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Combining the Names of Ancestors with the Names of Birds

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COMBINING THE NAMES OF ANCESTORS WITH THE NAMES OF BIRDS

by

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Bachelor of Arts in English Literature

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2009

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the

Master of Fine Arts—Creative Writing

Department of English

College of Liberal Arts

The Graduate College

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THE GRADUATE COLLEGE

We recommend the thesis prepared under our supervision by

Jessica Durham

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ABSTRACT

Combining the Names of Ancestors with the Names of Birds

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The following manuscript deals with a range of themes including origin, family, place, gender, sexuality and their intersections. The title, *Combining the Names of Ancestors with the Names of Birds*, and title poem exemplify the intersection of origin, family, place (ancestors) and gender, sexuality, movement, change and freedom (birds). Combining their names speaks to the interplay between memory and imagination that has served as a foundation for all of the poems in this manuscript. This manuscript is split into three sections: Origin, which deals with home, with growing up in Louisiana, with the land and the water, my family and my childhood. It points to where I'm grounded and from where I reach outward; Masculine Spring is about newness, self-discovery and turns away from the past and the future to look inward. The title poem of Masculine Spring is everything that has come before in the motion of becoming new; Future Wife, America looks outward again and toward the future. This section is the most experimental of the three in

terms of form, moving away from strict line breaks and self-limiting cadences by playing with repetition as well as prose and epistolary forms.

*For my dad,
where we left off.*

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1. Origin

Combining the Names of Ancestors with the Names of Birds

I let a boy through my window to put on my best shirt
the names of birds on my tongue swallows what woman sounds
don't be afraid he said blue heron sticks to my ribs
pink embroidery against his skin I'm a cowgirl he said don't tell
so many ancestors bellow like the swirl of wind in adult ears

Ancestors I button my pants in the warm afternoon light
a small bird lands outside breathes twice without knowing
to put on *this* shirt and not *that* is the undoing of everything
I move into the day undoing I came from long pelican throats
Remember driving remember woman sounds come from there

Bayou

From the suckling mud
mother bayou before dawn

cracked mouth rough
squeeze air up and out
clenched teeth

to love the southern winter
dream sediment
morning kiss
a flooded home

For My Mother, Left

Musty lake-house where the lake rose
rose and flooded
the screened-in porch and I listened
to good news through a coffee straw.
All my men hooked crickets
on lines and cast out from the roof
where bass swam over the ashes
the summer fire pit.

The dreams of chemotherapy
from the back seat of a pick-up truck.
The Mojave slid past in red and black,
dreams never wake, still the red clay
that fell from my father's mouth
he's afraid to sleep or shower, red
the clay that hardened over the radiation
burns on his back as he hunched
with my mother on the hearth.

A flood of her horses in a year-long
dream draws me nearer

her slick black eyes.

Believe her when she says:

there is always responsibility

in death, always someone to hold

the stethoscope, someone to close

my father's right eye and then

his left.

Home is Never Until

Mornings when children are not playing
across the road in the schoolyard
I notice too often the spot by the fireplace
where the carpet does not meet the baseboard

Sleep the mornings away in winter
a white cat breaks against the floor
as I haul wood up from the car, home
is never until the first fire

In the desert no spirits, no cactus blossoms die
—January, the pine boards creak
I listen for the sound of dawn
 rub through the fog on the window

My Mother's Gumbo

Rice for a crawfish gumbo

trip to Chinatown

for an iron kettle she

only looks at with bare feet

Mid-morning dream

a clearing of burnt pines

a pueblo painted red

A Campfire Always in the Morning

The smoke that bows
my dreams from a dingy pillow
to where mudfoam breaks at the ankle
my girlhood on the Red River
empty docks quiver and weaken
with the crashing waves that throw
sick fish

Our President's calling a lemon
a lemon a ripe orange in a wet woven
basket a Cyprus
marking the flood and still marking
my gendered nature in its willowed bends
its trotline the slick gar we didn't want
the guys their knee-socks
over my knees

Origin

for my dad

Your myth is

my myth

coyote trickster mouse king

I will always follow you there

peepers wide to

the nature of things the

steady clatter of polished boots

in the morning kitchen

I've seen all gods

blow through your hair

turn you gray

turn you plump and

thin again

I mirror your origin

exactly I trace your

fire in all my days even

amazing grace

a lullaby for

wolves

October

Winter metronome

dust everywhere you are

right in step

Time was formulated

for waiting especially

in the desert

cactus bloom never freezes

Pink unashamed a

freedom from seasons death and

parsing the slow slow

always wind

Another Again

Because another again gains on me at night a shoe on the way to the bathroom trips me up a shoulder hits the bare wall getting there and back without thinking of the noun for it, truth the fourth way to walking to bed. The newness has been stomped on six or seven times only then a smell like new grass, making it just right to smell like new grass. Only then is the land what I think of when I don't have any. Cities are all apartments and no new grass until the night, only then is circumstance dark.

A Dream of the Same Name

Tie a knot in your bootlaces,
count the syllables in his name and mine,
I dreamed of JFK and the knot
the morning cold and your
boots the color of sand.

Kennedy wore a garbage bag
an island between a reef and an hourly motel,
told me that the ship out there
is not the plane taking off.

Song of Immovable Night Birds

This owl is somewhere too

On the ground it does not shield its small body

the curb near my tire a night bird

trusts its nature against the pulsing city

yellowes its wide eyes and I mouth *spirit*

The cooling desert echoes owl

puffed and scratching at the bedrock

listening black scorpions

rattle the palms

Eventually, All Ankles

Eventually, all ankles in the river
wild in a small house, the drains
stuffed with cotton and flood
flood the hallway, old roads
Louisiana when I would be older
all wet

2. Masculine Spring

Adam Names The Animals

Two ponies pause always two
prancing toward her dripping two
fingers held high above
her cotton robe her
tilted legless throne

Ram just one more two
the names bull or goat
down our gravel road
back to August

Rabbit cat cat her
two fingers still dripping
with the love of names
ferret fence driveway hum

There's enough in the no
named ocean enough wet
for Adam to sleep for her
to stop fox deer doe

Masculine Spring

She combs black soil with her bare hands
an empty room near *Sur la Table* where mannequin blood
spills in the dark and boyish shapes
move into the light all blouses
have neckties again
a masculine spring

The wet and dry of water seeping across her paving stone-
butch in the only after-winter posture
the gender of women bound to right-handed buttons
a night garden in Las Vegas
is uprooted and the rosehips are replaced
the tulips are replaced
the lilies are replaced

Haunt

Unlit couples wake for sex
share dreams in dampened dark
knotted limbs
all into one another to sleep

Undulating haunt
left my body stiff as you came
down my bare-gendered crippling swell
fill the last dark alley

Her Hands on My Chest

the path from one dream

to the next the path

of a wounded bird from the nest

to the ground

Remember, Body

after Cavafy

Remember, body, all of your houses
not only the path from one room to the next
the purpling of muscle
—in veins while you are young
love remembering, body, how to crouch like glass
how a doctor told you that pain is the first to return
watching out the window for snow—the eyes were your eyes
the love of others, body
ones who came for you in your smallest houses
in the winter—sacred hands in January that traced
the current down your spine
longing remember, body

Dinner Party

A French dancer sliced through her salmon
said nothing needs be written
while you're standing and sitting and standing and
worship is a turning of the head to look
where someone is pointing

On the patio *what's in your soul* the myth
doesn't mind the wind *what are you*
is a question of place

I carried a notebook the first time I went to synagogue
chose the day it rained in the summer
ate honey with every meal

Blue is the Warmest Color

The title of a movie with bad lesbian sex scenes

The badness of the sex is apparent to the living

The inexplicably heavy breathing

The rotation of the wrist to reach nothing

The bad lesbian sex is unmappable

The unmappability of lesbians

The inability of _____ to imagine anything

The imagination of sex

The mystery of lesbian sex is its imagining

The sex is with one or more and is real

The most researchable question

The hire-ability of lesbians

The impossibility of mistranslation

The lesbians can turn their wrists and breathe

The maturity is a timeline for knowing

The map is in the close-ups

Coastal

In the photo I sent to you city water
beaded and curved over my right shoulder
you want to come
for me too late
my breath is morning space
full woman body alarm
I'm not leaving my dreams my
aching bones and the scent of stolen shampoo
hidden while you bathe
your far off tub

Dove's Rest

Into a sparrow's bath

dove's rest, soft wrist

lean white stark against your forehead

green blanket on the floor

pillows flat out against the low gray sheets

beaded plucked

wingless doves in mud

your creature transformed

Blue Jay

Dead rose once
from a grave
or an earthworm
and not a grave
just rose
death roams freely
in the rising

3 • Future Wife, America

Future Wife, America

I told her I liked the length of her pants and she laughed a corduroy-gendered laugh and a bee crawled in and out of her curls in and out and I didn't tell her and she knows now, my future wife. The truth is that bee is dead now after the coldest winter, the shape of the lake behind our house froze and we watched a fox run across in the night and leave tracks in the snow on the bank a toll we said for the use of our lake, six people died in the cold that winter and that bee died too, thank God. The truth is peonies don't grow like you think they do, America, they don't bloom underground.

How to Sleep Alone

In Berlin thin boys
squeal in their beds and
knock at white metal bunks
with cheap jewelry. Germany
is no place for a woman—expands
the month into two.

A motion here, a man shitting
laughing outside my window
outside Starbucks in Alexanderplatz,
moves me further from the Brandenburg,
nearer to the sea nearer
to cathedrals,
my lover's hair under a small umbrella
a window I've always known.

Łódź

Water beads on an idle train

what is left of a red brick wall

outside a savior streaks down

an alley somewhere near the center

I think of you

Again

My only love over
over again
among friends in a theater
and hiding I see her again
in an old apartment
lay her softly across the blue-lit
dawn move
over her with my hands and
with my mouth as the light breaks
through the linen curtains again
my dreams these nights
alone in Paris

Night Light

A line of light

the length of a shoelace

slips along in my room

makes shapes of you over

the sheets

In the dark I trace

what I can remember

My Spine Does all the Work

Starving, incandescent futures

guava near the afternoon window

the number of chairs

between me and the black tights that you

slap me for grooming pulling

lint from your thighs

Google Obituary

Regina daughter not

Regina at stoplights

where I did not think of her

sister aunt niece granddaughter

when she said I'm going for it

Buffalo meets beloved Holocaust

a field in Poland where a marker reads JOSEPH

murdered their precious first daughter Hadasha

precious angel in Chicago

Regina died March 13, 2011

Regina, naked in Las Vegas

washing up a poorly lit closet

Epistolary I

I planted my bookmark today. Teacakes aren't the same without rosemary and fondant for the cakes needs rosemary too. We have a new captain and he doesn't have any hair. Something's up with the atmosphere here, so everyone's losing their hair. My hovercar's broken. I think I might be pregnant. How are you?

Epistolary II

for Cynthia

I tried sending you pottery from the vines of the bookmark and from the vines of the baby. The clouds are hardened and the thick air is low today. It is not Spring yet. There is still time for the clouds and the air to rise and for the hair to return and for the pottery to go where I tell it. Elections are impossible right now. Lately the nights have been lasting longer. 20 and 30 hours at a time. When it stays dark, what have you given up? Where is your husband? My hovercar is working again, but another jar of clove oil costs more radios than I have right now. It won't be long.

An Experiment

In which a black balloon

in which the space around the black balloon is not

in which a black balloon is all

in which the ambient noise I hear is not the ambient noise you hear

in which two tubes are simultaneously filled with a green liquid

in which we bring your dog back from the dead

in which nobody can hear

in which societal norms are called into question

in which a paste is rubbed on the skin and allowed to absorb

in which several cans are lined up and kicked over as you yell STOP

in which that black balloon never returns

in which there is a device for that

in which movies are put on silent and a record is played backward

in which the Wizard of Oz is considered in relationship to The Pyramids

in which four balloons are not black

in which placebo

in which I walk out and you do not run after me

in which a new Earth is created and we are not all dying

in which Las Vegas is a figment of our collective sins

in which X is to Y as nothing else

in which two snow leopards are separated at birth and then reunited after five years

in which two machines are supposed to make the same sound but time travel instead

in which boba is plastic

in which Subway bread is plastic

in which everything is more plastic than we thought

in which piles of leaves are raked and then jumped into

in which your limbs begin to fall off

in which the economy collapses

in which we find out that the Universe is both expanding and collapsing

in which everything moves as a parabola

in which the United States does not invade anyone

in which the control is remote

in which a Malaysian plane goes missing

in which tattoos are removed

in which an Ewok village is burned down

in which artificial sweeteners are science

in which a black balloon is filled with water

in which a black balloon is not all

in which Halloween candy is laced with PCP

in which I fall backwards and expect you to catch me

in which marijuana is legal

in which public service announcements about driving on marijuana

in which guns are science

in which Airplane is remade shot for shot

in which we clip the wings of exotic birds

in which twelve radios are set to different frequencies and then unplugged indefinitely

in which aliens are among us

in which satellites are transportation

in which a determined diagnosis

in which matching matter to its original form

in which the distance between the balloon and its blackness

in which the black balloon returns

in which the ambient noise returns

in which the machine returns

Leaving

The gates have been locked forever,
dark, quiet the interstate that runs by
space-travel artifacts in a lot in San Pedro and
a factory for waxy space trinkets—smoke stack black,
black the stagnant, phosphorous haze.
The sun will be too hot the morning asteroids
burn through our nets.

Because we are alive, we imagine leaving.
White light that takes us,
song they sing that sounds like mother
always cast our nets
always know the song and sing.

Education

May 2014	Master of Fine Arts Degree, Creative Writing—Las Vegas, NV University of Nevada, Las Vegas
August 2007- May 2009	Bachelor of Arts Degree, English—Las Vegas, NV University of Nevada, Las Vegas
August 2004- May 2007	Louisiana State University, Shreveport—Shreveport, LA English Major
2004	Huntington High School—Shreveport, LA

Professional Experience

2011-present	University of Nevada, Las Vegas, English Instructor/Graduate Assistant—Las Vegas, NV Instructor—ENG 101, a semester-long freshman composition course. Tasks and responsibilities include classroom instruction, planning and implementing a course syllabus, grading writing assignments and assessing student performance, and meeting with students one-on-one to discuss progress. Instructor—ENG 101E/F, a year-long, developmental education course designed to cover the curriculum of ENG 101 at a slower and more comprehensive pace. Tasks and responsibilities include classroom instruction, planning and implementing a course syllabus, grading writing assignments and assessing student performance, and meeting with students one-on-one to discuss progress.
2011-2012	University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Writing Center, Writing Consultant—Las Vegas, NV Tutored individual students of all levels in hour-long, one-on-one sessions during which I assisted them at every stage of the writing process, including organizing, drafting, and editing. Worked with students to set goals and meet the requirements of set tasks or assignments within the deadline structure. Many clients included ESL and international students.
2011-2012	University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Writing Center Workshop Facilitator—Las Vegas, NV Facilitated writing workshops, including presentations on various grammatical and organizational writing concepts, as well as group discussion and writing practice.

Awards and Honors

2011-present	UNLV Graduate Teaching Assistant Position—Las Vegas, NV
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