

ABSTRACT

HAUNTS

by Amy Toland

This thesis explores identity as permeable, unstable, and opaque. Within the poems in the collection, interior and exterior spaces mix and morph. The work engages with a number of different subjects, including family, environment, politics, and sexuality, and explores various emotional states, many of them uncomfortable: anti-familial feelings, rage, and isolation. These topics facilitate an exploration of the ways poetry connects the personal with the outer/other. *Haunts* seeks to investigate selfhood's interaction with environmental, political, social, and intellectual contexts and how these connections raise questions about poetic responsibility and morality. While all the poems are free verse, the collection includes a variety of styles. This further reflects an interest in the instability of identity and exploring different approaches of connecting to an audience as well as creating a framework for beyond-text exploration.

HAUNTS

A Thesis

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by

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cris cheek

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Haunts

I erased the maps, yet they returned with fife and drum
unfurled close, proclaimed: *we exist*

Again I erased the maps—once peopled, busy with intersection turned blank fans, redrew
lines to new coordinates, mountained, rivered, laked, replaced dark regions with genuine
conquests—yet they emerged as from liquid, grew large, creatured strange as before

The maps were immortal but I tore them road from road, let winds lift their fragments and
thought my work ended, till they resurrected

No erasure here, just umbrella-closed papers of desert past
All freshly ghostswept till nightfall

She Travels Between

I.

I expect a husk
but find you more alive
than was reported

You command the room
a pharaoh queen
delaying the embalmers

Staring ahead
you smile recognition

II.

Any day now, they say
Any day now you will step away
But we know nothing of death

Yours is slow, painless
a clog of arteries within
the constant fold back to sleep
mind simmering at the surface

You lie still
wake for sips of liquid
always parched, face chalked

The hospice nurses bathe you
talk kind pessimisms:
"The important thing is that she is comfortable"

Holidays come and go
A new year opens with you breathing in it
Perhaps you will reach summer

Are you aware that your death is scheduled
People are waiting, primed for mourning

III.

Still, you hold court, hold on
suspended mid-world
in your hospital bed

They tire of the care, the uncertainty
But you outlive this impatient ministering world

You glide on a silent lake
surrounded by faces moving
in and out of dense fog

Fabrication

We put some through a very aggressive aging process.
While they may be bruised they will never be broken.

The end results are as natural and authentic as possible:
Every flaw, nick and prick or abrasion

Painstakingly produced by hand, to replicate real wear and age.
We are continually gathering data, observing wrinkles.

The process is much slower and deliberate, produces more waste,
but the end result is superior in texture and touch.

Our constant pursuit is authenticity:
Free and easy culture and a nostalgic vision.

We are a tool, a voice of things and values.

Chichén Itzá

visits to ruins result
in a view of an underworld
participating in new systems
of sacrifice and power

we came to stare at rocks
the rounded observatory
to tease out ancient riddles
perhaps climb impossible
staircases

rows of trinket sellers
screamed their wares lining
walks carving jaguars
devils with jointed legs

no way to buy them all

Real Estates

we dreamers walk
out-of-range neighborhoods

we've come for glimpses
visual feeding
from the sidewalk

we're here to stalk green

see how from periphery
midsummer yards
partially disrobe in dark, call to us
extend deck planks and shrub
groomed leafy for seduction

see how screened porches,
upstairs rooms expose in snatches
wall of frames bookcased plenty

we dreamers
dusk walk neighborhoods
flirt, but never wish to see naked.

Preparation

The trees give themselves
to color hesitantly

The important matter of primer:
entire forests gain the shadow of a thousand distinct rusts and wines
seeping from root in moist breaths to coat each twig
with a palette wrenched
from ancient loins

Before the neon profusion: buds torn from envelopes
sprouts spiraling joy to sun, the newborn leaflets, frilly and wild
shouting at passersby

Revelation

In the church of the urban outfitter
the bare-breasted truth
appeared to me in a cloud of smog:

*American apparel may be
an industrial-sexual revolution
but the only way to press further
(which we must) is a full return.*

The true hipster is made
from fused coal shaft, treetop, paper mill,
missing fingers, knotted knees,
tattoos from molten metals...

Such truth doesn't fit hangers.

Caribou Kill

To find the herd
you must travel further
than before, carry provisions, tents.
The herds are pushing away.

Still, the hunt supplies many families.
Caribou remains a staple, the heads
sit outside homes, stain snow;
antlers velveted and branched.

A sign in the post office
warns against meat wastage.
You must adhere to harvesting rules.
If you kill caribou you must eat it all or share.

On the drive into Tuktoyaktuk over a
frozen ocean road, I saw clothes lines
hung with caribou skins and pants
made from polar bear pelt.

The back stoop of another house
is covered with dozens of antlers
awaiting the carver.

Red Line

Girl on subway
eats ramen like chocolate
folds back the wrapper
to bite the dry nest

Girl on subway
sits quiet mid movement
folds back the pages
of cheap paperback

Girl on subway
knows her stop
knows her effect
perched in black
her bleached hair short

Her white teeth cut
the noodles clean

Firefly, genus *Photuris*

If one of us must eat the other
it will be me: *hater of all men*

I expand into the night
fury lit white
primed for mishap and fire
I descend heedless, fucked

*Come down in the grass, my love, come down
where the blades reach in a canopy*

In the mimicry of light
I unhinge my jaw
reveal my cannibal heart

She Inhabits

– after Anne Sexton's *Her Kind*

I have gone out, a possessed witch
haunting the alleys
the neglected architecture of cities
marble fountains to wars
the fenced developments of safety

In the pitch black
with the dance of vermin about my feet
I plot intricate crimes
an end to structures political and social
I walk suspended from my body
wrapped in tapestries, smog, and refuse

A woman like that is not a woman, quite
solo, entranced, hair flamed out
she inhabits between space
I have been her kind

I have found the warm caves in the parks
pleasured in air vented from underground ducts
nestled on a bench under a network of blankets
and built dwellings – each one winged
able to move in moments
yet inventoried as a database
pocketed with cabinets of cloth
for condiments, yarns, First Aid kits,
holy texts, bits of lead pipe
I have concocted five-course meals for finches
and lifted slugs from pathways
talking quietly to the concrete
pronouncing verdicts on cardboard

A woman like that is misunderstood
they skirt past her, looking anywhere but eyes
She is the addict, insane, withering in the open
I have been her kind

I have ridden in the ambulance
writhed from the gurney
to press my face against glass
I have screamed truth at medical staff
reveled in nakedness
exposed my breasts and beat them
run hallways in ribboned gowns
unfazed by medicines and straps
Glorying in puncture
I watch the needle slide in vein again
and again

A woman like that is not ashamed to die
Brazen, she faces the mental numbing
I have been her kind

Bus AM/PM

Airflow awareness: I need water A
harsh pressing this morning
Extension of muscle, ankle to knee

::

All-day listen to do-gooders
In utero talk sticks
All women: *encase in spacesuits*
Chew organic freshness
It's for the future

::

Plumbing awareness: rain push
The trees are stained, moist

::

After fight at work
Bus trip blurs red: that ego
Bloomed in front of me
Had to puncture

::

Some are better adjusted
To mass transit group experience
I admit to shirked duties

::

Woman inserts stroller
Into traffic: parting the red sea
My throat is dry

Indecency

If it hadn't been January,
If there hadn't been a raw wind
Sweeping the street at 1 AM,

And if she hadn't been from out of town,
I might have left her outside the club
To laugh alone.

But it wasn't right of them
To throw the girl out to chill,
Solitary and blue-lipped.

Back in the warmth, the sea of elbows,
The rainbow light, we searched
For the nonexistent boyfriend.

When the police came for the arrest,
she had nearly passed out
pencil skirt hiked up so far
you could see her.

They made no attempt
to cover her.

Pressure Tank

they will insert
 into you
their need for doubles
their need for enveloped
 being

they will insert
 their desire
 for expansion

they will apply pressure
the pressure will be intimate
 unfolded, unearthed
 attempt at repossession

they will insert
 their need for vicarious
 swelling

desire you to extend
 into future

this will be their gifting:
 invasion
 of all private space

Midway Atoll

In the bellies of sea birds
sliced clean with razors
soda caps bright as candy.

That's Just the Trash Talking

Try not to think about them later

Cat litter and chicken fat combining

Stink before the truck comes

After spending time with relatives

I worry how long it will take

To rot relationship

Low Pressure System

the sense of clouds amassing, whirl of wings

makes me kiss you many times before pulling from the terminal

the car, a hovering water glider

its connection to asphalt tender

after last night's storm, this landscape bleeds

rich, loamed, a Dutch still life

one of those Vermeer women, suspended

by the window, framed deep color

fields recede, form hairlines

I pass a barn folded in on itself, wax around flame

Return

Paper makes excellent kindling—
first black at the edge then spread blight
slivered in air.

It was an insular town.
When my granddad was young a fire took
his father, the postmaster.

Rescuing bills and such, from the family fire
died away from the ash moved the family
granddad's obsessions, his letters and papers

To collect, stack, organize—nothing
thrown away without pain. It was reaction,
a psychological plight, so the story is told.

He wanted to be buried in the family plot,
to return to Tennessee to rot under trees.
But no one cared to transport him.

Much more practical,
they said, much better,
to let him burn.

Into Light

Perfect explanation for it

Negatives from separate cameras mingle in chemical drip

Seeing angels (albeit potbellied angels) or ghosts
entertaining otherly unawares—

Glory to technology and harsh substances!

All those zeros and ones shot an email—the wrong one
Assassination or more accurate, suicide-ensconced in joke
Called the boss what?
Help wanted with possessed keyboard

Meddling technology-deity won't be stopped

The message is over, but still records
Private directives:
“Bring her into light....cause her to rekindle”

Message meant for supreme being
Hits human jugular horrid exorcism attempt

If holy exists beyond these errors(?)

It reveals dripped with dark

Exalted Egos

at the poetry reading—

prayer meeting

preach to the choir

holy-holy-holy—

we sway to Words

each poet

a self-proclaimed god

Reverberation

Screech owls are crying tonight—
their voices quavering from dark heights.

Silhouetted they wait to detach from trees—
to plunge at furred tufts in the leaves below.

: : : :

After months of silence, you choose this night
to phone— guts spilling from a wound.

All I can do is listen— knowing
your eyes are raw black moons.

Snippet

We exist

as inter-nourished cavities
past-present-future in diagram

This heart

is secure
stable, perhaps
though frida kahlo-ed

—exposed muscle

flexed and rhythmic
in open air
red and blue intravenous tubes
looped patiently from
my torso
to yours—

Why, then, question

my duty
with slight and nimble scissors?

Better to

test connections
watch the drops bloom roses
than never ache

Rothko Morning in Mid-January

I.

Mornings like this
when the sky bleeds
pink at the horizon

when the earth is sealed
forests reduced to ink lines
fields messy with stubble

the seep and rise
of granted color
is the only harbinger

II.

All is frozen save for
a lone runner
passing on the street

The tiny birds
in the thickness of shrub
twitch to keep threads
of blood inching

They are right to stir

III.

I think of you, away
under the same soaked sky

The cats cry for breakfast
their mouths strangely wide
piteous

Cenote

deep open eye

site of sink

crumbled space

for circled sky

ground seep mergences

you who drag trees

tourists peered over

ringed limestone rim

tempt fate answers

from mute supreme beings

asking blood

past sacrifices dredged

to edge the skulls

of young and pure

dripped in sunlight

the heated air

rings still cries

nothing too good for gods

Architects' Delight

9/11.

Normally, it costs

to demolish a building

or two.

Welcome to the Desert of the Real

I have thought this before

Considered the past as photo album

Experienced emotion and event

In relation to fictions

Even envisioned death

As a music video, a severing

of character after which

the soundtrack continues

Zizek, you sweaty philosopher

Telling us to pinch ourselves

Unplug and undrug

To acknowledge lostness

Movies are candy

TV is bubble gum

We can't tell the difference

Can't escape the webs

Films make

Prettier reality

Duck River, TN 38454

You'd have to be off course to pass through this one-horse town
a dot on the map southwest of Nashville Tennessee

You'd have to be passing by on the way to another place or lost
to see the cluster of old houses, the small trailer park

Only the post office makes it real, makes it a location
that and the land, the land, sweet and sloped
river swung muddied to the east, nursing fields

You'd have to be searching for the past, deep roots
The land's good for farming, not that anyone does that anymore
Not sure what the inhabitants of Duck River do exactly

You'd have to be off course to pass through this southern hollow
where the cemetery on the hill out-populates the town
I think they call it Shady Grove

Directives

remember to secure

your own mask

before

remember to secure

your own mask

to seal

inhale-exhale

before helping others

in case of emergency

walk—don't run

to the nearest

green field

island floating mid red sea

in case of emergency

walk—don't run

to the nearest

butcher block

guillotine cell

remember to remain calm

help is on the way

Installation

armed with bright Legos
I repair cracks in a wall
draw glances in abandoned zones

the redirected river
knocks out a village
to power lights

I rage cartoon in the rubble
scrawl a train car, send it out of limits
far away from here

a new highway
hugs the city
uproots past

tomorrow I'll stencil furies
tether bags to street vents
broadcasting by any means

How to Draw Snow

The snow
an elephant on the page

You know
but you must ignore
tiptoe your pencil
draw just the dark edges of engulfed objects:
the rectangular faces of the steps
suspended in air
malnourished lines
of tree limbs and trunks
reduced by half
awkward polygons left
when snow forms
at the corner of a pane

You attune
to every geometric subject
as distinct, alien
to corral the looming beast

The snow was always there
The page made of snow
Its shape emerges
You have drawn nothing

As when near

the ocean
a change in tree height
certain scrubbiness, speaks
of waves

i sense a clearing
approach out of forest
—horizon slipped
down trunks, top branches
distinct neon,
thin in light—

it is beyond
it is beckoning
waits to release from deciduous
press

i will run forward
as to water
find, claim as own
perfect froth of field

this, my hidden expanse
of blue

Inuvik, Northwest Territories

Early January and the sun is back

It's been 30 days since we saw it

The town celebrates with fireworks

On days when the sun is not visible

solar glow replaces it, dust pink at the horizon

Inuvik is within minutes of the arctic tree line

There is no gradual change:

one hill is covered, the next, barren

Bear warning signs posted at Boot Lake

Two grizzlies and a black bear shot by rangers this week

Threats to the town, the town's dump

Inuvik has three stuffed polar bears,

one at the library, airport, and restaurant

The last one wears mitts; patrons steal claws

Something you don't see every day–

a black Lab trying to gnaw a moose bone

on the side of Mackenzie street, no other meat around

Wasting meat is illegal in Inuvik

Otherwise people hunt antlers alone

Some of the dogs have ice blue eyes

A house caught fire. It was -35

Firefighters struggled with frozen pipes

The dry climate makes buildings prone to fire

There's ice fog in the mornings

Weather service says -40 Celsius

Every building sends a column into the air, exhaling

The town has one traffic light—

a yellow blinker only active during peak hours

If you walk outside of town

there are moments of complete silence—

all you hear are birds, trees

You get to feel the empty space

minimalist

Frostbite

wait all season
for mums
to burst blood
or yellow

wait for you
to tendril open
naturally

useless, watch
our green
corpse

emotions
all brittle
snap

Rose Garden

I remember horizontal sun in my hair
The violence of grass snapped.

Out on the dry lawn
Fenced by the house and cornfield—
Lines of roses, perhaps twenty bushes in regiment
Pressure the air

I wanted to cluster them inside
Even if they died the next moment.
I wanted to pluck and claim their color
But they are for living, not harvesting

Certainly in the mornings, she tended them
Placing bits of barbed green stem in a pile
She who could not have children
Nurtured the wiry forest

After she became a widow, the garden shrunk
Till the lawn stretched empty, forgetful
She began calling relatives
Speaking about her desire to die

They auctioned the house and its contents
Sent me a piece of silver
An awkward serving fork
Angled to prick

Search for Surrogate

witch is in the oven
let's Hansel & Gretel out of here
search for surrogate
beyond the wood's limit

gone bread crumbs
candy bribes
false puff from chimney
no return trip, cuz

bitch is in the oven
let's skip away to open worlds
search for surrogate
attempt rebirth

find someone, anyone
to help us
comprehend normal

Piece of Work

pushed to brink
of chemical collapse
everything recombined
to spark life

yes it is necessary
to pour yourself molten
death to touch
spew out blood fire
fresh from wound

it is encouraged
even as you change
the countenance of the room
you are in the process of containment
streamed direct into boundary

feel alive to froth
all will solidify

Late July, Boston

I'd like to kill a tourist today
but I'll probably expire first
curl fetal on cobbles
or dehydrated drape museum ship

Self-sacrifice is only fair
I am a sinner too
walking the trail to freedom
I join the languid
lined up for photo memory
& online secretion

This pilgrimage lacks backbone
the heat saps brain
saps patriotism
oh give me a musket
& I'll muster a rebellion

Bunker Hill tower is closed
due to excessive heat
fatigued on the hill
I watch a bus misjudge a turn
damaging an SUV

no casualties
the air discharges
as drivers exchange papers
a bulldog extends
his bubblegum tongue
& the flags move slightly

Salute.

After

The day after the death there is nothing to do
but rely on the liturgy of laundry
follow the familiar cadence of habit
carry the fragrant clean cloths and sheets
hands wrists flipping and smoothing with precision
blind bead upon bead upon bead
round and round and round and round
incant the rosary with detergent and water
then attach the towels along the line
vertical rainbows baked stiff
there is no halting these cycles and after
letting them wash and dry and fold
my thoughts by the end of the day I had dealt
with many graver matters

Nice This Time of Year

helpless to coldblooded instinct
we flee Ohio's whitened fields
& scheduled conservatisms

just enough floating quiet from plastic
to fund this exodus
but who gives a fuck really

as we board a plane in Dayton
I expect our concealed wanderlust
to trigger TSA alarms

I rationalize the experience
as exchange
this time, savings
 for sanity
one week in primary color
sea, sun, sand

Mexico's nice this time of year

upon arrival we turn
motionless as sun-soaked snakes
watch our lacquered bodies peel

eyes blink from bright
our papered layers curl in the sand
float out over the water

leaving any of this
feels unnatural

That Antigravity Attitude

Mindless vandalism can take a bit of thought:

Think outside the box. Collapse the box

Take a fucking sharp knife to it

What we need in this race are more streakers...

You can own half the city by scribbling your name over it

You know what hip-hop has done to the n-word

Do that to the word vandalism—bring it back

You owe the companies nothing:

People who get up early cause war, death & famine

Asking permission is like asking

To keep a rock someone just threw at your head

Something that defies the law of the land is good

Something that defies the law of the land

& the law of gravity at the same time

Is ideal

Crop

select sky
save to mind

select
save to mind
four-cornered snip

select
to mind
shadowed ribcage
gust of late summer

select
mind swatch
a thousand burst-green
flips of leaf

just this square
file for later use

Aftermath

little houses like ours
will fill the gaps
timber-clad and modest
buttoned to hills
each a machine breathing
pure inside its shell
slowly the world will recover
around us thin branches
strain to patch the rift
understory thick with movement
we will not be alone

Envelop, She

in bubble of murmur

mid sidewalk press

blurs lovely

encased image

yellow pleat skirt

whisks tunnel walls

on train straight

to city's core

earbuds close

circled in sound

fed atmosphere

solitary in the bustle

reflected in window

turns a smile

Approach

doors will open on the right

please take this time

to gather

personal

threads may have

shifted

in transit

please take and swathe

back from suspended

tangle the nest

restore ordered

internal

doors will open on the right

please take this time

to gather

In the Land of Round Birds

the birds are circles, puffed for cold

I spotted five plump grouse in a tree by Boot Lake Trail,

each one the size of a football

thought the thin branches would break

on chill mornings snow buntings line the rooftops,

tiny beaks, eyes, speck from white down

when the land warms, grey whiskey jacks appear in shrubs,

attempt to steal my picnic,

while dozens of mosquitoes tap my jacket hood like rain

I wait for the migrating ducks

the northern pintail

with its cobalt beak

beware. fox footprints

everywhere

Purr

something about

the way you

lured the stray

into the open

to stroke and lift

it in the light—

the concern

for its hideous

faults—

i returned

hungry for you—

stub tail

and one eye

closed with crud

i remembered

to purr

Wilderness

You've only been gone a day. Already the house is shifting. I don't trust the doors, the closets, locks. My reflection laughs at me in the bathroom mirror.

I stand aside, watch as the clothes in the entry rustle.

Grabbing a broken bit of chalk, I draw a single line on the wall. Entrench. You've only been gone a day. The bed has extended its borders; the house is pushing in.

I hear water running and find the staircase submerged beneath a raging cascade. Silverware rattles in the drawer.