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## Combining the Names of Ancestors with the Names of Birds

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COMBINING THE NAMES OF ANCESTORS WITH THE NAMES OF BIRDS

by

Jessica Durham

Bachelor of Arts in English Literature

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

2009

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the

Master of Fine Arts—Creative Writing

Department of English

College of Liberal Arts

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**THE GRADUATE COLLEGE**

We recommend the thesis prepared under our supervision by

**Jessica Durham**

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**May 2014**

## ABSTRACT

### **Combining the Names of Ancestors with the Names of Birds**

By Jessica Durham

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The following manuscript deals with a range of themes including origin, family, place, gender, sexuality and their intersections. The title, *Combining the Names of Ancestors with the Names of Birds*, and title poem exemplify the intersection of origin, family, place (ancestors) and gender, sexuality, movement, change and freedom (birds). Combining their names speaks to the interplay between memory and imagination that has served as a foundation for all of the poems in this manuscript. This manuscript is split into three sections: Origin, which deals with home, with growing up in Louisiana, with the land and the water, my family and my childhood. It points to where I'm grounded and from where I reach outward; Masculine Spring is about newness, self-discovery and turns away from the past and the future to look inward. The title poem of Masculine Spring is everything that has come before in the motion of becoming new; Future Wife, America looks outward again and toward the future. This section is the most experimental of the three in

terms of form, moving away from strict line breaks and self-limiting cadences by playing with repetition as well as prose and epistolary forms.

*For my dad,  
where we left off.*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	iii
Origin.....	1
Masculine Spring.....	16
Future Wife, America.....	27
Curriculum Vitae.....	41



# 1. Origin

## Combining the Names of Ancestors with the Names of Birds

I let a boy through my window to put on my best shirt  
the names of birds on my tongue swallows what woman sounds  
don't be afraid he said blue heron sticks to my ribs  
pink embroidery against his skin I'm a cowgirl he said don't tell  
so many ancestors bellow like the swirl of wind in adult ears

Ancestors I button my pants in the warm afternoon light  
a small bird lands outside breathes twice without knowing  
to put on *this* shirt and not *that* is the undoing of everything  
I move into the day undoing I came from long pelican throats  
Remember driving remember woman sounds come from there

Bayou

From the suckling mud  
mother bayou before dawn

cracked mouth rough  
squeeze air up and out  
clenched teeth

to love the southern winter  
dream sediment  
morning kiss  
a flooded home

For My Mother, Left

Musty lake-house where the lake rose  
rose and flooded

the screened-in porch and I listened  
to good news through a coffee straw.

All my men hooked crickets  
on lines and cast out from the roof  
where bass swam over the ashes  
the summer fire pit.

The dreams of chemotherapy  
from the back seat of a pick-up truck.  
The Mojave slid past in red and black,  
dreams never wake, still the red clay  
that fell from my father's mouth  
he's afraid to sleep or shower, red  
the clay that hardened over the radiation  
burns on his back as he hunched  
with my mother on the hearth.

A flood of her horses in a year-long  
dream draws me nearer

her slick black eyes.

Believe her when she says:

there is always responsibility  
in death, always someone to hold  
the stethoscope, someone to close  
my father's right eye and then  
his left.

## Home is Never Until

Mornings when children are not playing  
across the road in the schoolyard  
I notice too often the spot by the fireplace  
where the carpet does not meet the baseboard

Sleep the mornings away in winter  
a white cat breaks against the floor  
as I haul wood up from the car, home  
is never until the first fire

In the desert no spirits, no cactus blossoms die  
—January, the pine boards creak  
I listen for the sound of dawn  
    rub through the fog on the window

My Mother's Gumbo

Rice for a crawfish gumbo

trip to Chinatown

for an iron kettle she

only looks at with bare feet

Mid-morning dream

a clearing of burnt pines

a pueblo painted red

## A Campfire Always in the Morning

The smoke that bows  
my dreams from a dingy pillow  
to where mudfoam breaks at the ankle  
my girlhood on the Red River  
empty docks quiver and weaken  
with the crashing waves that throw  
sick fish

Our President's calling a lemon  
a lemon a ripe orange in a wet woven  
basket a Cyprus  
marking the flood and still marking  
my gendered nature in its willowed bends  
its trotline the slick gar we didn't want  
the guys their knee-socks  
over my knees



Origin

*for my dad*

Your myth is

my myth

coyote trickster      mouse king

I will always follow you there

peepers wide to

the nature of things the

steady clatter of polished boots

in the morning kitchen

I've seen all gods

blow through your hair

turn you gray

turn you plump and

thin again

I mirror your origin

exactly      I trace your

fire in all my days even

amazing grace

a lullaby for

wolves

October

Winter                   metronome

dust everywhere       you are

right    in    step

Time was formulated

for waiting especially

in the desert

cactus bloom never freezes

Pink                   unashamed a

freedom from seasons    death and

parsing the slow       slow

always wind

## Another Again

Because another again gains on me at night a shoe on the way to the bathroom trips me up a shoulder hits the bare wall getting there and back without thinking of the noun for it, truth the fourth way to walking to bed. The newness has been stomped on six or seven times only then a smell like new grass, making it just right to smell like new grass. Only then is the land what I think of when I don't have any. Cities are all apartments and no new grass until the night, only then is circumstance dark.

## A Dream of the Same Name

Tie a knot in your bootlaces,  
count the syllables in his name and mine,  
I dreamed of JFK and the knot  
the morning cold and your  
boots the color of sand.

Kennedy wore a garbage bag  
an island between a reef and an hourly motel,  
told me that the ship out there  
is not the plane taking off.

## Song of Immovable Night Birds

This owl is somewhere too

On the ground it does not shield its small body

the curb near my tire            a night bird

trusts its nature against the pulsing city

yellowes its wide eyes and I mouth *spirit*

The cooling desert echoes owl

puffed and scratching at the bedrock

listening            black scorpions

rattle the palms

Eventually, All Ankles

Eventually, all ankles in the river

wild in a small house, the drains

stuffed with cotton and flood

flood the hallway, old roads

Louisiana when I would be older

all wet

## 2. Masculine Spring



## Adam Names The Animals

Two ponies pause always two  
prancing toward her dripping two  
fingers held high above  
her cotton robe her  
tilted legless throne

Ram just one more two  
the names bull or goat  
down our gravel road  
back to August

Rabbit cat cat her  
two fingers still dripping  
with the love of names  
ferret fence driveway hum

There's enough in the no  
named ocean enough wet  
for Adam to sleep for her  
to stop fox deer doe

## Masculine Spring

She combs black soil with her bare hands  
an empty room near *Sur la Table* where mannequin blood  
spills in the dark and boyish shapes  
move into the light            all blouses  
have neckties again  
a masculine spring

The wet and dry of water seeping across her paving stone-  
butch in the only            after-winter posture  
the gender of women bound to right-handed buttons  
a night garden in Las Vegas  
is uprooted and the rosehips are replaced  
the tulips are replaced  
the lilies are replaced

Haunt

Unlit couples wake for sex  
share dreams in dampened dark  
knotted limbs  
all into one another to sleep

Undulating haunt  
left my body stiff as you came  
down my bare-gendered crippling swell  
fill the last dark alley

Her Hands on My Chest

the path from one dream

to the next    the path

of a wounded bird from the nest

to the ground

Remember, Body

*after Cavafy*

Remember, body, all of your houses  
not only the path from one room to the next  
the purpling of muscle  
—in veins while you are young  
love remembering, body, how to crouch like glass  
how a doctor told you that pain is the first to return  
watching out the window for snow—the eyes were your eyes  
the love of others, body  
ones who came for you in your smallest houses  
in the winter—sacred hands in January that traced  
the current down your spine  
longing        remember, body

## Dinner Party

A French dancer sliced through her salmon  
said nothing needs be written  
while you're standing and sitting and standing and  
worship is a turning of the head to look  
where someone is pointing

On the patio *what's in your soul* the myth  
doesn't mind the wind      *what are you*  
is a question of place

I carried a notebook the first time I went to synagogue  
chose the day it rained in the summer  
ate honey with every meal

Blue is the Warmest Color

The title of a movie with bad lesbian sex scenes

The badness of the sex is apparent to the living

The inexplicably heavy breathing

The rotation of the wrist to reach nothing

The bad lesbian sex is unmappable

The unmappability of lesbians

The inability of \_\_\_\_\_ to imagine anything

The imagination of sex

The mystery of lesbian sex is its imagining

The sex is with one or more and is real

The most researchable question

The hire-ability of lesbians

The impossibility of mistranslation

The lesbians can turn their wrists and breathe

The maturity is a timeline for knowing

The map is in the close-ups

Coastal

In the photo I sent to you city water  
beaded and curved over my right shoulder  
you want to come  
for me too late  
my breath is morning space  
full woman                      body alarm  
I'm not leaving my dreams my  
aching bones and the scent of stolen shampoo  
hidden while you bathe  
your far off tub



Dove's Rest

Into a sparrow's bath

dove's rest, soft wrist

lean white stark against your forehead

green blanket on the floor

pillows flat out against the low gray sheets

beaded plucked

wingless doves in mud

your creature transformed

Blue Jay

Dead rose once

from a grave

or an earthworm

and not a grave

just rose

death roams freely

in the rising

# 3 • Future Wife, America

## Future Wife, America

I told her I liked the length of her pants and she laughed a corduroy-gendered laugh and a bee crawled in and out of her curls in and out and I didn't tell her and she knows now, my future wife. The truth is that bee is dead now after the coldest winter, the shape of the lake behind our house froze and we watched a fox run across in the night and leave tracks in the snow on the bank a toll we said for the use of our lake, six people died in the cold that winter and that bee died too, thank God. The truth is peonies don't grow like you think they do, America, they don't bloom underground.

## How to Sleep Alone

In Berlin thin boys  
squeal in their beds and  
knock at white metal bunks  
with cheap jewelry. Germany  
is no place for a woman—expands  
the month into two.

A motion here, a man shitting  
laughing outside my window  
outside Starbucks in Alexanderplatz,  
moves me further from the Brandenburg,  
nearer to the sea nearer  
to cathedrals,  
my lover's hair under a small umbrella  
a window I've always known.

Łódź

Water beads on an idle train  
what is left of a red brick wall  
outside a savior streaks down  
an alley somewhere near the center  
I think of you

Again

My only love over

over again

among friends in a theater

and hiding I see her again

in an old apartment

lay her softly across the blue-lit

dawn move

over her with my hands and

with my mouth as the light breaks

through the linen curtains again

my dreams these nights

alone in Paris

## Night Light

A line of light  
the length of a shoelace  
slips along in my room  
makes shapes of you over  
the sheets

In the dark I trace  
what I can remember



My Spine Does all the Work

Starving, incandescent futures

guava near the afternoon window

the number of chairs

between me and the black tights that you

slap me for grooming pulling

lint from your thighs

Google Obituary

Regina            daughter not

Regina at stoplights

where I did not think of her

sister aunt niece granddaughter

when she said I'm going for it

Buffalo meets            beloved Holocaust

a field in Poland where a marker reads JOSEPH

murdered their precious first daughter Hadasha

precious angel            in Chicago

Regina died March 13, 2011

Regina, naked in Las Vegas

washing up            a poorly lit closet

## Epistolary I

I planted my bookmark today. Teacakes aren't the same without rosemary and fondant for the cakes needs rosemary too. We have a new captain and he doesn't have any hair. Something's up with the atmosphere here, so everyone's losing their hair. My hovercar's broken. I think I might be pregnant. How are you?

Epistolary II

*for Cynthia*

I tried sending you pottery from the vines of the bookmark and from the vines of the baby. The clouds are hardened and the thick air is low today. It is not Spring yet. There is still time for the clouds and the air to rise and for the hair to return and for the pottery to go where I tell it. Elections are impossible right now. Lately the nights have been lasting longer. 20 and 30 hours at a time. When it stays dark, what have you given up? Where is your husband? My hovercar is working again, but another jar of clove oil costs more radios than I have right now. It won't be long.

## An Experiment

In which a black balloon

in which the space around the black balloon is not

in which a black balloon is all

in which the ambient noise I hear is not the ambient noise you hear

in which two tubes are simultaneously filled with a green liquid

in which we bring your dog back from the dead

in which nobody can hear

in which societal norms are called into question

in which a paste is rubbed on the skin and allowed to absorb

in which several cans are lined up and kicked over as you yell STOP

in which that black balloon never returns

in which there is a device for that

in which movies are put on silent and a record is played backward

in which the Wizard of Oz is considered in relationship to The Pyramids

in which four balloons are not black

in which placebo

in which I walk out and you do not run after me

in which a new Earth is created and we are not all dying

in which Las Vegas is a figment of our collective sins

in which X is to Y as nothing else

in which two snow leopards are separated at birth and then reunited after five years

in which two machines are supposed to make the same sound but time travel instead

in which boba is plastic

in which Subway bread is plastic

in which everything is more plastic than we thought

in which piles of leaves are raked and then jumped into

in which your limbs begin to fall off

in which the economy collapses

in which we find out that the Universe is both expanding and collapsing

in which everything moves as a parabola

in which the United States does not invade anyone

in which the control is remote

in which a Malaysian plane goes missing

in which tattoos are removed

in which an Ewok village is burned down

in which artificial sweeteners are science

in which a black balloon is filled with water

in which a black balloon is not all

in which Halloween candy is laced with PCP

in which I fall backwards and expect you to catch me

in which marijuana is legal

in which public service announcements about driving on marijuana

in which guns are science

in which Airplane is remade shot for shot

in which we clip the wings of exotic birds

in which twelve radios are set to different frequencies and then unplugged indefinitely

in which aliens are among us

in which satellites are transportation

in which a determined diagnosis

in which matching matter to its original form

in which the distance between the balloon and its blackness

in which the black balloon returns

in which the ambient noise returns

in which the machine returns

## Leaving

The gates have been locked forever,  
dark, quiet the interstate that runs by  
space-travel artifacts in a lot in San Pedro and  
a factory for waxy space trinkets—smoke stack black,  
black the stagnant, phosphorous haze.  
The sun will be too hot the morning asteroids  
burn through our nets.

Because we are alive, we imagine leaving.

White light that takes us,  
song they sing that sounds like mother  
always cast our nets  
always know the song and sing.



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**Education**

- May 2014      Master of Fine Arts Degree, Creative Writing—Las Vegas, NV  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
- August 2007-    Bachelor of Arts Degree, English—Las Vegas, NV  
May 2009      University of Nevada, Las Vegas
- August 2004-    Louisiana State University, Shreveport—Shreveport, LA  
May 2007      English Major
- 2004            Huntington High School—Shreveport, LA

**Professional Experience**

- 2011-present    **University of Nevada, Las Vegas, English Instructor/Graduate Assistant—Las Vegas, NV**  
Instructor—ENG 101, a semester-long freshman composition course. Tasks and responsibilities include classroom instruction, planning and implementing a course syllabus, grading writing assignments and assessing student performance, and meeting with students one-on-one to discuss progress.
- Instructor—ENG 101E/F, a year-long, developmental education course designed to cover the curriculum of ENG 101 at a slower and more comprehensive pace. Tasks and responsibilities include classroom instruction, planning and implementing a course syllabus, grading writing assignments and assessing student performance, and meeting with students one-on-one to discuss progress.
- 2011-2012      **University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Writing Center, Writing Consultant—Las Vegas, NV**  
Tutored individual students of all levels in hour-long, one-on-one sessions during which I assisted them at every stage of the writing process, including organizing, drafting, and editing. Worked with students to set goals and meet the requirements of set tasks or assignments within the deadline structure. Many clients included ESL and international students.
- 2011-2012      **University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Writing Center Workshop Facilitator—Las Vegas, NV**  
Facilitated writing workshops, including presentations on various grammatical and organizational writing concepts, as well as group discussion and writing practice.

**Awards and Honors**

- 2011-present    **UNLV Graduate Teaching Assistant Position—Las Vegas, NV**