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Ten Percent to Light a Desert Sky

James Cory Ness

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TEN PERCENT TO LIGHT A DESERT SKY

by

James Cory Ness

Bachelor of Arts
Bucknell University
1998

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

Master of Fine Arts Degree in English
English Department
College of Liberal Arts

Graduate College
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
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Thesis Approval

The Graduate College
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

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____ James Cory Ness ____

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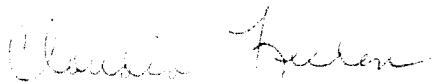
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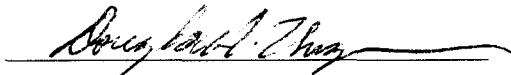
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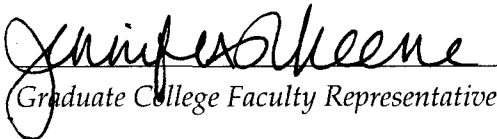
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ABSTRACT

Ten Percent to Light a Desert Sky

by

James Cory Ness

Dr. Alik Barnstone, M.F.A. Examination Committee Chair
Professor of English
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Ten Percent to Light a Desert Sky is a collection of poems written during my four year residency in Las Vegas, Nevada. The collection is tied together through prevailing themes of communication and a collage of the desert imagery scattered throughout the work. My many influences include W. S. Merwin, Federico Garcia Lorca, Lorine Niedecker, and Bob Dylan – as well as lessons learned through careful study with Alik Barnstone, Claudia Keelan, Douglas Unger, Mark Irwin, and Megan Becker-Leckrone. The thesis is organized in four sections: *Mojave Lowlight* attempts to define the collection's physical vocabulary; *yes...* dives into the thematic examination of communication; *Living the Catalogue* attempts to expand upon the preceding two sections and interpret my surroundings; and *two* ends the collection on a personal note of self-discovery.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	vi
MOJAVE LOWLIGHT.....	1
Mojave lowlight.....	2
Her desert night	3
La Luna Cuenta	4
Acting out.....	5
The poem uses color	6
A Gamble.....	7
Excess	8
My Pregnancy test and guacamole.....	9
You should be able.....	10
Your Note	11
YES... ..	12
yes.....	13
She says.....	14
Speak.....	15
Reading.....	16
Lover,	17
What we're saying	18
When we talk about love	19
The Love Song of Adam and Eve	20
Exposition as composition.....	21
Why the well lit elephant.....	22
Believing moon.....	23
LIVING THE CATALOGUE	24
Living the Catalogue	25
Girl misses bus.....	26
When you order scrambled eggs... ..	27
Just spinning	28
Advertising	29
The infatuating fluency of fingers	30

Plywoods	31
Hand Job in the back of a Taxi	32
Formalism	33
Study on the ADD School of Poetry	34
 TWO	 36
two	37
Vehicle	38
Sick Story	39
Winter	40
Caesurae	41
Kell	42
Shutter speed	43
Tuesdays	44
Motioning	45
You come in later	46
Poetry, love	47
 VITA	 48

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I.

Mojave Lowlight

Mojave lowlight

I walk Red Rock during rush hour. Rocks that looked white only an hour ago now swell and blush, this air feels smooth and black bananas pull around the loop, the women get out first, followed by Izod shirts tucked in plumply around the waist. “Sure is

beautiful,” I say and they agree, though there’s nothing here as spectacular as an arch or a massive dome of Navajo Sandstone, whimsical hoodoos, hogbacks and spires chewed into stone and no human remains to marvel at aside from the many red faces.

The park rangers discuss the Pinion Juniper and a tea made from Brittle Brush used for “good health” and with adequate rainfall the spring brings a burst of *wild* flowers and native tribes named for their white explorers like Freemont and the Owens Valley Paiute, every tree

in Las Vegas has it’s own garden hose, the grass glows like a sports car, the faces are dull by day—bright people working the *ciudad*, a nighttime of gold psychology, a mirror saying that this is you and you are everything you are seeing, and because the mirror cannot talk we continue walking.

Her desert night

fills with light from a yellow sun
filtered red through
an atmosphere of car crap.
She tells me

*Daddy had been a Republican
until the war and some labor issue
so now he votes for Democrats –
says they're "more democratic."*

*Mother declared herself
a "born-again Republican" after some story
her sister had told
about illegal immigrants.*

We follow I-95 into Arizona.
Trees arch in red geometry, the snow
ruminates white, wind slides
the small car across the chessboard.

La Luna Cuenta

The moon is counting dogs.
She slips and starts over.
 The moon is counting dogs.

Caught in the sage brush,
screwbeans hug their seeds.
They remember how the swelling began,
 caught in the sage brush.

The rocks grow cold.
The stone-cutter, the fired stone and slate,
drink in the breeze. Down here,
 the rocks cool quickly.

The moon is counting dogs.
She slips and starts over.
 The moon is counting dogs.

Nombres.
Wolves and tea kettles.

Acting Out

When you learn that your father
is dying you hang up
the phone and get in your car
and drive into the desert before rush hour
while the sun still blinds
but promises soon to fall off.
You choose a familiar hike
because you recall that familiarity
provides a catharsis but really
you decide that you just don't want any cause
to contemplate direction.
The sound of your steps is
loud where you grind soft sandstone
and shuttle beneath sun.
Philosophy is an easy distraction
that dissolves into a line of images,
distant movies about fathers and sons
and the walk you are taking – taking,
defined as something we remove –
eight years removed from the last time
you acted out your father's death, as the boy
needing crisis when they removed the first
tumor and the pituitary he rode in on.
But now you are poised
to become your father's man.
Of course curiosity demands
you imagine the moment he passes
(Isn't that why you're here?)
when you are unable to call simply
about yesterday's Yankee game or whether
his computer is working right?
And a movie appears more relevant,
not because of landscape
but because of actors
forced to imagine a path regardless
of what they are ready for.

The poem uses color

compact tufts of compressed
sand burned violent maroon
in spots revealing a
pink stomach through scrapes
of disturbed earth that
need almost fifty years
to re-cement and calcify

dry twisted roots exposed
between dissolving rock hiding
Greasewood a teal variety
of Fighting Yucca dressed
in red powder shoes
so little to love here
so little hiding beneath
desert personified by lack
of personification I don't
want a Woman bleeding

in her footsteps her
cuts mediating midday air
brushed with auto excrement
coagulating on black floor
mats under the silver
gas pedal no less
vocal than the priority
of the earthbound poem
and the modern sodality

A Gamble

When I try to describe the Mojave
desert to a friend in Austria
I use an equation of color schemes:

Seventy percent brown.

Twenty percent blood red.

Ten percent dull green.

I expand on how mountains
to the west deplete the
weather system of palpable moisture:

The entire southwest is

*actually a dry ocean, I say, but it is
the ten percent green that really makes
the region "special."*

This point is lost on her.

How can ten percent of anything
be *special*? Ten percent is always
too much or too little.

Perhaps it's the other ninety percent
that makes ten memorable, the mix
of browns, indigenous sandstone
and granular shale, mingled
with scarce cement and glass, pocked
together, determined and strong,
jockeying for position beside
the random Greasewood, Blackbrush,
or the flamboyant Banana Yucca.

Even in Las Vegas, all it takes
is ten percent to light a desert sky
and if I said I loved you
once in ten days,
you could respond
with nine more.

Excess

the new moon felt
cheated and lifted

her skirt
until the sun

baked lizards on
sleeping rocks

with pleasure
Yucca spike

out into
blue making

distance in
the distance

engines
roar and

explode
woo

My pregnancy test & guacamole

Two jars of yellow and green rest
on the shelf above the kitchen window,
over the sink. They are translucent
for the most part and make waves
in the tan stucco wall appear
larger than necessary, her words
bounce off each boundary,
past the rotund ornaments
in the expanse of room.
Outside the desert animals are
hiding for good reason.
They've never seen grass so commercial
but they won't bite or
scratch their ass in the cool green
bath of necessity.

You should be able

to raise an animal and not kill it
water plants with some frequency
cook eggs for a lover's breakfast

drive an automatic
ride a bicycle
walk legs
over desert ground while the violin lesson
follows the wind and you arrive at a cactus
stand selling more plants than you could ever need

listen!
airplanes are sucking air
cars are whipping violins
as if they were late for work

Your Note

Then sorrow slowly cradles
my frame
lies beside
me and quickens the breath
I sleep in.

Each vowel reforms
the language it wears
The desert
 rocks whisper:

On October 23rd you will be leaving.
The decision is yours.

II.

Yes...

yes...

I smile and say I know her...the obligatory refrain
follows the afternoon rain after a pigeon on 2nd avenue
finds shelter in a stone church...everything is as she
loves me because...she loves because...she said

yes...the parks could write themselves a newspaper...
yes because she walks and never ends her voice in a
pronoun...it begins how I write her...a change in
tense...two Japanese girls sharing popcorn speaking

Japanese...then they were eating...now they witness
the versicolor of our walk amid the clamor of pigeons
pecking concrete...I can only smile and say I know
her...she culls memory from rain water collecting

to run off...yes she says paper covers are becoming
obsolete...typewriters are outmoded because the ink
is wet and violent...she writes poetrys when she
turns a page...yes what I know in words and not

letters...the sky was blue...the rainstorm is on TV...
the pigeon flies a robot...she repeats her walk...my
heart going mad and yes I said...the parks continue
writing headlines with water and birds

She Says

"Have you ever
stared at a light bulb
right as you turn it off?
It doesn't just go

right out. You can see it
dim out. But don't stare
right at it, wait until
the exact moment

you switch it off
and then suddenly,
turn your head."
I try this.

I turn over
to her side
of the bed. It works
just as she said it would.

"Too bad you're not here," I say.
"Think of all
the lights
we could turn off."

Speak

She lay still
 on the mahogany
 slope of her bed

trying to expel
 the cricket

its terrified wings
 petrified in
 her throat

only moments
 removed from

the obscurity
 of waiting

Reading

stretching fabric over her body
tracing a poem in a small notebook

the same need for expression
her breasts rise noticeably through sheets

raising the vernacular bait & tackle
of an obscure town in rural Vermont

or maybe it's Maine or somewhere flat
in South Dakota's love of continuation

she's speaking with a cricket in her throat
the distance is two

the heavy breath after touch
the purse lips of exact obscurity

Lover,

I want to devour
your arms
and run

head down the street
A wild
Hindu

hungry for more
parts.

What We're Saying

She turns over and says "Be gentle with me,"
which I don't know how to take

because I do not love her and
we have only known each other for three days.

Sometimes I remember the dream where
I compose an entire poem

for a woman I can never describe.
It's these words, not her blurred face,

that I try to recreate. Did I really
compile the entire piece, line by line, or

was it the response that I admired?
I know what I'd like to tell her,

how I'm sure I love her red hair,
how our verse has too many verbs, but lines

cave with our breathing, together
with what could be words, the light

drawn between blinds
draws lines on the wall.

When we talk about love

Rain fell on the new car, rolled off
to the ground, collected
in puddles along the driveway
and traveled the porous pavement
towards the street. You could see
the irregular patterns resist,
a small stream swelled
by the side of the road
with water from driveways,
and bright family vans.
The rain reached the sewer
a house down, dropping from sight
into local creeks and ponds
around North Caldwell, where it
continued craving gravity.
We sat staring
through a picture window
without words to describe
what the rain ran from.
“I love you” was all she said
when I presented her keys,
with a miniature plastic replica
of the same ebullient vehicle,
(though not the exact sky blue),
with the dealer’s information
on the back— a telephone number
and website, in the event
of an emergency.

The Love Song of Adam and Eve

I want to
fuck you

I want
to fuck
you I want
to fuck you

I want to
fuck you I
want to fuck
you I want

to fuck you
I want
to fuck
you I want to

fuck you
I want to

Exposition as composition

She blows phrases about love like tissues
and I've told her how uncomfortable
that makes me.

Nicole, I say,
Jessica, where are
we, Sarah, this is
not, Allison,
who is calling?

When the phone
rings, the call is
not the
person I have
met on paper.

Turning a corner,
the twisted trees bend
because the light
moves fast over bark.

Why the well lit elephant

between love and love
there is beauty in dissection
the striations running through

adjective and pronoun
degrees of isolated emergencies
an afternoon of grunting by the pool

they are red
red they are
why red?
why they?

why not blue for
the well lit elephant?

does it matter?
your light hand
covered with my hand and light

Believing moon

My cousin says that homosexuals choose
their life and even if they are "good people"
they still choose sin in the eyes of God.
She says a Eunich is born without genitals or
sometimes they are castrated, so
she says, she can understand how
someone would not feel
a strong attraction for the opposite sex,
but they still have a great opportunity
to do something that benefits
from not having family or they can go
somewhere where working alone is God's plan —
and I get the feeling
that we are writing a guidebook
to the moon, and I say what if
she was attracted to a woman with the same
desperate necessity she feels for her fiancée,
to which she looks confused and I start to say
something about *love* being God, and she says
that a church should except
these people with *love*
and try to help them, and I accept
her view with *love*
and we are writing together fast
with the top down, over craters
and lunar graben, following our map
of the entire mantle canyon, pausing
to read descriptions of the indigenous
grey stones and how they were once
ground to cure cough
for the children she will someday give breath to,
inside the home she will tuck them in, and finally
we stop at an unfamiliar wrinkle ridge
which I argue must be a sinuous rille
but we reluctantly ask directions
because we are now arguing
a belief with a belief, and it
occurs to me that I don't actually know
one damn thing.

III.

Living The Catalogue

Living the catalogue

What if the street lights
gathered their legs and redesigned your birth place?

Drunk as a hoot owl thrashing in the bath
A woman from Flemington suddenly finds her home in Weehawken

We listen to Miles Davis play
so much so long
we translate the house cat
So What he says in so many words

Back in Weehawken they discover
that memory is just a prose technique
a solitude
a situation comedy involving a grocer the grocer's friend and the daily hijinks of
grocing

I read Chinese for their silence she says
her small hands
on small paper
She practices small
moments

and loves
what so many handshakes hope to look like
through a fish bowl

love
minus the word

Girl misses bus

Girl misses bus, she sits
and waits at the stop, light
falls on her shoulder, the other side
is covered in shade from a tree above
her bag, large and blended in browns,
she reaches inside for a phone and calls
the man she lives with.

Two others arrive — an old woman with
a plastic bag from Vons, a young girl
with a green hat, they listen in
on the conversation.

Now I will be late, the girl says.
The older woman stops listening,
moves into the shade to count change
in her left hand, making sure she has enough
to get where she's going.

When you order scrambled eggs...

The girl at the cigarette machine...her hair has two pink bows that match the dinner booths...pictures of Elvis, in Hollywood...a man outside feeds ice cream to a dog and on the corner there's a corner

man...the cashier says he knows what you're looking for. ..you're not the only one, tonight...the bus ticket burns the fancy shoes you got on...the girl at the cigarette machine thinks it over...but she loves

Lucky Stripes...the sandpaper of smokes...so lovely in heavy eyes...man, you'll tell her such poetrys...even if the song is a lie...*Hey Baby, I'm walk'n lonely tonight*...the Boulevard's got more nickels for bus

rides...maybe a car would just be easier...maybe her song says *Good Bye Donna Jean*...*So we're leaving tonight?* ...I can't argue...last time, I lost a perfectly good lover...in the way of quarters, nickels and dimes.

Just Spinning

in summer, fields of
corn stumps

dry, sun careens
overhead, looking

with one yellow eye —
through gases and bright explosions.

A truck stop in
Kansas, your

dress, blue and
frayed along the hem.

Cowboy hats, fat with
shadow, chew

the bright metal
used for street lamps.

The spade is dropped —
concrete loses its street value,

makes for a poor garden.
You smile in your brown meat.

I place a black-eyed Susan
behind each ear,

as you spin,
the flowers rotate off

and barely know
the wind they dance for.

Advertising

The greatest poem
I've read this year said
Fuck Bush on the red brick

of a Wells Fargo in Las Vegas.
I had tried for weeks to express
a similar sentiment, initiate

a conversation of ink,
the delicate nuance
of language riding the back

of a ballpoint ballerina.
And here was my idea, written
ostensibly in black spray

paint in the baroque style
common to this time and place,
the complete face flushed

against a backdrop
of finance
and refinance —

accepting the time
in which the poem
was written.

The infatuating fluency of fingers

plays all night across the bar, because
the band plays, they play and
you play and the night outside is lost
in a bottle only needing
the sound steady quiet like
lovers and morning air like trash
needs a can to crawl through,
the band needs you because
you're reading, not music or notes,
the indiscretion of time dotting
barbwire, it ends where it begins,
with the pit pit patter of what
the poet thinks he knows
of Jazz, thinks of a thing, what
you place on the table and
have no use for, because
you need and want and even
your sex is dripping with ink, bottled
up, calling out for
the composition to sleep off paper.

Ply woods

Not the mountain
 cirque this morning
 or headlights on

A deer wild with
 juniper mail-order
 and fantastic trails of turd

I know this tree
 from a walk I need
 to walk from

I was thinking
 that I was alone
 except for the wood

Hand Job in back of a Taxi

The window,
 winter, slush and
 ice, passing 3rd, getting

Close, the
 animals carry quarters
 home, later left on a table, our

Smooth line
 down Manhattan maybe
 I should have agreed, passing

People, it's
 people watching
 the dull yellow shimmer by.

Formalism

In love with Chinese finger paints
and badly in need of some
reconstruction, most of the sounds
floating off the deck smell of raw
fish and raw seas. The larger hooks
catch larger fish, which sizzle and hot-cake
on the deck while they're dying,
painting the steel with their scales.

Study on the ADD school of Poetry

There is one species of artist yet to be acknowledged for their contribution to the poetry community – remaining on the fringe of academic recognition, teetering on the seesaw of yes and no, how and why, left or right – This being, the ADD poet – And there are more of them than you think – at any reading, they may constitute upward of fifty percent of the matriculated listeners – make no mistake, they are separate from the appeasing boyfriend or extra credit hound, who have been ordered to attend – They may exhibit qualities consistent with listlessness or general lassitude or may resort to deep-stare tactics, i.e. the Professor Pause. But their stare *is* masterful – “*Did I eat yet? Oh wait. Poetry reading. Focus. Focus.*” – Of course, their continued interest may chemically require repeated bombardment of stimulation, such as barrelhouse antics, racial slurs, or nudity – uncivil remarks or even declarations of promiscuity may also achieve the goal of bringing the ADD poet back into your flock – It has even been proposed that Slam poetry was conceived to tailor to this demographic and that academia’s inherent distrust of the movement in fact stems from an apartheid-like fear of eventual rebellion – though performance anxiety might also have something to do with it, or perhaps everything to do with being a *poet* on paper – a topic we’ve all heard recited before, albeit a cathartic one – But shifting our attention back to the topic at hand, lest we deviate from the relative conundrum and lose the listener, we arrive at the question of *Why* the ADD specimen is so drawn to poetry? Why are the people least capable of paying attention to a phone call, attending an

event that requires such a stalwart attention to nuance, ebb and flow – Perhaps the grammatical freedom – the allowance of run-ons, comma abuse, creative spelling aerobics, hyperbolic misuse of the imperfect? Or perhaps boys go to meet girls who go to meet boys?

It remains anyone's guess. In light of recent scientific proposals to combine excessive enjambment with electric shock therapy, and other attempts to chemically bind the listener to the poet's performance, this excessive confabulation has hit a head –

Why Are You Here? How can I help you?

Perhaps the establishment is to blame? To compete with 100 channels and video game hard-ons, you might incorporate costumes or space-aged death sounds; advertise *ADD Readings* (or *ADHD*, for the more technically demanding in the group), include Ritalin with each book – But drudgery aside, why can't we all just get along? Perhaps, in this case, seeking change is bad. I say, LET THEM BE! Embrace the ADD poet!

So while the Narrative Troubadour wrestles with the Language Metrician, the ADD poet slips in and out, unnoticed and unapplauded – While their attention may be skewed, their dedication for the spoken word can be unwavering. Remember, these are people that could not sit still for their mothers and now are willing to do so for a poetry reading – your poetry reading. So, to those of you only now rejoining the poem, stand up and admit your heritage.

IV.

Two

Two

Morning.

If I could sleep
in the vacuum
 pores of her neck

Hide

like seeds

burrowed

 in soft fat winter.

Vehicle

She clasps the handle
tight and lifts

moments before
my keys

can unlock her
she then hesitates

for a time
after I'm in

to prove
she's not eager.

Sick Story

We made love the first night we met and again
for three more until there was less love
and more fucking and we had to acknowledge
that we knew nothing of the other person.
I suggested a movie – which we disagreed over,
regarding plot and character development.
No imagination could make me believe
that the two characters shared love
beyond the dramatic obligation for it.
We struggled to reword our perspectives
and just compromised
over less important impressions of setting
and film quality. But really,
we felt more rushed to return
to our fucking, the dumb language of flesh
and night – where you become an ex-
girlfriend in St. Louis, stripped of her fear
of physical contact, and I
must have been the relationship you said
you were looking for – I hesitated at your need.
Said there were two wantings:
what you said you wanted and what
experience says you're ready for.
I was ready to share the doctors, the smell
of the cold floor, the CT scans, the MRI,
MRA, Spinal Tap, Blood Patch – the latest,
“Cervical Cobulation Nucleoplasty,” set to repair
minuscule tears in discs in my lower spine.
It was the back-story I couldn't mention,
the difference between our fucking
and our love, procedures
that both require follow-up.

Winter

each exhale pauses
in the frost

the plastered sands
think of summer

the dune's grass
stops swinging

the sun
has such little hands.

Caesurae

Her hands press against the wheel, listen
to Mozart question each New England note —
the drive, slow and deliberate, winding through

a wasping cold of oaks
and startled maples in their black-
skinned darkness — a silent point

when nature loses its welcome.
I undress each finger
with a reticent procrastination.

"I'm pregnant," I say.
She accelerates, uninterested in how
I ever obtained the corresponding genitalia.

The violins needed sympathy for the impossible,
they motion toward a stoic gab
of cellos, while the momentum of bodies

collide with the shift in direction, you
off to Boston, while I
wait in the absurd clarity of waiting.

Kell

I touched her hand
 for a moment
thought
 that it was
not a hand at all
 but something
I might
 breath through

Shutter Speed

You scratch the back of my head and I
love that more than you could ever
really know or I can tell
because I just lie there cringing and still,
in pain perhaps. The morning light lofts
past the horizontal blinds
painting prison bars over
the bulging forms, caged
in a zoology of black and white—a rug
from Portugal hung on the wall and a picture
of four dancing children in Australia—
and it's frightfully clear that what's frightful
is not the motif of morning
but the accumulation of moments
of stillness, stalling for recollection,
the picture asking for its animation back—
while the breathing beasts try to blend
then with now in a foolish display of extremities.

Tuesdays

the pool is his bicycle
an extended

box retaining each
goal

his face tightens
he

breaths and crawls
forward

rotating
the introduction

trailing her image behind
him

Motioning

Again he imagines them together, lying
naked, before he sleeps, coarse bristle

against his thigh as she writhes against
him, the fan buzzing his breath, and with

each rotation, the faces change their
distinction in the wet heat.

He thinks: So writing, is writing your pain,
not as pain but as writing.

What would he say? He hates his words.
There are too many to say, they own him

as much as he owns them, or thinks he does,
or knows that knowing his words too well

may be the problem. Again they are naked
and blurred, it doesn't matter who she

becomes, the colors coalesce on the roof of
his mouth as he hesitates to speak, turning

over to hold her hand in his mind, pressing
into the words he would give to her.

You come in later

The woman is blue sand
Her legs orange

Her hair huddles around
A thick white pulp
Where Knees forget

If the sky is blue today
It is a shaking thing petrified
In paint strokes
Satisfied with staples on canvas

The moon kisses her daughter
She is kind enough
To forget
She always does

And if you asked me what I saw
Standing alone
 Was I lost?
 You asked

It was the I
I was curious about

Poetry, love

Most of the poetry I read is never
as close as I would like to be
to you

I am frightened of everything
and a word is the only
anxious sound I have for this

VITA

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