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CARLOAD

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of
Fine Arts in Creative Writing at Virginia Commonwealth University.

By

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Bachelor of Arts, College of Charleston, 2007

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I

THE STATE WITH THE PRETTIEST NAME

*Thirty or more buzzards are drifting down, down, down,
over something they have spotted in the swamp,
in circles like stirred-up flakes of sediment
sinking through water.*

-- Elizabeth Bishop

You endure, but I still wait for the call to prove
your frailty: lungs mutinied from years of smoke
or a sleep too dark to rise from. The first was a truck, half-sunk
in an irrigation canal. Only a child then, you'd put the thing in gear
as it sat idling on the edge on the of the sugarcane fields, while
your father walked into those stalks (taller than most men) to see
about something. The truck rolled backward into the muck,
and the water reached the roof before the field hands saw. They ran,
leaped into that tiny river to pull you from a half-opened window, scraping
your belly on the edge of the glass. Then, cottonmouth, wrapped around
an oar as you paddled Lake Okeechobee. It coiled, and like an infant wailing
into the morning showed you the white gape of its mouth. Your brother
smacked the oar on the swell of the bass boat's side, just as you, years later,
would swing your head against the bedroom wall as the encephalitis took
hold. Your brain nearly burst through its fences. Years move: curved
by threat. A car you drive is eaten by flames from a flicked cigarette.
Under the porch, a man with a knife makes his home. Our state
is persistence, and like mangroves after a hurricane, it works
to flatten. Soon, I know, this swamp will quit its chasing, won't
find you, camouflaged in these relentless tangles of gold.

LEPIDOPTERA NOCTURNE

We climb each other like a rock face, grab
at ears, nipples for holds. Stacked limbs

are cairn, monument. The insects
spiral round our column, the false eyes:

violet, cerulean, navy repeating.
Not the familiar Monarch flit

and go, sidewalk moment landers, little
tickle on the nose or forearm in the Butterfly

Rainforest, a children's museum.
They bump the second-story

glass until it gives, stream in the window
the night you cry in my bed, powder of the wings

mixes with brackish lines on your face. They black
out the lights, the thread-thin antennae touching

my hair, your hands in it.
Exhausted, they quiet. The largest lands

on your chest, flattens itself like a collapsed
circus tent. Stripe upon bright stripe, quilt

of jewel. Then, your hands folding mine into
letters, signing to me with my own fingers,

as if even shouted I might not hear.

Long after: like bats, like birds, they sleep tucked
between the wall and the chocolate suede
headboard, curled in the tines of a dessert

fork, lining the pocket of my black silk robe.

CANCER TEAM

This winter, we all gathered. A small party of nine women who wrote their names on sign-up sheets to rinse the chocolate meal replacement from her feeding tube, rewind episodes of *Sex & The City*, walk the dog. We balanced plates of meatballs, pineapple au gratin on our knees, wore shirts emblazoned with her name, the cotton tees the pink of Depression glass molded into champagne flutes, faint pink of candied hibiscus we nibbled. When she tired, we cleaned the kitchen, and I took leftovers to my place, called twelve friends who came quickly to light my cigarettes, pour whiskey, hit the lights and dance in dark of the kitchen. I leaned with a man against the counter top. We stood there like that, kissing for hours.

REASONS TO KILL

Because soon I'd leave for Prague.

Because he'd left me. Because he'd left me
for an Indian beauty. Because at the moment

those two damning lines appeared

on the pregnancy test, I fell to bathroom tile,
howling. Because during two months in me

the child saw Orlando, lakes surrounded by palms,

how the concrete blinds in midday sun. Because
I'd killed before. Palmetto bugs on a leaning

second story porch. The yellow of Charleston

street lamps confused time of day and season.
There were museums. Flights of craft beer,

El Topo at midnight, sparkling Shiraz, candy.

My grandmother's funeral, three blond
would-be aunts. Many, many dogs.

CAUGHT

You are the dip of the bobber,
 cocktail ring falling into a toilet.
The defeated *drip* and sigh,
 a finger to the mouth trick.
I swear it will be quick today,
 Like a pinch. Bee sting.
I'll meet you halfway. (On the
 mud side.) Airborne! Then you'll
be in my basket. My father will
 clean you with his large knife.

THE DEFINITION OF INSANITY

If years before we met, you watched a glassblower
gather the liquid on the end of his pipe like honey
on a dipper, I must be crazy to return to this city
of our terrible coming together. On the studio floor,

a thread of the glass fell, then cooled into a thin twist.
Tonight, I extinguish the light in a bedroom that never
gave me rest, but only dreams of snakes. The nightmares
do not cease, and neither will this climbing into sheets,

moss green like some of the serpents I imagine. They hide
in the leaves of a ficus or thrash underfoot. A coral snake curves
in the pattern of the oriental rug. A baby ball python warms
in my mending basket near the radiator. Sometimes, the stuff

of you frightens me: receipts for olives and pineapple, torn
tickets from the burlesque review, a toenail clipping, the frail
line you place in my hand like a crystal signature. Like the wake
of a trawler. No, of course, like a snake.

CATCHING

We watch each other preen in mirrors
 opposite. You shave. I pluck, paint cheekbones
on my round face with powders the color of
 a fish's rose belly. *Why wouldn't*
I be worth it? Bumpy leather and its muted gold
 repeating logo, sunglasses' interlocking C's
pressed to a tanned temple. Whale oil, liquid tarantula
 fat diamonds. Everything dies. I open a black,
belted trench to reveal nothing.

II

DAUGHTER AT BEDTIME

Hide from dipping violets, wallpaper
flowers that seem to lean
toward you as you try to bring

on sleep, listen for the tinkling
of ice in a beveled water glass
as your mother moves through upstairs

halls. Listen for ambulances. Finger
the scar along your arm, refuse to turn
your back to an open space for fear of dead

relatives that might scrape your shoulder
with cold fingernails. An older cousin
has frightened you with stories. Wonder

if you'd hear burglars as they enter,
how you'd plead for your life. Beg
for stories: crocodile, elephant, words in

French, man in a fez. Think *tongue*. Tell
mother you've been petting the dog as she
holds your hands to her face.

TO MEASURE

(Try hard. Body quakes.)

There you are, bending
deep in the mirror.

Here are your silly teeth,
your paper robe.

Clinic lady, through violet anesthesia:
How did you arrive here?

A need for thickness, starch.
Is there a road named dead you're on?

A kit for stopping the bleeding
includes bagel, milk, mouth stuck with cupcake.

No baths! But you take one,
the stowaway done with its slipping.

SEROQUEL: EX-SESTINA IN TREATMENT

During check-in a nurse asks your age, weight. Math to better know you, calculate milligrams of meds per pound. Number of drinks per day, number of blackouts per week. The counting hurts a deep place behind the bridge of your nose, as if a green stem were hoping to pop through the bone, but just keeps bumping.

You know to rely on the kind sleep meds that make your head fuzzy for a few hours while you tangle with the idea of staying a number of months in this ward. You just want a drink to settle your stomach and the quickening muscle spasms. Someone does the math and scribbles your heart rate on a chart. Your eyes twitch. Your head pounds. In the dim of almost-sleep, you quietly thank the sleeping pills that allow your shaking body to bump

the rails of the hospital bed without ever really feeling it. At least you were never a meth head like the redneck you watched in intake earlier. He counted the numbers (all of the ones they ask you about) on his fingers, then laughed and pounded the heel of his palm on a denim thigh as he mentally wrestled with an answer he couldn't find, said he was *never good at math anyway. Ha ha.*

The only non-habit forming sleep med gives everyone the munchies. Bundt cakes, brownies, turnovers. Addicts are hungry, so the baking is constant. You cover cupcakes in green icing, pink icing, non-pareils and gain weight. But you'll take the pounds to be guaranteed to never toss with your blankets in fitful sleep. Family weekend: your mother scowls as she notices your thighs from across the airport. She counts in her head what you've gained.

ANTIDEPRESSANTS

Because some days are boxes
to be crossed out in red ink,
others, small round pills to be punched
through foil.

To press a palm to a child-proof cap,
shake out one white circle, then swallow,

is a bulletpoint, item completed to be
struck through. Like flossing, or the
peptide balm I knead into my thighs,

knowing that twelve bucks spent
at the drugstore won't firm, hoping
diligence will. Like a pilot

who peers under a wing to check
for leaks, checks that his lights are bright
and clear. Like my father, who so often lifted

our family northward in a Beechcraft
Bonanza to spend entire summers
in the Blue Ridge Mountains, breaths

held as he banked left and we prayed
to bump safely onto the runway jutting
from one of those Jackson County peaks,

topography I believed I could memorize
as the six-seater glided down. I lie when
I say that later in my bunk, as my sister

tossed beneath me, those peaks' pattern
would not form in my mind. I never
thought of them again, like the stations

of the cross, much repeated then forgotten
until now: Once, upon touchdown,

the nosewheel's tire burst, and with

no jack to hoist the fuselage, Dad
left us eating Mentos in the musty
FBO, returned with fifty pound

sacks of horse feed that, tossed
in the cabin, would tilt the Bonanza's
nose to the sky like a bayonet.

I remember that it worked, and that
not long after we peeled the skin
from barbecued chicken breasts

at a long, wormy chestnut table,
tilted back our heads and dropped

the food in. The grain went to feed
our Tennessee Walkers. Some went
to rot like a child called *genius* too

soon, or the bright optimism of an eager
young wife kneeling before her naked
husband, like a child kneeling

by her bedside who whispers the names
of everyone she loves, then *Christ in me,*
the hope of glory.

SAUCE

made of strawberries
and other things
not worth mentioning.
It's only the fruit that anyone
remembers, oddity
on a pile of pasta, the way
you think it will taste, how
it's not like that at all.
Balsamic vinegar cutting
through the deep pink
on the tongue, shavings
of pecorino drifting
onto the plate like dollar bills
onto a king-sized bed. Or snow
on wool the day Richmond
got ten inches and I screamed
into the morning, YES!
Because the only snow
I'd ever seen had been slush
packed hard and dirtied
under rented ski boots
in North Carolina,
the rescue team lifting me
into a toboggan and attaching it
to their skis to take me
down the bunny slope
after I caught an edge
and fell. One leg, east;
the other west. Hurt,
and sad for having fallen,
for not having been more.
Like the night I cooked
the best thing I knew, and
afterward you kissed me
not for love but because
you knew you should.
Or how when later a stray
dog, one eye gone, found us
on the porch, you held her,
stroked her, said *good girl,*
sweet girl, most beautiful
girl in the world.

FEAST OF FLOWERS

The county took eight boys this year, stuffed
in the backseats of cars, thrown from
motorcycles. Lying still on the slopes of grassy
shoulders or slumped on steering columns, they
died, amid architecture of charred, bent steel.

Now they are stickers: names and dates in vinyl
pressed to cars' rear windows. *Robbie, we'll never
forget.* Tattoos: a guitar with angel wings, fireman's
helmet, black and grey portrait on a shoulder cap.

You press a funeral program into my hand, and
we read together. I trace his nose on the page, then
yours. You seemed young. Too young to find him blue,
hours dead after falling in the shower, the water running
cold. Not the watery death that surfers fear, but from a
seizure, safe in his own home.

Before the memorial, you paddled out past the breaks
and straddled your longboard, tossed daisies
into the inlet where five hundred years earlier,
Ponce de Leon landed, and named the place
for blooms and resurrection. You floated, listened
to girls' small voices rising from the beach, singing,
watched the sun change on the stripes of the lighthouse.

Lying in bed, I beg you, if I die next week from
a snake bite or the bird flu, or rot slowly because
a mole on my back has seen too much sun, to never
print t-shirts with my face, or forward emails about
me, but go to my house and clean out my drawers, hide
anything that would make my mother cry.

BETTER THAN THE THING ITSELF

We were reflected and curved in a sculpture
the size of a small house that sat like a bulging
drop of mercury on a concrete pavilion. We photographed
ourselves, there, stared at our stretched bodies,
as if looking directly might change us, like Medusa,
into stone. Later, the child in the 3-D theater reached
out, tried to touch the bowing fingers of an anemone,
the clown fish that rests in its fluttering. When we left
through the automatic sliding door of our hotel,
there were the hunks of cold: fourteen ice sculptures
being carved in the park, artists gripping their saws
the way lovers ice skating clutch at each other's gloved hands.

III

CARLOAD

The mob of chimps streaks through a forest. They beat on trees with sticks and howl to intimidate a rival group whose lush fig tree they want. The alpha kills one of the enemy young, and when bored of it or full, passes the little skull still mottled with wet flesh to his patient, hungry mate. This is what it's like to take another person's story. Here's one: a woman sated from chicken and wine drives her boyfriend from dinner. He says something that angers her, and she swerves as a child over-correcting a video game's sports car would, onto the train tracks that run parallel to the road, says *I'll kill you. I'll drive into a train and kill you.* And her daughter, sprawled over the hump on the back seat's floor, timid, asks *Then won't we die, too?* The child thinks *balloons, horse on a spring outside of the supermarket, small plane lifting.* The car makes awkward leaps over tie after tie, bouncing.

LETTER TO A DYING COUSIN

After food: exodus of color, hats
 into the yard for the sun and cigarettes.
 I hear you're smoking, and I'm glad for it,
 each drag a small *fuck you* to this place
you'll soon leave. Easter again. We added cardamom
 and pecans to the waffle batter and dressed
 in the style for which the holiday called.
 Do you think of me,
 how I haven't written? I have promised
myself to learn about trees and birds
 before summer's end, to know more
of green, the shrill calls that wake me. What are your promises
 but to wake and only that? Your body withers:
 I cannot tell you that I have broken myself
on the back of a tall man, and that most days I think only of this.

NO ONE CHARGED

My neatly manicured nails pop
against the double clear of a tumbler
of vodka. Your canoe-carrying man's
hands, the bitten nubs, cradle swirled blown
glass. You suck at it, a giving nipple, blow
the sweet whorls at my face, open
and wide as when receiving a kiss.
No paved roads, and while stuck
in this rented house in the dunes
our skin grows too apparent. We focus
on wildlife. I perch in a bar chair
while you kill a dozen hornets. Porpoises
announce the East, the island's wild
Spanish mustangs nap in the warm dirt
of the lawn beyond the lower porch.
Later, you read a newspaper story:
a killing that rocked five hundred
locals. Three horses, high-powered
rifle. None of us want to be
innocent. It must have been a mind
gone awry. Like Britney on the cover of the
Us Weekly in my lap. Her bald head
lit by the parking lot lights as she beats
the side of a paparazzo's van with an umbrella.

EQUINE NOCTURNE

Tonight, as the man pours grain into a red plastic bucket, his sorrel Walker writhes in the gray dirt, pulling up grass. The huge curve of red middle is rolled

toward the sky, eyes showing white. He's grazed too long and eaten sand, or minerals have made a hard ball in his belly. Tapeworm, roundworms,

larvae in the bowel. So many ways to fall ill. The man sighs as he loads his pistol, and remembers another gelding, khaki-colored. Another gun, how

he hated telling his daughters, and that any death, to those girls, no matter how merciful, was cause for tears. The springer spaniel, liver and white, who pissed and

whined when it rained, wrapped in a quilt and placed in a grave lined with trash bags. The grandfather, beaten with a dining room chair by an intruder, then pieced together

only to die. The oaks are sentries as the bullets crack. One, then three. The fourth and fifth are from a larger gun, but the huge ribs expand like bellows

still. His wife leans against the fence rail, the edge of her smocked cotton gown wet from the grass, and begs the man to bed. As he tosses,

the horse tosses, shaking something inside loose, then each stands quietly at dawn, believing, because they must, in miracles. The man sponges

the dried streams of blood From the horse's nose, knows he will never speak of this. At dusk, the horse will eat noisily, bucket knocking the fence with each thrust of his head.

GREYSTONE

I.

Syndicated portraits. The photographer asks each to wipe the hair from his eyes. Five faces: smug or tired. All I know. Like students shot in their classrooms, who from the moment of their bleeding out become fences: whitewashed and surrounding their homes.

II.

Girls and their tears self-consciously abandon vanity and honor the memory of mouth and heat with bare faces, covered bodies. All in sweatshirts and ponytails. Those with bad eyes wear glasses. The flames of short candles reflected on smooth straightened teeth. So without stain. Near clear, near blue.

III.

The dirigible breaks into halves against the oak bark after two hundred silent feet. Twice today I have recounted it, my tongue clicking, an adding machine as I tick off the figures that swallowed boys. Five in an \$80,000 two-door. It flew a mile and change. Then the air, borne into the late before morning.

NIGHTLIFE

His name will be Valentino, *like the designer*,
and he'll finger the Louis Vuitton logo
bagette on your shoulder. He'll ask if it's
authentic, then won't believe you. A gift
from an uncle for your high school
graduation. Space Electronique will be packed,
kids on study abroad eager to slam absinthe
and tequila in a *real European discoteque*, but the girls
there will all be Americans, Australian. The Florentine
men will know to come, know to sit near the upstairs
bar in a giant room lined with white leather couches, poles
and mirrors, black boxes above the dance floor that hold
teetering co-eds. Valentino will be pleased to find
you've not worn a bra under your halter top and will fondle
your eighteen-year-old breast in a round booth downstairs,
will pull aside the black crepe that gives under his knuckles.
The other girls will plead with you, but you'll go with him,
sit in his lap in the tiniest BMW, climb to Fiesole and watch
the city blinking from above. He will pull your skirt aside
and ask if you're a natural blond, if *you have Tampax in?*
When you think of this, remember billowing
pink window treatments, a large armoire in the corner
of the bedroom, the three cigarettes you'll chain smoke
the next morning while perched on a velvet reproduction
Louis XVI settee. Forget his voice in the moment he asks
if you have AIDS, the proof of him in your faded pink panties,
his low chuckle at your cheap shoes.

NICK ARVANITIS

In 2004, financial firm Morgan Stanley sent mercenaries to find a young executive stranded by the December 26th tsunami. His girlfriend, Leslie, also a Morgan Stanley employee, drowned.

Here a week, and each morning
the same. A beach waiter, reliable
like the tide, brings me fruit;
I give him baht on the plate
of my palm. In an ad for a cruise
line : balding dad un-tucks his shirt
and dances like a dervish, grinning.
His kids impressed. Can a person
be changed? I run a few miles
every day back in New York, and Leslie
laughs when I call the front desk
to ask about a treadmill. *Does the city
never leave you?* she asks. *Will I hear
taxis honking if I hold you to my ear?*

*

Dozed in my beach
chair and woke to children's
voices. I want a little bite
of something. My hand grabs
at the plate next to me
and it almost tips from the teak
folding table. A child runs by,
then her father. I hold a green
slice of melon. Then we're
all running.

IV

WHEN SHE DIES

By the third time you'd entered rehab,
I had practiced my faces, stone-still
and the wailing obscenity of the mourning.

It will not be a cobra, or an air disaster (tomorrow's
trivia.) We are the innocent bystanders. The man
in the ski mask is my Sarah. It will be theater. Opening

night with orchestra seats, and I can't wait. My black
will be pressed and clean. Someone projects photographs
on the side of a white house with a very small yard.

*Your sister loved you very much. See fig. 1. I will pass
hors d'oeuvres to the piano teacher, tennis coach
Great Aunt Elaine. Will nod solemnly, say more*

*crudite? Will swill merrily from a monogrammed
flask. Later, splayed on tile, they see me and say
Look what she has done to us. Look at us.*

FLORENCE, SOUTH CAROLINA

So unlike Italy, where we met, where *soup* literally means *reboiled*, and the authentic stuff is difficult to find. We walked miles, crossed the Ponte Vecchio to eat the day-old minestrone layered with thin slices of bread, then cooked again. On the steps of the Duomo, a gypsy cackles and runs from me. She's stolen my gelato. Here, the fridge in our roadside motel room is empty. We've met halfway, drove four hours each to be screwed by blue laws. When all the beer is gone, you tell the waiter at the Chinese restaurant it's our tenth anniversary. He gives us wine in styrofoam cups with straws.

THE BURN

to my Mother on her 60th birthday

A tiny scar shaped like Cuba
floats above a knuckle on my left
middle finger. Its bubbling is done. The mark
hard and crusted over. A moat of pink,
the yellowed middle.
From a baking sheet, out of a four
hundred degree oven. I'd let the day go
and go without a lunch, and the delicious
heat pinked my cheeks. I brushed the pan.
Hours south, you cook or remember
cooking. Your house less full, none
of your girls crying in the kitchen or dropping
tennis rackets near the hall tree, the large
and cursed breasts you gave them pressed down
by Lycra, shirts marred with sweat and Clinique.
The creak and cadence of the side
door and the man who opens it signals
day's end. As you take a cocktail with your
husband, do you look down, examine
your old burns? So many since 1948,
there's no way to be sure if the taut pink
damage says *artichoke squares* or
curried rice. Leaner times: *hot dog, tomato
soup*. Resting your head on my father's
shoulder, you wonder how many more months
your niece will live, whether the Virginia cold
breaks through my wool coat this November, should
the house go up on this shaky market, as four women
along the east coast, all with yellow hair, roll
limes on the counter to release the juice, trace
the embossed letters on their Crane stationery,
remember just what you told them.

PUNK

The store wouldn't be built for months,
so you got naked in his backseat,
the construction site wide, street
lights bounced off the red jewel eyes
of the skull shaped gear shift. His blue
mohawk scraped the Chevy's headliner
as he pushed up from each kiss.

Then a spotlight through the back
window, voice on a megaphone,
and you were shivering in a t-shirt, barefoot
on the new concrete, arms crossed under
your breasts, the bra on the car's floor.

Two cops: the man picked up your cotton
panties with his flashlight. You watched his nostrils
flare as he held the fabric away from his face,
while a woman with a long, tight braid
pulled you aside, asked did your parents
know where you were? *If he loves you,
he'll wait.*

You had waited, would for three
more years, but when the cops left
you let him drive to a friend's house,
stand over you and jack off while you
laid on the cold tile, your shirt pulled
up, your skin a place for him to land.

HOMETOWN TOUR

I.

Mansions, small zoo, barn where you fell,
seizing. Landmarks, torn tickets, English
peas, pecorino, small pours of malbec
and Cotes du Rhone. Later: opiates
and cheaper reds. This house where
you grew fills with the shouting of slurred book
titles, names of pharaohs. This, the hour
of the photo album, the television quiz
show, the snap of thick pills, cleaving.

II.

Days begin late here in your parents'
home. Thick blinds postpone light. We
move slowly through motions of waking.
As you mumble last night's dreams, you're
soft against my back. I ignore the muted want.

III.

You can't not tell me about the high school
girlfriend who lived at the end of this snaking
back road known for whitetails that crossed
its lanes in the dark. You both vowed to never
drive it at night, to take the long way home.
Once, you broke the promise, and your palms
mashed in time like chest compressions on
the horn. Honking, to warn the deer.

LETTER TO AN ISLAND

If he has gone to you, I, too, will leave, will tell
our home to keep for me this small porch lit
by round, white bulbs, his water glass pooling
on the nightstand. Do each of you hot
and palm-treed places know each other? When I
soak in Ponce Inlet (full of sharks) will the faint
scent of me reach him like gossip? Keep watch.
Give him melon, hammock, the sure hand he'll
need to spear fish. Today, my foot on the black
of a treadmill was his foot climbing lava. My eye,
his eye admiring tanned leg. Show him the empty
space where my face might be as he exhales smoke.
Protect him. Tell him everything, don't give him back.

POCAHONTAS MEETS THE LITTLE MERMAID

You died reclining, your bleached hair fanned
on the arm of an overstuffed chenille sofa,
as if suspended in water. Cheeks bloated, a gallon-size
plastic Ziploc of your jewelry on the floor
next to you. Your father sends his secretary
to identify your body. For two years, mother,
his sister, will not mention my name to him, so
protective of the breath still in me.

Our mothers were beauties, tan and fit,
and belonged in the water. We watched
them float on their backs while we screamed
for their return to the boat, held our breath until they hoisted
themselves up on the foldaway wooden ladder, ran their
hands through bobs lightened by the sun, told us they'd
felt a hammerhead's tail move the water just below
their feet. Never once frightened by all that blue.

I stared at you, all leg and breast in a neon
high-waisted bikini: the color of an airbrushed
heart on a t-shirt from Daytona Beach or a shade of nail
polish that might change color in the heat. You laughed
at my potbelly while you added Sun-In to your hair, spoke of
maybe one day modeling for Ron Jon Surf Shop, asked
why my mother wouldn't let me wear a two-piece
or shave my legs.

Joellyn, our grandfather named a boat
for you. We watched our parents dive
into the Atlantic from its hull, grabbing
at lobsters and conch. Once, I overheard the captain

say we'd picked up too many, that if the Coast Guard caught on, we'd have trouble. I pictured mother's brown wrists in handcuffs, threw every single lobster back.

Your wedding photograph: Oahu, off-white silk, hibiscus flowers frame a severe updo. Fuschia lips and foundation one shade too pale, still stunning. Your father stayed home in Florida, but paid for the luxury package: vows under a gazebo, private balcony with ocean view, two plush robes. You leave cosmetology school after one semester. Your husband leaves. You sneak into your parents' garage, smash a bottle of red wine on the cement next to the Jaguar, and cut your lips trying to drink. They couldn't tell the blood from the wine.

BROOKLYN'S FINEST

North of me, you too are within walls
and won't prepare for the storm
that will move from here and hang
above your brownstone like
a cold mobile. Unlike me, you don't
stand in line for beer & bread
like tired parents in the grocery,
who on their hips balance children
swallowed by parkas, like L'il Kim
in her black mink who wailed watching
Biggie's funeral procession. She reached
out desperately toward the limousines
crowned by wreaths that snaked down
your street in Bedford-Stuyvesant
more than a decade ago. When
you pass your window, do you glance
down, and for a moment, think of the
neighborhood boys holding dollar bills
over tall candles purchased from the bodega
as the over-sized coffin passed in its hearse?
Their tribute to his childhood boasting:
that one day he'd be rich enough to
burn money. The dollars, then the boys
turn to smoke. It was, in fact, all
a dream. So you return to your books,
count them in case of a wind that might lift
& steal a prized copy, read again a chapter
that always made you weep, or open
a can of beans and forget them on the counter
for a game of online chess. Probabilities
swirl above you like hallucinations, like
the spectacle of neon, my first night
in Atlantic City. In that suit at the Tropicana
you were really something, and taught me
just what to do. Always double down
and triple stack. Play the dozens. Tip
the dealer. Order Long Islands to get
your money's worth, but keep them
off the felt. If you win a black chip, call it
a night. Never forget to bet on zero,
because when you forget is when it hits.

GOING UP

My turn to see it: the orange
& pink, the sky above Lake Weir
lit as the shuttle launches from
the Cape. To the east, seven
astronauts are stood up by the night.
Something misaligned, propellant
leaking, or lightning. The bar
we wade to afternoons is empty.
Every biker & boater long home.
The dark has made me jumpy, scared
of what I can't see in the water: moccasins,
sharp edges of mussel shells. But the
shallows are warm on our ankles, & you
tell me the gators don't want me
any more in the middle of the night
than they did in the daylight, when I leaped
from the back of your boat & let
my mouth still wide from a scream
fill with aquatic bacteria. Somewhere,
the seven sleep: grounded and whole,
cargo packed. A new treadmill
for the space station, racks of equipment.
Then a stuffed toy eagle, gold medallion,
football jersey that upon reentry will be
given to children to touch, displayed
in the halls of alma maters, as if each item
were wholly changed by flight.

Vita

Anna Claire Hodge was born in Orlando, Florida on August 7th, 1985. She presently lives in Richmond, Virginia. She received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Communication at College of Charleston, South Carolina, then received a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from Virginia Commonwealth University. She was a 2009-2010 AWP Intro Journals Project nominee and a Best New Poets 2010 nominee. Her work has recently appeared in Blue Earth Review and Breakwater Review, among other places.