

Salem State University
The Graduate School
Department of English

Smoke Follows Beauty

A Creative Thesis

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Smoke Follows Beauty

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RECKONING

The Firepit

My grandmother said, “Smoke follows beauty”
but no seat is safe from southern politics.

In the scent of 2 am and bourbon
I summon no rhetorical questions.

“The Drop Kick Murphys are fucking liberal”
but the Drive-By Truckers are okay.

One time, my aunt called me a paradox
a two-headed woman, because “you’re never
more southern than when you leave.”
The embers grow orange and cavernous.

Adding fresh pine branches just stokes the flames.
Smoke billows, and I can't get out of the way.

As a child I was flattered, now my eyes tear
and my hair stinks. They slur something like

“Shut up and sing,” and their voices are so strange
I can't understand them—or I've forgotten how.

Tropicana

The bloated gallon of orange juice sweats
in the sink and reminds me of home.

The distorted shape wobbles; imagine tropical sunlight
trapped— bursting plastic seams.

I recall the slow thaw and empty fridge
— like waiting for payday.

The sticky sweet concentrate pooling
while the branches were clustered with fruit.

Uncle Remus in Boston

Something broke in Uncle Remus as my friend
spat and then slammed the door, laughing

“Racism? Every single fucking day!”
But I’m stuck in the fourth grade.

In my shoebox kitchen, with a thread spool
table, and matching gingham curtains.

“You didn’t make that,” the kids would say
–but I have, and I did!

I was sawing out a door with a knife
while my teacher was reading Brer Rabbit.

There are Avenues of Survival

There are procedures for failure
—a GED, a restraining order, foreclosure,
bankruptcy, divorce.

A guidance counselor in 10th grade
opens a file, selects beauty school
instead of a college application.

The gynecologist charts, “pleasant
disposition.” The pediatrician, “doesn’t
baby talk with the children.”

But the victim’s advocate Tara
stands posture perfect and silent
—then raises her voice as my own.

“Your Honor, the protections should be
permanent.” Her defense an open window
—its resonance, a squall.

In an empty room of bibleless pews
the chandeliers flicker
and complaints litter the floor.

The Skeleton Clinks in Escape

A lovely flesh dress on the physical body:
salon workers must be fit to survive

and scheduled every half hour
to join hands with strangers.

At home, men and babies claim
their hip bones and pull at their hair.

High heels aren't designed to flee
and make-up and curling irons pay shelter.

At the Kitchen Table

I chop at a block of ice cream.
There is no delicate curling roll.

No sense of silk melting on the tongue
no behind-the-lips flavor, just chewing.

Eager for calories, for fullness
my body wants, fat, storage, and survival.

He cracks an egg and filets its cap,
balancing a perfect bite on the tiny spoon

a ritual of sated manners.

Footprints

We shape the landscape while
machetes erase the fields.

Slow silhouettes move on the horizon
backs bent like the setting moon.

We count the rows like years, like waves
of wealth, muddy soles imprinting on an old

old world, while the ocean rages and
the native mangroves root to save the soil.

Elvis and Cobain

Rock' n roll ushered in society's decline
Is that why Cobain's death was violent?

Why kids huddle for shelter, backpacks
over their heads, straddling toilets?

Is that how those good church ladies
felt about Elvis's hips while picketing

integration, breaking albums,
burning effigies and planting bombs?

The Guidance Office Writes, “She’s a Good Fit for Cosmetology School.”

She would skip school
or just wouldn’t make it there
no ride, no money, no lunch.

At Clearwater High
they fail you after nine
absences—she had ten.

Beauty school felt like a choice
but now she wonders
about providence.

When did she decide
that paying the bills
outweighed an education?

In salons, she quickly learned
that hairdressers are made for
survival.

A Visit with Mom

Upset that I'm crying, their Akita
Mister rests his head on me.

How often does he hide from this
drunken distemper and glass breaking?

His eyes flash as he watches the door
then falls asleep beside my bed.

The next morning, I say goodbye
to look for my childhood friend Lori.

She works at the Chanel counter
and, with a calm touch, does my makeup.

We haven't spoken much lately; it's like
eighth grade again as we talk.

Back then, I used her address so
I didn't always have to change schools.

She says, "Come on, you know your mom
was always crazy"
—except I didn't.

Adults Only

At Village Lake apartments
Peter Pruitt rode a pink BMX.

He and his best friend, Bird, did bike tricks
on wheel pegs and chrome handlebars.

Like circus performers, they spun frames
long hair, and reflective bodies.

Pete teased Bird, saying his chest was concave
that's how he earned the nickname.

They picked on the red-headed kid Brian
called him Ronald McDonald.

Then teased my brother for his southern
accent, making him “country boy.”

My cousin Stacey and I both liked Pete;
for some reason, he liked me.

On the bridge, in yellow bug light
I kissed Pete long and intentional.

I felt it in my guts and could replay
the feeling for days and days.

A sign on the bridge read “KEEP OUT
Adults Only Side — Village Lake Staff.”

Peter cut his nickname “Chi”
out of a poplar block in woodshop class.

A gift I stored under my bed for years
until my ex threw it away.

Catching Flies

It is dirty work to scrub the filthy pool
that collects at the bottom of the waste bin.

The odor of decay is a tangy syrup
an attractant for vermin and bad men.

A reminder she was raised to be sweet:
“You can catch more flies with honey!” they’d say.

Now maggots run over the edge; they drip
and divide, like when a shovel splits an ant pile.

With the garden hose, bleach, and gloves
she washes away the sweetness and rot

and imagines how clever women—unsentimental
and sharp—keep their bins tidy.

I Believe You

I think of you thinking of me
the child you saved from drowning
on Pass-a-Grille beach – maybe 1980.

I regret not saying thank you.
I just ran up the shore rewinding
time with the current.

Choking on salt water and terror
with the heartbeat of escape
– I told no one.

You tell the story now over whiskey
and your friends mock the melodrama
chuckling at the child who sprang back to life.

Maybe they don't even believe you
but I want you to know, I'm okay
and I am not afraid of the ocean.

But sometimes when I jump
in the dead calm bay
and swim away from the transom

I see the near erasure
of the ocean and heaven
and I can hear you say
– stop fighting.

A Message to My Brother, Shane

Remember our old house near the marina?
The one with a barren flagpole and windows like gills.

Who lives there now? Do they sit on the counters
drumming the hollow belly with their heels, never finding

anyone home? Staring back at it, luminescent
through the palms from a far sea wall, do they listen for sirens?

Maybe all that water rose up, and it returned to the Gulf
clay tile scales, aloe fins, the pole, a lure

and my earring still trapped between the vanity and the floor
—the other one here.

SMOKE

Beach Day

Remember, our car is parked on a side street
near the crab shack with the palm-thatched roof.
Avoid talking to the riffraff and drunks.
Cover yourself
— it will save you from burns, wear shoes.

The beach should be empty.
Stay clear of storm wrack; it stinks.
Know the tides, and don't forget
your belongings
— the flood current's a thief.

If you hope to find conch
you must wade in the swash
and sift through the silky white quartz with your toes.
But don't lift your feet; shuffle them along
— the barbs of the stingrays are cruel.

Do not swim in shadowed waters
or in the strong break.
Under the blue sky, there is another one
foaming and violent
— do not wear anything shiny.

Remember, if you're in over your head
if your feet do not reach the seafloor
if you cannot see me, or the structures onshore
grow faint, or worse — disappear

— jump and scream.

High Shoals

A river runs over the fells, so high up
I can't see my brother in the water below.

Folks slide down the wet rock with a beer
sometimes while standing on their feet.

I've heard stories of drunks cracking
their heads, drowning. Everyone in my family

has gone over but me. It's safer
up here where the water makes clear

shallow pools on the mossy rocks
and I only watch for broken glass.

Crawl Space

What is poverty when
your whole world is a trailer
in an empty Georgia field?

Is it the brittle skeleton
crouched doorless on the corner
peering out from under wisteria?

Or the angry shirtless man
whose door swings cock-eyed
on a single rusty hinge?

His bottom step is broken.
The cinder blocks were stolen
so, he can't reach the ground.

I heard he shot his mom.
and when it's dead silent
and everyone's working

I can hear him scream.
Instead of school, I wander
through crawl spaces

looking for that stray dog
and her puppies, making a pact with
my brother not to tell a soul.

Maybe poverty is more like the sound
of a hollow beer can— no curtains
just an echo and movement under your feet.

Side Yard

Here I haul a harvest
that I gather and claw
from the eroding creek walls
buckets of creamy blue clay.

Barefoot and shirtless a mile or more
scoring the ground as I go.
Little filth trawler spinning a cloud
making auburn hair from Georgia dust.

In the side yard, I am a potter
in the sticks and the leaves.
I collect an armor of freckles
in the sunbeams of the canopy.

There I work the muddy treasure into
a clumsy bent bowl for my mother.
It's embedded with twigs
but I imagine it smooth and pristine.

All day and all night, I dry it atop
the metal compressor box
and wait for the pot to transform
but my side yard isn't sunny enough.

Not bright like in her pictures
to Eastern airlines. Her face
full of warmth and radiance.
She didn't get that job.

She was too tall, too much baggage.
Her roots are here;
she just doesn't know it.
At sunup, I run with my offering

—but my little clay pot breaks to bits.

The Little White Girl Complains *for Pauline*

In fifth grade, my stepmother pulled me
from the clay creek, washed my hair and
dressed me in penny loafers and blouses.

In a new school, I writhed and wiggled
in stiff corduroy, tags abrading my neck
belts cinching sweaters at my waist.

I never chose my clothing.
“You’d be prettier with long hair; wear this!”
I missed my overalls crusted with dirt.

My teachers glowed with compliments
“You always look so nice!” Sean sent me love notes
and ate crayons to impress me.

My classmate Pauline seemed like a woman
—tall, with short hair, knee-length dresses.
She could have passed for a teacher.

We never spoke, but one day in the girl’s bathroom
she snatched me up by the neck
“Who do you think you are, little rich girl?”

Did I fight back or keep my mouth shut?
I only remember the shock
and avoiding the bathroom.

I told my stepsister, who told my teacher.
All those folks said I didn’t have to worry
anymore, then Pauline seemed to disappear.

But the next year, in sixth grade, I saw her pass
in the hall, her folders drawn up
to her chest like a shield.

She saw me but didn’t look; her wrath
replaced by some other kind of hurt.
I thought it was probably grown-up stuff.

Even the Losers

When mom switched to insurance sales
we got a fancy house in Clearwater.
It had a white shag rug and a parlor.

It even had a screened-in pool
with a jacuzzi that stayed green
after mom dumped the pool guy.

I spent hours in my bedroom
cutting up old magazines –*Vogue*
Cosmo and *Better Homes and Gardens*.

I made a wall-sized mosaic
of women and perfect kitchens.
I glued it there—permanently.

My cousin Stacey loved this house.
We'd scale the trellis to drink wine
among palm trees and streetlamps.

Stacey lived in a tiny home
in southside St. Pete, where decades
of school pictures hung on the walls.

By the next year, I was in a new
school district but returned to small
claims court. Sitting next to my mom

I answered their questions about
wall damage, ruined carpet and
algae in the jacuzzi.

Pulled Pork

The children forget, as mouths
devour history, pulled from the bone.

Women's hands glisten in its greasy fat.
With bent country knuckles, they pick

and cackle like birds above a carcass
—the slow, dirty work of separating.

Smoke pits permeate the Deep South.
How do I return a recipe to its owner?

Handywoman

Greasy and bent over in repair
she tenderly saves machines
from the rubbish.

Fixing bent, broken pieces, she
rescues motorcycles, gas stoves
even coffee makers.

When taskless, her loving hands
only hold one another, because
to belong here in rural Georgia

she's survived years of being called
crazy. "She ain't right," they say
and tote over their idea of a lady

hoping she'll repair it.

Ancestors

This same tongue, thick, velvety, soft
repeats love, lies with a southern drawl.

Our ancestors say they're too poor
to discover new words.

We tip our hat to the neighbor, but rocking
to and fro, the brittle porch cracks.

Will we ever look out on the field
and reckon with the spirits?

A Southern Women's Circle

It'd be a sewing circle if it were 1920
hiding gin under our skirts
between our thighs

twisting threads and needling stories.
Laughter rising like dough in the kitchen.
Here Sarah tells us what Casey will do for sex.

Taylor giggles with a wicked grin, cheeks
glowing red, disclosing the dozens of boys
she kissed —and then some.

Aunt Debbie says, "Oh girl, that ain't nothing
lemme tell ya where he tried to stick it!"
and we roar, folding over at the waist.

As the young'uns mouths fall in fascinated
horror, the men pass by to chat but they're
outsiders, mocked or ignored.

Aunt Jo hollers
— *Pour your bourbon and get!*

Cornbread

My mother's script
crumpled, grease-stained
with a torn edge.

A doctrine of measuring cups
and pans, clattering
chaotic from the cupboard.

The fork echoes on glass
and the whisk suggests to the bowl
"Everything spills over the lip"
— but remember

sieved flour and salt tenderly
indent with the pressed finger
and become coarse with meal
— fold gently.

The beaten egg binds.
Sour the milk for taste
combine all things
— scrape.

The cast iron pan screeches
across the oven rack.
Add the batter, it should sizzle
— bake.

It's a chemical process
precise amounts in perfect order
or you invent something
— entirely different.

BEAUTY

After All, It Is Spring

There is a violent asunder
to all dead things
—trees stripped, rotting
peeling, crusty lichen.

There is a longing for a house
where the sun burns morning
squares of light on the floor
and turns the room amber.

For the shadows to relinquish
this dark winter cabin.
For every shade of bland
be released from its prison.

To hear this single-born thrushling
in this burgeoning world
high up in its perch.

Personal Care

I clean your feet with no physical space
between your soft arches and my rented grip.

I labor in debridement, the remnants on the floor
of being human. Down here, I know your dirty soles

whereabouts: your crooked gait, fallen arches, warts.
Your feet are too big, toes misaligned, nails malformed.

You speak of profits and losses, degrees of risk chosen
and then nod toward a red polish, phone to your ear.

Sometimes you appear grateful, and sometimes
you tip extra if I pretend not to see or hear.

On Saturday My Last Client is an Esthetician

Lisa asks if my poetry friends
look down on us salon workers.

There is a winter storm warning
and we are finishing up our week.

She chooses electric purple polish
to contrast winter landscapes.

When her nails are done, everything
reflects in the deep glossy finish.

Flesh Dress: Modeling

She never plucks her eyebrows
and never leaves home without a mask.

But they pluck her eyebrows
mess up her hair, dress her in spandex
strange shoes, and a blank face.

“You have a tiny mouth, but it’s perfect.
Your best feature is your ass.
We’re not sure about the freckles.”

“Do you think we should put her
in bed or up against this wall?”

A Photoshoot

Nose to nose, the makeup artist's
hand rests on her cheekbone.
They quietly breathe the same air.

“You have dark circles,” she says.
“How late were you out? You shouldn't party.”

Mitch is eating tuna using the folded
metal lid— protein to feed his investment.

She didn't tell them she shouldn't
be a model; she was just an imposter.

But today, her yoga instructor said
she's got great body awareness
and Mitch is still making music videos.

Youth Waving

It's the side mirror,
her face in the grotesque light.

She adjusts her chin
as the engine turns. In Florida,

her parents exist in a
neat diorama fading

under fluorescent light.
She mourns between shadows

of trees and passing signs,
the girl she never really liked.

Is this Silence?

The binge-breaking moment,
when you turn off the tv
and negotiate static anxiety

You follow vitreous specks
across the fixed shadows
what is this strange place—is this silence?

Or just its ear-ringing absence
hovering amid
the high waves of aircraft
and the low draft of the street

And you think
but don't want to
of everything wrong
in dread and instinct
— a sick sense

of your mother's frail body
and the chemo dripping into your dad
and you visualize each child
and count them
—one, two— upstairs—three—in bed.
Oh, blessed is ignorant sleep!

What disquiet the television hum hides
before it goes blank
when surreal fear awakens
and the cooling plastic cracks in retreat.

Send Away the Chaplain

Almost dying
is not the same as being told you will die
and it is not the same as taking radical measures
to save your life.

It's more like
watching a bullet graze your arm or
hearing about an avalanche on the trail
you didn't take.

By the time you
realize the danger, there is none.
Sure, you almost died, but you'll be fine
— like the rest of us.

Still, on the fourth floor
after visiting hours have ended
you'll open your phone and look up
pulmonary embolism:

*a blockage of an artery in the lungs
causes lung damage, faintness, coughing up blood
one-third of people with a PE won't survive*

and the hollow room begins to stink
of chemical and plastic.

Rebuilding Everything from Scratch

I hear his voice echoing
from his office down the hall.

The meeting sounds serious.
“We took everything we had

isolated one line, erased the rest
and used it to build a new system.”

The other engineers sit in silence
slowly digesting the idea of erasure.

It’s both brilliant and terrifying, imagine
taking only a child from a failed marriage

or a single metaphor from a lengthy essay
hitting delete or walking out the door.

In a Dark Wood

If I ever make another home
it will sit high on a grassy hill
where the sea consumes the sun.

Or on a dappled plain, door wide
drapes breathing in the windows.
But save me from dark forests

that trades sunlight for shade.
Where timbers rot on the mossy floor
mixing the living with the dead.

A canopy of bugs, incessant robins
and screaming cowbirds.
They love the decomposing.

As the setting sun seeps
through woody fingers
mosquitos flank my ankles

and brown bats dash my head. Yes
instead, I'd be the red-tailed hawk
gliding above this canopy.

On Translation

Walking through the Ipswich watershed
I tell him, “When we translate a Ma Yong Bo poem
we spend an hour discussing the significance of
wheat, reed, cattail, bamboo, and grass.” But he
doesn’t care for poetry. He says:

“The cattail is a genius form
superior engineering.
It’s concrete biomimicry.
A tower of this narrow height
wouldn’t stand, and if it stood, it

would not bend with the wind but break.”

A Love Poem
for Wolfgang

He is the pause
I am missing
—no um, no uh.

Scapula down
gentle shoulders
—curve open.

“I hear you,” he says.
Driving the same road
—every day.

Hiding my birthday cake
in a paper bag
—decade after decade.

Bed

I spent decades in the
catcher's mitt of familiar men.

Using my back as a partition
to fold around my heart.

Now the grooves in the pine
floor are carved like little lakes.

I'm mellow in his climate.
Sometimes I sleep in his breath

and sometimes I wake him
just between consciousness and sleep.

In the morning, the quilts are
a shelter to avoid life.

February is the Longest and Shortest Month of the Year

The sky looms heavy
like a skeleton heaving
sandbags on its skull.

The February calendar
is a bingo card
— no numbers called.

I've heard freckles and
happiness fade without warmth,
long days and sunshine.

Maybe it's me, but he has
pillows stacked on his head
and won't get up.

The Clouds Move, First Nothing Changes, then Suddenly Everything is New.

Suddenly, you're so tall and witty
I remind myself you're just twelve.

Curls cover your eyes and sometimes
I use my hands to reveal your face.

On Tuesday, you're annoyed by this;
on Thursday, you don't seem to care.

When I ask, "want to cut it," you shake it
loose and return to your phone.

Evaporating

Under pressure, frozen puddles shatter
mere gas bubbles with a hollow underworld
splintering into irregular edges and shards
—jump, stomp, crunch.

An audible deconstruction
of the fragile crust, then an Arctic gust
might scatter and spin the puzzle
blown about in the grass.

When the clouds' part on the playground
and the spring sun softens the earth
the sod becomes sponge
and the melt-mixed mud clings
to tough little shoes.

Hopscotch, tag, duck-duck-goose
pressing wet prints on the pavement.

By night—evaporating.
Who promised you anything more?