

OUR FOREIGN SELVES

by

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by

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ABSTRACT

OUR FOREIGN SELVES

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George Mason University, 2015

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This thesis is a selection of poems written during my time in the MFA program. These poems loosely fit the theme of “identity foreign-ness.” That is, how we perceive ourselves vs. the way others perceive/describe us (to the point of paranoia, in my experience); the expectations parents have of us/children vs. the reality of our wills; our subconscious vs. conscious decisions to like/dislike something (tastes, hatred, fear); the way we relate (or fail to relate) to others; and the self-awareness and protection of our bodies vs. souls.

Piety

I would like to sit on the grass, alone,
among the slow stomping of the cows' hooves,
their head shakes and their flopping ears, their grunts
and sneezes, to hear a creek trickling
behind some trees, buzzing flies, and dry grass
snapping under hooves. Up close, I would see
short coarse hairs: pixilations repeated
fitfully over its body's canvas.
Instead, I charge hastily through this place
in my car. I see this world the same way
passengers see it from the train: mute, wide,
flat. So they have fresh news, delicate foods.
A woman cuts along the apricot's
seam. Its fruit will feel like fur on her tongue.

Early Spring Scene

Daffodils rising again, wet with earth and rain.
That love is like this: an interest in witnessing
you change over time. Slow.

That it is not always
felt: the way light's reflected back into the curtains.
Blood oranges cut in quarters. The brick walls now
slick with white paint. Enamel.

That brightness is hard
yet softens the look of things. Rest here. Your spine
under my hand: the bones beneath your skin
locked like hunched buildings down a hill.

Seen in the Peripheral

To call the day, to hear
the bright blue words:

I am the only one
awake in town. I stretch my gaze

out the window
and toward the line
of birds.

They float in a necklace
shape above the street. A crown.

One bird descends the fleet.
She settles on the utility pole, begins
a song, then pecks. Cleverly discrete.

And then she stares at me. Two small black eyes,
her beak held still.

So shrill their calls, the group,
she flutters, arcs back to their lace disguise,
and they flitter

above a horse that stoops,
hangs down his head beneath the morning sky,
nose-dives a stick that penetrates
his eye.

Primary Rules

Love swells like crowded house plants straining to maintain their line.
We've been cast the same role, so naturally we compare lines.

Truth is no guarantee: continue your research. Light
brought close to the wall exposes even the faintest hairline

crack. Photos rise in baths, yet your fingerprints hide all over
my arms, legs, neck. Even these thoughts needling at my hairline.

If your wet bathing suit, wet hair, wet body, leaves
a perfect outline of *you* on a towel, do you dare lie?

Calvert Cliffs

They stand like tall weeds:
 exposed and sun-bleached.
 They're scraggly with iron ore
and fossils. Rows of waves
 line up like soldiers, each row
 crashing and retreating, capturing
fossilized shark's teeth from
 the cliffs. We walk along
 with strainers, pants hiked,
perspiring: the sun drowns
 our conversation. Our fingers wrinkle
 from the hunt. We find
gums blackened and attached
 to blue-gray jagged teeth. Some
 rest heavy as steel in my palm.
I slide my tongue over my own
 teeth, impressed by their
 cool centers, smooth
as an apple's skin. I want to shove
 sand into my mouth. I want to
 chew shells, keep shoving sand
into my mouth, fist over fist,
 until my teeth grind down to
 sand, until my body shatters
on the beach and the waves
 swallow me, tooth by tooth,
 and spit me at your feet.

Chess

It only took an introduction—hi!—
and then you sat me down to teach me chess.
The first game was spent following your eye
as you showed me the moves to so impress.
You taught me all the rules, how to castle,
and then how to seal your opponent's fate
—like this—checkmate.

Graduation tassels
soon swept you away; this put me in a state.
The other boys would come and go, cookies
or flowers they'd hold, stiff as a statue.

The day you returned, I was no rookie -
We played chess long and slow, and then I beat you
fairly—like this—checkmate. I won two games:
already I swallowed you up like flames.

Sacrifice

I'm in my parking lot about to unload a bag
of recycling. I flip up the lid and at the bottom
of the near empty plastic bin I see the back
of the birthday card my mom sent me. It's cold,
my hand white-knuckling the bag and I drop it in,
knowing I'm the only one in our entire complex
who has made this discovery. But I do wonder
if next week the card will still be down there.
So for this I am hung in guilt. The kind of guilt
known well by a child brought up in a
Presbyterian family when all the rest
of her cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents
were Catholic. I went to mass once with my Catholic
grandparents: how strange it was to bring both my head
and knees down to prayer. I remember being bribed with
chocolate mints, to stay behind in the pews when
they took Communion. The kind of candy wrappers
that even crinkle after the candy is ripped out
and gone. That kind of guilt. And yet I am still
drawn to the altar, to its small dishes of silent food
and dark drink, to the napkins folded and saintly white.
Or perhaps I'm drawn to the cut flowers, the ones arranged
by only the most worthy of women, the flowers
purposefully placed there not just for decoration
but also as a reminder of sacrifice, designed
to softly persuade us of the grim realities of our sins
and shortcomings. Those flowers that look out
with their mocking eyes, begging, *what world?*
Just what world belongs to *you*? The one where
being human means to accept your own limitations?
Is that the one? One where two deaf women sign
to one another through glass: one woman in the
creamy light of the coffee shop, the other one out-
side with a cigarette between her lips, both hands
fluttering? Is there one where no verse is incomplete?

Quiet Draining

New Orleans, March 2006

Trees we saw from the road bloomed greener the further we drove south, and the sun steeped in our sleepy eyes. When we got out in Louisiana, we saw forests flattened: leafless, aching limbs

splintered without argument. Mud still drying. In the building converted into a church, we sat on folding chairs, our mouths opening, closing in prayer. Our words echoed and mingled,

rising to the ceiling. We went into the French Quarter that first afternoon, and heard the frantic casino sounds. The beignets hot and powdered. Those plastic beads, discarded and cold,

snapped under our feet. A camera crew blocked off streets and filmed characters conversing in the gardens neatly tended, blooming. We went to sleep hot, fans whirring over our cots,

and woke up cold. We zipped up in blinding white suits. We heaped furniture still damp from months before, and dragged appliances to the street, draining them

of rotted fruits, plastic wrapped leftovers, and ice trays pocked with dirt. We cleared the floors of the black muck, taking it out in wheel-barrows whose tires kept popping

under the weight. The ceiling fans drooped like wilting flowers, and we stripped them blade by blade. We carried two snakes out to the yard on our shovels like an offering. The walls came down

easily, and we drifted through them like ghosts—gradually, transformed.

Rondeau in Approximation

Everything that can be perceived
is a symbol. Grey branches sleeved
in drying leaves, autumnal red
and gold cast in an inverted
devouring, like fire. Deceived

by the no-fence, the ball-retrieved
dog that would have been has achieved
nothing. He walks nose down, snot-bled:
everything that

smells is marked with snot. Mother, grieved
over the child missing (not yet believed
dead), lies next to the no-forehead,
kissing the pillow instead,
blaming whatever conceived
everything: that.

Relics

Arm in arm, our scarves sweeping
through the hushed, crowded space,
we walk at an unhurried and knowing pace.
Behind the thick glass for safekeeping

stands the heavy white gown worn
by Jackie Kennedy on Inaugural night.
My mother hunches closer, eyes bright,
and sighs, "oh, look," to me, her firstborn.

And I see, but also do not see. She aches
for time that has passed, for time
that came before me. I wait for her. The first time
we celebrated the holidays

without her, I found a small box of ornaments
she left behind: cross-stitched, handmade,
all made before she married. Glass laid
over the patterns, and gold circumvented

each one. Plastic. I stirred them, my face reflected
in them all, blurring what I saw beneath
each glass. The box heavy with my mirrored teeth,
I hid it in my drawer, under clothes, unsuspected.

Sonnet to John Singer Sargent's Portrait of Elizabeth Chanler

With clasped hands, Elizabeth Chanler sits
directly facing the viewer. Her eyes,
forever widened, shine like two nails
that hoist her ashen body, and her arms,
in an "O," express what her closed mouth
silently calls. Two pillows busy with stitching
are held close beneath her arms – yet her dress
runs black and constant as the bottom

of a lake. I walk through wide halls cramped
with white marble statues along the perimeter,
statues like perpetually hardened snow piles
as evenly spaced as the paintings on
the walls. I sit on the bench before her – me,
grounded; she, in unmistakable rising.

The Absence of Forgetting

Steyr, Austria, 2006

We were sitting on the patio
eating cantaloupe crescents
when we started to smell
smoke. But I don't remember
sitting on the patio
or the crescent-shaped cantaloupe
or even smelling any smoke:
I just reread that on an old blog post.

But I do remember her falling, her arms
held up, and her noiseless bawling.
And I remember the fire's
insistent crawling choking all
in its sprawling--those trying to name
everything worth recalling.

You are be in the habit of thinking that you need it

You let a coyote lead you out into the woods:
you close your eyes and hold on to the stiff fur
between his shoulder blades. You fold the bathroom
mirrors towards you as you apply makeup
and there are just so many of you now, you forget
which hand holds your brush. In your head,
you go over the blueprints of some future
conversations, but they never actualize.
Some nights, you stand at your window
to watch the snow fall: your neighbors in theirs
like pink-nosed caged kittens, and you peer out
vacantly, letting your gaze bend the buildings closer
for a moment. Then you soak your feet back to pink
in the hot bath water, your bare back to the mirrors.

Approaching Loss

No blame for the distance light travels through
air, returning to the open hand.

Resettling impressions.

A flower's growth: the product of perception
between blinks of the eye,
smoothed over
by the heat and retreat of the humming sun.

We interpret departure as missing moments, and time
as fictive as the naked body.

In faith, we cherish and defend
gaps in evidence.

Insomnia Poem

Insomnia draws you out of bed and
onto the porch. Thunder claps deep
on the horizon, and the after-rain
drips in a ticking, sound as sleep.

Worms seep up from the ground.
Sheltered by the late hour, they mate
without fear of birds, or of the night
fisherman scouring the land for bait.

If summer showers tap at the ground,
swelling the earth and bringing
forth worms, and, later, the land dries

and sunlight drives away their singing,
then how will you bring your own self out,
only giving, not needing anything or clinging?

Shaker Chair

At a flea market, I sometimes
find behind inlaid mirrors
and veneered tables the simple
straight back of a shaker chair
and I have imagined sitting
on its square, wicker seat
the fairest of angels, climbed
down with even step by the
chair's ladder back.

Breathing

We bring
a heavy quilt,
cool from the locker.

The sun glows
through your ears.

It's easy to run
into the breaking
waves, until it isn't.

Our Street

Eventually, all the children
aged out of this neighborhood.
Streets emptied

and quiet. Inverted living.
Something less

understood than prayer.
In some far-away hotel room

the roving eye
of weather forecasts

keeps time in 5-day increments.

Better

Then we're here:
summer, a bright blur.

There's a flower.
an ordinary flower.

Let's go to the zoo,
where we can all take
a better look
at each other.

Christmas Portrait

Breaking from coffee and warm desserts,
I stood before the new mantle. Smaller
than the last, this mantle, too, collects

the Christmas decorations, and here, an old portrait
of me and my brother, taken for his first
Christmas. It poses as background

for the manger, baby Jesus, and the animal ceramics.
I wore my Austrian lederhosen: I remember
its straps tight, the buckles cold even through
the blouse underneath it. My brother's toothless smile
is relaxed, his chin tucked into his infant chest.

He brought black bags, I remember,
three fill lights, a tripod and empty boxes.
A drop-cloth the color of brown eggs
slated the back of our living room: a temporary
cloth wall separating old pictures on the mantle

from the boxes we were about to pose on.
My mother moved the coffee table
to the porch that morning, she released
my hair from the curlers, soft for an instant
and then sticky with aerosol. He wanted

to use his cotton sheet to soften the boxes,
our props. But my mother, she brought down
the white blanket, the one she crocheted

for my father for their wedding, the one we
would later call the "sick" blanket, brought out
only for fevers and days home from school.

Maybe he liked the way my mother
jumped in, she leaned over quickly

to steady the baby: my brother's
back seemed to retain, still,
its curled embryonic posture: he could not sit

yet on his own. The bulb flashed,
brightening tears already cast to my face,
glass flecks soldered to countless brother-sister portraits,
while my brother's gentle smile diverts
attention and affections. Now I stand here

in this new home, clouds of Christmas wrapping paper
at my feet, the ground warm from the babies crawling,
and a thickening sky outside. And in this old picture:

what was to be unseen and not suggested: my mother's hand
behind the blanket, behind my infant brother's back.
It looks to me like beating flesh within the shell: a determined
underpinning, secure and sturdy, causeless but for love.

Umbrella Poem

She holds the blue, green, red,
yellow, and white umbrella
over his head while he hovers
over the gray steam of the engine,
gray droplets rolling down the hood
toward the still beating
wipers. There are bandaids
on her fingers, and much like the springed
stopper on the rod of the umbrella,
the one that holds up
the parasol, she must release her
bandaids at night to slide her rings
off her fingers. He and she
sway together in front of the grill,
his gut supporting himself,
pressed against the steaming engine,
from time to time. When they move,
she follows his lead, and they move
between the visible boundaries,
congealed like the bubble in
a carpenter's level.

Holiday Fulfillment

I reel them back in, unchanged:
bright wool I use to crochet
some hats and scarves. Unraveling
from a tightly wound skein--

bright wools I use to crochet.
I prepare for the holidays, twisting bacon
like a tightly wound skein,
speared with a toothpick.

I prepare for the holidays, finding bacon
on sale, says the circular. Samples
speared with a toothpick.
I unravel my list, adding a few items

on sale (says the circular). Sample
some gift ideas online.
I unravel my list, adding a few items.
Ideas about a better holiday than the last,

some gift ideas online.
They're about to come home.
Ideas about a better holiday than the last.
And I like to hope

they're about to come home,
some hats and scarves, unraveling.
And I like to hope
I reel them back in, unchanged.

The Mortal Sonnets

I

Here at the library, among the glass
unfeeling eyes, and stiff fortified chairs,
my knees below the desk (as if elsewhere)
bounce earnestly, as though they've time to pass.
Across from my desk (whose width can surpass
any blue whale's colossal girth), I stare
(and twirl my hair away from my head)
at a book set on the end of the case:
this jacket's back features, amidst cool gas
and curling waves, a mermaid—unaware
of her demure eyes closing or her brass
lips murmuring silence—offers a shared
gaze towards her gift bearing hands: silken grass
like gums of fish clumped beneath her sweet stare.

II

Like gums of fish clumped beneath her sweet stare,
the mermaid's curls of hair open widely.
Mackerel, tuna—their mouths open idly
and drowsily, below her hands. White pears
of her breasts topple forward as she strains
her eyes towards the graying sun, the sky shredded.
Yet here, within her hair, the summer threaded.
Timeless, as just the thought of her remains.
But what can be expected of a tease
except her eventual fading glow,
then hardening into memory she goes.
A bleak remembrance. That one hard to please.
Unfasten her from my mind if I could:
Clearly my ruined garden as it stood.

III

Clearly my ruined garden as it stood
could not overthrow my sinking statue.
It would not lather his rugged lines subdued
by rhythmic weathering (as it could),
nor cast shut his open-eyed prolonging,
nor thwart his splendid reach towards higher deeds
by ravishing his thighs with reckless weeds,
nor sink low his unrestrained belonging.
Instead, he's more lively than I can admit:
his toes swelling in the bubbling mud,
and stony cheeks all warm and flushed with blood,
and leaning towards us seems to say, that it
will never come again (for me, for you)—
in everlasting fixed commotion, too.

IV

In everlasting fixed commotion, too,
the city ascends, striving excellence
while mythologizing its decay. Suspense
excluded from the painter's point of view
(only sometimes). Perhaps he paints the strains
of *being* versus *possibility*,
and in being, that sensibility
of dying. In small cities, where the reigns
of portrait painters pass from each to each,
that one, who paints without completely telling,
who paints fire curling within their speech
without the candid use of color-swelling
or inflating the heart to a wild peach--
he collects what's there and less compelling.

V

He collects what's there and less compelling:
some several stones under moving water.
He stands so sturdy yet thin as a daughter
and ponders the water in its propelling.
Should he try to draw them with pen and ink?
To paint the rocks with moving stream would take
about a decade's practice, without break,
and still it may not capture the dark stones' drink.
But the pinhole camera might work better,
to capture the careening scene's expanse
while the water's movement's left up to chance
(like prayer songs watered down to letters).
And as some artists airily admit:
so small a hole compared to the portrait.

VI

So small a hole compared to the portrait:
each star a pin-prick in the velvet skies.
If only to sweep up those swarming eyes,
or at least unravel them from orbit.
But perhaps they're more like balloons cast off
that clink together on the night's dull ear,
that dangle wildly on the wide frontier,
and stammer in the wind's sporadic cough.
They reappear like contemplation's scars,
and streak across a glass like rain
in all directions there within the plane,
eluding us. Ah, but there go the stars—
beat back by the morning's polished horn—
escaping by day through the night sky torn.

VII

Escaping by day through the night sky torn,
my thoughts assembling link by link, up flights—
I meet them there. Now at these cloudy heights:
polish the mask of clarity unworn!
Below, the thickening sky, dark with snow,
descends upon the heavy-lidded statue,
and pats upon his head a slushy shampoo,
and stills the world, like his, in frozen glow.
Still, here I sit, heart crumpled, less festive,
and there, my reflection. Within the crass,
magnified silence stand the respected
books, rainbow-rowed and echoless: the stacks
shuffled out fan-like from my perspective
here at the library, among the glass.

At the bend in the road

At the bend in the road, there's an old farmhouse.
Rocks ride the rainwater like sad songs, and they end
at the yard. It's just wild flowers, then road. That close.

Deer buckle crossing the road. Fleas come with the field mouse,
and scabs tend to shrivel in the sun.
At the bend in the road, there's an old farmhouse.

A wedding cake with flowers, and the warm wind rose.
That delicate, that close. Two figures clasp their cool hands
in the yard. It's just wild flowers, then road. Matte clothes.

Absence becoming more like wild flowers than house.
No fence, no railing to protect what's begun
here at the bend in the road. There's the old farmhouse.

Both the photographer's hand and eye are behind that pose.
The world moves in truths. Please don't depend
on the yard: it's just wild flowers. The road's too close.

From the road to the front door the path is closing.
A car comes up the road. How that all depends.
At the bend in the road, there's an old farmhouse,
and the yard is just wild flowers. The road, that close.

Still Happening

On the weekends,
I bleach the bathroom
and my nails give way

to translucence. My neck
and collarbones turn rosy
as I blow-dry my hair.

On rainy nights, I light
candles to feel warm.
If the fog creeps any closer,

the window will turn dark
white, blending in with
the walls that surround it.

My box of china

My father and I used to open the box
every few years, and we'd talk about
the dinners I'd serve with my dishes:
steaming pot roast in the center, platefuls
of creamy desserts after. With this gesture,
talking through the oppressive attic heat,
fantasizing feasts for my future family,
I knew that my future was laid out
before me, bare and valuable. My mother
walks around the table nightly, fists
full of silverware, setting each spoon down.

Adapting

In Degas's statue of a fourteen year old dancer,
her tights appear slouched at the ankles and knees, as if
two sizes too big. Her eyes
are barely widened to the sky;

the sky, too, is copper heavy, falling to rest
between the tears in a leaf floating downriver.
Plaiting the water with their chalky tongues,
the winds emerge as tangible as fog

or as memory, if memory lives in the warmth between
crossed legs, or behind the hosed knee—in the sweat
that chills you as soon as you walk out from the museum
in winter. Statued arms heavily fallen, hands clasped—forever
guiding memory's haunting, forever offering the same thing.

Arms on roof

Before we leave, we let the hot air
out, warming our bodies
and we stretch our arms

across the roof of the car.
Our arms prickle
with the heat. Turned

toward each other, you
stretch your arms toward mine
than slide away.

A Hawk Trapped in the Library of Congress

Above the patrons, the hawk makes a path like a spoon
lingering over a bowl of cut fruit—except the bowl is empty,
cracked, and turned upside down. Still the sun rises: the dome

brightens with the morning sky, milky as birth, and
Father Time continues to count the hours down below.
Nothing goes unnoticed. The mural above the hawk

is already worn smooth with its eyes. The books are tidied,
lined up cheek to cheek. A sweater discarded,
thrown over the back of a desk chair—its arms

dangle toward the ground and invisible hands claw
the air. What difference does it make if all the choices
are studied, and still a path cannot be found?

A feather streaks the air,
silent as a still clapper. The hawk squalls, siphons air—
its wings quicken the distance between art

and the viewer. Whispers of it gather up there
like warmth under a blanket. A bird itself a symbol—
coins pregnant with this image: wings lifted

as if to carry the coin in flight. And they do, sometimes:
they hurl from mother's purses into mall fountains,
or jump in clinks at the bottom of a donation barrel,

or end up perched in cardboard slots in a book my father
saves—turned over, then thumbled down into place.

Upstairs

Guitars and sing-songs lure us up to the nexus—
we ascend, passing each gourd set
squatting on the left side of every stair.

The room boils with colorful voices,
glances toward the child
running naked, now chasing your dog.

I don't find the right seat upstairs.
I shape-shift between platefuls
of vegetables from the garden, and chili

still warm in the cast iron pot on the stove.
My mouth is lead heavy, my speech
ushered away by the music.

I rinse my plate and it stands drying
like the moon. I pick up the baby,
and he grasps my necklace—

the nexus is now between us.
We sway to backdrop music, mothers admiring,
yawning *you have the touch* . He falls asleep.

Still swaying, I watch you sitting on the ground
discussing concrete. You say you will start
by making mortar from the sand

that runs along the creek behind your house
ten miles away in the country. You'll mix it and pack it,
and then you'll rename it. I watch

your calloused hands move, rehearsing future operations.
You sit, your sharp knees pointed up, the dog
tenting beneath your legs. I sway and I

try to imagine a time when I won't
 feel like dry sand descending thread-like
 through your hands.

Old Star

His head, his receding hairline, is fastened
with the bruised sky. Bales of hay sink
into the horizon like children on an old couch.

Meteor showers this late in the summer
smolder his gaze of everything familiar to him.
He checks his watch, an inheritance,

and walks with a torch bent toward the ground,
burning the weeds in the ditch with a colorless flame.
He walks like a withered comet, tail dragging along the road.

Past All Concerns

Under the dizzying Mediterranean sun,
we swam as far out as we could get
to feel separated from our American

chaperones and our selves. Our hands—silky with
our new lotions from the Fragonard—
remove our bathing suits,

the closest our teenage bodies, as yet, had come
to relating to the birth of Venus—in her
near slipping robe, bound only by

her relation to herself—accepting what we believe
the world is, and how we're meant to
live in it. But are our intentions

really ever our own? Light beats on buildings,
the past's intentions lathered over in paint—
and our bodies pressing against those

painted alleys. Realizations of my own
intentions visibly haunting the heavy air
above me as I try to sleep,

restraining me to my mind, my body, my bed.

Regret and Her Conscience Construct a Poem

Morning blackness
melts away like butters
on her toast. Her scraping
woke me up. I have chosen

to let only one eye peek out
the window; the other hidden
by the glass of water you left me
on the sill (the crack of cold air

keeping it chill). Or can it
be hidden? The glass
immaculate—her eyes penetrating.

This neighbor's morning
routine, her writing
sweater she neatly buttons.

Peering

Peering down a gargoyle's mouth, just as
many others have done before, as if hiking
through well-known forests.
well-mapped, holding onto
sweat-rubbed limbs, helping us scramble
through the mountaintop. Their bark
smoothed, furnishing the trail
as though organic railings. We ask
why we even bother with peering down
this mouth, this containment of light,
why we slouch towards it, mystified yet
horrified of its barrenness—or rather,
of the baroque-ness in its expression.
But still we inch closer to it.

BIOGRAPHY

Elizabeth A. Gerber received her Bachelor of Arts from the University of Mary Washington in 2007. She lives and works in Washington, DC.