

GRAY, WHITNEY D., M.F.A. *What Remains*. (2011)
Directed by Prof. Stuart Dischell. 36pp.

This thesis is a collection of poems written during two years of study at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro M.F.A. writing program. This collection of poems explores the creation (and destruction) of identity by locations, trauma and circumstance.

WHAT REMAINS

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
2011

Approved by

Committee Chair

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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Concessions

Take my home—the green house
on the hill. With it, you can have
the dry flowerbeds and stubborn
magnolia trees. I don't need my mother's
gardenias, my father's bread.

You can have the foggy mountains,
the temperamental rainstorms. Keep summer.
I offer cherry blossom trees and shade.
Leave with the Oconee River, keep its mud
caked red under your fingernails. Let the quiet
steel mill haunt you. Everything belongs
to you now—speckled battlefields,
silent bell towers and steeples.

I live with pollen in my lungs. My bones
are shaped by broken beds. I no longer need
those things. You can have it all. I give you
what used to weigh me down. The burden

of memory is yours. I collected what was necessary:
the sparrows, the light on my face
at dusk, the heat lightning that burst
the yard into flame. What is left

is yours to tend.
Now give me the rest.

Flood

Atlanta, Fall 2009

My mother laughs, but I can hear the fear in her voice.

I imagine her perched on her bed, knees drawn to her chest,
cell phone clenched in her hand. She is looking out the window
through wooden shutters into the rising muddy darkness.

She has almost died in this bed before. It only makes sense
that if the Good Lord changed His mind about the waters,
that she would be washed away in this bed.

*The Lord said He wouldn't use the flood again to destroy the earth,
so I'm not too worried about anything.*

I can see the bloodstain on the mattress, now flipped over,
I can feel the spot burning in my guts,
even now, hundreds of miles away from her.

She is Born Again and looking forward to Judgment Day.
I am reminded I need to hurry up and catch up
so I can make my way with her when the time comes.

*For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west,
so also will the coming of the Son of Man Be.*

I am moaning, uninterested in salvation and gospel.
I am not concerned about the coming rainbows. I want to know
my mother is safe, even if it means she's lost in scripture.

*I will never again curse the ground on account of man,
and I will never again destroy every living thing, as I have done.*

She is unafraid and promises to wait for me. I cannot
return home until the waters clear and recede to the river beds.

Photographs of My Father

My father's face: happy, but
weighted. Not by gravity, not
by the pressure of the mountain air.
Is that regret? I can't see what appears
so bright and centered.
His silhouette fades into the sun-bleached
background of snowcapped peaks.

I think of the photo from our first visit,
how he looked so young. How his grin
revealed no wrinkles or worry.
How his tan arm broke the blank sky
as he swept across the view.
In that gesture, appearing to say

*Can't you see how quickly
life can go cold
like a sun streaking over canyons?*

Ocmulgee River Walk

Macon, Georgia

See the sun? It trails the train
as if pulled by engine.

The sun glides across the sky
drawing long shadows

from each tree. Petals
blanket walkways. From the grass,

red clay emerges.
The train races its reflection

The water is still.
The old paper mill is quiet.

A wail from the train
startles the mockingbirds

in the cherry blossom trees
lining the tracks. They scatter

dip and swoop, peppering
the pink sky with their tiny

bodies. Wings flap without
sound toward a sun

sinking into railroad tracks,
disappearing into the river.

When He Worked at the Mill

He sits with a hundred other workers, heavy
with dirt and old coats. I see his face.

I know I should look into his eyes
but the boys on the front row
demand attention.

They are small—no more
than ten years old—battered
like the men behind them. Their collars are limp
and their shrunken pants reveal their bony ankles.
Look how those dead boys
fold their hands politely on their laps.

Consequences

A tree bends to catch
the light. Splintered,
its branches frayed.

The sun sinks
into mountains. Ears
deaf to the quake.
Bones feel it first.

Breakfast, the Morning After

I crack eggs. I breathe,
feel the wheeze, the splintered rib.
Yolks fall through my fingers.
The whites roll away, release
the yellow. The shells: discarded, useless, brittle.
Fingernails peel the membrane. See?
I can break what's fragile, too. I can see
how one swift turn of the hand
brings force. When the next egg drops,
who can say if it was accident or intent?
I don't know the difference, but I can see
how they are the same.

When It Breaks

These ashy days are somber.
My own reflection startles me.

I wonder why irises turn white
against the blackest pupils.

I would hang each thought of you
from a tree but the sky is too bleak.

Dormant narcissus bulbs rest under
frozen soil. They await the sun. I crave relief.

The particles of memory float and I am
slowly catching fire in the wind.

Burning, I finally learn what it means
to be just like you:

unknowable. No water to put me out.
No cool touch calms this fever.

Funeral

The holly bush is weighted, its branches
drooping to brush ground. Red berries tremble
as though breathing.

In the distance, a machine churns dirt, makes room
to lay the dead to rest. The plots are quiet,
unmoved by this noise. The sun, though high, gives
no heat. A chaplain, bundled in an overcoat,
clumsy with his shivering hands, creases
his sermon. His breath hangs heavy,
ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

A car door slams shut. The bush bursts
into an explosion of color—the berries now scattered
against the sky in a flurry of cardinal wings.

Packing the Estate

Bad news—a phone call
I can't chew, can't
feel in my hands, can't feel tug
on my stomach lining. Where
does this go to dissolve?

I ate the drawer of cutlery,
spared no spoon or spatula. Choked
the cork screw down behind the knives.
My throat: a wide chute, receptacle
of junk drawers, gift shop thimbles and tacks.

It all goes down so smooth: buffalo nickels,
the garden hose, straight razors. Gin
chases marbles, splashes against
the bobbing cue ball in my gut.

I swallowed the knick-knacks—your favorite
porcelain frog, the cat's toy mouse. The cockatiel
tempts me. How would a chirp feel
in my bowels? Little bird, she can preen
in the hand mirror, glazed in my spit.

And I ate the horse, ate the whole thing.
He whinnies, ringing in my ears. My belly
welcomes stamps, hay bales, anything
to soak it all up.

No will left on letterhead. I will
sharpen my teeth, gnaw on your headstone
until I feel full again.

Fables

I.

No matter how much you feed the wolf
he will always return to the forest.

II.

Trees will make a forest.
Trees will make a bow.

III.

If we take all these seeds and we bury them fast
we'll pray they take root, give buds, shoot grass.

IV.

If everyone's a structure, where our own savior sits,
then I'm an empty storm cellar with no one living in it.

When the River Rises

I've known rivers and clay
that stains palms. I've learned
when the river rises, it is time
to pack up and move on.

The retaining walls around my home
cannot stop what rises. They know
slick hills bring water and damage.
Waterlines make themselves known.

Each garden trench washed out.
The water engulfs shingles and rafters.
Waves beat against the chimney.

Mold has bloomed across carpets.
Source of life and stench—the river
takes what it desires.

Remnants

Consider the woman shot dead
in the parking lot of the grocer.
Her body lies on asphalt,
blood creeping out into the open daylight.
Wide eyes watch the police arrive
and roll her into the dark body bag.
A lone female officer waits, paint in hand
to continue tracing the outline
of the fallen body.
The white outline overlaps
the bright yellow parking lines.

Or the twin girls found
twisted and bruised, cold for days
piled by the large oak tree
on the neighbor's farm.
Crows gather and watch
as the neighbor boy stumbles into leaves,
tripping over the broken arms
of the two naked girls.
He chokes, gags, but can't
look away from their tiny breasts,
used, bitten and blue.

Or the father wading in the pond,
kicking ice out of his way,
still searching for his missing son.
A frozen mitten glows on the surface,
luring him farther in,
until his foot is caught
on a frozen root—a hand?—
dragging him under.
He doesn't fight it, only hopes
to meet his boy at the bottom.

Consider the questions of *why* and *how*
as the casket glows under church lights.
Consider the last joy of reaching in,
touching a cold hand,
crying without a sound.

Consider the Silkworm

I.

He is bred blind and domesticated,
kept safe under the glass but
do not tap! You will disturb his work.
Kept at a constant temperature,
he is fed, left to squirm
and crawl among the rest.
He is one of thousands.

II.

What he creates:
raw silk to be spun
and

dyed for royal gowns;
upholstered for dining room chairs;
stitched into daughters' underwear;
measured for suburban curtains;
sewn into women's negligees;
embroidered for prom dresses;
draped as a shroud over a corpse.

III.

The silk sacks will be dropped
in boiling water, blanched and shipped
off to a factory. Old women squint
in the dim industrial light, pulling
the tiny threads, careful
not to let the threads
break their blisters.

Cronus

It is not madness in his eyes, but despair.

The quick pulse of blood is cruel, familiar.
His sickle now the walking stick for a depleted man.

He has spilled blood before—
*he who kills his father
shall meet the same fate.*

Crops bare, the withering people call out.
He is deafened by grief. He gulps water,
frantic to rinse his mouth of his child.

He offers no bounty but sorrow.
The horses have lost their eyes to the rain.

What We All Lack

A small white pipe, modest, not
unusual. From its ghost mouth—
a clear bubble, glass, still.
I cannot see the breath, those expanding
lungs. *What We All Lack*.
I stand at the display,
consider the pipe, the absence of smoke.
Is it a loss I feel? My own
emptiness swelling, but no breath to puff out?
The museum's white walls unnerve me.
Observers shuffle by, murmur,
ignore this artifact. What I lack: I try
to name it, but can't get it right.
If I could name what I lack,
it would engulf this pipe, these walls,
melting clocks, make nothing
of what surrounds me. What I lack
is all I have.

Walking With You in Chinatown

Raw, heavy scents of turmeric. Old
mothers stand on stoops, picking their teeth

and waving people into kitchen doorways.
Signs flash steaming bowls

and cartoon chickens. Vendors line the street
calling out, waving bulbs of garlic.

The golden fish stare from beds of ice,
eyes shiny and magnetic—following

as we push through crowds. *Gucci?*
Prada? Accents heavy. Words spit

from crowded corners. I clutch
your arm, duck my head at the sound

of firecrackers popping and hissing
in the alleys. It is the Year of the Tiger:

your birth year. Stubborn months ahead. We
are surrounded by tigers in storefronts.

I touch the glass, see my face, sweaty,
disappearing into your chest. Your glasses fog.

Paper cats swallow your eyes.
“Their faces look so human,” I say.

Red fabric glows under burning lanterns
hanging from pagoda corners. Everything:

a ghost. Everything:
an imitation.

Keep Me

In the dark hills of Ithaca.
I could make you happy. When picking apples,
I will sing, pat the eager dog, check
each fruit for ripeness. Like the bright orchards,
I will bloom for you, even without rain.

You are stubborn, but if you will listen,
you will know how good I can be. I will take you
to the book sellers and fill a paper sack
with novels. Comb the shelves for your favorites.

After making love, I will push your hair
from your eyes, kiss your forehead, turn off the light.
Each night, I check the locks, say goodnight to the dog.
I will look out the kitchen window and see
my face: ghostly, unreal,
but happy to be your wife.

Finding Love in the Sex Museum
for Brienne

Dildos greet us—shiny, pink and clear
crystal: a sign warns *Do Not Touch*.

I study you as you touch the displays.
You breathe slowly, your expression
caught between amusement and disgust.
Your long fingers shake the hand
of a blow-up doll. You turn to laugh.
I look away, but I am grateful
to be here with you, a woman who understands
her body, her power over men.

And what I think I feel is some kind of love—
different from what I've never felt for a man,
or for myself. My shaking hands roam
over yellowed magazines. The curved women
are flat, feeble in their crouched positions,
exposing what men lust after: their long legs planted
with confidence. My stomach burns.
I don't know who I am.

Zombie

I used to sleep with a guy who said he was a zombie—
he used to bite me, aiming to draw blood. We rarely spoke.

I was really the zombie. Bruises
on my neck were morbid decorations.
The broken capillaries on my breasts:
wilting roses turning in on themselves.
Skin blossomed from pink to purple to green:
shades of corpses and decay.

Gnashing his teeth, he'd flex his jaw,
pull my hair, refuse to kiss me. There were rules:
no last names swapped, no calling out, no tears.
We were strangers, spread out like headstones: close

enough to touch, but our identities weathered away,
too damaged to be seen clearly.

Snake

Our bodies uncoil past bed posts,
we wager the space left in our bed.

You reach to touch my shoulder,
peeling away my skin. Revealed,
you pulled back what is dead.

Holding our breath, we tally the risks,
contemplate our emptiness, what
we might hold.

My skin clings to your fingers. You blink,
hope to see through me. Eyes fogged, milky:
the eyes of a reptile.

Which is worse:
to be swallowed whole, devoured and lost?
Or filled with the other, skin bursting?

If given the chance, you would eat me alive.
I allow you this animal delight.

What Is Underneath

He won't look at my face.
He'll look away at the same spot
on the wall that I notice—
where the paint is peeling
from a picture taped up once before.
His eyes will find the whitest part
of the spot, and he might wonder how long
it took for the paint to peel away,
revealing its skin. Maybe someone
was embarrassed by the photo.
He might think about how many times
that photo was taken down, always carefully,
taking more and more of the paint
with it each time. He might think
of how he sneaks over, just as carefully.
His mind will wander and remind him
that wandering leads him into beds
not meant for him. But he might learn
that eventually, I, too, will be bare.
He won't look at me, only graze my cheek
with a polite, bored hand, not sneaking glances
at my exposed thigh, not noticing
where I have worn away.

If I Die Young

Float me down the river, let me
sink. My bones will fill
with silt, wash away the marrows.

If the sun is high, walk me through
the weeds, drag my feet along the trail.
Stop for rest if my body is heavy.

Maybe I gave away too much: a telltale smirk,
my mother's secrets, my broken locket.
But I know I won't need those things
when I go. Where I go,

I'll be resting: a girl with waterlogged lungs,
hair that clogs ponds, climbing
up the cattails. If I die young,
let the currents pull me far along the banks.
Back on shore,

wish for oceans for me—
a wide opening, an empty nothingness,
some room to finally breathe.

When I Return

I will be heavy with dirt,
tangled in roots. The thick
green coil in my throat
will unravel—kudzu.
Is this what has choked
me for so long? I will spit
dust. Exhale. Clean my lungs.

What is left of me:
ribs, hair without a curl,
a hollowness
that never filled.
I can no longer resist
the sleepless shadow
that has followed me—
the blackbird on the ledge.

Past the pineapple sage,
I will drag myself
along the creek bed.
I have no secrets,
no pearls to barter.
In each life, I have
given what I have to each
crying mouth.
If I find my children
and they are starving,
I will cut off my hands
and sell them for bread.

Bone Harvest

Take what you can use—a rib to dig
for roots, something to stew and eat.
My pelvis—scoop water to drink.
Do not starve yourself. Pull from me
what can nourish you. Somewhere

deep within, you can find breath.
What is left of me should remain
useful. I am no mausoleum. Find
a phantom pulse: your own river
and inhale. Take my bones, keep
them close.

This body was never truly mine. Borrow it,
bend my rocky knuckles, gnaw my joints.
Consume me—I want to know
these parts are worth something. I want
to see what light filters through me.
I need to know that now, something
outside me lives.

Repossessed

Go ahead and sweep away the hair
that clings to corners. Brush the curls
into the dust pan. Discard.

The lights in the hallway flicker,
the walls smudged by careless hands.
Paint cans bulge from heat
in the garage—each color marked
by a thumbprint.

Plant the sign in the yard. Drive the stake
deep into the tender earth. The grass
is forgiving.

When summer comes, and the zucchini blooms,
who will know about the sparrow
buried under the garden? Who will remember
its rigid body and crooked wing?

You can tell them whatever you want
but they will know that I have been here.

It's True I Named My Children

after ghosts
I'd never met. Each one entered the world
howling, already burdened.

What can I give them that I haven't already?
I planted my eyes in the garden,
begged the rain to bring persimmons.

For winter, I saved my bones like firewood.
Stockpiled ribs. I saved what I could
for the first winter alone.

When each child learned to speak, I taught them
new words, curled their fingers
around a piece of coal to write. Nothing

is left to give them. They won't find me
deep in the undergrowth. Moss
grows slowly, but it will keep me warm.

I will lie down, give my body back
to the cold earth. From my head,
branches will sprout.

I could never
reach so far on my own.

Bone Ghazal

Consider the fracture, the etching left on the bone,
the way the spine deteriorates. Bone rubbing on bone.

Our last night in town, we drink wine from paper cups
and watch swans fight on the lake—their necks smooth as bone.

Kicking through leaves, search dogs sniff for
what might be exposed: the girl's hair and bone.

Maybe you will understand this: all that's dark
inside me is slowly seeping from the bone.

Withering in the garden, the magnolia droops—
curling petals, bright and brittle, the color of bone.

The sun beat down. We aimed our cameras into the light,
standing outside the church of bones.

Chewing on a lamb chop, he says, *the marrow is sweet*,
his tongue rolling over the grooves on the bone.

Someday, you will know me and I'll give you what remains:
this fever that won't break and all my dirt and bones.

Self-Portrait, 2210

Soil exhales, allows
the steam to settle. A lily
opens, exposes what is bright,
folds in on itself.

Roots tangle with ribs—reach to reclaim
this daughter's carbon. Vines unfurl,
fill the empty chest cavity. Deep
within, rainwater pools.
Tongue long gone, the mouth will fill
with clay, dark as rust, bright as blood.
What's packed in will stay
until the next storm.

Somewhere: the dotted skin
of a berry reveals its flesh: red
and tender, an angry fist,
untended heart.

Paprika

I have forgotten my age.
I count peppers, feel the weight
of my basket. When the sun sets,
I make my way home
across the fields.

After supper, I sink
into the tub, feel the water
loosen my muscles. Though I scrub
with goat's milk, I can't remove
the red from my palms.

In my next life, I won't work,
my mother once promised.
I can splash my hands in the river,
shake them dry, release these stains
like birds.

Last Wishes

I want to come back as a garden: sun
drenched, thirsty. My fingers as green beans
uncurling toward the sky. Eggplants
flush against the dirt, sink like my thighs
into bed sheets. My tomato cheeks
will rise and plump in the heat.
My breasts—sturdy and vibrant—
two beets concealed in soil.
Vines climb gates like curls. The twisted
path through the weeds: my spine,
narrow and crooked.

Give me what I long for:
a pair of dirty hands tending to my roots
showing mercy where I rot.