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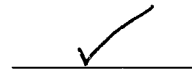
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PARALLEL TO SHORE

by

Alexandra Tinari

B.A. The New School for Social Research, New York City, 1999

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements


for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

The University of Montana

December 2005

Approved by:



Chairperson

Dean, Graduate School

12-21-05

Date

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PARALLEL TO SHORE

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When you transsume your own material, it has more pungency because it derives from what is your own. Such transsumption of language is like a mirror for you, since you see yourself in it and recognize your own sheep in a strange field.

Geoffrey of Vinsauf, *Poetria Nova*

When death comes, we take off our clothes
and gather everything we left behind:
what is dark, broken, touched with shame.

Linda Gregg, *The Sacraments of Desire*

WORK

It should be snowing
by now

but isn't.
Floes rub

beneath the bridge.
It is dusk.

Fish lie adrift
where water

still flows.
The truss rocks

its still spiders.
This is the point

of the iceberg. The colliery
glows.

I will call it

IN A HUSH

Birds have no genitalia, just two oval
orifices rimmed with mucus, held
by desire's seal in midair. I want
to be that small bird ensconced
within a bush trembling
with song. Or, more commonly, tugging
at the hard earth to bring forth seed.
Those I love are not remembered
for the ways I loved them. Nor are they
forgotten for the ways in which
I failed. A bird would have flown toward
the wiry black thread that held
my aunt's lips shut in death and tugged
until the string became something useful.
My aunt said a bird would sing to her
every morning, in the rain, in the sun.
It seemed impossibly true, her loving
something she had not yet found.

SHEEP IN A STRANGE FIELD

We yearned to be loved
by our fathers, but our fathers
were rising up. Though we tried
to wish rising into the opposite
of falling, our wishing stalled.
We had not nailed
even two pieces of wood,
we had never
picked ourselves up,
not even once,
without finding sheep
in a strange field,
without vegetable life
dissolving
amphibious
or pulverized.
When our fathers left us
in unfamiliar places
without a look, touch, or salute,
we remained more reptile
than bird. Rock hammered the first nail.
No rope; rope drags. So we staved.

EXCEPT THE WINGS, FLAPPING

The days were dark. Crows cried,
landed heavily on pines. If granted
a wish, she would have wished for doves
and monks in crimson robes. Not this dog
barking at the wind. Yet the world was still.
Only she moved and was moved. Secretly
she touched herself among the rye. Night
melted. Then morning broke. Everything
hardened. Darkness entered when she
woke. Dreams had been stained
with many-colored lights. At dawn
they froze beneath the day.

BEFORE MIRRORS

We longed to be dear
to our mothers,
but our mothers
were cloistered in static,
wed to enameled
interiors channeled by breakers.
Gulls tore pink moons
from crimped casings.
Though we seized
them, we did not know
the proper way to stake
our claims. Periodically
we caressed them,
tracking their grooves.
Shellacked,
on glass shelves, before
mirrors, we glimpsed their uneasy
reflections, hollowed
by a weightlessness
touch might subsume.

THE LETTER

I am not feeling whole yet, but I am tending
to my body. The weather is relentless.
I read and write all day then drive to the lake.
Walk deliberately to the water and enter.
I do not know what I hope to gain. I feel I am
doing what I know how. It reminds me of when
I was seventeen, dreaming of women, two willows
bowing, stars appearing. Perhaps poetry
asks me something that others do not.
Perhaps I am waiting to be asked. My clichés
I love as children. I cook, clean, wash, sleep.
Sometimes I go into town in the morning
and read a whole book over coffee. Sometimes
I stand in front of the lake, glistening.

MOVING

In the kitchen
cabinet's
dusty corner
I discover
a nest:
sock lint, dried grass,
scraps of red yarn,
cereal box labels
in curled strips,
tightly woven
by her long
golden hair.

It trembles in my palm, light
with slight
impressions of bodies.
Collecting
her things,
she must take it
but won't.

I've traveled
to a far
field:

dented pillow
clawed scalp uvula grapes

stunned creature
hunkered
to the trap's back.
Try to shake it out.

IN THE KARILIAN FOREST

More. Sergei watches his great-grandfather whittle white wood. Shavings curl and crest like waves. Under wood wasps, woodpeckers, the pile grows. He wants to dive into them. Tumble, not climb inside, just be swallowed. Without waiting Sergei grasps the knife, makes wood whisper. Other fallen things: wet straw, acorn wombs.

In Between. Because this is the way it is done, we pass it through fire.
Because this is the way it is done, we pass it through fire.
This is the way it is done.

Fishing. Whale. Winter, wind wails and wrinkles. Sergei borrows a line. The fish wrestles. Wears Sergei: woolen coat, woolen cap. There is nothing particular about fishing. Shall he carve antler or bone? Ice whistles.

In His Native Language. Wolves. Beyond his window, Cassiopeia, wing.

Careless Water.
Woman. Welter.

Winnowed beaver wood. Chisel, whorl-rubbed ash. Sergei watches his great-grandfather's wrist. The object inhales. Through fire, the object wakes.

Sound: wet willow wishes.

WATER

carving shallow scars no one sees i keep my toe underwater until

it's red, my foot so blue-yellow it's hers in the ICU—

neck : legs : fingers seize we bury

earth's earth fissure unbridgeable places consider

pocketing faded egg-blue river stones

asphyxiate that's the color her eyes

SHIP

The ship grew larger, steel sparkling, as it traveled parallel to shore. We stood on the warm sand, watched the massive black hull enter the familiar blue space, our private horizon. Repeatedly I waved until my mother said, "They've seen you, but you can't see them back." Her dead brother behind one of the portals, calmly observing the scrolling shoreline. I knew it wasn't true. He couldn't see me in my new tri-colored swimsuit, its smiling whale with orange button eye I twisted on its thread. With ESP I called (*come outside*) where I could chart his sunken figure, red swimming trunks, the end of his cigarette beginning to flare.

THE HANGING POEMS

I.

You'll return when she finally folds the limp sweater into her basket. Your sister guides needles through wool. They chatter like electric teeth. She tells stories about little you: small boat, wind at fifty knots, killdeer's stuttering defense, spring when orange golf balls unearthed themselves. Your mother reads aloud about men spearing seals or harpooning whales.

What was that?

Maybe a tree branch thrown to the roof, hungry raven's caw. I eye the bowl of clementines, taut pocked skin against gentian china. As she reached for one, your sister's opal necklace, its aerial weight.

II.

Did I say gentian? No, I meant the miniature blue windmills and weeping willows. The kitchen's oak table, its thickness. Your sister's *fingers* chattering, yes, your mother's silence after the wind died down. Her head tilted like a bird's, mouth cracked. Your collection of spotted salamanders, flattened by cars and dried in the sun, weeks spent piecing together the boxer turtle's shell, face green under the den's fluorescent light. Crystalline winters: stove choked

with mossy wood, father's cigar smoke fogging the porch. Moan of lake ice and spring river's rush. Woods we hauled blackberries out of. Picnics, rolling hills: rolling hills. We blew the insides out of eggs from your father's chickens, painted them, hung them in the Japanese maples before dawn. Before dawn, with sewing shears, your father snipped the fishing wire and watched each shell slip to the open earth.

III.

Winter we sang Handel's *Messiah* in the snug white church on the hill. Winter you hung yourself with boat rope in the crowded attic, bird droppings splattered the floorboards, your plumb-lined body part of some experiment, something we might have done together.

Hauling you down,
you not you, pounding hard on your chest : hands : mouth : compressions : breath

slight involuntary intake, faintly started heart. Not the dream in which you loose your kite above Benedict Pond, string taut until it drags you up, into

IV.

Stasis: not static, not a flicker under the dried out lids they bathe in saline daily, small puffs, clicks, and cheeps of the machines, skin's brittle sloughing, brambled hair overtaking the starched sheets, your mother cutting it

she's cutting

The metal furnace is fired up and it's spring, the switches are flipped, it's utterly cold and soundless

GHAZAL FOR DYING

Thick photographs from attic albums.
Calla lilies. What we the living mine.

A space dug into. Your clenched fists
held to your chest like a sign

Toward the ones who betray you.
You are deaf to our choosing the pine.

Still in a room, the stillness out loud.
The body will not be kind.

Now it's a room. Soon, just room.
Noon-day bells will chime.

There will be a casket, silk-lined
the craftsmen lacquer to shine.

They will make you hold a cross.
I've seen it done. Not for you, you're fine.

You're dying. The bees are singing.
Come get your bread and your wine.

We will crowd around you. Shroud you.
Come quickly, come swiftly. It's time.

ST. JUDAS HOSPITAL

Gloves, gas, scalpel, scope, laser, knife.
She forgot to survey her life

like they warned she would do,
instead tried to name the exact glue

they'd turned her mouth, limbs, her torment
to: was it crazy, Elmer's, rubber cement?

It bothered her she could not think
of it. It was then the room sunk

into darkness, she heard
voices murmuring. A bird

loose, she thought, they should let it
out. And then pain bit

into her mind, body blued,
she couldn't recall what she knew,

Floor moving, into recovery,
what crime

had she committed? And why hadn't
she cried before, that time at the pageant

when she'd forgotten her lines,
Hark I bring thee good tidings

yet stood her ground, stubborn,
impatient for the babe to be born.

MUSEUM

We get instead
a man on the bench
clutching his dick
like he can't find a place
to put his piss. Looking up
we catch the exact moment
rain begins. We feel
a little better. Inside,
circumcised irises
clatter the picture
window, clouds form
into chandeliers. Rain
now in gessoed strokes.
So dark we squint
to see into it. One
called "Oranges"
is a cat with its eyes
gouged out.

PETRIFIED

Place. Man climbs in.
To a faraway
It is my way of moving
Almost my voice. He is not a man.
His piece of flesh
Around my neck. He's secured
On my ankles, rope
He is wood.
The ironing board
His shirts across
Tight as
I pull the sheets
Some nights
On my thighs. He's rolling his die
Forces cold utensils
He
The winter sky. I become god
The moon in
I keep still as

WHOSE VOICE IS HEARD (Ho Nah'unpi Win)

It was the winter I stopped drinking.
The winter I shaved my head, removed
all my rings because they said
it would get so hot in there I would kiss
the ground, though it seemed ridiculous
in February on the South Dakota plains.
When we climbed Harney Peak
the weather changed four times. I heard
singing, drums, and the medicine man
leaned close whispering
It's the wind through the trees. He didn't say
those are our ancestors buried beneath
this mountain. The winter the ghost
sat at the table Miss, the youngest,
pointed to the empty chair, saying *It's uncle.*
He's hungry. It was the winter I fed
the uncle. And I fed the children. Fed
myself bricks of fry bread soaked
in commodity butter. The winter
I found my voice low and sure
between each word between each way
of saying. That winter I learned to love
the cold, though three people
died two miles from here, gauze
of frost around their open mouths.

PETRIFIED

A half-dead
man climbs in my bed
steals my warmth
with his cold, wet tongue. He
is not a man. He is arctic
blue. He is wood on my ankles,
rope around my neck. Some nights
I pull the sheets tight
as my father's shirts
across the ironing board. Still
he forces in. Places cold utensils
on my thighs. I keep still as
the moon in
the winter sky.

ARS POETICA

a blue more blue than
 azure then a cawing
 winding shadows across the land
an icy surface where
 ravens reflect but coiled words
 can catch in your throat
like mirrors

THE RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD

Beneath the sky's slow wake of retreating waves, we drive. A red-winged blackbird alights on every milepost. In September I was choked and raped atop a chapel's black piano. The strings vibrated when my head struck the keys. As I left my body, I remembered a pamphlet I once found between some books in the public library. In crucifixion, it said, tongue becomes sand, lungs grind flesh upon flesh, glands sweat blood. *Once sorrow has found its body*

We pass a cottonwood near a creek, a leaning barn, haybales. Three mares rear their heads, another gallops close, ribs showing. Blackbirds anchor the bales, pluck straw and lift away.

GENEROSITY: A STORY

One evening as a Western Meadowlark sang from the tip of a tall Norway Spruce, a woman selling magazines approached my house. Unremarkable in every other way, the woman wore a large brown patch over her left eye. After a perfunctory smile and nod she asked: Do I enjoy sports? Am I interested in improving my health? Do I want to keep up with the latest fashions? Her professionally inquisitive voice caused me to feel immersed in a tub of cooling Jell-o, its warm sweet smell enveloped me, until she paused and I was returned to the porch steps in my bathrobe.

"What happened?" I asked. She said her brother shot it out with his bb gun. She wears a patch out of common courtesy and (she admitted) to spare herself embarrassment. "Does it cause you any pain?" In fact, almost constant pain keeps her from regular employment; thus her appearance at my doorstep with subscription forms. I declined the magazines and went inside.

The woman returned the following week. This time, instead of selling *Good Housekeeping* or *Simple Living*, she described a procedure that offered the possibility of a new eye. Unlike glass, this prosthesis would be made from living tissue, integrate into the muscular system lining the inner socket, and be capable of responding to movement, light, and humidity. But the procedure was prohibitively expensive. Upon hearing this, I rummaged through my papers, shoved three thousand dollars into her hand, pushed her out of the house and bolted the door. She stood on the porch, mouth agape, her one eye blinking and deepening into an intense copper blue.

It was a Sunday when I sat in the still fragrant air by the narcissus, lost in thought, absent-mindedly watching the bulb flies at work. The yard was spongy from a recent rain and her shoes left gullies in the mossy grass. I first glimpsed something from a distance that seemed to glisten and melt into the low golden rays of late afternoon. Soon her bloated cheekbone appeared—then the eye itself, gluey, writhing, alive. Her nervous smile faded as she noticed my sickened expression. "It's....just..." she blurted out between sobs "awful...isn't it?!"

"Isn't it!" I said.

NATIONAL BOOK AWARD WINNER, 1962

Filling molds for plastic vaginas in the factory
he hears a voice dictating the poem and repeats it
quietly under the machinery's noise. He scoops
white putty into the hollowed shape, smooths
it down with a wide palette knife. The smell
burns his throat as he kisses the clay. He thinks:
I am making a vagina.

The molds are carried by belt into the firing device,
heated, pressurized, hand-inspected by men
who run thick fingers over them and stick
their numbers there. Black vaginas and brown,
some pea colored, some as white as china. He writes
the poem in his mind, work so familiar
he barely looks down while uttering words
removed from him and now—

his wife's doctor handles the model. He
demonstrates just so, says *You try it*. But she shakes
her head, slips the disk into her
snap purse. Home, she gets out her mirror.
Gets out her paints, palette, brushes, canvas.
Removing shoes, blouse, skirt, slip, stockings,
bra (reading his open manuscript: *Venus
of the marriage manual haloed by a diaphragm*),
she parts her hair and her lips.

SUMMER

required us / crush grapes / burgundy / drown
Japanese beetles / in soap water / protect
the house / slapped carpenter bees / with
tennis racket / for pennies / each with the blade
of a spade / we halved

cutworms / a regular
/ factory / we ate / in sideways sun / five
paper wasps / clung / to the steak tray / sucked
trimmings / caterpillars spun / enormous tents /
father door to door / sold homemade mini-bombs
/ gypsy moths / sunk into our hair / glass
reflections / robins smashed / we

RITUAL BEFORE MARRIAGE

You must acquire a live stick. Test it on horses, tap their rumps. If they rear their heads, gallop over the frozen lake, crashing through, knock the ground three times. The earth will shift and slide away from you, rolling under, sharpening the mountain's edge. Another peak forms at its foot. Clap your hands to juggle fire. Your tongue may fan the flames. Align your smaller breast to face the larger mountain. Wash your hair when thaw comes.

ATLAS OF AUGUST

["without clenching my jaw, flinching, or holding my breath" ~Greta Wrolstad]

As if this were any August [your stretched cornflower head]. Four deer leaping one by one over the low fence that separates our yard from the thick yellow field. They rip lush greenery off young tree branches. I woke [black blood and stitches along the right temple] to find the doe lifting and stamping its hoof. As if this afternoon the neighbor's children will return, scramble out of the beat-up Volvo, clamor [eardrum sewn in] on the swing set, climbing dome, inflatable pool. Kyle will wander over with gloves, a jar, and a cracked magnifying glass. You will open the wine and rock in the rocking chair while flipping through a picture book of Micronesia. Sometimes you take notes. I will pull [surgeons press scalpel to frontal lobe] grandmother's apron over my head and begin to slice onion until tears come and you finish the job. You mince the garlic because you do it best. Before the meal we sit in silence [burst on impact] while you recite a prayer memorized long ago and I pray to myself never god. Sometime during dinner the light and clouds will separate, you'll turn me by the waist and say *let's dance*.

Any August we'd be pressing flowers between thick paper Dee made in her bathtub last year. Piles of flowers categorized [not recognizable, you became so suddenly] by color, then we'd separate by shape. You'd affix the tiniest ones to miniature vases to give to the cousins' children. You'd teach me how to knit again knowing [both lungs collapsed] I'll forget by Rosh Hashanah. Any August we wait for the cloaked ascent of dark. Hear snakes along the path before we spot them. When magpies tear shingles from the roof and flickers wake us with their drilling I knock wearily to startle them away. We glue chips back onto our antique china plates [your toes, fingers, eyelids –]. I leave notes you answer. You slip your fingers through the blinds to touch morning's fog. I see your hand lingering there [the same purple-blue]. We're sitting up, peering out the window for a while.

SLOW

taste of coriander patient like sunrise in winter in falling over into her staying there
wet slipping on stuck leaves slicked to pavement October evening cold his feet up
above trees wiry fingers whipping her window into sleep sleep shhh loosening her
gown

months after scraped raw of possible
twin tissue an inside-out razor burn not the careful brushing of artifacts not sleek
deer on her way to the moonlit bathrooms into the dawn into the shell lifted from
Edisto porpoises like heartbeats arriving into and out of stained azaleas
afterimages of birth of quicksand.

The saline forest licking itself to its jagged edge

MONARCH

Feel the print of them the way her fingers touch interior marks mouth flutters over skin tongue answers each breast's raised gold on soft green silk each expulsion of breath a sculptured time pressure returned for pressure bits of wax woven into morning's mist entering the integument full sun on the warm lake of her. Body suspended. Wing-carried

SLIPPING A LITTLE

something in umbilical tubing the anesthesiologist's smile in narrowing light black
gurney's universe tipped back injections y and z razor buzzing numb skin urine
drain gas pumped organs part miniature camera slick metal scalpel cauterizing
tools parceling nerves splintering undertow palpable sometimes laser-light

noon-light more morphine shots
somebody's shushing

something crumbling crinkled before a wave dew-covered sapling shimmering
aspen transporting dull brightness questions swirling nausea sea here hello hooked
up quivering tide-line upon my body a body

FLORA'S EVE

You bring the simplest things. Binoculars to glimpse
Jupiter's moons, a glittering speck at nine o'clock.
Your O's shape the air, a bullfrog's roll, pond's
surface puckers a static kiss. We build a fire, set
marshmallows aflame with thin sticks poked
down swelling bellies of anthills (all entrances
sharply curved) but we quickly recall and blow
them out. As tree edges feather with space, distant
headlights project halos in the branches.

SOME PRINCESSES

have hard bottoms. Some rings dazzle more
in a dish of dried beans. If you whisper,
I'll draw close, pass swiftly in a long coat
with borrowed buttons. If you call another's name,
I'll catch. Maybe you're praying, already
forbidden me, maybe the winds won't buoy you far,
but bury you singing. If I sleep in your body's mark,
I'll dream of skuas in a storm, seafarer drifting,
cliffs bespangled with fog followed by
nothing. Once, everything lifted, even your
green eyes to mine. Your blouse. Your perpetual
rocking, our damaged lullaby.

ARROWS

There are no arrows no people there is no spiral
of smoke. Things are as they began.
They are falling together under the chaos of water.
Light hovers over the thin shoulder of the mantis.
An arc of space where everything is met. The shifting
of plates alters bodies.
There are no arrows no people

Tapestries of locusts ride the unpredictable air.
They will descend and search for the thickest
field to sustain them. They will ravish
the earth. Boulders dissolve into salt. The grinding
in the distance, the mind's ocean. They will
crawl up on limbs for a while. Survey their scars'
longing. Things are as they began

Notes

"In a Hush" is for my late aunt, Elizabeth Ann Gerace.

"Sheep in a Strange Field" was inspired and patterned after Kathleen Peirce's poem "Quiet Lines" from *The Ardors*. "Before Mirrors" continues the pattern.

"Except the Wings, Flapping" is patterned after Linda Gregg's poem "Slow Dance by the Ocean" from *The Sacraments of Desire*.

"The Letter" is in response to Linda Gregg's poem "The Letter" in *The Sacraments of Desire*.

Sergei of "In the Karilian Forest" is a fictional character, though inspired by the real Sergei Kulakov, an artist and woodcarver who learned the ancient tradition of carving spirit figures from his great-grandfather in a forest village of northern Russia.

"The Hanging Poems" are in memory of Christopher Burkhard.

"Ghazal for Dying" is for my late grandmother, Ida Nastro.

"Whose Voice is Heard" is for my adoptive mother, Margaret Grant. The title in parenthesis is in Lakota. It is also my name.

"Generosity" is in the style of Charles Baudelaire.

"National Book Award Winner, 1962" was inspired by the *New York Times* obituary of poet Alan Dugan.

"Atlas of August" is in memory of Greta Wrolstad.

"Arrows" owes much to C.D. Wright's poem "Humidity" from *String Light*. The poem was set to music by writer and composer Ramona Radonich.