Leitmotif

Breiseus A. Ashford

University of New Orleans, bashford@uno.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td

Part of the Poetry Commons

Recommended Citation

https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td/1685

This Thesis is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by ScholarWorks@UNO with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Thesis in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Thesis has been accepted for inclusion in University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UNO. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uno.edu.
Leitmotif:
Poems

A Thesis

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

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

by
Alexandria Ashford
B.A. Pepperdine University, 2010
August, 2013
For Elainea
Acknowledgments

A million thanks to Leslie, who always brings the poet out of me. Thanks to Kay whose patience convinced me that this book of poems was possible. Thanks to Carolyn and Gina for so gracefully serving on my thesis committee. And finally, thanks to Derrick, the best big brother; the best at finding the good in every poem I write.
## Table of Contents

**Preface**

---

### Side One

- Letter to NaNa
- Lessons in Lavender
- What NaNa Sings of Autumn
- Home Again
- Reading Signs
- Memory
- Glamour
- Cousins and Me
- Dead Yard
- Middle Passage
- Ritual
- Elegy
- Mama
- (Passage) or (Rite)
- Chanty
- Dirge
- Smoking a Cigarette in Thirty Degree Weather
- Holiday
- Cotillion
- What I Hope to Tell My Granddaughter
- Sicily
Tiny Dancer ........................................................................................................31

Side Two

Dreux from the Concrete Bayou ........................................................................33
At First Sight .......................................................................................................34
Baltimore Love Song .........................................................................................35
Love Bugs .........................................................................................................36
Insomnia ...........................................................................................................37
Good Luck .........................................................................................................38
Nine Night .........................................................................................................39
Blues ..................................................................................................................40
Susannah’s Song ...............................................................................................41
Lantern ..............................................................................................................42
What Lovers Say ...............................................................................................43
First Fight of Summer .......................................................................................44
Nocturne ..........................................................................................................45
Vita .....................................................................................................................46
My first mistake with this manuscript was choosing a title so early. The first working title for *Leitmotif* was *Songs for Bernie Taupin*. I chose the first title because one of the first things I knew about the collection was that I wanted to talk more about my father who raised me on Elton John’s music, a large majority of which was written by Bernie Taupin. When I found out that Taupin had done a spoken word album, I searched furiously all over the internet searching for a copy. A month later, I mentioned it to my father, who said, “I have that album on vinyl.” It was the kind of “coincidence” that always drives me to write poetry. My dad had had those Bernie Taupin records my entire life. In fact, *Taupin* was released in 1971, and my father had purchased it fresh off the shelves. It had been, all this time, waiting for me. Though the collection was just barely beginning to take shape, I knew that the importance of Bernie Taupin’s presence in the book was that his music was a symbol of happy times between my father and I. Prematurely, I pegged the collection to be a dedication to my father, and only my father. But the collection had its own ideas about what it was to become. I spent two weeks listening to Bernie Taupin, both the spoken word and the songs performed by Elton John, and began to see my entire childhood through the lens of the music. I saw a procession: My father blasting the music on Saturday nights; my little sister and I in bed telling ghost stories and laughing as Elton John’s music began to blare from the living room, the bass beating through the walls. There were other images, still, of me at my grandmother’s house, where I found myself singing the songs aloud, my cousins having no idea what I was singing or who Elton John was. Initially, it was unclear to me how the Bernie Taupin motif would connect to anyone other than my father. Then it dawned on me, for the first time, that my own body was the body that connected this music and these
people and that they could exist together in a collection. More importantly, I discovered that the second book did not have to be a departure from my first, but, perhaps, an extension. *Danke Schoen* had been about death, family, and love, motifs common to the lives of human beings. *Leitmotif* decided that it would do the same, though I had planned for it to be totally different.

Thus, the working title for my second collection was changed from *Songs for Bernie Taupin* to *Leitmotif*. I began to realize that I was not yet done with some of the themes that were present in the first book, and this collection would be a sort of excavation—me daring to look deeper at the themes and motifs that have carried over into the new work. I came across the word “leitmotif” itself as I was studying one of my father’s old music theory books. The fact that the word was German, just as the title of my first book, was another little sign I couldn’t seem to ignore. Thus, *Leitmotif* will be the second of four operas (The first being *Danke Schoen*), modeled after Wagner’s cycle of four operas *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, in which Wagner uses dozens of different leitmotifs. Some of the leitmotifs occur only in one opera, but others appear throughout the cycle. My first book, *Danke Schoen*, was modeled on some very specific recurring motifs, the most obvious being my grandmother, called “NaNa” in *Leitmotif*, as well as other broader themes like ancestry, feminism, colonialism, and the complexities of Afro-Diasporic identity. My trouble with creating a second book was the idea that the second should be different, more exciting, more daring than the first. I wrote a chapbook called *Lantern*, that I filed away until recently, and I wrote many smatterings of poems here and there, seemingly unrelated. But when I looked at everything, closely, I realized that the themes present in the second collection were also present in the first—though in different “clothing.” For example, The “Dreux” motif in the second collection is a tragic, brooding, black male figure constructed from several of the characters that showed up in the first collection; in poems like “West Cape,
In Memoriam,” “Wanting,” “Elegy in Broken Stanzas,” “Leroy,” and “Of Newness, Of Ghosts.” In many ways, I’m still preoccupied with the same figures and themes from the first book. The title of the first, Danke Schoen literally means “Thanks, pretty,” (popularized as “thank you”) in German and is also the title of a song by Wayne Newton that my grandmother happened to like listening to when putting up peach preserves. She played the vinyl over and over all evening, and we sang along to it, never even knowing what the words “Danke Schoen” meant. Since my grandmother taught me to read dreams, and signs, and omens, I can only suspect that though we had no idea, we were saying “thank you” while putting away peach preserves, a tradition directly connected to the necessity of preservation in communities where every morsel of food was precious, were, inadvertently, part of a sort of primitive praise ceremony—a grandmother and her granddaughter, the elder teaching the younger something of tradition, ancestry, and the art of preservation. While Danke Schoen was loosely connected to music, since the title poem was based on words to a song, the term “leitmotif” is directly connected to music, its original meaning being “a musical term referring to a short, constantly recurring musical phrase.” As it pertains to literature, a leitmotif is “an often repeated word, phrase, image, or theme in a literary work.” All in all, the idea was to make the collection a sort of opera of images, relying less on sequence to connect the poems and more on the recurrence of the common themes.

Wagner’s Der Ring des Nibelungen operas were written to be performed in a single week. It doesn’t quite work this way with poetry, but the idea of writing four connected collections that somehow form a whole was an exciting idea for me. In Danke Schoen, the poems were longer and denser. The subject of male / female love appeared more implicitly in poems like “Vertigo” and “Bien- Aime.” Bernie Taupin’s 1971 spoken word album Taupin consists of eighteen poems—nine on side one and nine on side two. The first side is called
“Child” and the first poem is called “Birth.” The first side is sentimental and nostalgic, but the second gives way to more political matters. For example, the poems “Today’s Hero” and “Sisters of the Cross” appear on the second side and are much more rooted in the poet’s present than in the nostalgia of his past. I think it’s an interesting transition to make because it is such a simple one. In much the same way, *Leitmotif* is divided into two sections that go from nostalgia and memory to the realities of adulthood. If it makes any sense, I *want* this collection to have a feeling of fragmentation because memory really is fragmented. I want the fragmentation I inherited from my ancestry to be embedded deeply within the collection. With my first collection, I had no idea the poems would even fit together until I sent the manuscript to a publisher and they approved of the poems and thought they were worth publishing. I had felt when I first began to put together *Danke Schoen* that a collection should start with a general theme or governing idea and stick to it for the entire duration of the collection; but that’s not how it has worked for me.

Though I began with very specific intentions for *Leitmotif*, the manuscript looks quite a bit different than what I planned; and I am happy with that. Though I initially wanted the collection to be heavy on implicit and explicit references to my father, he only appears in one poem in the collection, “Tiny Dancer,” which is also the title of a song written by Bernie Taupin. And though both sections of the collection, “Side One” and “Side Two” begin with epigraphs from Bernie Taupin’s lyrics, Taupin appears far less in the collection than I thought he would initially. I envision the Taupin epigraphs at the beginning of the sections as doorways into the poems that follow. The thing that pleases me most about this collection is that the poems wrote themselves, then graciously gave themselves to me.
I no longer believe that I write poetry. On the contrary, I believe that poetry writes me. My job as the poet is simply to be receptive to the muse and use my editing skills to piece together a unified story with the poems given—no matter how fragmented the story may seem. I’m not a poet who writes well objectively. I write because something inside me burns until it is written on a page. In the tradition of my ancestors— from NaNa’s West Indian heritage, to her half German grandmother who hated her for having dark skin, to her part Native American father—everything my grandmother taught me was about survival. Not just physical survival, but mental and spiritual survival. Survival as a black woman. NaNa, who had fourteen children, was a connoisseur of fragmentation. She took old, worn scraps of clothing and made beautiful quilts for her children (and baby doll dresses for me). She took scraps of food no one wanted and made gumbo and succotash. Claude Levi Strauss calls it “bricolage,” making something out of nothing. Na a called it “art.” I am her granddaughter. Art is in my blood. I call it “survival.”
Side One

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

-Bernie Taupin, “Funeral for a Friend”
Letter to NaNa

I looked for you
near the pecan trees
and couldn’t find you,
not the smell of hyacinth
engraved in your palms
or the weary sigh as you bowed
to say your prayers.
Only the memory
of your voice
once
at the end of a tune
between the pop
of one song ending
and the next beginning

*before it’s all over*

*the song will tune*

*itself.*

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

Lavender sugar and primrose
spread out on the table.
You used it for everything:
to kill the cat smell in the carpet,
in the lotion to make it pop.
Your wedding dress was purple
and so is the gown
you were buried in.
It was ageless
on your body,
a rim around the moon
sugar plum shadow,
Tchaikovsky at Christmas time—
the year mama wore the purple chiffon
and looked flawless.
You had dreamed of fish
and losing a tooth:
a birth
and a death.
We ate neck bones and black eyed peas
for luck,
then after dark
you boiled the lavender.

The house smelled too much

of chaos, you said,

so much coming and going.
What NaNa Sings of Autumn

Light the old
gas heater,
watch the dandelions
burn.
Home Again

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

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

the Cherokee hair
from grandfather
Caribbean bones
from NaNa.

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

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

This December

the roses bloomed.

    NaNa believes
    it is a sign.

*The world is ending*

she says,

*the whole earth*

*is full of His glory.*
Memory

Even

with Alzheimer’s

she knew each cat

by name.
Glamour

It’s evening.

Wheel of Fortune blares

on the floor model.

Antennas with tinfoil

catch the best

signal.

Grandpa lights a Cuban,

tomato sandwich and milk

for supper

tonight

when Mississippi

turns cool,

moon breathing

white ice

through its gills.

We learn life

in little flits,

tiny memorials,

these torturous

little glamours.

*a glamour is a magic spell.*
Cousins and Me

We made mud pies
in Aunt Lula’s yard
sewage
flowing by us
like a stream.
We grew up
never even fazed
by our childhood
playing in shit:
it
was all we had.
Dead Yard*

When
Aunt Isa passed
we fed
the duppy*
fried fish
and rum.

Then NaNa
read the scripture

*let the dead

*bury their dead.

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

*Duppy is a Jamaican Patois word for “ghost.”
Middle Passage (Interlude)

I wish
I could rule
the sea
dismantle
the passage
that made
a slave
of me.
Ritual

Tonight there’s a storm.

Channel Four says 15
already dead in Kansas,
Dorothy’s ruby red slippers
not enough to save them.

   Funny how Katrina
   spared the inland
   and swallowed Waveland
   like Atlantis.

   *In the end,*
mama says,

   *it all comes down to rain.*

   Tonight there’s a storm.
   Slugs stretch across
   the threshold,
   mama draws the salt line
silent declaration
wordless kill,

   *to keep away the slugs*

   *to keep away the ghosts.*
Elegy

In NaNa’s backroom
twilight pours through
lavender sheers,

    a short tune glitters
    on the victrola
    destined to end
    in two minutes’ time.

I tune the needle
small silver helm
at the end of a knife,

    if a camel could enter
    its bottom I would enter
    oh un-smudged tune
    pure as sunlight,

lucky
like dodging a bullet
on Canal street

    a boy named Glover
    killed two feet
    ahead of me.
Mama

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

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

They covered her body
in a gown the color
of spring. She was quiet
lying there. Still. The birds
in the ceiling were new:
small wrinkled creatures,
beaks open with longing,
still screeching their song
as grandmother slipped away
beneath a ceiling as gray
as tears.
What I have always hated
about death is its wideness,
the way it sweeps a room
and holds it. Even more
its subtlety: the way it leans right up
against you, the brush
of a passerby, blushed
cheeks of a newborn.
Gone again before
you know it.
Dirge

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

I want to be warm now,

but I want a cigarette more.

I’ve become my mother’s daughter

though she has forgotten

to love me now.

I watch the news at 10

because she’s watching too,

from her bedroom,

trees rustling

to her window.

The leaves will ask her

where her daughter is.

And if she calls,

It means she heard them.
Holiday

You’re here to remind me
what’s lost:
best friend
first child
gone before it had eyes
or a whole heart.

Christmas

mother recalls
the smell of apples in the attic
where her father hid them.

Silver bells roll like marbles
across splintering floors,

NaNa knits a doll dress
fit for the sugar plum fairy
her favorite what-nots atop
lace doilies,
paper dolls
left to sun
fade on the windowsill.

Last will be the immaculate drink
of mint and ginger
after the soul food
will not wear off,
small reminder
you are here
more able to read the paradox
than you knew,
shaking leaves from your coat
the Christmas the baby died
death grip on a crucifix:
You too
will die young.
Cotillion

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

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

When the ghosts come
after I have become one
myself,
honor the things
I have taught you:
cod liver oil
for colds,
salt
for mean spirits
and slugs.
Ginger tea
for man troubles.
When they stone you
take the blows.
There is nothing
more honorable
than laying
your life down
(one day we all
got to die
anyway),
and you’ll only
have *HEART*

after you’ve had yours

broken,

been crucified

by those

at your table

and on the third day

still manage

to rise.
Sicily

Angel hair and pinot grigio
for breakfast
under stars
the sky still so dark
they twinkle
in Morse code
to my folks back home
on the inland
ham and grits
for breakfast
under sunlight
under heat.
Tiny Dancer

Daddy gave me
whatever he could,
cinnamon bread
for tough mornings
neon pink
and 80’s rock bands.
Daddy loved me
the best he knew how,
leg warmers
and ballet class
music box
for the twirling girl,
his one and only
tiny dancer.
Side Two

“Love is a cannibal.”

-Bernie Taupin
Dreux from the Concrete Bayou

You drove

a green Chevy,

won dice games

in Algiers all summer,

*Free Boosie*

tattooed

where a stray bullet

entered

and barely missed

a lung.
At First Sight

Lightning
struck the sand
and it was glass
beneath
our feet.
Baltimore Love Song

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

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

I kill love bugs the lamplight
has called in.

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

Just this slow waning one
ebbing. Uncertain.

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

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

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

has called in.
A faint starlight between us.

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

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

For Dreux

I miss you
and Algiers
in the summer:
daddy long legs
Making love to my windowsill,
air heavy with dandelions,
gumbo. Heat.
Around the corner
from Lilly who foretold death
through baby teeth
and tarot cards,
and Lemuel
the Haitian activist
who wrote about the killings
and home invasions,
Maurice, the old bootlegger
whose brains
were scattered
on the kitchen walls
of the house
right beside us.
Nine Night

When your grandpa died
I brought ganja and rum
fried fish with bammy
and my shoulder:
preparation
for the long night
between grief
and letting go.
Blues

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

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

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

Got buried
in the prison
peach orchard,
blight tipping
each leaf
in black.
Susannah’s Song *

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

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

For Derrick

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

*After C.D. Wright*

Let’s make a mess
of the bed tonight.

Pull your palms
across my skin.

Comb the blues
from my hair.

Write a poem
on my back.

I'll never wash it off.
First Fight of Summer

Streetlights hum, flicker:
Burn out.
This is the ghetto, after all.
Rena walks outside
With all the elegance
Of sassafras tea
And petit-fours,
Twilit parties on the panhandle.
She’s got a soda pop walk,
(Her voice ALL sex)
And a tight-ass weave
Felicia finished last night.
Refrain: He beat her like a man
And she never shed a tear.
She’s got three babies,
a fourth on the way.
Cum on her
drawers, same ones
from last night.
He beat her like a man.
She never shed a tear.
This is the gutter, after all.
Nocturne

It’s always night
when you come to my window
past the crickets’ bedtime
before the moonflowers open
their petals to the moon’s
cryptid light.
You hand me a bowl of embers
and whisper to me
that all death feels this way. The
taking of the sweet center
feels like rape / violation / ingestion.
So I learn to lay still. Let it happen.
Stop fighting.
In my periphery there is always
this same lamplight, the same
glow: warm, soft around the edges
starlight reincarnated.
It is this moment
each night that I am
killed and reborn
to say these words,
sing to this bowl of embers
as if it will become love
Oh careless love
bleeding from me
like oleander sap
purpling my legs
drowning me in the sweetest oblivion.
Alexandria Ashford is a poet, ethnographer, and hip hop critic. She received a Bachelor of Arts degree in creative writing from Pepperdine University in 2010. Her first collection of poetry, *Danke Schoen: Poems* was published in 2010 and received the Prize Americana for Poetry. Her poems have appeared in literary journals such as *Chopper, Silk Road, Review Americana, South Jersey Underground*, and *The Rose and Thorn*. She is the editor of Ethnografis: A Poet Reads Rap, a blog that conducts critical analyses of music and literature using the tools of ethnography, anthropology, and literary theory.