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The poems in *The City Skirts* are concerned with the ways in which the urban landscape informs the identity and personal narratives of the speaker. Deeply involved in the acts of observation and association, the speaker in these poems is constantly looking to the urban landscape for guidance, for answer, for reason for the personal and unreasonable.

THE CITY SKIRTS

by

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APPROVAL PAGE

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

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## **What Places, Things**

A drink of something. Not tea, sky. You ask for the sky  
In a shade of purple. A pickup truck and I, you say I

Must write the particulars. A certain word, at least one  
Time, all sand and aster. And I ask what. We make us

With these things. Between here and Ohio. Not the sky,  
Your pickup. Purple then, a thin thread. Laced to the town

We fled with CB radios. It's me. Two blocks from the East  
River, a man curses in Polish and sleeps. Splintered chairs

And box spring, a broke down Toyota where a house  
Should stand. Once I crept close enough to touch the water-

Stained upholstery, but wrote you instead. Once you called  
Just to read me a poem. The poem begins with margaritas,

A man in New York and a woman. In Virginia, it ends  
With stars. Something about earrings, grapes. The color

Over the river. Just before the sun slips, it's you. I always  
Answer. Revise the love story, where. A lake skirts

The places we paint, thirsty and orange. This is how we know  
The other. We hedge our bets with the sky. We call it geography.

I.

### **Notes from the Missing**

The woman next door has pushed a fence of plastic tulips into the dirt again. We're nearer to bees now than winter. If anyone asks, tell them cold graces my radiator like a canary. Tell them everything. Should you need me, build a dollhouse and bury a cello. And every February, please, light a candle in the far corner of the church on 51<sup>st</sup>. Tell them the red scarf Allison sent still smells like Zanzibar tea.

## Near Elegy

What we did for a cup of coffee. That first November  
in Cleveland, snowbanks the size of us, and you  
wore your hair in pigtails. Not two weeks ago you said  
you want to kill yourself again. We were baking spinach pie.  
I remember the mornings radio static mixed  
with the squalled ache of the alarm, the blankets pulled tight  
over your head, slow wheeze of bus after bus off the curb outside.  
Nothing could wake you then. And when you did not answer  
yesterday, I waded into hours, all the green bottles ditched  
in a stream. That is no way to die. Last July you said you believe  
life falls under two categories— things that are vanilla almond  
and things that are maple pecan. You tell me now the days after  
your death will be like any other. The day you dyed my hair  
in the bathroom. It was a Friday. We ate peppermint ice cream  
while we waited for the color to take.

## **You Ask How I**

Am always one bird. Am the first fray. Am ribbons traded  
in airfields. Am sequence fixed to concrete. Am hinted but  
twice. Am rare. Am archive. Am everyday before mayflies  
thatched the nest. Am documents roughly pinned. Am radios  
hooked as bait. Am squeeze toy decoy. Am one electric eye-  
liner, binder, crinoline. Am winged. Am waistlines cast in  
subtext. Am freshly hunted fox tooth. Am scented letters  
to the new hero. Am bathtub songs. Am tremolos clocked  
inside mailboxes. Am stamped. Am maps folded into one  
thousand ways home. Am a fire, red door. Am tin ceilings  
in a port city. Am safe. Am no false crow. Am cheating  
architecture. Am those rooftop flower pots. Am almost  
sorry. Am how? Am tied to your engine. Am are? Am not.  
Am you? Am no lullaby. Am after fine medicine.

## Maps To My Home

1.

The gravel lot is as near as you are  
to the remains of a textile mill.  
A forest grows up from the mill's center.  
Render a familiar hollow foreign.

2.

We argue about the shape of the collarbone  
just to feel the collarbone.  
It's June. The bird neglects the tree.  
I miss the abandoned factories.  
Pretend to leave me.

3.

If I am the tree, you are the bird's wing.  
There is a tear in the sleeve of my dress.  
Bare the direction from there.

## After

that autumn every girl practiced pinning moth wings  
into corkboard            each wing she dreamed  
was the skin of an eyelid    pinned open    a pair

of scissors pointed at her head    that autumn  
every girl cut the locks off her hair    turned mirrors  
into shadow boxes and light    she'd walk

with hot bulbs in her hands if it meant a garden  
would keep her    safe this time    that autumn  
after she was raped    every girl practiced being

a museum    a vine shorn from the season    one breath  
and bricks to sound bells            every girl pinned  
together    a cobbled shelter    a church wall

## **Power Failure**

And nothing to light the sirens. The body half-buried  
in the gravel. Yes, she struggled. And still the pitch  
landscape is inside. What animal will kick up the last  
of the weather? Won't you find me a candle to hunt  
the eye, the memory, the mouth of the thing.

II.

## **Rape**

Some nights it's easier to bury myself in juniper  
than to remember the road where first he asked you  
if he could get a cigarette

### **Walk-In Testing**

When the man pricks her finger she thinks  
of the fountain in the flower shop, fresh-cut marigolds  
sewn to the scales of a fish. She understands the flowers  
as three shades lighter than a tiny drop of blood  
on a plastic stick. Mouth permanently agape, the fish  
heaves water into an organ-shaped pool of loose change.  
Someone wished on an old subway token. The man  
drops a rubber glove into a can and leaves her  
skimming the ceiling for fishhooks.

## **Each Spring**

Off the potted tree in her  
tiny wrought iron lined  
courtyard, a woman  
vacuums a fist of brown  
stiff leaves. Her skirt pockets  
stuffed with white tissue.

## **Snow in North Miami**

See where the sky unravels the inside of a quilt.  
Unfold the blanket and lay your head down.  
Further down the beach a woman spins her arms  
in the air and screams. Seagulls funnel around her.  
Maybe she's a propeller on a plane, descending.  
The pink and yellow houses, the run-down stucco,  
how many strip clubs did you count today?  
What names did you invent to explain the colors  
in the ocean? You know who you are looking for  
and you are looking in all the wrong places.  
When they found her she was already a room  
you could see through. When the last fist closed in,  
when his hands had finished shaking, the world  
turned over and it fell down all around you.

## **Just This**

One small spoonful  
of ice cream, then  
another. The carton  
on the counter, a clock,  
the cordless telephone.  
She'd like a coupon  
for the good shampoo.  
Maybe the Sunday  
paper. Maybe tomorrow  
her daughter will call  
with better news. She  
turns the spoon over  
on her tongue. The fridge  
clicks into a hum.

## Self Portrait, Polaroid

the train tracks a sign belled into red a paper cup  
turned up in the crux of a curb a wall part concrete  
part collapse look up and over the over-saturated sky

extend the arm and pinch a button black the grass  
where grass and steel what letters name a misplaced  
corner seam of a sleeve a fleck of skin some hair

pulled loose a single frame laid out in the light dulled  
white and into focus you've gone where you thought  
you'd rather be you're all graffiti no girl

## Post Trauma

The girls hold each other up.  
Cameras blacken and turn the fire  
engines quiet.

    An ambulance stalls.

When I see the yellow tape cross the stairs  
into the station, I become part of the tallest building,  
steady the sun on the sidewalk. Moths rummage  
the stomach. The eye strains  
sand from water. Sounds

                    come from boys

braced against a blue mailbox.

I almost do not believe. They are whispering  
about me. They are saying something  
about the devil. And not a word  
about the boy who dared to climb a train.

III.

## **Tattoo**

More than the fenced-in parking lot  
freckled with a thousand cigarettes  
flicked out over the rocks not far  
from the cars tagged on the tracks  
in this part of town that is the same  
part of town in every town where I  
in my red dress and tall shoes pencil  
myself into the image where you flick  
another cigarette into the lot which has  
nothing to do with the nights last summer  
we slept in the same bed and fought on  
sidewalks all over this town near this shop  
where now a man needles pink and red  
flowers to the inside of your arm while I  
sit and watch my nails tear bits of skin off  
my plain body I thought it would hurt more

## To Solve for X

Subtract  
the holiday  
oranges. Divide  
laundry.  
Detergent.  
Delicate. Spare.  
Blame slack-eye  
on the late train  
and absolute zero  
caffeine. Factor  
a clean suit, a shirt, a tie  
by suggestion. Distance  
body from body. Distinguish  
tongue from lolly. Punch,  
Sucker.

## The First of Hunting Season

The deer strung to the bed of the truck appear hollow already.  
But I cannot trace the wound or blood trail, nor can I gauge  
the yard of the hunter's bullet. The way a buck quakes

as if at fault, does he? Tell me, how deep into the brush  
does he stagger before he falls?

We are far now from the fields

where last I killed a swarm of flies. Stiff wings to ground,  
legs shriveled across the body, I found them on the living room floor,  
the windowsill, window opened to a screen. Each fly a reprieve

from the dishes you dropped in the kitchen, a little tremor,  
a trip over nothing in the hallway.

The books and brochures

say "clumsiness" and "indifference" are the first signs.  
You never mentioned, then, the disease.  
I read you will forget me.

I am on a road in West Virginia. After all this time  
let me touch nothing that's living.

## **The Alarm**

The city leaks. Swarms, rats.  
And men under a bloated sky  
tower. The heroine crouches  
behind trash heaps. Gloves  
and ash. A baby slighted of  
oxygen still bleats inside her.  
Dark rooms. Where some light  
blue thing is always. On fire.  
No sign of her. No sign of her  
lover at the window. She drops  
into flood waters sipped by bodies.  
A claw drags a man and a woman  
off a ruptured island. Rats scatter.  
Across a pocked street the heroine  
kneels next to a spider. A web.  
She begs the legs to spin her into  
silks to smother the alarm. Sever  
from her hand another finger for  
the feast of a dead king. She will  
not rest. Rest until she finds him.

## Visitor

Where the street rushed with four days of rain—  
she remembers. Near the gas station, a river, surge

at the mouth of the sewer. The city swells from setting  
to subject. And harder to place— the space from his shoulder

to her shoulder, as he walked, with her then, under the white  
streetlights, the turn of his face toward her face, darker than grass

the exact shade of green in his eye. The door to his apartment,  
the days damp layer of clothes. The two of them almost

where once she was home. And the next morning,  
her suitcase in his hand, the last spit of rain on his glasses.

### **For the New Moon**

All October carefully spackle the fissures  
where screws large as telephone poles  
grow through the walls of your new life.  
Scale counter and fridge to scrub the last  
greasy boil off the kitchen paper. Try to eat  
but find tofu unbearable, lettuce limp. Then  
drive for two days in search of tomatoes,  
purple onion, cucumbers, the produce stand  
with the good limes. You'll find him there  
pricing fresh greens. What else can he do?  
With Saturn opposed to your sun, the whole  
world's gone mobile. Be wary the Gemini  
when he's rising. Hold your face over the kettle  
when you cry. Everything rusts in this transit  
and you've only just scoured the sink.

## Casual Dating

Across the bar the jukebox digital eye  
skips to C85. Guitar riffs a good tonic

swig and I start the story over. There's us  
dancing in Dad's apartment. No, see this

is about my sister and I. Five dress sizes  
too little to know where table lamps crash,

we wore the audiotape thin. Our parents  
already split *should I stay or should I*

Here your hand runs the grain of the bar  
towards mine *if I stay it will be*

Pass the open matchbook. You've never been  
to London and you're going. Now fidget

with the straw in my drink, I think I could love  
your hand on my knee. Neon signs quiver

and faint below The Clash. *Darling* you mouth  
the words like you're going to kiss me.

I've left this town by Greyhound so many times  
I could draw you the stink of each exit *should I?*

## **Expectations**

Music drills the wall.

The wall is without portrait, textures,  
without frame. Not even a bed's carved edge  
touches the wall and still the wall rattles,  
a low note. Metal hum. The bass, an iron lung.

Hands, now. A man's hands etch the spine,  
my spine. His questions about the days that follow  
sound like stories, calendars, a long drive home. I answer

there were girls who worked in the market. Behind glass  
counters, glass cases. Chilled tongue, liver, lamb. Their eyes

blue slate and I never once heard them sing or speak.  
There was a radio by the register and all summer

cockroaches climbed the pipes to the apartment upstairs,  
found a way in through a hole in the wall.

## **The Querent Dreams the Seven of Swords**

Under this city's patchwork canopies is a woman  
he won't want to miss. She isn't you, though her face

assembles a mirror. Without her he'll believe himself yellow—  
yellow as the ground, as his best shirt. As everything ripe

for the running. And when the backyard chorus breaks in  
to quarrel, he'll insist he ruined the grass, your lungs

and the stitching. Eyes closed he'll know how little  
he can carry, the red shoes on his feet and five swords

dragged from the dirt in his hands. Try to touch him  
or don't. Devine a yes or a no and a door locks at the hinge.

In the morning admit the lime tastes vanilla. He's left you  
the dishes, the last two swords, and the dog, fast, asleep.

## **Luck**

I lived above a meat market then  
and every morning I walked  
seven minutes to the closest train,  
slowing at the lot where cranes  
stretched into the sky, which was  
often grey, but sometimes blue and  
when the sky was blue it was easier  
to make peace with the new concrete  
slabs of a high-rise over the bakery,  
where if I was lucky and the sun was  
right, I could see through the metal  
slats in the door, more than fifty loaves  
on a conveyor and anyway I was always  
late to get where I was going because  
I thought those cranes were beautiful.  
This was before I knew you. And now  
wherever I am, some other girl is  
living my life.