

MCQUISTION, CLAUDIA, M.F.A., *Absent Orchard*. (2011)  
Directed by David Roderick. 37 pp.

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

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

Greensboro  
2011

Approved by

---

Committee Chair

© 2011 Claudia McQuiston

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 \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Acceptance by Committee

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Grateful acknowledgement is made to the following journals in which one of these poems first appeared:

*Flint Hills Review*: “Hickey”

My deepest thanks to my parents and sister for their support of my education and my writing. Many thanks to my teachers, Stuart Dischell, David Roderick, and Rebecca Black, who provided wisdom and guidance. I am also indebted to Emily Benton and Kyla Sterling for their careful attention to my work. This project would also not have been possible without Jason Edgerton, a wonderful listener and source of encouragement. Thank you for all you’ve given me.

## 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 65<sup>th</sup> 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.