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

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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

By Jessica Durham

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Professor of English and Creative Writing

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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
generally 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
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
eylows 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.
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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