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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A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of the Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro
2007

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Date of Acceptance by Committee
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Grateful acknowledgement is made to the editors of the following journals in which some of these poems have appeared, or are forthcoming:


*The Greensboro Review*: “Post Trauma”

My best thanks to my parents and my sister, Mara. To my teachers, especially Stuart Dischell for his patient reading and rereading of these poems, and Thomas Sayers Ellis for knowing from the beginning. To my close friends and close readers in workshop. To Allison Cox, Jesse Floyd, Jessica Cox, Erin Bittman, Jessica Ratigan, and Josh Baugher— I am so grateful that once we lived in the same city at the same time.
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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 51st. 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

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.
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 lolli. 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 shrunken 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 into 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.