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Still Life Drifting

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Still Life Drifting

A Thesis

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

Masters of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theatre, and Communication Arts
Creative Writing

by

Kari Shisler

B.A. Goshen College, 1987

May 2010

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For Barbara Esch Shisler

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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, whose 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 *sjjos* 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 *sjjos*, 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 ocher shores
as Dhow boats pass with lateen sails
and skirr 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
steading 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.

3

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 mem-
ories, like tea
 cups bro-
 ken,
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 he 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 he 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 baseyo.
Good Morning.

Within silken amnions,
consonants flutter
toward tiny ears.

Yojuum Oh-toe-Shim-nee-ka?
How are you?

Double vowels tumble
marble-smooth.

Jeon sagma reul wonhaeyo.
I am looking for apples.

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

Piga ol gobt katahyo.
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 *hanbuk*,
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.

Mugunghwa

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.

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.

Mens 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,
altitude 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
bro-
ken
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

brit-
tle

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 Tebran

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.