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WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Department of English

Writing Program

Pinwheel

by

Marni Ludwig

A thesis presented to the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Washington University in
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Being born is going blind.

–Townes Van Zandt

CEREMONY FOR A SPHERE

Since the accident, when asked to sketch your face
I draw a wheel.

Nights, I balance an egg on a spoon
and close my eyes to the questions:

If I have complained of isolation
amid the din of men
cutting themselves with spokes,

if I have walked beneath a cul-de-sac
of stars crawling their bowl,

toward a hive which swarms
intact in the amniotic dark,
not prone to constellation,

where I meet myself again
in the grove of ruined thinking,
ready to be maimed
with a lemon in my mouth.

AFTER THE GIRL

After the girl
with the handful of mice
and a tiny silver guillotine leaves,
we lie down in the dark.

You tell me last night
you dreamed you wore
a beard. The night before
you drowned but did not sleep.

On the screen behind us
citizens of a great island
build the streets
toward a difficult sky.

On the next screen
a blind girl steps
before a shining faucet
and lets her dress fall.

LITTLE BOX OF COTTON AND LIGHTNING

The best guards are placed
outside the gate to nothing.
Well, I've nothing left to take.
Shot up the last with spit
and a shoelace.

This year is last year's:
 a. best case
 b. worst case
You're a good horse.
You can sleep standing up.

The birds sing: systole,
diastole. The puppeteer
appears to be wearing
the same outfit
as her marionette.

All bets & metaphors are off.
Leaning on the wrong
neighbor's door,
the cards tell you to knock,
so knock.

A REENACTMENT

Blame a man's hand for the window.
His crime's a sheep, his fine a lamb.

His secret: that he's joyous.
We risk a kill for candy and a dollar.

This dust's a dime, the dog, a quarter.
Manhattan means we drink too much.

We luck to run, and cook to fuck.
The stars are bears. We outswim the Hudson.

Greed's no river to live by. Or to die.
That's fear. A good deed meets us on the corner.

By what small margin we escape and look up.

HUMAN COMPASS GARDEN

Land is kinder than water.
We bury parts of boats in sand
that they may be received in heaven
as a prayer for rain. Desert is a myth.
There is only sky and the shock of hearing
your own recorded voice played back.

The highway follows the river down.
Crossing's a lucky thing, late at night.
We swim in our clothes. We love
our enemy and this city in its infancy.
The magic is, it's dark by six and
that stranger has always known you.
A ladder and its shadow lean.
Your keys are cold in your hand.

CEREMONY FOR LYING COMPLETELY STILL

I say I had my accident,
after which two men ran
into the street while I counted
the number of steps it took
to get to where the door hurt.

All drawings are by thieves
with beautiful hands.

All silences are accurate.

I like a mask. I like music.
When I get sick I take my logic
with a spoon.

Did you notice if he was wearing gloves?
I've come to trust only questions.

At approximately 2 pm I was lying face-down
on the floor, asking nicely for an afternoon.

BROOM

My floor is shining because it is fire.
My ceiling is shining because it is air.

You are sweeping the future ahead of you
like luck. It's ok, no one's listening

to the laugh track of your life.
The sick call in their jokes,

but they remember them wrong.
There's the one about the three stick-men

and their drinks, and there's the doctor
who knocks but never enters.

The sick call in. You lick your cobwebs
and the corners glitter. Everyone cares

though there is no one who is clean.
I am not compelled to help,

resting as I am, on the doorjamb
of your perfectible world.

CLINIC

How beautiful we are in the afternoon of hands.
We trade our shadows for days
of suddenness. A bird got in my blood,
a tricky one, with a split tongue.
Now it doesn't get dark
because you shut your mouth.
There's too much water here.
I wish you were dead
or near. My paper slippers
glide down the shining hall
where my friends on the walls hang
their names. The shift clock blinks.
I don't think I'll get better. Outside
itinerant clouds nod and the lilies
twist in their beds.

AGAINST MEDICAL ADVICE

A switchblade sun is shining.
The humans are outside
selling feelings into things.

CEREMONY FOR THE CLOSING OF THE MOUTH

You and I were having a fight
in the street where we fell in love
with our accident.

Several artful lampposts instructed me:

How to point.
How to spin the lights.
How to sit one chair away from myself
in the auditorium of mistrust,
where a piano lid crashes
inside the stomach.

You taught me to connect
music to the will,
though I did not say loudmouth,
busy as I was bending
spoons that were the exact shape
my pain made.

AMONG THE LIVING AS AMONG THE DEAD

A walk, a nap, a photograph
of a life raft. How do you cure
memory? Choreograph the sky
and the birds all turn to plastic bags

or else they smack the glass.
Say something less true
but with one true face,
like a statue. Say something else.

I sold the future for a second past,
told the snow my name
but it knew. White logic,
black spoon, scare tactic,

nodding out in a hospital bracelet
humming some third harmony
you shouldn't sing
a kid. You shouldn't sing.

You should step aside.
The birds hit back here,
where want is an event
visibly breathing in its sling.

You died twice in a lace dress,
in a folding chair,
you didn't hear the door.
You died twice, the trickle

of your smile sinking
like a miracle as you
let your eyes adjust.
You died in a lace dress—

the story is an excuse
for the voice. Begin again
the chorus of your carefully
reordered childhood.

EXPERT ON SHADOWS

Red, and the terrible shapes
of animals sprung
from their dark course
beneath the river.

A few yards back of the house,
fed by storm.
Everywhere the dirt shows
traces of its making.

Every fox was once a kindness.

I forget you upon our first
meeting, or never. If never,
you are nearer,
whom I love.

Each day I wake from a dream
of stones. Nights I walk
and repeat
for myself the prayer against shame

I copied down.

CIGAR BOX

There's no difference between women and men.
The characters all disappear into the plot,
except for the French girl hiding her canary
in a ukulele. They both sing at weddings.
They have always shared the same body.

We agree athletes get into the best accidents.
You'd prefer to be deaf and too warm
and your mother insists you were calm as a child.
In school I was good in death and math.
I practiced your name on yellow scratch paper.

THIMBLE

I am tapping at your picture
window. You are sewing
yourself into the bed sheet.
The world is held together
with rags. Cross-stitch of sun
in a thin season – tomato
pin-cushion in which to stick
your discarded dream
of a garden. I am dumb
as a hem, a tin can
watering a snakeskin.
I hold only a little liquid.

CEREMONY FOR A SUSIE

Pretend you know yourself.

Delusion, your twin,
is whittling the sky to a toy

and it is a comfort not to feel
small. While you are dying

you are dragging your rattle-doll
through the bright kennel light

of an irrefutable moon.
She and you add up to one.

She follows you around
until your body is a thing

she can predict and don't you fit
nicely in her onesies and posies?

She precedes you

into the stairwell where you grasp
the narrowness of your life

with a cradle for a handrail.

BRaille

I knew better.

The one star, a fixed gear
grinding over the paralytic lake

like a keepsake. Would you rather
be dead than bored? Dead
than loved? I would.

I held my lily head.
I went swimming with horses.
Afterward a faint rain troubled the water.

The secret of the blind is the hand.

I strung paper flowers.

A two-fingered breeze spun
lavender, as from the weather-vane.

LINES FROM A SOUTHERN AIRPORT

I.

I would not take off my gloves or my coat.
It was hot and I hated your small town.

II.

The future makes us liars.
Night is how we are to appear.
I know a place to play the phonograph.
No one else will hear.

III.

I wake and fix my shot and look at you.
I wake and fix my shot and look at you.

The heart beats its clinical name for slip,
a salt lake skipping its best ghost.

No one dreams herself empty-handed.
I steer the red bicycle I rode as a child.

PARADE

I.

All the songs about the electric chair
sound like love songs. Weather

carries our Chevy to sea,
merrily, merrily, merrily.

A mariner with a stand-in moon
can't quite stomach daybreak.

Two sisters twirl batons on the lawn.
The older holds the younger's hand.

We raise our keys to a thunderstorm
by kite, track time on our arms

religiously. Control is comical.
The cineplex screens the worst meal

of our childhood. Anchor on your dress.
Only the waitress was meant for us.

II.

Every waitress is meant for us. Every meal
is final. The condemned make perfect guests,
light our comets with kitchen matches.

We say dead, but mean incarcerated.
A child's story: father disappeared,
not mother. She's still a homemaker
in Illinois. The jukebox sings Surrender

and the regulars listen. Gardener
is a gravedigger, plants our ice skates under
the elderflower. Snowmen make us dream
of summer. Picnicking ruins everything.

Scarecrow, distant isn't shy.
Hands their own graspy animals.
Your room and my room are not the same.

III.

Welcome home, intrepid weatherman.
We are struck by lightning and now we play
piano prophetically, with both hands.

Skywriting makes me feel like a fake human.
Empathy is a lie. Forever lasts 24 hours
in the sun of the abandoned flashlight factory.

Blinking at the map, dreading the future
wholeheartedly, happy birthday, windy
helicopter. Good luck, smoke.

An ocean liner the length of a full city block.
Directions scrawled on the paper hanger
of a dry-cleaned shirt. They're predicting
ordinary cold. An umbrella opened and I died.

IV.

It wasn't raining. It was remembering.
A rocketing back to a chillier sphere,
trapping lightning in a mason jar to exclude
the world. I was astronomically empty.
The robot microwaved dinner nightly.
Kissing a good, round zero in the planetarium

never made anyone an astronaut. Plant a time
capsule under the welcome mat, blow a birthday
cake into orbit. Moon podium, dead satellite,
the physical feeling of falling back
into favor. A novocaine sun stares down
the horizon, rehearsing its line in the sky.
Where I am flying it is yesterday.

V.

Don't shiver. It's only your father's
halogen arm searching for cavities
between your stuffed sheep and baby teeth.
What's a way to keep the mouth safe?
The answer's numb. Insert two thumbs
inside the cheeks, pull a doll out of
a bloody smile. (She is mine. I won her.)
I use a ruler to cut her hair.

He'll love you especially well
when you're sleeping. You'll get
especially used to it. There's pretty gauze
around the trees. Bite down
on the sun. Rinse your nightgown. Spit.

VI.

Rabbit-light, rabbit-light, in the night, dense
with chase. A trick for panic is to bite
the sun-side of a hunting-knife.
The trick for dark is to hop
a fence. My teeth were keen.
The forest swooned. The trees,
like scars, were concentric
in their listening when we set
the meat into the traps.
It's better to be caught than wait.
Better to wait than run. I hid a rifle
in the tall grass. I pinned
an ear to sleep's black hutch.

DYING SO A SCENE MAY BE REPEATED

If it's four, it's six.
We've not slept.
What I would say now would be
too clear for this light.

The streets we walk
lose half their shade
with morning.

This won't be settled.
Still, when night comes
we bend

like railwaymen pitching
sand toward the last
blood of a jumper.

FERRY

Are you feeling anything?
Are you forgetting
your breathing?
It's your river,
running coldly.
It's your star
coldly following,
saying thank you
for the anchor,
good moon, good
moon falling down.

Drowning looks like sleeping.
The quiet, a comfort,
the lighting, pleasing,
a weak rain beginning,
but nothing trying, no
nothing too terribly heavy
upon your head.
They were pebbles,
but I called them stones.
I forgave them. I tucked them in.
I kept them with me,
counting slowly, as we
put the boat to bed.

BLACK WHISTLING

It's not listening, it's behaving.
Winter spent acting out
an igloo, a paper plane
doing something pedestrian
with the wind. A man
leaves early in the morning.

You have to dream away people.

The elation of an empty room,
pineapple upside-down,
like watching privacy.
Keep quiet, tortoise.
I'll tell you about yourself.
The star on your shell is mine.

You were a submarine once, you sank so quickly.

CONFECTIONARY

The bird that landed on your chest
meant you'd died for a second
time. All you ever ate was sweets.

The reticence of a brick house.
Who cares what flowers are for,
selling jigsaw puzzles door-to-door?

Life without relief.
Layer cake mystique
telling secrets to the tongue.

The canary is a quandary.
We're happy to be lemon, happy
to be home, yes, but mostly no.

EXURBIA

All the old stars
appear redder than they are.
The soldered cars of the train
unwind identical and black.
There were fourteen neat hitches
Now a dim light to count.

In the dream I have of her
crying, the front lawn
seems small from the window.
Fate is for the dumb.
That moment, for the dumb.
The yard and night turn
away from each other
like twin bones of the wrist.

PILL BOX

Every wife is a still-life.
Here I am with the vacuum,
my good arm reaching after time.

Half the apple tree is blossoming.
A quick lark shakes a branch.
A headache can be beautiful.

Little doll murdering her chores,
how alike you look in the photo
of you and your father.

How agreeable you are,
lying cold on the bathroom floor
thanking your mirrors and corners.

IRON

What I see in you is nothing
fitting. The curtains torn down
for pleating, the trees outside
the window curling in at their limbs.
The earth is flat, believe it
when you sweat, when you sit
on the step, kin to a black burn.
If you can't sleep upon stopping.
If you're closed at the throat.
I'll be waiting with the winter wool,
pressing your eyes to neat creases.

ORCHESTRINA

It's spring again in the ballerina's room.
The fixed stare of a flower behind the ear
and a pirouette into a red sunset.
Blue only brought the sky down.

First position: I admire an ankle.
Second: you hug your legs.
She's undone at the cotillion,
a swan for no one.

A little pretty music for the mouth,
very quiet amid very white.
Composure is not a mirror.
She points a slipper into the lake.

REFRIGERATOR

I am liking you leaning in
for yogurt and morphine.

You've decided to die again.

–and the milk ticks
off the blue seconds
at your wrist–

–and the eggs hum
to the insect
in your chest–

One is frightened
and spins all night
in its carton.

Tell me now how you love
to look at your life
in pale yellow light.

THE PARTY

A woman opened a window. The trees in the front yard had grown in the dark. She prepared as if for a storm. She bought water and liquor. She moved the furniture. She worried over the dog. She began the music with a song written by a man she met once, who once called her from the highway. After that, someone else saw to the entertainment. The guests wandered between rooms, exclaiming over the food she had set out. She knew it to be ordinary. She walked to the upstairs bathroom and washed her face and hands. The air clicked on in the room below her. A strict, white flower was the favor.

CEREMONY FOR A BYSTANDER

Listen, I am returning to where you are.

Wisteria, wisteria,
asleep on the stalk,
show me how to keep
the mouth soft.

Inside, wasps

are building cornices in the dust
and not one accurate place
in the silence.

EVERYTHING IS A HAT

Your wife,
a teacup
rattling in her head
the night you wore her
out to the banquet.

The moon,
a chipped tooth
confused
with the room
you died into.

Sleep,
like a black
kite soaring
from your wrist.

Sleep,
lying prone
in the family
position.

The bird
that married
your thumb.

The rain
that began in June,
in a photograph
I took to look
exactly like you.

DAY CHOIR

A room where you went to listen
to carillon. A white-walled room
to rest in. Breathing is its skin.

Where was my house when all I was seeing
was smoke where was my house?

The phone rings. It ties its shoelaces.

I worry about my neck.

In the walls I hear anesthetists in their coats
and the nicker of a black horse. Then the sticks come,
wearing their drummer's uniform.

Winter is hovering over and so all I am doing is picking up
winter's clothes. Wool is its own
animal and feeling
and bell.

I alone cut the muffled white sheep.

A dial tone.

MUSEUM GARDEN

One who painted light, and the other, a grave.
Each time I mistook understanding for love.
Ditch, ditch, the rapture
in a square. The stone horses canter
toward an immaculate green. A martingale
to tie the head, and the old, umbilical fear.
Break me down slow, follower,
with the calm eyes of a statue.
Where do you go to remember winter
and were you ever warm.

GYMKHANA

My white horse lay twisted in the grass

while attendant white flies traced figure eights
like the habits of sadness.

Flea-bitten one, it rains in the barn

and now where will we sleep?
With the false stops.

That old comfort, inertia, the chore of standing up
in the stirrups.

A loudspeaker calls my number to the far field.

I'm not worth saving.

Bright ribbons loll their tongues at the fence line
and the coffin bones turn.

IN THE KINGDOM OF SHADE AND SILENCE

I trusted her. I wanted him.
Winter showed itself
as a symptom.
I took myself down
the path of needles,
the path of pines
to consult the woodsman
blacking his boots
behind the woodshed.
He had painted the trees.
There was blood in his hair
when he said
without looking at me
the one word
that would annihilate all others.
Then how did I walk on—
my skirt of starlings
kicking in the wide, white field.

CEREMONY FOR THE LYNX

High up in winter, I do not feel
a cage is my enemy. It is me.

Among the shadows and evergreen,
trap after trap lies empty.

I record my location every half hour
until I am elsewhere.

Elsewhere,
I am greeted warmly.

When I am starving
in spring I am not

required to be present
at the loss of appetite.

The way I am moving my hands
over my mouth they will say

I was incredibly cold
and pure until hunger ruined me.

VOTIVE

One who watched the sea go out so far
he lost sight. One who swept
the grass to keep from drowning.
What you thought you had you never did.
Be glad. The old dread tends its watch-fire
in the beds of placid children.
Wherever the water stands, whatever is inside
the star. Be kind. Everything I fear
is green and then green burning.

PETITE

The author wants you
to be interested in her nature.

The plants can be viewed as furniture.
Yes, the room must be this warm.

These are the largest tigers in the world.
These caterpillars once were cats.

They like for us to pet them
but not for us to stare.

They like us to be silent
as in honor, as in hour.

MERMAID PARADE

We have come back from breakfast with our dead
who no longer seem to enjoy our company.
I would say what I did
but prefer to watch with envy,

Coney Island vanishing according to plan.
The sun setting west in a game
of chance. Sex is the same
as a swim in the ocean.

I wish you slight misfortune
and a self-prescribed sleep disturbed
by dreams of immaterial lobsters.
I hold your place in line

and your hand at the parade.
Already you are at my side
with a little paper cup of water.

PARALLAX

I can't swim in my condition.

Say the sand is discarded by the sea,

The flowers you loved were weeds.

It hurts to be right, a slight need satisfied.

The dead kick a ball around the yard.

The living remain wedded to their paths

Like rooks. Once I took a dandelion

For granted, with some sun.

It is possible to be sick with intuition.

I seem to be leaving, but still I am looking.

CEREMONY FOR A STEEPLECHASE

Face down in the sun you can say you followed an animal
into the sun. We were having a conversation
about her pain. Bobbin and Pin, first in line,
and then the other ponies trailing behind, mending
their shadows by the little coughing light of dusk.

And the birds dropped in our laps...

How could the sky have forsaken us after we made it
small, to match our faith, and rode it
so purposefully into the breezeway.

From the east, you shall hear the call of seventy pentecostal hoof-taps.
From the west, the haystack whispers, *slow learner*.

Once I lost the use of my arms.

It was the only time I felt a kindness toward myself.

As for despair, I've learned to sit with it,
to arch my back and sink
the weight into my heels.

Every night I oil the saddle.
Every night I spit onto the torn bed-sheet,
rubbing concentrically until I can find you
lying in the grass, drinking at the mouth
of the river of an inner ear.

SECRET

I dreamed I swam in a public park
while leather-beaked ducks
ate black bread at the edge
of the cool water. I was afraid
to feed them. I was afraid of the sun,
which showed me the original image
of myself, floating on my back.

A dog barked and then another dog
raised its head. I feel I deserve to die
if I have made a mistake. Underneath
the lake: bird music, cold sky
swimming up to meet my hands.

NOTES

Among the Living as Among the Dead: thanks to Carl Phillips for the title, which is from Rilke, by way of Nietzsche.

Parade: is inspired by Robert Frank's *The Americans*. In "VI" "rabbit-light" is from Wallace Stevens' "A Rabbit as King of the Ghosts."

Dying So a Scene May Be Repeated: The title is from Borges' "The Plot."

Ferry: "They were pebbles/but I called them stones" is from Beckett's notebooks.

Everything Is a Hat: is inspired by a documentary on the life of Genesis P'orridge.