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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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Entitled

\_\_\_\_\_ Ten Percent To Light A Desert Sky \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
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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.

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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 Fremont 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 23<sup>rd</sup> 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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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 3<sup>rd</sup>, 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



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