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An apology for the lies I tell about my character

Jess L. Bryant

Eastern Washington University

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AN APOLOGY FOR THE LIES I TELL ABOUT MY CHARACTER

A Thesis

Presented To

Eastern Washington University

Cheney, Washington

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

By

Jess L. Bryant

Spring 2016

THESIS OF JESS L. BRYANT APPROVED BY

DATE _____
PROF. CHRISTOPHER HOWELL, GRADUATE STUDY COMMITTEE

DATE _____
DR. JONATHAN JOHNSON, GRADUATE STUDY COMMITTEE

DATE _____
DR., GRADUATE STUDY COMMITTEE

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“Dénouement” and “A Variation on Threnody,” *Gravel*

“Cold Frame” and “For Wassily,” *Meat for Tea: The Valley Review*

AN APOLOGY FOR THE LIES

I TELL ABOUT MY CHARACTER

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THE BOY I LIKED

On the subway to Jackson Heights
my eyes left the slow moving train
bound to the rain and cracking
foundations.

In collapse,
I found solace,

I found lines in my skin
like mortar between bricks
of family owned bodegas,
years piling one after the other.

And then a 12-year-old boy
beside me, hat backwards like mine,
tapped my shoulder.

He motioned behind us,
through the window
where murals painted the sides of
broken down buildings,
faded messages
ran together,
toppled one another
and the skin of the portraits
met mine. The lips drew me in,
spoke to me in tongues or
some other language
I couldn't understand,
like color.

My neck was sore
from staring back
when he asked
Are you all right?

I replied,
"I am trying to find
the destruction."

MINUTIAE

Your eyes unwound
toward the grate
below our window

I waited as you bent
the iron rectangles
and walked below ground
cold as you were

balancing words
on your fingertips

“I see myself holding eyes
in your hands close,”

you said to the men
who threw smoke
bombs at strangers

while gathering
tiny figurines
into your arms,
other peoples'
tiny plastic childhoods.

ON LEAVING

The wind came stale
with the scent of tobacco.

The shelter of my skin collapsed
and you began singing *Ava Maria*—

your voice a negative,
filling rooms and my body.

I stepped away and waited
for the whine of the refrigerator,

the child's footsteps
from the apartment above,

but my teeth moved
toward the sound of you,

bit you open, made
way for the crows.

And I left you
only ten steps from the door.

CLEMATIS CLIMBS THE WALLS

Birds laugh on the ground when
she says—something like—
go over and pet them.

I stand on one foot,
flamingo heron, stretch my wings
and lump over.

My fingers open and a bird
digs dirt from my nails
to build a walkway.

She sings now.
My ears perk, fly up,
carve out a skyway for the jays.

My feet are cold with muttering
liver spots, stilt tracks on my carpet
lead toward evolutions.

My door strains to let out bird songs
but what she wants from me is all done.

MY POEMS WON'T CHANGE THE WORLD

I sit on the clothesline,
decide on boxers
and throw a clothespin
through my neighbor's window.

I aim for the television set
when the phone rings,
and I hit the dog instead.

I decide to take up slack lines.
Standing, I feel
the breath of window watchers
and remember I'm grieving.

PANTONE #1

Her voice rang inside me,
crawled out to my skin
pox-like, the anthem something
only gods could hear

and me, mourning the mauve
chalk she wrote with on weekends,
the wind chimes painted with pastels,
singing through the walls
I colored red.

The parchment paper on the desk
is empty and apologetic.

On the way to work, I watch
limping pigeons by the
food court near city hall
and think about World War II,

how some falls cause begging.

WHAT WOMEN WANT

Your umbrella cast a shadow
two sidewalk squares wide,
but as I neared
it drew itself in.

Finally, I saw
the “no trespassing” sign
taped on the canopy.

THROUGH THE CURTAINS

Her silhouette
painted stop signs
yellow,
and the air
was filled with chalk
that made my eyes
weaken and shutter.

I climbed the space
between carpet and ceiling,
when she entered
and drummed the fan,
turned it circling.

The wind, now her hands
I fall asleep under
murmuring about iris.

When I wake,
I am wearing a floral dress
and in her eyes,
I see my eyes
pecking through.

I am sure now that I have lost myself
as her voice creeps up the walls.

SALVATION

| | |
|-------------|---------------------|
| Suppose | we are |
| the ribbon | of a typewriter |
| impregnated | with ink |
| wound | around two axles |
| and | in the middle |
| pounding | strokes |
| spin | our almost-cylinder |
| insides. | What happens |
| when we | are replaced? |

I sign to ghosts in the background
and you in the corner listen
to the noise my hands make.

Will you join me?
I made a marble for you
from pieces of my teeth,
shining browns and yellows.

Roll it around on the carpet
and make your imprint—
you were always the artist.

I want to see the shatter,
our eyes reposition
our mouths. I want the whole
bodied part
rising out,
the new construction spectrum
painted,
I want to tape our skin
back together.

AN APOLOGY FOR THE LIES I TELL ABOUT MY CHARACTER

The woman whose father
shot at her through a door.

The woman whose Mormon mother
used chopsticks at dinner.

The woman whose name
called Haitian Gods.

The woman whose cratered skin
worsened during thunderstorms.

The woman who would
marry a Mormon man.

The woman who would marry
Adonis.

The woman married
to a computer analyst.

The porn star
and the mafia daughter.

I left them all,
broken in subway stations
or on sidewalks,

cigarette in hand
and felt nothing but the cold
air on my skin.

But now
through single-paned
windows and thin walls,

through hardwood floors
splintering my feet,
I feel them.

And when, I wonder,
will I become them
or free of the lashings
I caused.

TENDER DEMON...

show me how to shoot without remorse
a quail or an arrow
through a lover's artery

like when I was young
before asking forgiveness.

You were with me when I broke
that girl at the art store.

She was high when we carved
her jagged
lust rough and framed it.

Show me how to find that music
again.

I want to live within an anthem
of outlines
drawn around the bodies we slayed
and my own.

I remember when we met.
I was a girl then,
using only my tongue.

Now, I lie naked
under bamboo sheets,
my blinds, cracked enough
for me to see the park
at the end of the block

And once, while searching
for your hands, I saw
a small girl with her father.

His mouth twisted
like the trunk of an olive tree,
his body growing in front of me.

When he neared,
The girl ran barefoot over
branches, her feet began to bleed
her eyes filled watersheds
but she laughed
and laughed.

I wondered
if she knew you better now,
if you were hers.

ON LYING

The day before Thursday I saw you
doing a line off the washing machine

and wondered how many
miles could help you with that.

I don't care for an answer.
If I seem callous, then I must be

evolving. I stood by the gallery
we used to visit on 34th

saw the girl with the orange
raincoat and asked for a light

She told me sometimes puddles
help balance her gait

and tomorrow we will walk
across sea-saws. I won't mail

you any postcards this evening
but I will reupholster your chair.

I don't know what being
sentimental feels like, but I know

how to work with my hands.

A VARIATION ON THRENODY

I tore down statues and left
no fingerprints, dropped Maya Devi for Sizzzy Taylor,
came into your hands and screamed Jesus Christ like a sailor.

I'll trade decadence for a chance
to parlay absence into remains.
And this is the part that I like.
Tongues
raising questions
of apathy to the nun
down the street
who begged me to join
the gang.

Turn me over, she said,
and I sacrificed her body
for humor, I inquired about the
notion of propriety.
What happens when we
delay the process of
adaptation?

Tempt me
with absence.

I'll show you
Resurrection.

POWER LINES

I walk above you
watch your body
hit the ground
send smoke signals
to call girls
and ask them
for money.

I wonder what
it's like to make
a living.

COLD FRAME

The man who fell tended to magnolias
in the greenhouse, and when they died,
he told me to watch his papers
for snail activity
and a diagram of the biosphere.

Stumbling through Chicago,
he found concrete too cold.

Under the recognition that absurd
was second to reality's marginal
need for a suitcase and a master suite,
he walked to the hotel through an alley,
his language a bridge
patched with outsourced stone.

I cupped rice in my hands
when the staircase rattled.

I saw him slip toward carpet
etched palms and the splintered railing
of his smile.

I remember his body was warm
when they took him.

IN THE END

Birds brace skies for beak
bored holes, the old come through
caned bulging larger
than the hands of any god
time webbing fingers for flight.

The young below walk
through their high piled bodies
as if they were dead
already waiting for turns
to cry and shift halos.

THE MAN I LOVED

Outside the window I see my grandfather
near the clothesline that hangs, faded blue,
between two oak trees.

He's here to steal my boxers.
We've dressed the same since I was a girl.

At once, he is criminal and fragile,
hooded in black, feet shuffling
over the silence of grass.

I grab my spray bottle,
head for the backyard
and chase him while he ducks
behind the shrubs he planted.

When I catch him,
he'll offer his dentures
so we can go for lunch.

Later, we will sit together
on a pink and green paisley couch
reading Don Quixote in German.

He might mock my accent
or ask why the carpet moves like
spider legs, why the lampshade
speaks to soldiers in French.

When he sleeps,
I'll steal a pair of his suspenders.

WINTER'S DILEMMA

The snow breaks my bones
but a soft shatter of skin
hides in the tiny
crevices of women's arms.

A death wish due north,
I gather clouds
in my teeth and follow
the lines of hollow chests,
of others leaving
flesh beside mine.

When we reach

the boundary of the wind
my history comes forward
hanging its head in shame.

OPENING

Between my rough hands
and soft shoulders,
lines deepen and caverns multiply,

though the unabashed child
sits somewhere begging
for thumb wars,

and in her eyes I see pain taken,
like when on my knees
in a bedroom
her hands inside me
trying to pull apart my threads,
she begs that I give her
what was given to me.

But like the child
I cradle in my mind's
most tender crevice,
I won't fill her shallow well.

She can have only my breath
the way the lake has it.

Only five years old,
I can still feel the water
in my lungs,
the panic and comfort
of being swallowed.

ARRIVALS

I saw the scraps of your clothes
left unlaundered
in cab rolled windows,
proof of North American sundry.

Still the moving happened
for salt I licked a mix
of teeth and tongue.

My twitching eye was reckless,
voices broke over coffee.
Because cords are fragile,

tie me in wire from the mandolin
you hold to your chest.

You played it aptly
if only for a masque.

Such an aberration—
I speak in code.
Hood me and I'll make
a break for the child.

HAVE I TOLD YOU HOW I CAME TO SEE EVOLUTIONS?

Concrete statues stand over children
when they bleed and mother catches
them, holds them to the ceiling,
where heads hit plaster
decaying the place we call home.

I pull my knees to my chest and count slowly.

I listen to taped conversations
from the grocery store on fifth.
I am made to believe in my father's will to outlive
the wavering of his neighbors' tongues
and it comes back to the swing set
we shared.

Incessantly I watch him rock
in linens but what if
I am fifty, wrinkles crawling
up my neck with skin, bright red
splatters of Pollack, it's always
like Pollack, my toenails cutting holes
through my socks.

But he's lucid
and I wish I could harness
his voyeurs.

PORTRAITURE

Acetate blinds her
older man,
whose alter egos
he deals out like cards,
shuffling face down,
turning them up
at his pleasure.

Some evolve,
others have the face
of a dirge.

And the one who comes most often
is a woman
whose left eye hangs lower than the right,
like her breasts,
like when you sit
at a table
and it tilts,
one leg shorter
than the rest,
and all you wanted,
was a smooth cup of coffee
and to read the paper.

IT IS SOMETHING LIKE A NUISANCE THAT YOU EXIST

I stare at corners to find cracks in behavior.
And I stare cornered.

Did you find the letter I left under the dirty laundry?
Dear Perspective, Feel it up.

Or was it something like a tissue I folded into squares?

When I woke with you at the end of my bed
I saw crosses in your eyes.
The witch wars were only the beginning.

Have you seen Moulin Rouge?
I would like to, cross-legged on the floor over blankets,
not under, because intimacy is juxtaposed with nothing,
except absence.

And what is it, the black book I can't remember?
Who was the goddess on the cover?
Who did you fuck last night?
They all like being dominated.

DÉNOUEMENT

I've been underneath the floor,
pounding boards to find the one that creaks
at night and sends
my fingernails to search
for mules, to mask the scratches
on the wall, and below me felt her voice in shrivels
I went down
to fodder further
locked my knees
and braced for distance. I recall
a time she welcomed rapture
and found comfort, now she fucks me with her eyes
closed. And I escape
into the dirge, humming
through the pages
for better times: the night we beat the walls in
took the windows
in our palms, reported bleeding,
made love on the sidewalk
while ants got tangled
in my leg hair
and her mustache peeled on my tongue

WATERBOARDING

Pirouettes are for strangers.
Sometimes I want to
I mean really kill you.

Let me explain:

Split seams down your legs
where your pants rub hard
against your skin
tape re-chord the way
speech slips through
your tongue
your teeth
and pulls out before
you come
to decide
I've taken this too
literally fill your lungs
with remorse
or water
whichever is quicker.

IF SILHOUETTES WERE LINED WITH GOLD

I pluck eyelashes from strangers
and sew a black lace of human,
that, in the right light, become coruscations
scraping away the rest of each other.

In the kitchen, thinking herself alone,
my mother knelt where a jar had fallen
and let glass into her knees.

Through the window, she watched
her neighbor become crow,
pecking someone else's skin
to fringe his feathers with gold.

Her smile fading, she found
the illusion of beauty.

ROLLING PAPERS

**Gather
your arms with thorns
meet me at the market on fourth
where Bali Shag is six dollars
and the owner counts
our conversations on his
fingers.**

GIVE WHAT YOU HAVE TO THE HOMELESS, MY GRANDMOTHER SAID.

So I bought this guy
art supplies
to use for the portraits
of strangers he drew
on the steps of the
entrance at Bleecker.

I told him to charge
more than a dollar,
then bought myself
wafer cookies
for the week,
fine with the taste
in my mouth
and my simple
temporary poverty.

BETWEEN MY FINGERS

Rolling papers from Bali
 Shag leave shavings
 of tobacco. I saw you meditating
 in your room and fell in love
 with you, between
 boy and boy. I was using
 graphite, crackers split
 my hands into portions. See,
 I gave you all that I had.
 This is what it means to be
 poor; some days it was fuck it,
 let's go to Sunshine Theater, sit
 in the back row and evaluate
 what Synecdoche means.
 I never rubbed
 my hands through your hair
 and didn't want to. All that is
 left are snippets, slightly
 balding spots of curls.

This wasn't romance, it was the time
 I felt like Jesus, fully man. And you
 were Atlas. But after parking
 my car, I couldn't find
 your breasts. In paralysis
 caught between your eyelids,
 I allowed my knees
 raw on concrete,
 I lost faith
 sewed together
 like a toddler
 I watched
 the filament break.

URBAN LANDSCAPE

Sidewalks carried me to the playhouse
where you showed
your ribbon-like tongue, lungs retracting.

Invited to sit, I wanted my body
to be like yours, our lineage monophyletic.

I retracted, tooth-like,
into abscess and apology,

watched you write at night,
meditate on wood floors,
your knees bruising
with me at your door.

Others mistook intimacy
for idolization and pity,
for me
stripping down.

Could you reconstruct our ancestry,
cast me as your brother,
the two of us, born boy?

I, the lesser one,
part-ash, part-remnant,
temporal and bloodlined elsewhere,

allowing the breaking to happen,
bodies piece and drift like petrified wood
on water-lined streets.

I left the city's edge to gather the thinning vestige
thinking next time we'd be synapomorphic.

But when work was done,
my hands were smooth and
better running. I grew into other fittings,
no need for pedigree.

INTIMACY'S SHADOW

I drew your brain in graphite,
soft gray lines tracing faces that spoke
where buildings narrowed outside
the windowed midnight train ride to New Jersey.

All along, the voices sang broken,
and I dreamt you killed me,
though your head lay soft on my shoulder
closed eyed sunken and circled with women.

I was only a graying sky offering
to gods who served the fallen,
yet still you trusted my arm around you.

It was home you were after,
your head near mine
and the glass drops of rain.

WHEN, FOR A MOMENT, EVERYTHING

I fell down littered streets
toward the awning where I found
you in uniform concrete
tissues torn from your body.

You told me a story of *desamor*,
of separation, without language.

We drank champagne
from my hands, your eyes
alive with damp *diadema*,
our movements tied
like puppets in play,
threads heavy on our bodies.

And together we watched
dashboards battle tremors,
trees burn into asphalt,
a train braking,
hands coming out
of a woman's chest.

The rain relented.
Our eyes staked clouds
from our need to suspend time.

This was before my plane left,
before foreign money hidden in passports,
before once more we collapsed into personae.

Sometimes I mistake this for creation.

CHILDREN

She left her uterus on Heidelberg's
cobblestones during a Christmas lighting
and I was left to hold her.
She was a desert in me already.

On the cab ride into town we endured
windows and beyond them those broken
Coco Rosie songs she sang on stairs
of the farmer's market in Park Slope.

That night in San Telmo she played
mandolin and strangers tossed coins
while I pinned a piece of music
to the back of her dress.

Soon we'd take a bus to Las Toninas,
play with stray dogs and climb
Jacarandas tearing twigs
to send home with notes of sacrifice.

FEEL ME UP

Bodies broken and disarmed
like tiny figurines
from my daughter's toy chest
after the war
were scattered by your feet.

No longer a statue,
I was among them
with blackened bones,
and a neck craned backward.
You said you couldn't find me.

But I was once you, held together
with tendon, skin
and façade.

I remember you showed me
once on a movie screen
the person you thought I was,
spinning in circles and laughing
like a child.

But now I am a deconstructed god
and you splinter at my feet
unable to weave
toward forgiveness,
as if forgiveness ever existed.

I WAS DERIVED FROM VARIATION

Your lips lassoed clouds
lowered and zoned them
like me
twitching my outcry.

Out speech,
I became your instrument
and a melody
that pleased no one.

You told me our sky
shifts with seasons,
gray covers to pull
over my head
made you feel safe
inside breaking me.

You taught me what human
means, what hands become
when severed,
the sound pain makes
when it stitches
a via dolorosa.

I woke one night
from a sleepwalk
miles from the house
we shared and wrote
hermitic distance
from the flesh
I have shed.

WHAT I MEANT TO SAY

I syncopate the elegy
with scribbles
on moleskin.

I'm only good at portraits.

Finding your body
on my hands,
I wrapped in
in organic cotton.

20/20

I recently mistook a trash bag for a dead animal,
all day lamenting over its ragged body on display
street side below my bedroom window.

I refused to leave my house.
Dressed in black, I lit candles
And mourned for this creature,
this flattened body.

I thought to sing,
but "ooh child," was the only song
that came to mind.

Feeling that it was an inappropriate ode,
I watched television instead.

When finally, I left for work the next morning,
I saw that my creature
was only a plastic bag,
run over by cars,
frozen to the ground.

I knew then my prescription was outdated
and death is subjective.

THE BODY WON'T ROOT

When the ground moves
and life bisects into twisting
blinds and terminals,

somewhere on a swing set
your legs go limp,
your head goes ocean,
crawling
toward your yellow house
on the corner of Poplar

where song birds
won't play for you
and your mother
smokes in the garage
with the door closed.

MY LOVE

I await your return
while young men tracing
their lineage to Hemingway
strip you
with turpentine.

ON BEING GOD

Her tone cracked into erasure
hollowed my chest and moved
toward the corner pushing walls
apart. The vase fell and I buried
myself under nails of yellow pine
collapse The record scratched
with its last attempt at music and I
caved into a foundation holding
your bodies in my womb made you
better this time without me made
the night believe in paisley and
memories of fucking on the
sidewalk in May rain clinging
clothes the need to strip bones
not skin I made your mind my
extension and it was just what I
needed.

FOR SAPPHO

Your sand-dried hands
crippled my
home in your eyes

the blue
 blanket shielded you

Mine
 a body
liftless

sacrificed breath
 and built your tower
the way Atlas would
 shoulders caved
for a lover.

And yet, I am a desert in the waking
dust of eyes muddied with worship.

Naked and curled into bone
my skeleton weeps
your skin song
its hollow knowing.

PANTONE #2

I dream of becoming Pantone
in a walled marsala hotel room,
holding my body while violets
outside the window,
shrivel into tiny
nothings and reveal the winter white's
dilemma: where to find you
in all the snow.

Wait till bird's eggs come back to the nest
of the tree topped home we shared in
Poughkeepsie, the wet weather shining our skin,

I might say something like,
"We've been here before under
this dusky orchid sky that follows our
screams."

And you might say
"I'm better at this now
and besides the citron light
followed me here."

ASTORIA AT 2:00 AM

Her voice inhabited my body
empty and shallow
when she asked
“Will you walk with me
through the rain?”

Because I was young
and close
to loneliness
I said, “yes.”

Our hands held
the yellow lines
on the street down.
Our words settled in the air.

And that is the last time I felt innocent.

Months before,
she had left me, bleeding
on the 33rd street sidewalk,
but that night the still child in us let go
and ran through the rain covered streets
the buildings sweeping by in waves,
the ashes of neighbors
blowing through the air,
their lives already given over
to window watching,
but not us,

not until I stopped believing the night,
and rain could wash away mold,
sweep me up and cover
the headboards of lashings,

until I stopped believing that umbrellas
were for the dying.

FOR WASSILY

It was a crevice I slid into that reminded me to cross-examine the way bricks fold in on each other—the way that precedes collapse. My hands shake like they do after playing handball in Staten Island. The roof shifts the birds into occupied space. And then I am home where linoleum tiles are replaced by concrete, replaced by letters. My head pounds against the floor. Kandinsky said, “the eyes are the hammers.” The ceiling fans fall by my hand and the blade feels—like a machete—as it goes to the walls. It’s composition seven. Wallpaper slides to the floor takes over the weeping. The ceiling falls in calcimine fragments on my skin. I can’t think of a better opening. It points to 1920, to just a bit of colour, to the time I saw my mother’s heart stop just for a minute, in a dentist’s chair.

GENTLE PEOPLE ARE CAPABLE OF MASSACRE

She brings her fists to the floor and feels
floorboards splinter the heads of tiny
men who speak to her at night,
“you’re saved,” they say, “go find your lover,”

stripped and open on the carpet downstairs.
“She needs your” nothingness again, whispered
into her broken nothing left for you
to promise but a soft white opening

where children play with their fathers, held high
above their heads and skies feel breakable.

Her eyes and the fragmented
ceiling, collapse. Armed, you walk
outside. You find a bird singing on a branch
and shoot it.

Some things die for no reason
and you might as well have power.

BRIDGED VOICES

She crawls
inside sermons
and brings our bodies to circle.

Dementia broadcasts through gray
walls. She loses bearing and watches
almost empty passenger cars,
through windows, searching
for breath and smaller endings,
the no more wood stove kinds.

Have you ever seen cows struck
by lightning? They land haloed,
outstretched and bloated.

All she wants is to hear
your womb hold her.

She no longer drops pennies
in acid to watch them hollow,
sees only the silence between stations.

ON RECLUSION

Sidewalks
give under
the weight
of strangers.

All the while
I sip my coffee
stumbling
over graves
and fluorescent
lights.

SUNDAY AFTERNOON

I.

I decide between boxers and briefs
arrange handkerchiefs
sit cross-legged on the floor
facing my closet and think
what it might look like
if I hung next to the sweaters

II.

my legs dangling
off a southern Indiana dock.
On my skin, lukewarm water,
cloudy from fish food.

AFTER YOUR DEATH

I spent hours trying to reach your voice,
but the mailbox was full.

I only wanted to talk about the birds I saw
on the drive to your house, red bellied

on a fence post, two in a row.

VITA

Author: Jess L. Bryant

Place of Birth: Grand Rapids, Michigan

Undergraduate Schools Attended: Pace University
Otterbein University

Degrees Awarded: Bachelor of Fine Arts, 2013, Otterbein University

Honors and Awards: Graduate Assistantship, English Department, 2014-2016,
Eastern Washington University

Professional Experience: *Willow Springs Books* Managing Editor, 2015-2016,
Eastern Washington University