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In Uncharted Waters

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In Uncharted Waters

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

by

Mollie O'Brien Day

B.A. Sarah Lawrence College, 1996

August, 2010

Acknowledgements

In my youthful wanderings, I have visited many sites along coastal Louisiana. None of those places could compare with the deep-woods dreamscapes of the labyrinthine Louisiana wilderness, that my dear friend, Dr. Terry Kennedy, sought and found through his keen instinct and grand affection for all things mystical and beautiful. These extraordinary landscapes were and are glorious to me because they exist in harmony with the earthly wilderness, and yet, somehow, they are other-worldly. My deep love and most profound appreciation goes out to my now deceased friend and mentor, Terry, who called on me to rethink my idea of what a wilderness landscape is – or was. His efforts enliven my spirit; they enrich my soul and reveal to me invaluable lessons about the earth, poetry and their extensions.

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	ii
Preface	iv

The Clearing

Birth of Maurepas Swamp	1
Island Refugium	2
The Clearing	3
Hunger Pangs	5
Silvacultural Warfare	6
Old River Control	7
Crevasse	8

Cancer Alley

Africa Plantation	10
Petrochemical Nebula	11
Forecast	12
The Flood	13
Dead Zones	15
Terrebonne	16
Uncharted Waters	17
Feasting on the Atchafalaya	18

New Orleans

Second Line: Louisiana Avenue	20
Chain Gang	21
Equinox	22
Tremé: Medical History	23
Ancestral Flame	24
Carnival Oracle	25
Celebration in Bacchanal's Garden	27
Notes	28-30
Vita	31

Preface

During a 2008 conference at Tulane University in New Orleans, creative writer and critic Fred D'Aguiar struck a provocative chord among the crowd of diverse, creative thinkers and writers in attendance when he emphatically said, "There is an ethical center of writing, and if you don't have anything to say, then shut up."

D'Aguiar's comment, peeling through the symposium on race and writing in post-Katrina New Orleans, harmonized with my plans for this collection. *In Uncharted Waters* is my attempt to express, through poetry, the dynamic between ecological and cultural elements on the mythic and destroyed coast of Louisiana. I hope this work accurately portrays the industry-dominated region, populated largely by Euro- and African-Americans, in which all elements, living organisms and their relations are deeply entwined, in which humans are as essential to a relic swamp as phantom trees are to the urban landscape.

Research and fact checking fortify this body of work. As a former, New Orleans-based environmental reporter, I am closely acquainted with the intricate biological, cultural and political web that suspends coastal Louisiana; I've reviewed countless state and federal environmental policies and budgets; I've interviewed, in total, hundreds of scientists, lawmakers, landowners, loggers, sawmill owners, environmental activists, historians, and state and federal employees. But the trouble with newspaper reporting is that it tends to oversimplify and compartmentalize information. For example, one might read in the paper about a levee system and groundwater as two distinct features, rather than the interconnectivity of rivers, groundwater and soil fertility. Poetry, however, can express that interconnectedness of the world in which we exist, but that we often do not understand. Poetry allows our imaginations to explore new

paradigms. Poetry may be our best tool for rethinking coastal Louisiana, which is in “critical condition,” according to scientists, politicians, environmentalists and certain industry leaders.

In the dawn of colonial America, leading politicians held the belief that nature was a force to war against and to defeat, largely for economic benefits. Then and now, among Americans, the dominant paradigm was and is that we must conquer the other in order to survive and profit. In 1809, the U.S. Congress and then President Thomas Jefferson appropriated the first funds for alterations to the Mississippi River (and, eventually, its watershed – two-thirds of the nation’s rivers). Over the next two centuries, congress increasingly supported efforts to gain control of the Mississippi River for navigation and development, and against flooding and foreign invasion. These waterworks missions were, then, and are, to this day, carried out by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, a major army command.

In 2005, during Hurricane Katrina, America lost the war against nature. On the eve of Katrina, New Orleans tottered on a heavily eroded coast, one that was completely deforested, riddled with over 20,000 miles of oil and gas industry pipe canals, and many thousands of miles of levees and spoilbanks, all of which dramatically degraded the coasts’ natural hydrologic cycle and hurricane protection systems. Without a formidable coast to slow it down, Hurricane Katrina surged ashore and sailed inland, straight up the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet or “hurricane highway” (a navigation canal that was built by the Corps) and through many ill-constructed and poorly maintained, federal levees which failed during the storm. As a result, New Orleans suffered catastrophic flooding, and well over a thousand people died (the exact death count is yet undetermined). This tragedy shifted the collective belief system about nature; many New Orleanians began to see Louisiana’s wild wetlands and swamps not as something savage, but rather as integral parts of an elegant and complex system – not to mention a protective shield

against tropical storms – when it’s in good health. Today, Louisiana’s coastal ecology remains extremely vulnerable to natural and man-made forces: It is the fastest disappearing landmass on earth, according to the United States Geological Survey. Meanwhile, Louisianans remain absolutely vulnerable to the health of the coast.

It needs to be said that much was won through the Corps’ mission and through industrial progress in Louisiana: a seemingly safe landscape was secured for the tired, poor and huddled masses from around the world. Still, it is difficult to praise an engineered river, floodwalls, tree plantations and cemented swamps – full though they may be of temporary value.

A broad chasm divides what’s left of coastal Louisiana’s wilderness and the majority of Louisianans – who, like most Americans, increasingly spend more time behind computers and in cars, and less time in bayou-side camps and pirogues; sadly, our impressions of Louisiana’s wilderness are fading as fast as the land. It seems a rubicon has been crossed between walking or paddling a canoe, and rocketing over land in a petroleum-charged vehicle. Today, starting at the tender age of three, children spend upwards of eight hours a day indoors, in pre-kindergarten or “after-school” classrooms. Their imaginations are based on a world of shadows; alligators, river willows and songbirds exist only in zoos, digital images and plastic, toy figures.

Possibilities still exist. We can yet learn from experience, that rowing a boat down a river may grant the mind greater access to the unconscious. And poetry, like the rhythms of steadily paddling downstream, can bring to the reader a sense of connectedness to the environment.

In this collection I do not attempt to present the self, reflected in nature, as did seventeenth-century Chinese meditation poets such as Han-shan, who wrote: “My mind is like the autumn moon/ Shining clean and clear in the green pool.” I do attempt, in some poems, to depict a landscape void of any physical human presence. Moreover, if possible, I try to write

from within the elements. By steering away from the human-centric, first person point of view, and the narrative mode, as I do in certain poems, I hope to give a voice to the landscape itself.

In my effort to illustrate both the landscape and a sense of immediacy therein for the reader, I find it very useful to engage the three main rules that Imagist poets applied to poetry in the early twentieth-century. The first two tenants call for: the “direct treatment of a thing”; and the elimination of any word that “does not contribute to the presentation.” With these guidelines, a poet may preserve a place and its beauty by employing condensed, direct language, as Ezra Pound does in his landscape poem, “In a Station of the Metro.” It is my intention, as I cross the coast, poem-by-poem, to capture an aspect of the immense beauty of the landscape, and specific offenses to it, in a clear, “high-resolution” image of exactly each thing I mean to treat. Individual poems are parts that contribute to my larger, mosaic-like vision of the coast across time.

By borrowing from the imagists’ toolbox, I also hope to project a voice that allows the landscapes’ natural unspoken majestic beauty and sound to arise. This brings us to the third tenant to Imagism: “as regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of a metronome.” New Orleans and its subcultures are exceptionally musical. Many varied rhythms fortify the secondliner’s downbeats, the buckjumper’s dance steps, and twenty-four dialects (spoken in New Orleans) that accent a way of life in both physical and verbal expressions. The river too, in its natural and altered forms, has specific rhythms. Herein I attempt to capture the musical phrasing of these landscapes. In addition, I hope that my phrasing will help to emphasize those things that cry out for more attention.

Through reading or wandering in the woods, when we open the doors to the unconscious, we are striking out to see the sun shining on an ivory billed woodpecker; we are attempting to hold still – or react – while the eighteen-foot alligator slides from the bank under water, with his

nose pointed in our direction. We are learning to coexist with these things or, perhaps, feeling the urge destroy them.

In Uncharted Waters is an attempt to describe the “radiant affinities,” as David Jones calls them in his introduction to *In Parenthesis*, felt by people like me, who are, “of the same world of sense with the hairy ass and the furry wolf.” Jones’ notion, of a fragile, yet magical relationship between the human and its environment, also beautifully describes the metaphysical mysteries of man in Louisiana’s wilderness ecology, and encapsulates the delicate intricacies of an environment on the brink of extinction. It seems fitting to connect coastal Louisiana to Jones’ World War I-inspired interpretations of a shifting landscape, given the forces of violence that rocked eighteenth-, nineteenth- and twentieth-century North American soil (slavery, relocation and genocide, clear-cutting, damming, industry, land development and the resulting massive extinctions), which occurred as paddles and sails gradually gave way to petroleum. Furthermore, I connect more strongly with the breadth and depth of Jones’ prose than I do with the great works of ecopoetry written by, for example, Gary Snyder, W.S. Merwin or Mary Oliver.

While this work strives to walk the path made by ecopoets, its greater aspiration is to know the web threaded by masters of poetic beauty and invention. *In Uncharted Waters* may be eco-centric, according to J. Scott Bryson’s definition of poems about nature, written by “a poet working from an ecological perspective on the world.” However, in this collection, the definition of ecology includes humans. The poems herein are driven, as are the poems of W.S. Merwin, by the environmental beat, as much as they are a response to D’Aguiar’s call for justice through an ethically centered approach to literature. In this way, this work strays from the eco-centric path of ecopoetry. Were these poems ever to find perfect form, I hope they would become for the reader something of an Imagists’ ethnography: a breathing, visible and palpable experience of

time. Louisiana's wilderness and urban settings are here re-membered to serve as fodder for a future in which those landscapes will inevitably be changed.

In depicting Louisiana's endangered ecosystem, stereotyping is a concern of mine. This manuscript houses several, potentially bad guys. It depicts, for example, some of the state's first Euro-American inhabitants, loggers, as they first encountered Louisiana's vast wilderness and viewed the contiguous, ancient cypress forests as a source of profit. Clearing a swamp state of its enormous trees is no small task. Loggers in Louisiana endured dangerous working conditions in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century coastal Louisiana. Were it not for the loggers' work, the materials of centuries-old cypress homes would not have been provided. Thanks also to the skill of great craftsmen, many of these cypress-filled homes survived hurricanes and floods to grace New Orleans (and elsewhere) until today. It is not my intention to stereotype individuals, but to gaze through poetry, across relic swamps, void of shade and species diversity, over hundreds of thousands of acres, and to wonder: What are the implications of our actions?

There is still time for re-discovery and profoundly sensitive explorations in nature. As we decompress from the stress and over-stimulation of urban American life, we can begin to cultivate a greater awareness of the natural environment and a greater sensitivity toward one another. It is my grandest hope that my readers will begin to rethink their relationship to the coast, that some poem in this collection will excite a reader to wander deeper into the swamp to seek a magical interaction with a cypress forest or a meandering bayou, whose beginning and end is uncertain. There is no map that leads into the future of coastal Louisiana. But mythical, magical, dissolving places can extend across the waters of time through verse.

During that writers' symposium of 2008, as D'Aguiar spoke, he challenged me with the question, "Are writers crossing thresholds of flesh and blood, through their own vulnerabilities to

cuddle a wasp?” Creating poetry that is beautiful, that exposes the story of a landscape in a way that takes hold of a reader, is a difficult challenge. The effort for me involves finding ideas that replace human exceptionalism with a stronger wilderness ethic and a basis for co-habitation between humans and nature, and expressing that bond through eco-poetic images. In answer to D’Aguiar’s question, “Have you set out to do the crucible of what we as writers can do?” I hope that I might say ‘yes.’

The Clearing

Birth of Maurepas Swamp

In twilight, the sheen
of wet birth in green cells,
the delicate arc
of a fern leaf.

A small frond
begins to breathe,
its infant limbs
reach

with the forest.

Island Refugium

Autumn light drifts through the canopy,
crimson glow on the cypress,
copper glint on its threads, rising,
between long shadows.

Tails thrust, anole and salamander lunge,
fern to fern. Sori, cast
in the scatter-gust, black seeds,
caught in the whirlwind.

As the trace of its yellow feathers
fades, the warbler's darting wings flick
sun-spray from quivering palmettos.

A buck moth pants under leaf.

The Clearing

I.

Below the frothing white rush,
silently suspended,
below the river's turbid thunder,
silver silt on plum light.

Cold-water masses,
cascading green riverbanks,
diffuse the ripe soil flows
across floodplains.

Lavender-hued reed plumes
buoy up and the
switchgrass monsoon-windrows
wander in springtime.

Swollen bayous - vital,
sand-cradled waters -
slope toward the sea.

II.

Then the thud of thick hide,
mud-bolted boots, jam
in the rush of swift, rising waters.

Slaves and loggers
lash through sedge blades,
poling deep into shadows

of the rich, wooded marvel. Its
waterborne forms
and emerald branches

are laden with songbirds,
flitting in the velvet
forest. A play

of hide and seek, arboreal,
for the white diaphane.

To the loggers,

it seems a wood, moving.
So they glue a blind-eye
sternward. Their rough

hands pole the barges, faster
and farther, down
straight-water roads,

and whip blood from the mules
slogging trunks
through the bottomless mud.

Towers of lumber,
brethren of sequoia, whose limbs
fill a mass, wooden grave.

Beneath the narrow, blue ribbon
of sky, black smoke spreads
over log-stacked trains.

In the vast clearing, nothing
remains, but ghosts of stumps,
millions, rot

among the bloated mules –
one great, white egret
lost in the carnage.

Hunger Pangs

In April, thin gadwall pock the silent
flyway, over log-choked bays,

in the dusk. Above the torpid water,
gnats hover, thirsting

for blood. A fritillary hangs
from a leucage web.

Low, in phantom shadows,
the hunter crouches,

wolf in his stomach, searching
through discarded branches.

Silvacultural Warfare

In the barren swamp,
broiling under-sun,
native seeds perish,
their husks buried
in soil, sodden with rust.

Foe sprouts unfurl
in the sinkholes,
exhuming salt-crusts
roots. Solastalgia
sickens the heart.

Old River Control

With steel piles staked
in the river's soft bends, rash levies poised
over loam and the General's

primal salient bulging out,
he yammered, *Nails are more effectual
when knocked below the surface!*

And so, armed with hammers
and dynamite, his legion set out
to bang green light from the water.

The contiguous, riverside
forest - *savage territory* -
all that generated energy or fertility,

or that nuanced the river, they
chopped down. Then
to tame its course, they corralled

all sawyers and snags, plundering
new depths – the dredging, the whacking-off
of meanders. And at last,

in that victorious moment,
with the balded, rocketing juggernaut
of a river charging by,

Privates Bates and Coldpepper
wagered, *Three dollars,
that she jumps the sluice!*

Reflection sank
below the water.
In that deep murk,

hot water, entrenched,
sped seaward as
the river's life-force

rapidly declined.

Crevasse

A finger above the threshold,
white-knuckled on the waterline.

An earthen mound, miles long,
rings the settlement
and the sinking
concrete hole
we inhabit:

an incident still brimming –

Cancer Alley

Africa Plantation

He pauses on the levee, across River Road
from his sorely weathered house,
chopping block in the yard,
rooster blood in hallow bowl.

He watches, entranced, while the cane crop
burns; black roots smoldering,
red embers hum in the fields.

Here his grandparents slaved.

Here he was born, his infant body,
petal-like, descended, a succession
of hands in rose-colored light,

here heard the *whoosh, whoosh*, of indigo skirts,
saw the bright yellow tignons of the sisters
who delivered him, then drifted up
over-field on a trail of smoke.

Here on a path through black dirt,
his bare feet tracked toward the virid swamp.
Haunted, he wandered in liquid lands,
hunting old blood. From the photo

he memorized the contortions, the shape
of her dress, dangling like a bell, her ungodly
long neck and the sign they pinned
to her back: *This Nigger Voted*.

Here the levee shadows the estate.
Wind-peeled boards, curling skyward,
are threaded with wasp nests. Here

cane rows roll into sugarberries,
oaks lilt toward Gulf prairies,
sweetwater marshlands and the sea.

Here, across the road from these old,
crooked steps, it begins.

Petrochemical Nebula

Above the cane fields,
ions gather into
midnight sky
and the illuminant
plant.

Sour clouds,
pillars of creation,
billow over star-shooting
flares. Pillars
of corrosive vapors spiral
over rust-eaten towers.
Their purple smoke-plumes twinkle
with halos of florescent,
green light.
The obscure moon
rises.

Forecast

Through the murky filter
a silver fin flickers,

the black spill, slick
in its marrow.

In light under siege,
its gray belly swells.

The Flood

An hour is held deep
in the underneath of time,
where man's innerness,
stripped of its garments,
rows among the clouds,
beneath a cosmic sea
and prays to see God's image.

In the darkest hour,
sisters and brothers,
bearing wale, sleep
in the shadow of a skeletal levee,
below the plane of the sea,
beneath the waters of time.

And in the dead of night,
stone rain storms the sea,
the river rears its head,
turning inward,
over flood walls, that sheer
under waves of loam.

Unstinted nimbi part
for a moment
and, through the window, children,
upturned, afloat in bed,
see the cryptic moon flash
silver face on an axe,

cracking through shingles,
on a gnarled hand and
the terror-drenched skin,
but only for a moment –
then slip
out of reach and crosses over,
very dark.

The moon smiles on an unbridled
casket.

Rain pounds the apparition
of an old man's face and

his stiff arm, raised high,
chopping at the sky, in death
to beat it.

 Rooftops swirl in the river-foam,
white light in the rain;

the silver moon like a beast
shines on the axe that froze
in death's grasp,
and enters the body, electrified
with the terror of a species in flight;
it alights on the divine

in fear's mystery,
in men falling – our tie
is held deep, underneath time.

Dead Zones

Went down to the ship,
set keel to tempest, forth on the oily sea --
oars raise in the maze of pipelines and we
pulled fast over Gulf to day's end.

And there - where
moon's eye sees nowhere,
platform corpses darken the water,
night crows fish bones
in hot, filthy backflow - rowed fast
through the fosse, open
for sacrifice. Black

blood flowed from a well.
Our hull snared on the cracked
oil vein, mired in swelling waters.

Terrebonne

Desolate are the oaks' dead
leaves, scattered across the bayou-
side road, desolate the road
where young girls race –

sea blossoms, streaming
from their long, black locks,
lead-riddled airs, staining
their lungs. On the road to Grand Bois,

past ill-kept cocks and kegs
of sour beer. But the girls'
golden legs run steady
over broken glass, over branches

and leaves, fallen in fog
of benzine, foul on their lips,
past stilted trailers, sunk
under brine intrusions.

On this sliver
of putrid green lace,
marsh becomes shadow
under tide. Here

in summer, Terrebonne
bleeds.
Over asphalt,
the stroke of their breath

races on, though the oaks
are dying and the breeze
sears the young throats
on the road to Grand Bois.

Uncharted Waters

Gravestone waves smother
Isle de Jean Charles, a fingerling ridge
of sacred land. On its edge,

the Houma Nation still stands, united.
The Pointe aux Chenes and
Biloxi-Chitimacha bands, rooted

in Atakapas, Acolapissa and Choctaw,
mama and child, traiteur and trapper –
all fisherman – survive

by the Po-Pierre, dockside. Or trawling
down bayou, through the cord grass,
over crab traps, on a slick, black stream,

on the silvery shrimp tide,
their nets, like wings, rise and fold.

Around the Point of the Oaks,
ragged boughs, once sentinel,
now decompose,

and scarlet flowers drop
into caskets adrift on the liquefying land.
The fiddler sings out

from his cardboard canopy,
his notes drift away from the shore.
Great, black wings of majestic

frigates slipstream over nets, cast
in uncharted waters.

Feasting on the Atchafalaya Swamp

In springtime crawfish fill up the Basin
where earth's first trees drink in floods.

A discolored man bathes in the river,
his blackened eye winks; my hands cup the water.

As our pirogue passes, ivory bills swoop through the shade
and disappear from the shore. Look carefully:

the swamped road vanishes in a glance,
the way home sprawling in all directions

in a labyrinth of hollow tupelo and bleached
stumps, desiccated, headstones. Grief wanders heavy

in this heat. We carefully slip through long thorn thickets,
following a trail of yellow strings, tied to the saplings.

Bounty fills our traps. Shells glisten,
black and red, shallow of breath.

Rain clouds and fish crows emerge
above the dark, giving water.

As the sun sinks low behind the trees,
our boat unravels from the trunks on a glaze, glowing and orange,

up the pipe channel, back to Sorrel. Cicadas fill the sweetgum.
Dark forms return.

Outside the cabin, cayenne crackles in the air
and a strong fire glows beneath kettle waters.

New Orleans

Second Line: Louisiana Avenue

Chief coasts by in a white Cadillac,
top-down convertible, Creole-
Indians planted on the running board.

As they ride, their brown faces shine
on the backstreet. Cruising to the fight,
which at one time ended in killing,

Chief thrives in his seven-suns suit.
A legacy of lemon yellow
feathers bloom from the lace

of his parasol, though no water falls
from the rain of brass notes and humans,
chanting and fanning white plumes. His dancers

buckjump on soles of alligator-skin shoes.
His pageant inseminates
the long stretch of Louisiana Avenue.

Boys in red suits, gyrating, hop,
roof to roof, their rhythm
resounding through the digs below.

Felon-riddled blocks.
Smack trash on all corners.
The trumpets blow

past the Murder Mart and parade
on LaFitte Street cemetery. Here
Chief's spy boy veers off course.

Clouds of pollen, a river of thighs
and Chief's golden rays entrance
the sweat-soaked dancers, bending their bones.

Chain Gang

The school board's
dead of night
white vice
can't snare
the conviction
from Simone
(Cimone's brother)
as he braves
a path home
through the ruins
of Agriculture Street.
Blackwatered America –
 asphalt chunks,
 bombed out roads,
 toxic snares,
 ashen faces.
Moton elementary,
a superfund wasteland,
a schoolyard,
unearthed by
catastrophic
waves.

The day's last light
glares
on broken windows,
desks mangled,
lockers crumpled,
putrefied trash
and red-shouldered
hawks hovering
over blight, over
children guilty
of immanent wisdom.

Equinox

That morning,
Lt. Lohman might have
awoke aware differently
of himself. Sensing chlorophyll
coursing through his pores,
might have stripped of his bedclothes,
stretched out and stared at the ceiling until,
with the velvet air whispering in his ear,
he imagined windmills, churning,
or felt the cool breeze and
a sudden drop of carbon in the air.

Inhaling a full, sweet breath,
Lt. Lohman might have
arose, seven am, making his way out
into the yard to munch
young dandelion leaves. This delectable
communion with plant life
could have warmed his blood
and he could have lingered there
thinking of the men who never fell
on the Danzinger Bridge. Roots
would have sprouted from his feet,
deep in black dirt, as his toes drank
with the worms. As he spoke, his voice
would have resonated with the earth.

Then, in the richly scented soil,
his thirst quenched,
his spirit would have ascended
to azure water, the morning mist
exuding from his pores.

Ancestral Flame

Three nappy-headed boys
down French Quarter streets
anticipate the secondline.

Cimone, elbow tall,
thrusts
open the crowd

and sees his mom's
killer jump
free.

His footsteps falter
under hot muzzle,
as police horses lean.

Someday, in a year
or two, they may catch him
low, below the jive.

For now, the brass band beats
away the heavy clip,
horses forgotten.

The boys, swift-footed,
high strutting, initiate
dignified trance.

Red and gold
umbrellas whirl
over our heads.

How sweet to savor
this moment, Cimone
dancing the streets of Tremé.

Carnival Oracle

This is a tale of three storms, he booms, lifting
three denim flaps from his suit, *Katrina, Rita*
and FEMA, his testimony, the bells pealing.

The wind blows, laden with bar-b-cue ribs,
past the gates of St. Aug., beneath a huge,
wooden cross and cast iron emblems of Erzuli.

He appears this Carnival morning,
shaking his staff, rattling the beads,
and he begins to chant about

the one whose name is concealed, about
a tribe and its only survivor – the keeper
of sacred illustrations. His ictus

is woven in sanctum, into folds
of his costume. His tale's blow
and ire flow with precise calculations.

Through his threads, he reveals the vision
of his house, engulfed, its walls, crashing in
as the waters drag him down.

He prays, knowing others are dying.
And then breaks through the surface,
finding his world, dissolved, but alive,

in the darkest night, in blackest waters,
the abyss racing backwards over rooftops,
dragging him through the trees, toward the sea

until he grasps the last branch. Howling
wind lashes at his arms and face,
as his people huddle on rooftops,

waiting for rescue.
Days and no cavalry. He prays
for the Lord to bring them home.

By and by, beams of light shine

through the cloud-covered, Carnival sky.
His voice done thundering,

he shakes to empty the water from his mind
and then disappears
in a clamor of drums and tambourines.

Celebration in Bacchanal's Garden

Uncle Lionel strolls into Bacchanal's garden,
an old Creole face in the fire-glow, bearing bel canto,
and wearing gold with his burgundy best.

Pulled up from the flood, Uncle Lionel was dropped
on a half-submerged highway and left there to burn
without an ounce of water, under blistering skies.

Now, in the twilight, he arouses the Loko,
their leaves unfurl, kumquat and tupelo.
Gods appear freely in Bacchanal's garden,

spinning grass into poetry, heavy
with pollen, muscadine-scented,
rooted in bull tongue and bloodrot.

As Lionel breathes sweet life into song,
Chief Yellow Feather bellows,
the ironweeds flutter, the phantom trees

shelter the flutes. And Uncle Lionel,
a fine falsetto, caresses
every note and tip toes through the lady slippers

singing "Crazy for Feelings," as we
stoke the fires that led him home.
The red serum rises over flame,

a rose paleness in the moonlight. With his
nieces and nephews, who number in the thousands,
we reclaim him, alive and well-dressed.

Notes

AFRICA PLANTATION Originally known as the Babin Place, this historic farmhouse was purchase by a benevolent organization called the Grand General Independent Order of Brothers and Sisters of Charity North American, South America, Liberia and Adjacent Islands in 1911. They renamed it the Africa Plantation. The black benevolent society raised crops to feed the poor. They also advocated for good health, good hygiene, and self-sufficiency and against alcoholism and indolence in the black community. Dr. John H. Lowery, one of the first African American doctors in Donaldsonville purchased the farm in 1933. Later, it became the home of Leonard Julien, who invented the sugar cane planting machine in 1964. After suffering much neglect and hurricane damage, Africa Plantation was disassembled, piece-by-piece, by Leonard Julien's many sons, daughters and others in 2009.

CANCER ALLEY takes its name from the term coined by late twentieth-century environmentalists. The term describes a 130-mile stretch along the Mississippi River between Baton Rouge and New Orleans. In the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries, this low, soupy, region began a remarkable transition. Slave-labored plantations, floodplains and swamps were transformed into to a dense swath of oil refineries and petrochemical plants, which continue to produce billions of tons of airborne toxins and many other deadly substances. A mixture of many, unknown chemical compounds in the air and water, deteriorate not only the environment but also human health. These factors are accounted for in the Louisiana Tumor Registry's data, which reports inordinately high rates of cancer incidence among all Louisianans and cancer-caused death in Louisiana.

MARDI GRAS INDIAS: Over thirty-eight tribes of African-Americans have paraded the back streets of New Orleans in fantastically colorful, handmade suits of Native Americans apparel on St. Joseph's Day ("Super Sunday,") Mardi Gras day and other festive occasions since at least the mid-nineteenth-century. The Mardi Gras Indians are known for masterful craftsmanship, hand-made costumes and theatrical display. Mardi Gras Indian roots stems from the meeting of Native

Americans, Caribbean and African peoples on colonial American soils. Their heritage, worth researching, is shaped by race-based strife and culture-based manifestations of great creativity, persistence and endurance.

SOLASTALGIA: Dr. Glen Albrecht's term, used to describe a homesickness one feels at home. In Albrecht's own words,

“Solastalgia is the pain or sickness caused by the loss or lack of solace and the sense of desolation connected to the present state of one's home and territory. It is the 'lived experience' of negative environmental change.”

Albrecht is a professor of sustainability at Murdoch University, Perth, Australia.

<http://healthearth.blogspot.com/2008/01/solastalgia-history-and-definition.html>

SILVICULTURE: Native American forestry practices that are often challenged by the federal government. The feds most infamous attempt was made by Smokey the Bear, a anti-fire mascot who traveled to southern states with the Dixie Crusaders in order to convince southerners that that their land management practices were wrong and harmful*. Southerners traditionally employ low-level controlled burns, a Native American silviculture technique, to clear a forested area of snakes, tics, etc in order to make it workable and safe for human inhabitants. Silvicultural battles between the federal government and the southern states have persisted to this day since the time of the Civil War. (*See Steven J. Pyne's cultural history of wildland and rural fire: *Fire in America*, Wyerhaeuser Environmental Books, 1982.)

TIGNON: The tignon, was a turban-like headdress, whose use was mandated for women of color, slave or free, in Louisiana by the sumptuary laws (1785.) Many women of color were mistresses of white French and Spanish Creole man in colonial Louisiana. These affairs sparked the jealousy among the men's wives and other female relations who competed in beauty, dress, ostentation and manners. But, as stylish and flattering turbans grew from simple handkerchiefs, the beauty and inventiveness of these gens de couleur continued to attract admirers.

Vita

Mollie Day is a widely published environmental reporter and poet. She specializes in coastal Louisiana, the fastest disappearing landmass in America and ground zero for environmental change. She is a fellow of the Institute for Environmental Communications, Loyola University and a graduate of Sarah Lawrence College. Mollie understands the landscape – its indivisible ecological and cultural elements – as the extension and potential of who we are. She is closely acquainted with the intricate, biological, cultural, economic and political web that suspends this delicate region. She is committed to writing about the interconnectivity of pieces that we tend to compartmentalize.