The Fool and the Flood: A Journey

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The Fool and the Flood: A Journey

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
Creative Writing
Poetry

by

Michelle Hoover
B.F.A. Savannah College of Art and Design, 2013

May, 2018
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When I was working towards my BFA in illustration, professors always told me that an image shouldn’t need accompanying words to be understood. I obeyed that suggestion without question, not only to retain my GPA but as a way to force my visual work to, for lack of a better phrase, “speak for itself,” rather than rely on words to explain it. I thought a strong work of art shouldn’t need a paragraph. Now that I have finished my illustration degree and am focusing more on writing, I question the nature of what I was taught about the relationship between visual art and writing. After all, most illustration projects are to accompany written works such as magazine articles and illustrated books. With this thesis I attempt to create a fluid dynamic between my poetry and visual art so they enhance the understanding of each other while simultaneously being able to exist separately.

Since furthering my study of poetry I have also been introduced to ekphrastic poetry. Ekphrasis is traditionally defined as poems that critique or describe visual art, and through this critique, ekphrasis opens up a direct conversation between written and visual art. One ekphrastic poem that stands out to me is Margaret Atwood’s “Manet’s Olympia.” Not only does Atwood engage with Manet’s painting by describing the situation in the painting from a woman’s point of view and making Olympia her speaker in the final stanza, she also automatically puts her poem in context with the history of Manet’s painting, which was inspired by Titian’s Venus of Urbino. Manet’s painting is seen as portraying a woman more in control of her sexuality than Titian’s painting because the female figure is staring straight at the viewer, and Atwood capitalizes on this by portraying a woman in complete control of her sexuality by taking on the voice of the woman in the painting in Manet’s painting in the final stanza of her poem:
I, the head, am the only subject
Of this picture.
You, sir, are furniture.
Get stuffed.

Atwood’s work incorporates the themes of its visual inspiration while simultaneously expressing Atwood’s own views and interpretations of the painting.

Although not directly a traditional form of ekphrasis, reading tarot cards blurs the assumed lines that separate visual art and writing. Most modern tarot decks come with a guidebook which helps to describe each individual card and helps any reader perform the reading. Most tarot decks vary slightly in their meanings and symbolism, but they still maintain a similar core meaning. Maintaining this base meaning gives the creator of a new deck a starting point to maintain the tradition of tarot. The challenge then becomes to create a unique deck of cards that still manages to interact with the traditional symbolism and imagery. With both the poems and illustrations in this thesis I hope to draw from the archetypal images in tarot and combine them with my individual images to create a unique narrative.

The journey of this sequence started as a visual discovery of Hopi Kachina Dolls six years ago. From that point on my design viewpoint changed. I focused on patterns found in nature such as coiling nautilus shells and ferns, and I combined them with the jewel like reds, blues, yellows, blacks, and whites of Hopi and Eastern European folk art. Although the characters’ designs were heavily inspired by Hopi art, the landscape described throughout this thesis draws from a broader range of inspirations. There is traditional tarot imagery in “III. The Empress” with her throne and golden wheat as well as color symbolism that connects certain characters such as The Fool, The Hermit, Rider, and Death who are associated with blue, and The Emperor and The Devil who are associated with red.
Besides having a narrative structure, dynamic motion is important in my visual art and poetry. After discovering Kachina dolls and an entirely new artistic style, I wanted to express that same energy in my own work. I have always had a tendency to be tedious and focused on details and often get stuck in the details of a piece, whether writing or visual art, so that the piece as a whole can become too static. Stasis is boring, especially in the context of a journey narrative such as the one I hope to create in *The Fool and the Flood*. In short, I want to combine my signature attention to intricate detail with the movement I found in nature and folk art such as the flowing yet geometric designs of Kachina costumes and the coiling and concentric patterns in flowers. I have created larger, more intricate illustrations to accompany poems as well as smaller illustrations that serve more as motifs for the narrative as a whole. This idea of creating juxtaposing images at multiple levels of detail can enliven the narrative through similarly recurring images in the poems. For instance, from the start of the journey The Fool is guided and almost haunted by the chiming of bells, which first appear as something The Fool sees when he meets The Magician in the form of bell shaped lilies of the valley but later heard coming from the mouth of a portrait The Fool sees in “The Fool Finds His Ghost”. Throughout the narrative, the chiming of bells serves as a symbol for The Fool’s lost memory.

Aside from the detailed images, I also experiment with the poems’ structure to reflect the personalities of the characters as well as the mental state of The Fool throughout. Because The Fool is usually seen as a free spirit, I try to create the structure of individual poems not only to reflect The Fool’s uncertainty but the other characters’ distinct personalities. Consider the fractured speech and description of “XI. Justice.” Although the character is based in the idea of balance, her physical description and speech are broken up with line breaks more than any other
character. This device means to accentuate the imbalance of The Fool’s life in order to show its effect on Justice herself.

During the process of composing this thesis I also discovered intricacies in the relationship of creating the visual and written work at the same time. Poems that flowed readily during the initial stages of writing were the ones that already had individual illustrations for them, or the ones for which I was designing an illustration for simultaneously. Creating the visual and written elements simultaneously created a conversation between them. For example, I created a watercolor sketch of the High Priestess and took notes on the process of sketching her, such as the behaviors of the water and paint on the paper. I then worked some of those details into the poem about her such as when the air around her “ripples, as if with midday heat.” which came from how sections of the paper buckled from my excessive application of water and almost a dozen layers of paint. Similarly, the written structure and character of “XIV. Temperance” with her fluid and fluctuating form was inspired by a rough sketch of her that didn’t have any solid lines but just relied on brush strokes. I incorporated the loose style of her sketch into her physical presence in the poem, in which she transforms into water: “her body now a giant / drop of water   whirling through the air.” Through this interaction during the process of creating both visual art and poetry, both can evolve from the other’s influence.

Along with the sequence’s visual elements, I also want to create a distinctive voice, or rather voices. I intend for each character The Fool encounters to speak with her or his own voice, but the initial challenge of this project presented itself in finding a voice for The Fool himself. The Fool often remains an observer more than an active participant. While The Fool’s character is evolving, his voice in the long run, should be the driving force of the narrative. The Fool’s
voice opens the narrative in “0. The Fool”, but I consider the unnumbered poems, such as “The Fool Finds His Ghost” and “The Fool Counts His Blessings”, to expand The Fool’s voice.

Through this thesis I hope to express a subtle yet sharp evolution of character as illustrated through highly detailed, interweaving imagery created through a combination of poetry and visual art. Unlike most ekphrastic projects, I have the unique experience of creating both the visual and written elements of this sequence, which allows me to tailor and adapt the visual and written elements for each other, instead of just having the poems react to the images. Through this interaction and through the narrative of The Fool’s, I hope to create a uniquely sequence through The Fool and the Flood.

Because the poems in this collection don’t directly critique, and sometimes don’t even directly relate to the images in the collection, it stretches the borders of ekphrasis and leans more in the direction of William Blake’s ‘composite art.’ Blake made his art so it could be seen separately from his writing but still exist in the world of it. Most importantly, “the most obvious manifestation of the independence of design from text is the presence of illustrations which do not illustrate.” (Mitchell) Blake includes illustrations of characters that are never mentioned in the writing, so the reader is forced to read them as separate things in conversation with each other. The type of interaction between art and writing in Blake’s composite art makes it so the written and illustrated elements don’t overlap narratively, which allows the illustrations to stay relevant in the larger scheme of the written work. Although my illustrations are more directly related to the accompanying writing, the dynamic relationship between the art illustrations and the writing in Blake’s composite art is what I am trying to achieve through The Fool and the Flood.
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Abstract

This journey based narrative inspired by the traditional narrative of the Major Arcana cards in the tarot, centers on The Fool and his interactions with the rest of the Major Arcana. The Fool’s journey centers on memory, regaining personal power, admitting and accepting weakness, and creating a personal place in relation to a larger world. This evolution throughout the journey is explored through detailed repeating imagery and symbols drawn from a mixture of traditional tarot imagery and the author’s personal image set created for this narrative.
The Fool and the Flood: A Journey
this is not about falling
0. The Fool

Something wet and cold laps my face.
I crack my eyes open to Rider on my chest,
his bright teal eyes beaming down at me like stars.
He barks sharply, then nips at my sleeves and chest.

“All right! I’m up. I’m alive, see?”

He nestles his tiny white body next to my hip.
The muscles between my shoulder blades sting.
My spine aches. I don’t want to grow wings.
I find high enough places to fall from just using hands and feet. A wilting, unwoven shred of myself, this falling, too familiar, my chest aching and broken an abandoned nest.

Sun and heat rise above the cliff and leave me in shivering shadow. I want to remember, to know just where I’ve been.
A ringing dances through the air.
A Chime.
My bones need to follow.
I creak to my feet.

Crazy wisdom, walk with me on two legs, on four and three. Lead, guide me anywhere but here. I want to see my blue water lilies again, to cradle them in my hands, to drink them in like water.
I. The Magician

Chiming dances through the trees.  
Coiling vines coat a cabin  
in tiny white flowers that droop  
like heavy bells from their stems,  
sprawling as they sing out in the wind.  
A figure steps out of the open  
doorway, his cloak catching the sun  
with a shifting opalescent black.  
It matches his eyes.  
A dark blue tinted hand severs  
a strand of bell flowers, still ringing, as he steps  
back through the doorway.  
I follow, cross the creaking threshold, Rider by my side.

Over an oak table facing us, the figure hunches.  
Stems bearing red berries stitch  
through fissures of old jigsaw walls.  
With a silver mortar and pestle the figure grinds  
bell flowers throws their powdery shards between us.  
They hover in the air shine like constellations.  
I step into them.  
Underneath my feet stems creep.  
Hanging from my sleeves, my blue crystals chime.  
He hears, cups his ear, looks to me, and asks,

What do you remember? If you would  
allow, I have the skills to help you, to show you  
what occurred, why you feel as though you don't  
know your own face anymore.

The mist turns blue and chimes loudly.  
Swirling current pulls at my feet.  
I want to follow the currents to remember falling  
back into night sky. Teeth. Sharp teeth grip just above  
my ankle, bring me back. It’s Rider. I look down  
as he unclamps his jaws. The thick mist condenses.  
Hundreds of butterflies swirl around me chime crest and drop  
to the floor. They melt through cracks in the floorboards.

I'm sorry. I thought I could help, but she won’t let me see.  
Now is not the time. Go, my friend, follow the night  
blooming flowers. Learn to trust your breath.
II. The High Priestess

White bell flowers lattice the ground.
Between two pillars in the ruins of a temple,
a woman in blue and purple robes lounges.
All the bell flowers chime at once, then go quiet.

Rider runs to her. Her eyes and hair
shimmer in that same black opalescence,
but somehow different. Rider nestles in her lap.
She waves me over. Pomegranate wind.

Hello again. Please, come sit with me.
Her voice echoes as if the temple was still standing.
In the air behind her a suspended curtain ripples,
slow, like a waterfall, that same opalescent black. She smiles.

Even the giants, the old trees, settle further into the earth.
It is not his place to help you. Sometimes forgotten things
you’d best leave alone. They hinder new things, drag them down.
Now you need only trust your instincts, your feet.

“No! That’s the last thing I should do.
That’s what got me to the bottom of a cliff
in the first place. That’s what lead me here,
remembering nothing before the fall.”

Are you sure you fell? “What?”
And now you seek something? “Yes, of course I fell,
but now, I only remember my water lilies,
glowing like blue lanterns.”

Her eyes blend into her hair and the curtain
behind her, making her head seem hollow. Around her
the air ripples, as if with midday heat.
The night is cold. She stands.

You know what you need.
You will not let go until you get to see
your water lilies again. I miss them too.
They were always so beautiful in the river at night.

She steps through the curtain behind her
and disappears. The winds slow and I hear running water. Rider nudges me forward with his head.
I trust my feet and follow her through the curtain.
The Fool Tells Time with Red Sands

Black opalescence seeps around me curves solidifies into a dome.

I walk to the middle of it
A pool of red sand shivers beneath my feet.
The sand’s center darkens, an inverted cone of fire.

The dome starts to melt.
Ceiling drips a slow rain dropping on my hands my shoulders.
Chime. Some of the viscous black pearls stop midair,
shivering like pupils of eyes adjusting constantly to the dark.
I drip. Blue, purple, yellow, bones white highlight reflection.

All fall down. My body, a drop of molten glass falls through funneled red center point back into a pool of opalescent black. I swim up,
surface, float buoyant on my back in the thick not water.
It drains into a whirlpool until I lie prone, on solid floor. Ceiling? Dome above me, tapering to a red pointed center. Chime.

Echoes. This world vibrates, starts rising falling up.
I drip, fall up. Up into the red.
a dream    an echo
III. The Empress

I wake up face down in the remains of the same temple. The edges of the trees glow from waxing light, their centers darkening like a deep ocean to sink into. Rider butts my forehead. The sunlight spreads, erasing the black from the trees.

I hear running water. She mentioned my blue water lilies floating on a river. I follow the sounds leaking from every direction. I trust my feet know where to go. The trees thin, their old roots giving way to flexing saplings budding like tiny fireworks. Twelve streams converge to form a river, an island of gold wheat floats in its heart. The island sways with the current as though held only by an anchor attaching its center to the riverbed. Amid the wheat a woman sits in a red throne of poppies. She emanates gold. Her scepter and shield rest next to her.

I hold Rider in my arms and leap onto the island. Rider jumps into the wheat, curls up, and falls asleep. The woman stands up and hugs me. She smells like Spring grass, her eyes and hair glowing gold. Here where the earth is warm as a hearth, things grow.

Welcome my dear! It’s safe here.
The sun has just awoken, though your night was restless with dreams, with too much time repeating.
Lie down. Relax. Let my island’s currents calm your mind.

I recline into the island’s warm body and close my eyes. The midday sun wakes me. The gold woman twirls a poppy stem and whistles, chimes, same as the bell flowers. Now go, she says, Reenter this world. Follow the river.
IV. The Emperor

Rider and I walk the river’s edge,
following the current downstream.
A figure with fiery coral sprouting from its head
  jumps out from the trees  looks left  then right,
then jerks back into the shadow.
Rider stays close.
We are being followed.
The figure reappears and grabs me,
  forces me into the forest.

Quickly, come with me.  It’s not safe! He whispers.

We weave through a maze of cut pathways in the fractured sunlight.
Rider barks behind us. The figure drags me into a dome sculpted out of dense,
  dead vines. The only way out
  is the way in.
Thistle bushes sprawl in clusters across the ground.
The figure releases me. Clad in velvet purple,
  rusted armor on his shoulders
and neck he wears a white pelt stained with red.
Into his throne of woven dead vines he slumps.
White centered red roses accent his throne’s dirty roots like faceted jewels.
  Large white horns coil back from his temples.
His dry, sunken, dark red eyes stare at me, over
his hook nose: a battle worn shield of a face.

There are giants out there. Roaring giants!
Can’t you hear their echoes? Even though they took my sword,
  they still fear me. Fear seeps up from the ground all through this forest.
  I can feel it soak through my feet like blood into a cloth.

Rider tears up a thistle and tosses it towards
the figure, a dead offering. A faint chime.
  He rears from his throne.
  I take you into my home and this is what I get?
  Defiance?

I grab Rider and begin to back away.
What happened to the river?
  He approaches with open arms as though for an embrace.
  Everything starts to
  turn. Red pools out from
  the throne, from his footsteps. Even the roses bleed.
I run. The forest darkens as we weave through the maze.
Just keep running.
I can hear the river over the whispering
V. The Hierophant

The maze of trees stops abruptly before a small cave. A figure sits by the entrance. He looks up at us, then stands, brushing the dirt from his autumn robes.

Rider and I freeze, out of breath.

_Are you two all right? Looks like something scared the life out of you. Are those creatures on the prowl again?_

Rider spits out a small piece of thistle.

_**Oh, now I understand. You ran into him.**_
_In the past few seasons he’s gone completely insane in his little dead throne room._
_I can assure you, he’s much too much of a coward to pursue you this far._

We follow him into the cave.

_Do you want to see what real power is?_
_Come, come along with me and feel what it’s like to live without fault, to have no shadow._

A short passage opens to a broad atrium with a floor set below us. All at once I see faces of hundreds of figures. The robed figure raises his arms and all the figures break into song.

_This is real power. Devotion always trumps fear._
_They are happy here. I give them light purpose._
_You are lost. Poor thing, I can give you purpose._

He steps further into the atrium, his sun-cloaked back to us.

_It would be a way out of wandering. It would be something to hold onto._

He turns to reach for my hand.

_Say. Worship me. Go down. Join them._

How nice, to have something to hold onto again, but the cold darkness below recalls my dream.

_“Thank you, but no. I have to find my own purpose to hold.”_

I retreat outside, look over the top of the cave at the sky.
The Fool Contemplates Omnipotence

The higher I climb the smoother
the boulders get. So easy it would have been
to have stayed with him, to dwell within his
chirping, shaking mass below
to chant hymns to the sky,
but I have my own shadow own steps.

Above me, Rider springs easily from one boulder
to the next. My hand slips
into a pool of clear rainwater, its bottom lined
with a collage of fallen yellow leaves,

its surface rippled like molten glass.
A blue bird lands on my submerged
hand between my thumb and index finger.
Ripples spread from its thin legs. It submerges,
jumps onto dry rock, shakes the water
from its wings, and flies off.
I take my hand from the water to press it
against a smoothed boulder. How quickly
my handprint fades in the warm sun.

I gently press on the back of my hand, feeling
the wide joint at the base of my thumb.
I move my thumb back and forth across
my palm. This precise movement, this control,

is this what it feels like to fly
instead of fall?
VI. The Lovers

I spot two faces peeking down at me from the tops of the boulders, so I climb to the top, a broad plateau, to find a man and woman clad in sheer white and green clothes that sway in the wind. Behind them, in the center of the plateau, grows a small oasis, vibrant green and with a hot spring. The couple smiles at me, then sit by the spring. I follow. I ask, “How long have you lived up here? It’s so beautiful but so small, so separate from everything. Are you two alone?” They turn to me and speak as one, *We are not alone. We are together.*

I sit with them by the spring, warm as the island of wheat, yet still I feel the cold rock beneath. The heat’s heart, the fuel that steams the spring and sprouts this green halo, comes from the couple. Together. Devotion has power. Even with their smiles, my feet are chilled by my exclusion. It’s not fair. “I need to find the river, can you help me?”

*Of course,* they answer in unison. The wind picks up. A cool shadow falls over us. A golden chariot soars above our heads and circles the spring. *We’ll call him down for you. He knows this land’s body better than we could ever care to. He can help you find your river.*
VII. The Chariot

We glide down from the plateau, effortlessly
land by the river, then step from the chariot.
The armored driver joins us as his long legged,
winged creatures graze by the edge of the forest.
He looks down the winding river
towards mountains covered in a thick mist.

*It gets dangerous down there, not just
From the land. The things that live down there.
This river, it’s unnatural runs the wrong way.
I try to keep clear of it.
Not that I’m afraid! I just—it throws off my direction!
I think I’m going north and next thing I know,
I’m at the south sea! I’m not afraid of that river—Just tell me
where you want to go. What’s the name of the place?*

“I don’t know whether I am looking for a place
or just for my blue water lilies.”
and to remember.
A breeze rises and gently pushes me downstream.
The mist around the mountains almost looks blue.

*Well that’s something. I don’t think I’ve ever seen
something like that, not that I can’t handle it of course,
but I wish you luck up there, friend. Watch your step.*

As we start downstream he calls his creatures,
readies his chariot again. I turn and ask him,
“Do you ever get tired of travelling while always knowing
the place already?

*Huh. I don’t know. Never thought about it.*
VIII. Strength

i.
We follow the river again. Rider stops suddenly, staring ahead at something in the river’s bend. Something large. The mist almost hides its mass. A creature. It sniffs the air, turns its blunt head towards us, then abruptly charges, shaking the earth. I freeze and fall backwards into the thick grass as the creature bounds towards us. Suddenly, at arm’s distance from its gaping jaws, it stops and looks down, teeth still bared, at Rider. Rider stares it down until it steps away and relaxes back onto its haunches.

*All right, I won’t hurt you, at least not while he’s Around. Even I know what I shouldn’t tempt. Come with me, it’s getting dark.*

We head downriver to a cave in the side of a sheer rock face. Bushels of vines and fallen branches droop over the entrance. Moonlight illuminates piles of bones in the rear corners. Rider sits down and nudges me to do the same, to sleep. The creature lies down near the entrance. Outside, the rain falls in sheets.

ii.
Sunlight wakes Rider and me. Orange morning light reflects on thick, white fur of the still sleeping creature. I was too afraid to notice his fur before, exactly like the bloody pelt that horned figure wore like a trophy. I stare, still too anxious to speak. The creature growls, *What do you want? Out with it.* I brace myself against the wall and ask about his fur and about the horned figure. I tell the creature everything.

*He is a coward. Killed and skinned one of us too young to fight. Called himself The Emperor. Wanted to show his power over a helpless thing.*

“Don’t you want to find him?”

*My kind, we stay here. No one bothers us here. Mostly.*
How can something so big, so fierce, be afraid? How am I not afraid anymore?

*Why are you here anyway?* It looks down to Rider. *And with him?*

“I’m looking for my blue water lilies.”

*I don’t know where you can find flowers like that. No beautiful things grow here, but there is a small house in a clearing to the east. Maybe you can find something there.*

The creature looks back at Rider, nods, then without a sound, disappears into the thick forest.
pre and post cognition
The Fool Finds His Ghost

Thinning bramble spines puncture, 
stick, and cling to me like desperate hands. 
I fall forward into a clearing 
with ground burned black molded 
into heat ripples. In the center of them 
lie the remains of a small house. 
Mine. My house.

I approach. The ash filled 
air makes me choke. 
My pale hands start to shake. 
Is this nostalgia? Am I homesick? 
Or is it just seeing a life as it was, 
what was left alone to rot? 
A controlled burn.

The front door is still intact, but I 
duck in through a hole in the wall 
like a thief. Stealing through memories. 
A drawn charcoal portrait 
in the rubble catches my gaze 
with its black, burnt eyes. Those eyes 
were lighter once like a clear blue ocean.

Although scarred, his paper face 
survived the fires. I try not to drown 
in the big emptiness of his eyes. He opens 
his mouth charcoal blurs and crumbles 
to burning embers. He screams a chime 
that shakes the house. It shakes me loose. 
Running is good enough.
IX. The Hermit

Rider nips at my heels, trying to get me
to stop running. I can’t—can’t escape
that howling face that chime burns
my ears. Keep running through grass over rock
slick from recent rain. Don’t slow down.
Rider barks. Break in the trees. I slide over
wet shale into air. No. Falling again. Rider jumps
into my arms. I claw at the air for anything,

We’re being pulled up. Feet on solid ground, I turn
to our savior. A figure in a dark cloak with eyes like mine.
I try to move away from the edge of the cliff but
he sits in front of me, blocks my way.
No, sit here. I like this spot.
You’ll learn not to fear falling, not to fear
what you don’t want to know. You need it, to find
and hold it close as part of you. I was
like you once always searching.

I don’t understand. He closes his eyes.
Rider disappears, comes back with small branches,
drops them between us, and curls up by my side.
With the sun warm on my face, I close my eyes. The face
that chased me from my house is silent. No more chime.

Dew drips from my fingers in the thick air.
I hear rustling and open my eyes as the cloaked figure
tips his ornate blue lantern a larger version of the crystals
hanging from my wrists and ignites the pile of branches.

A pale blue fire flickers between us, crackling and warm.
The light from the fire illuminates maze-like patterns
on the figure’s face and what I can see of his hands and arms.
The firelight tints our bodies blue. We sit in silence.
turn around
X. The Wheel of Fortune.

At dawn the cloaked figure leads us through the low mountains, away from the river. I trust his familiar eyes, the rhythm of his steps.

Our narrow path between two sheer rock faces opens onto a large circular space.

Intricate etchings of gears sprawl across the ground. Eight closed doors line the etched stone walls.

He motions for me to stand in the small center circle. The etchings rotate around me. They create a pathway to the door on my far right. It’s open now. That’s your way. The Wheel won’t lead you astray. It flows in harmony with this world unlike that river. I can’t say it will lead you where you want but it will lead where you need. “But I have to—the river led me here. What if I can’t find it again?”

There are many better things to put your trust in than fear.
XI. Justice

The dark stone tunnel opens
onto green, marshy fields.
I still can’t
hear the river, but now
the scent of salt water
floats on the wind above brackish ponds.

Suddenly a hand grabs my shoulder.
Her thick, shell-like robe
Falls in yellow and red concentric circles
around her
feet. A massive headdress rests
on and fans around her shoulders,
a giant wide eye on each
side next to her face. She has no eyes.
She slips her arms from her cloak
to take my hands loosely into hers,
weighing each as if to see which is heavier.

Her head tilts to one
side, slightly then
tilts back to center.

Imbalance.
Though you feel you don’t
deserve it,
your actions from before will remain,
drag you down. One choice,
learn to carry them or fall.

She drops my hands disappears
into the tunnel.
Rider nudges me back towards the fields.
XII. The Hanged Man

We walk across the fields as the sun dips below the horizon. I cast a long shadow. Another shadow, swaying like a pendulum, crosses mine.

Roped by an ankle to a bare tree branch, a small, stiff bell shaped figure with bones around its face hangs.

“Do you need help descending?”

No did this myself like this view better. Nothing but sky. Can’t remember Last time my feet touched the dirt. Didn’t like that feeling so I changed it. Now the world is better, more likeable from here. Before now doesn’t matter.

How much easier if I was like him, so sure of what he wants, what he is. “But, what if you get stuck here, swaying like a reed in the wind?”

Back and forth he sways. All I need is this.

He’s back in his world like mine With the shivering pearls the falling down, Up. Do I miss that falling?

I look at my feet in the dark grass, dig my toes in, and start to walk again, hunched like a wilting fern. Night rises. A gurgle. Do I hear the river again?
XIII. Death

Moonlight paints the meadow
into a flickering sea
of silver and blue. One coiling tree
disrupts the light. Before it
stands a woman with a bone face.

Her silky black butterfly wings extend
over the field of furled flowers,
the night. The underside of her wings
glow a blue halo around her body
and her opal, fish scaled limbs.

She crouches close against the ground
crawling towards us, her limbs bent like a spider’s,
eye level with Rider. He steps back.
I follow him. I want to ask who she is.
Familiar? The flowers around us, as she passes,
unfurl, their centers blooming
in a blue glow against rising sun.
She stands erect. Our noses nearly touch.
Our eyes the same teal, reflect each other.
She plucks a crystal from the bracelet on my wrist.

_I am buried things. Mouth and tail._
_Butterflies and morning glories._
_I am always. Remember me._
She flings my crystal back to the tree.
The branches bend, pick it up and coil

into a scythe, flooding the meadow
with blue light. She lifts the scythe, spreads
her wings, then takes the sky. Her blue underbelly
enflames the trees. A splash. I chime rings
from the gnarled roots of her tree. I go to see.
if the river could burn
The Fool Counts His Blessings

I dig up my own bones under Death’s tree. There used to be a riverbank right here, by the roots of this sprawling thing.

I know how bones smell. Like sand mixed with salt and oak leaves, all left to bake in the sun. Mine stink.

I’m covered in dirt. I don’t know, I shed them, bones, purposely, the way Strength shed its white winter fur a long while ago. I think. I knew my bones were here. Chime. I want to keep some, just a couple, not my skull.

I disconnect the left side of my hip bone by folding back and forth along its perforations, like paper doll clothes.

A section of spine right between my shoulders, where wings could have sprouted, breaks off the same way.

I brush dirt from their crevices, then clutch my bones close to my chest. I take them one by one into my body. I feel their weight. What if my bones swallowed the river? I press my ear to my sternum in the soil and listen for an echo.

Nothing. Nothing churns and swerves in these bones. But what if they could grow something? What could I nurture out of these bones? They rest, so weakly in my hands, as if they are homesick for the styx and dirt of their earth.
XIV. Temperance

I trace the scent of the ocean until I reach  
an outcropping of pale, thin, trees.  
I hear splashing. Follow the sound.

A green-skinned figure in silky, white robes  
dances, with a chalice in each hand, through  
shallow pools between the trees. She swirls  
water through the air around her from one chalice  
into the other. Jasmine cuts the odor of ocean salt.

She looks across at us and cocks her head to one side.  
Water trickles from her left chalice onto the cracked  
porcelain earth. She rights herself and continues dancing.  
Her eyes are fixed on mine

Each time she swirls the water through the air  
I hear a chime. It echoes louder. Sunlight reflects  
in rainbows off her silky white robes, her body now a giant  
drop of water whirling through the air.  
Her arcing limbs blur in the light. Her skin fades  
to pale paper bark. I see right through her.

Chime.  
Louder. Chime. My body sags and sinks like wet clay  
onto the ground. I have everything I need to remember.  
A slow falling. A ring of fire.  
Lead chest.
XV. The Devil

The white robed figure disappears. The scent of jasmine fades. It smells like my old house now like fire. A cold wind hits me. All the color I can see remains but just pale as though cloaked in fog. Then I see him stark white skin, bright vibrant robes with antlers growing from the center of his four faces. In one hand he holds a large blade the other drags a twisted bundle of faces held together by strings of what looks like blood like his eyes. The faces clatter together with hollow clacking like discarded seashells.

Good. You almost remembered. Now your body knows hopelessness. Let it burn. You miss that smell. You miss drowning in the fall, don’t you? Remember?

Chime. Louder than before, than ever. I drop to my knees, cover my ears, then try to look at him. He smiles. The faces surrounding him smile too. I hear him in my head Can I have your face? Not to have it would be such a waste of good suffering.

Rider rushes in front of me snarling and howling louder than the chime. It stops. The figure screeches like an owl and leans down towards Rider.

You don’t scare me as you scare the others!

He stares down Rider while another of his faces stares at me. I can’t stop shaking. I see an opening in the trees. A beach? The sea? I run. Rider barks sharply and follows me kicking dirt in the figure’s faces. The figure stands tall and shouts,

I’ll find you! I’ll reap your sorrow slowly when you fall.

Ahead, amidst the red storm laden sky, a silhouetted tower stabs into the sky.
XVI. The Tower

Lightning strikes. The tower crumbles to its knees.
Why did I think this was a good escape? —Because, this isn’t about falling. This is about jumping.

Salt wind rises. Flames climb up to the battlements like burning veins. I sprint up the central stair. Race the fire. Lightning strikes. At the top of the tower I fall to my knees.

Thick sulfur smoke and soot cloud the air, the water below a blood red. One patch of clear sky. I remember that sky. This isn’t about falling. This is about jumping.

Waves arc up, break around the tower’s unsteady feet shine a sharp, tropic blue dagger against the red ocean. I lean over the edge. Lightning strikes. Half the tower’s parapet snaps into the sea.

Ripping waves beg me to follow the ruin of old habits. Chime. Underneath them, broken things sleep. This isn’t about falling. This is about jumping.

I’ve come this far, but why even bother? Chime. Lightning strikes. The tower crumbles beneath my feet This isn’t about falling. This is about me, jumping again. Me jumping. Again.
The Fool Floods His Bones

i.
Again. It was about the jump. Again.
Alive again. The current pushes me
ashore. The water lightens, crystal blue
and calm, too calm, too hot. I dig my hands
into the dirty sand and root my feet,
sinking into the earth, to burrow down
away from crushing sky that haunts me still,
the lure to fly again into its breath,
especially now. I long for the sea
to sweep me out into the tide and teach
me how the water’s fingers reap the earth,
how Death will find a way. A butterfly
wing folds around my shoulders. “Old predator,
you’ve come again to take me with you, right?”

ii.
“You’ve come again to take me with you, right?”
But now she sits calmly in the sand,
pressing her hand against my chest. She speaks,
*Bright life, this body full of it before,
but then it left you hollow as a gourd
when you jumped, cutting through the air eyes closed.*
*Although he tried his best to hold you back
you waited till he turned away, remember?*
*The cliffs? Remember them as well? I watched
you slide below the sky. You should be still,
within my river now. You’re not. He begged,
insured your spirit still held strong enough.
A flame; the blue that burns behind my eyes,
all yours, a gift, so you can see what’s left here.*
iii.
“All mine. A gift so I can see what’s left here?
What’s that supposed to mean?” She keeps her hand
upon my chest and I can feel her cold
begin to seep into my lungs. She drops
her hand. Her black cloak pools around her feet,
body, a stolen section of the clear
night sky, her scaly armored skin—but she
had said that he’d convinced her. Shining blue,
familiar, his eyes, that blue like—hers.
Rider. I trusted him to you. She says,
He couldn’t bear to see his only friend
abandon him, give up. He’s guided you
this far. But now you must decide which path
to choose. Don’t let it cut you at the knees.

iv.
To choose. Don’t let it cut you at the knees
as you let it before. Your destiny,
an active pulse that other living beings
can’t even contemplate. Still silent, I
look to the sea, horizon line aglow
its fading green, its dimming blue against
the timid waves below. Are you afraid?
I shake my head but still don’t meet her eyes.
The ocean never really touches sky.
Where do I even start? It reaches out
too far. I’m just a drowning ant, so why
not sit instead and watch things die? I look
into her eyes and ask, “Can ocean die?
The sea, does it have fields for you to reap?”
v.
Of course the sea has fields for me to reap. If you can put your trust in me. She stands and offers me her hand, the ocean calls for me at night. She leads me out above the surf. We float above the churning waves. My feet stay dry. We walk out past what’s left of The Tower. The rubble smolders still. She stops beside the moon, uneven body, and points down to the sea, placid as ice. She’s standing on a murky void, a pit of midnight blue. The emptiness pulls at my soles. It tempts me like the sky before. I want to jump again but I just stand. You feel that pull? Remember that. That’s me.

vi.
You feel the pull? Remember that. That’s me, the river you were taken from, the dried up bank beside my tree. I know that you remember that. The bones you found and took were waiting. Drop them down into the deep. You have them still. I feel their growing weight. You’re sinking now because of them, their need to sink back into my river. Let them go. The sections of my spine and hip I found seep out. I dip them in the water’s skin. I don’t resist their gravity. I let them go for her to keep. The surface sleeps. That isn’t me that’s sinking, not again. Was that so hard? The water calls her now.
vii.
Was that so hard? The water calls her now beneath its surface, ankles gone. Changing. Her legs, her hair, melt into sea, her cloak a cloud of thick ink draping from her neck. What were her scaly armored limbs alight, a writhing moon now by my feet. Deeper, she sinks and swirls into a coiling mass, a fish with opal skin and swathes of star filled sky for fins. Without a second look she swims away from me. I look to shore and catch a movement, a howl. It’s Rider. He’s waiting there for me. I raise my feet over the cresting waves and jump to shore. Again. It is about the jump. Again.
Rider and I walk from the shore into a line of trees. A stream runs through the grass. A water lily floats downstream to a pool half covered with white water lilies and tall stalked cattails. The open pool reflects the moon and a large star. They ripple. I look up. The Star and the Moon unfold their bodies and land softly in front of us. Images of coiling seaweed, fish, and bubbles sprawl across the Moon’s body as she kneels down and cups a water lily in her hands. It floats into the sky. She turns to me.

*Yours lilies always reminded me of little blue fires floating up to me. Such elegance. Such a lack of fear.*
*If they fell, they would find someplace new to grow. You’ve been trapped in your timeworn dreams too long. Let them go as you did with your old bones into Death’s arms.*
*Those old urges don’t pull you anymore, do they?*

The Star pulls two large jugs from the water, her dark purple body barely visible. She throws the water in an arc across the sky. *But without those urges, you don’t know what to do. You’re an empty urn.* Droplets hang in the air, stars. One glows more brightly, an eight pointed swirl of galaxy, like the Star’s eyes. She points to it.

*Follow that one east. We will light your way.*
excavation
XIX. The Sun

The star fades as my eyes adjust to sunlight, 
A face rises in the sky, a body 
uncoils and floats down to us. He hugs me.

*I’m glad you’ve come! So much to show you!*

He holds me by the shoulders, one of his two faces 
looks at me. His lion’s mane of hair flares 
in the steady wind around his head.

*Let me lift you so you can see!*

Rider perches on his shoulder. The Sun holds me 
and we rise, higher than I had anticipated, but 
my body floats like feathers buoyed on the breeze.

*Point out anything you see and I can tell you about it!*

The ocean. I’ve never seen it like this before, its multifaceted 
surface reflecting light, never noticed the spirals of ponds and marshes 
tracing across the meadows. I focus on a break in the trees,

“What’s that?” A stone circle like the Wheel. *Oh that?!*

*It’s a passage very old built by someone with eyes like yours.  
“Can you drop us down there?”* the Sun smiles and releases us. 
We float down, landing lightly in the grass.
XX. Judgement

Now, a passage, a circle of stone, with four conical pillars bearing the same stoic, inward turned face near the top around its edge. The central pillar curves up and forward like a snake about to strike. I run my hand over the base of the center pillar, its weathered surface warm, churning with life, a welcoming blue fire in the night. Behind the pillar, sits a descending stone stair. Below, I hear crashing water. For the first time I can remember, I control the descent. No falling. No jumping.
XXI. The World

Where the staircase ends I see nothing. Rider barks before running into the darkness. I close my eyes and weave through the dark. I never touch anything, never fall or falter. Slopes and curves, I know this earth. I smell fresh water now. The tunnel opens onto a large sunlit ledge covered in grass and vines on the side of a cliff. The river runs off the ledge’s edge into a lake in an open valley reaching back to blue mountains that carve ragged fingerprint edges into the horizon. I sit next to Rider by the edge of the river, run my hand through it, and sweep some of it into the air. A chime resonates, across the valley. A spectrum of white butterflies weave through the air. So much horizon. I rest my hand on Rider’s head, let the other hang loosely in the river and breathe. The waterfall and the lake below overflow with blue water lilies.
End Notes

A Note on Tarot- Tarot cards are often used in fortune telling. Each card has a unique meaning, which is reversed if the card is displayed upside down or ‘inverted’ in a reading. Aside from fortune telling, the twenty two cards of the Major Arcana, which are depicted in this collection, can be read as a narrative journey that follows The Fool through the rest of the other cards.

“III. The Emperor” is written as an inverted card and based loosely off the delusional and schizophrenic behaviors of mad kings such as England’s King George III.

“V. The Hierophant” is also written as a slightly inverted card, and his atrium is loosely based off Plato’s cave.

“XV. The Devil” takes inspiration from horror writer Clive Barker’s character, Pinhead. The Devil also directly quotes Pinhead in lines 16-17 and 26.

How “XIX. The Sun” takes The Fool into the sky and tells him to ask questions about what he sees is based off the flight of the dreamer and the giant eagle in Chaucer’s House of Fame. Unlike Chaucer’s dreamer, The Fool is able to distinguish the earth below him and is able to continue to the last stage of his journey.
Bibliography


Vita

Michelle Hoover received a BFA in Illustration with a minor in Creative Writing from the Savannah College of Art and Design in 2013. She was also a Writing Fellow with DEEP, a local Savannah nonprofit, for three semesters before moving to New Orleans to pursue her MFA in Creative Writing with a concentration in Poetry from the University of New Orleans. She has been a reader for Bayou Magazine for almost 3 years and is currently the Graduate Assistant for the Greater New Orleans Writing Project.