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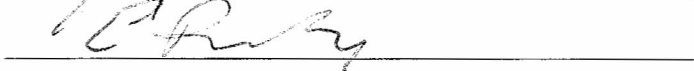
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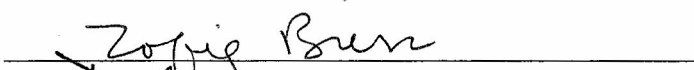
A. Moriah Jones  
A Thesis  
Submitted to the  
Graduate Faculty  
of  
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in Partial Fulfillment of  
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of  
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Committee:



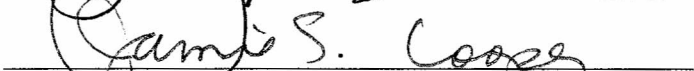
Director





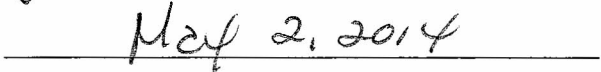


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Spring Semester 2014  
George Mason University  
Fairfax, VA

Refigured

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

by

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Bachelor of Arts  
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Spring Semester 2014  
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## **ABSTRACT**

### **REFIGURED**

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George Mason University, 2014

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This collection of poetry investigates the integral components of identity. The poems strive to explore and question the intersections of faith, race, gender, and sexuality through the stories of a diverse group of women throughout a variety of texts. The texts explored cover a wide range that includes Biblical narratives, folk tales, slave narratives, and the history of one of the earliest African American female poets, Phillis Wheatley. The poems born from engaging with these women's stories grapple with an array of issues, chief among them is the desire to understand what it means to know and be known. What it means to look closely and be seen.

## **PROLOGUE**



## A voice calls

Hear a voice calling out: *woman*  
and it carried on the back  
of the sound of a cracked sky

Know deeply that you are not  
sufficient to the task but abled  
in that you have fingers

Wonder-muddle through rightness  
turning the concept upsides over  
till it loses all meaning

Find that you are cold then start a fire  
but be sure to make it tasteful  
destruction does compel

Remember that you want a tree  
one fitted with twelve kinds of fruit  
that bloom in and out of season

And the voice calls again:  
*Woe to the man-eyed*  
Now write it out: *fire tree*

## Phillis and I make a history

I am not of sliceable air  
thick among the trees that thrive  
right down through the soil  
that reach broad and high  
into the crick and hiss of a live place  
I've not seen it  
    so how can I speak of her

I am looking  
    into the history of one Phillis Wheatley

Stolen then stuffed into the dank and festering hold of a slave ship, brought to a new land, purchased by strangers: a slave, found to be extremely intelligent so given an education, a genius in a strange land, told she is treated like family while knowing she isn't family, a child so she found this distinction confusing, aware that her position was an exception to the rule, aware that while her owners were kind they were still owners

It's all been said hasn't it  
our ears gloss over the story  
but what of the human rot and the chains  
around ankles laid stomach to back to foot  
to face to curve to bone to excrement  
of the self of the body nearby and wailing  
    then the silence  
but for the skitter of claws across flesh  
oh and the sharks grown weary of the hunt  
that follow in the wake waiting  
for the bodies the daily dump  
the ritual sacrifice for safe passage  
it's all so familiar and yet  
I've not lived it  
    so how can I know her

Human so she loved the attention, human so she hated the attention, human so not satisfied to be owned or accept being loved as an object or privileged pet or second class family member or any other characterization that did not know or care to reckon with the whole of her

For there are many ways  
of holding the self gently  
many ways of saying look

my faith has been pressed  
like flowers to be arranged  
for pretty pictures but the chains  
I've carried did not scar my flesh  
so how can I touch her

Told about a god who loves, long treated as something “sub” so she doubted humanity, doubted this god, doubted love and anyone’s ability to actually forgive, actually forget, human so she recognized that she was “better treated,” hated that she was “better treated,” wondered if that was what they called grace and if it really related to mercy, and she was human so her soul yearned and she searched herself and somehow found herself thankful for good clothes, decent food, philosophy, Alexander Pope, and Juvenal. But oh how she remembered the chill of the clay pot filled with fresh water, sunlight on new honey, unfettered freedom, and love she didn’t have to earn, love she didn’t fear would run out and those seem more of the god of love than all the rest, so she resents that she learned to call him by name here, but this is where she was. She was here and she could either learn to breathe this air, learn to hope, learn to see god all about her or she could, she could...

I am looking  
    Into the figure of her  
and I've been both: full of love  
and hungry – I have found here wanting  
I have found her broad – many  
stretched into herself and becoming

Aware of the find and definite lines she walked. So figure this: a girl-child was stolen, surrounded by the dying, brought to a land and made to live as a constant tension of identities and hoped for realities, does not rend between these forces but decides that she wants to voice her voice – conceives herself

## In spirit and in truth

### I.

A girl stands before an altar and waits for the live coal press  
against her lips. Forehead so wrought up  
brows snap back tugged as if snagged by fishhooks

Hands raised in something like a praise and she's trying  
to speak out in the tongue of angels  
or at least somehow foreign somehow other

to the words that hitch to the inside of her jaws  
words now grown into a stale blandness. The stillness of air  
that only a mouth closed in hunger or silence can provide

Confusion gathers on her temples and drips down  
in beads and she knows that the heat is not from a fire  
shut up in her bones. Knows that she's just weary with effort

and the effort itself seems shy of justice. But this too remains  
unsaid. So she is sent away with a pat of the back and "maybe next time"  
and like a child told to wait for Christmas, she doesn't understand

because after all it's supposed to be a gift

### II.

A woman lies down pent up with knowledge  
of how all the world is a great unending recurrence  
wheel run round by persons hurried through the waking rituals:

walking the ache down through wearied limbs.  
She lies down so pent up with waiting  
that she rises with a stomach unsettled as the sea.

There are still things she can't give voice to  
but she's in the habit of belief and has grown  
accustomed to questions and to silence.

Though there are times she would swear it is like fire  
most times she accepts that belief is the gravity  
without which something would unhinge

inside here and she be flung into the dust of space.  
Most times she understands why in a millstone world  
thanksgiving and praise are the required sacrifices

and sometimes she falls asleep on her knees.

**AND TO SEEK**

## After Ecclesiastes: on the words of the preacher

### I.

Vapor's vapor  
hebel hebel breath  
vapor: everything's a wind on a circuit:

white bark birch trees and more  
trees together make a forest. Underbrush  
and thick grass break open to glades  
lead down to creeks shattered over broken  
rocks crumbled down to ocean plains under ocean skies

littered by the sparkle flash-mash works  
of luminosity: brightest Sirius of greater Canis  
north east to thrice flown Columba  
and the twelve signs are brought forth  
in their varied seasons  
and the heavens stretch  
to the furthest point  
into nothing  
it stretches

into the strangeness of life's essence:  
the miniscule builders  
of all things: blood, seed and air  
float by mostly unmoored

we are all filled with great space

though eyes aren't satisfied with all they've seen  
and ears don't lap over with all they've heard

"All things are wearisome, more than one can say"

*I have longed for silence  
have closed my eyes*

### II.

Solomon keeps explaining his motives

“Come now, I will test you with pleasure;

enjoy.”

He built himself a house, planted an orchard, also made pools of water from which the gardens and forests drew, bought maidservants to clean, menservants to tend, hired musicians to cheer them. Married women – many women – about a thousand – then found them vexing whereupon he said:

“So I hated life; because the work that is wrought under the sun was grievous unto me; for all is striving after the wind.”

the myriad shades of mirth’s  
cikluwth  
cikluwth  
sorrow:

the shadow’s breath  
between abundance and excess

III.

“Cast away the stones”

Of clotted spasmodic blood spills  
grey placentas shiny with the wet  
and amniotic sacs passed  
like so much waste  
but still a labor  
still a birth

“gather them together”

Of full flushed and wailing  
all a flailing limbs that stretch  
grow thicken hard then brittle crack  
back into the grave  
the womb first cried for

*To be told there is a time for this*



bring forth: yalad yalad  
be fruitful, engender, travail

no matter what is taken away  
we equal out to a certain end

“that which is now has already been”

*I seek it out  
seek it out*

IV.

“Again, if two lie together, then they have heat: but how can one be warm alone?”

*So a body not known isn't a body?*

A mother tucks flannel bundled hot bricks in the fold of sheets at the foot of a straw tick mattress. Later, a girl with only a sleeping bag for a bed fills it with bottles of hot water. Later still, a woman looks in her linen closet filled with microfiber, wool, cashmere, fleece, and cotton-ply blend blankets – not to mention the heating unit plugging away at a comfortable 75 degrees, and she decides that she does quite well keeping warm.

Everything a shadow impression  
of occupied space even the sofa  
the body rests on is a blur  
in the afterglow of the shuttered silence:

lonely is the ache that won't be got at  
the coolness on the other side of the pillow

*No – a body not known is not worthy of the body.*

V.

Do not voice – utter sounds  
By way of the mouth articulate

to form meaning – a vow – personal  
pledge of significance or import –

not to say never but to say be wary  
of the urge to speak be wary  
for the tongue is serpent shaped  
the tongue is unruly

and words are the only things  
that take root in the air  
neder neder: promises promises

of the heart  
of the mind

*Has it all been said before – have I lived before  
complete: known: voiced?*

VI.

Two bare feet on rain soaked soil  
but to not once wriggle toes  
down into the cool

lungs filled with air but to never stop  
and wonder at one of the great mysteries:  
alveoli – akin to the splayed honeycomb:  
the split pomegranate – microscopic  
functional but fully beautiful

to be in every pertinent part alive  
but lack the power: courage: will  
perhaps the appetite to live

nephesh nephesh  
hear no flesh

used in this chapter as appetite but most commonly used in this translation as soul  
also life or self: person: individual: the man himself – which is problematic  
because selfhood is described as masculine but nephesh is a feminine noun

But the difference is more  
than our component parts  
to say that we all hunger – after many

disparate stars and thirst alike

is not to suggest an absence  
it is not to say that we are less than  
the body we are in

*– it is not simply put  
so it would be bold – to suggest*

## One. Flesh

II.

Cannot fathom this holy and undefiled  
union: bare breasted and un  
ashamed. From beginning to end  
bent towards this purpose

III.

Great mystery: a body  
not known isn't a body  
Existence begs verification  
quanti and quali fication

Self is a body contained  
in three parts: flesh, soul  
and mind. Spirit being  
something separate something

more. Maybe we are four

I.

Flesh of body and bone  
for this clause cleave and be joined  
into one flesh

## Tamar

as chaste: demure. Observed  
and desired as pure: beautiful.

The wearer of embroidered robes  
many colored richly dyed.

A virgin. Identified as such  
because she wore such a garment.

Tamar as the “self” defined through trappings:  
articles of dress: raiment: attire:

that which makes one beautiful.  
Beauty later corresponding

to responsibility: complicit:  
somehow at fault.

Think about the length of her skirts. What she asks for.

Tamar as suited for some neighboring royal:  
fulfilling function.

Function being proper to her person:  
the task for which she was designed

or exists: her role.  
Tamar of the many roles:

Nurse for a “sick” brother.  
Made sick by the arousal of interest.

Interest without reciprocity:  
unfulfilled: the lingering

sensation of heaviness:  
aching discomfort: the need

for gratification.  
Also lacking in self-

control: sick.  
As in troubled.

Tamar as forbidden  
but loved.

Calling it love being an error of translation:  
a thing rendered but not accepted.

Think of the father's complicity.

Tamar becomes lamb led to slaughter:  
sudden violent disruption: unsettling

or lacking in exactness.  
Tamar as achieved:

conquered: hated. As tossed aside.  
Then sat in corner and kept:

a reason for violence  
done and violence returned.

As everything for everyone  
but herself: never seeing

anything more of herself  
than that moment

and what led to that moment:  
never moving beyond:

existing there. Tamar  
as the archetype:

inevitable: known  
redundant:

as unspoken answer  
to a pointless question:

did he come into you?

Tamar as the stain on the sheet  
the ripping of garments

the desperate ringing of hands  
ashes on forehead

leaving the scene staggered  
screaming no wailing

but then asked to be  
and forever being silent.

## Snow-white Miriam

### I.

Her hands take hold of the fibers  
fold the braid into the braid  
upwards round into curved upwards  
    baskets and bulrushes  
    the unleavened cakes carried therein  
skin rubs into raw skin: a well worn  
habit of blisters on the hands – and swelling

### II.

At the edge of a red sea  
She's all freed: praise and fervor  
with tambourine and with dancing  
    bare feet and dust  
    turns round and round the ankles  
tripping along a coast – shell strewn  
sand soothes the coarse edges

### III.

Prophetess your eye refracts light  
Imperfectly – the bride was not your brother's stain  
    leper's ash strikes the hand  
    and you are out beyond the walls  
see without sight: further  
– can goodness go too far?

### IV.

It was in the hills and valleys of zin  
that they laid her  
    in a land without water  
here in the hills she was buried.



**Beerlahairoi**

*well of the Living One seeing me*

To be figured the vessel where one plants a seed.  
Crops being of the soil but not for it.  
No one says this too will be asked of you:

unfold your body for me.  
And even if I were in every part  
disinclined and my very blood to recoil

at the thought of his touch it would still not be  
it was never about my yes. It was to be furrowed:  
made surrogate hole then hated for the way

they wanted me – my womb self:  
the experiment that bore out.  
It was to accept their hot their cold.

And yet I thought to myself what wonder inside  
me: growing of limbs. And this pride misplaced?  
To do everything that's asked then dare

at joy. Worthy then of chastisement?  
So yes I fled from their presence to a nearby  
wellspring and there considered

my body – so our bodies – beneath it.  
And also what comes after the body. But then  
a thus saith on this wise: *you will have a son, Hagar.*

*A wild man – yes. Every hand against him – yes  
will know strife, but you'll know it together.*  
It reached to the very of me.

To be called first by name. My own.  
And where it reached I was sated.  
Because it is something like water, to be seen.

## Dirty hands

To talk about the seed  
talk instead of the garden –

rather the work of the garden.  
The shovel down through thick

moist dirt and the motion  
of twist till turn – the root

that resists the shovel – that must be  
forced that must be pried to the point

where it does indeed crack – yield  
and after much of this

only then – the seed

## **Niddah**

to mean moved so separated as in put apart – twice it also meant flowers but if a girl were to woman in this way flower even behind the curtain of a marriage bed she would be niddah: to also say impurity

uncleanliness and this word – uncleanliness – used also to describe a man who takes his brother's wife

but most often separation as in that which is required of a woman with an issue of blood – to not be touched so to no be known – to be without exactness

and all of this to think about the woman with a hemorrhage so a filthiness that warrants distance from all save the doctors who can't cure her

the text does not specify so imagine from which part of her the blood flowed

think of her body – wane – was she sticky with it

think of her self – how she'd be cautious because though she'd be spoke by others voiced – so known by all as the woman of issue – they would never smell it on her or see a telltale of it crimson or dried – she'd be pristine to the point of holiness save for the issue she pours into folds of cloth

but she knows the not of her – the ceremonial impureness of herself lingered – until one day a prophet or god come down – because she's heard rumors – walks through town and she thinks: I will touch him

to take a moment and mention that he walked surrounded buffeted by friends strangers and the curious so it is not that he was without the perception of physical contact but that until her hand was upon him he did not know virtue leaving him – so they were both taken aback when she reached out to then feel her fountain dry up

when he felt himself leave his person he looked for her in the crowd he stopped and searched for the one who made herself known who made herself touched

## **Good times**

I have a few friends that understand sometimes you just want to hit someone. So every so often we fight. I can't help but recall the story where two wrestled through the night striving until the break of day – our brief bouts last only a few minutes. We circle each other and my hand snaps out to smack the side of her neck. She snatches at my left arm. I proceed to slide my leg behind her left ankle and we topple: both attempting to land in a position of power while keeping flailing limbs from sensitive places. One of our rules is no face hits.

The common critique is that due to a lack of practical application I don't have refined technique, but I am scrappy. The girl tags out and another friend says that she'd like to try. I think to myself that I shouldn't fight her because I don't care for her as much and at any moment the playful ritual could turn – how easily I might forget what's really at stake. In the old tale one reached into the follow of the other's thigh to tear a muscle – played dirty, but the other still wouldn't let go without a blessing. She starts to circle me and I'm wondering what blessings look like. How would I know? I slap away her hand and remember that one of them is God.

I.

Tangled mid these branches, trussed arms pinned there  
grafted: pinched limbs pressed on bark like flowers.  
Picture diadem all leafed for glory

*but for the thorns*

Cursed is everyone who hangs from a tree.  
Call it scion, bearing heavy fruit so  
strange so mottled: dangled and tendered  
care until ripened drop. Hands that sow such  
sacrifices reap bloody palms. They are  
not hallowed through the kindred demonstration.

II.

Picture vastness: spoken and braced down by choice.  
The pitch of space tethered and drawn in:  
pulled toward the center: glory bodied

*but for the thorns*

Bodies come attracted, always paired and  
purposed battered. Torn and careful of what binds us  
ground with weary weight and pressure.  
Dissent marked we weathered dust of earth-bound  
to dust return. Then bodies equal celestial  
bodies taken leave of that which ties.

III.

Hardened by the press and better  
bent for pressure's tasks and bloodied.  
Pushed all down – now dribbled rain – now  
sodden rootstock trickled down through  
earth: the eventual blossom feathered break

*of the thorns*

## A thing planted

Arguably, the beginning of action is not the beginning.  
Even the decision to act does not go far enough  
does not reach the root. Perhaps  
I am not looking for the root but the seed.

So in the beginning God  
created all the heavens  
and the earth was without form  
and void – without form:

“Useless; ineffectual; vain. Without contents; empty”  
and also without form.

So perfect God creating  
imperfection: creating  
chaos.

::

The Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. Spirit being the English rendering of *ruwach*, a transliteration of a Hebraic feminine noun meaning at various times, wind breath, mind. Rachaph, rendered moved, was often used to describe the motion of birds hovering over their young. I am given license to imaging God as a wind bird returning to His destroyed first and perfect earth.

Then over a period of six days – I should say here that a day is as a thousand years and a thousand years a day to Him, so either in six days or six thousand years He recreated or created, depending on which theory I am hanging – or perhaps the point being time is without measure, so the measure of time becomes unimportant.

::

This is the chief matter: God  
created. Over a space  
of six(?) God calls forth the light  
divides it from dark. Gathers  
water to sea, etc. Sets things  
in order. Sees this as good.

::

Theory as a proposed explanation.  
Language as a thing interpreted.  
All of this a gesture at understanding.  
All of this a great effort for control.

::

Words were spoken into the expanse of black nothing – it really could have been a white blankness. Though it was probably neither, but beyond black and white I cannot conceive “nothing.”

::

I have often wondered: What  
do You think of my blackness.  
If you think of my blackness  
is yours the parent’s response  
at the sight of the newborn’s  
five fingers five toes: elation  
but not worth much discussion  
beyond the original observation.

::

I think about frustration with the created  
about loneliness

and believe He understands

I think one might ask why speak  
disorder into order.

::

It is a little known take that the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were fair, and they took them wives of all which they chose. When the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men the children born became the mighty men of old, men of renown.

I imagine this as the origins of Zeus and his cohorts.

I don’t mean this to be blasphemous.

That the sons of God were angels is not stated in the text, but through etymological research I find support for this interpretation.

::

Knowing that it's not possible  
to please without faith. I question  
the need for support.

::

My mother gets impassioned when defending marijuana's legalization. She argues that drugs and alcohol are the same. Both are psychoactive and social. My mother sits me down and says that I've been socialized to demonize drugs, but she knows. She has grown up around them – intoxicated men. Mom says she can tell me tales, but I know nothing. She tells me: I've been sheltered and that a true and righteous balance would show them equal. I think righteous is too strong a word for this. I say as much. She disagrees.

I understand her argument, but I struggle to believe.

::

Righteousness though cannot be reasoned

::

So in the beginning God  
created the heavens and  
the earth was without form and  
void – without form

Both female and male made  
in God's image who breathed breath  
into earth: filled them with soul.

Every herb bearing seed was given  
to tend – was a gift.

::

Many cultures mark a great flood in their histories.

Is this a muddling or a validation?



A theory. There are as many  
as there are laws: motion:  
goings come always paired  
with return. Cursed are all that hang  
from a tree. Also gravity  
that which binds us to the ground  
with weight and pressure

::

So in the beginning God  
created – this is the chief  
matter: God created.

Beginnings are important.

And until the heavy fruit dropped  
the concept wasn't named  
wasn't empirically known

it was understood, accepted, believed.

## **Like a child**

I hear somewhere that the Garden of Eden has something to do with the mysteries of the Bermuda Triangle, and this sounds true, in the way esoteric whimsy and pseudo-science can sound true, so I believe it. Not a belief that is held beyond the point of being pried away. More like the way a child first likens fireflies flickering in hanging mason jars to fairies, and then eventually comes to believe that fairies are real. Believes the creature lights that wane and clink against the sides of the jar are fairies trying to escape back to their hollows.

The child forgets the depth of her own involvement: how she waited in the place between the forest and the open field right at the point between dusk and deep night. That she repeated their light patterns with her flashlight. That she swung her net as they drifted and hovered over. Belief like that. Belief that imagines a world where elements merge in the night and the exile gets to returns home.

## **A WAY THROUGH THE FOREST**

## The six swans: transformations

It was the work of those silk thread shirts  
of such soft splendid lustrous smooth  
to the skin-touch that yields and gives  
so they did glide with such ease  
over the brothers' heads the shirts did settle  
on their back light like wings

And the pain was clean: brought clarity  
how exquisite – the bones folding into each other  
all density and mass maintained  
by some sick alchemy: the body twisted into itself  
the body equally exchanged for another  
and become nonchalant grace

Conjured precision well-wrought to the point of beauty  
distilled resinous pitch of a body  
all sailboat into curved sibilant  
elongated neck. Figure this rara avis

rarest of all things  
fancied nonexistent

Black swans atop a still lake: shimmered  
mica sheets dimpled by the wind  
turns. Those gentle pulses swaying  
plant life beneath the surface limpid  
languid, but something must be  
teeming just above the tangle

So keep the body moving: feel the weight  
down through the beds of the feet  
propelled forward – carried right to the edge  
of reflection right to the edge of the self: look

## The six swans: rara avis

*When it comes to breaking curses, who looks at a woman and says: she can?*

Gurgled and chattering rush of liquid  
over rocks. Many varied thrum and buzz,  
layered staccato of mating calls and crying out  
the sudden hush after the crick  
of a predator's mislaid paw. Dry cracking break  
of a branch now dead and falling, falling  
to the moss covered ground. Muffled and swollen  
thump. She's become acquainted with the forest's noises

Weaving shirts of thorn thread: pricking, pressure, holes  
in fresh soft skin, worn raw and blisters to swelling,  
swelling burst of blood puss, stinging ache, scabs  
on top of knobbled scabs. Knotted thick skin

Place has become what she is  
of and where she belongs  
connects to her purpose:  
the action that rises  
that keeps rising to the surface

They asked of her stilled hush and swallowed utterances  
she was made the silence where you hear yourself think  
the noted absence of excess:  
that indulgence of the self-distilled into want  
recognized in the ache that constricts a throat  
that leaves it ever thirsting to say no  
or yes: that leaves it desperate to voice

~~Isn't there a single one worthy of you, in all that vast flock?  
Let her be lovely, gracious, and fertile; let her exhibit her  
Ancestors' faces round her porticos; be more virginal than the  
Sabine women, with tangled hair, who ended war with Rome;  
A rare bird on this earth, in the very likeness of a black swan;  
Who could stand a wife who embodied all of that~~

## The sixth swan: a curse

I.

To be a lift and swirl mass of wings  
to leave the ground by wind and force  
of myself – carried by the wind to fly

He saw his mate gliding like silk  
over the water. Her bill just  
touching the neck: he was drawn in  
by the length of her lines

He courted her like this: billowing out my feathers  
thick but all air and every bit true  
and amounting to a demand: see me  
judge me – do not find me wanting

So hear this triumphant:  
the sound of him traveled  
on an oscillation up through the neck  
and out in a call to her  
who might respond  
to her whose truth  
will make of his shout: song

He was gathering for the nest  
when they found him.

The careful rending of weeds  
and cattail tubers – his head beneath  
roughing the water as he twists  
until at last it yields.

He stretches his girth  
to its furthest point and swells

But they do not back away  
make him see them  
for what they are: brothers  
but he has long since yielded  
to the compulsions.  
What they want of him  
is all but gone

II.

Won't speak against it. Once well welcomed  
friend and signal of escape. Ease and peace  
on the breath of a whisper. Reassuring notion  
that it wasn't here to torment, but signify  
my love for them. But now I am surrounded  
by gradual gray fog turned thick and heavy  
on my shoulders. Taunted by the voices  
inside myself. Silence is a beast of shifting attitude.

Sacrificed six years sewing shirts.  
in silence as a woman mad  
so men tied her to a pyre for a witch  
so we flew out last  
for her  
so she threw the thorn thread shirts  
upon us fibers tinted with dirt and blood

Silk exchanged for thorn thread blouses  
to break their curse. Six shirts save a lone left sleeve.  
For six brothers and six years to have them  
Standing tall before me. Six years is a long time  
to mull a thing. A single thing to desire  
but a man who is half a bird  
is a man torn is a not

I felt the grit upon me settle in and down  
to heavy feet weighted bound  
ground to earth again.  
Men again, or something like it.  
I did not want it.

They pulled me from the witches' pyre  
and all was silent but the sound  
of my brittle cracking laughter.

## Flat feet

You've always been  
like this: intent  
on planting each  
inch of you ground  
down no upward  
lift to avoid  
no interest in  
arched perfection.  
You are a line  
flat: the distant  
horizon

But

I'm not trying  
to speak of hope.  
Just this: the throb  
that begins where  
the arch should be  
radiates through  
the knees and is  
felt. I take this  
to mean you've known  
been known – for this  
I envy you  
and your felt pain.



## Myth of the elephant graveyard

For years they come back to the old spot  
and caress the not-carcass: far past the point  
of decay. Touching themselves with  
the skull, the jaw, the rib: they remember.

Elephants return to the bones  
of their loved ones.

Not having met you  
there are few things of which I am certain:

the tenor of your whispers  
or how the skin is fitted over  
the height, depth, and length of you.  
The subtleties of your temper.

I don't know with what urgency  
we will first make love or linger  
over learning one another, never tiring  
of the taste – whatever it might be.

I am certain of few things, but knowing myself  
and this to be true

I will come to cherish even your bones.  
Yes, I will know. And will grow old with remembering.

## On the breath

Hear the weight of it pushing through the body.  
What a thing this is to have life traveling  
on the motes that are filtered in and out  
with the machinations of ourselves.

O this is the urgency.  
O this is the need.  
This is the very beat. The very pulse.  
They very in and the very out:

he is alive next to me.

The warmth of his breath on my neck is alive.  
What a thing then to feel the breath  
and say: O life in me pushed through and pulled  
to the taut. To the right now.

O myself on the exhale and breathed  
into he that is alive next to me.  
O ourselves living into each other.  
O this great unending.

## Against sleep

Where the neck's nape ends  
at that point between the shoulders  
there's a certain tension in the spine

something more than weariness:  
the whole of the body become a protest  
against holding up the head keeping open the eyes

What images are behind that rapid movement  
beneath the lids – betraying the pretend peace of limbs  
paralyzed by the drugs born of our deepest sleep

Who knows what incubi are fought there  
what impulses are given into finally  
in something like surrender something like release

## **Rose patch**

Years later he will wonder why he traversed the thicket of underbrush and thorns. He will look at her – where she sits across the table – the glow of her face now faded haggard and well worn. Wrinkles so deep it's like someone took a knife to clay. He thinks this then feels a twinge – some ghost of the guilt he's long since vanquished. So what she never sleeps? So what she can't shake the shadowed dread of something waiting there behind her closed eyelids? So what one can't easily trust that which has enslaved? He will look at her and wonder how he did not see that it wasn't the castle or the thorns that trapped her.

## **The widow's improvement**

First she sets the load size to super clicks the water to hot turns the wash cycle to heavy pushes the knob down which begins the flow of water. She lifts the lid to reveal the hollow basin. She wants to hear the water clashing into itself. In the kitchen she sets the empty dishwasher to heavy wash. Pushes the soft plastic button: start. As she walks past the sink she turns on the faucet holds the open palm of her right hand beneath the water and watches as the skin turns pink – red – watches until she cannot bear the pain and then positions the faucet head so the water funnels down into the garbage disposal. In the master bedroom she turns on both sinks: grabs each left handle and turns them forward. She draws back the curtain of the bathtub shower. She bends down and closes the plug. She pulls up the shower switch on the bathtub faucet with her right hand and with her left grabs the temperature handle and pushes it to the far left side of the red strip. She does not take off her clothes. She steps into the tub and settles her body so that she lays prostrate on the hollow basin's bottom. She revels – or something close to it – in the sound: the water strikes like footsteps of a march against hard porcelain and marries with muffled plops as it hits then soaks into the fabric of her clothes. The water turns cold. She thinks: This is right. For him it was a cold day. She stays there until the water covers her mouth. She stays there until the water covers her nose. She wants to do what he could not. Wants to be so used to a chorus of rushing water that it does not deafen. That she does not panic or flail. Does not want her heart to clinch and fail from the shock of cold water. She begins to hold her breath – this she can do for seven minutes. When she began she could only last a minute and thirty seconds. Right before the widow flings her gasping body upwards she becomes aware of the desire to tell someone that she has become fixated – her self arrested in a moment – but the crush of air against desperate lungs and the panicked quicken of her heart-beat drown this thought.

## Wendy

Because I am a woman in a body  
and I have missed the person I was –  
when I was defined as connected to you –

I think I know what she meant  
when something inside of Wendy  
cried “woman, woman, let go of me.”

To cry out to the self to release the self –  
it had something to do with expectations.  
It had something to do with failure.

It has something to do with wanting  
there to be a button  
that says “do over.”

Or clickable red heels  
that bring you back home – growing old  
but feeling young and wanting to hold on –

my tenuous grasp is slipping.

## **The maddest aspiration**

Resists the hand pressed down against  
or perhaps upon but either way felt.  
The pressure of skin on skin. The dewed  
condensation of fingertips of palms  
clasped in something like prayer so  
something like hope but more desperate  
than that more honest: there is no sun  
that will not set. There is no greener grass  
all is wet by morning's dawn. The moon pulls  
there are oceans lapping over and what is  
built of sand will crumble – but to speak accurately  
is to say the sun will also rise.

## Under construction

A long ways out midst trunked depths  
shrubs and low vines: underbrush  
growing in the shadow of the branches'  
overarching – the sun a swath of thinly stretched  
green pulled to transparency.

And a little cabin notched  
settled there among the chittering many  
and beside bark rough logwood  
and beside water clear and cool.

Fancy that she holds this  
a ways away inside. Herself  
there falling over the lines  
of herself. And a tendency towards drawing  
and redrawing the self as anything  
but her here and now self.

That exists:

as hands on wheel  
as weight on seat  
over rubber over asphalt

as the constant return

as the vague impression of gathering dust  
the awareness of dust containing human cells  
the hair and skin of herself being heaped  
upon herself: residual

This being the inescapable law:

there is too much not enough.  
So I am asking you to whittle me  
bone down. Make of me cabin  
set me beside still waters.



## **WHAT SONGS SHOULD RISE**

## Am I not a woman and a sister: The history of Mary Prince

### I.

I was born at Brackish-Pond, in Bermuda, on a farm belonging to Mr Charles Myners. My mother was a household slave; and my father, whose name was Prince, was a sawyer belonging to Mr Trimmingham, a ship-builder at Crow Lane. When I was an infant, old Mr Myners died, and there was a division of the slaves and other property among the family. I was brought along with my mother by old Captain Darrel, and given to his grandchild, little Miss Betsey Williams. Captain Williams, Mr Darrel's son-in-law, was master of a vessel which traded to several places in American and the West Indies, and he was seldom at home long together.

### II.

Mrs Williams was a kind hearted good woman, and she treated all her slaves well. She had only one daughter, Miss Betsey, for whom I was purchased, and who was about my own age. I was made quite a pet of by Miss Betsey, and loved her very much. She used to lead me about by the hand, and call me her little nigger. This was the happiest period of my life; for I was too young to understand rightly my condition as a slave, and too thoughtless and full of spirits to look forward to the days of toil and sorrow.

### III.

My mother was a household slave in the same family. I was under her own care, and my little brothers and sisters were my play fellows and companions. My mother had several fine children after she came to Mrs Williams, — three girls and two boys. The tasks given out to us children were light, and we used to play together with Miss Betsey, with as much freedom almost as if she had been our sister.

### IV.

My master, however, was a very harsh, selfish man; and we always dreaded his return from sea. His wife was herself much afraid of him; and, during his stay at home, seldom dare to shew her usual kindness to the slaves. He often left her, in the most distressed circumstances, to reside in other female society, at some place in the West Indies of which I have forgot the name. My poor mistress bore his ill-treatment with great patience, and all her slaves loved and pitied her. I was truly attached to her, and, next to my own mother, loved her better than any creature in the world. My obedience to her commands

was cheerfully given: it sprung solely from the affection I felt for her, and not from fear of the power which the white people's law had given her over me.

V.

I had scarcely reached my twelfth year when my mistress became too poor to keep so many of us home; and she hired me out to Mrs Pruden, a lady who lived about five miles off, in the adjoining parish, in a large house near the sea. I cried bitterly at parting with my dear mistress and Miss Betsey, and when I kissed my mother and bothers and sisters, I thought my heart would break, it pained me so. But there was no help; I was forced to go. Good Mrs Williams comforted me by saying that I should still be near the home I was about to quit, and might come over and see her and my kindred whenever I could obtain leave of absence from Mrs Pruden. A few hours after this I was taken to a strange house, and found myself among strange people. This separation seemed a sore trial to me then, but oh! 'twas light, light to the trials I have since endured!—'twas nothing—nothing to be mentioned with them; but I was a child then, and it was according to my strength.

VI.

I knew that Mrs Williams could no longer maintain me; that she was fain to part with me for my food and clothing; and I tried to submit myself to the change. My new mistress was a passionate woman; but yet she did not treat me very unkindly. I do not remember her striking me but once, and that was for going to see Mrs Williams when I heard she was sick, and staying longer than she had given me leave to do. All my employment at this time was nursing a sweet baby, little Master Daniel; and I grew so fond of my nursling that it was my greatest delight to walk out with him by the sea-shore, accompanied by his brother and sister, Miss Fanny and Mater James,—Dear Miss Fanny! She was a sweet, nice young lady, and so fond of me that she wished me to learn that all that she knew herself; and her method of teaching me was as follows:—Directly she had said her lessons to her grandmamma, she used to come running to me, and make me repeat them one by one after her; and in a few months I was able not only to say my letters but to spell many small words. But this happy state was not to last long. Those days were too pleasant to last. My heart always softens when I think of them.

VII.

At this time Mrs Williams died. I was told suddenly of her death, and my grief was so great that, forgetting I had the baby in my arms, I ran away directly to my poor mistress's house; but reached it only in time to see the corpse carried out. Oh, that was a day of sorrow,—a heavy day! All the slaves cried. My mother cried and lamented her sore; and

I (foolish creature!) vainly entreated them to bring my dear mistress back to life. I knew nothing rightly about death then, and it seemed a hard thing to bear. When I thought about my mistress I felt as if the world was all gone wrong; and for many days and weeks I could think of nothing else. I returned to Mrs Pruden's; but my sorrow was too great to be comforted. For my own dear mistress was always in my mind. Whether in the house or abroad, my thoughts were always talking to me about her.

### VIII.

I staid at Mrs Pruden's about three months after this. I was then sent back to Mr Williams to be sold. Oh, that was a sad sad time! I recollect the day well. Mrs Pruden came to me and said, 'Mary, you will have to go home directly; your master is going to be married, and he means to sell you and two of your sisters to raise money for the wedding.' Hearing this burst out a crying, — though I was then far from being sensible of the full weight of my misfortune, or of the misery that waited for me. Beside, I did not like to leave Mrs Pruden, and the dear baby, who had grown very fond of me. For some time I could scarcely believe that Mrs Pruden was in earnest, till I received orders for my immediate return. — Dear Miss Fanny! how she cried at parting with me, while I kissed and hugged the baby, thinking I should never see him again. I left Mrs Pruden's, and walked home with a heart full of sorrow. The idea of being sold away from my mother and Miss Betsey was so frightful, that I dared not trust myself to think about it. We had been bought of Mr Myners, as I have mentioned, by Miss Betsey's grandfather, and given to her, so that we were by right *her* property, and I never thought we should be separated or sold away from her.

### IX

When I reached the house, I went in directly to Miss Betsey. I found her in great distress; and she cried out as soon as she saw me, 'Oh, Mary! My father is going to sell you all to raise money to marry that wicked woman. You are my slaves, and he has no right to sell you; but it is all to please her.' She then told me that my mother was living with her father's sister at a house close by, and I went there to see her. It was a sorrowful meeting; and we lamented with a great and sore crying our unfortunate situation. 'Here comes one of my poor picaninnes!' she said, the moment I came in, 'one of the poor slave brood who are to be sold to-morrow.'

### X

Oh dear! I cannot bear to think of that day, — it was too much. — It recalls the great grief that filled my heart, and the woeful thoughts that passed to and fro through my mind,

whilst listening to the pitiful words of my poor mother, weeping for the loss of her children. I wish I could find words to tell you all I then felt and suffered. The great God above alone knows the thoughts of the poor slave's heart, and the bitter pains which follow such separations as these. All that we love taken away from us—Oh, it is sad, sad! And sore to be borne!—I got no sleep that night for thinking of the morrow; and dear Miss Betsey was scarcely less distressed. She could not bear to part with her old playmates, and she cried sore and would not be pacified.

## XI.

The black morning at length came; it came too soon for my poor mother and us. Whilst she was putting on us the new osanburgs in which we were to be sold, she said, in a sorrowful voice, (I shall never forget it!) 'See, I am *shrouding* my poor children; what a task for a mother!'—She then called miss Betsey to take leave of us. 'I am going to carry my little chickens to market,' (these were her very words,) 'take your last look of them; may be you will see them no more.' 'Oh, my poor salves! my own slaves!' said dear Miss Betsey, 'you belong to me; and it grieves my heart to part with you.'—Miss Betsey kissed us all, and, when she left us, my mother called the rest of the slaves to bid us good bye. One of them, a woman named Moll, came with her infant in her arms. 'Ah!' said my mother, seeing her turn away and look at her child with the tears in her eyes, 'your turn will come next.' The slaves could say nothing to comfort us; they could only weep and lament with us. When I left my dear little brothers and the house in which I had been brought up, I thought my heart would burst.

## **Phillis considers the sea**

Phillis sits expectant on the sand and looks out across the water  
the balls of her feet rock into the shifting granules  
her toes wriggle press their way through  
pull out and begin again. In the distance there is a boat  
but she cannot presently tell whether it travels shoreward  
or to somewhere away. She thinks about comings and goings:  
how little she knows of life at sea and what it means  
to turn the stern of vessel through the wind  
Phillis takes a moment to consider how it might look on her:  
the work of the sea on her legs the sun often against her neck  
to not just know the stars but need them. She decides  
the boat draws closer and that perhaps she could  
see herself there and that perhaps it would be polite to wave hello

## **Phillis considers chains**

And decides there are things worse than bondage  
of the body become the shell  
through which one must pick and crack free  
how the maddest aspirations choke on stale air  
how the heavy clatter of wrought iron  
against wrists and deep into ankles  
gives way to gashes that crack over to open  
again to puss and the acrid smell of old pain  
how the only good that comes of chains  
is the eventual staggering loose into praise  
the only good is that everything falls somehow  
and the way this runs the mind into fearful wonder

## Phillis plants a tree

Worries whether it will grow  
allows that the roots  
when they attempt  
to extend their length  
into the surrounding ground  
might recoil  
from the foreign touch:

*where has the soil of my youth gone?*

See the tree  
is what you'd call "exotic"  
and that whisper  
near breaks dear Phillis.  
Such hopes and surely  
the best of intentions



## **Phillis tastes a pear**

Before the moment the sliced fruit parts her lips  
she is told the honor of this treat  
that it speaks to her position  
as special treated and recognized

How the separation that comes with honor stings

And the leaves that paved the road to Jerusalem were strewn  
by those that later stood shouting at the foot of the cross

The smooth and cool against her tongue tastes of sweet water  
long set out so become laced with the bitter pith of the day

## **Phillis takes a walk**

Orange hangs round a moon that seems  
as it should: bigger than the palm of her hand

It's late and the wind is sweet warm

Ahead a woman clings to an elbow's inner crook  
the couples' heads lean close and the gesture is kind

even though they tense after noticing Phillis  
and she steps down into the gutter to make way

Gnats gather beneath snatches of light while  
in her kitchen tea grows cold on the counter

## **Phillis catches chill**

Pulls her chest in towards her chest –  
a tautness rests beneath  
her shoulder blades and naked hairs  
rise along her skin: alert  
to how the cold makes her  
alert of where the heat limps  
from the house  
through the hole  
in the draft guard  
where the cat waits to catch  
hard shelled bugs –  
how watching the cat  
she is reacquainted with cruelty

## Phillis in love

She's all a-stagger through the air  
roughed by the insistent wind  
She lets the gazes of passersby  
float through her as unmoored motes  
revealed by street lamps

She settles with herself that this tizzy of the mind  
is revelatory of hidden depths  
that she's stumbled into tesseract  
that fold space like kites against trees  
in a sudden loss of wind

She's all staggered and recalls  
the way her body was still beside him  
pent up and waiting so much like the bird  
witnessing the great careen of the kite  
as it broke the branches that held her nest  
and envied the persistence of its fall

## Phillis after a spoon of honey

Oh it is still a sweet something, but she believes  
that its character rests in the tawny amber  
that the ochre hues speak of times past  
when honey didn't have a telling bitterness

It's no simple task to recall *the was* of a self  
but don't linger over the carcass  
She resists the fullness of revelation  
holds her hands up to block its light  
insistent as the sun at noon: blinding and sticky

## Phillis reads the six swans

I.

How out of place the brothers must've been  
amongst other swans. *You are not swan born*  
the bevy cooed. *Let us try you*  
*let us learn of and see your lack –*  
*what can you know of song?*

Though it was some magic miracle  
of a curse that gave me wings  
bird I am – the black feathers of Juvenal's rare bird  
deck me along with impossibility –

and it is always left at the feet  
of a woman. So there is no surprise  
that the sister quickly acquiesced  
to the menial work of stich stich return  
in order to make her brothers men again

That is not to say the task lacked in skill  
I've always known the beauty of form  
but why must their sister sew to save them?  
Could she not write a letter to her statesmen  
and expect an answer?

II.

A mind must bear the weight of its knowledge  
so let us strive towards honest: it must have been  
refuge and prison, for I too have craved silence

but blessed still waters  
do not try my depths  
I would be swallowed there

The sister and I know what it means  
to deal in silence  
pray that someone might read  
between – might hear our protest's  
strangled cry

III.

With shirts sewn of thorn thread –  
save one left sleeve  
she made her brothers men again –  
save one swan wing

My wings have been severed  
I have been neither  
nor becoming

How that wing marks him

sets him apart  
makes him unfit for polite society.  
I know of duplicity.

And the sister's still born hopes  
are near to me – finding the babies  
born in captivity missing  
and the blood on your lips

Come sister, brother too, we will break  
our vows we will leave the rest  
to fend for themselves  
we will throw back our heads  
and not be silent – we will wail

## **EPILOGUE**



## **To climb out of the grave**

It is not to summon strength and break through the coffin by way of bloody knuckles that strike and strike again at that which encloses you. It is not to propel yourself through the cool and crumbling dirt that funnels through the hole. It is not a thing to be done with physical prowess. It is also not the counter-clock move of time: to have died factually but then find yourself born again in the style of the Hobart Phase – where you need only wait for the grave diggers to free you from the tomb. It may be the fact of being born. It may be that from the moment we are deemed alive we are dying and so already dead. It may be that the womb is the first tomb and we are buried alive – but the grave is not then the absence but the presence of everything – and that would be reason enough to cry when we are expelled from it. Or it may very well be that the grave is the flesh house we dwell in and we must be brave enough to climb the self out of one's self. In that way we set the only-true-self free. Shook loose of the binds. Shook loose of the force that holds us ground down. Shook free of our grave clothes to fly or be flung out into the greatness.

## These identities

The days of my youth have been littered with an incessant beg of a need unfulfilled: made ruinous by all those fantasies dredged from the long past and the inaccurately remembered promises of chestnuts stuffed with ever-compactable dresses of sun rays evening gowns of moonbeam threaded by shooting stars. Yes the glass slippers yes the silver hands yes just let me amount to three great tasks solved through goodwill. Let the balances equal out let it somehow be rendered just. Let the day come when we care to reckon with the truths and the sadness there contained  
the speckled-egg splayed open – yolk all run into the grass at the side of the birch tree and the mother bird that pushed it there because of the lingered smell from some misguided hand.  
Also the prince who places the slipper on every bloody foot until it fits. See the way these problems amount to the impossibility of recognition? So yes let my love call me by name when he sees my face for the first time. Let me not forget my countenance once I turn away from the mirror.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

A. Moriah Jones was born in San Diego, California, lived for a short time in Japan, and grew up in various parts of Virginia. She received her Bachelor of Arts from George Mason University in 2010, and after spending two years masquerading as a Property Insurance Agent Moriah returned to George Mason where she received her Master of Fine Arts in Poetry in 2014. Her work can be found in *St Katherine's Review* and *Rock and Sling*.