict the limits of what can be interpreted might be evident. These are boundaries, though, between which exists a sort of field for multiple understandings. Language sets the field for play, and metaphor is the game. This element of play in poetry is what makes it dynamic, and it applies not just to poetry, but to any work of art. Metaphor, when used effectively, acts like a crack code, or a Zen koan, pushing the reader toward meaning through the use of meaningful and unusual juxtapositions. The key for crossing the gap between poem and reader lies here, because with metaphor things can be said which otherwise cannot be stated directly. I use metaphor both in these poems and in this preface to try to bridge the gap between experience and poetry, a creative lie told with the intent to penetrate an authentic truth. It is my belief that

metaphor speaks nearest to first meaning, to original experience. By using figurative language, the poem admits the gap but at the same time does not abandon the original idea. Metaphor springs from that basis, the basis of inspiration. Since the experience cannot be stated directly, figuration is needed to approach it simultaneously in an indirect and in an honest manner.

In keeping with the discussion of metaphor, allow me to explain the structure of this manuscript using a biological concept. When deciding on the order of these poems, I envisioned a sort of helix like this:



In microbiology, a helix is a spiral structure in a macromolecule that contains a repeating pattern. A macromolecule is a large molecule formed from the connection of a number of small molecules. I mean for these poems to fit into an organic whole, not unlike a macromolecule. While each section and each poem is to have its own unique identity, the whole of the manuscript is also to work as one unit. I intend that each of the poems is like a molecule in the helix, repeating only on the surface as a poem, and that each of the three sections unfold like a section of the helix (bottom, loop, top). Finally, the manuscript as a whole might then act as single macromolecule, a single cohesive unit.

The bottom of the helix is where *Living Without Your Skin* begins. The opening poem, “Summer Solstice,” means to offer sparse images and a sense of isolation reflected by the structure. I mean for this poem to serve as the launching ground for the rest of the work. It is a poem about waiting, as well as loneliness and a keen sense of solitude. This state of feeling is to grow and develop into many manifestations as the poems progress throughout the manuscript.

The poems in this first section mainly concern individuals a search for the self’s place in the world. For example, “Letter to Jim Carroll” means to ask, without ever explicitly posing a question, for advice from a seasoned poet. Jim Carroll’s works have influenced me, but his life and attitude have influenced me more. Carroll is a self-taught poet, musician, and fiction writer. Poems of his such as “Savage Bubbles” and “It Doesn’t Matter” present their respective subjects with precision, razor honesty and raw emotion, grounding them in tangible images and tight, provocative phrasing. Like Carroll, Mark Strand is a master of seamlessly fusing the intangible with the concrete in clear, unpretentious language. Works of his such as “Keeping Things Whole” and “The Coming of Light” exemplify the union that is possible between the material and the immaterial. It is this sort of delicate, powerful balance I struggle to attain in my own work.

Like “A Letter to Jim Carroll,” “Fragment” is a poem I have been working on for several years. Yet it, too, is a poem about isolation, boredom, pathos, and detachment, a detachment so deep that it becomes detachment from the speaker’s very own body. Alternately, “On the Front Porch of My Parents’ Home” means to illustrate a deeply saturated feeling of estrangement. Finally, I intend for the speaker in “The One Thing I Can’t Tell You,” the last poem of the section, to consciously shoot for but neglect to grasp what is to be revealed in section three: a wiser voice, a better sense of self in relation to the world, and a stilling glimpse of something immaterial. “All is well” means to read as a statement pointing toward that which the speaker most desperately wants to believe in but cannot, because she has not experienced the feeling that “all is well” first-hand, only heard rumors. I hesitate to say “god” as a qualifier for the immaterial because of the rampant and conflicting connotations of that word. What I mean is a general notion of order, the unchangeable, something that might make a life make sense. All is, in fact, not well for this speaker, but there exists a pull toward an as-yet unrealized peace.

The second section, the loop of the helix, expresses a maelstrom of tangled emotion as the speaker interacts with an “other” in a romantic context. It begins with a first meeting fraught with potential in “First Night.” The section means to quickly turn obsessive in “Because” and then to turn

obsessively malicious in “Paper Boy.” Later, I intend for an element of despair to enter with “Turning.” “The Death of Seed” relates a common situation: the failure of language to relay meaning between two people, leading to a final unraveling which I explore in the last poems of the section. The idea of this problem of language to relate meaning sparked the beginning of this poem. It’s when you hear yourself talking to someone and the words are not what you mean, but you can’t seem to stop them from continuing. Afterward, the opportunity for honesty has been lost, leaving in its wake a web of misunderstandings of the most subtle and indestructible sort.

The last three poems mean to sizzle with attitude and vengeance, especially “Peeling You” and “Hot Chocolate.” This second section, I hope, acts as a crucible in which the speaker is forged and subsequently transformed. I mean for this loop of the helix to function as a knot of sorts, a knot that is, with luck, loosened with the right kind of reflection, a reflection I initiate in “Adrift,” the first poem of the third section.

The third section intends to mirror the structure of the bottom of the helix, the first section, but not perfectly. Again the speaker may be faced with the self in relation to the world, but she possesses a different sort of outlook now, one with a stronger sense of who she is. This self has moved past frantic questions into a more stable, imaginative state of being. Surreal images, such as the mannequins in “Effigy,” the sweaty hallucinations in “Dali Fever,” and

the unlikely conversation in “Living Without Your Skin,” mean to suggest a definite move from the “I” to more provocative, visual subjects. I put these poems in this section as a counterpoint to the self-involvement in the first section. For me, they place themselves at other end of the continuum, exploring the world in a very different way by looking outward instead of inward. This objective viewpoint, in my opinion, reaches an apex in “Cosmic Play,” an homage to Italo Calvino, a writer known for playful fictions such as Invisible Cities and Cosmicomics. Cosmicomics is a collection of short stories which combine particle physics with very human characters. In these stories, Calvino melds science with poetic prose to produce unique tales. Calvino has challenged me to push the limits of my own imagination in my work and, most importantly, to treat writing as a sort of play. To have fun with it. “Cosmic Play,” “Dali Fever,” and “Effigy” are poems that I hope demonstrate this playfulness.

On the other hand, “The Burghers of Calais” is a poem centering on revelation. It attempts to report a glimpse of divine beauty on an ordinary day. The poem intends to reveal my conviction as a poet that there are in fact no ordinary days. It is a poem about momentary clarity experienced on one of those days when nothing can touch me, I feel invincible, and every face on the street is radiant. On such days, I feel I might disintegrate because the beauty revealed is so overwhelming. Such an experience, I think, is a formidable

challenge to portray because of the inherent flaws within the medium. Writing about any internal experience is a challenge, but this sort of experience (some might call it religious) is the most challenging, in my opinion. I rely heavily on metaphor and imagery in this poem to convey meaning because I feel that stating the thing directly is impossible. I attempt to let the metaphor of Rodin's famous sculpture carry the expression.

The manuscript ends with "A Tiny Hole Becomes Most Important Under Great Pressure," a poem that means to reflect on the importance of the atomic. Again, the speaker is solitary, as in "Summer Solstice," but I want here to assert a more objective voice, a more mature viewpoint, and for the tone of this poem to be more objective, less personal. The voice in this poem has been transformed, having become possible now because of the voices in the previous poems.

These poems aim to live without their skins, revealing bare emotion with unapologetic candor. I want always to write honestly, to write the truth, to give, as Ezra Pound says, accurate reports on the human condition. There is nothing substantive contrived in this work, not at the root. I have tried to honor the occasions which produced the poems, and have done my best to reveal the core of the matter through concision, word choice, and metaphor. I hope that these poems provide both enjoyment and a cause for contemplation. I hope that, after reading this collection, a reader might see the world with

sharper eyes and a more tangible sense of the ineffable, a world that may have remained hidden without poetry.

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The note made me feel terrible and good at the same time, which was the way I felt most of the time anyhow.

— from Hollywood by Charles Bukowski

Memory's images, once they are fixed in words, are erased.

— Italo Calvino

I

SUMMER SOLSTICE

Before the sky
splits, I sit
at the curb.

Sparrows flutter
in lakes of dirt.
Solid heat

crowds the brick façade
of the gallery next door
where, above, gray bulkheads

hang hard to the west.
Behind them,
light again.

My dirty toes curl.
Concrete steps bleed
into concrete walk

with hardly a pause.
My eyes focus, unfocus,
as they reach to meet

the sky.
Memories seep from my skin,
then rain.

Again, summer.
Birds break
into song.

FRAGMENT WRITTEN IN DOWNTOWN MOBILE, 1997

People know where to find me – Hailey’s is a good bet.
I’ll be knocking back stouts with some semblance of grace
on Saturday night, one night in a string,
weaving the same drama. It’s a repeating scene
in fitful progress, unedited: girl-fights,
bouncers, drunks, police.
Someone looked at someone wrong.

Boredom, that unending source of fuel.

Once I told a friend that, if all the world’s a stage,
poets are the unwilling audience,
handcuffed to the drink holders.

I end up walking alone through one-way back alleys,
with no stars to guide me, weaving through no obstacles.
Underfoot, suddenly, I feel the pain of crunched glass.

These streets are all the same.
I never can find my car.
It’s not even mine, that bloody skin.

LETTER TO JIM CARROLL

Jim, Dear Jim,
 wandering this decaying city,
 watching the buildings continually meet
 the ground with tremulous block feet,
 I understand a little better
 what it means to live as a writer.
 No valor lurks in pawn shops,
 no fame hides in an empty wallet,
 only rank desperation and a greed
 I have no wish to uncover.
 Every waking punches me in the face
 like some vindictive cop waiting at my door.
 These cracked and rolling avenues strip
 all pride away. In the smallest hours,
 my pens run dry.
 I stare at blank pages.
 I don't trust myself alone.
 Jim, I need answers.
 I'm out of juice.

Sometimes I hear you
 shouting at me over a bad connection.
 I hear no words, only the urgency
 straining to pierce the void of night.
 You escaped your youth without lethal wounds
 despite jamming needles into your temples,
 despite whoring yourself for spare change.
 Nothing ever pierced your original shine.
 I knew you best, I felt you best beside me
 when I heard you would climb
 your mother's brownstone to the roof,
 strip, lie down and jerk off,
 facing the radiant star-holed roof of the world,
 no woman in mind,
 just in love with it all.

Jim,
 I avoid coffeehouse readings,
 women's poetry groups,
 other poets.
 I spend a lot of time in bars.
 But you've taught me this:
 always to eye the line
 between the stain and the metal,

to know the stain is not me.

Jim, I need answers.

Another day breaks as I write you
yet nothing, nothing has changed.

ON THE FRONT PORCH OF MY PARENTS' HOME

At three a.m., the place slumbers, long silent
except for a clock marking the seconds
like a frowning blackguard at the door,
watching me turn the brass knob
with both hands, not to disturb
the triadic peace upstairs. But the noise
of the tumblers resounds over wall-to-wall carpet,
a clear breach of some unspoken agreement,
and I can already hear my father say,
 Make sure you lock the door.

Outside welcomes, a wild division
from systematic air conditioning
and though the nearby houses sit fixed,
the air around them pulsates.

Sitting, smoking on this threshold,
I see a beetle inch his way across the porch.
All his bug world rests
upon his phyllo-thin carapace,
his tiny legs wobbly strings
leaving no trail to mark
his way back.

With the grace of the estranged,
he plods forward, bent to make distance,
forsaking the swarm, exiled
for life.

I can only watch, stricken dumb
with compassion.

Ten years I've sat on this doorstep
somewhere, caught between night and morning,
smoking endless white cigarettes,
never forgetting
 to lock the door behind me.

KITE FLYING

Young then, my mother took me
to a park, to her park where
the wind lashed rough enough
to tear the green from leaves.
She brought a kite and held my hand.
We mazed through mute suburban streets,
then past slides and swing sets
into a patch of grass that sprawled teetering
on the brink of wood.
Her long hair blew in burnt whips across her face
as she grabbed the kite and ran,
leaning back hard, her mouth
crushed into a bloodless line,
and the kite parted obediently from the earth.
From my stake in the shade, I crouched, wary,
as it banged around tree trunks, a clumsy miracle.
Then inspired, I suddenly burst out running,
screaming to catch it,

but it soared fast beyond me.
Sitting back hard, shocked at its lift,
at the invisible sweeps of wild power,
I stared as it flew past my mother's hands
into the hands of something else
and I screamed
and screamed and screamed until
with murmured curses,
eyes flashing like an annoyed goddess,
my mother landed it hard
with a blunt crash.

The thing lay crumpled,
shivering, like the wings
of a felled dragonfly.

In lumbering silence,
we picked our way back
through the fallen green,
the rest of the world grinding
its teeth, the wind savage
in discordant glee.

And between the branches
I spied in the sky

the twin pin eyes
of a god leering at me.

WE CANNOT ALL BE CHILDREN OF THE SUN

We cannot all be children of the sun,
Bright lovers pulsing wild with divine fire.
We cannot all embrace the fall of night
Nor stand alone to face transforming pyres.

Doleful are those souls who trample blind
Or solely cling to empty acrid talk,
But doleful more the mind that knows the way,
Pointed straight, but static, scared to walk.

Children of the sun, be drunk with light!
Bless us lost with love and laughter rare!
By your beacons, give us clean, unhindered sight
To pierce the clouds, to see the sun laid bare.

THE ONE THING I CAN'T TELL YOU

I can tell you what I had for lunch, this is true.
 I can tell you how birds move: wind shear and lift.
 I can tell you what pi means,
 to an extent.
 I can tell you what my neighbor's shoes sound like
 on a Saturday night: they sound like life,
 like the meeting of friends.

I can list my family, names and dates.
 I can describe the afternoon sun in December:
 a fleet of heat-charged kisses.

I can also reveal how when, sitting on the levee,
 I sometimes want to jump.
 I cannot tell you why.

Nor can I tally my dreams, only offer fragmented reports
 in a language that doesn't translate well.
 I surely can't tell you I remember my birth,
 that curving wall written into history,
 nor how false this reality is we mistake

for truth.
 I can't tell you how it feels to fathom
 death as a shadow, never an end.
 I can't tell you how beauty blazes, barely hidden.
 I can't tell you because, though these things are true
 I have not yet

the eyes to see them.
 I am blessed,
 as some poets are,
 only with glimpses.

Sometimes I laugh for no reason.
 Sometimes I laugh for all reasons.
 The same laugh.

The one thing I can't tell you—
 the one thing I will never tell you
 as ghosts clutter thick in the corners
 and the ground begins to drop away
 is all

is well,
all is well.

II

FIRST NIGHT

The piles of fevered exchanges on my desk
never could have prepared me.

The swarming crowd of marauders chanted in discord
from behind their garish masks.
It was past meeting time.

You stood in shadow, I knew, watching me
as I parted company loosely
kept, and I knew if I sat alone on that curb
you would come. You came.

A thickening of air, an upward look,
your blazing countenance hovering above
my head, mirthing with recognition,
a new old friend.

The bodies thronged thicker, but we could not
remain, so parted from the mayhem and made
our steps rhyme through narrow empty streets.

You beside me was enough, I felt,
to dismiss the rest
of the world, the two of us
hand in hand,
running to your bed.

BECAUSE

Because the way he smells unleashes something
 primal in you and my god it is beyond
 your control because this time you forget
 yourself and follow where your body
 leads and you devour everything.

Because the way he wipes the sweat from his brow as you
 make your way to the bathroom to clear away the evidence
 of this night makes it even more messy because you try
 to convince yourself you are not caught, that there is still a chance
 your mind can make this better.

Because when you go to sleep twined with him
 he twines back and you know you cannot
 use this man you cannot pretend as if
 you are devoted lovers, not two aesthetic junkies loving
 the fact that you do not have to sleep alone tonight
 and it startles you because you did not count on this, this
 authenticity.

So how do you take it?
 You pretend it does not exist because
 when you go home you know
 you will lie in bed awake because
 you will remember how warm
 his chest felt against your face and because you want it
 there again, because you need it there so badly
 you think of driving to his house, and begging
 no matter the cost, so you make the call and of course

he does not answer
 because he has gone to sleep or gone
 to twine with another
 because you have no claim on him
 and because he has no stated claim on you
 but god if only he knew,
 then you would be done for
 because all defenses are gone
 when he walks toward you
 freshly showered,
 his hot intentions
 smelling so much
 like a man.

PAPER BOY

Even at 32, your flesh is unfinished,
a mess of boy and man.

Limpid inky eyes, twin collar bones
frail as parchment (they beg
to be crunched), soggy blood
rolling through transparent hands,
the folded shape of your knees—

Each morning, like dull scissors
flexing to mesh, incapable of slicing,
your slender calves divide the sheets while you sleep.
(How I could dice you with my tongue alone.)

Abandoned, you sleep as I pace the room
calculating your bones, your too-large head.
There's a bloodlust in me; I live to destroy
all that is pure, good, unspoiled,

and you, with your paper limbs, your bad grace
sprawling dumb as a weight
over thinning linen
as I creep nearer to lick
and slice the content
from your crumpled face.

TURNING

Rain slides down the other side of the window and your mind wanders back: last night, you lay awake, half-drunk, waiting for a call that never came, remembering three nights before when he stayed with you and he consumed you with a ferocity you matched and you want it to happen again but

Today, at the window, your skin is in limbo. This morning upon waking you began to bleed and a part of you was lost as it is every month and the very presence of blood closes one window and opens another because now even if he does call –and he will – you will not be able to give him back what he gives you – a delicious assault upon senses, sitting eight inches away watching a television show and you relish the charged air, so charged you think twice before lighting a cigarette because what if this is the moment he wants to kiss you? But you like the control, you need the control, knowing he cannot kiss you while your mouth is doing other things, and lighting that cigarette gives you control, control for the last time and later you will be glad for the loss.

So you are sitting at the window the next day, today, watching the rain, feeling drained, teetering on the edge of another numb depression, things you need to do, things you haven't done looming like angry relatives at the front door, forcing entry. A part of you thinks that the only thing worth knowing is the heart of what happens between two bodies such as yours and his, that this is the only authentic knowledge, and these other things, these deadlines, this laundry, these dirty dishes, undermine everything and distract you from drinking him in though really he could be anyone, anyone at all, so the only thing you have to do

is turn to the glass and remember, because what else *can* you do? The only thing left is the rain and you, so all you can do is seize the memories knowing how good it can be when it suddenly is not anymore, such as today, such as when it rains, such as when you strain to devote your mind to the occasion, not allowing it to fade, even as you are, even now, forgetting what he said.

COUCH SESSIONS

I take for granted the evenings
you and I have spent
here on my couch.

After you leave, each time,
either going home to sleep
or going to work at dawn,
the things I choose to keep
fold themselves quickly
into the deeper folds
of my memory.

Yes, I think last night

it hit me – I am so in love with you –
you ass, you who can never decide
whether to stay or go,
who dangles a plane ticket
back to Baltimore between two fingers
in front of my nose,
who dances wildly
on hot and cold feet
knowing neither where to run
nor where to seek heat.

THE DEATH OF SEED

Trampled acorns pop and smear the walk
into a freckled plate of bursting ochres
and the spaces between the matter seem open
to anything, the same as with pause,
with laughter, with gesture, and with talk.

A diner. An order. Raw clinks of bullied dishes.
Salt and pepper holders. There is no real law here—
there is just you and me, noise and silence.
Whatever else germs will join with what we've kept

like mile-weary boots, shuffling toward somewhere,
heels flapping, holes in the leather, trudging forth
despite certain collapse
with no need for water or rest.

With a single misstep, soles crush potential.
The death of seed is as common as chatter
that moves toward insight but misses
the mark, plundering the heart.

HOT CHOCOLATE

It was only right
the chocolate you chose
to pour over my breasts
was bitter and cheap.

I imagine another scene
as you clean up the mess you made:
a patient man wielding whitehot Godiva,
slow-winding his river south...

Indeed, your indifference to
my skin seems the exception:
the stares of passing strangers
remind me I am a delicacy

sateen as milk, dripping
with texture, center soft as
a maraschino cherry soaked
in aged brandy, smothered in
crumbling cake.

I have savored other lips
more sweet than bitter, lips
always hungry
for more than I would give.

Let's end this now, my friend.
Let's not embarrass each other
with these flaccid tries at ignition;
I, a controlled blaze; you, a wet match.

GO AHEAD—

if slamming doors is what gets you off now
take the back door first
and make your way to the front
go through the bedroom slam that one next
then the kitchen the library and finally

slam the front door hard as you can
rattle the frame the roof the whole house
never mind it's two a.m.
make your finale grand
 and when you return for your things

you'll find me here
drinking red wine
wrapped in royal silk
listening to the trains outside roar
over river silt sowing the earth ripe
for fresh seed.

PEELING YOU

Refusing to sweep the glass you smashed
or bow to the silence that came soon after,
I pinned you then peeled
back your skin to unearth
the origin of your madness.

My hands soaked in dirty blood,
my nails crumbling to their quicks—
you fought me every turn until
I found my arms tangled in visceral roots and there

a black gash that never closed
lay open before me: you finally admitted
this coveted memory, this cherished ache.

You can stitch yourself back whole.
Hiding pain is your business
as mending it is mine.
As the trees outside my paneless window all bend
in the same direction, so we remain,
stuck in proximity,
hopelessly paralleled,
never to meet.

III

ADRIFT

Rowing your own boat now with one shambly oar,
 you are lost for a map — Only a map! But no —
 in circles you go, not by the shore,
 nor out toward the deep, but spinning within

a Sargasso strait, momentous waves heaving
 yet never breaking forward,
 no current strong enough
 to propel you in one direction.

I waste no pity on your glassy eyes
 as you stare at my sure wake, with all I hold now
 harbored inside me: a memorized star guide,
 my sight now clear, self-mastery my beacon.

Dipping onward into the blue, only once
 do I glance back at your diminishing form,
 your sodden, waxy face,
 your blood-drained lips locked in a silent O:

O how you grasp at the drink, at me, at everything!
O the things you keep, they are none. O, as empty as your heart
is the sky reflected in the still pool that will drown you—
O, I must row, I must row.

DALI FEVER

Lying at the bottom of a river, watching clouds pass
over my eye with the current, I float, suspended

here, trapped
in "Persistence of Memory."
I melt in time with the clocks.
Against wooden trunk columns
my skin pours
flows into water and

it's all so acceptable
this way in this land
where we who have hands
 drip
 like
 candles
but trees merely wither
and harden.

EFFIGY

An assembled wooden wreckage:
one thousand naked mannequins
stuck in angular, piled display,
proffering rain-blank faces.

I pushed past their jutting limbs
to the gutted library
and walked up the charred steps
to peer inside.

Then, I turned to the crowd.
They seemed stunned,
as if expecting a bomb.
"We can rebuild this."
I didn't believe myself.

They stared at my lips
with wide painted eyes.
They knew I was no leader.
I knew they would never follow.

I lit another match.

COSMIC PLAY

for Italo Calvino (1923 – 1985)

Shuffleboard with false photons!
 Play hide and seek with lucid orbs.
 Dear magician, show us again
 on which branch the Baron lives.

Give us scope to find the path
 you plowed to mark his life's high end
 while Ursula H., spinning in grace,
 so deftly dodges solar winds.

Protons dance their particle jig
 with quarks named Sphere and Gwendolyn
 while Silver cities bend and quake
 on spindle stilts, facing north,

and Isotopes pull pasta ropes
 like lonely roving paladins.
 The Marco you know is the one
 who carries chance within his pen

as old fish-face, with hairy chin,
 inquires where his nephew's been.
 (Well, Lll seduced that dripping goof—
 she's oh so *nouveau pedestrian*.)

Ecce homo! Italo!
 Gentle physicist du monde!
 How did you get here, sorcerer?
 Why did you leave us, astronom?

LIVING WITHOUT YOUR SKIN

"...and, sometimes, "she said, "I am startled awake
at just the wrong time
and knocked
right out of my skin
so I am left
dragging it along
by my left foot
like a petulant shadow.
People ask me,
 'Who are you?'
 'Where are you going?'
I try to answer but
my lips have turned to ash
and I cannot remember the words."

 Something inside my chest
 beat terrible and hard. "How," I asked her,
 "do you get it back on?"
 She replied,
"I don't know that I ever have."

THE BURGHERS OF CALAIS

While the city smothered her discontents
 with jasmine-sweet swampheat,
 easing shut many eyes,
 I, alone, gained a wider vision.

My fingers bled colour to canvas,
 fresh portraits revealed in form and symbol.
 The old ones whispered their secrets to me—
 they came, each, in urgent dreams:
 Van Gogh, to inject me with mad passion;
 Rembrandt, to reveal soul-stilling sorrow;
 Rodin, to have me pause,
 himself halted and humbled.

And only then could I, too, witness
 the faces on the streets lit from within,
 shining forth from deep holy lanterns
 carried close inside clay chests.

The Burghers of Calais had risen,
 walking freely past cluttered shop windows.
 Everywhere lines had disappeared:
 trees danced, shaking loose
 their cool green wisdom—
 Holy men marched with ladders and paint—
 Virgins scolded godless children—
 Beggars shone immortal
 beneath their dirty haloes—

A TINY HOLE BECOMES MOST IMPORTANT UNDER GREAT PRESSURE

Driving through the Mobile Bay tunnel
 with my father,
 I looked for holes in the walls
 knowing that the impact would kill me
 should a hole exist
 before I ever saw the fracture.

A hole in a condom, say, or a boat—
 a hole in the atmosphere:
 all are of great consequence.
 Or the lack of holes, such as
 no space between the fibers
 of a choke rag;
 the perfect solidarity
 of the jury
 deciding your fate.

Of course, every solid
 has an element of play

in its components.
 I once heard a story
 about a physicist who,

in his later years,
 wore snowshoes
 to keep himself from falling
 through the floor
 through the gaps

between atoms.
 Negative space is like zeroes
 or breathing;
 no one seems to notice
 until it changes.

VITA

Kelly M. Gartman was born in Mobile, AL. She received a B.A. in English Literature from Spring Hill College in 1998. After moving to New Orleans in 2000, she enrolled in the Creative Writing Program at the University of New Orleans where she received a Master of Fine Arts in Poetry in 2004. She currently lives in uptown New Orleans and works full time as a technical writer.