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Heaven's Disco Dances

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HEAVEN'S DISCO DANCES

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree Bachelor of Arts with

Honors College Graduate Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By:

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Western Kentucky University
2015

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Approved by

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2015

ABSTRACT

Heaven's Disco Dances is a collection of poetry about finding identity through defamiliarization and displacing oneself from reality to better understand it. Within the literary community, there is a great deal of derision toward writing that fails to be “real” or “serious” enough, and poetry is an excellent example of how sometimes the extraordinary speaks to us in ways that realistic fiction cannot. The marvelous and fantastic might serve as an escape from the world, but not necessarily from reality. Rather, they give readers a different lens on life, and sometimes that makes it a more powerful one, because people often need a new perspective to see themselves clearly. Just as dreams lend themselves to psychoanalysis, so can poetry create a visual representation of the subconscious. To that end, these poems contain variety of surreal narratives, often from the perspective of animals or inanimate objects.

Keywords: Poetry, Surrealism, Defamiliarization, Western Kentucky University, Creative Writing

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VITA

April 12, 1993.....Born – Winchester, Kentucky

2011.....Mars Hill Academy,
Lexington, KY

Fall 2014.....Jim Wayne Miller Poetry
Competition Finalist

Spring 2015.....3rd Place Sarabande
Undergraduate Poetry
Competition

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field 1: English
Concentration in Creative Writing

Major Field 2: French

Dedicated to
those who spend far
too much time
in their own heads,
and find,
within that small space,
a boundless cosmos.

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INTRODUCTION

When I began this project in my creative writing capstone course, I did not anticipate calling myself one of the poets in class, let alone embarking on a collection of poetry, but it was well worth the endeavor. I realized for the first time that there is a distinct difference between writers and poets. Poets are the visionaries, the ones who find meaning in the meaningless, who name the nameless, and who connect the dots between seemingly incoherent concepts. All poets are writers, but not all writers are poets. Whereas prose generally requires a more logical assessment, poetry does not often yield itself to pedantic criticism, and many writers fail to understand that poetry is built on emotional impression, not the explicit meaning of individual words or ideas. In the words of the poet Marianne Moore, it calls for “literalists of the imagination,” who create “imaginary gardens with real toads in them.”

I have only just begun to define my poetic voice, but it has been such a wonderful experience to share my work with the other poets at Western and learn from them. In the end, I failed to follow many of the guidelines I laid out in my proposal, but I have come to realize that intention and result are rarely aligned in creative writing.

Here are some of the things I have learned in the process:

1. Themes are born, not created. You can't plan them, because your emotions are not plan-able.

2. Poetry is hard to write when you're more focused on generating material than developing style and expression.
3. Poetry is hard to write when you're too tired, stressed, and miserable to wonder at skylarks and daffodils.
4. Also, writing poetry about being tired, stressed, and miserable is rarely helpful. Get some sleep.
5. Non-poetry classes are wonderful opportunities to write poetry. Dr. Tom says so.
And finally—
6. A short, cohesive collection is better than a long, scattered one.

Little Bluebird

Little bluebird
dancing on the wayward wind
and drinking in the moon—
why not have a spoon to taste the day?

Little bluebird
snakes might thank you
for carrying them to sunny rocks
but how can wingless creatures
understand the way you fly?
find some robins to dance with in the sky

Little bluebird
dip your feathers in the water
to see if you're a fish after all

Little bluebird
why linger with the seagulls?
they scream too loud to hear the silence
humming in the rocks beneath them
don't they know that thunderstorms
are heaven's disco dances?

Coo Coo Cachoo

deep down I know
that I am a bird
because my skin still stings
from where feathers were plucked
and wind kisses stronger
than any lips

This poem is inspired by the song "Little Bird," by the Weepies and loosely follows the same rhyme scheme.

Fiberglass Feathers

Sometimes you find the peace too golden to breathe.
The white mind folds back inside
to savor and seethe.
You can't grasp the light like you used to,
so you hide your wings in the grass
and wait for the moment to pass.

Sometimes you look ahead and see only sky.
You grapple with clouds and fall—
you wish you knew why.
Everyone's feathers grow thicker,
but yours leave a trail to the sea,
so you sit there and wait for company.

Sometimes you see the earth rise up below.
The other birds flee
when you bring the snow,
and shadows grow thick on the treetops.
You think it changes when you're older,
until the night brings more to shoulder.

Sometimes your wings burn bright in the wind
as leaves come in waves to take you again,
and gales of light pool under—
from here you grow wise as you wander.

Somewhere there's sound,
you just have to keep calling.

Finalist in the 2014 Jim Wayne Miller Poetry Contest

The Monochrome Filter

It's very disconcerting
to find fish scales on your feet.
You lose all comfort in walking
and often imagine this glass box of air
collapsing in a great cascade of water.
You'd like to dart in blue ripples of sky
when bubbles pop from your mouth and
friends frown in wonder. Come again? They ask,
but you don't understand the bubbles either.
Every tree starts to look like a plastic palm in a
fish tank, and you wonder if this monochrome
filter is an ocular defect, or a side effect of the
foreign atmosphere on salt-crusted eyes.
When did fleshy faces become so alien?
You wear double-layered stockings to hide
the fins on your calves and find it comical
that no one comments on the swollen shapes.
You're afraid that they'll scatter like birds
when they finally see the truth,
but deep down you hope they do.
The only solution is to read more books on fish
and find what metamorphosis
has transpired once you resurface
and wipe the dreams of men from your eyes.

Advice From a Starfish

Never forget that you are a
sea star, not a fish.

Display your most striking colors
to ward off predators.

Your arms house your most vital organs,
but even if one breaks,
you can still grow another.

Speck in the Sea

Don't you wish
you were a speck in the sea
like me?

I see everything important
without having to stop

like schools of mackerel that
make their zigzags,
and the baby whale that watches
his mother soar to the surface.
I bob through the red algae
as it yawns in the current,
and nothing touches me.

I am a microscopic god,
and oblivion is my shrine.

Every so often I bump
into a flutter of fin or coral frond,
and for a moment

the palpable world pierces me,
and I think I know how the whale feels
the first time he tastes the sun,
whose phantom beams
rain above our ocean bed.

But the motion hurts,
the scales sting,
and the salt becomes too bitter,

so I do what specks do best
and simply float away.

3rd place in the 2015 Sarabande Undergraduate Poetry Contest

The Jellyfish Queen

The moon floats
like a jellyfish in the
ocean of midnight sky,
the stars, a trail of
bubbles in her wake,

and I swim from my
dream-worn window
to wrap my shoulders
in her lace.

Coke Bottle Island

With sunlight crisp
on the back of my neck,
I watch branches bump
against the prison of sticks
and trash and sludge-like leaves,
trapped in the rapids of Barren River
by some invisible hand,
while amber water sifts past
in the glow of dusk.

Now, sticks poke into
my skin,
the icy mud of the riverbed
clamps over
my feet
as chips of wood
pile into my eyes and ears
and fingernails.

The water beats.
The water taunts.
The water gallivants around the bend.

I only grow heavier,
more wood than flesh,
more stone than bone,
but to move
must mean to drown,
so I let the splintered mass grow,
until the weight itself
heaves me under.

I blink, and I am
on the bank again,
mud swollen around my toes,
and when the water

sprays over
the rocks in the rapids,
I feel myself fly too.

Land of Metallic Sun

The kite surfers circle the bay
like a swarm of gnats,
and you know they are invincible.
You know by the way they fly
that there is no air here,
only Wind, and the Wind is liquid light.

You must be floating too.

The sun is metallic, cool and crisp and gold,
and each breeze its gossamer finger.
Nothing is dismal under this brilliance,
this gold and emerald movement, slick as granite,
which laminates your cheeks in silken chill,
so that you too are gold and smooth.

The waves foam like vinegar on the bank,
and you can taste the acidic grit
as it writhes on the sand.

You realize that you are moving,
but it's the land coming to meet you.
Obscured from the shore,
a stone fort sinks between sand dunes,
and you dare to kiss its shadow.

History smells like cedar,
faintly sweet and burnt.

In the bramble, brown cocoons and tufts
of cotton hide, but before you can hide
with them, the wind hurries you along.
Come see the marshland!
The marsh is a sea of clouds,
trampled by the muddy feet of gods.

These are all visions, clear in the metallic sun.

You can see the parachutes now, and
the kite surfers sing in unison. They glide across
the water in pairs, a duet of cello strokes,
slow, deep, and mournful. The wave rises
in grim accelerando, and up it slings them.
Their spinning flings arias across the salt water.

The sun burns on the water, while the boats
by the docks fossilize into copper. The sun is a
tired giant, forfeiting his throne to cerulean specters.
You're tired too. You can see the parking lot.

The light has melted, the electricity,
the visions—beneath your numb toes,
the sand turns to mud.

The Stars Doused Their Fires

when I heard that
Carey Mulligan married
Marcus Mumford.
I mean, damn it, Carey,
you already have perfect skin—
must you take Marcus too?
I imagine they walk
down gravel pathways
as Carey chats about squirrels
and other sweet things,
while Marcus studies
two grooves in a tree trunk that
reach
 reach
 reach to the sky
and wonders if they ever meet,
or if they fly beyond the branches
to seek another
hopeless
 wanderer.

Nomads of the Sea

I am barely one year old,
yet I have lived six million years,
and we will live six million more.
We need no heart, no brains, no bones
to rise as one in bloom,
to undulate each plume and flex
our luminescent hoods
as we drift from the dark
and drink starlit currents.
We are ancient dwellers,
invasive invertebrates, conquering
the watery terrain as much
as it conquers us.
We are moons and flowers hats
and black sea nettle, big as
boulders and small as grains of sand.
Our pilgrimage takes no pause
unless we bob to shore
and our gelatin flesh dissolves,
or the weight of my tiny year
begins to pull,
and then, I revert again to polyp,
muscles mutate into nerves
and sperm and eggs that spawn
a hundred perfect clones of me
to plod and drink the sea
with their brethren.

Whistle-Stop Mountaintop

The gazelles dig the banana trees.
Sometimes they have tea parties in the shade,
but they never invite the Mad Hatter,
because he discriminates against fedoras and flat caps.
The bananas make them hungry,
so they stick out their tongues to catch the sunlight
and drink up the sea with their eyes.

The gazelles take selfies with banana trees.
They tear out pictures of grasshoppers
to make an inspiration board for the neighbor,
who doesn't appreciate midnight karaoke,
and when the sun melts over the mountains,
they make smores in its heat.

The gazelles chill out with banana trees.
When it rains, they like to make lists
and glare at the soda trucks that pass,
because they don't trust anyone
who doesn't drink tea.

After an All-Nighter

My chest crumbles
from the inside out.
So this is how a
Nature Valley bar feels.
Poor body, poor
muscles and bones:
here's a biscuit for strength.
I swallow it whole
because my tongue is dust.
Caffeine! The brain implores.
My eyes begin to glow
as my frame shudders.
I sigh, and one lung caves in.
My heart lets out a final quiver
and sinks into my stomach,
where it breaks
into flakes
of ash.

Dear Space

let me rearrange your
supernovas
and steal your dark energy
beneath my wings.
You taste like cigarette smoke,
a storm cloud between
the sky of us,
and whisper tales of
Eli's absence,
while the yellow kitchen
lamps float in his eyes
like harvest moons,
and he mistakes the ants
on the wall for planes,
carving routes through
paint-chipped
clouds.

Death by Sparknotes

If I had wandered into *Paradise Lost*,
I might know how to wipe
hot ash from my eyes
and build Pandemonium
on lakes of darkness.
Had I dared open *The Scarlet Letter*,
perhaps I would wear
my low-burning madness
on a hat to wave at neighbors.
If I wrote notes instead
of poetry in Brit lit,
I might have seen how
Mrs. Dalloway bought lilacs and sweet peas
when her childhood garden began to chafe,
or heard Keats explain that
Melancholy is the valley
from which stars glow brightest.
Moby Dick, that sea-caped vigilante,
could have shown me which
vultures to pass and which to drown,
and maybe if I'd camped out
with *Last of the Mohicans*,
I would know how to
tread softly in a thick wood.

House of Hair and Bone

My brain is built of
sallow barn beams and dust,
because back in high-school
I tried to teach an interpretive dance
to the moon, but my feet
stuck to the hot tar of pavement,
and I dropped all my dreams
in a puddle—damned things.
Then the moon's reflection
chased them away
with ripples of laughter,
and a once-bright door
sealed shut.
Despite the dank and dusted wood,
I still feel the low glow
of childhood visions
and twenty-something ambitions
in the wall stud,
though it hurts to sing through
the debris when every penny
for my thoughts wastes away
in a wishing well.

Snow Globe Days

The sky sags overhead
like wet wool
and suffocates the still-bare
trees in a globe of abysmal
white—white like eyes
rolling back in hysteria—
as we, the little villagers,
wait for someone to
shatter the glass
so we can float from
our verandas
and ooze into space.

Daylight is for the Birds

Everyone knows that sea turtles
fly fastest in starlight.

When the celestial sphere shifts
and replaces time with space,
I cease to know myself.
Embers of self-reproach
flicker and smoke on bloodshot horizon
until twilight swallows the earth,
and I wake on ageless sands
below the silk-fire gaze
of Empress Moon.

The sea turtles wait on the crags,
and though my fingers shake
with the ache of not enough, not enough,
I clamber on one's back without a word.

Mistress Moon awaits when we ascend,
and dares us to deny her feast:
the cobalt sky is thick enough to drink,
and the stars, ripe for picking.

I watch the galaxies light their fires
and memorize their method.