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LIGHTNING BUG, AT NOON

A Thesis presented in partial fulfillment of requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts in the English Department, The
University of Mississippi

by

JONATHAN R. VEACH

May 2016

ABSTRACT

This manuscript of poetry explores, or seeks to explore, the role non-human nature plays in human imagination and thought. The poems attempt to overlay a physical landscape onto a landscape of a subjective imagination, while trying to explore the phenomenon of metaphor – an act that is simultaneously destructive and creative, but seems to be crucial for humans’ interpreting and articulating the world around them.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Grateful acknowledgment is made to the following publications, in which some of these poems originally appeared:

The Tulane Review: “Salvo”

Thrush Poetry Journal: “We Are Responsible for the Crop Circles”

Phantom Books: “Oölogy” & “Aneurysm”

Big Lucks: “Hollow Earth”

&

Salt Hill: “State Property with Some Pines, Mississippi”

. . . it is better to be a live dog than a dead lion,
as the Scripture says.

- Czesław Miłosz

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Oölogy

I love you so much I could just bite you
so maybe the heart likes to confuse violence
for love all my lovers have similar hair
and the buttons on their blouses are from the guts of stars
so maybe this is about one person in particular maybe
this is when the *all* turns to a *you* and I know you
are no longer impressed by quantum mechanics
but remember a black hole gives a little back
as it takes away so maybe you could tell me that story
again where the starlings get stuck in the sky
since I love all your invasive species stories
I suspect the heart must be broken several times a day
the bored looking woman on the bus
breaks my heart with her big hat
when we order the same kind of beer
that breaks my heart your kind of eye contact
is usually heartbreaking as is the gardener
burying bulbs in the world but
the world is full of enough bulbs and big hats already
so I remember the night
many nights ago when your body filled
a doorway and all I could see were your bones
glowing with cyanide and I thought your heart
was like a hammer falling
through a forest and now I understand
you must climb this tree
I understand you must climb it alone

Salvo

You, she points, and you:
Don't fuck

with agency: I'll make you
your very own

wizard cap from roadside
condom foils—

it will block all transmissions. Her
rooftop stretches

for miles. I'll sit there for days,
watching numerous

silhouettes of felines. When I first saw
the satellites

I believed they were constellations
knocked loose.

You tease me about my accent
and I'll tear

down your red stable, ride
your palomino

to the glue factory. My hands
build bombs

from clock potatoes. I target
everyone—

I've traced triangles with grim
efficiency

on the bare backs of lovers.
I forget

whole portions of the alphabet
and juice fresh

watermelon with shotgun blasts.

Tiny elves

inhabit her attic. If her head
is a rose

garden after a hail storm,
then mine

is a thunderclap after
midnight.

Cloud Poem

This morning the sky cracks open
like a forearm i never imagined
radiation was as real as the hamster
wheel the elms count their fingers
the clouds gather that might be
the smoke of the dead the going
dead vapors i mean vespers
it might be the breath of something
tiny i might describe the color
as butterscotch the clouds are
moving and transmogrifying as i
am already they are in several
states at once as i am
they are in illinois and mississippi
if they contain traces of radiation
i believe it is the kind that helps people
that is what i believe they are no
longer fish they are not deer
bedded down it is no longer morning

We Are Responsible for the Crop Circles

This the original document,
before the peace has been signed:

Here is Larry and there is Luanne
fishing off the pier, she showing

him how to tie a blood knot
and pronouncing Latin names of fish

not yet caught. There is a lit match
falling to the floor of heaven. You can

tell they have not yet slept together,
but will soon. The plot will bloom—

bombs will be constructed by our nation's
apple-cheeked mothers. Masks change

faces. Migrations of squirrels swim
across the river as the million-dollar

bones of velociraptors shudder to life.
The way the two don't know each other

fully is wonderful. Color by the numbers,
sweetheart. Color the rhinoceros

purple. Make me shadow puppets
on the backs of breaking

waves. I don't see you yet,
but I can hear you.

Stickman Made of Sticks

I can only count the blue leaves
at night when moths settle

on the ax handle after freezing rain
beer cans in the yard are like

the bodies of fish flensed from creeks
there is a yellow fire hydrant

far out in the forest I say
the heart is a cedar tree

on fire because cedar tree is
the closest I can get

there is a knife in a bucket
of cold water

a compass on the bottom
of a river somehow

sparrows stay alive in the woods
all winter limestone turns

the river green now wind
comes through the corn

like women dancing
orion is strung up

like a war drum somewhere
a star is exploding

hummingbirds move
very fast to stay still

Vanity of the Old Gods

When Solomon's seven hundred wives
would play him their dulcimers
he would go off to bed
with whoever played
the worst

Archaic Device

Elocution is one way to get into heaven.
In far off lands there used to be an instrument

called a Moral Compass! I've been wandering
miles into the forest. Night comes

quickly in a pine stand. This morning I found a
blood trail in the leaves. It became five cardinals

that exploded from the ground. My sins
are communicated to me in foreign language.

Wind blasts the cedars. Hearts are heavy
talismans. A fish in the moonlight

is a thrown blade. The trails I make
are circular, but the scenery is noteworthy:

Trees, waterfall, trees, grist-mill: Lovers
spread out their picnic blankets

in the long light. I never heard in school
how Einstein was unfaithful all his life.

There is that thirst to explain the universe
in mathematical equation. Now, this

forest hums like a jackknife thrown
in an oak stump. I am nervous

with anticipation. I am either nauseous
or content— listen, something thrashes

in the tree-line, something is tacked
to my ribs. My love is gerrymandered.

There's a woman wandering in this country
of petrified pines. The forest burns.

Summer on the Ground

Once I was a little girl
a boy again
then that little boy's black
labrador

it isn't dark yet
under the lake
so I dive down
for mussel shells

I can punch
buttons out
like a cherokee
my hair is always sweet

with cedar smoke
maybe I was always
the little girl
I crush fireflies

between my fingers
I rub a green glow
under my blue eyes
shotguns

make cardinals break
from the quarry
and mussel shell
buttons flash

on my sundress
like eyes in the dark

Clay Figurine

Luanne tunes her violin to the sound of water flowing
when the night is a sheer black dress her hands are like the
deltas of rivers sparks leap up for miles between cypress
breaks i see the eyes of horses and children from the
river cane when i place cowslip on the small of her back
nettles on her eyelids we find each other in small rooms in
the woods i taste salt in Luanne's hair we kiss an
arrow sings in my side a red moon hung in the cottonwoods
is a violin floating out of sight i must collect stars in
spoonfuls of water we press our palms in the clay to mock
raccoons our blackberry wine is filled with thorns we
can see lanterns in the river and a ladle in the sky the
shapes of our bodies are like the shadows of horses
walking to the creek to drink a spring is the ending of an
underground river from a country that has no name no
language of any kind a breeze flows from the other world
it is cold & sweet we lie down in the dark and laugh

Aneurysm

Many couples die
smiling
in their beds

when the comet flies over
new love

like a flame
in the grass
in the weeds

by the river
I found a rusted trumpet

the things
that will kill us
have beautiful names

nightshade
in a field all by itself

arrhythmia
proves the chest is a birdcage

the comet is beautiful
because it appears
to move

so slowly

I know a crown of ivy

is still a crown

most goddesses keep

their maiden names

the only way

to true love is through

smoke

that little bit of red

in my eye

is blood wet on the corn

is blood smoking in starlight

Antoinette 187b

Darling these days i'm jealous
of nearly everyone the serial killer
is a motherfucker because his trial
is nationally syndicated i covet the photon
because it knows nothing other than
the speed of light tonight my only
wish is to part my hair like a head of state
i envy the fireflies flashing morse code
for everyone they love i shove a firecracker
in a frog's mouth and i wonder what men have learned
from splitting atoms i shot a hole through
a packard in the woods and a copperhead curled
out like a flame i felt a hole in my chest with a white
carnation blooming out so i dropped the carnation in
a bucket of milk i am presently covetous of the tallest
tree in america i envy the pistol i threw down
a well and the night a bell tolled in the trees
i covet the sinkhole that swallowed
my lover's apartment the horse running the field
has a sack over its head i covet the voyager
probe leaving our solar system just imagine
the old man weeding his garden the astronomer
naming planets after every woman he never knew

Hollow Earth

(One)

Fireflies hatched from ashes string
constellations across my yard
i mean lightning bugs
i mean what
i was trying to say
was the greenhouse burned all saturday
we woke up sunday
and renamed things
i argue burma you scream
myanmar we fuck
and make love the word
atomized
hangs above our bed
like a dirigible
the radioactive
pulse of stars
rocks me to sleep
like an astronaut
i mean a river
it rocks me to sleep like
a river
it warps my heart like
steel
we applied a little
heat to agitate
the atom falling
in love was like

a scavenger hunt

betelgeuse

a cat's tooth

chicken feathers

lightning bugs blinking

at noon

(Two)

Real stars and the black
cords stitched between them
orion swings
a machete over our heads
a scythe sings
through the firmament you know
purple is only an early iteration
of black
my bed a flat earth the heart
a hollow earth
draconian physics plays out
with the june bug
lets play tag in the unified field
welcome
tarot cards will henceforth
symbolize nothing
you shall be chosen
based on your proficiency
with a sextant
the twins
gemini will enter your room
their faces
will be like water lilies
they sit on the edge
of your bed they know
gravity is just falling
towards something
so fast you keep missing it

evolution is a series of mistakes
out here on the spheres
motherfucker fireflies
always carry symbol

Nature Writing

We fall in love and maroon ourselves on small islands filled with corn
I buy books on constellations, democracy, and the hunting of small game
Women I know from the Midwest never get lost in fields
Landlocked is the only way to live the saying goes
Gravity is a son of a bitch any sharpshooter will tell you
At some point math becomes art so
Sooner or later everything becomes a percentage someone
In line for coffee says there is no math in nature
Sometimes I dream of frogs croaking inside rocks
Every morning the sky inverts itself
Crows I know from the Midwest can recognize my friends
When the cheater was confronted he said he was only following procedure
There are a few mysteries only children can solve
Atlantis wasn't all that great
The Sphinx was most surely conceived by aliens
Dolphins in the Amazon are believed to be the ghosts of women
I write *Nature writing is too quiet*
And a bullet unzips the sky
Jealousy is a form of cell division
Let's not compare grains of sand to stars in the Milky Way
A number like 400 billion just demands we drink bourbon
I'm surrounded by the tallest ears of corn
And I can't eat anything

This Poem is For the Field

In the field the trees
are just being trees
distant impressionistic
combines
on the very edge of the scene

oaks and sycamores
and inside the oaks
a metaphor tightens
like heartwood

i do not know the metaphor
i do not know the species
of oak but i can guess
overcup oak
or pin oak

we value the wind
over the water

it's already been
a wet spring
wind is only visible
the metaphor
is only visible

in the undulation
of waxy leaves
visible only
by what the wind disturbs

the shape it makes

as it passes through
the towering
trees of summer
crown
of thunderhead

in the field the creek
is just being a creek
it is stone it is
water
some roots

it flows through this field
these woods
there are cardinals
distant fence line
then other fields

Everyone Look Up and Point

You must understand we
were carried here
like a whale under a helicopter
like all vagrants of this planet
like the moon disappearing in a flipped coin
falling out of the sky
I am sitting by a lake in mississippi
let us be very clear about our setting
it is night
the perseid meteor shower
and the barred owls begin asking
who cooks for you
and the crickets start
picking the night's tin locks
when I say I am like a whale I do not mean
I am singing
meteorites fall into the lake
like confetti probably whales
always seek the company
of others and so they are singing
I am sitting by the lake with someone
who loves me and I love her but we
are not singing we are not
even speaking the night is as silent
as meteorites
I move through
our medium
you might call that singing or climbing
a mountain hey john muir!
we love you

but there are no mountains
in mississippi
there may be whales comet debris
burning through our atmosphere
I am not sure I know mountains
exist even on mars
hey olympus mons! we at least
like the idea of you
and we know whales
exist all species of whales
blue and baleen and humpback
and that is enough just sitting
and not singing let's
be quiet now oh just below
the big dipper that was
a good one

Druids

I left for the backcountry. High meadows. The cries of a far off hawk, tethered to nothing but air. When I step off the dirt road, then I know. The only books here are locked up in lodgepole pine. There is water in the form of creeks. And stone. Incense in the heart of the twisted cedar. On the first day I follow three pronghorn into a granite hollow. Their shadows leap up the stone walls. Their shadows walk on two legs. They were curious, but had no need of my opinion, no need of me at all. And their eyes had no fear in them. Their shadows fled into the cedars. As did mine. But the pronghorn remained. On the second day I swim in the pool of a waterfall and am too cold to take a breath. That is all. On the third day, I have not spoken in three days, I smile, and do not speak. I am beginning to realize that there is no nature. I am not alone in this. I also make fire from the small dead. I will return home and chop a hole in the ceiling of my house and what happens next is not nature. I am only the shadow that walks on two legs, after the deer is trapped in a valley. It walks out of one door and disperses like seed. It feels a need to live. I return from the backcountry. When I say There is No Nature, people respond in the way people respond when asked about God. I believe that *you* believe, they say. When I return home from the backcountry my house is the same. Only the shadows. The shadows walk on two legs. I feel I have crash landed here from a planet with no need of speech. There is language, but no speech. There is always a radio playing in the next room. It is important we hear the hawk, but not see it. And my eyes, my eyes something like fear. Small lamps that they are.

Wolves

The lake is weird small
silver bubbles
come up from the dark
as lopsided as memories cliches
which contain most
of our lives the failed
marriage is not so terrible
inside a tiny bubble
and mountain sunsets still
elicit mostly epiphanies
and the minnows refracting
light there the bubbles
of my fingers produce
knives I throw
back at the sun
below me
many empires sprawled
in the mud
in the old days one
would walk for years
into the wilderness
don't you believe that wolves
have souls they said
when you return you were
incapable of speaking
for weeks and might dance
for days now today
I am something like the ballerina
ghosting the bottom
of this lake who decides

to drift up into the other world
and the mud fills
my eyes like smoke

Poem Vaguely Resembling Arkansas

She says you should go and I say where she fans her knives
like tickets once a barge passes around a bend it no longer exists
i'm like jonah on the mississippi catholics in my valley set
the woods on fire I know midwestern thunderstorms shake
the moon a little yesterday I buried my dog like a viking
I pushed him like a paper lantern into the channel the soil
gets softer here river breeze makes the cottonwoods
sing my zodiac is constantly changing my aries
in a field of clover somewhere my aquarius
will wander this river for decades for three months
our silhouettes are barn owls I haven't seen you
in weeks this morning I found an accordion
full of minnows under my window when barges
churn upstream my glass of water ripples a little

Tiny Sky

Her silence like the ghosts of deer
those waves grinding the shore

echo like crows in the woods when
the oak comes crashing down
when the deer scatter soundlessly

stones skipped across this shallow
river is a metaphor for something I

cannot say that woman in the foundling
dark is like the blades of windmills that I
cannot see stones dropped in certain wells

take several minutes to reverberate silence
like the ghosts of deer bedded down where

drops of dew weigh down the grass so it
might touch my cheek

The Agenda

Setting birds free is more fun in theory than in practice I think maybe I should have tried robins instead of parakeets robins being more acclimated to the weather systems of the upper midwest but I wasn't thinking about climate zones I was only thinking about cages

and Maya Angelou just died and what we are trying to do is make birds instead of cages so when I let these three parakeets go I open the little gate to the cage and they just sit there blinking for a whole minute before flying off and I wonder if they can reach the clouds unsure as I am of the maximum cruising altitude of most parakeets I realize I don't even know what species of parakeet I was in care of I feel I have totally misunderstood their whole existence however

I know you should always keep them in pairs but I had three parakeets so did one of them feel like a third wheel now I stand here with an empty cage in some farmer's apple orchard and I am either in Michigan or Wisconsin I don't know which side of the lake to skip my stones from and why don't planes hit birds more often I mean it seems like with all the billions of birds out there it would happen more often I've been hearing domestic cats kill billions of birds every year billions with a *b* and that's never mentioned in cat poems

although this is most certainly a parakeet poem with an interest in cages so much so you could cut up all these letters and re-arrange them into a cage of letters yes that would be perfect and I will paint my parakeet yellow and blue and green I will place it in your newly constructed cage and one rain-shocked Sunday I will take the poem out I mean parakeet I will remove the parakeet from its confines and set a match to it no I will set tongues of fire to it yes tongues of fire and I will divide those tongues of fire one for me and one for you and we shall place the tongues above our heads like crowns the wind will pick up then the ashes of parakeets will be swept into the clouds into the contrails of jets the sleek purple zephyrs the cold and godless jetstreams

The Devil is the Only Man I'm Attracted To

The blue of his eyes has been described
as curdled dawn you know how
it is a red sky in the morning and
mother takes warning his maps
of rivers make no rational sense
and change shape with the weather
a handful of his soil grows
the best corn in thirty counties
his field song has been described
as a roman candle he knows
laughter opens its door on a river-bank
i argue *sparrow* and he spits
feathers in my face parts
his hair from the left like
he always did casts stars
like dice he taps at my window
with his ivory-tipped cane

The Caste System

The scientist loved science but
I found the need to ask him anyway
skittery man that he was
do you love science
I have always loved science
and do you love the state
of the Academy
I have always loved the state of the Academy
he was silent for a moment as we stared
at one another until
we both burst apart laughing
come on I said
let's get the hell out of here
we hiked into the woods just outside
of town joggers jogging
fragrantly by the pines
cool and dark
we reached the ocean
in the purple afterglow of twilight
the scientist produced a pickax
from his bag and began hewing
steps into bare stone
the sun was completely under the ocean
and the air smelled wonderful
granite sparks and the lingering
scents of joggers
when he was finished the scientist
was quiet for a while then said
this is dedicated to past and future students
jogging carefully down these steps

into the dark unknown
and as the cold waters began to lap
at our feet the scientist muttered
about how the Academy had helped him
saved him
when he needed it
he began peeling off
his shoes and his socks
and so did I

I Study the Ground

And so what the hell
good is Derrida
as you count your dimes
for a half-gallon of milk

Pre-Cambrian

The ocean takes me
further from my shoes
my recent interest
in flint knapping
has left me friendless
but vibrant
i get down
deep in a pre-
cambrian funk
now: i must light fire
look: a tern balances
on a cumulus
listen: I will not relate
the cloud to the whiteness
of surf i will make fire
with flint chips and driftwood
figures approach
in the gloaming
good
i can ask them if
they've seen my shoes
they stand on the outskirts
of my firelight
and rock
with the rhythm of tides
i throw a cigarette
in the fire
and smoke leaps up
like a censer
when man first stabbed

man with a
slice of flint
what did he believe
the blood contained?
birds horses
the very stars?
we rise we walk
the wet leaves shudder
look: the firelight in eye-
light I will not say
there is blood i will not
fashion arrowheads
i will say welcome
i will inquire about shoes

Another Whale Poem

Tonight we are the whale
that is pulled to the bottom
of the ocean by a tractor beam
Tonight the sky curdles
into orange meringue,
baby Tonight
we are the one whale
because our understanding
of one another the intimacy
of our speech when you say
Wasn't that bird weird?
and I say yes that bird
was very weird,
sweetheart Rabbit
blood in the weeds tonight
appears so painterly
poor rabbits the bird
is weird because it never
sets down the maraschino cherry
in its beak flying off
towards untold fortune
or pulled
by the alkaline glow
of the undisclosed tractor beam
of our nation

Binary Star

I'm a glass half-full the sunlight illuminating	type of organism your face
took seven minutes here	to arrive on this hillside
beside the shifting of sycamores	forms walk with me
a little while in this brief moment	hand in hand we have together
we need to go out like fireflies	and flit across this galaxy
I'm serious light many	shake the bones roman candles
under the dark forms silently we orbit	of sycamores the sun the distant
stars glowing in a creek	like lanterns we are not near
the ocean Herman Melville	but let it be an ocean in Moby Dick
wrote by an everlasting itch	I am tormented for things remote

I love to sail

forbidden seas

May Day is Our Only Day

In this hill country of the body
all our chickens gasp
in the breaking light
the sun rises immediately
and it sets like an arrow

arcing over the trees
the hens have stopped laying
so we are left scratching
our heads
scratching the dirt
into wonderful illustrations:

i draw diana drawing
her bow you sketch
zeus as a swan
and that's pretty silly
the chickens think we're silly
only the debate over

the cognition of chickens
is vigorous
and brutal
we can always erase
what we've done
with dance steps in the dirt

you taught me how to dance
in a way i find respectful
to nature

if i'm out by the pecan tree
when night comes
all at once

i'm lost out there
until morning
the chickens are the only
ones that can help
I spread my arms like jesus
like a scarecrow

like a moon-white jesus
and the stars flock like bugs
around my glowing arms

Rivers in Twilight

That word you're looking for
is an arrow humming in a tree

two fields from here
sometime I wonder if
the thing and the word is just

sipping yesterday's cold coffee
in today's small skiff

with the river braiding
under you
the whistle of some burning arrow

dividing the red
sky in two

State Property with Some Pines, Mississippi

This river wears a moon like a pendant
where we run pine needles
make the ground feel hollow
there's the forest service road
sumac flaring in the thicket
ravens rise from this field
to settle in other fields

I fall forward in my sleep
I think wind in the pines
is trucks on the interstate
there are doors slamming
inside of sweetgums deer
run across this glass river
so they may reach other rivers

barbed wire looks misplaced
in our dewy mornings red-tailed
hawks like paper birds
in our evening sycamores
end of October and a couple
warm days left crickets eulogize
and go about their cricket days

as if nothing's wrong our sun
burns out as a white dwarf
this river is built from pieces
of stars it's agreed a catfish wears
the moon like a silver fob chain
if we're under sycamores we shout

Dapple! and the light dapples

~

Country Life

Larry come by
every Sunday evening
with cordwood
and a bottle of bourbon

in his daddy's old tacklebox
we stay up
as long as the stars will
let us

we take a shot
of sour bourbon
every time a satellite
pivots over the pecan grove

and my horse
hangs his head
over the barbed wire
like a coffin

his eyes
a little lake
with a white ember
drifting up

Half-Life

He rises in cold dew
like a boy born in a forest
snares built with river cane
hold their breath in shadow
the river's elbow holds mist
longer than the ferns
and a bell rings over
the mountain
12 o'clock noon
he simmers cow peas
over a smudge fire
his love like uranium
growing warmer
as it decays
his dog sighs in the shade
rose windows in
the cedars
when the light gets low
the second bell rings
over the mountain
he'll walk out into the clearing
kissing the back
of his hand
to draw out the foxes

VITA

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EDUCATION

M.F.A., Poetry, University of Mississippi, May 2016

Thesis: "Lightning-bug, At Noon"

B.A., English, Southern Illinois University, December 2011

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Instructor, Fall 2015

University of Mississippi

Course: Introduction to Creative Writing

Teaching Assistant, Fall 2013 - present

University of Mississippi

Courses: World Literature, British Literature before 1850, American Literature since the Civil War

HONORS AND FELLOWSHIPS

Teaching Fellowship, University of Mississippi, 2013-2016

Gwendolyn Brooks Poetry Award from the Illinois Center for the Book,
2nd place, 2011

PUBLICATIONS

The Naugatuck River Review, Summer 2010, “Martyrdom”

Quiddity, Fall 2011, “Songsmithing”

The Tulane Review, Summer 2012, “Salvo”

Thrush Poetry Journal, Fall 2013, “We Are Responsible for the Crop Circles”

Phantom Books, Spring 2014, “Oölogy” & “Aneurysm”

Big Lucks, Summer 2014, “Hollow Earth”

Salt Hill, Summer 2014, “State Property with Some Pines, Mississippi”