

2011

Celestial Bodies

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Celestial Bodies

by

Jared C. White

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
Department of English
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

Major Professor: Jay Hopler, Ph.D.
Hunt Hawkins, Ph.D.
Kimberly Johnson, Ph.D.

Date of Approval:
April 1, 2011

Keywords: poetry, body, water, boy, distance

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Dedication

With grateful appreciation to the chair of my thesis committee, Jay Hopler, for his trademark optimism and unwavering belief in me, for his accurate suggestions, and for allowing me to live in his house while I complete this thesis.

With gratitude to my thesis committee readers, without whose devotion and support of my poetics over the past three and five years this thesis would not have been possible: Hunt Hawkins, whose humor and wisdom makes him an ideal reader and mentor; and Kimberly Johnson, the first to suggest what poetry would mean in my life.

With appreciation to Mrs. Kloss, my high school teacher, who introduced me to poetry and, like all great teachers, will never know the result of the seeds she planted.

A special thanks to Ira Sukrungruang for his cheerleading and his practical advice, and especially to Katie Riegel, who invested into this project an overabundance of hours, insight, and emails, often at the expense of sleep. I'll always be indebted to you, Katie.

With fierce love and thanks to my family, who cheers me on from great distances. And above all others, for my wife, Hannah Marie, whose love through this project was my bread, my sinew, my song.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to express grateful acknowledgement to the following publications in which the following poems first appeared:

Confrontation (“Cucumbers”)

Mason’s Road (“The Kenai”)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iii
INTRODUCTION	1
I The Mind Begins to Bless the Body	6
Untitled: In Six Acts.....	7
Boy Raised by Apple Trees.....	12
Boy Sledding	13
Caves Made by the Act of Raising.....	14
II Violences Against the Body.....	15
Finding Your Body.....	16
Mother Flexing.....	17
Four Children Falling	18
Death and All its Pleasures.....	20
Swimming Hole.....	21
Showering.....	22
Walking Siesta Key at Noon	24
Cucumbers.....	25
III When the Boy Sees the Girl.....	27
The Shape Made by the Line.....	28
What Eve Rejects for the Other.....	29
The Moments between Making Love and Dreams	30
Meditation on the Seasons.....	31
Children in the Garden	32
Lover as Landscape	33
Allegheny, Summer.....	34
Offering Made with His Shaky Hands	36
IV Words Unutterable.....	37
The Body of the Poem.....	38
Speech Therapy	39
Speaking the Word Cool: an Interpretive Dance.....	40
Speaking in Tongues	41
After Reading Exodus	42
Poetry as the Art of Theft	43
Because You Asked About the Line between Verse and Prose	44

Fire Poems	45
We Speak Not of the Dead	47
Allentown, Pennsylvania: October	48
V The Distances Between Us	49
The Kenai	50
Longing, We Say, Because Desire is Full of Endless Distances.....	51
Walking through Winter in Rexburg, Idaho.....	52
Ghost River.....	53
She Watches Her Husband Die	54
while Fishing for Afternoon Salmon.....	54
Celestial Bodies.....	55
Birds in the Autumn Wood	57
The Distances between Us	58
 ABOUT THE AUTHOR	 60

Celestial Bodies

Jared C. White

ABSTRACT

The following is a collection of original poetry written over a span of three years while attending the University of South Florida. The poetry is divided into five numbered sections, marking the major thematic divisions. Preceding the poetry is a critical introduction to the work that outlines the author's developing thematic ideology.

INTRODUCTION

Celestial Bodies is a collection of poetry written to fulfill the Master of Fine Arts degree at the University of South Florida. This title references a metaphor employed in 1 Cor. 15, wherein the apostle Paul describes the physical bodies of those resurrected. He compares them in glory, brightness, and beauty to celestial bodies in the firmament, specifically the sun, moon, and stars. This title encompasses the arguments of the thesis as the poems therein are centered in the mortal view of the body in dialogue with the divine view of its potential. The body becomes a medium for physical and emotional growth, violence, sexuality, knowledge/intelligence, and death/loss for the speaker and the reader.

Although most of the pieces in this thesis are lineated, some are prose poems. I admit the pressure of lineation worked against some of the poems' content and to me some feel more natural as prose paragraphs rather than lineated stanzas. When I find a poem wanting to be more narrative than lineation might allow I tend to experiment with the prose form. In this thesis, the prose form is a way to create a formal distance between the audience and the speaker, such as the distance between a narrator in a stage play and its characters. My hope is that this distance, when combined with a first person POV and content that the audience feels to be of a private nature, creates an organic tension for the audience. This technique is seen in the first poem, "Untitled: in Six Acts." This piece employs formal dramatic techniques as a way to create structure as well as tension. The

structure it provides is similar to a play divided into acts (represented in the poem's six sections) and scenes (represented in the sections' stanzas that utilize prose poetry and lineated verse). This structure offers the reader a more accessible interpretive entrance into the piece. Combining this structure, which formally distances the audience from the speaker/narrator/characters, with prose and lineated poetry, which encourages the audience and the speaker/narrator/characters to interact more intimately, assists the reader in negotiating the heavily narrative, private content.

This tension is further utilized in many of the lineated poems; in deciding where to end a line I considered the unit of the line, the unit of the sentence, and the interplay between their different meanings. This technique is displayed in "Allentown, Pennsylvania: October" wherein we're given a simple autumn setting that includes a road-side table on which sits a glass jar. The poem's speaker informs us of a note attached to the jar that reads, "Take a pumpkin and please leave / five dollars." This single sentence unit contains two lineal units. When reading the first of these lines, the reader will momentarily process the line as an off-putting statement penned by a gruff old man requesting passers-by to take a pumpkin and leave. But this tension is immediately resolved in the following line as the reader learns that the author of the note is likely mild-tempered and unsuspecting, as illustrated in his trusting invitation for passers-by to leave money in a jar before they take a pumpkin. This pattern of introducing tension and an almost immediate resolution, when juxtaposed with the overall content of this thesis, is a third source of tension; any resolving that takes place in these poems is found in formal techniques rather than in the issues discussed. These poems discuss issues of negative body image, anorexia, speech impediments, suicide and illness within a family,

and preparing for the death of loved ones, none of which are issues quickly resolved in the real world beyond the body of a poem.

This thesis is organized into five sections. As the reader progresses through the sections he/she will notice the speaker getting older. It seemed natural to begin Section One with poems wherein the speaker is a young boy, and allow the reader to witness some of his experiences and struggles as he comes to an awareness of his self as an embodied entity, as he explores his curiosity for his own body and the bodies of others, and as his family members die or experience life-threatening illness. In subsequent sections these themes are developed, but I felt it a proper introductory section that introduces the boy, who is the main character of this thesis, and lays the thematic groundwork for what the reader should expect throughout the thesis.

Section Two focuses on the body through a harrowing, violent lens. We see by virtue of his dark self-descriptions that the speaker's view of his body has become distorted during the process of maturation. And the poems wherein the boy doesn't figure, the reader is presented with visceral representations of the body. An example of this is in "Finding Your Body," in which the speaker finds the decaying body of a friend: "Your abdomen greens and bloats, / red streaks your veins, / marbleizing into green chest, / shoulders, thighs." Although Section Five contains the main discussion of *distances*, Section Two introduces, violently, the impact distances have on mortal bodies, as in "Four Children Falling." Many poems in this section are either founded on my memories or on family stories that, because of consistent retellings, have become part of my memory rather than merely creations of my imagination.

In Section Three, the boy's curiosity for the body, particularly the impact violent acts might have on a mortal body (from Section Two), turns into sexual curiosity. The first poem in this section, "The Shape Made by the Line," begins with a youthful, inexperienced uncertainty: "He is not certain how he can love / something not himself / so fiercely. . ." And as the poem progresses toward its conclusion, the content is an associative exercise of memory until the final stanza: "and when he gently rubs her earlobe between his / thumb and finger while she kisses his throat he thinks / *wild fruit pulled from its tree, / shared between lovers*—." When writing a sex poem, I use Pablo Neruda as a model; he isn't pornographic in his detail but rather focuses on a detail so intimate that only a lover could be privy to it. This detail might be a lover's freckle or the way skin creases against itself in a certain light. I believe this approach to intimacy in poetry to be the most tasteful and artful.

Section Four complicates the concept of the body by comparing it metaphorically to the body of a poem. Much of this section is interested in utterances and the unutterable. This invites one to consider ways in which the physical body literally and metaphorically gives life to a poem when it lends the poem its own breath (the act of reading aloud), which is a conscious allusion to God blowing into Adam's nostrils the breath of life. This ideology is demonstrated in "Speaking the Word *Cool*: an Interpretive Dance." The genesis of the poem is a quote by Robert Pinsky, which appears as the poem's epigraph: "The medium of poetry is the human body: the column of air inside the chest, shaped into signifying sounds in the larynx and the mouth." Essentially, the poem's speaker is describing the demands of a single, monosyllabic speech act on the human body: "heavy-coughing consonant hanging in the throat / then live breath trills the cords electric. . ." In

this moment the speech act and the body stand as metaphors for the spirit and the body. In this way, Section Four complicates the concept of the body by claiming it is not merely a physical entity; it is as much a spiritual entity.

Section Five is concerned, in part, with the separation of the spirit from the corporal body, a natural result of Section Four's assertion that man is comprised of a spirit and a body. The speaker of the poems in this section is no longer naïve to death and human tragedy, as was the boy from Section One. In "Longing, We Say..." the speaker, in second person POV, reports on his widow aunt's inability to move her husband's shoes from where he last put them. After an entire day of failed attempts, the widow and the family dog "give up and head for bed knowing the distance / between inside and not inside, between here and not / here, between the living and the dead." This is the first, explicit mention of distancing caused by death. This statement simultaneously alludes to death distancing the living from the dead and the severing of the spirit from its corporal body. But this distancing idea of death is opened fully in the final piece of the thesis, "The Distances Between Us." The speaker is striving to bridge the spaces between the reality of an uncle's suicide and the scene of this event as he imagines it (not being privy to details of the scene and with no one willing to speak about it). But these chasms are permanent, and he realizes this: "My mind fabricates the whole event of the shot / as if something remembered and not / created out of necessity. I try to find images to explain / the cause of this: the distances between one body / and all others is perpetually too vast." This passage evidences that the speaker not only sees death distancing the living from the dead and the spirit from the body, but also sees death distancing the living from the living.

I

THE MIND BEGINS TO BLESS THE BODY

6

UNTITLED: IN SIX ACTS

INT. FAMILY HOME—DAY:

1/

I search for Mother's lost purse—in rooms, behind couches, in cars, in closets. I approach the top stair and call out, "Hello? Is anyone up here?" My aunt responds over her hair dryer. I walk a few steps to the open bathroom door. She is there,

standing at the mirror with hands combing
wet hair. Shower steam mists

across the bathroom's lit bulb like clouds
eclipsing moon. She is naked. She has

middle-aged roundness, she has no
wrinkles, soft-looking and glowing

pale, her nipples like chest-
nuts. The boy can't move. "Get out!" she shouts,

having mistaken mine
for her husband's voice.

§

2/

During the family reunion, the lake house hums—people swarm. Unannounced, a voice ignites: "Put on the skillet, put on the lid." The crowd goes wild for it. "Mamma's gonna make us some shortnin' bread."

I have never heard the song, but like what it does
to the family. Then I listen to the words—

"Now three little children are lyin' in the bed, and one was sick and the other 'most dead. I called for the doctor, and here's what he said, 'Give those kids some shortnin' bread.'" I imagine the words become real: sick children

and parents unable to cure them,
bread as substitute for balm.

The audience claps in rhythm with the uncle, handsome and not yet wound with depression. He takes one of his three sons by the hands and they dance, the crowd claps time, his words open over the clamor.

§

3/

When I take off my shirt, the cousins and uncles laugh. The aunts know not to laugh. My skin

is soft and pink
and *soft*. I am mass.

But my same-aged cousins' skin pulls
taut over muscle, quick leanness. I retreat

to the lake. Beneath the surface
my body hides. I clever-stroke, breathe

rhythms under my arm. When it's time
to eat I'm ordered from the lake,

cloak with the nearest towel
my body.

At the food table I peel a paper plate from the stack. I know my chubby body: nothing served will bring leanness. I fill my plate enough to appease my aunt—butter pools in scalloped potatoes, Romaine lettuce leaves drenched in Caesar salad dressing topped with bacon strips, and submerged in cream sauce are those soupy enchiladas stuffed with sausage and rice! I see an open seat at the cousins table and move through the throng as though by slow, deliberate motions without breaking the water's surface. The mountains across the lake stab toward the sun. "Hey, have a seat. You can finish my food after you eat yours." An uncle overhears, says from across the open room, "No, don't give him your food; he needs to stop eating so much." I imagine I'm back in open water, arms

cocking back along my sides, jetting forward overhead. My eyes wander the yard where smooth grass sloughs into the quiet lake wherein no body can live forever.

I breathe the lake
closed-mouthed through my nostrils,

fill both lungs until my spirit,
having shaken loose from clay,

floats home.

§

EXT. FAMILY HOME—NIGHT:

4/

I learn from a wrestler in my 8th-grade band class that there are secret ways to lose weight. He speaks of whole days of not swallowing even his own saliva, carrying around a water bottle to spit into, tells of him and his teammates wrapping each other's entire naked bodies in cling-wrap before jogging to lose five pounds in one hour. I'm not wrestling but want to make weight. I begin:

eat only apples,
oranges, pretzels, push- and sit-

up until I throw up.
Dispatch plastic

grocery bags—in the bathroom
tear a hole in the bottom,

stick my head through
like a t-shirt, my arms through the loops

like a tank-top, step into another. Add
thermal layers and run

laps around the yard
until I can't move

my cramped legs. Before re-entering the house, I reach inside my pants and pull from my groin, thighs, glutes, and from under my shirt the sweat-slick plastics. I abandon the bags outside so as not to be discovered.

§

5/

It's at John's house where I see her for the first time. Having shot baskets, he and I go inside for sodas. He looks through stacked mail awaiting his parents. "Hey, take a look at this!" he says, opening a magazine on the table. I come close. I feel my throat tighten when I see the lean woman, dark-haired and naked. John touches her glossy paper figure.

My body thrills, gasps,
my body flexes choke-red—

this must be sin.

John asks, "What? Have ya never seen a naked lady before?" Lying is a sin, too. "Yeah, sure I have," I blurt. But not until walking home across neighborhood yards do I remember:

sitting on Mother's bedroom carpet
watching television as she showers

and towel-dries, red nipples raised in cold
air and wet, dark hair between her legs.

§

INT. CHAPEL—MORNING:

6/

I sit between my brothers on the reserved pew, mouth the words of a hymn, our three black suits crisp and clean. Our uncle shot his chest out with a shotgun and two of his

sons, now sitting in the first pew, found him. One tried CPR through the blown-out chest.
I pinch my eyes against their lids into darkness and imagine—there is bone there,

the sign smoke leaves on
air, or foam on water there are bone

shards pierced through
walls, through ceiling the staunch salt,

strict iron stench where blood pools
stretch down through

carpet huddle against cement blood
explodes onto room splatters like

stains what it can reach what can
it reach what sort of cold hymn to have

what tenor singing shoeless to hold a paper-
thin prayer in this place on knees before

the rushed body toes metal?

BOY RAISED BY APPLE TREES

We live in a description of a place
And not in the place itself.

WALLACE STEVENS

He climbs trunks and limbs,
not for closeness to God

but to gain distance from the earth
in which his father rests.

He ponders the apple wood, its
smell. But when will the apples

turn? When will he pick and pluck
bucketloads and barrowfulls?

When will he help his mother
make sauce and cider?— When

will the grass, going to seed, be cropped
and smell sharply alive?

BOY SLEDDING

The boy sits, heavy in his body, on a yellow metal saucer
watching the moon behind winter clouds
glowing them into smoke, and slides backward
down a snow-scuffed ski slope through black woods.
Like a slow-spinning top's
rounding thrust chasing its tail, his sled's
direction is governed by terrain, all
his movements flailing down, his body
falling with gravity, the body into dark air
over bone-white snow. A boulder stops
his plunge, his body, his breathing,
his gloved hand crushed by metal and granite,
his finger-bones crush from knuckles,
the mind begins to bless the body with slowing blood
slowing pain, with anesthesia of shock,
with corporeal forgetting.

CAVES MADE BY THE ACT OF RAISING

At the scout fair the camp stove flames blue. The 14-year-old boy melts white wax blocks in stout pots. He watches them warm into each other then spread like spilled oil, clear as hot grease. He dips match heads in the wax to waterproof, to prove them against water. Passersby admire this creativity. The boy considers the matches,

dips his finger into the clear wax. He recoils, repeats, each time submerging deeper. The wax coats with each quick dip. He waves his finger in the air to cool and removes the wax in one clean piece. He returns it to the pot, resumes dipping matches but his one dipped finger is supple and tingles against the breeze. The boy drowns his whole hand into the clear liquid. He wants to scream and can't remove it quickly enough. He submerges it again

and again. Each dip dulls heat. The layers grow. He has his dad's hands after only a few emersions. And a few more give the boy his uncle's girth, the man whom the boy once saw punch a delinquent horse in the head. The boy waves his hand in the air to hurry cooling. Before the wax sets, he slips his hand from the glove. He sets it on the table, contemplates. A hand carved out, hollowed. Epiphany swirls behind his eyes; he sees the difference between the living and the dead, a body without a spirit. He wonders, *Is this how God made man, blowing hot breath into wax shells?* As a group of people approach the troop booth, the boy returns the wax body to its grave, watches the wax dissolve into wax. His fingers are soft against each other, red and nimble, as they pinch the wooden body of a single match and bathe its head.

§

On the day the doctor tells him his mother will die, the boy, now in his twenties, can eat nothing but returns home and sleeps. Later, he removes his clothing, walks to his bathroom mirror to examine his body for lumps. He lights a white, thick-wicked candle, sees no lumps. He palpates, feels nothing. Unsatisfied, he lifts his arms from his sides to make plain his ribs, biceps, sides and the round caves made by the act of raising. Around the wick the once cold wax mass gathers in a clear pool. He places palms forward, holds them crucified—such symmetry and shape, light and sinew, line and wingspan!—He thinks *whited sepulcher*, thinks *funeral for sick mother*, whispers *Jesus*. Through the glass his body blurs. Shallow gasps staccato down his throat. He sits in the shower, knees to chin, ankles crossed. The water is first like frost then, like flame-clear wax, scalds.

II

VIOLENCES AGAINST THE BODY

FINDING YOUR BODY

Because you are prone to long silence and distance, long bouts with apogee
lasting weeks—
after bleating my throat guttural,

 after painting my hand
red against the door
 I shoulder it open,
the odor crushes behind my eyes.
I stumble, vomit on my shirt, convulse

until my flexing air
is absent of acid,

shirtsleeve my lips clean—

Hollow bottles

of bourbon and pills spill
around your body
 heavy in the carpet.
Your abdomen greens and bloats,
red streaks your veins

 marbleizing into green chest,
shoulders, thighs. Your skin slips loosely

beneath my fingers. Rejected, you
are a piece of bread, a wick stripped of wax,

wind-scattered seeds fallen
among stones, among thieves.

I know there is nothing
 quite like you.

I know there is nothing quite like
what you have left for me here.

MOTHER FLEXING

1

After giving birth six times, the boy's mother starts lifting weights. She changes her diet from sugar, salt, and fat to fish and broccoli. In the mornings the house smells of broiling fish and steaming broccoli. "Mom?" he says, knocking on her bedroom door. He can tell from her tone she's in a good mood. He opens the door and sees her standing in front of the mirror in nothing but a shiny gold string bikini. He is shocked by her lean body of muscle. Her back is all sinew, her arms and legs defined mass. Her chest muscles boast clear striations from her neck down toward her breasts. Her stomach is a halved egg carton. "See how this pose brings out my legs and abs? And I'm learning to not hold my breath while posing," she says as she turns her feet slightly inward, placing both hands behind her head as if under arrest. "And this pose is for my back and arms." The boy is in high school and doesn't know such definition. When he leaves, he goes to his room, locks the door, and removes his clothes. He tries her poses in the mirror. He sees some muscle but no tightness. He flexes harder. His arms quiver and he realizes he is holding his breath.

2

Unuttering, the boy sees her eyes wide at the ceiling, feeling her head bang and bang, her body flail both elbows into the cold pound of marble floor. She is all gyration and flex; she is halt and start and spit, full gnash and tooth, all spasm—violences against the body. She is raw edge jaw tense, ravished from a thing unexorcised. She is heel-thrash, bruise-red. The boy's sister head-locks the mother, spreads legs presses body against mother's vibrato, jack-hammering, and lies: *It's okay mom you're gonna be fine I love you mom please stop shaking stop shaking I love you god please stop mom please stop shaking please love her God please stop this*. When her body stops, it is sweating and sallow and scared and cannot speak. It has no articulation, no word for *seizure*, tongue fat and dumb. For days it speaks slowly, a pained exercise of the throat, of the cords, of the mouth, the swollen tongue, all seared and scarred and stung.

FOUR CHILDREN FALLING

1

When my brother is six
he is 20 mph too macho
and removes his seat belt,

opens the van door. Of the two fears
with which children are born,
he only fears loud noise.
The harsh corner shocks him
to the pavement

like burlapped potatoes
pitched
to the curb.

2

I am seven with my family at a condo.
I go upstairs where mom is watching
my two-year-old sister and I ask

for my swim suit. The screened windows
are open as a field.
Mom looks under the bed, grabs the trunks

but lets go of the string

and screams, disappears from the room,
down the carpeted stairs and outside
to the concrete where sister is

sprawled out like a kite.

3

No one watches her at the party—
The ski boat pulls cheering children
on a tube.

The grill under trees sears meat.
Children play tag and ball games
and mothers gossip and drink

and the men drink and listen to the gossip.
—no one is watching when the child
of 18 months falls off the pier

into the water, her hair floating
on the surface until she breathes
enough lake.

The search ends
with firemen finding her
submerged under the pier. Like a boat rope

half-hitched to a cleat,
her brown curls smother
a grouping of nails. They cut

her loose, pass her to her parents.
The mother sits on the grass
not speaking. The father holds

the cold body, weeps. After some time,
the police pry the body from his arms,
untangle the curls from his fingers.

4
In my dream, my son falls
over a railing three floors to concrete.
Running after me,

my wife yells *bless him,*
with your hands—you'll save him
if you bless him. I kneel

beside the body not breathing.
I watch my hands move
to the blonde hair warm

with blood. Before I find utterance
I awake, leave my bed, search every room
of the house forgetting we have no children.

DEATH AND ALL ITS PLEASURES

1

Placing the belongings of the deceased
in the attic is the final act
of giving him up to God.

2

Each morning the family converges
in the kitchen where, over breakfast,
they report dreams of the night's restless sleep.

3

The longer ice is in liquid
the slower it melts,
not that its purpose has changed
but rather its need to dissolve has decreased.

SWIMMING HOLE

an ekphrastic of Eakins's painting of the same title

The big artist keeps an eye on nature
and steals her tools.

THOMAS EAKINS

The summer
swimming hole lets each boy see other
bodies tight with cold, each boy's sacked stones
cringe. The sun's slow skin-scald—.

There, in that place,
such handsome lines, lank, work-made.

Leanness in times of plenty.

With what zeal

paws the dog! Pressing brown
paws down, each liquid step lacks
mass, each stab at sand
groundless.

Such scenery
each swimmer's eyes search the shallows,
measure depths for diving.

What do they find but their own bodies
worthy of praise through song.

They sing now—

Even the dog sings.

SHOWERING

1

You survey my body
as I smear the scented bar again and again—
across my chest, arms, shoulders, reaching
my lifted ankles, up my legs
to my backside, between my thighs—
I disappear in foam. I lean into the water
and gravity avalanches lather down my landscape,
gleams my fractions livid, my flex and un-flex jolt
such slight things as weight change. We have
showered together for more than a month.
But I catch your eyes gazing
the loose expression of my genitals.
When you, smiling, don't look away
I'm witless. I towel without washing my head,
step and slide my sopping body
into clothes, cram my gym bag, make for
the door. It hits me I might be guilty
of misreading you. I know we all look—.

2

On a road trip with my father we stop at a motel for the night. *We need to take a shower before bed*, he says. He starts the water, testing its heat with the soft side of his hand. We wiggle off our clothes. He steps over the side saying *it's okay, come in*. I see nothing but water until he finishes soaping. He is a snow monster and at my eye level, soap and water run off his elephant trunk. I have never seen such a thing. I reach up and hold it. I shake it but stop when he laughs. *Your penis will look like mine when you're older*. I look down in disbelief. He washes my hair, telling me to keep my eyes shut tight to avoid the sting. He tilts my head softly into the water. I'm no longer afraid. I say to my father *this is what men do, isn't it?*

3

Before leaving the locker room I go to the sink
to paper towel my hair dry. There in shorts
at the mirror, you comb back your half head

of hair. I nod my chin down, a man's hello,
and discard the paper. When I turn to leave you
say *please wait* and offer a paper scrap

with numbers on it. You say *You can call me some time.*
You're timid and anxious for me
to stay, and for me to leave. *Thank you* I say.

4

Even now
I could describe your body.

WALKING SIESTA KEY AT NOON

My eyes squint against sun and wind against sand grains charged with needless heat
but from miles out rise sea gusts—

over currents of water, currents of sand—
wind carries its loose body
to wash my freckles, my hair, my

body—I am naked. I move

into the water my feet, my thighs, genitals,
abdomen, chest, throat and scalp. I float and

submerge. I resurrect and breathe. The harsh sea taste
in my tongue's grooves thrashes and
crusts of sand catch in my teeth. I spit. I

spit and hawk, my throat pulls
mucus into my mouth sour on my tongue.
I spit. I breathe again.

CUCUMBERS

FOR MOM

1

The house into which I just moved smells
like elderly women and cats and dust.

2

I have traveled a great distance from home
to take classes with adults
who just recently learned
that pickles are cucumbers first.
In the words of my grandmother, *some people's children*.

3

During a recent bout of homesickness
I made myself a peanut butter and banana sandwich,
not because *I* ate them growing up,
but because my mother once told me she ate them growing up.

4

I am probably allergic to elderly women.
Or elderly cats.
Or dusty women.

5

Once when my mother as a teenager she sunburned so badly while roughing a field that
her mother told her to soak in the canal without any clothes and to bathe in vinegar and
salts. My aunt, who was twelve, approached the canal pretending to bring my mother a
towel. She placed the towel a small distance from the canal so that my mother would
have to leave the water and walk, naked. When Mother was between the canal and the
towel, her sister unveiled a camera and photographed her pink nudity.

6

My grandmother used to slice cucumbers
and tomatoes and serve them salted and soaked
in vinegar to accent her dense meat loaf.
At her house on the farm, I would play
among the dusty cornrows with her cats
until she called me in.

7

As I leave the house
for the backyard, I close the door behind me.
For sun-browned skin, I am wearing nothing
but sandals. I stretch myself across a lawn chair
until my skin tingles in pinkness.

My landlord never mentioned the door locks on its own.

8

After eating my sandwich
I remember that it wasn't peanut butter with bananas—
it was peanut butter with pickles.

III

WHEN THE BOY SEES THE GIRL

THE SHAPE MADE BY THE LINE

He is not certain how he can love
something not himself

so fiercely, how seeing her
heats his feet, how her round breasts
and the shape made by the line connecting her sides

to her hips

to her thighs

fills his mouth with liquids, with sibilants—

how when he hears the word *woman*
he thinks *story*—

how when he sees a ripe pear's thin skin he thinks
narrow road through the woods at dusk—

how when he smells orange-ginger tea
rising from the stove he thinks
funeral arrangements for sick mother—

how when he hears children's voices
at play in the distance he thinks
picking berries bare-footed in tall, cold grass—

and when he gently rubs her earlobe between his
thumb and finger while she kisses his throat he thinks
wild fruit pulled from its tree,
shared between lovers—.

WHAT EVE REJECTS FOR THE OTHER

Berries and grapes, peeled white apples—
pineapple hinted with the acids of tin.
Mango juice in mango skins.

Wheat grain ground down to grist.

Paprika specks on pods of sodden
chick peas. Salad greens beneath
rust-colored pepper seeds.

Brittle tunics flake from onions. The stubborn
soil stuck in red and russet potato crusts.

Green, shucked corn husks tumble
past yellow geraniums.

THE MOMENTS BETWEEN MAKING LOVE AND DREAMS

Against the orange tree his body climbs, articulates
hungrily among her limbs to find her last ripe fruit:

Her breath, scent of citrus orchards at dusk, spreads
across his chest, his arms flanking her sides as he climbs.

His fingers reach the fruit, its star-shaped remnant
of stem. Its softness startles him as he loosens its skin
and commences, waiting for his stomach's release from hunger.

Afterward, his body spent, he lies beneath her
Branches of hair, dark as the chestnut soil of orange groves,
spreading across his throat

as she floats steadily toward sleep
with each slack draw
of breath.

MEDITATION ON THE SEASONS

female nude: oil on canvas

1

Empurpled hues of red
marble the breasts
and hips. Pools of light grip her body
like spring snow, huddled in
fruit tree shadow, thaws.

2

The summer's flesh is sun-scarred
peach skins, the tongue-stung tinge
of half-sucked mangoes livid with thirst.

3

The bodies of fallen leaves are ink-scarred
maps, their veined vertebrae ebonized
in night frost, into every last cardinal
each searches on wind for burial.

CHILDREN IN THE GARDEN

Field Three, Sophia, Guyana

Over the dust, pinched yelps of
stray dogs roil.
Beyond the garden

the wind's slow curling fingers
tousle the field grass.
There are children in the garden.

In the garden there are chickens.
There are chickens
in the house. A roof of tattered

plastic, propped walls of sheet metal
and ply-wood.
On a dirt floor where

naked children are not playing
in chicken droppings,
a floor fan sips juice

from a car battery
while the children's parents steal
sleep. The woman stirs from breeze

whistling through cracks
in their one-room and the birds'
low clucking. Because

the children are in the garden, and
in the house only the chickens,
she slips her hand inside

his shorts, her fingers Braille him
awake. Spooning, she lifts her skirt,
breathes deeply, exhales—.

LOVER AS LANDSCAPE

You resume dreams of
walking barefoot in woods past
your childhood trees.

During hours of
night, a stone falls backward in-
to shallow water.

Around your waist my
arm falls, lifts and falls again—
a field, moon-heavy.

Moon splinters flare its
hair golden, a field of wheat
cast into our room.

Your hair coils like
spiral shell, hovers as night
sea around islands.

Your skin is not pale
as snow—it is the honey
flesh of peeled apples.

ALLEGHENY, SUMMER

1

This morning brims with trees—
ancient red and sugar maples wearing
ragged bark, their paired seeds bundled
in wings, their bodies warm for flight,
for burial. Light intervening between leaves tumbles
through your hallelujah mouth and throat.

My thumbnail flays a birch twig's burl
and out oozes oil of wintergreen. I offer it to you
to smell but you recoil toward the black
ash, toward the black cherry's white
blossoms and serrated leaves, toward the butternut's

yellow-green catkins flowering
in male clusters. When you do this
we laugh. You remove your sandals
and twirl, your sundress wrapping,
unwrapping, unfastening your thighs—

2

You are the spider web
in the honeylocust,
spun in the wind.

3

Four-petal blossoms of flowering
dogwoods. Sugarberry. Unpinning your hair,
curling and russet, you move toward me, touch my face.

4

You are not the silver,
abandoned web
clinging to the honeylocust.

You are its clear
pebble of dew,

trembling.

5

The cone and tassel of the white pine,
the pitch pine's needles in fascicles of three. In a web,
a black willow's falcate leaf spins into delirium. A black
walnut with a sunburned bole, the green drupes
omitting pity, hostile as a stone.

6

I am a bloodroot seed,
savage with thirst.

OFFERING MADE WITH HIS SHAKY HANDS

FOR HANNAH

There was another life we knew each other...
In the desert the thirsty went down to the water
Hummingbirds swarmed lions roared in quarries
Silence is an envelope noise is paper
This is a story poems come after stories

CYNTHIA ZARIN

When the boy sees the girl he thinks the word *story*,
which is not to mean the normal way in which characters rush
toward the climax and break inside themselves
in a stillness called *happily ever after*,
but rather because of the comfort in storytelling,
in listening to the story, complete
with plot, setting, characters, perhaps more
than one point of view—

She smiles now because she doesn't know
what to say, because she doesn't know
what she is hearing when he says to her
the things in his head—

*Because our words used to tell a story,
the two people eating in the dark of the café, the music lifting
from across the room like the smell of fresh bread torn open
between them, smeared through oil and put in your mouth,
but not just against loneliness, but because—*

He looks at her and asks if she will
become one with
him, beyond an ending, however happy
an ending might be. She sits there
with him, at the table, watching the night grow
thick and cold—is he
telling a story or is it something more
significant, an offering made with his shaky hands
wanting to dismantle bread as sacrament,
to have and to hold, for better, in health,
for as long as they both live?

IV

WORDS UNUTTERABLE

THE BODY OF THE POEM

A poem has nerve
and sinew running
the length of its body—

a vertebrae
of argument, the way
utterance dances breath livid—

O slack mouth! down
the throat, lifting the chest.
Even when faded, tarnished

under antique glass, O how the mirror parses light,
divides it across years! We learn
to parse syntax this way, to chew

words, toss them on tongue, suck
marrow from their bones
until our attuned ears divine song.

SPEECH THERAPY

There are words unutterable. He can't say words with "r" in them. They all come out as "w", which embarrasses him. *Wrist* comes as *wist*. *Train* comes as *twain*. *Broom* comes as *bwoom*. Classmates taunt his tongue. He quickly learns silence, develops the practice of studying his shoes. Whenever he feels people question the sincerity with which he studies his shoes, he squints his eyes and crinkles his forehead. Most people leave alone a boy seemingly interested in something so dull. Except for one girl in his third grade class. They are outcasts. She follows him around on the playground watching him watch his shoes. "What're you looking at down there?" she asks. He stops walking. He doesn't want to confess it's only his shoes. Instead he shakes his head from side to side, his eyes frantically learning the ground between his feet. He wants to be left alone without asking to be alone. He remembers, earlier that year, sitting with his grandmother on the porch of her farmhouse watching dusk become purple. The wind jostled heavy-bending heads of wheat against each other, slanted green-leafed willow switches toward the grass, shimmied the poplars. "Why don't you talk to anyone?" she asks. He looks into her face. Shakes his head. She steps toward him, pats his back, and says, "It's okay, you don't have to talk to me. No one talks to me because I smell funny." He wants new ground between his shoes, wants articulation in perfect liquid consonants to tell her she smells like *trees* and that he likes trees, wants her to feel more whole than he.

SPEAKING THE WORD COOL: AN INTERPRETIVE DANCE

The medium of poetry is the human body: the column
of air inside the chest, shaped into signifying sounds
in the larynx and the mouth.

ROBERT PINSKY

Each word a rare coercion
of the body,

separates air from
air, diving it down
the throat, lifts the
rib cage and swells
the lungs with intake,
rolls slack the shoulders—

until the diaphragm recoils

—heavy-coughing consonant hanging in the throat
then live breath trills the cords electric,
hums the slow vowel over the tongue, flicks the back
of the top teeth like a tide's foam
flowing on beach walkers' bare feet,
saying *cool, cool, cool*.

SPEAKING IN TONGUES

*The only way to get rid of a temptation
is to yield to it* says the minister
on TV. I notice he's reading
from a teleprompter,
and struggling. He starts to laugh
to buy time, sounding out the word
he's looking at. His southern accent
offers him no credibility
to my northern ear. He turns
to his default sermon: interpreting
Bible verses in ways not done before.
His producers don't realize he's breaking
new ground, an odd miracle.
His slurred speech suggests a serious
breakthrough in turning
backstage water into wine.
His sermon is on speaking in tongues,
the notion that no one can
have a secret prayer language,
but that God's spirit translates
one tongue to another's yielding ear.

AFTER READING EXODUS

it's as if I'm on sacred ground
wherever I go, so I stay
shoeless, let my hair
and feeble beard grow

for months.
My neighbor burns a bush
of heaped mulch that flames
and spits. I can't hear

what's being said
between them.
I plague all day the jerks in traffic, casting black
boils to their backsides.

Driving to the beach
I imagine I'm leading the procession of cars
from lives of bondage
toward the sea.

I weave a dead snake
through a rock rake's metal teeth,
hold it up while standing on the roof
of my car parked at the mall. Security

guards approach cautiously. I spread my arms
slowly at eye level, palms outward. I speak
declarative praise to the sky, but nothing happens.
They laugh—

It starts to rain.

POETRY AS THE ART OF THEFT

I first learn to steal in church
as a child. During long sermons
I thumb apart pages, search
the hymnal. It feels heavy
and comprehensive. I land in the
sectioned appendix where the page is marked
by *Meters*, syllables numbered
in each phrase of text. I don't yet know
of sin, or redemption, or the longing
I will develop for both. I catch on
immediately—interchanging texts and tunes,
paring and re-pairing, stealing words
from one rhythm to bless another
with articulation, my hosannas washing
past priests, under pews, pillars of smoke
ascending into darkness.

BECAUSE YOU ASKED ABOUT THE LINE
BETWEEN VERSE AND PROSE

It is the distance between paintings
in the city's art gallery.

Each piece presses toward light
flaring from fixtures
honed toward interpretation,

it is a textured exhibit,
it is an exhibitionist text.

But in hushed tones
it confesses:
you should see the others—

but not yet,

not yet.

FIRE POEMS

He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost
and with fire.

LUKE 3:16

1

Self-Ablution of a Christian Boy

The child loves to swim
in deep water, a practice

of discipline. Such constant climbing in dark,
lulling water makes him crave rest

on the lake floor. He distracts himself with discipleship—
he is John, the one

officiating, and then he is Jesus,
the one immersed.

He crawls out to dry in the sun, opens
his arms and listens for a bird floating

overhead. When nothing happens, he settles
for the holy ghost.

2

Self-Immolation of a Young Buddhist Monk

His body is finished,
the only Noble Truth, which is

on his mother's heels
as she wanders the house for days.

She has seen the news,
has turned it off, has attempted sleep

four times, has turned the news on again,
clutching his spare glasses against her breasts.

At last she submits, craves to eat but first must wash.
She removes her clothes in front of the mirror

without looking. She smells her clothes—
everything smells like gasoline.

WE SPEAK NOT OF THE DEAD

That which goes unspoken and untouched
dissolves, memory
in perpetual dusk.

There was a woman I made love to
and I remember how, holding her in my hands,
I felt a fierce longing at her presence
like a thirst for thirst, a hunger
for famine, for the way flesh is made
red during the work of mating,
for my childhood tree—
 hidden treasures in its nooks,
 for its shade in which I played
 dead, for the sunburned apples it gave each fall, for each
 fall, for the songs my mother learned from her grandmother
 and sang to me so that I would not forget a woman I never met.

We talk about it while walking the beach one night,
and in her voice there is a strand
of anguish. I understand that, speaking this way,
we splay the air with words,
the symbols of things we cannot bear
to lose.

She speaks of a lullaby her father sang,
an elegy, that she was not fond of until his death.
She speaks of the act of resurrection
being an act of the voice, a vocal command
for the dead to rise up.

The wind mists salt water on my skin
through darkness; I feel enlivened.
I think someone ought to listen
when, over the wind's bay,
her throat loosens and she begins to sing.

ALLENTOWN, PENNSYLVANIA: OCTOBER

There is no small man
worn from harvest

sitting behind the table.
There is no chair. There

are no crumbling sidewalks
between these elderly houses
and no man sweeping them.

There is a note on a glass jar that reads:
Take a pumpkin and please leave

five dollars. Across
the road a chestnut tree,
gigantic above a small man

in another's yard
bent to collect the dropped burrs.

His thick fingers
pick up and shuck

three brown stones
from each green pod

and find them into a burlap sack. There
is wind and there are leaves— red, brittle, all curling at the edges.

Some,
ripped cleanly,
tear into flight.

V

THE DISTANCES BETWEEN US

THE KENAI

FOR DAD

I understand even as a child that rivers never sleep.
My father takes my brother
and me to the Kenai at a quarter to midnight,
each of us carrying our own flies and rod.

Near the bridge we leave the road
and side-step down the hill. A pale
current of moon
rounds clouds, trees, and people to the meltwater,

raucous, drumming through the pines. Hundreds in waders
walk slowly against the water. Men stand along the river,
each five feet from the next, waiting.
Father tests and re-ties his knots. The surface

breaks, salmon clearing the water
as if they're trying to swim
upstream against the current of moon,
their sequined skin gleaming silver

before they side-flop in again. Just as my father
hands over my rod and tells me to walk
into the river, a loud man sings a countdown from ten
into his cupped hands. After "three, two, one," the man yells "Go!"

sending hundreds of handmade flies whipping
past ears and over shoulders, the clear floss humming,
drowning the river's sound. I clutch
against moon, against currents of

kings and stop casting. The water presses my waders
cold against my thighs, the polar-pine
air catches inside my ribs. I stand there,
watching fish leap toward the moon.

LONGING, WE SAY, BECAUSE DESIRE IS FULL OF ENDLESS DISTANCES

after Robert Hass

She watches your shoes now—quiet
on the floor. Their posture is not arbitrary:
the way one shoe t-bones
the other at an angle resembles shyness.

Their laces still knotted from your last wearing,
a symbol from which she deciphers
no meaning. She will move them out of sight
tomorrow, place them in the guest closet, and forget

them. She spends the night considering
strategies for moving them without
moving them, at breakfast announces the plan
to the dog. He appears to be on board and follows her

to the shoes, watches her place one
of his treats in each leather cave. She moves away,
starts toward the guest room saying,
bring 'em here, bring me the shoes. Before last week

she couldn't keep shoes from him, but look at him now—
he lays belly down on the carpet and whimpers.
Perhaps this is a learned behavior. They spend the afternoon in
the room with the shoes.

Finally, because the darkness has ambushed the windows,
they give up and head for bed knowing the distance
between inside and not inside, between here and not
here, between the living and the dead.

WALKING THROUGH WINTER IN REXBURG, IDAHO

after William Blake

Though this walking has been dark for hours, still I search—

the asphalt, the snow-
fields, the dark pool above
with distant thimbles of light, like leaves
scattered by wind across a surface
—for the moon.

Around me wind blows blue-
tinted snow. The blackmoon, aching
for spring, drowns in grey clouds.
Ice coats handrails, bare trees, lean and tired,
lean and are tired.

How like a god the snowy owl— luminous, blushing
light, perched on a hummock in the snow-
field, its white plumage bristling
against sleet. No—
against *sleep*.

O what balance you keep in black wind!

Nearby, children's pinched voices float taut through
dry air, their numb limbs shiver, vision
blurs to lake, lashes blink away
flakes while Blake busies
God's inner ear:

*The north is thine; there
hast thou built thy dark
deep-founded habitation.*

I imagine seeing through God's
windows fires flame and thaw
while night's white-hot frost
windburns my skin raw.

GHOST RIVER

In the orchard valley, brown-boned
fruit trees flank the river in which ice
buoys toward the slow town.

The river has torn breath
from countless bodies,
its way of memory.

The children know about the unfound bodies
buried in the water, about the spirits
waiting for winter, when the river

sleeps, before they venture an escape.
On the sharpest mornings, the children see ghosts
rouse out of and walk on the water,

slanting in gusts from the north.

SHE WATCHES HER HUSBAND DIE
WHILE FISHING FOR AFTERNOON SALMON

1

His back pressed into the boat's
deck, the heart beneath his shirt and skin
spits and halts miles from shore. A distance

too gaping to do much good.
As never before she understands
time and space and distance. They float.

2

Her mind floats backward—

Summer lawn clippings at dusk.
Shucked corn husks too green to burn.

Bird flocks lift and turn as a cloth in wind.
A restive sailboat's once-docked sewn cloth,

wind-ravaged. A slick black smock sloughing hair
to a cold floor. A distant pair of children with sidewalk

chalk. Faulkner's music read by her father's voice
Through the fence, between the curling flower spaces—.

3

She tries to conjure him
back to her while making deals

with God, swearing
oaths she cannot keep.

4

She still makes him meatloaf with celery
and buys him cigarettes.
She studies these tokens, looks past them

out the window into the forest at the snow
falling into snow through which flowers dare
not drive, wondering if anyone else hears it land.

CELESTIAL BODIES

There are also celestial bodies, and bodies terrestrial:
but the glory of the celestial is one, and the glory of
the terrestrial is another.

1 COR. 15:40

1
After studying etymologies, I
ask my wife, while watching her
apply makeup in the bathroom mirror,

Why do you wear cosmetics?

They make me pretty.

But you're already pretty; you don't need them.

You want me to wear them, trust me.

To this I say,

*Cosmetics comes from the word
cosmos, which means to put into order
that which is in chaos.*

She looks at me, says nothing.

2
There is one of the sun
one of the moon
one of the stars—

3
I'm sitting in my house,
alone, as a child,
during lightning.

The power leaves
the house as from a body
in death. I fumble through

a drawer for a flashlight
and take it with me to hide
under the stairs.

I turn the light on and cup
my hand around its lens.
My skin glows

translucent, a glove
unable to contain the light inside.

4
They're not white, these bodies,
as if dusted with flour or caked makeup,

but of a foreign brightness,
a spark in the chest

that spreads by veins
to quicken—

5
In my brother's second winter he finds in my coat
slung over the sofa one thin glove.

It is white and dirty and loose on his hand
as his fingers wiggle life into its cotton body,

a smooth gesture to embody that
which was disembodied. With his hand waving

he mimes among us, touches my face, trills the
keys of mother's piano, crab-walks her table.

6
—and each mortal thing resumes:

lucid as breath; the fingers flex;

nerves pulse light and heat, stoking

fire until the body rises up, walks.

BIRDS IN THE AUTUMN WOOD
a cento from Carolyn Forché's Blue Hour

What crawled out of the autumn wood:

light mottling the forest floor, crows leaving one limb for another

man in the coroner's arms

as if a flock of geese were following,

as the water in which the corpse has been washed—

a private death

so that the dead climb up out of the river to blacken its banks,

the birds became smoke,

neither a soul nor a body

to remain haunted

without wandering too far into the past.

It is not you who will speak

what God does or does not forgive.

THE DISTANCES BETWEEN US

1
Bone is found in the ceiling,
 in the walls, shot clean through sheetrock.
He had promised his wife he would remain,
 to have and to hold,
in sickness.

2
Two sons find his body,
 the older tries CPR on the blown-
open chest, his bone-cold fingers swim
 among ribs and organs
as the younger looks on.
 The police find the boys sitting together
in front of the house, tired of weeping,
 under a sun-shaken cherry tree.

3
I don't trust myself alone with my thoughts. I search
 my mind for distraction and find nothing
but memory. My mind fabricates the whole event of the shot
 as if something remembered and not
created out of necessity. I try to find images to explain
 the cause of this: the distances between one body
and all others is perpetually too vast.

4
His wife finishes a morning bike ride, arrives
 to the shine of police tape at her home.
They don't let her go
 to him.

5
Two of her brothers who came
 to clean the body and blood
from the floor and walls and ceiling, stop to hold each other and weep as only
 men can—
they replace carpet and paint walls, burn
 scented candles while keeping quiet
vigil. I see the smoke ascend toward the ceiling, through

the roof and lift on wind
over the mountain like prayer,
like music guiding the dead
far away from here.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jared C. White received a Bachelor's Degree in English from Brigham Young University in 2007 and entered the M.F.A. program at the University of South Florida in 2008. He has taught undergraduate courses in Composition and Creative Writing and has given several presentations throughout the country on creative writing, popular culture, and creative writing pedagogy. He was born and raised in East Wenatchee, Washington with three sisters and two brothers; landscapes and family figure prominently in his writing.