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Scatterlings and Orphanages

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Scatterlings and Orphanages

An Honors Thesis

presented by

Taylor Mardis Katz

to

The English Department

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for

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Scatterlings and Orphanages



Taylor Katz

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The title of this thesis is lifted from Paul Simon's "You Can Call Me Al," a song of my childhood & my aspiring adulthood.

Scatterling (noun): A wandering or vagabond person; a vagrant.

Cover photograph taken by the author in January 2007 in the feral city of Barcelona, Spain.

for Misha

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Antes

Eoin's Ode

I am grateful for the way you insult
Raymond Carver and make us talk

outside when it's too cold for the cat to leave the house.
Four years ago, I stopped caring

that you smoke three cigarettes
per conversation. You sat

me down, shackled my wrists with your fingers
and said, *When you steal my lighter, I buy another.*

You need a haircut, an acting job, and a change of scenery;
you need to gain weight and lose interest

in girls who speak Spanish. You say it's tough
being you, because, *I fall in love twice daily.*

I believe in the two of us
eating sushi together for lunch. I order

you to stop looking at me like that, your eyes
canny, ablaze. You order a Coke

and smile when I spill it
with an errant move of my elbow.

New Hampshire

Can you recall what it was
to crave & adore the rain?
Its entrance: the mud
the squish under plastic sandals
browned toes on slick ground
the sky stirring frantically
toward a deeper grey, clouds
like dirty paint water?

The only ones upset were the clotheslines
dropped low & defeated
by raindrops, devourers
of towels, transforming them
to heavy. You should have admired
the sky then for showing gray
despite a sunny stereotype.

Back then, July saw rain
as unforeseen: celebration
of the higher melancholia. In a world
of tetherball & sunburn, hair parted
& braided sometimes too tightly,
the sky had gravity;
it had anxieties, small jokes,
had seen someone naked
by accident. It knew suffering
and love. Back then, when I
was only a whisper, I knew enough to say
"Oh to be the sky above."

Hospital Visit

Seeing not
as many tubes as I'd expected,
I feel better. There is color
in his cheeks and in the sign
above the bed in red marker:
LEGALLY BLIND.

The hospital veracity impugns
our family comity but we
concede to the doctors:
the ones
who saved.

Men Alive

Black, white, purple
lights, the sizzle
of mics who can't lie:
the artists gripe and
survive, while beats
and rhymes light cries;
amidst sweat, putridized
lies the craving cacophony
of bodies on high.
Fallacious desire inspired
by these stageworthy men
creeps off their pedestal
seeps into the pen
of bedlam and bodies
and resilient words.
Their carnal leisure bleeds
from the stage, as
whoring grins speak and
collapse, duly plagued
by the coveting crowd, pushing
with inward commotion,
their limbs clashing and wrangled
finding force in devotion.

Gado Gado

There is nothing like a couple's first meal
cooked shakily with fleshy hands
which puckering fumble in tune
with compiled directions.
Portioned foods combine
as music moves sideways
through steam until the pot

simmering and defiant
lets out a saucy burp.
Droplets splatter on witness surfaces,
precision escapes through tattered screens.
Spices swap stories, flavors plead
in whispers to be sampled.
But oh,

we could've eaten that meal all night.
Instead, our brazen fingers forked
sauce-soaked vegetables mouthward
as quickly as lips could manage
and the bottom of the pot
left with sauce growing hotter
crusted over, burnt.

Tricycle Dismount

When she sings to herself in the car, he listens with eyes closed
wanting to savor the fine-spun intoxication
of floating notes trapped inside the vehicle's boundaries

As the sun sets, she has no obligation except to memorize
the intonation of his compliments and believe him when he says
that the curves of her hip bones are like two sides of a violin

Her friends have careened around her in paired crescendos
until now; now she drives toward ocean, her passenger seat warmed
and pursues the serpentine road with two head lights aglow

My Mother's Father

She only called him
twice a year, when she heard
the new way he was pretending
to have gotten on his feet.
Otherwise, we didn't
speak of him much, except
to comment on the ragtag
presents he sent us for holidays
and birthdays: complex
antique puzzles and golden
picture frames, tarnished
and splintered. He signed
the accompanying cards with
a picture: a whiskered
man with glasses and beady eyes;
he was an artist
and his cards were his last
remaining canvases.
Once, on a trip to Arizona,
we piled into his RV, feigning
unawareness to the pervasive
window crack. As we stepped
into the desert sun, he turned
to us, grinning, and said,
Tengo un dolor en mi cabeza,
what does that mean girls? We
told him it sounded like he
had a dollar in his head. But
we were wrong, he had a pain
and later when all the tubes
and nurses, and pill
bottles arrived, we understood
that he'd never really
been okay, not even when he
would clean himself up for
family gatherings.
Now he's beneath ground
the alcohol in his body seeping
out into the yielding earth around
him, leaving him, finally, in the
osmosis of the afterlife.

In a Costa Rican bungalow after a full day's hike

two bodies starfish
on a bed wider than it is long
and punctuate a display of contentment
underneath the futility of a ceiling fan.

Meter Stick

Carolina, Carolina: one with
the long *i*, one stunted & precise.
In writing, all's the same.

She was short with him, quite
finished with his actor's tricks
& book-like humor; it was enough

of the same gloom. Her hair
had grown brighter, the ends broken,
curled. She'd always towered over him

in debates, but in the mornings,
under battered bed sheets,
equals. In March, and then in May,

he clipped his toenails to be rid of her.
Both she and his nails resurfaced,
her skin dark against his

Irish ancestry, after the months
spent in her own accent. Weeks
later, separated by a dozen borders, he writes

me the stunted summary of his
infatuation – the unknown, the known,
the questions left behind.

Through phone lines, his breaths
are soured, gone deadly, acidic
in the wake of his short-term love event.

Rebirth, New York City

The ice cubes have melted
into a watery precinct
next to the computer screen.

Within the cubicle's static day
discarded papers pile wide
& threaten what's left of space.

No one attempts to cover up
yesterday's lunch bowl: a night's
crust, nobody's nourishment.

If I were the desk, I'd
protest—
use my four hardy legs to walk

away down the hollow avenues
toward the beaming forest
—*and not that Central Park!*—

and there I'd rediscover my roots
leg by
trembling leg.

A Little Bit Deadly

One of your lungs collapsed mid-Wednesday
in the town where we grew up.
Tissues and membranes covered
like new orphans:
half an organ gone glum.

In my kitchen with jasmine tea,
cross-legged on the counter
you assemble fortunes
for the bulletin board
with magnetic words. Shaking hands.

I spin on a stool. Doodle on scraps.
You mimic the friends
you clink bottles with
on nights I maroon you
for sturdier ground.

Broke and Ugly

On my last leg of lunch
I see a woman lounging against
a worn backpack: red-eyed, red-
shirted, smiling into the hazy sun.
Her home made sign pronounces

“BROKE AND UGLY;”
I chuckle and waft
a dollar into her hat.
Her husband arrives and paces;
they are travelers, here to see two ruined

towers, hitchhiking against traffic,
the soaked heat of buses
("never Greyhounds")
the fatigue of passage. Without
thinking, I ask if they've read

Kerouac. Confused, they nod
and say, "Sure, but not
recreationally," and continue
their timeline of travel
from the distant Oregon

where they say panhandlers are real
veterans trying to pay their medical bills.
The husband is missing a tooth
or two; his tongue is pierced and lisps.
He tells me he's been clean now

for forty-seven days, because,
"As soon as I was on the road
there was nothing I could do to get a fix."
They are married, which is
becoming on them, and I imagine

their social gatherings as rosy and lasting.
They are staying on the street by choice
("the food at hostels is pure
poison"), allied by witticisms
on signs which sum up the essentials

& humor the suits who scamper by
with the Great Contradictions of our Century:
"IF MONEY IS THE ROOT OF ALL EVIL
LET ME CARRY THE BURDEN."
That one doesn't work on New York

atheists, plus it's illegal to ask for money
in this city. Instead, people shake cups
and chant their mistreatment on
found cardboard squares – called
"statement signs" by those who know.

It is 2:54 on a Monday and I've
truly overstayed my lunch break

but as I walk through the doors of my
dark-glassed building, I espy

the evenly-paved path of my life
for a kairos, and glance back

as two tall suits drop dollars
into the couple's filling hat.

Postage

Two years ago I gave birth to a religion
a splatter of kisses in the middle of winter
breaths loitered in the air like unwearied clouds
and even the smallest of my toes felt like calling out

But goodbye knocked yesterday and I answered
in my pajamas, expecting a child
selling wrapping paper or protection
for a forest in danger across the globe

Send me things you know I'll like
the broken lead of your pencil
the paper scrap you used to hold
your place in a book and I'll mark my mornings with it

Missing you looks like my cat
pawing at the door past midnight, an entreaty
for blanket nooks, the snug luxury
of witnessing another's passage into dreams

Después

The Finca

No one's responded to my letters
yet. I can imagine why:
the new horse got loose, the eyelashed cows
continue not to give milk, the goats
need their monthly shot. Maybe the rains
begin earlier these days, drowning
the beets and lettuces, only just
extending their leafy fingers sunward.

There may also be the problem of snakes.
Of electricity. Of seeds, or mud,
or pests. The ants, *los hijos*
de puta, might be right
now biting underneath gloves,
pants, rain jacket sleeves. I do understand
the theories that govern their schedule,
our distance.

But the grocery store here
sells chayote (the inverted
green squash best fried in egg)
which we ate for a week straight
twice. And the daily motions, the words:
carretillo and *pala*; the dogs —
Benjamina, Milagro, Africa, Lobo —
even now, inhabit me.

I wish I were
there still, more
still, less far from that
person. Foreign now, foreign then.

Independent Study

I have learned about cities.
In cities I've gathered

myself; no one else did.
In a city nobody loves you,

the latest body-obstacle
passed that day. On warm days

benched couples pose
for each other. The conversations

at shaded tables on street-corners
erupt with conflict & assertion

and exclude my earnest, sideways nods.
I covet

the foam-ringed glasses
and all things

get memorized by accidental
stares. Even the birds

like frantic pepper in a mandarin sky
don't need help to complete their V.

The sun sets then rises then sets. I enter
and exit stores, opening, closing

my wallet and mouth as nothing
splashes out. The typical foods –

crumbly fried squid or potatoes
dripping with spiced cream –

enter precisely and I return
napkins to their square metal homes,

folded paper saved for other lips'
splattering. On a Saturday I am misunderstood

at three separate establishments & ramble
home, foot stalking foot, underfed.

Cities rebuke their visitors:
of this I'm certain. They soil

and clunk and jostle
and what is left on the pavement at night

gets eaten. I don't parrot
those who own the clatter

still at every pause I occasion
someone else spits fire into my raw eyes.

To Long For (What Belongs to Another)

I've been meaning to revere
music. When my pen friend

writes of Luiz Bonfá on the record
player after pushups & before sleep, I want

that feeling. The musicians' names stir
the cooling porridge of my brain—

wordy-word on the horn, word-word's third
recording. Surely when he listens

he thinks of novels, or love, or voyages:
the signage

of a life. He feels lonelier
with music in the room, but writes

of the occasion as one would
of a caress. Sam Cooke for the new

year & the ebullience
of carbonated bodies; the back

of a van & trees made fast,
Taj Mahal warming the leathered

seats; Bill Evans & rocking
in his chair or off a couch;

Wagner screaming, the whomp
spewing out of black into black

leaping toward climax then awe:
the needle's finishing click

his ungainly return
to foghorns, dogs, passing fates.

Luis Vinicio

I pinned him as trouble
from Minute One – his thin
lipped mouth & quick to kick
legs. He wouldn't draw or make

the lists I requested, even as others
tested marker colors & asked
for more paper. He wouldn't read
& piled his books

on top of a girl's hands.
He misbehaved until the last
seconds of that first afternoon
then threw a notebook

in his bag, a soccer ball at someone's
unsuspecting head. Traipsing
over half-packed backpacks
at the day's end, he stopped
in front of me to fish

in his uniform pocket, balancing
his bag on one angled shoulder,
limbs askew, nearly still.
All day he'd squawked

inches from my nostrils
about leaving or soccer or
the bathroom. At lunch
instead of noise, he chose refusal:

his mouth was a line
as the other children sang-spoke
the mealtime prayer. Here now
in front of me & nearly

my height, he looks upward
performing reverence
and sticks gluey hands
into the depths of his uniform

for two glass marbles which rest
next to each other in his
slender palm, a balanced pair.
One is purple with white swirls, the other

he calls *coco blanco*, making white
a revelation. Picking the white one,
he holds it up with two dirtied fingers
and places it in my hand. Coconuts

and sunscreen and piled snow
bloom from the sphere. I curl five fingers
around it as he tells me we will walk home together —
since I don't have a dog, he says

I need an *amigo*. As we exit the classroom
he grabs hold of my empty hand.
The playground sun gleams
off monkey bars & into my eyes:

the vision equivalent to the din
wreaked on eardrums all day
The twenty seated morning faces
mingle with the forty post-lunch hands

grabbing & poking for attention. Finished
for the day, we trek uphill and buy
red popsicles. His house is closer
to school than I expect & within moments

he is inside the doorway waving back at me.
¡Hasta lunes! echoes from inside
the tin-roofed house as chickens in all stages of life
roam, pecking, around the yard.

Perennial

I've tarried
on your front porch

since the hottest day
last summer could muster.

You join me
at times

for a breath of what I'm inhaling or
to test what jacket suits the day.

Never invited, I've moved
in to the wrought iron chair & my

mug's scarred the all-season
outdoor table with rings of dampness.

Iron never gives
to human form, and my stomach rejects

coffee turned old too soon
from battling the weather's

stronger breaths. Even your gift
of a scarf, wrapped with your own hands

around my stiffened neck, is nothing
but a length of blue-green fabric:

soft, a gesture, sure, but obtainable
wherever clothes are sold.

Close Quarters

The tea at the cafeteria:
served in a porcelain cup
where 4 ½ sips of warmth wait

and allow milk to mix in.
Earl Grey, or Ceylon – an off-
flavor – and the heated milk served

saucer-separate. The wind on my way
to a seat wafts the label
with relish: the miniature flag

of a country discovered and re-
discovered daily, at the expense
of no one. In that world

people the color of porcelain
shake hands and heads
with and at each other: some

they know to have been made
elsewhere. The waters there
are murky – more gray than

brown in color – and honey's not
offered in their parts. Back
in the tiled cafeteria

the students begin to sidle
into classrooms, their cigarettes
barely snuffed. Cups drained,

sugar packets ravaged, we all
return singly, in unison
to our sundered realms.

Anna Karenina

The book he bestowed on her
was marked with five languages
and the wisdom
he had unearthed in her absence:
faces & concepts corralled
in cafés & solitude
each page touched & turned
by his fingers as slowly
as eyes would allow –
phrased rows
soaring boldly into him.

It is hard to imagine
being far away from him
being not in love
with him, whether
the book landed
in intended hands
with correct sound,
or if it collapsed:
a hardcover thud
against unfilled ground.

Did she suffer correctly
the reverberations
of gathered sweat and love
flailing outwards
from the thinly sliced
& imprinted trees?
The songs he'd cried
into the scroll's
gluey skeleton?

I pray she loved it
enough, loved him enough
in their time;
and herself: the mounds as well
as the smooth caverns
the words and the whiteness
in between.

The book is gone now
remembered only
as the best gift he has given; spoken of
once a year and even then
in passing –
for the idioms of that opus
are lost to him:
ejected from his heart
jailed in thumbed pages
and shelved in a bedroom
he no longer shares.

For how does one face
the appalling affair of reading
again, that saga?
Fingering virginal sheets
of a new copy:
cover made brighter
by this year's colors
the observations translated
by the newest scholar
of our generation. The binding –
rigor mortis & unknowing –
could crack from an accidental
flip to the center.

The story he has known –
once, twice, nearly
three times studied
and finished and loved –
has curled its aging covers inward,
blocked out
new sun.

Of Two Minds

The car ride was a battleground.
I peeked at your deflated body

at stoplights & speed zones
and requested directions in terse tones.

You were barely in the car.
The half of you you wanted

to be with was back at home, sitting
on a couch or at a computer, responsible

only for dinner and a document.
You leaned your seat back & made silence

worthy of hate. You fueled
a hurt that has sauntered

through generations of women turned numb
by neglect. I was alone, for the first time

with you. Glancing at my dried out
winter knuckles, I knew I'd only

grow colder. I could scarf, glove,
& jacket my parts, but the night

would be ruthless
and I, a meagre puddle turned ice.

Souvenir

Overseas, I cried in squares
stone paved & splattered by birds,
accompanied by yogurt

and Hemingway: things
consumed. Miracle
is too glassy a word

for someone loving
bordered by no one
loving them back.

There are things we invent
to keep us close when bodies
pine for the matched latches

loved since introduction.
Typed words, wire-thin words
or hand-written & stamped won't cure

hurt. In Barcelona I slept
on a rectangular pad;
mornings I collected

the strings of my steeped tea bags
to braid into rope: proof
dried, tied around a wrist

of my untenable tasks:
the folding and re-wearing,
the sizzle of invented dinners.

Where I Walk

Down by the water
near the palm trees, conceived
in pairs. The rock jetty &
a scattering of teens,
the slap of ball against rock
against foot. *El mar: que callado*
how quiet
but how close she is
to the noise of it all.

Requited Love

How is survival
in Brooklyn? I know
your room is cramped

and windowless,
job sporadic, jaw
clenched, bearing it.

Your brother's nearby
but family for you
means chosen not born

plus you could never
state your case
in his company

after so many years
of concocting him
for yourself.

I miss you when you don't
require me; when enough
time has lapsed to make you

calm again. You know
people can't be consequential
all the time, comprising

eyes and rawness
never named
until now. I'd hold your hand

— and I have —
when prescriptions
don't travel

to the right aches.
On the subway now
you read books:

motherless, you cook

your own dinners.
We compete

for each other. You win
at humor and history,
I at buoyancy. Scarring you

weekly by writing
of others, I invite
you over for lunch

when hungers align
and put between bread
all the fare I can stomach.

Two-Step

I left a party once
(I leave them
always) and saw

the marks I'd left
around the room, a hair
picked off my shoulder

now on the floor,
two or three clear
plastic cups: one

on the bookshelf,
two (half full) on the small
wooden table, number three

inside his room. I was wrong
to leave myself around,
let him keep parts

of a roped-off self.
I was not his nor could I
ever let him be close

to pursuit again. Near 4am
he had placed his hand on my
black-stockinged thigh

as I lay on his couch waiting
for my cousin to be awake,
aware, a guardian. We'd walked

to the party together, our hairs
brushed back by wind
from walking, and split

inside the party's
atmosphere. My mistake
was the acceptance

I performed in pretending

to doze as my brain
butterfly stroked its way

into frenzy.
No one could have known
how I stayed awake

through the night:
stomach dyspeptic &
hungry for a morning brand

of purity. Ice in a glass
for corporeal punishment
crunched in way

that echoed of knuckles
cracking
under someone

else's pressure. A baby cried
upstairs as I lay on the couch
and champed ice until

gums protested blood.
Tasting myself
I was stronger. I remembered

who I was within the lines
of a life I had sketched out,
colored in, & offered

to the world. Swallowing,
I stood up and poured
the rest of the ice

down the silver drain
as a sun rose into a room
I hadn't slept in but knew.

Climate Change

It is January but soon
it will be May: lengthy,
melodic. The pool closed
on the first of October. Tarp
covered water that leaves
had invaded, turning it
tea. I drove through
Connecticut and saw foliage
I'm told will be extinct
in fifty years, the trees
warmed up & confused.

I can't keep drinking cups
and pots of the same
dark drink, milk
& honeyed, Biblically
sweet, too hot
for tongue. The meals we make
are strange: sauces crust
early, soup is under-spiced,
nearly cold. But I've trained
myself to seek out flavors
unspecified by recipes
and when we eat we sit close
and are filled.

In cars, we bore each other:
you noticing grasses, me dreaming
myself into other landscapes. We stop
at Scenic Overlooks to take photos
of each other & embrace without
the gear shift butting in. Forgiven
are miles ahead of us which
will keep our bodies separate, squirming.

The seasons change —
two years ago
there were still nooks
yet to be curled into.
Last year we missed each other
and sent letters

as the countries around us
adjusted their temperatures. I rise
to greet you, and lay my head
between your arm and side.
I imagine the way your hair
parts just after a shower;
I carve more cabinetry
for you to open and oil.