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CHARCOAL

By

JASMINE DREAME WAGNER
BA, Columbia University, New York, NY, 2000

Thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in Creative Writing, Poetry

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Approved by:

Dr. David A. Strobel, Dean
Graduate School

Greg Pape, Chair
Department of English – Creative Writing Program

Karen Volkman, Co-Chair
Department of English – Creative Writing Program

David Moore, Co-Chair
Department of English

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CHARCOAL

Chairperson: Greg Pape

Co-Chairperson: Karen Volkman

Co-Chairperson: David Moore

CHARCOAL is a book of poems.

For my parents

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CHARCOAL

BALLAD PAST MERIDIAN

The waste we made of the museum
that day in Owl Park, watching soldiers
crest on the ridge. Your father's holding

company, his soldered wire, spooled
thread—how articulate, how schooled
his ashen industry as you inherited it.

You soured in the unlikely hawthorn,
Owl Park a black snake against the barges:
China Shipping, Nippon Yusen, they

ghosted into the Narrows. Gone to gravel,
the bracket wall a blanket of swordgrass,
bindweed and paint, stripped blank, then

excavated in the nocturne of the autoclave.
We slow-danced in its resin. Once, entrain
to Owl Park, we gazed upon the oily bilge-

water, upon the possibility of blaze and now,
we blaze. We love ourselves best. Owl Park
another world now, and you in your pallor

of placard lakes, your father's Michigan
Railway, pill advertisements and candy
wrappers like glowworms in rotten logs

along the pier, where old Greek men fork
their catch of mercury and lead, warm their
hands at the mouth of a stomach of sand

and plunge their cans into the tarmac.
Winter engraves its borders in shellac.
We own no virtue. Our barges adrift

in historical process, roads reduced
to trucks tarrying, our childhood
grown lax in the wisteria.

GREENPOINT TERMINAL MARKET

Follow the yellow line to
the yellow weeds in their
yellow ditches: gasoline,
one rosebud match to spark and
burn like a television.

Paranormal glow of the
Citicorp Center, aqua-
marine of a caged parrot.

Ruin is a cultured pearl.

Rain comes as requirement.

Requires we submit to
its loose, fluted memory
fluttering like a receipt

in the incision, human-
colored haze in the hollow
sector. Iron sleeves of drain-
age where pigeons in wire-
less slate skies return to roost,

lucite-winged moths narrowing
beneath sodium streetlamps

dim

as the maples in the park
turn
on—

Sleep without memory, our
ruin.

Past deferred from becoming
passed, from emerging legend
in the foreground of trauma,

ruin itself is traumatic.

Its fingerbone begs us to
unearth its contusions from

corridors of lightning-singed
Christmas holly. Ruin is
forensic, identity
as many forms of erasure

as preservation: coin-toss
distribution of spiders,

dandelions in bluegrass
where bulbs of black brands curl from
milkweed sown in sow-thistle:
waxmyrtle coils, smokestacks

titanium light has cursed
with specificity, each
raw wire, each cinquefoil
chrysanthemum equally
alight in terse, unrehearsed
testimony that marks their
place as site.

—from the northern
whirlpool of Spuyten Duyvil
to the southern breach of time-
lapsed barges' haul, the Narrows,
the East River under gold-
leaf, rippling, oil-steeped welt
coal-thick with potential, its
pillars of pyrite, jagged

skyline hazardous with zinc,
cadmium, thallium, lead,
benzene, silver, osmium,
nickel, carbon monoxide,
sulfuric acid, rubber,
asbestos, arsenic and
fiberglass—

—from the open field to the
curtilage, to the tag-pocked
hull, stripped with chemical wash,

from desire to rumor

from dynamite to fiber-
optics, from arson coeval

to vagrant, to armed guard, to
hex, to diode, to copper-
barred bales of synthetic knits,
polyester butterfly
collars, silk crêpe ruching, shirred
crates of marjoram rot

burnt—

In the end, a fly dies as
flies die.

Our rust, not our fear
configures the elements.

Ruin is a misspelled word.

Our ruin comes second-hand,
like clothes.

Radium buried
in an ingrown nail.

Footprints
like neologisms we
cannot reverse.

Ruin is
a cask of flies.

Neither dead
nor alive, the mass.

In the
end, a fly dies as flies die.

When a body moves within
ruin,
the body becomes
the impasse within its core.

The ruin becomes a cask.

The body becomes a cask.

All that becomes,
becomes a
cask.

All that becomes,
becomes
a core.

Ruin is not meant
to be amplified,
though it
is bought and sold as more,
more.

When a body moves within
ruin,
the body becomes
remains.
Not meant to be named,
a body is not a name
for a body is not meant
to be covered.
Ruin is
not memory,
though it steeps
its ward in memoriam
more often than not.
Ruin
is naught and knot and ø,
as
ruin should and could and ought
and when in the scabbard of
kite and cot and caught,
is wrought.

Dust filming the lung of a hepafilter. Clotting the blades of a white plastic desk fan. Red lettuce leaf, heirloom tomato. Cloud oil, cider vinegar. Satellite in a stone statuary. Drywall between iron pylons accreted along McCarren Park. Meridians of cathedrals cached under glass atria. Asterisks. Camels along the Dead Sea. Bauhaus. Dried mackerel strung from coarse hemp twine. Green vireo born with one bent wing. Cellular transport. Cubed styrofoam. Charcoal.

NOISE

Our songbirds evolved to migrate
nocturnally, when predators
retire and winds die, but now,
in the sky above the Tribute
in Light, whorl in the white floodlit
condensation. Smog, particle
suspension, whatever the news
calls the stale fractal void, birds flit
between its bright spokes and the
dark site, impossible to track
any one bird for any length
of time as they coil, blind and
wailing in the bold false dawn that
lured them inside the fingerprint.

THERE IS NO PART OF THE BODY
THAT HASN'T BEEN PIERCED

Blessed are the ego mules, for they are shod with their own lead.

Blessed are the muckrakers, for they will fork the Milky Way from its gravel
to delight in the gravel.

Blessed are the red beep of backing van, salty crinkle of amnesiac
radio, crow squawk, clear whisper of HVAC, for they contain, at once,
the variegated grasses of now.

And blessed their nonharmonic intoning, for blessed are the radical, the anarchist
prostitute, insurgent
motorcycle, unhinged trapdoor of a tarantula's oubliette, a fight
not to forget one's silk net longings.

Blessed are the tattooed starlings and nautical insignia, for beneath them,
only water.

Blessed are the executives, for they rise, cyclic, with the sun
and will not know the surety of a wingbone
pressed against an eggshell
and will set.

Blessed are the politicians, for are they not unlike an eggshell.

Blessed are the bankers, for they are starving.

Blessed the egg of a heady swamp, umbilical gar, spun sugar
cottonmouth maw, for they are not unlike
the fog that cloaks them.

Indistinct
seep of habitat with no beginning, no end.

Blessed are the firecrackers, cherry bombs, snapdragons, for they are
the waterworks, sweaty palms, calendulas of sudden vision.

Blessed are the stars, for their asterisms
give earth its philosophers.

Blessed is the sun, for it gives
earth its feather headdress.

Blessed is the sun, for how is it not unlike a feather headdress
on a mule, a Milky Way, a red beeping, a silk-bound door
tattoo leading down into the firecracker wingbone.

Bless the manic sun, for how is it not a stoplight, an executive.

And the moon, for how is it not a purple thistle
exploding in the rain, and how is it not the sun's
campaign for better living through electricity.

The epidermis unhooks its canvas and tugs, for beneath
the starlings and shooting stars, there is
no blood, only grain.

The epidermis reveals its blank page
like a prostitute, for tender needlework can whittle purple thistle
whistling from a gravestone.

Ambulances are foaming, bless them.

Muskets of cattails with hunting caps, bless them.

The obese, the obtuse, the large and awkwardly-shaped,
they wade in shallow water, bless them.
And bless the tiny, the shrewd, the scrawny,
anorexic and grim, for they have persisted in a wooded thicket.
And bless the purveyors of TiVO and 5 AM long-distance,
for they have taught us to moonlight as secretaries of shorthand endurance.
And bless the clover-picking baby with the cleft-palate, may she emerge
from the bassinet ambidextrous, with swans for hands.
And bless the gossips, bless their colicky violins,
wet and pink as roast beef in their vertigo of infancy.
And bless the hail on the tin roof, screech of a March robin, dial tone,
for is not the return of a familiar tone
a memory of a tone
in all of us

the farther we live on into ourselves,
the farther we look back onto ourselves,
the harder we have to listen, so bless

each peach, each nectarine, each apricot pit, each fifth metatarsal of each left hand, for the light
of a star never stops but travels until it rings
in its sweet dark center.

Place a penny beneath your tongue, taste the green almonds, bless them.

LISTENING FOR EARTHQUAKES
IN A SHADOW ZONE

The moment the brass button
vanishes, the lemniscus
of lemon root turns leitmotif.
A white towel dries on a hook.
In cirrus, sycamores
loaded with minutes. A blue orchard
sinks its anchor and steeples.
A name for a zipper is closed to the soul.
Trapped in a room of red sand. A blue
pill capsule lifted into a train
window becomes a lemon
the way wind in lemongrass harbors
blue light. The way a rifle
smells of pink snow and tobacco.
The way howls affix ravens to
glyphs. Given Lepidoptera, Lepidoptera
dehisce. Given index, a desert
aerially strafed. Given alphabet,
a gray flag of rain, a tenement
strewn through it. In a life,

one pours milk
into a crystal vase, naked
as a number. In a life, pines
devour starlets. Sand
whipped in a hurricane
lamp. Given forgiveness, Lepidoptera.
Given forgiveness, black mulberry
lipstick scrawled
the flight of cranes in a train window.
A church organist pens the word *parasite*
on her wrist. Maples blow
into orange cysts. An autistic
predicts the fall of a black trick.
By the time words have been liberated,
books will know the absence
of books. Will know white
annuals. Uranium tailings. Bullfrog eye
clotted with maggots. In a life,
a lime, a rivet. A camera
tucked into a spine.

BLACK WATER

a nightcrawler
must sense a shadow

jay flew the river until the river ran out
could have flown further

never reached

the source

once

a thunderstorm
followed a stream
to a point in the earth
where water swelled

watch

factory
paper factory
paper clip
airplane spoil
industrial soap
sanitizer
factory spit
toxins in

the aquifer now

it storms every saturday

even milkweed
are missiles

 desire
microphones

 gowns

to sleepwalk
barefoot

silt

black ants casings
of oak buds

dandelions larger than sacagewea dollars
glinting pin
 yellowjacket

broken window wings

stones green
as grenades in
aspen blades

take spring an even year

bricks blue at dusk

turn the throat of the
weeping cherry

X
RHODODENDRON, MARIGOLD

X
BULLETS LACE METAL LIKE SALT THROUGH ICE

X
AN ANOREXIC SUCKS A BLACK LOZENGE



X
CONVULSE IN BLACK TULIPS

X
PICNICS CARVED IN GREEN TABLES UNTIL CORRECTIONS

X
BEACON BOUNDS ITS PRISM ACROSS THE WINTER SKY



X
CHOCOLATE DOG TAG

X
DELPHINIUM MOURNS TAIWAN

X
MORMON TABERNACLE CHOIR: *BURNT LAND!*

X
HAPPY BIRTHDAY, SACK OF SCREWS



X
ORDNANCE IN A ZIPLOCK BAG

GLASS

1985 THE BOOK OF SAND

“The fear of infinity is a form of myopia that destroys the possibility of seeing the actual infinite, even though it in its highest form has created and sustains us, and in its secondary transfinite forms occurs all around us and even inhabits our minds.” –Georg Cantor

—Yes, Principal, I have ventured out of bounds.
I twisted the swing until the steel chain broke
and the globe has come unscrewed
on account of my wandering hands.

I was only playing kickball when
I found the patch of five-leaf clovers
and traced their origin from center field
to the drainage pipe at the edge of the cafeteria.

We are forever climbing, as Principal
of Gainfield Elementary you should know
the limits of the convoluted metal bars,
the diminishing span of the blacktop:

First the hyacinths, the broken tulips,
then the forsythia's yellow glow,
the hole razored in the chain-link fence
and the miles of ragweed to mow and mow—

BAY OF TALLINN

One direction tapered into the paved and salted, where crooks of ebony trunks curved out of cracks in the asphalt, bare branches black and hooked as though the cracks themselves had sprouted and domed the deepening avenue, the avenue leading southward, into the city. Where the path wandered northward, dead pines brushed their fingers against the elms' gnarled fists as the oaks snagged their neighbors' darkening vertebrae. Above the rolling soot and snow, the natural world bristled in a skeletal glow. I turned my body from the winding and faced the wood, the stone wall, the copper gate gone blue where a hooded crow perched like a ball of ash, one garnet eye rolling back as the fledgling cocked its head.

It was here that the sidewalk diverted into a grove. Behind the copper gate, a man bundled in frayed tweeds bent like a stalk of wheat as he shuffled over a trail of ice-singed cobblestones. His ears were red coals, half-tucked into a fur hat, half-exposed to a wind that, beyond the wall, snapped the earth like a white blanket. The crow shot into a tree as the man approached. With one windburned hand, he unhinged the gate and hobbled through the opening, eyes fixed to the ground as though he hadn't seen the lever, as though the world itself were transparent.

His figure receded. The net of trees trembled. The sky hung low, matte as chalk.

I gripped the blue copper handle, depressed the lip with my thumb and felt the uneasy uncoupling of the lock. One metal joint whined as I swung the frame and slipped through, though the sound could have been my own exhale whistling through a nostril, or a sliver of a gale angling across a snowbank. Listening for the silver sound of metal or bone or ice, I heard only the rough, packing sound of snow beneath the rubber soles of my boots as I followed the man's footsteps in reverse. The shore lay somewhere in the distance, a green mineral scent sharpened by the late light. I stared up into the diffuse whiteness. The clouds had grown sullen, variegated in fluted shades like microcline feldspar where they jutted into the atmosphere, sunlight a lean trace of pyrite laced through the swollen opacity of the crystals—and at the base of the sky, the rusted tating of a Ferris wheel.

The amusement park had long ago fallen into disrepair. Metal sidings of roller coaster cars were streaked with deep brown decay, cracks spreading from seams, pressing up from the peeling primary hues of paint. Capsules of a tilt-a-wheel lay scattered in the snow, scrub brush zagging through the white coat of ground and catching in the crevices of the mechanics. A few stray footprints led to a chain-link fence that sagged in its attempt to isolate the park from its surroundings. I paused at the cross-hatching of the wire, observing the frost where it forked like lichen across a cube of concrete. Melt leaked from the crusted veins of urine, amber in hue and suspended in yesterday's sleet, pure odor preserved. I stepped back onto the pressed ice of the path and followed the wind to the water.

Sweat dampened my woolens and the nylon lining of my down coat. If cold were a state of mind, my own mind had pitched a black tent where days were short and dim and nights, prolonged and jagged, temperature just below the level needed to secure circulation in the skin and vital organs. Beneath my boots and along the dirt-marred snowfall, pebbles pockmarked the slush where a sidewalk drunk with thaw had folded into slumber. The pewter hairs of the grove thinned. Branches of the oaks bowed, sagging under the weight of their icicles, their crows.

Eyes narrowing in the spitting wind, I toed forward until my fists stubbed against a limestone barrier that separated the soil of the lowland from the water, a wall that barred the walkway from a sharp drop onto a bank of frost-sheathed ice, a fractured onyx expanse. At the base of the wall, along the icy ridge, a pack of mute swans and varied seabirds dodged and dove for scraps of bread that tumbled from the hands of a woman balanced on the edge of the escarpment.

The woman wore her platinum curls pinned under a mauve wool hat. Her coat was trimmed with ermine, her hands wrinkled in the dishwater light. She flicked crusts from a plastic bag into the churning of feathers. Large as sows, two swans had necks thick as the width of a human leg. Caked on the obsidian knobs knotted above their orange bills, debris hardened the faces they whipped like weapons as they lunged for food, for each other's backs, hissing like the ice beneath them. Dusk rendered the woman dark as limestone. Her shadow bloomed along the wall, a wisp-shadow of her plastic bag ballooning along the ledge, blurring with my own on the birds' mucked down, on the veinless black marble bay.

PORT OF MORROW

Gills of the fields devour black powders
in bone hours, in the dim aquarium dawn
as wicker slats of wind dimple the skin,
a canvas shift beneath the deadlocked
hemlock rattle. Black crabapple branch,
glass slats of a brass-gridded greenhouse.
Somnambulant silo sifting silver corn
flour, dealated husk of a lichen-baked
trail of 2-ton trailers stapled to the seams
of a crust of grackles cracking from a drum,
ale morning rippling deep on the tarpaulin:
a bound volume, a rust sash, this grist-
clouded gunmetal gild of the alder row.

CANDLEWOOD VALE

In November she will trade in the body.
Leaves will crust over the chassis.
A cricket will scuttle beneath the stove
as I stand at the frosted lip of the window
in this apartment where I spoil.
Scrolls litter the stairwells
in elaborate wooden spirals.
Already I am shaving angels from her lindens.

The yard is quartered by rods of mottled saplings
and a spread of butter-colored grass.
The garden has broken into a terrible rash.
Out in an unused birdhouse
the squirrels have already looted
the yarn from its breast.
Crows are swooping down from power lines
to rest on an overturned basin.
Someone is cracking a whip at a crippled
wolfhound's hips.

I do not watch the banquet pass from her muzzle.
It takes three men to prop her on a wire bed
and strip her mange
like a badland.
I am terrified of what history will rub out.
It was only yesterday
two spores rehearsed
in the hollow of my mouth.
I slid from my spoils
and drifted into the crabgrass
on the edge of the cul de sac.
No one will remember. Not even the almanac.

THEY CALLED IT HOG ISLAND

There never before had been conceived
a plan for the fabrication of ships
in such cold, silent deeps,

though by 1917, our need overseas
for troops, goods and guns required it.
There never before had been conceived

a manmade island, the possibility
of commanding steel or stone to rise from silt
in such cold, silent deeps.

The Army Corps filled the seeps
with black muck dredged in an enormous dig.
There never before had been conceived,

not even by early settlers, their felled trees
fused into dikes, such earthworks. Once, pigs
in such cold, silent deeps

in wood-bound marshlands roamed free.
Then the charcoal clip of machinery, cogs and rigs
as never before had been conceived
in such cold, silent deeps.

THEY CALLED IT DEVIL'S TOWER

In boots discarded along the darkening timber,
dandelion dun, calves as pitch as holes.
Was it mercury, was it a birch forest?
A Pyrex basin of scuttling silverfish plaque,
land. Where the sea floor lifted its mast,
they called it subsidence, called it reclaimed.
Cured, bronzed, declawed and left to thaw
to granite, driftwood sun, inculpable morning.
The shape of the island was a hoe, a roadblock.
A coast of a gown at the end of an awl,
a reef stalled as steed in the lineage,
plantless aside nigiri, orchis, flounder.
Gravel inlay of gloaming, pink-sailed archery.
Concentric pewter tines, parlor grass
bull-frames along a rock bay quarry-
louse. Whitewashed shag of infected vineyard.
Slope of evicted ailanthus, axial kitten heel
houndstooth to porcelain claw, clasped black
in flight. It came from linen, amaranth felled,
unfurled, its muss a thrust fist of plaster
and in one crag of balmy cauter, a fern
filigree of tradewind bucking its molt, basalt
of quinine and tonic, unmoored, aching to lee.

CHAMPION MILL

Variations on a field, Missoula, MT

there is a buoyancy to ice unencoded
there is a buoyant blossom in spectacle
no part comes naturally part is work
and the days work and the aphids
the telomeres and tentative wrist
a glass quality in them now
a glass quality in the snow
a windshield embedded with spectacles
bedazzled quotients of ice
a windshield withstands elements
blue windshield supplants a sky
hazed red with rumor smoky
clavicles of turbines
cavities design

hooks in the shoulder of a byway
old rumor unproved appendix
a buoyancy in the shifting gear
gearshift of manual transmission
in tape loop lupine cellophane
rumor backpedals down the highway
but what of drift of hint in shag and
what of green flies and what of redux
platinum sparkplugs and what of harts
of speculative fiction spooks coils kisses
and what of domain walls and monopoles
and what of the trowel used to contuse
this water to describe dance
as curve of pursuit

somewhere a landfill with its callus
of cold beryllium
measured wind with foil fan
rebar skewed to violet
somewhere a window painted pink
closed its ear
archaic torso of a mill
decorated like a war veteran
its red and yellow tags
black tape lip
mouth ajar lets
weather in
what would a geologist do
with a heart like this

a surface of a sphere is an approximation
a wily chaotic hoop of flagpole
a chimney stovepipe gyroscope caduceus
a shipboard compass computer
simulation a rotating plate of dust
and what of tibia of china and what lust
and what of siamese we
all a bit live a bit must
the brass quality of the gimbal
the brass quality of dusk
and what of radar
analogous to duel
of turbulence
of rust

blue is symptom of a deeper malady
two kinds of blue mesozoic pleiocene
neither intuitive neither dream
neither metacentric boundaries key
the violet blacklit landscape painting
its *nova totius terrarum orbis geographica*
its glittery theater of snowglobe
their fasciate obligate cartomancy
their theater of key with velvet rope
theater of scree of bruise of
wild unknowing wild
blackberry made bronze
by scarcity made barb wire
unable to uncrow

in deconstructing a minor key
in a popular book on an ancient world
from the hoover dam to cape canaveral
where do these stairs actually go
and why do black holes radiate energy
and why does this energy imply heat
and heat imply body and body
imply loss and why does slow loss
of heat suggest we evaporate slowly
and who does the black hole really love
and where does this aqueduct flow
and where do we store the silent
films no one screens anymore
and the end music why is it silver

go to field a periphery
go to a field with a friend
pass caricature paintings
past weed acrylic flint
and lay on your back arms spread
and lay in the black stink of park
earth convex against your harp
dirt flexed under mars
go without javelin corn or lens
and go without trial goal or fence
without the batsman will insist
without the batter will insist
and will assist
and will assist

what percent tungsten
percent lead
what lock shale of yellowcake
thread beams too damp to burn
pitch like a vent
somewhere a lack of firewood
strikes a blue match
somewhere a satellite seals
its mind cell by cell retires
its blueshift
sinks
in a drift
o what longing for drift
if there were no drift