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The External Soul

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Salem State University
The Graduate School Department of English

The External Soul

A thesis in English

by:

Catherine Fahey

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of the Requirements for the Degree of
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Faith

Can a
pentacle

formed of
broken

mirrors save
itself

from the bad luck

of its
creation?

Or does
creation

and making
whole

override one
superstition

with an act of blessing?

The Winter Witch

this climate demands long underwear
wool socks and extra sweaters
dark at seven dark again by four
candles lit against the missing light

wool socks and extra sweaters
ice roses melt in the moonlight
candles lit against the missing light
frost figures inside my windows

ice roses melt in the moonlight
follow the trail of lost left mittens
frost figures inside my windows
found ones stumble home

follow the trail of lost left mittens
orion guides your way
found ones stumble home
my heart is carved from carnelian

orion guides your way
come and sit by the fire
my heart is carved from carnelian
quartz-iron blood runs cold

come and sit by the fire
you need heat more than I
quartz-iron blood runs cold
can I ever be warm

The Fool

Thrift store jeans, faded t-shirt.
Save money for boots and a tent.
Carrying what I own,
can't lose myself while
balancing on the edge of an island—
dancing over Niagara Falls—
tripping up and down a slide—
leaping blindly, yet trusting
there's room for a carry-on bag.
Life: an open return ticket.
Experiences as currency:
where to go on a penny trip
at the crossroads? Flip a coin:
heads is left, tails is right.

Collins Cove

The sea and sky are the same gray—
the shade of rush-hour emotions,
seagull underbellies & lonely playgrounds.

If I can just swing hard enough,
& reach escape velocity

I'll fly above the power plant,
over the Atlantic &
into yesterday

when a strong push was enough,
where clouds were just clouds.

Judgement

I fucked up. I ran
that red light. I forgot
cat food. I called you
an asshole for leaving
the seat up. I didn't
pay the cable bill on time.

I called out sick when
I wasn't. I crossed
the street to avoid
that guy. I pretended...
 to call
 to come
 to listen
 to care

On Cheese

The hostel in Barcelona wants a group photo before we head out on a tapas crawl. The photographer, a girl from Argentina on a gap year, says, “Tag yourself on Facebook, *vale?* Ready? One, two, three...” “Cheese!” “*Queso!*” “*Fromage!*” “*Kaas!*” “*Ost!*”

In the 1980s, my grandparents qualified for social security food benefits. I loved opening the refrigerator, seeing the slab of government cheese, and knowing I could eat as much as I wanted. Every time I ran away from home, I ran to Nana’s, where we played gin rummy, drank weak tea, and ate cheese & crackers.

Next to the Mezquita in Cordoba, there’s a cafe, one of the only restaurants open at 8:30 am. I order a *café con leche*. While making my order, the waitress tells me about Bar Santos, the place next door, famous for its *tortilla de patatas*, “*que son cinco kilos, como un queso.*” I repeat, “*Cinco kilos de tortilla?*” She replies, “Here’s your coffee. Are you American?” Later that day, I go to Bar Santos, where the tortillas are indeed sliced from wheels that are five kilos, like a cheese.

On December 30, we went to Goodwill and bought every crock pot under \$6. We rang in the New Year with cheese, oil and chocolate fondues and cheap champagne. With no one to kiss, I sang “Auld Lang Syne” into my fork. On January 2, we donated a bunch of crock pots to the thrift store.

I accidentally-on-purpose follow a private tour through *La Casa Andalusí*, a small house museum decorated in Caliphate style. Listening to the guide, I surprise myself with how much Arabic I remember, 20 years away from verb drills and noun declension. I learn that the shabby pillar supporting a potted fern comes from an old mosque, and the display case holds 13th century Qur’ans. In the tiled courtyard, the guide takes a photo of his clients. “\,٢,٣...Cheese!

The refrigerator died in July. It took my slummy landlord three weeks to replace it. I was eating constant takeout. Finally, after a call to the Somerville Housing Authority, he bought a new fridge. I immediately took the bus to Formaggio Kitchen and spent over \$100 on cheese.

The Presentation of the Self

I want to wear the tartan poodle skirt
but choose the gray dress
so I won't be
known.

To have the wings of a grackle;
To live in the old pine tree;
To wake up with dawn, not before;
To wear feathers—never alone.

Moonstones catch all colors and none,
Sodium potassium aluminum silicate where
light diffraction through successive
layers of feldspar pretends disinterest.

St. Stephen's Green is littered with magpies:
One for tourists, two for beer,
Three for spare change, four for fear,
Five for friendship, six for pain,
Seven for a backpacker caught in the rain.

Only the top layers of silver tarnish:
a self-limiting chemical reaction to hide
away the layers beneath.

The carrion crow sits
on my shoulder—
eating.

To the Young Girl in the Torn Dress

Your dress is older than you,
passed down from
who knows how many cousins,
thrift stores, and church rummage sales.

The smocking has collapsed in parts,
sagging between snapped elastic.
The hem is frayed, the blue and white
cotton soft and thin with age.

This delights you
because through it
you can see the Band-Aid on your knee.

One spaghetti strap is broken.
It's been sewn and glued and
safety-pinned, and finally tied
to the dress, a great clumsy knot.

The knot comes undone
as you run through the sprinkler
towards the playground.

Your dress slides down,
the strap streaming behind, snarling
your hair, you don't notice, you don't care.
You only care how fast you can run.

Mental Health Day

Indulging in the cliché of pampering, I get
a mani/pedi, eat
a pint of Ben & Jerry's, & buy a vampire romance novel,

where the heroine willfully sacrifices
herself for love
or the idea of love, & I cannot stop reading:

like watching congressional testimony, or bad theater,
I am consumed
& repulsed and desire closure, so I buy

the sequel, where the vampire & the heroine
defy convention, get
married & raise happy half-vampire babies

who are doubly parasites, whose constant needs
transform the heroine
into a dutiful wife & mother who cheerfully

bleeds herself dry; & when the Lifetime
movie adaptation plays,
I lose a weekend watching it, taking screen

shots for online feminist debates, &
memes. Oh, how I want that life & how
I hate myself for wanting that.

Callanish

I'm jealous of the commercial
photographer who got the postcard-perfect
shot of the stones
dancing with the northern
lights, and of

the local children playing hide
and seek
among the stones, who make
friends among the stones, who sneak up here

as teens to make
out under the stones.
I take a package
tour, the only way I can
get to the stones. The driver
reminds us to grab
lunch and use the loo, all in
45 minutes. An in-and-out visit.
Only time for selfies and a cuppa

then back to the bus and the next stop. I envy
the sheep who graze nearby.

Horn Dance

Fiddle
half heard,
mistaken for a cricket.

Fireflies wink, dismissed;
coincidence of night and timing.

Then the triangle, metallic, certain.

The dancers:
stags bow and
circle, bow and
circle, chased by
the child
archer, the
mollie, the fool.

Fiddler follows
all, herding
dancers through
the clearing, through
the fireflies.

Tune strong
enough to
cut through
questions of
history and
authenticity.

Stags dance into
the woods, antlers
clashing the beat,
triangle soothing,
ritual ongoing.
Out of sight, dance
has no end, only

echoes of the fiddle
blending with
birdsong.

Crewel

As I thread the needle in my eye,

you pout, *I don't understand.*

Nevertheless, I invite you
closer to see the scars
stitched on my freckled canvas.

There is beauty
in the making, I say.

You say I should stay sunny,
so I embroider the moon on my hand.

Grayscale

smoked eyeshadow smudged fog tarnished silver

not hip enough, not cool enough, not New York not fashion enough

demi-goth

not not-impure.

between many &

clouds breaking rain ending sun hiding

a stuffed toy elephant//kept in New Hampshire//at the vacation house//always missed at home

all the finger paint splattered together.

half-remembered...

what was I thinking?

the moon's halo

Six of Cups

I built a lazy Susan. I want to show my father to prove to him that graduate school did not turn me into a useless academic, incapable of taking care of herself. We haven't spoken since my mother's funeral, when he introduced me to his new soul mate. We've been out of touch since I chose college over marriage; out of sync since I went to the library instead of the ball field. We've been circling each other since I was a daughter instead of a son. I want to show him the even spin, the balance and the utility, to say "I love you more than donuts, Dad" while he swings me around the kitchen singing "Waltzing Matilda."

Lynn Shore Drive

There are no shanties for those walking the edge of the water,
no songs by those left waiting, only tears of salt water.

There's a seriousness to the sea: *Boaty McBoatface* renamed
RRS Sir David Attenborough — long may she explore Arctic water.

My great-grandfather was a dory fisherman, my brother studies
marine invertebrate zoology, heritage flowing from water.

Hurricanes, perfect storms, high tides, flood plains:
insurance rates go up the closer I live to water.

I don't like seafood: while others eat lobster rolls and steamers
I snack on french fries and taffy made from saltwater.

Evaporation, transpiration, condensation,
precipitation, surface runoff: the cycle of endless water.

One day, like a ship's cat at the end of a voyage, I'll turn
my back on the sea, and look inward, inland for fresher water.

Equinox Redeye

Seattle's rain politely taps
my shoulder, glittering
a carpet of camellia blossoms
on the sidewalk.

I order at a café where baristas
dust cherry blossom on
foam. Humidity wraps me in
a blanket, jade moss creeps
past my feet. The world is
damp and rich and lush
under a shifting roof of
rainbow umbrellas.

Boston's crocuses are dead.
Ice crystals slice
my eyelids. Plows spread
junk snow, disgorging
lonely gloves, candy wrappers,
beer bottles, abandoned
lawn chairs. Coming home,
I huddle under blankets
through a late blizzard that
freezes forsythia. My hands
clasp a mug of cocoa
spiked with rum; I pray for
the power to stay on.

Plum Island

Red-tailed hawk gives
flying lessons to red and white Cessnas
buzzing the runway, screaming
kree-ee-ar at the pretty flyboys.

Pink house and the beach
roses both leeching color
into summer, bleached and shabby,
crumbling back to the marsh.

Piping plover lays her eggs
in clearly marked beach lanes,
to complaints of the tourist
struggling to park her minivan.

The Star

I set up a star feeder in the backyard,
hoping to attract some yellow dwarfs,
maybe a quasar and red giant.
The comets came and ate everything.

I took up a star catching net;
went hunting with Orion, hoping
to find Aldebaran & Rigel.
The net ripped, stardust fell out.

I picked up my star-fishing pole
with a lure of refracted light,
hoping to catch the pulsars.
The only bite was trout.

I looked through my stargazing lens,
watched them dance for hours.

To the Asshole in the Pickup Truck Who Cut Me Off

You crossed four lanes of traffic, ran the red light to make an illegal left, then stopped & honked. I flipped you off. I laid on the horn & your girlfriend leaned out the window to flip me off; yelled "Fuck you, you fucking cunt." You laughed & rolled slowly forward so I could see the MAGA stickers on your tailgate. I want to take the 2x4 hanging off the back of your truck and beat you until your teeth fall out, until you learn compassion.

Instead I sneak into the nearest parking lot, find a space behind McDonald's and cry the adrenaline away.

Litany

Sister Brigid described
 purgatory as the chalkboard erasers
 of god, cleaning my soul
 better than I cleaned the classroom.
 It made sense in third grade.

Our Lady of the Car Wash, pray for us.

Theology's changed
 since I walked out of religion
 class an atheist, hoping
 for sweet decomposition,
 rebirth as an earthworm, a chickadee, lichen.

Our Lady of Grackles, pray for us.

If Sartre's hell
 is other people, I must have committed
 some impressive sins to arrive
 at this empty echo chamber
 instead of a celestial holding cell.

Our Lady of the Registry, pray for us.

As I make my way
 on public transportation, speaking
 the world's third language, a selfie
 stick my pilgrim's badge, my
 prayers rise from a candle
 lit for the memories of wax.

Our Lady of Shelter Cats, pray for us.

Maps and myths and guidebooks
 don't work here, where all books
 are holy and equally
 profane, where the print
 vs digital debate is
 decided, where inquiry is supreme.

Our Lady, Help of Lost Girls, pray for me.

The Roses that Bloom at the End of the World

are \$5.99 at Trader Joe's.
They come wrapped in cellophane, surrounded
by ferns, with a futile packet of plant food.

I place the roses in a milk glass vase on the windowsill
behind the sofa, so the cat can enjoy them, too.
It's not her fault the world is ending.

The roses that bloom at the end of the world
are hybrid — all vibrant colors,
perfect petals, no scent. I'm not worried
about the cat swallowing a thorn,
or the vet bill. Useless pet insurance.

I place the vase on the windowsill,
framed by the curtains, so the neighbors
can see it, too. They should enjoy this
last chance for gossip while
they can. Busybodies to the end.

The roses that bloom at the end of the world
last long enough. It's their job — to stay
with us. To watch, to wait,
to witness. To say
yes there was a world
and yes there was a life
and yes that is over now and

To the Guy Riding His Bike Without a Helmet, Both Hands Occupied with Texting and Vaping

I hope you crash elsewhere,
because my phone is charging,
and I can't call 911.

Seasonal Fashion

I know
I had a hat on
when I left in the
morning, but now, on
the bus ride home, I
lean my head against
the frosted window
surprised by the cold
on my cheek.

When I get home, get
out yarn and needles, pour
a glass of wine. Cast
on, miscount, cast on
again. Let necessity
dictate design. What's
fastest, what's warmest?
A toque, a watch cap,
pussyhat or plain
cat-ear-hat? Decide
on a bobble. Or not.

If I knit fast
enough, friction and wool
burn will generate
bonus heat to warm
your hands, too. When
done, cast off, ends woven
in, this hat will keep
my ears covered
until in haste or
early thaw, I forget
it on the bus
during rush hour when
it's just warm
enough.

Poppies, Isles of Shoals

After Childe Hassam, 1891

Impressionist poppies, ideas
of ephemera, floral
suggestion, slapdash
red and pink against
fixed granite.

A frozen summer, eternal
New Hampshire August.

Humidity hanging like a funeral.
Why should the boat return, when
the sea offers escape and air?

Two of Swords

Held by swords of fear,
pulled by strands of desire,

trapped between sea and sand
tenuous balance, unable to move.

I can't see the ocean, only hear it.
I can feel the moon changing my mind:

brain gremlins sending conflicting signals,
misfiring neurons, I don't want to know

what's going on in my heart. Emotions
fighting to surface, I push away their mess.

The collective unconscious calls—
I've blocked their number.

Enough! I put up my hands:
I hold the swords and the strands.

Flirting

¿Por qué Valencia?

He asks.

I sip my wine.

The bus ride from Barcelona to Granada is over 14 hours; I need to break it up somewhere.

I want to wade in the Mediterranean. I want the golden hour's light to wash over me, so I feel beach-worthy in November.

My sister wants me to eat paella so she can live vicariously. I hate fish, but paella Valenciana is made with chicken and rabbit—worth a detour.

I spent two years studying El Cid, dreaming about the reconquest of Valencia. I want to see what kept me up at night. But my Spanish is limited to ordering food, and describing the color of my aunt's pen. I smile.

Por qué no Valencia, I reply.

Reading Poetry

Skip to the last line to see if the butler did it. (No).

Tell everyone the poem was better than the movie.

Dog-ear the steamy stanzas, the tumescent stanzas, the quivering, falling-in-love stanzas to re-read later.

Be thankful you don't have to wait years for the next section of this poem.

Turn to the sports section of this poem.

Look for coupons in the Sunday edition of this poem.

Put last week's poems in the mudroom for the puppy.

Always do the voices. And hold the poem so that everyone can see the illustrations.

You're only reading this poem for the articles.

Refer to this poem often during tax season.

Promise yourself you'll make at least one recipe from this poem.

The High Priestess

When Hypatia solved algebra & geometry
When Hildegard examined causes & cures
When Dorotea Bucca chaired philosophy & medicine
When Margaret Cavendish observed experimental philosophy
When Ada Lovelace imagined poetical science
When Maria Mitchell saw her comet
When Mary Anning uncovered her ichthyosaur
When Caroline Herschel minded the heavens
When Annie Cannon ordered the stars
When Admiral Grace Hopper first coded
When Mary Leakey found *Paranthropus boisei*
When Rachel Carson silenced spring
When Valentina Tereshkova flew Vostok 6
When cells were taken from Henrietta Lacks

Inishmore

A 5,000 year old ring fort defends the cliff
from invaders, its stones

offering little protection to tourists.
So you crawl along the drop.

There's nothing for you at home. Your parents
sold the house your freshman year;

You came back at Thanksgiving break
to a cot in a basement.

Now, standing on the western edge of Europe—
No one would notice if you were pushed, or if you fell.

You came here to find yourself—
you tried on different names: one week Catherine,

another week Kate. You changed behaviors
as you changed names.

You've sent out hundreds of résumés.
You're living here on the last dollars

of subsidized student loans.
The government owns your brain.

Below you, a solitary cranesbill, pink petals
blooming against the gray waves,

defiant and bright it clings to the cliff face;
braver and more content than you.

You came to Ireland to find yourself—
to lose yourself.

You got drunk on Redbull and vodka,
spent the night with a boy

in a squeaky hostel bed, uncomfortable
in your skin and his hands.

Now it's you and the cranesbill,
dangling on the edge of potential.

It's 100 meters to the ocean below,
3,000 miles to Boston. It's 7 kilometers
to the ferry and back to Galway.

The Moon

At Luna's All-Nite Diner
the chefalopod serves up Eggs Prophetic,
8 arms cooking in short order while
blending coffee beans with moonbeams.
Who's hungry? The owl-eyed waitress
recommends the Introspection
Special: a warm blanket and the best
waffles and whipped dreams
this side of Mare Tranquillitatis.
The jukebox plays "Only the Good Die
Jung." For a penny, change it to "Silent
All These Years" or "Nightswimming."
Chamomile tea spreads truth in steam;
on Mondays, lycanthropes eat free.

The External Soul

I mistrust my memories, the bright ones
and the gas-lit ones.

My strongest are cast in metal.

The silver and green earrings are souvenirs
of Ireland. The gold sun-and-moon
ones hold a dream. That bracelet
was made on a dare. When I wish
to forget, I follow KonMari, and thank
the object for its service.

I sold my high school ring for scrap
because I hated those bitches, and kept
my sorority pin, even though I de-sistered:
a charm against future bitches. My mother's
class ring sits in my jewelry box,
it's onyx stone cracked, half-missing. I can't
bring myself to wear it, look at it, destroy it,
sell it, toss it into the sea, bury it, burn it.
So I hide it away, and keep it close.

We misname the people we
love because our brains store
all important names in the same
place. When I call you Frodo, it's
not because I'm losing my

mind, think you're a hobbit, or
love the dog more.

Everyday memories—ice cream & dances,
bike rides & red lights, my nieces' screams,
my sister's hair—are planted
in a field. They grow wild there,
among rosemary for remembrance &
pansies for thoughts & rue for
fuckups, all transformed, passing
from bee to bee, becoming
honey-sweet and candle-light.

The hardest memories, the ones
I can't stop thinking about, the ones
I can't tell my therapist, the ones
I can't trust in my head, or outside it,
are forget-me-nots, tattooed on my hands.

To the Shopgirl at the Lush on King's Spa Road, London

I don't know
what time it is. I haven't
had a conversation
since clearing
customs. The last person
to touch me
was some guy
on the Tube.

I bought into
the Instagram ideal
of travel,
forgetting the reality of shitty
Airbnbs, and
drinking while jet lagged.

I stumble into the shop,
let you take
my hand, apply
Karma to my arm.
You prattle and I want
to weep at the calm
familiarity of commercial sensuality.

Here, I know
I have your particular
attention as you sell me
on the virtues of fair
trade organic avocado
oil for my hair, and how
yuzu-orange-chocolate
is *Happiness*.

The World

Over thirteen billion years ago,
hot energy, massless, stopped
dancing and cooled into matter:

updown strangecharm topbottom
become carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen,
oxygen, phosphorus, sulfur.

Pangea shakes and splits into
Gondwana and Laurasia,
which drift and crash

displacing Argentinosaurus,
seeding mosses and ferns,
stranding the Galapagos tortoise

which was described in 1835
by a curious homo sapiens.

St Dunstan-in-the-East

Outside, horns,
squeaky brakes, diesel
rumbles, sirens compete
for attention.

Inside, only the wind,
pigeon wings, apologetic
footsteps, and the burble
of the fountain.

The lunch crowd of
bankers and tourists
gathers in silence, some
eating, some Facebooking,
all aware that for over a thousand years
this space was holy ground,

serving the City
through the Reformation and the Fire.
And when the bombs dropped
during the Blitz, the walls
shattered and the ceiling
opened.

And trees grew.
The new caretakers
aren't holy men
but city grounds crews
charged with keeping the
beauty and the stillness.

The lunch crowd knows.
We are all here, and
in our own ways,
we are still holy.

notating
their own sounds in common
harmony across habitats. Conducting
the forest, dictating
descant, counter-rhythm,
bass line. The aural arrangement
of self, of self embirded
as augury.

Suddenly,
the flock takes flight,
resettles, writes a new song,
tells a different future.

Earth & Planetary Sciences

At the
Harvard

Museum of
Natural

History mineral
specimens

arranged in glass cases by chemistry and form,

halides with
halides,

sulfides with
sulfides,

pure elements
alone.

Diamond
is no

different from
graphite,

each labeled with a single C.

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