ELEGY FOR A MOTH

By
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For Lisa, with love
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Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School of the University of Florida in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

ELEGY FOR A MOTH

By

Mark A. McKain

May 2004

Chair: Debora Greger
Major Department: English

Observations gathered by the author touching the natural history of the heavens, water, and earth in the West Indies and other lands to the Pacific. Also of their beasts, fishes, fowls, plants, and other remarkable rarities.


SUBURBAN GENESIS

First God planted palms and shrubs along a walk. Then He divided the waters to make a fountain and multiplied mud enough to build a mall. God formed a man from asphalt and sang,

“Be my man!” into his headphones. He set Adam to garden in the atrium. When the Lord reached to open him, Adam cried out. So He made Eve from spareribs abandoned in a box in the parking lot. God said, “I give you appliances, furniture, all household goods, subs, sushi, pizza, every fried food-- just don’t touch that tree in the center.”

The Devil slid from a branch, handing out credit cards. He said to Eve, “You’re a perfect size six.” The woman saw she was pleasant to the eye; she took the card and bought the finest fig leaves.

Then they heard Him walking on the main floor, and so they hid in a rack of clothes. 50% off! When the Lord called, Adam looked down at his naked legs. He pointed at Eve.
APOCRYPHAL STORY TOLD BY MY MOTHER FORETELLING MY OWN GENESIS

He drove a red convertible across the Huey P. Long, past freighters and refineries. She bumped down Canal Street to Arthur Murray’s dance studio. Nights, they walked along the levee, the river higher than the streets. They passed the stained equestrian statue, and the Civil War submarine shaped like a potato. She stared at a paddle wheel, the city breaking into costume.

The gutters filled with beads, with masks and bottles. At the Fontainebleau, he stepped into the numbered footprints painted on the floor, as if he were following the schematics he drafted at the office. Down Bourbon Street, into a vortex of trumpets, strippers, oysters, and beer, they fox-trottéd. Like children, they grabbed at trinkets tossed from drunken floats until they came to a rose-haired clown handing out miniature coffins with a little skeleton inside. On the trolley tracks, Adam and Eve, greased green from head to toe, carried an alligator on a bamboo stretcher. I was born twelve months later.
SNAPSHOT OF LIMBO, PUERTO RICO

A chameleon puffed its red throat-fan—
a warning stolen from the burning cane-fields.

My six-year-old sister and I posed
beside a wall of wrought iron and hibiscus.

I held a ball of string. A wild dog sniffed the gutter.
My kite made of palm ribs hung on the thorns of a lime tree.

A hurricane of scents—sweaty skin, rotting mangoes,
a spitted pig, bleeding fish—bathed the island.

We sucked on oranges. Juice ran down her chin
and stung the corners of my mouth,

the smell of citrus, sea-rain,
and seared flesh streaming through her hair.

A maroon centipede undulated toward my feet.
Sugarcane ash fell on our skin.
A TOUR OF THE STYX

An airboat skimmed over brackish water,
a solitary boatman at its helm.
“I’ve got you now, old sinner,”
he hailed my guide, bumping the shore.
“You hellion, take us on your swamp tour,”
said Virgil, “and we’ll buy a case
of whatever you’re drinking.
My friend wants to see exotic sights.”

The boatman grabbed a cold one.
“I got a place for tainted souls like yours.”
As he drank, he steered with his feet.
We cut through sea grass and shoals of mullet
till he pointed with a finger missing a joint.
“Cast your eyes starboard—
there’s something for a postcard.”

We drifted close. Worms writhed
on a man’s muddy face. An ibis landed
on his skull, its pink beak snuggled in the ear
to extract a grub. “Dolphins and manatees
are what the tourists come for. Not many see this.”
The boatman handed me a beer.
“If I said those worms spin
a shell of their own shit,
would you catch my meaning?” Virgil said.
“They filter the water through the hair
around the feeding tube.”

The captain laughed and spat,
“The whole basin floods through that mouth and nose.”

“But why?” I asked.
“Who the hell knows?
I got sandwiches and hard eggs in the cooler.
Let’s watch him stew before we see the rest.”
As we ate, I saw alligators dismember him.
Even now I praise God for it.
The boatman said the limbs would reattach
so he’d continue to suffer.
Virgil said, if he was not mistaken,
the towers across the bay were the Florence
of the infernal tropics. A cloud of mosquitoes
descended on us as the airboat jetted toward Miami.
I have seen and tasted many goats, 
but I did not see one sheep. Wild dogs are bred 
in the woods and go there in great companies. 
These dogs live on crabs. I do not mean 
crab apples, but a living and sensible creature that, 
in feeding upon, even men find delight. 
At our first coming to Puerto Rico, the dogs 
kept a fearful howling, every night bemoaning 
their master’s absence. They fall upon the sheep 
and make a terrible waste. The goats live more securely; 
they love cliffs. I did not see either hare or conie 
but there is an excellent store of poultry: 
cocks and hens and capons, some turkeys and Guinea hens, 
pigeons in marvelous abundance. Parrots and parrachetoes 
are here, as crows and daws in England. I have seen them 
fly in great flocks. They are extraordinarily talkative, 
but otherwise not much regarded.
I. *To override this poison more reactivity was needed.*

We would never have had enough plutonium, had it not been for him. And that clever idea he formulated during the fifties—wormholes,

a black hole with a rear exit, shortcut from one universe to the next—back when we all wanted to escape the cloud mushrooming overhead.

One rebel angel suggested reality could only be understood by a statistical ensemble of observers who could see just a part, however precious—

a fragment of a lost Greek tragedy or scattered pieces of a Dead Sea scroll. Others were suspicious. Hadn’t Wheeler’s birthday been celebrated last month?

II. *How come the quantum?*

According to Wheeler’s theory, waves can be particles like sand: small pink clams wriggle against your left foot.

Your hand hovers above sea-urchin spines, then you run back into the cool shade, wrapping your arms around a palm tree. Sand coats your legs.
Why, in bed at the end of a sunburn,
could you still feel the waves over your legs?
Why did you dream of stray dogs,
coconuts cut open, and yourself drinking the milk?

With his barbed spear,
a diver dragged a sea urchin
up the beach. Its spines undulated
in the poisonous sun.
Along the river mouth, we saw Indians
and baydarkas on the shore,
and saluted, firing blank cartridges.
The Aglegmuit greeted us joyfully,

bringing dried beluga and bearded-seal meat,
boiled blubber, whale flippers, dog salmon,
berries combined with caribou and marten fat.
The dog is for notables. I called the toyons to my tent,


giving them wide trousers, shirts of Holland linen,
scarves, seed beads, ribbons, and sail knives.
They danced until their strength was exhausted,
accompanied by animal cries—bear and wolf.

The next morning, they brought us white fish.
Their gifts are considered a bond.
After dinner, I wrote: This nation is rich
in moss. The bearded seal is of five varieties.

The greatest has a mouth larger than a sea lion.
They make nets of it, render the fat, dry the meat,
and when they have no further need bury it.
They use the guts for raincoats.

Lord be praised, this is a beautiful place.
He has given us abundance in all.
Next day, I found three walrus heads washed out;
we pulled four tusks from them.
SCISSOR-TAIL

Just beyond the hood ornament,
a dust devil appeared on the road.
It swirled my wind-sheared hair
but didn’t move the feathered mesquite,
the tarry creosote, the spiny cactus.
It just stayed there. Stayed there, twisting.

*Ka-leep, ka-leep,*
a scissor-tailed flycatcher called
from the vacant lot beside the Desert Shade Motel
somewhere in Texas. Binoculars were not needed
to see a car speeding toward desert dunes:

I was fifteen again, cutting school,
with six-packs and sand surfboard.
*Ka-leep, ka-leep.*
Binoculars were not what was needed to see
long thin blades scissor the hard blue sky.
Gritty the emptiness
that blew into my eyes and mouth.
ELEPHANT SEALS NEAR HEARST CASTLE

They bellowed, they drummed, six lounging
on black sand. One rolled up the beach
on a treadmill of its own blubber.

Another male reared,
their slug-like bodies bent at right angles,
mouths open, pink as salmon steaks.

Now all the males quivered
like fat fingers growing out of the sand,
striking like snakes, and a crowd gathered—
parents and their preteen kids.

“This is as good as the Nature Channel,” one dad said.
A mother and her ten-year-old daughter
sat on a drain pipe listening to their trumpets
echoing in the hollow of the bluff.

They watched the female bodies gently arc;
tail-flippers lifted off the sand,
waving the air like sea palms.

In a tidal pool, the Pacific swayed.
Red and yellow hands of starfish gripped the rocks,
reaching for pink mussel clenched in black shell.
EX-CALIFORNIAN ON THE ROAD TO FLORIDA

The big letters of the “HOLLYWOOD” sign
take their last bow through a curtain of smog.
The million blank windows of downtown L.A.
glint like rhinestones in my rearview mirror,

but I, ex-gaffer, ex-best boy,
head toward the brittlebush of the Mojave.
A dark line of palm trees follows, not me,
but the San Andreas Fault—the only place with water.

Spiky Joshua trees stand motionless
in the hundred-degree heat. At a rest stop,
I, ex-travel guide, read how, long before
Indians camped in the meager shade,

giant ground sloths stripped the leaves
with two-foot prehensile tongues.
But in the present, a slash of light
illuminates my hands on the steering wheel.

Gritty colonies of creosote bush sprawl
in all directions. The road wavers at the horizon,
and I, ex-cartoon writer, think I see an oasis to the east—
alligators, and the phosphorescent tails

of mermaids swim in a deep, clear pool
next to a billboard for the Pink Palm Trailer Park.
ON THE OBSERVATION DECK

Across the mirror of the lake,
an alligator’s jagged profile slipped.
Shadows rippled, crested with cloud.
A boy leaned over the rail toward a bluegill

rising from the pond on a dark stem.
Its spiny fins spread; the sun
backlit its captor, a snakebird that,
in a flash of scale, swallowed the fish.

Ignoring the bulge in its serpentine neck,
the bird hung wet feathers out to dry.
Its long black tail spread like a Spanish fan,
wings trembling against the horizon disappearing.

A girl flashed her throw-away camera.
CREPUSCULAR

After the first flush of mysticism, the horizon is just a car hood flung up, a message of distress: “I’ve lost the diurnal engine of creation!”

Your eye dilates wide as a cave mouth. The leathery smoke of a bat battalion pours out. The oak trees soften. You echolocate down a trail that emanates chthonic luminescence. Your ears, no longer little carbuncles, unfold into diaphanous membranes, hirsute with piano wire connected to silk hammers.

You haven’t gone far. An un-channeled spring sluices through the grass. The peeping frogs are a twenty-one-trill salute to the moon. From behind the hill, an eye too big knocks the *pneuma* out of you. One resolute hoot: an owl steals across the sky on anechoic wings. Only you see its tufted silhouette swallow a vole. The sky is littered with clouds, inexplicably pink, fragments of dream.
RATTLE OF GOLD

Terns keeled their lower beaks
through the water, grabbing flashes of silver.
The egrets, the great and the snowy, gathered on the pier,
staying close to the men pulling in fish. Wary,
yet they did not fly as I walked among them.

One gripped the rail with elegant yellow feet
and fixed me with the fire of its stare.
A fish, unhooked on the pier, flapped,
rocking its thin head. The sharp silhouette
of a frigate bird hung, motionless,
twelve-inch mortars aimed at the blank sky.
Iron rings dripped down limestone walls.

Was it on this island
de Soto found the Tocobagans fishing?
Their signs and threats left little doubt
they were bidding him to go. Amid their nets
he found a rattle of gold. He killed forty,
and captured others for his guides.
FIELD GUIDE TO A RESCUE PARK

Bathed in a freshwater spring:
schools of tiny zebras,
snook with under-slung jaws, snapper
and sheepshead floated like buoyant sphinxes.
Saltwater fish, not eating or spawning.

A brown balloon swam into view,
covered with a lawn of wavering grass. It swerved
past the aquarium window like a sailor’s mirage:
ample mermaid, fat flesh flexing. Up at the surface,
its whiskered mouth grazed on duckweed.

In another ward, water birds were recovering.
Flamingos blared their air horns,
a jam of curving necks fighting for right of way
at a trough of rotting shellfish.
A lanky whooping crane probed the stream
running through its townhouse-like cage.
From the walkway, you could almost touch
the red comet on its crown. Were they as hard to approach
as Audubon said? At close range,
you caught the greenish-gold glint of its beak.

The raptors were arranged by twos
as if posing for a field guide:
hawks, red-tailed, red-shouldered.
The caracara wore an ill-fitting toupee.
From a shrub, the eyes of a great horned owl blinked.

Three bald eagles perched on a fallen log,
the curved yellow beaks a rending tool.
Feet like work boots, talons digging into wood,
one screamed and beat its enormous useless wing.
ON HALLOWEEN

she wore the nurse’s uniform,
and he the assassin’s mask.
They drank cosmopolitans in the kitchen
while the Cowboys beat the Redskins.

She wore a nurse’s uniform with a red cross
painted on her eye patch. They drank tequila
and talked to a dead man, the devil, and Little Bo Peep.
On TV a car bomb exploded in some far-off market.

She wore a nurse’s uniform. Red lipstick flecked her teeth.
They drank whiskey with Cleopatra and Freud.
A car bomb exploded at the Red Cross in Baghdad
as the Ravens feasted on the Bears.
MY SISTER LEDA AND THE SWAN

Water spiders rowed the surface tension.
Bats, a millrace of fur and skin, flew an insectivorous mission.

She rattled the container of corn, threw three handfuls
into the shallows, and called, “Come to me.”

The swan chewed corn with a coral beak.
Eggs, ripped open by a fox, littered the bank.
I WANTED MY FIRST POEM TO BE THUS:

chocolate truffles in a jeweled box.
Words like billiard balls
that spin and carom into the pocket.

I wanted elegant equations,
not beauty, but haecctas—
the stubborn thingness of the world:
a field of lotus, yellow moons

gathering bees and beetles
to make seeds like stones
waiting for the next hurricane
to strip them from the husk.

The lost word stock of the Greeks
and the Romans. A discourse on the rivers,
a battle with whales.
The pleasure of looking

at the lunar body, not only
the thin faint new moon,
but its face whitened by earth’s ashen light,
a small down-payment to the stars.

Delinquent credit cards. Pangs of religion and science.
The coasts of California, Texas, and Florida.
Freshwater snakes. A truffle
filled with untraceable cyanide,

a man speaking with his heart cut out.
ELEGY FOR A MOTH

in memory of Primrose

I. After the Death of Her Daughter

Thousands of butterflies lay dead on the ground.
In gray colonies the living huddled in the branches.
We followed the guide up the breathless trail.

It was cool and cloudy at the sanctuary.
He said their wings overlapped to keep them warm
and sheltered from the rain. “Shingling.”

She repeated the term he used.
“Isn’t that a wonderful word? That’s what I want to do.”
She brushed my arm. Her eyes darted and fluttered.

I had come to see the monarchs
blossom into clouds of gold. We drank tequila
and ate tortillas with goat cheese.

We never saw them fly. Back in her garden, in the States
another milkweed flower fell.
Something flickered on a leaf—

a monarch broken out of the chrysalis,
its fat abdomen pumping fluid into wrinkled black wings.
With thorny fingers she plucked old blooms.

“Deadheading,” she said, “isn’t that a good word?”
II. Chestnuts

She bought a bag with her crumbling French
(the high-school French learned before I was born)
from a vendor outside Nôtre Dame,

on a near-religious rainy day in December.
That was our second trip together.
O older friend, eccentric aunt, muse of adventure,

for you I remember the chestnuts’ strange tender taste
as we walked past flying buttresses,
your mouth dissatisfied.

Your worn face grimaced from the climb
to the top of the vault. A congregation
of carved grotesques looked down on pigeons and chimneys,

the city domed with silver cloud.
You hugged a gargoyle as if it were a lost child.
III. Pecore Street

You, divorced and in your fifties,
owned the house on Pecore and Eleventh
where I, in my thirties and never married,
rented a room. Saturdays, we walked south,

through Houston’s oldest neighborhood,
to the bayou. Your eldest daughter,
the one who kept white cats with blue eyes,
lived a mile away. She and the cats never went out.

Your ex-husband reserved a stool at a bar near NASA.
You puffed past a shopping cart
drowned in the bayou’s brown, the willows teeming
with starlings fed on spillage from the rice silo.

We stopped at the café on Eleventh
as a black Mercedes turned into the parking lot,
and I thought of all the people I didn’t want to see—
mostly ex-es with new loves. I brushed a fleck off your chin.

We drank a second cup and chatted about your daughters,
your boyfriend the balloonist, his latest schemes.
At the next table, a woman, wearing a green parrot
on her shoulder, sat down. On black claws,

it sidestepped closer to her neck, then inched down her dress
to drink from her cup. It stared at me with a gold eye.
“More!” it said. “It’s past twelve,” you said.
I’m going to do something even if it’s wrong.”

_You are my favorite mistake_ floated from the speakers.
IV. To the Ruins

She stood in the shade
of a candelabra cactus, its quilled arms
arched into the hard Mexican sky.
She had on loose white pants, the battered toes
of her tennis shoes touching the edge of the cliff.
This was the opiated eighties; I wore black jeans
and an auto-focus camera. In the viewfinder,
her face was eroded limestone.

Fumbling in her purse
for a water bottle filled with brandy and then
for a brush to comb her graying blonde hair,
she glared at the Mixtec tomb,
hers shadow rippling across the dirt.
Her foot slipped. She grabbed the wall.
At the far end of the ancient ball court,
a dust devil twisted.

I had just turned thirty.
Why was I traveling with this older woman?
People would think she was my mother . . .
The dust devil blew past the entrance to the tomb.
“Time’s running out.” I parroted what you always said.
O muse of misadventure, you fell to your knees
and crawled toward the hip-high door. Another gust,
and you disappeared into the rock.
Seconds later, you came out sweating, hair flung over your face. Without speaking, we hurried back to the parking lot, where I stared at the stacks of tiny bamboo cages, each holding a single cardinal, wren, or mockingbird; they had just enough room to sing. You washed down pills with the water bottle and reached for a pink- and green-spotted cat. In the crook of your arm, you, who would lose your daughter, cradled a gold baby and an angel of black clay.
V. The Second Law of Thermodynamics

A world ran on energy from her glass—
I loved her science. Ice cubes, water,
vodka set spinning by her crooked finger
while I sipped Chablis. She lit a cigarette
and her daughter’s ghost drifted
over the kitchen table. I remembered
Newton said time was reversible,

but the second law insisted.
Heat dissipated, entropy rose
like cigarette smoke. Ice melted, soda went flat,
another vodka bottle emptied.
After her stroke she could barely speak,
except to her dead mother and daughter.
My world wound back to a point
when time was wrapped around her finger,
the second law just a theory.
VI. At the Sanctuary

With my new binoculars, I spotted the sharp silhouette of the oracular frigate bird. Later, running through a cloud of mosquitoes on the way to the wildlife sanctuary, I stopped short, to talk to a friend who had died of a stroke a few months earlier.

She was calling from the swamp—a gray catbird making a mewing sound. And I remembered the house we had rented, those humid summers, and the maroon sea-bean I had given her while walking the tar-stained sand, she with her gin and tonic.

Then at a roadside restaurant my dear dead friend came in, slim, blonde, wrinkled. She sat off to the side, smoking, crossed her good legs, waiting for the other ladies in her lunch party. I ate pie (the special) without speaking to her. Drove down Highway 87 to the rookery. Found a nighthawk resting on a gate, but the list of what I did not see was long: blue grosbeak, Louisiana water thrush, summer tanager, indigo bunting, ovenbird, worm-eating and cerulean warblers. Yet what if, listening for the trill of ice in her gin and tonic, I had haunted the island for one more week?
VII. Elegy for a Moth

Lovebugs, stuck end to end, 
streaked my windshield. The female, larger, 
dragged her mate backwards—a misalliance 
or a perfect match? It was that kind of fall.

Blown from the Yucatan 
on wings of autumn, black witch moths 
fluttered onto the Texas coast, 
out of a hurricane’s eye.

Oh, Primrose, would you have seen 
the moths’ false eyes as an evil omen, 
the way they do in Mexico? 
Or as a sign to escape Texas—

take a train to Oaxaca, a flight to Prague? 
Or a trip to Florida to see the vultures soar 
over the cape where you raised your kids? 
The oldest one was my age.

In Houston, turning thirty, 
I was your surrogate son. 
And you, old moth, where are you now? 
Are you at rest on a leaf,

or clinging to a car’s undercarriage, 
waiting for a delicate eye to whirl you north? 
Touch down on the tar-stained sand 
where we walked.
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Born in Louisville, Kentucky, Mark A. McKain spent his childhood in the paradises of Puerto Rico and Louisiana. He migrated to the inferno of Texas where he attended the University of Texas and earned a B.S. in television and film. Traveling to Los Angeles, he worked in television, writing educational and entertainment programs for PBS, Fox and Disney. He has also written comic books for D.C. Comics and published non-fiction books for middle school and high school readers. His poetry has appeared in over twenty literary magazines, and his chapbook Ranging the Moon was published in 2003 by Pudding House Publications.
Elegy for Mot (NA). in > Commemorate the 2014 Season! Already in effect, but they rounded up Go to comment. : Worlds Reveal Show. Elegy for Mot (NA). in > Worlds Reveal Show. This should be a good pre-show I'm interested in what they have to say about the 4 groups and the teams :3 Plus, I'm excited to see the first match Copenhagen Wolves vs. H2K tomorrow. Go to comment. : Gnar survival guide. Elegy for Mot (NA). in > Gnar survival guide. A Elegy for Mot (NA). in > Patch 4.11 notes. talk about a cat fight. Go to comment. : Patch 4.11 notes. Elegy for Mot (NA). in > Patch 4.11 notes. It takes a long time to break a champion's legs with only nerf bats {{item:3134}} {{champion:236}}. "Elegy" reflects his desire for a conversation with the world at large, and many of Levis's recent poems turn to the natural world as an imperfect but necessary mirror. Sometimes nature's most ancient face finds itself at odds with our daily experience. In "The Oldest Living Thing in L.A.," Levis describes an opossum trying to cross the forbidding intersection of Wilshire and Santa Monica boulevards. Monuments to an Elegy is the ninth studio album by American alternative rock band The Smashing Pumpkins, released on December 5, 2014. Band leader Billy Corgan has noted that "similar to the band's previous release, Oceania, the album was the final part of the project, Teargarden by Kaleidoscope, due to cancellation of the project in 2018 by Corgan. The album received generally positive reviews from music critics, but sold poorly compared to the band's previous albums, peaking at number 33 in the U.S.