

AS THOUGH OUTSIDE

by

Anya Creightney

A Thesis

Submitted to the

Graduate Faculty

of

George Mason University

in Partial Fulfillment of

The Requirements for the Degree

of

Master of Fine Arts

English

Committee:

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and Social Sciences

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Fairfax, VA

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Bachelor of Arts
Occidental College, 2005

Director: Sally Keith, Associate Professor
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DEDICATION

To My Parents

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ABSTRACT

AS THOUGH OUTSIDE

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This thesis attempts to distill my experience as a bi-racial, bi-ethnic woman. At the same time these poems explore what it means to be black in contemporary America today. The poems explore themes of rage, injustice, joy and even love.

Using plain yet subtle lyrics, I discuss my relationship to the story of my birth, a story I once thought irreparably split. Now having traversed modern explanations of race, these poems chart new growth, new narratives of “wholeness.” All in all, the collection moves from “biological background” in section one, to “conceptual challenge,” in section two, to “emotional freedom” in section three. In total, I argue that the complicated stories of our births need not define the myriad ways we navigate identity, gender, and even physical appearance. For me, this collection is one of intellectual and emotional healing.

As Though Outside

Anya Creightney

ONE

How to Tie a Knot or Write a Bi-Racial Poem

i.

Lay two strands of uneven length on a hard clean surface and walk to the grocery store wearing your nervous system outside your body. Buy glue as normal and follow the instructions on the back.

ii.

Braid three strands of nylon line and attach to a cedar sapling. Light the entire thing on fire. Cry as you point at the blaze.

iii.

Walk two animals of uneven size and gait through a park. Fasten their leashes together in the shape of a bow. Watch as they struggle to loose themselves from each other.

iv.

Hitchhike to the opposite side of town while cutting red ribbon in the back seat. Once outside, let them fall like confetti every time shame shuts the self.

v.

Make love with naiveté, connecting one strand to the room's doorknob. Close the door hard and swift. Twenty years later, when the body's no longer ugly, swallow the tooth whole.

vi.

Bring a boat ashore amid a windstorm. Making a figure eight, wrap the rope around the cleat. Bury the other end in sand. Watch as sea salt explodes the air.

Tennis

In the tennis court I don't play on
 lay lines — the geometry of win and error.
I can't see it now — I moved cross-country,
but I know leaves, brown and tan, scuttle back and forth
 across the net as does inconclusive water —
 light hail; then snow — flakey, wide;
the type that fingers grass and asphalt evenly.

Evenings, my father often calls to
 ask about my anxiety. I take issue
with the word, but learn not to play
semantics. It's like a parking lot — worry.
 Like sitting in one — having driven there
 without intention because picking a
destination is impossible — though simple.

Or how country stoplights, those on wire
 instead of pole, bobble in the wind,
indiscriminately flashing colors
we agree mean wait, then go. He must not
 understand. He tells me I was a happy child
 who played — what does playing indicate? It
belabors memories — pictures even,

of old roller skates; the wheels singing
 in quartet — each arching themselves round
and round as they try to differentiate
each other's voices, eventually
 accepting whoosh as sound. I suppose I'm listening,
 or maybe I'm talking, but really, I'm
imagining the tennis court I don't play in;

its asymptomatic lines; its simple
 demarcation of in and out. I'm
counting, as one would a game, the trees
just beyond chain link. I'm encouraging their
 brown leaves to participate, to choose.

Winter

after L.S. Lowry

It is ghoulish to walk
 amid the snow,
 with hands & face

exposed to the wind;
 with legs barely
 bending at the knees,

with feet guessing at
 the promise of
 warmth. Then, it is

tiresome to love snowmen
 with their scarves
 & carrots, or children

with snowballs — their
 bodies refusing to
 cast the long, sumptuous

shadows of June. Then, it
 is easy to forget the
 heart, pumping warmly

in its home & remember
 only the hunch of winter.
 Perhaps this is why Lowry

painted the cripples as he
 did — their faces whitened,
 distended, their legs mere

matchsticks, their lips a
 rouged & awkward
 red. They are not so much

crippled as they are cold.
 They are not so much
 broken as they are routinely

normal. People will always
 have their same problems,
 Lowry seems to say. Or maybe

it's just that he sees our
 loneliness & envisions
 that winter as crippling.

Patrick

Man with golden hair and light skin who calls
me nicknames in my home and on my couch —
his leg akimbo, shoelace undone, fist asleep,
this man I rinse head to toe, bathe thick calves
and thighs with sad washcloth. I weep for this
one. Show my chest to this one. Still he treats
me bad. Keeps me shy. I'd like to tell him I've
no fruit hiding up my vagina — no good
secret — no extra juice to wash my underarms.
So go from me. Bring me my man and washcloth.
Tell him it's time and he's wanted home. Tell
him I found my voice and don't sound like
always. Or better still, I'll tell him myself after
I sear this soured skin, face down heart open.

Woman in Spring

For Patrick

After the museum
I'm all smells
 frangipani
 daffodils
dust
the acrid sweet of moisture between my thighs

I want to swallow as the earth does
one big gulp
of rainy Sundays
 the sky obscured
 soured and gray
but still
subtle in its meanderings

And the mood
 in the museum atrium
 reminded me of his body
or more precisely
his hands
 the flesh of his thumbs
 the clarity of his nailbeds
the wildlife of his palm
 the way we held hands in the sun
our skin tones looking
 and speaking differently

And yes in the museum
our bodies were unlike each other
 but often the memory still smells of
 frangipani
 daffodils
dust
the acrid sweet of moisture between my thighs

Nothing So Plain

The light blooms

the corner of the kitchen,

showing the depth

of afternoon heat.

Someone has washed the dishes,

now stacked comfortably

waiting to dry. Were they

people on a beach they'd lie

just as gracefully, sunning

themselves. A pinstriped dishtowel

hangs as delicately as muslin,

still wet from use. The garbage

bag, equally functional,

is gathered loosely at the top.

Its red ties thick

as birthday ribbon.

They are a bow atop the kitchen's

cleanliness. It feels impossible

to find entire rooms of equilibrium.

This is one.

Min Mor

When I was ten, she inserted a tampon
while I was in the bathroom
and I knew where the cotton

went, but not really.
I felt as puny as a mosquito,
the blood: unrecognizable.

So, I grew in her shadow,
my eyes the loudest wing
of my body. "Wear a dress," she'd say.

"Who told you your legs aren't beautiful?"
In Copenhagen, we'd shower one after
another in her childhood apartment.

She'd dress as if her clothes, not
her father, flustered her.
The air was the real ripe,

and sad thing, but I couldn't say
it; I thought I'd lose her
to the flutter of being seen.

Last night, I dreamt she
abandoned me at a party,
the rejection unusual, confusing.

Where will I be when her body goes,
when the cavity will take no more?

My Mother

Last night I dreamt she abandoned me at an airport, her rejection terrifically total. Speechless, I vomited or worried I'd vomit; my stomach full of disjointed language:

blueberry, blanket, beach, bifurcate. How could I come from that thing, her body? Once, when I was ten she inserted a tampon while I was in the bathroom, and I

knew where the cotton went but not really. I felt as puny as a mosquito, my eyes the loudest wing of my body, the blood a hidden blue beneath the skin. Abandoned

at the airport, I dreamt, eyes open, in a too bright hallway: *blueberry, blanket, beach, bifurcate.*

Dreaming, I created a reason for my rejection: drunk, at a bus stop in Copenhagen,

I lost and found the keys to our apartment. Worried then too, I anticipated the flutter

of being seen. In the morning, I wondered where the body goes when one sleeps

awake in a dream: *blueberry, blanket, beach, bifurcate.* Yes, I came from that thing, her body, but where will I be when her body goes, when the cavity will take no more?

Mal Humor

My mood eaten or rotten
let me sit — my lungs alone
my mouth stony
my blood mixed and noiseless.

And tell me my name
my stupid name
in the dark or else
feed me orchid roots in the kitchen
with my father's hands.

Tell him his dead dumb air
diminishes my larynx. Tell him
I'm going to correct his mind.

In the rancid dark of evening,
terrific spoil cages his head,
his face.

The world wild and digestible
and the kitchen sink winking
at me.

How He Will Go

Last night I dreamt my father sold the family home in preparation for his death. He chose a family with a daughter no older than five or six to live amongst our things. But after signing he didn't understand he was meant to leave. He spent the entire closing digging holes in the backyard, convinced he buried money under a cellar we didn't have. At night we snuck in, concerned they'd arrest us for trespassing. He clung to me as if I were a nurse and I walked him, a hunched invalid, through a house he no longer recognized. Without turning on any light we could tell they removed the paintings from the walls and he moaned and screamed so loudly I could not calm him down.

Déjà Vu

Along the walking path a father walks a boy no older than three.
The boy in turn walks a dog no bigger than a large stuffed animal.
Then in a leap of animal joy, the dog lurches forward making the boy

fall to his knees. Without exchanging words the father leans to
hug the top of his son's head. Having dreamt of my father the night
before I tighten and melt; my eyes like hot petals. I think out loud,

I've fallen to my knees father. I feel no older than two or three. I
am nothing but cotton stuffing, a sullied tattoo of milky white. I am,
I am outlandish, feeling as small as toy terrier. I leap to think of you.

Los Angeles

I remember my grandparents' house as an orange tree

The kitchen, a bowl of dropped fruit, both orderly and overfilled

The hallway, one eloquent branch of perpetual evening light

The bathroom tile and tub, green on green, waving a rococo crown

The sleepy lace-covered dining room voicing honey-grass blossoms

The porch, forever tugging dark dirt, a breathing susurrus, out then in

The roof, variegated and worn, warming in the sun like cracked bark

And my grandmother, the heartwood, watching the yard and

whispering a psalm

Still, there was a time she didn't want me — her child's seed.

Copenhagen

My grandfather died walking
the gravel path
to his tiny summer cottage.

For nineteen years
my mother waited
for him to acknowledge
his grandchildren
mailing him pictures
of dark little me
and brother.

In the end
I'm glad
it was his heart
that took his life.

TWO

Imagining the Ship

She, a slave, seeing the crossing, waited, preparing herself.

The crossing: ready to receive, mouth open, mouth gaping
to the sea. And how those sailors schemed and stalked her.

She: the sick one — she: allergic, crazed, soon drowned.

But first he took his: a dance in private quarters, touching
her with one gloved hand, then groping wildly, inhaling it:
new stench. Her shock hung purple between them while
the sick and slatted floorboards gave him strength, gave
him room to prowl, one whole animal forever unmarred.

Leaving the House

I am going out in the world resolved to act all boogaloo and bug eyed, to say something real nasty in 7/11 or on the subway. Maybe Simone White is right, I got a chicken wing twitch of the right arm, which is to say, I'm either gonna out order the darkest motherfucker in the rib joint or write a postcard in the fancy part of town, knocking real neighbor like on some ornate door asking for postage. And I'm no star but I am gonna spend serious money on skincare at Barneys. During checkout I'll use nothing but outdated slang. Scratch. Scrilla. Anna. Chedda. Fetta. Cheese. Or how about Little Tokyo? I'm gonna order mullato right off the menu easy as pie. Self made, I'm gonna Archie Bunker his armchair at the National Museum of American History. Scatter brained, I'm gonna smear my fingerprints all over the damn thing. And when it's all over and provocation comes I can say I did it. I mean it.

Scented

Panic. No beauty in head. A cardinal joined, landed for table scraps. It cocked its blood red face, looked past me. If it sang I saw only shadow. Underneath, concrete, that ugly macadam, accused me of having weight, having a body. The garbage truck, with its distended anus, agreed. It beeped its dirt yellow body. *Back up. Move properly.* I walked home, stinking from every orifice.

Partial

Children walk in a park, half-curious, knowing little. A bus extends a stop arm obscuring a guard's face. The park is half clean, half dirty. Trash just outside the bins. To know what these children think: *we are new, dented bodies*. Leaves in semi-conscious piles, the children kicking as they go. The day is filled with adolescence. The children exhausted, explained. Construction noise loud as numbers without number. Then they come: another group in slow trudge, their steps becoming winter. Sometimes it's good to be only half-aware.

Cannot Talk

My mind worked and winced
trying to understand

I couldn't say with clarity

I was a splashing pool of dread
I was shadow and figure

I was smile but mostly ghost
I was nightmare and tired

I was great wide eyes and tiny hands
I was bubble of effort and quiet language

I was breath, quicker, quicker
I was crazy forest pulsing with wind

I was sorrow and tears to make it brighter
I was the bow and melody of confusion

I was a flash of blood-red imaginings
and whisper cooing *safe, safe, safe*

It is only now I forgive my voiceless throat

Take Over

Come stupid girl, stupid younger me. Come with me and come out of that bed. Come into honey warm conversation just outside the door. Come out of that bed little girl, little misunderstanding. The town cook is preparing something drizzled, something elegant. Come out at once silly girl, silly stupid girl. The artists are painting in their white rectangular rooms. They say out loud, "We are artists! We are artists who paint!" So, silly girl come out from that room. Come out little girl, little younger me. Let yourself be seen at the mouth of the river. Right now snow is falling like china and schoolchildren laugh and laugh but not at you. So come out of the bed, little girl, little younger me. Come out of that curled up question mark. That shape is wearing you out.

Take Over

Go on plastic body, make a spoon, make a spork. At 23 weeks a woman's womb is a grapefruit. At 6 weeks a pea. And radio is one gorgeous box. On call-ins you can speak to New York, Helsinki, Shanghai. It is your electronic friend. See? Go on plastic body, new raindrop. Go on. Right now there's man is alone in a room, his voice like a crater. *I'm a cloud. I go anywhere I want*, he says, feeling gauche. The sky like crystalline jelly. So go on, liquid face, plastic body. In your hand an Easter basket is one long braid. Inside, eggs like cartoons. Tinsel like sheared straw. Yes, go on, strange body, strange lightning. Go on dandelion spray. You can be anything you want.

Decision As Reported

“My down there looks the same.” “I’m supposed to practice saying it.” “Like me,” “Nurse said.” “Say it like me.” “OK?” “Don’t cry.” “Wash your face.” “You don’t look half as bad now.” “Do you know anyone with lupus?” “It’s not hereditary, it’s environmental.” “Who dies from environment?” “I checked the box for sickle cell.” “Nurse wanted to know if I made my choice.” “Neesy says forms are for suckers.” “Neesy says the census pays you to go door to door.” “The Latinos always claim two to a house, but she changes the boxes afterward.” “I’m feeling better.” “Neesy knows old girl’s SSN#.” “I want a [].” “I’m always showing up late, and then they’re out.” “Nurse had good hair.” “Wish mine’d grow like that.” “I took prenatal vitamins for a while, but the only thing that grew was my bush.” “Damn, it’s hot outside!” “You think there’s time to eat?” “I want what she’s having.” “Who dies cuz the air’s too thick?” “I’ve never heard of that.” “On the Internet, Nurse said, you can get a form that makes you exempt, or whatever, but you gotta have the baby first.” “I don’t know anyone with lupus.” “Good.” “I don’t wanna pay for shit, you know?”

Legend

She had many children. Everyone deserves punishment. Tell me, did you tone your vaginal opening? Coccyx crack. She laid down. Wanted to know what she'd done, which is natural. Doctor said mongoloid mantra. *You may not touch or hold the baby.*

A man slunk off, drunken St. Patrick. Horse shit outside the bar. The parade was over before it began. Black boy ate candy off the street. Everyone deserves punishment. *No, you may not touch or hold the baby.* The police watched from their caravans.

Legend

He transported her across state lines. Beat her in Louisiana. Pissed on her in Arizona. New Mexico was a blur. I came in daytime so as not to appear threatening.

I am always following arcane rules.

Legend

Park authority comes with vacuums to clean up our mistakes. Black man with robotic arm walks backward, toward precipice. He apologizes for the noise, having done his job correctly.

I have not one new thought in my head.

THREE

Recycling

I am in the position of beginning
or else its just another day.

A motor runs. The refrigerator drawer
opens as normal.

The tab on the soda can is permissible
as a mouth.

And sex is mysterious. It doesn't
always make knowledge.

But that's okay. Not all moments
are precious.

*

In the garden the tulips withered,
the stem a brown leg.

The nutrients descended like an elevator.
Now bulb, a creamy eardrum.

Sheared of their tops, a snap as I go.

I deadhead, I tulip.

*

I tell myself one thing at a time.

One benevolent, shrouded
head at a time.

*

Neuro from the Greek. *Pathy*
from *pathos*.

To arose. Poignant, a pinprick
to the skin.

My father's marring makes
him small as a breadbox.

When he eats papaya, I imagine
him as seed. Or else I imagine
he is practicing his size.

My thinking is not without resistance.

Garden State

The body is in hand and, as usual,
tonight is like a ship's light.

I am so small I admire it.

I am intricate:
a shut mouth
a stone pill
a statue of repose.

Or else, I am an arm or leg to take home.
Tomorrow I will have a clean
beautiful color.

And smell will shutter me like
flowers.

Garden Apartment

The day, a blur. I moved from room to room begging. Outside, grey sky became the crown of my mother's head, the quiet snow her shorn hair. *I am no one in particular*, I mumbled in the bath and walked naked to the kitchen, immediately forgetting what I wanted there.

Across the alley my neighbor's television went red and splotchy. Then new light in the bedroom. I don't understand how people move through their lives at all. That night I dreamt I wrote a poem, but it mattered little by morning. I spent the whole day thinking about crisp, white computer paper.

Mistranslations of Min Mor

say domino mean hopscotch
say fog mean blur
say blemish mean tattoo
say diagnosis mean prognosis
say elaborate mean fastidious
say mother mean metaphor
say doctor mean totem
say cartoon mean failure
say mother mean tunnel
say water mean wellspring
say timely mean 401k
say hallucination mean future
say corpulent mean corpus
say gone mean reverie
say marriage mean do over
say lifetime mean quantity
say sayonara mean hiawatha
say mother mean bury
say idiosyncratic mean idiom
say crib mean bedside
say mother mean mother

Conversation Unsent

Mama did I tell you the sun is out and warmth swaddles my memory as one

would an overgrown

watermelon? Or that during the poetry reading, I feared I'd cry in public, and then

promptly feared I couldn't

cry at all? Did I tell you I imagined stowing explosives on the bus last week —

I waited for the handcuffs

not the explosion. I've read about fantasies like these; psychologists say these ideas

mean something very

normal: a fear of going unseen. Mama, today the temperature is a brisk 32 degrees

and the living room

is set to 75. Some days ago I bought a homeless man a sandwich and have avoided

telling anyone.

His cheekbones remind me of the men I love best. He chose meatball; I chose

turkey. Mama did I

tell you the sky is as full as a protuberance; the sun a little surprised to gleam atop

the snow? Or that

yesterday I read Rilke in the library and felt exquisite because he simplified life to

“house,” “gate,” “tree”

or at most: “column or tower.” Yes, I told you I slept well, exhausted and dreamless.

I'm sure I did.

But I didn't tell you that loneliness tastes like waning autumn. At 4:00pm the

streets are quiet

and my brain is as straight as earth's longitude, but the sun is out, Mama. For

that I am glad.

Polished

I ruined the day by reading.
Afterward, I needed words
like afterward.

My life felt uncomfortable,
fragments obtuse.

By noon I closed the doors.
I couldn't stand
my own hallways.

In the grocery I painted
one thumb, testing color.

How feminine, my thumb
one red sign.

I looked out from my face.

Cherry blossoms whispered
to each other, and teens
wore their hair, bang heavy.

Through the window, houses
like pointy hats with chimney tassels.

I washed the dishes. I did not once think
of drought.

Outside the neighborhood was a motorcade
of light. The streets, indistinguishable.

I watched a linear movie, pleased
to sip tea and understand everything.

Kamal & Bibi

desire is a wild
boundary like a ludicrous
or endangered animal
(platypus or kookaburra)

& all words sound
sexual, especially “calvados”
with its bestial root center,
or “mammal” with its mouth
full of meat

so it’s not a tad surprising
that a woman called Bibi
loves someone named Kamal
each on all fours
mooring rhythmically,
mooring percussively,
into the air

together their ravenous
laughter is winding smilax

& isn’t it funny to feel so
intimidated by slow
undressing, when
intimidation is partly the point.

the paradox, an
unforgettable addition
like a blade of light
in a dark house.

& soon Bibi will know
if Kamal’s hip is a violin.

Poem

barely frozen water talked
to me fluid with
with

i translated for you failing
to tell *with* right

i said
your voice is deaf
to moon's grey eye

i meant
your body is rain
grazing a bald tree branch

how i fib swollen with
with

how mistranslation belies

the animal between
your legs (*dream of*)

a wedge of tongue
like candied lemon (*need for*)

our collision like handmade
nicknames (*result of*)

i decided best
way out

translate tell
i am lonely as a teacup

Ars Poetica with Fever

after the snowstorm
I made myself ill
constructed sentences
like a charm bracelet

(a real humpty dumpty)

and when the telephone rang
I wore my big hair
like a hat

a huge hot hat

no that can't be right no

after the snowstorm
a fat truck drove around
the block like a saltlick

dogs walked themselves
home and our yard was dirty
meringue

(I got in bed with a bad case
of metaphor)

I drank fizzy drink and tolerated
my leaky face

I dreamt I fell over
board though a broad navy
man spotted me
thrashing in oversize
camouflage pajamas

(no dramatics I merely fell
for aquamarine)

when I woke syntax
was burning up its odd force
pure dynamite

when I woke light
went in my body my body
one atomic flower after another

Notes on Travel

I dreamt above streets I walked hours earlier
My hair electric, unruly, smashed as though a pillow

Landing is nerve wracking

In the terminal it felt superfluous to buy anything
the glamorous will always be glamorous

In pet relief no pets relieved themselves
not one wordless mammal

At carousel five we chose our belongings as if newly deactivated
In the bathroom we recognized each other but said nothing

On the train I stared redundantly and must've appeared touched
On another I smiled once at the back of a baby's head

I imagined her fluorescent brain was the center of language
then I was as thoughtless as an arrow

Above ground I fell in love with every detail of the city's shining face

Breaking Away

outside I'm fearful (the
weather is so cosmic) and
wind winks hello

bare or A line trees amend
me (I often feel bad about
small things) today I read
poems out of order

the spiral sun befogs
like always I try
to make my heart patient

punishment amounts to little
said with concision your wound
is like theirs.

BIOGRAPHY

Anya Creightney was born and raised in Albuquerque, New Mexico. She received her undergraduate education at Occidental College, in Los Angeles, California and the University of East Anglia, in Norwich, England. After that she spent two years traveling between Eastern and Western Europe, including stints in Asia. Upon returning to the United States, Anya Creightney became an editor and teacher. Now a Vermont Studio Center resident and Cave Canem fellow, Anya Creightney lives in Arlington, VA, having graduated in the Spring of 2015, with a MFA in Creative Writing, emphasis poetry.