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These poems, in part, seek to explore our world by means of employing various personas and multiple environments. They attempt to examine the relationship between our inner landscapes and the external geographies in which we cultivate them.

ABSENT ORCHARD

by

Claudia McQuiston

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APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved of by the following committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair _____

Committee Members _____

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
To the Blue Hour.....	1
I.....	2
Dear Orion.....	3
What to ask for, what to keep.....	4
After a death	5
Suppose.....	6
Lament	8
Nighttime on the 49.....	9
II.....	11
In my past life.....	12
The Seamstress	13
Off a highway in the middle of winter	15
Like lightning.....	16
Hudson Ghazal	17
At the end of a season.....	18
III	19
Summer Sketches	20
IV	23
Circe Approaches Old Age.....	24

Hickey	26
In my next life	27
Nomads	28
When he left,	29
Spring, North Carolina	30
V	31
At dawn	32
Daughter	33
Like rain	34
Lament in which nothing's lost	35
Song for Fall.....	36
Elegy for myself.....	37

To the Blue Hour

Take me there—

these stop signs show
no hint of parting.

Their color is muted, dull—
rust on a doorframe,

the copper tongue squatting
inside me. These are streets

I turn to. I slink down every dead
end. The lanes are veins

done moving, gray hairs fallen
fast, four pathetic limbs. Help me

discover the moon: that scrap
of potato skin. Tonight fireflies

dine, their bellies burst,
sockets of gold—

the power plant fumes.
Wings of the bug blink & flicker,

swim over grass, on roofs
of silver houses, the gravel gathering

like broken teeth. August has
its arpeggios. My body stands up straight.

And then. The sky puts
its lamplights back on.

I.

Dear Orion

As a girl
I ran

I followed you
Blue avenues

A tar stain
On jeans

Men yelled
What are you

Looking at
On the subway

I counted stops
Cracked tiles

The tracks intersected
Like shoelaces

I wanted to tie around
My finger

O to point
To what I found

A yellow belt
Apartment window

A neon light
I keep hunting

My body stuck
Against the ground

What to ask for, what to keep

Each night

Each harmonica inside each train

The hundred sedans on the highway

Your shape as it uncurls

The gate where the honeysuckle spools, how it spills over steel, over ivy

The birch bark roasting off trees

How soft you speak

The stars nodding in their white caskets, as they do not yawn, as we yawn,
as we wander back in our sheets

My fingers, your fingers, our palms

That flock of birds

This place where you lie across me

After a death

I'm watching bread glow
in the orange oven like a chest.

Dear brother, I write, you can't come back.

The breeze is not caroling with you.
There are no simple things, no sprigs,

though this earth is round
and the mountains have untied their sutures.
Though birds in their canopies are building nests.

I plant no roses.
No perennials wind up on time,
my nails just break.

It's been like this for years:
the rain stays and then goes

like our bodies have gone through houses.
You used to sit in a car with your blinkers on

as I got ready.
You were waiting in the driveway
on a night similar to this one.

And I ran to tell you I was there.

Suppose

the winter never came
and the ice we glide on,
those quick conveyor belts,

vanished beneath us
one afternoon forever.
The icicles that point to the ground

lay broken,
and suppose the mint air
had put its silver beads away.

Tell me
you see it too, the highway roads
no longer dripping

as if with sweat. No cars
caked in white shards
of snow, no clouds

rising from our throats
as if they were made
of raw cotton.

Suppose glaciers were warm caves
where we could hide,
and the lizards left

the molten shores where they sleep.
Imagine their green feet
roaming in our pastures,

the palm trees
always sweeping our sky
from its dust.

You will not miss
the foggy cold,
the music that plays

when the wind slides itself
onto windows during the night
when you're dreaming

of another place.
You won't believe
there was a time

when the world went gray,
and nobody
wanted to keep it.

Lament

What vanishing purple of leaves did you rain
upon me?

There were nights we slept in my basement.

Each crack in the wall showed a moon: a hard thing
I could not count on,

a calloused hand

reached for me like I was dust.
It has been years since we parted and you have a name.

Back then, I said it. Back then I wanted too much.

Nighttime on the 49

Crackle, the smell of shale

On limestone, linoleum. This city we grew up in.

Fission. As if the ache could be found and cured,

Called *lovely* like one calls the moon.

The cars in the light of the moon.

The geese fly away from Ontario.

So you have come and gone, sunk in

Like salt & wisteria, the seasons changing:

I could never live without snow.

Your voice is diamonds, damp leaves,

A chain below the fence.

The grate on 65th Street sways.

Once I swore I could put off death

By running your thumb

Over my bitten lips. Yet our knees rattled

Sweetly in theatres. How do banks sit still by their rivers?

The streetlamps on Pike keep going off.

To walk, to cross, to taste this delicacy—

You wait by the side of the road,

Your jacket looked blue on this bus.

What trickles down but rain on the ocean,

The slow run of hands against sleet,
And blood springing up to the heart.

II.

In my past life

I wanted nothing.
Like a common weed.
I wasn't hungry. I took
what was handed to me:
bread & milk & so on.
My heart in its case
only thudded all day long as I put pictures
into wooden frames.
My good mother. My brave father.
The usual light on my face.

The Seamstress

What breaks
 but the loose pin & thread,

 my tired needle?
Somehow I tie

you to me, take
 the last remainder:

 your drawn lips,
 coarse sediment,

 this din dying down.
I repair the broken

all day anyway:
 tell fables, twist twine.

 I steam your body
 clean, hold you up

in this red light.
 I watch the hooks

 keep their promise:
 the eye always bound

 to surrender. Darling, you wear
these plackets well, shine

 the rust off buttons,
 my pearls, my single set

 of teeth, awls
 that I sharpen

at nighttime. I look
 for myself in each mirror,

I see my tightened
filaments. The lace frays.

Always the stitch
splitting with us.

Off a highway in the middle of winter

Fields like bright hands
as they open

as fingers burn

blank hill pasture

satin spun into sheets

your mouth
was my fiery bird

at the stoplight you flew
into me

Like lightning

You can see it—

the bronze factory, the face of sunset huge,
nowhere near us.

We take the gray roads twice
& white them out again. Seams on our sides burn.

Can you count the fallen houses?

Storm doors now lead to cellars, caverns
I found my way from years ago,

when the sky was washed out like a sheet.
I was so good

at watching through windows.
Then you lit that black match for me.

Hudson Ghazal

The first night you found me we drove toward the river.
Your hands smelled like cigarettes. You blamed the river.

You cradled my fingers like I was your spider.
So I built a web. Each strand was a river.

Your mouth formed an oval, a rind ripe for peeling.
Clementines shrank like pruned thumbs in the river.

We swam toward the light blinking out from the city.
As we sunk in the mud, we said *This is our river.*

I trailed you to train stations, to closed supermarkets.
You knew what you wanted: a stone in the river.

I measured the length of your arms: hooks that
caught me. Once there were fish in every river.

Your breath in my ear was a car going faster. I saw
blue streaks and branches. Air hung by the river.

In basements you whispered *Claudia, can you
hear the rain?* All of it fell, like dimes on the river.

At the end of a season

You speak & I always answer.

I give you the black rocks
inside me, my hardened rind,

what you roll your hands
slowly over. This life has set

its parameters. A calyx breaks
into thoughtless leaves:

we slip pins in our blisters.
We can't avoid that. We press

our skin to the sky and wish
we were somehow less brittle.

The hallways we move through
are bare. Un-gardened.

In this silent world I can hear you.

III.

Summer Sketches

I felt it—

the blinking eye,
wind

like curtains closing, one hand

that hardly held us.

*

Buds on their stems went in baskets.

Leaves clung to branches
like answers to questions I didn't ask.

*

The light just fades.
I saw no gray ephemera,

no gardens,

there were no shards of broken sun.

*

& mockingbirds repeat their tiny cries,

calling our names,
what we answer to:

*

Before,

catastrophes would shine.
Sweat stains would sink

on the pillow.

*

On nights we walked
through grasses, in pastures.

I lit up lanterns everyday.

*

My hands grow softer.

Knobs I neglect
once needled you through—

*

I had no dreams of your face,
of these buds,

the branches grasping the air like a harness,

the air around us a cape.

*

You told me to lie on the ground.

The sun hung off your shoulders.

*

& mockingbirds spread their slate wings:

the clouds still part.

We searched for answers in the trees.

*

In another life,

I was plenty.

I was the wind.

I was the white spring
you drank from.

IV.

Circe Approaches Old Age

My hands
are not
my hands,

my face
no golden
empire. I lost

my errant urges.
I hear no voices
fork the air

like fat I once tried
to render: my nails
are too furry with mold.

They look like beaks
of fallen vultures,
what picked bones

as if they were flesh
yet stuffed them down
the gullet, the throat

just a warm tube
of cloth, harmless
as men I clawed

my way to. I was graceful
about it: I mended
their unglued hearts,

dusty as aging asphodel
and almost as white.
I'm not scared

of the dead, chains
my feet skip over,
boring as mourning

doves. My hands
are not my hands.
But when I lick

my fingers
they still taste
like honey.

Hickey

Splash of wine, the mottled dots
of code. A stain that sunk like a lesion,
this centipede found sleeping.
Even your teeth kept me warm.
Who says the world isn't raw
& so plentiful? I counted your freckles.
I measured their lonely diameters,
leaves that could fall no further,
stark as stones on the road.
I craned my neck, it was nighttime,
December. I saw your breath;
the tiny lights shone.

In my next life

I'll make mistakes.

I won't speak
of rain, how the bells
from my door keep calling.

I won't listen.

I won't examine the trees,
the leaves they manufacture,
red cloth in pieces on the street.

I won't take them into my arms.

I won't ask what falls to stay.

Nomads

What we had
 wilted quickly—

lilies lay like stars
 on the earth,
poplars could not

be burned. It was
 the same path
we kept taking: a song

of boulders, the sticks
 never getting
straighter. Each night

we shivered in furs,
 we saw the grasses
flattening. I was

your flightless bird.
 When you held
me to your chest

I said nothing,
 you fed me
no worms, only ice

from salted waters.
 The mountains
would melt in the dark.

So now I wander
 in absent orchards,
I reach for stems,

for fallen fruit,
 the leaves as they rise
up to meet me.

When he left,

I ran my hands through water.

It felt like the hard shell of a mollusk, like a fish hook, or aluminum.

I lost my earrings in our sheets.

His keys I placed in a basket.

The dogs went howling in their cabins like cartoons.

I gave my name to strangers.

The sun vanished.

There was even a hue when the wind flew past my face.

It seemed like the sky became purple.

It looked like a wide bruise on a peach.

I had this need to drive past frozen boulevards.

I noticed stores without awnings.

There were no bells.

The signs would not light up.

Spring, North Carolina

Wind scrapes the tiny roof.
And green bridges.

Grass stains too bright
to die. Sick things bleed out
but we seal our mouths

to stop them, each time you knock
on my window

I hear the morning breathe
in, see the sun

crawl, your hands hot
on my back. I used to mind
them. The wilderness
goes on as if no harm could be done.

So I'm tempted.
What more can I say?

That my body like hills will cave.

V.

At dawn

What can I make of my thumbs,
white asters, weeds on my way to the door—
in the half-light I'm counting trees.
I see the backyard raise
its knobby fists. The sun like a scar,
the sun lifting up its ladle. I used to wonder
about heat. I used to watch
my chest sink in the burly grass
and think it mattered. When the earth went dark,
I thought I would too. I wanted just to be glowing
when the sky turned itself into pink.
Strange and fettered, I've spent
my life in jars, putting myself in cabinets
as the honeyed world gleams, as the rocks
rust in their sodden beds. It is not yet warm
enough out. There are no circling birds,
no worm gets up and rises. There are fences.
There is this light that I want to keep.

Daughter

First I found
 goldfinches

hidden in hemlock,
 their nest hung

in bramble,
 white birch branch—

things I thought
 were taken,

a stone thrown
 from some saint

looking to light
 my last waltz.

I plucked spare
 plumes & left

them in pockets:
 two wings

of my own, what
 I could count on.

When I get away
 I'll go south.

Later, I saw the chick
 chase after a cricket.

Her feathers flew far
 from my hand.

Like rain

on the windows on the tiny set of trees
 on the diner above the window's ledge
I could hear our breathing climb up and fall down again
 the accordions inside our ribs inflate unraveling now
on rooftops those silky copper streaks the glass in windows
 a splattering we used to wander in the heat the wind
we shimmered brightly those urges those flames
 the taxis' razor lightning across the tarnished street
 the lamps like birds on those nights we ran so swiftly
there was thunder neon world now take us back

Lament in which nothing's lost

Opulent sky,
show me what I can take.

The seagulls circle like silver ships.
Trains conduct their bleak symphonies

at no request. In a factory,
there is no silk that black pins won't stop
pushing into. I'm never done

walking through rooms, sleeping
soundly in the mouth of the famished night.
There I go,

imagining the brutal world
& all of its gray machinations. The airplane

twinkling in its flight. How typically
it lands on the tarmac.

Song for Fall

As they go. As the branches go.

As the branches unravel their braids,

Gold braids, gold braids that burn by my feet.

Branches I used to hold as the leaves float,

As the leaves go slowly backwards in the light,

As if they're finished sleeping.

As if the branches might melt in the grass

And the sun is too strong to sink. As dirt sinks.

As the sky was a marvelous thing I couldn't hold.

As the wind had swum in the light before me,

Burning though all the black grasses.

As I cut both my braids. As the sun

Lets everything show. As the branches must go.

As leaves fell bright at my feet.

Elegy for myself

I'm sure I will not live forever,
embrace the slow
 & coming years,

the blonde which grows back
 after 2 days, resilient
as things I like:

your cackle, the light always at 5:15,
 the light whiting out the houses.

Imagine how Galileo went blind.
He sketched a code asleep in the stars,

 plain as water off the coast,
what shines like string,
 a blue lariat.

 I've mapped that shape
against my whole body.

When my vessels go soft,
 I won't grieve for this earth.