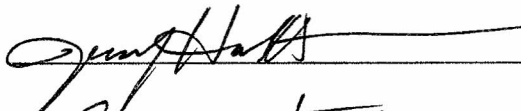
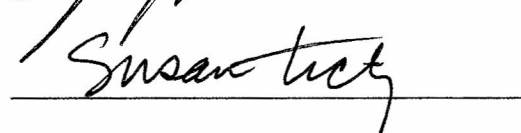


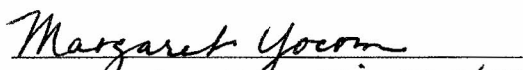
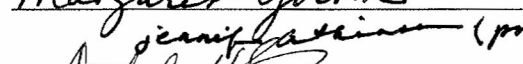
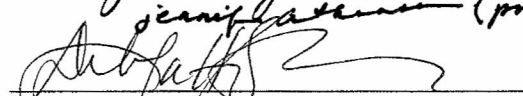
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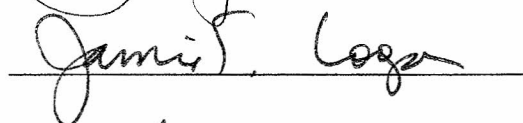
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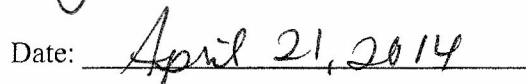
Matthew B. Blakley
A Thesis
Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty
of
George Mason University
in Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree
of
Master of Fine Arts
Creative Writing

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Date:  _____ Spring Semester 2014
George Mason University
Fairfax, Va

Violet

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of
Fine Arts at George Mason University

by

Matthew B. Blakley
Bachelor of Arts
University of Mary Washington, 2011

Director: Jennifer Atkinson, Professor
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Spring Semester 2014
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

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DEDICATION

For my parents, who raised me to love.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A warm thank you to my class of fellow candidates—Amber, Darby, Michele, Mike, and Moriah—for the pleasure of growing and writing beside you; the faculty, especially Jen, Susan, and Peggy, for your generous mentorship; all the friends and family who’ve offered me enthusiasm and support on my journey as a young writer; Jack for the many inspiring conversations and celebrations of poetry; Shana for accepting this third love that is poetry into our home; and, of course, Claudia, Alyssa, and Christine: your endless friendship and guidance not only brings me closer to poetry, but also to myself, which is a gift even more precious.

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ABSTRACT

VIOLET

Matthew B. Blakley, M.F.A.

George Mason University, 2014

Thesis Director: Jennifer Atkinson

This thesis explores the uncertain nature of representation and focuses on the precious failures of language and memory. In doing so, remembered narratives of a young-adult speaker are encountered as they're confronted with words. It's during that state of fitting words to an experience when a representation of the memory must prevail despite its complete otherness. A sense of otherness further complicated in this thesis by the work of ekphrasis, the representation of a representation of a representation. Thus, this thesis too attempts to investigate generally, yet specifically, the state of "being," the subjectivity of color, and the necessity of light.

*

How incandescent is a grief?

—*Arthur Sze*

*

DIFFRACTION

Light slit
from its navel to its throat

Waves of flowers
Blooms of phytoplankton

Through these glasses
I can see everything

ONE

RED

It was an accurate winter
The snow famous

All I could do was wade curvature
my head barely above

so my sister pulled me
a sled behind her

Nothing was recognizable
It was our Alaska

We were tunneling to the next village
fleeing

A war had begun
We sled finally up and down never-

-ending hills
shaped just for this

We sled until we could take no more of it
the coldness lush blood on our faces

I remember the stripped trees
the skinny awkward legs of them holding a narrow pier

into the white
you could go anywhere that day

the middle of a lake even
a fox had

the snow adorning him a blanket of ritual
Did he scream

into the muted contrast it marked
desperate as the wind swayed nothing

but the fence rusting where we couldn't stop
I thought of August

What the world looks like then
How it feels

My own acute aliveness
in the dead of winter

Something I must have realized
beyond our feet

as the sun dug the most impossible grave
lowered itself in

FEAR

*And I said: remember
this is not something
of the red fire, this is
heaven's fistful
—Mary Oliver*

The dog, moving at my feet, sensed it: beneath
the back porch, a snake denning in mulch. Of course

I didn't know it was a snake then, only later,
after the fact—the names of things identifying themselves

when it feels it no longer matters. The dog, moving
at my feet, sensed something. Beneath the back porch, it,

denning in mulch, undulated from one sheer darkness
to another smoother than night, a released ribbon of breath,

where I stopped it with the rake, the shovel, my hands.
I don't know what else I could have done.

After, when I held out its head, the name revealing itself,
it was as though a late copper beech leaf, perfectly

supine, my palm the shadow into which it had been released.

BLUE

for my father

Even just once I didn't want to go
the yard dew thick yet thinning faster

than I wanted in the upstairs bathroom
washing my face with the hand worn water

again and again I was delaying everything
staring at myself in the mirror my pupils

shadowy thickets light shot into these thickets
a place nothing like where you led me

you wouldn't let me bring my dog it wasn't her place
I wonder if I went back to that house I could

lead myself there all the way past the neighbor's barn
where a few stale hay bales marked the end

of an electric fence an ellipsis into a field
freshly cut and turned yet I always think

I will do things I never seem to do after
about an hour of listening to the woods

camouflaged you pointed the gun in my hands
 toward *a buck* in the field boastful antlers

raking the air of light taking it back with him
 as he leaped into the covered darkness perfectly

you didn't say but you were disappointed
 later *a doe* footed toward us the tree

you shook your head as if to say *no*
 she lowered her neck feet before our boots

then raised her head frozen her eyes drawn
 to the blue in your gray eyes

blue the color I hear now deer see differently
 than we do they see *more of it* whatever

that means just as I fear I'll hear you've died
 and I've done nothing but stand watching

ELEGY FOR SUNFLOWERS

The first death was in the picking and all week a heaven yellow
stumbled backward petal from petal, dissolving

almost completely in the vase—tall in this tightening fist
of water. Might a drain bottom it; the heads

an inflorescence of inflorescences. The feeding stopped Tuesday.
Look, they reveal proportion: fly eyes, that big

above the lip of the mouth, of the vase. Open the window
I say for birds, this a second death; an offering

for all those nests. Why do I feel such a larger sense of grief
for such? I open the window and wind spreads,

loosens the flower about the kitchen, the hard wooded floor, crawls
the skeletal spider deeper into the dust, returning

these small things back to the places from which they came.

SINCE

Since the sun walked through your windows
and offered me an orange

Since you went to make tea
Since we counted cardinals in your yard

Since the clock
Since you folded your arms on the table

Since a penny shone in the street
burning a hole in the asphalt

a beam of light
through magnifying glass

Since the ant
the irrevocable note

the lesion in your brain

NOTHING ELSE

what was it like
holding a pumpkin
for the first time
surely it was
not a globe of
the earth its
one great sea
orange or just
a squash this
variation another
sign of winter
oh how many
do we need
that hollowness
think of it as
a pumpkin
nothing else

STILL LIFE WITH BIRDS' NESTS, 1885

Like a god Van Gogh created light
and shadow

The cup-and saucer-nests shaded
in the late tint of October

A wonderful thought
a wren's nest more brilliant at its edges

Names of nameless colors
whispered open

An entire woods in ode
to the falling leaves

undoing the black
holes above ground

A fireless indication of fire
A birdless indication of birds

THE FIELD ENGULFED

On my birthday a Christmas present
from my grandmother

A brushfire half a mile out

Dusk and a spider paints
another self-portrait in the rain

Today was the day I microwaved
my coffee and remembered to drink it

I fear I will never see light the same way
the same way I fear I will never see light

I think most about the candle

TWO

RAT SNAKE: A PAINTING

The sun found it first and breathed its edges purple
as if it were a Sunday sock or the pant leg coiled

around wire in between the rest: sheets, towels, a family

of whites slowly becoming lighter, drying thin again;
its body bowing the line, its dullness against the breeze.

A CATBIRD IN THE HOUSE

—*for Claudia*

*

It's Sunday and we've come to my grandmother's
to clean the house. After all,
when there's nothing

at least there's housework—duties
my mother mimicked as a girl, almost exactly
like this: play house in this same home,

her mother in the next room. In the corner,
silent, my grandmother paints
a bird's small portrait: 10x10 inches

of canvas blurred like a pupil in its eye,
or a palsied hand pushed to rest on the plane of her desk,
begging to be still.

**

An elegy of sorts,
a catbird imitates the noises of the animals
that surround it,

fracturing sound,
almost invisible: she's a bottle on the sill
feathered in dust,

pouring the day,
filling with night's liquid black, a glass
moon tinting—

A painting of a bird
is never just
a painting of a bird.

DOUBLE BASS

She tells me he removed the strings
and she is right.

A hairless doll, mute, she cradles it.
What we see when we hold things.

GHOST

A light moth frees itself

from behind the window curtain

and dizzies her in her gaze,

obscuring the room. Was it behind

or beneath the curtain?

The curtain matching the bed

sheets she's quit making—*no use*.

Here light is not the metaphor,

though it's so keen to be; dark

has become this house: no shades

drawn, no windows left widowed

of cloth—no day—no night—

VALEDICTION

a brief salutation a
space where your mind naps
that older house that
place where you ask
those same damn questions
not knowing anything not
even my name and
I have nothing because
you have nothing

CHILD

She can no longer bathe herself,
so my mother draws the water, delicate;
the temperature of skin.

I went once; listened from the bedroom
water pour from a cup;

drew the box and triangle of a house
into the gleam that was the bed's comforter,
pink as hands; erased it.

My mother does what she must
as an only daughter, expectations like this,
ones I, unlike my sisters, will be spared:

the washing of our mother's body;
of her thin, weak hair, the brushing.

CHRISTMAS EVE

Tonight
she refuses
everything:
her supper,
a bath,
the company
of her cat,
her own
daughter,
even: that
girl who
cooks, that
girl who
cleans, that
girl who

THE APPOINTMENTS

When she has had enough she plucks her hearing aids
from her ears

blackberries rotten from the vine
Dives into the ocean of the wallpaper

misinterprets nothing
This is where she goes

This is how she protects herself
The reason light is fickle

is because it too carries with it darkness
and nothing is darker than darkness she tells me

Take the doctor's soundless mouth for example

THE CEMENT STONES

I remember gathering a bunch of small things:
marbles from the tic-tac-toe box, little shells
you saved, plastic-green army men;

pressing them into a mixture to be kept,
each preserved in their own pie pan, ready

the next morning to be placed around the garden,
the space between some so far we would have to jump

to the next. Still, among what have now become weeds,
lies all of those invariable circles, those unhinged clamshells,
those figures of man as we know him.

THE NEEDLEWORK

We find them all along the walls; draped,
even, in the bathroom as hand towels:

the houses, fine cotton, their windows
small and lusterless, the frenzy-fixed birds,

and the proverbs she sewed pupil-thick—
every letter dilated and black.

Each suspended, still; a taut memory
from between her round-edged hoop. In her hands,

she holds a new one now and flips it
over to show me her favorite part:

the stitch's underside; what is behind
the piece's embroidery—what is lost

beneath and, through a needle's eye, pulled back.

A GOOD DAY

Hornets have again nested in the porch fan;
she is not a cruel woman, so she allows it.

Sits beneath the windless hum and sips her coffee,
brown as a bird in its nest.

Never has the air been so fragrant with grass,
nor the grass, her feet discover, with air.

There is a bush under the porch, a rabbit
under the bush. Around the house

she traces a slug's trail,
its journey across the driveway unusual,

no arrival of the thing,
no logical departure: just light lines measuring

the asphalt—stretched and dry.
And with this she is delighted.

NIGHT

isn't what it used to be.

It has become something else,

something she tries to shut away,

ignore: the bed,

his towel folded

in the bathroom, the things

she fears touching. Every night

she sits, tends to her cross-stitch;

stares between threads out the window:

the leashed darkness

lunging toward the glass

again and again.

THE SLEEPWALKING

She now fears for herself what we already fear:
that she will leave the house and awaken

feet first to the confusion of grass,
asphalt, the moon. So she attempts to

reverse sleep: lie in the day
like a throw pillow, dressed, embroidered;

sit beneath the skylight at night,
watch the stars lower their necks, move on.

MEMORY IS A BIRD

switch

bird memory

memory bird

switch

memory bird

bird memory

switch

bird memory

memory bird

switch

which

which

memory bird

bird memory

switch to which

which to switch

bird memory

memory bird

which remembers

switch remembers

fly away you fools

fly away

THREE

STILL LIFE WITH APPLES, 1887-1888

a river on fire

a bundle of cardinals carried by the wind

a pocket of blood

a perfect image echo

a rush of odd blue

a refrain in E minor

a house of red

a gathering of roosters

a handful of pennies

a long vowel

a sonnet written at a window

a reflection of water

a softness of hearts

a memory somewhere in the brain

ALIVE AND WELL

When I'm alive and well
I'm not thinking about the tension between
the fridge the stove or the candle I lit
there are no more napkins

I cannot know just yet
what I'm thinking when I'm alive and well
but I do know if I were alive and well
well it wouldn't be any of that

I wouldn't curse the air-
conditioning for touching me so freely
or explain painfully the birthday present I want
I certainly wouldn't mistake

the tapping my computer makes
when I turn the volume all the way up
all the way down for something at our door
you welcoming whatever it is in

BLACK

Seeing at once an eggplant sideways on a ceramic plate, I have the despairing thought
that by now art has ruined me.

I see a still life that's violently layered, its colors miraculously shimmering with shadow
an odd and shapely figure on a platform merely rendered to platform.

I see an Angus the tint of an indescribable black injured in the road, our car swerving in
the rain, our headlights shone on the clean curve of its back.

I see the Blue Ridge Mountains dividing the entire world in the last hour of dusk, the one
behind them engulfed completely in flames.

But I see you, too, lying on the bed covered to your navel, trying with all you have to
love me again.

BLUE RIDGE

We arrived early the mountain was dead
 practically no one there but us we took
the beginners path you had made us sandwiches

the ridge was silent so we were silent
 from that high everything casts shadows
the birds especially

 on the hike down
remember that snake the envy you felt how
whatever it touched could remain as though untouched

to hike was your idea I remember
 you suggested it in the perfumed darkness
that was your bed that was your voice

TO LOVE: AN AUBADE

Fruit flies swarm the pantry the kitchen and linger
a dozen black specks reveal

sunlight raising the walls the ceiling the last peach
shriveled at the bottom of the bowl

it is here I understand what prevails fermenting juice
the smell of the bowl that is now

the bowl it is this they want and if asked to name it
who wouldn't say *love*? something

I wouldn't know without metaphor how the flies search
for the otherness this peach becomes

and slowly die each day in every room of the house
for the one thing they know this one thing

TO LOVE: A NOCTURNE

Remember you described a night like this
when a friend went swimming years ago

your voice carrying across the water the words
you spoke undressing the Atlantic remember

the glowing phytoplankton all that neon
light blooming bottling the blue of each wave

was she there your friend orchestrating
that shallower brilliance here just beyond

our knees remember your admission
you never cried about it then you did

let me trace a map of it
between your breasts

FOUR

STILL LIFE: VASE WITH IRISES, 1890

Spread high in the light of a dusk fainting
I've found the impossible
blue of February

Bones
poured from a pitcher
sprouting in the brightest bay window of the house

A dangerous color
its shades
pulled by the feet of crows

If a world within a word does exist don't say *winter*
a sudden death on your tongue
a silence you can taste

Instead say *mercy*

GRAY

The entire world
in concealment

No deep notes a purple Viola makes
beneath whispering snow

To trace an invisible deer
no leaf-shaped prints in the frozen mud

In this despair all I can see
as the window appears catching my breath

are the blurs of crows bruising the yard
Dark threads stitching

sky to ground

THE HIGH FIELD

We walked there
to watch night lower its head
but we were too slow

Instead we watched cattle
huddle a fence
a heifer collapsed in a long, pregnant sprawl

To get to her
we climbed the fence
and for what?

How we could do something
but would do nothing

THE BODY IS BRIGHT

I made a bird and let it go in the living room
a House Finch

I made it from floral wire
22 gauge Once we went hunting

Returned empty-handed
I remember I couldn't bear it

We went bird hunting and I couldn't
shoot birds I missed

This bird
hollow as a bird

This bird
bright daylight

Why do I look at everything so closely?
Did I learn that from you?

Please forgive me
father

AFTER BIRD HUNTING

The pheasants would be set on the table
cleaned of its grime, the stretch of sawdust,

the used nails; the birds' necks falling limp
onto one another, their heads now curved

as though to see the knife—my father—
that would open their skin. The incision

in place, he would peel away their
bodies' body, its autumnal strokes, moving

his hands, then, to the quick separation
of breast and wing. It was clean, he'd say,

hosing their blood over the concrete
into its low drain. Easy, he'd say, tossing

their sharp remnants into a bucket,
the hollow bones whistling in that flight.

STILL LIFE WITH LEMONS ON A PLATE, 1887

My mother slices a sun on the kitchen counter
leaving five others resting
on a plane of whiteness

The birds tell my grandmother
the final frost is coming
as she stirs her tea into steam

The window she's brought me to
pointing
reflects only the darkness of our bodies

standing before it
in the last morning of March
And though we are still

in this eternity I know
the birds will glide again
in the perfect world of a high meadow

My grandmother
tired
will fall asleep in the sunlight forgetting

she has forgotten My mother
will pick flowers
like words that will save us

And after fixing a neighbor's porch light
my father will bring home husks of bartered corn
a gift

stacked on the table with a vase
its tulips holding for days
countless accuracies of yellow

*

KOI POND

This house has no roof
but an unleveled transparency:

a window open overnight.

Light of each season, they cross one

curving end, then the other, the way
we do in our own contrived body.

*

NOTES

EPIGRAPH (page 2)

From “Quipu” in *Quipu* by Arthur Sze.

FEAR (page 9)

Epigraph from “Hawk” in *Owls and Other Fantasies: Poems and Essays* by Mary Oliver.

STILL LIFE WITH BIRDS’ NESTS, 1885 (page 16)

Also the title of a painting by Vincent van Gogh.

STILL LIFE WITH APPLES, 1887-1888 (page 37)

Also the title of a painting by Vincent van Gogh.

TO LOVE: AN AUBADE (page 41)

The question *and if asked to name it who wouldn’t say love?* is influenced by the poem “The Pear as One Example” in *The Pear as One Example: New and Selected Poems*, 1984-2008 by Eric Pankey.

STILL LIFE: VASE WITH IRISES, 1890 (page 44)

Also the title of a painting by Vincent van Gogh.

STILL LIFE WITH LEMONS ON A PLATE, 1887 (page 52)

Also the title of a painting by Vincent van Gogh.

BIOGRAPHY

Matt Blakley was born and raised in Orange, Virginia, and received his Bachelor of Arts in English from the University of Mary Washington in 2011. George Mason University's 2013-2014 Heritage Fellow, Matt currently lives in Washington, D.C., where he works as the Program Support Assistant at the Poetry and Literature Center of the Library of Congress.