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# FIREWATCH

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

by

JAN MARIE VERBERKMOES

May 2018

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## ABSTRACT

This is a collection of poems that uses fragmented forms to explore the fragility of the memory, the body, and the landscape.

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## Pulleys of Light

lift and drop us into the sleepfrost.

---

In a minor key  
two voices  
set a rhythm that holds  
the neck of all other rhythms  
in its teeth.  
One voice in the grass  
one in the periphery.

Wind shushes and the frozen  
reeds push.

Nothing will stay down in this marsh.

---

The rhythm tugs  
our limbs, draws our skin  
into the crystalline morning.  
Ice drowns the trees.

Why is there a hummingbird  
in all this winter?  
Ruby-throated green-tipped bird  
nicks through the reed grass  
scans for shocks of red.

---

The voices marionette us upright:  
we gather the years lying  
at our feet  
lift and drop their heads.  
Here they all are here  
none lost none lost.

Above a barely boned thing  
warns

In a minor key  
two voices  
set a rhythm that holds  
the neck of all other rhythms  
in its teeth.  
One voice in the grass  
one in the periphery.

Wind shushes and the frozen  
reeds push.

Nothing will stay down in this marsh.

---

The rhythm tugs  
our limbs, draws our skin  
into the crystalline morning.  
Ice drowns the trees.

Why is there a hummingbird  
in all this winter?  
Ruby-throated green-tipped bird  
nicks through the reed grass  
scans for shocks of red.

---

The voices marionette us upright:  
we gather the years lying  
at our feet  
lift and drop their heads.  
Here they all are here  
none lost none lost.

Above a barely boned thing  
warns  
by means of displacement.

---

Two men in the sand

In a minor key  
two voices  
set a rhythm that holds  
the neck of all other rhythms  
in its teeth.  
One voice in the grass  
one in the periphery.

Wind shushes and the frozen  
reeds push.

Nothing will stay down in this marsh.

---

The rhythm tugs  
our limbs, draws our skin  
into the crystalline morning.  
Ice drowns the trees.

Why is there a hummingbird  
in all this winter?  
Ruby-throated green-tipped bird  
nicks through the reed grass  
scans for shocks of red.

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The voices marionette us upright:  
we gather the years lying  
at our feet  
lift and drop their heads.  
Here they all are here  
none lost none lost.

Above a barely boned thing  
warns

In a minor key  
two voices  
set a rhythm that holds  
the neck of all other rhythms  
in its teeth.  
One voice in the grass

one in the periphery.

Wind shushes and the frozen  
reeds push.

Nothing will stay down in this marsh.

---

The rhythm tugs  
our limbs, draws our skin  
into the crystalline morning.  
Ice drowns the trees.

Why is there a hummingbird  
in all this winter?  
Ruby-throated green-tipped bird  
nicks through the reed grass  
scans for shocks of red.

---

The voices marionette us upright:  
we gather the years lying  
at our feet  
lift and drop their heads.  
Here they all are here  
none lost none lost.

Above a barely boned thing  
warns

*da-a da-a*

---

In a minor key  
two voices  
set a rhythm that holds  
the neck of all other rhythms  
in its teeth.  
One voice in the grass

one in the periphery.

Wind shushes and the frozen  
reeds push.

Nothing will stay down in this marsh.

---

The rhythm tugs  
our limbs, draws our skin  
into the crystalline morning.  
Ice drowns the trees.

Why is there a hummingbird  
in all this winter?  
Ruby-throated green-tipped bird  
nicks through the reed grass  
scans for shocks of red.

---

The voices marionette us upright:  
we gather the years lying  
at our feet  
lift and drop their heads.  
Here they all are here  
none lost none lost.

Above a barely boned thing  
warns

Elegy as Negation: No Bear

From my room            above the trees, I  
name what I can see    in the hot house        of August:

a wash    of hay field    between house and barn,  
the lake,    green-skinned    and clotted,

and the gnarl of town beyond, bare knuckled,        bridgeless.

You may            or may not    be any of these things—        I know  
I left you somewhere    with a mouth    full of sand.

In the center of the field        a pit of white in the tawny grass—  
only a rotting sheep. A little red    tufted around the neck,

the cavern of its middle    bloated    with heat.

Wind snickers over the hay. *Weren't you just holding        a baby?*

You are not the sheep            or the boy    sleeping behind the barn,  
his mouth wet                    from a beating.

His forearms    thin rifle barrels. Not you.

The heat switches    with insects. The grass weaves    and unweaves itself.  
You taught me            some birds are sirens and sound off

just before the fires burst.    Honey-light,    cleave this skin from skin,

hot-gun me    to a borrowed body.

I am ashamed    to look            like anything at all.

## Firewatch

From my room            above the trees, I  
name what I can see    in the hot house        of August:

a wash    of hay field    between house and barn,  
the lake,    green-skinned    and clotted,

and the gnarl of town beyond, bare knuckled,        bridgeless.

You may            or may not    be any of these things—        I know  
I left you somewhere    with a mouth    full of sand.

In the center of the field        a pit of white in the tawny grass—  
only a rotting sheep. A little red    tufted around the neck,

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You are not the sheep            or the boy    sleeping behind the barn,  
his mouth wet            from a beating.

His forearms    thin rifle barrels. Not you.

The heat switches    with insects. The grass weaves    and unweaves itself.  
You taught me            some birds are sirens and sound off

just before the fires burst.    Honey-light,    cleave this skin from skin,

hot-gun me    to a borrowed body.

I am ashamed    to look            like anything at all.

Body

*What kind of snake are you capable of—*

They said I'd find you somewhere in the settlement  
between here and childbirth

outside this town where every man is men.     *keep looking*

*in the throat of the passerine*  
*the air has a choice   between alarm and song*

Behind me the snowpack thaws in a slow stampede:  
child man animal man     *can slip seamlessly*

*between consonance and dissonance*

Night is traceless on the waterskin  
as it sheds from the mountain.

What urgency if we already number  
among the dead. What water if no body.

*a sibilance of ice on ice.* I find you here, gone,

you dripped a trail for no one to follow home.  
Isn't blood someone's bread—

River   scaled and splitting   teach me that trick again  
where the snow won't melt on your skin.

## Body Double

Fingers in my hair like little reeds,  
hollow-boned sister

I think there were still two of us then:

coalesced in a constellation of gold  
our outline mouthed the shape of lake.

*But I thought I was lavender,  
I thought I was sand.*

*But I thought I was lavender,  
I thought I was sand.*  
Together we watched the young man *Uncle?*  
fall, lapse into the grass.

Voice sticky in gin and memory of lime-green fields,  
he calls to us *girls*

Uncle, don't try to swallow the stone  
that crests your tongue.

Your belly translucent, already swollen with stones.  
Those little weights call blue blue blue. *Uncle?*

*Girls lavender, sand don't watch.*

You kneel at his head. His eyelids gone quiet,  
creases at his temples like seams of a leaf.

The skin walks, leaves the body behind.  
I can't say what happened after that.

Interleave me now in the reeds. There's a bird call  
I cannot swallow. It sings *body blue blue blue.*

## Hunt

*What kind of snake are you capable of—*

They said I'd find you somewhere in the settlement  
between here and childbirth

outside this town where every man is men.     *keep looking*

*in the throat of the passerine*  
*the air has a choice   between alarm and song*

Behind me the snowpack thaws in a slow stampede:  
child man animal man     *can slip seamlessly*

*between consonance and dissonance*

Night is traceless on the waterskin  
as it sheds from the mountain.

What urgency if we already number  
among the dead. What water if no body.

*a sibilance of ice on ice.* I find you here, gone,

you dripped a trail for no one to follow home.  
Isn't blood someone's bread—

River   scaled and splitting   teach me that trick again  
where the snow won't melt on your skin.

Nightjar

He departs into fissured grasslight, switch-thin birches.  
Dawn waters down.

His mule, shifting under her load, tosses her head at his touch,  
and he digs his thumb into the broad meat of her shoulder

hard and she remembers who he is. He says

*I've been mistaking things lately—luggage for language  
accident for ancient binding for bidding,*

*forgetting the count man man animal child animal.  
Did I kill or be killed—*

He stumbles under the weight of no animal on his back

and the morning fractures in his hands. Accident, ancient.  
Endless retrieval he begins again.

No animal wants to die so why does the mule  
walk off into the dry riverbed burdened and blistering

searching for no one  
and no one following clumsy over the shale?

She tosses her head and remembers.

Elegy as Conditionality: Hornets Building

A man stands            at the lake edge, a girl on either side.

Straight, spines not yet recoiled.

The lakebed is ash.

There is no one in the water.

He lifts his finger to the mountain ranges, calls them            dog, girl, mother, summer.

We are the girls            and can see only a fringe of lavender thinning into blue horizon,  
can name only the evergreens—            white pine and fir.

We wade into the ash.

A Nighthawk booms the water.

Diversion/Division

*What kind of snake are you capable of—*

They said I'd find you somewhere in the settlement  
between here and childbirth

outside this town where every man is men.     *keep looking*

*in the throat of the passerine*  
*the air has a choice   between alarm and song*

Behind me the snowpack thaws in a slow stampede:  
child man animal man     *can slip seamlessly*

*between consonance and dissonance*

Night is traceless on the waterskin  
as it sheds from the mountain.

What urgency if we already number  
among the dead. What water if no body.

*a sibilance of ice on ice.* I find you here, gone,  
you dripped a trail for no one to follow home.  
Isn't blood someone's bread—

River   scaled and splitting   teach me that trick again  
where the snow won't melt on your skin.

## Retrieval

He departs into fissured grasslight, switch-thin birches.  
Dawn waters down.

His mule, shifting under her load, tosses her head at his touch,  
and he digs his thumb into the broad meat of her shoulder

hard and she remembers who he is. He says

*I've been mistaking things lately—luggage for language  
accident for ancient binding for bidding,*

*forgetting the count man man animal child animal.  
Did I kill or be killed—*

He stumbles under the weight of no animal on his back

and the morning fractures in his hands. Accident, ancient.  
Endless retrieval he begins again.

No animal wants to die so why does the mule  
walk off into the dry riverbed burdened and blistering

searching for no one  
and no one following clumsy over the shale?

She tosses her head and remembers.

## House

Lavender, piano-hands,  
won't you press your black -fretted neck  
into a trilling stream?

I'll dance for as long as you'll play.  
Everyone's gone asleep in the grass  
and I think we're just two.

I want to twist my body  
into whatever song your finger -throat touches.  
To slip this blue integument that fills

and stills with our wet breath.  
Sing us cleanly through. This house  
only a hand on your hand.

Vantage Point

A man stands            at the lake edge, a girl on either side.

Straight, spines not yet recoiled.

The lakebed is ash.

There is no one in the water.

He lifts his finger to the mountain ranges, calls them            dog, girl, mother, summer.

We are the girls            and can see only a fringe of lavender thinning into blue horizon,  
can name only the evergreens—            white pine and fir.

We wade into the ash.

A Nighthawk booms the water.

## Mule

When thrown from the mule  
it is best to let the body drop slack, as though sloughed,

to feign the state of relaxation.

When you land and your mouth gouges the gritted earth,  
simply abandon the chipped tooth to the dirt.

The mule bares his teeth— sawed and dully white.

To search for you shows intolerable attachment  
but I know you're here somewhere, star-splayed

and blue, face opened. There, your body's gone silver where it's bent.  
Do you know yet all the points at which it won't yield?

The tongue in its bed floods with blood.

*What a sweet boy what a nice man*

Only you could see piano keys in the mule's mouth,  
could hear a song in the rhythm of white.

Elegy as Imperative: River Crossing

I chart gold lines here  
to here to here,

constellation proof there is a body left to trace.

At the border wire marks a perimeter  
and firebreaks switchback the hillsides beyond.

I set my disguise  
and breach this town with eyebrows on,

lips on, nose, face skin on.  
My hips buckled to my ribs. Tight,

tighter. Night, and the language here is tinny  
mosquito sting.

Houses emit only whine and ringing. I wake  
at dawn with hot welts up my thigh

and your body still missing.

My late parents, sister, state, my late country,  
my late continent—

I warned you here, don't speak  
when spoken to:

to say *hello* we throw ourselves down  
on the ground.

Continent

I chart gold lines here  
to here to here,

constellation proof there is a body left to trace.

At the border wire marks a perimeter  
and firebreaks switchback the hillsides beyond.

I set my disguise  
and breach this town with eyebrows on,

lips on, nose, face skin on.  
My hips buckled to my ribs. Tight,

tighter. Night, and the language here is tinny  
mosquito sting.

Houses emit only whine and ringing. I wake  
at dawn with hot welts up my thigh

and your body still missing.

My late parents, sister, state, my late country,  
my late continent—

I warned you here, don't speak  
when spoken to:

to say *hello* we throw ourselves down  
on the ground.

Lake Ash

I chart gold lines here  
to here to here,

constellation proof there is a body left to trace.

At the border wire marks a perimeter  
and firebreaks switchback the hillsides beyond.

I set my disguise  
and breach this town with eyebrows on,

lips on, nose, face skin on.  
My hips buckled to my ribs. Tight,

tighter. Night, and the language here is tinny  
mosquito sting.

Houses emit only whine and ringing. I wake  
at dawn with hot welts up my thigh

and your body still missing.

My late parents, sister, state, my late country,  
my late continent—

I warned you here, don't speak  
when spoken to:

to say *hello* we throw ourselves down  
on the ground.

Winter

I raze our red hair so short, the father confuses  
his daughter for a soldier and the house lights up

in a summer burn. *Lie still* then velvet-headed, we run  
for the far side of the lake.

The water sunken in its bowl of mud,  
yet deep enough to wrap us in soft webs of algae.

We float on our back, the sky fitted with thin white clouds,  
cut and cut again with the black silhouette of wings.

Water-fingers press into our ears, the corners of our mouth.

They teach us to inhale  
so the voice travels inward, back into the belly

and cannot swell the mouth open. *Remember?*

I rub my skin where we separated and it stings.  
Water-body, who is holding who? I still can't dry off.

## Waterbridle

I razed our red hair so short, the father confuses  
his daughter for a soldier and the house lights up

in a summer burn. *Lie still* then velvet-headed, we run  
for the far side of the lake.

The water sunken in its bowl of mud,  
yet deep enough to wrap us in soft webs of algae.

We float on our back, the sky fitted with thin white clouds,  
cut and cut again with the black silhouette of wings.

Water-fingers press into our ears, the corners of our mouth.

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so the voice travels inward, back into the belly

and cannot swell the mouth open. *Remember?*

I rub my skin where we separated and it stings.  
Water-body, who is holding who? I still can't dry off.

Elegy as Hypothesis: Burning the Boat

I razed our red hair so short, the father confuses  
his daughter for a soldier and the house lights up

in a summer burn. *Lie still* then velvet-headed, we run  
for the far side of the lake.

The water sunken in its bowl of mud,  
yet deep enough to wrap us in soft webs of algae.

We float on our back, the sky fitted with thin white clouds,  
cut and cut again with the black silhouette of wings.

Water-fingers press into our ears, the corners of our mouth.

They teach us to inhale  
so the voice travels inward, back into the belly

and cannot swell the mouth open. *Remember?*

I rub my skin where we separated and it stings.  
Water-body, who is holding who? I still can't dry off.

## Omen

I razed our red hair so short, the father confuses  
his daughter for a soldier and the house lights up

in a summer burn. *Lie still* then velvet-headed, we run  
for the far side of the lake.

The water sunken in its bowl of mud,  
yet deep enough to wrap us in soft webs of algae.

We float on our back, the sky fitted with thin white clouds,  
cut and cut again with the black silhouette of wings.

Water-fingers press into our ears, the corners of our mouth.

They teach us to inhale  
so the voice travels inward, back into the belly

and cannot swell the mouth open. *Remember?*

I rub my skin where we separated and it stings.  
Water-body, who is holding who? I still can't dry off.

## Drought

I razed our red hair so short, the father confuses  
his daughter for a soldier and the house lights up

in a summer burn. *Lie still* then velvet-headed, we run  
for the far side of the lake.

The water sunken in its bowl of mud,  
yet deep enough to wrap us in soft webs of algae.

We float on our back, the sky fitted with thin white clouds,  
cut and cut again with the black silhouette of wings.

Water-fingers press into our ears, the corners of our mouth.

They teach us to inhale  
so the voice travels inward, back into the belly

and cannot swell the mouth open. *Remember?*

I rub my skin where we separated and it stings.  
Water-body, who is holding who? I still can't dry off.

## Event Point

There's a girl, lavender, standing rifle-ready  
in the dark. She braces for the thing

heat-seeking toward the house.  
Night daubs her face, skin. Dampens her clothes.

I should explain— there's a man loose in the woods  
and she guards her body like a house.

Listens into the pulp- night. There. His chains clack  
like prayer beads. Chambered and locked, she watches  
as no man, but war emerges from the trees.

No one could've known. Siren -boned hands crack her cheek,  
her jaw, three links of spine. The air congeals in her hair.

I'm trying to explain— the war is a father and her body,  
bird-shaped and gunless.

She sucks air. Her belly fills with the sounds of sleep.

Or was she sand, my little featherhead? Salt-bite, lavender.  
Don't worry, I hid you down

where the water-lick buries and buries you.

## Reentry

I raze our red hair so short, the father confuses  
his daughter for a soldier and the house lights up

in a summer burn. *Lie still* then velvet-headed, we run  
for the far side of the lake.

The water sunken in its bowl of mud,  
yet deep enough to wrap us in soft webs of algae.

We float on our back, the sky fitted with thin white clouds,  
cut and cut again with the black silhouette of wings.

Water-fingers press into our ears, the corners of our mouth.

They teach us to inhale  
so the voice travels inward, back into the belly

and cannot swell the mouth open. *Remember?*

I rub my skin where we separated and it stings.  
Water-body, who is holding who? I still can't dry off.

## Waterlock

This town can't remember  
its last breath: faces, swollen,

blue in a pinch of will, smile blue.

Collapsed waterbody found I lift it, you, blue,  
from oil-edge. Blue smeared ribs, blue matte of your hair.

Hold, soft as blue your chambered body in light.

A coil of blue faces tells me blue. Blue spills  
from their mouths, blue burning their lungs.

These house windows mirror only blue,  
and the rain-done streets shine.

The birds blue, warble blue marbles of song

as the trees tremble blue.

Never mind that we are water -locked,

refuse blue. This blue.

This uniform blue.

## Interior of an Elegy

I razed our red hair      so short, the father confuses  
his daughter    for a soldier      and the house lights up

in a summer burn.    *Lie still*              then velvet-headed, we run  
for the far side of the lake.

The water    sunken in its bowl              of mud,  
yet deep enough    to wrap us    in soft webs of algae.

We float on our back, the sky              fitted with thin white clouds,  
cut    and cut again      with the black silhouette of wings.

Water-fingers press into    our ears, the corners    of our mouth.

They teach us to    inhale  
so the voice travels    inward,    back    into the belly

and cannot swell the mouth    open.              *Remember?*

I rub my skin    where we separated      and it stings.  
Water-body,    who is holding who? I    still    can't dry off.

Elegy as Insistence: Bulls in a Field

I razed our red hair so short, the father confuses  
his daughter for a soldier and the house lights up

in a summer burn. *Lie still* then velvet-headed, we run  
for the far side of the lake.

The water sunken in its bowl of mud,  
yet deep enough to wrap us in soft webs of algae.

We float on our back, the sky fitted with thin white clouds,  
cut and cut again with the black silhouette of wings.

Water-fingers press into our ears, the corners of our mouth.

They teach us to inhale  
so the voice travels inward, back into the belly

and cannot swell the mouth open. *Remember?*

I rub my skin where we separated and it stings.  
Water-body, who is holding who? I still can't dry off.

## Tracking

I raze our red hair so short, the father confuses  
his daughter for a soldier and the house lights up

in a summer burn. *Lie still* then velvet-headed, we run  
for the far side of the lake.

The water sunken in its bowl of mud,  
yet deep enough to wrap us in soft webs of algae.

We float on our back, the sky fitted with thin white clouds,  
cut and cut again with the black silhouette of wings.

Water-fingers press into our ears, the corners of our mouth.

They teach us to inhale  
so the voice travels inward, back into the belly

and cannot swell the mouth open. *Remember?*

I rub my skin where we separated and it stings.  
Water-body, who is holding who? I still can't dry off.

## Temporal resolution

and I falter as the tiger beetle sprints into blindness.  
Granular fracture, the vision field crackles.  
Mesh of his eyes unable to gather enough light from his prey,  
he collides instead with the crease of a knee,  
pauses, turns away. The evergreens rasp and whine in the heat.

If speed is desire, certainty dissolves as I approach—  
leg or arm, or limb draped in leather? Some gracefully jointed animal.  
*Listen for the hunt* the silent detonations that tighten sleep:  
fist after fist of light like craving. The pinecones crack at the seams.  
Each cone of light blinds me to the knee, the beetle,  
to the damp cloth of day poised to snap back  
and reveal them whole or gone. The trees ratchet up the alarm.

## Dogdaughter

I razed our red hair so short, the father confuses  
his daughter for a soldier and the house lights up

in a summer burn. *Lie still* then velvet-headed, we run  
for the far side of the lake.

The water sunken in its bowl of mud,  
yet deep enough to wrap us in soft webs of algae.

We float on our back, the sky fitted with thin white clouds,  
cut and cut again with the black silhouette of wings.

Water-fingers press into our ears, the corners of our mouth.

They teach us to inhale  
so the voice travels inward, back into the belly

and cannot swell the mouth open. *Remember?*

I rub my skin where we separated and it stings.  
Water-body, who is holding who? I still can't dry off.

## Field Burning

I razed our red hair so short, the father confuses  
his daughter for a soldier and the house lights up

in a summer burn. *Lie still* then velvet-headed, we run  
for the far side of the lake.

The water sunken in its bowl of mud,  
yet deep enough to wrap us in soft webs of algae.

We float on our back, the sky fitted with thin white clouds,  
cut and cut again with the black silhouette of wings.

Water-fingers press into our ears, the corners of our mouth.

They teach us to inhale  
so the voice travels inward, back into the belly

and cannot swell the mouth open. *Remember?*

I rub my skin where we separated and it stings.  
Water-body, who is holding who? I still can't dry off.

Elegy as Interrogative: How the Egret

I raze our red hair so short, the father confuses  
his daughter for a soldier and the house lights up

in a summer burn. *Lie still* then velvet-headed, we run  
for the far side of the lake.

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yet deep enough to wrap us in soft webs of algae.

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Water-body, who is holding who? I still can't dry off.

## Living Look

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his daughter for a soldier and the house lights up

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for the far side of the lake.

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## Blue Stain Pine

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Water-body, who is holding who? I still can't dry off.

Wake

I raze our red hair so short, the father confuses  
his daughter for a soldier and the house lights up

in a summer burn. *Lie still* then velvet-headed, we run  
for the far side of the lake.

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Water-body, who is holding who? I still can't dry off.

Elegy as Subjunctive: Taxidermy of a Swallow

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Water-body, who is holding who? I still can't dry off.

*Petrochelidon pyrrhonota*

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*Fundulus grandis*

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## Elegy as Recursion: Into Another

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## Landscape with Afterlife

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## VITA

- 2015 – 2018 University of Mississippi – MFA, Poetry (anticipated)
- 2012 – 2013 Portland State University – Non-Degree Enrollment, Creative Writing
- 2002 – 2007 University of Oregon – Bachelor of Arts, *summa cum laude*, German
- 2004 – 2005 University of Heidelberg, Germany – study abroad