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## Gravel ghosts: Selected poems

Megan Ann Merchant  
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GRAVEL GHOSTS : SELECTED POEMS

By

Megan Ann Merchant

Bachelor of Communications  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas  
2001

Master of Fine Arts Creative Writing  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas  
2005

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the

**Master of Fine Arts Degree in Creative Writing**  
**Department of English**  
**College of Liberal Arts**

**Graduate College**  
**University of Nevada, Las Vegas**  
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**Thesis Approval**  
The Graduate College  
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April 22nd, 2005

The Thesis prepared by

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Entitled

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Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

Examination Committee Chair

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ABSTRACT

**Gravel Ghosts:  
The poetics of landscape**

by

Megan Merchant

Dr. Alik Barnstone, Examination Committee Chair  
Professor of English  
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In his collection of poetry and prose *Spring and All*, William Carlos Williams said, “the reader knows himself as he was twenty years ago and he has also in mind a vision of what he would be someday. Oh some day ! But the thing he never knows and never dares to know is what he is at the exact moment that he is. And this moment is the only thing in which I am at all interested” (88-89). That moment is the landscape for my collected works, *Gravel Ghosts*. The flower itself is a great representation of the desired moment that Williams describes; when the white flowers bloom over the nearly invisible stem it looks as if a parachute is suspended mid-air. We are all rooted by the invisible ties of our history, floating somewhere between immediacy and becoming.

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I have arrived at the end of this journey and see nothing less than what it took to get here. For those who showed me how to live as a poet, not simply how to create poetry--thank you. To each member of my committee, please know that I greatly appreciate the lengthy conversations, recommendations, guidance, and motivation. Thank you for opening so many doors. And Paul, thank you for teaching me how to have faith. For showing me how full the world is when passing through it with open hands--thank you for walking alongside of me.



## **Gravel Ghosts**

## **Branched, Leafless**

## One Hundred Year Bloom

From my rotting body,  
flowers shall grow and I am in them  
and that is eternity. ~Edward Munch

How many chances in this life  
do you have to meet yourself,  
as someone else? To come  
back to the land where you  
were born, only to find,  
among boarded windows,  
cracked pipes, shorn shingles,  
that you have already left,

trees mindless of the man  
who once soiled their roots,  
tended to a violet patchwork  
of cattleyas when the evening  
frost called in an emergency  
of night.

How instinctively you would  
grasp the thinness of their leaves  
in a palmed cup, draw them close  
to your lips, whisper heat and breath  
to keep them through wintry hours.

When exactly  
did you stop listening?

How long has this landscape  
of your past been receding,  
without a phone, just a junction box,  
frayed wires, a stranded motorist  
in the desert calling out random numbers,

letting it ring and ring, waiting for  
an answer, a voice to recognize  
and say yes, stranger, you are alive.  
But *no one's home, no one*. The greater  
parts of yourself are living  
some place else.

And in the morning when you wake,  
you feel a loneliness of having kept  
something alive, long enough to let die  
another night, with another choice.

March 10, 2005-National Park Service

*The Mojave Road across Soda Dry Lake  
is impassable due to standing water,  
muddy conditions.*

Once I saw a Buick  
stranded in an oblong  
puddle that looked  
no deeper than my knees.  
The woman, hysterical,  
climbed from her window  
to the roof, arms reaching  
toward the sky for a rescue--  
oblivious that the clouds  
had started it all, although  
who is to say how long  
they had been holding a storm  
inside tempered enough  
to draw out a small stream,  
thick enough to engulf a passing plane,  
flocks of swallows, tendrils of smoke  
and dust.

Her father should have taught her  
the proper technique for passing  
through bodies of water,  
how to cross the glassy onyx, when  
to touch the gas, shift the wheel,

plummet the same direction as a slant  
of light through drawn blinds  
in an early hour. To turn her body  
whole in the direction of her eyes,  
the way a stream flows under rocks,  
despite gravity. The body follows.

*Ivanpah Road is dry but rough;  
high clearance recommended.*

Desert tortoises come out after the rain.  
Park rangers avoid dirt roads until they  
can map what has washed away. Couples  
park cars along the North side of Kelso,  
haphazard, almost abandoned, to seek out  
the most unlikely carpets of blooms--

spreads of hyacinth spaced along dried lake beds,  
depressions of earth and deep basins. From the tip  
of a desert dune you can see spaces of soil between  
each violet cluster and the morning air drying long

linear leaves. Out here, the heat tricks the thirst  
of imagination, westerly shadows of stirred dust  
become wet ravines, glossy pools of water,  
that after such flooding, seem close, possible.

My Mojave prefers strays, distance. At least  
an hour's walk for wildflowers that refuse  
to give themselves too quickly.

*Cedar Canyon Road is rough; open  
to all vehicles willing to tolerate "washboard"  
conditions. Be prepared to drive slow.*

When the summer rains dig below cracked mud, plates,  
winds the first bloom of Joshua trees in the later evening,

it folds, stains of earth, roots of myth. Sparse pocks  
of water that move by name--Piute, Rock, Marl, Soda Lake.

Their locations make sense of directions. Once lost  
on a highway runoff, I was able to look at the openness

of all directions, but had to stop at a gas pump  
to find mine, and an urgency

came through with the *ting* of the  
hooded gold bell above the door- if you don't know

where you've been...I was looking for a way  
out, told the cashier of the small depot

something of the same. His jaw twitched,  
fingers of dust themselves pointed right,

his right. *People confuse the  
yellow tack-stem flowers with desert*



*dandelions. One fields its long  
lemon flowers along roadsides, vacant lots,*

*sandy flats, and deep washes. The other, is  
hunted for days before the mood of August heat sets,*

*but when found, all the more valuable. The only way to  
tell the difference is to place your index finger*

*along the slender bristles, run it down the stalked  
yellow head and press the leaves growing underneath.*

*One is coated with a thin, skin-like fur, the other  
naked and rough.*

The map he gave me was full of side-roads,  
outlets, approximated miles, connections to the land,

the little bell in the door sounding each one,  
letting them go, *he-llo, he-llo.*

Canis Latrans

You define a desert  
by what's lacking.

My little Mojave,  
my fierce wild fire

of rocks and seed  
mountain peaks that bloom

in June. Ravaged by wild haired dogs,  
coyote night travelers that cross your basins

swiftly, bulldoze flora,  
scavenge space.

My scorched earthen pot, they say  
your wildflowers peak once in twenty years.

So every spring photographers  
climb onto piles of collected earth,

scamper peaks to catch what could be  
a record radiance-- what turns into

a glossy image, the month of May  
on my fridge, passed days crossed

with a black marked X, the future full  
of obligatory details.

And when my three year old niece  
reaches for a cup for juice, she places instead

her small fists onto the startling white firs,  
trying to grab, trying to hold,

outside the frame--swollen sounds of nearby  
construction that distract swallows from

landing in bottlebrush nests,  
amongst planks of wood, nails, thick tired

trucks, migrant workers eating  
aluminum wrapped burritos

on bits of earth, not yet covered,  
the tan, grainy color of stucco.

Coyote, what sprit howls within you ?

## Death Valley Junction

They call these roads  
inhospitable, but I find  
their heated salt flats,  
deserted plains and depressions,  
honest.

There's a point, west,  
on the 220 miles of road  
where travelers stop  
to place a rock on top  
of a pile, take pictures,  
laugh at their meaningless  
contribution, or stand  
in reflection,

holding palms flatly  
against sun, shielding  
the universe of dust  
that stirs in the wind,  
making it hard to breathe,  
focus. Most people climb

back, behind the windshield,  
chart the distance from gas,  
food, usually a bathroom,  
without looking in the rear-  
view mirror

to witness as I creep  
behind the pile, tip  
one rock off the top,  
watch it climb down,  
land wherever it may.

## Moths as big as hummingbirds

### I.

Today I awoke unafraid of library fines, tourists, double parked cars,  
two-ply toilet paper, wasting-time, wasting water, wasting the word love  
on a Tuesday. I awoke unafraid of beginning as if on purpose,

unafraid of the sun, the slip of hours in a day that might lose me, two inches of rain or no  
rain at all, the score of a baseball game that could predict a second coming, what it meant to  
see a crow and pigeon pressing beak to beak in the park. I was unafraid of being the only  
witness, when everything stopped, and I was left, standing still, remembering motion.

### II.

Today an August storm swept Death Valley, killing two, washing out roads, covering parts  
of the park with a suffocating mud, then lessening, soaking into the soil as a gentle guest,  
unfamiliar and tireless, in a wasteland accustomed to not seeing water at all.

The landscape opened, unafraid of being historic, of being measured by scales of beauty  
and shifting terrain, surfacing minerals, spreads of gravel ghosts, notch-leaf phacelia, desert  
stars, moths as big as hummingbirds spreading seeds in all directions, their paths abandoned  
in a three o'clock wind. Even the rocks are blooming a sulfur yellow, widespread, daring.

Nothing, Arizona

"When you've seen Nothing,  
you've seen everything."

-Town Resident

Driving through Nothing

I am scolded for asking

what desert we are in

along the stretch of Highway 93,

when it is really a town--

three shanties, a rusted gas

stop, piled funereal twisted

metal and heap. Sounds,

all passing, bits of heavy

rock, honking horns, timely

disruptions in a mapped space

where time owns only

itself, deeply spiked ravines, low

flat basins, arms of Joshua trees,

gardens of creosote bush, ocotillo,

and cholla cactus, and a sign

that reads *last stop for sixty miles*.

A man could die

in this evaporated openness,

or live with nothing to do but  
think, shoot giant saguaros to  
pieces, count cars, and still call it  
a life.

I wonder if the residents  
eat their meals in company,  
share secret earth's, interrupt  
each others sentences to break  
the rural flatness of always being  
heard. If in this absence they  
are close, like family.



## Midnight Lightning

I have been through storms more remarkable,  
but was startled by the way you said  
*its all right, go back to sleep*  
the night you climbed out of bed  
to stand naked in front of the window.  
There is a quiet privacy in desert lightning.

The night my grandfather lay dying in a Hospice  
I climbed down to the docks and sat in thunder and rain  
to feel the vibrations against my chest  
until my hysterical mother pulled me inside  
to keep from getting sick.

I always felt the remarkable intensity of crashing  
meant that I was home.

Until I wake to you quietly climbing out of bed  
and notice, more than your nudity,  
how your whispering,  
in a room full of lightning,  
occupies the small bones  
of my chest.

## Mojave

"Nevada is a good place to learn about space. Outside of Las Vegas, Reno and Carson City, it is empty."

-- David Lamb

Christmas is out of place in the Mojave,  
It's beautiful at night when the pinkness turns  
the mountain frame to background. We're driving it,

the route to LA and because there is only one,  
when traffic stops, everything lacks options.  
We're open for discussion and I tell you how much

I like the defined shape of your chin. How  
I could see it if jumping out of a plane, even  
in the darkest amphitheatre. But it never tells me

where to land. You begin a conversation  
about defining masculinity that has nothing to do  
with phone booths or Stetson cologne.

Only your need for attractive women to think  
that you are--and because they are  
beautiful strangers, it's meaningful. They

make you a man. I think about the cactus leaves  
that have been tricked by the unseasonable  
warm. How their bloom, the color

of rushed blood, glows in the low light,  
so transparently that I want touch your  
face, shout *Happy Bloom Day*,

but don't. Instead I draw upon the thin  
silver needles of sagebrush that never show  
seasons or age, what's to come in June

when rain rusts away the sheen. When I wake  
next to you, familiar. Or, if we'll even make it  
that far, stalled inside accidental spaces,

twilight soundlessly moving  
over our bodies, faster than any desire  
to arrive. A trait we may never see.

It's Christmas, minus wrapped presents,  
a lighted tree, coldness. Only you and I  
in traffic, an event so uninvited

that it feels like a celebration.

## Gravel Ghosts

“The spreading shroud of white flowers connecting  
at the nearly invisible stem  
is reminiscent of a parachute in the air “

--Falcon Guide to the Mojave

What haunts you in this landscape of blankets and windows,  
Is it the low growl the wind makes when it tempers against  
the glass, or is it that this time, you don't want to hear it

calling you from your bed into open acres,  
across the main road where yesterday you saw a coyote wander  
into the stucco stretch of homes, and you knew then

the feeling crossing you in sleep, tapping alongside  
each delicate inhale, was your departed history,  
stirring. Not even the summer monsoons, the drainage

that collects low in the valley, the tolerant sage in the dry walled  
canyon, could predict such a survival. History catching up to you,  
watching patiently while you hide your bags behind the car port,

half buried in Bottlebush and thicket, while you take your time  
sipping wine in your bathrobe, slow and democratic,  
as if you had every chime in the world stilled to your request,

but you still cannot not hush this calling--It's in your bones,  
gravel ghosts pressing coarse grains into your skin  
while you dream the settled names of towns--Menomnee Falls,

Chenequa, Heartland--a red barn door, hay bales tightly wrapped  
in string, the catch of a loose door hinge, the picture of your father  
holding you and the trout you caught in the same lake  
that buried his father,

how tight the sleeves of your shirt were, or weren't,  
the picture hasn't been around for years now,  
there isn't a need. Only a word, that rustles your sleep,

sends you wandering the streets, crossings and lampposts  
identical in every direction until all things are same,  
except you, frightened, scurrying away from the night.

### **Um·bel**

: a racemose inflorescence typical of the carrot family in which the axis is very much contracted so that the pedicels appear to spring from the same point to form a flat or rounded flower cluster

## Profile

Light or without, it's there.  
Poised and coiled in the damp  
cellar, underneath the red wood  
pier, in the clock and stillness of  
an hour, when you look  
at my wrist and say, *Baby*  
*I'm late*. It has already arrived.  
In the water dish, after fingers  
dip and bless a dying forehead,  
in the mosaic of an early Spring,  
it has found a shape. In the semi-dark  
when you're there, but half in sleep and  
waiting, when your arms are folded  
into themselves, when the geraniums  
bloom, the silver comes clean,  
the mail falls through the slit, when  
a pigeon flies its way into an open  
office window and you feel all the stranger.  
It's there. When glasses crash  
against the wall, when the poems  
come clean, when the poems come  
quickly, too quickly, and you haven't  
written for days, it's there. Like a  
black winged beetle, the cicada song  
after June, the wooden chimes  
in a windless desert day, this  
day, it's there. In the emptiness,

yes, look again. When you try  
to stop the words from  
forming, just maybe,  
quite possibly  
It is there.



## Door County

I close everything into a glass bookshelf  
to keep the shape, bindings that prove  
nothing was ever taken from a book  
of poetry. And instead of writing,  
spend hours watching you pick  
through the grass, head and back  
bent in concentration.

We've only been in my childhood  
home for three afternoons when you burst  
between the wooden doors, hand  
me a four leaf clover you found behind  
the garage, picked it like my grandfather  
used to do, insisting I press it  
between pages. As if you know

the tradition. We retreat to the porch where  
the sun draws a dusted heat and the June  
fishing boats reel into the dock  
around five, dragging lines of bass,  
walleyes and pike.

I listen to the calming noise  
of their complaints, rivets of old  
propeller engines and the clinking  
dinner time preparation --washing mason  
jars to use for wine, that you'll drink

in my father's wicker chair, as if  
nothing has aged, only been replaced.

Except when the humidity settles into night,  
the doors and windows let in less air  
through ducts that once hummed  
dreams into sleep. And a tiny glass nightlight  
shapes each picture lining the stairwell,  
that, in spite of memory, pledges things actually  
happened. Things before you that were picked  
to disappear.

## Tracks

“When we lose twenty pounds... we may be losing the twenty best pounds we have! We may be losing the pounds that contain our genius, our humanity, our love and honesty.”

~Woody Allen

When I was five, I lost  
a decoder ring in the woods  
behind our white, one story house  
and cried so loudly that my father  
tied a toboggan string to his belt  
and pulled me through the  
evergreens to hunt for  
my lost treasure. We found  
animal tracks and frozen leaves,  
in the snow that day, everything  
except the ring and when  
I looked back, from the middle  
of the branches, the falling white-  
ness had buried every door, window  
and shingle, leaving an unseen  
emptiness I unearthed. It was  
a beautiful winter day, my father  
trudging through embankments,  
head down, murmuring little  
inspirations- *it's got to be here  
somewhere. We'll find it.* While I  
kept my eyes on the disappearing  
spot where our house once stood.

Beaver Lake, Wisconsin. 1982

My grandmother bought a wood carved statue  
in Tahiti and buried it along the path between  
the Knoll's backyard and our acre. She told us  
winged Indians had visited, danced and buried

magical trinkets for luck. I thought Indians bared  
a similar resemblance to chickens until second grade  
when we played Oregon Trail and learned the names  
of Algonquin tribes who settled Milwaukee, Waukesha,

Mequon--but never what became of them. History is like that.  
A looking glass with wings. A handful of displaced butterflies  
that touch down and leave little snow angles along the ground.  
And you learn what parts of you belong where.

Beaver Lake, Wisconsin, 1984

Behind the gravel drive of elm and fir  
were things so remarkably imaginable  
that daylight kept us bound--  
the geographical lines of neighbors' yards  
that ran North of the 18<sup>th</sup> hole.

We wanted nothing to do with uncovered  
spaces, ladybugs, poison oak or barking dogs.  
We hunted rewards-- stray golf balls  
that my grandfather collected for 25 cents a pop.

We looked in the back-brush, in mud-dark holes,  
deep in thickets and thorns for the ones that lived  
to tell a tale, each scratch an adventure that my grandfather  
would recount from his black leather chair. *This one,*  
*oh, she's special alright. Straight from the pockets of the great Gambini,*  
*while on his trip to smooth over foreign relations in Wisconsin.*  
They spoke to him, about airplane rides, Eastern riches  
and lost loves--the scarcity of a pink lady.

And when we found her, our lady, he would scratch his chin,  
light an evergreen mint pipe, soften his eyes and talk about war,  
how he survived just to see her again, slept on mortar shells,  
out-waited rains in shallow trenches, watched homegrown boys die--  
ones who worked the sales floor of JC Penny before becoming  
soldiers. Then, as if we mingled into the rhythmic smoke,  
he would sit and stare into lake waters, the chipmunks

climbing tree branches for ears of corn, the sun  
aging below the pier, methodically rolling  
each ball in his hand.

## The Story of Your Life

In the third grade I had to do a book report  
on our family history. We talked shop, cars, aerospace  
parts, growing up in the streets of Chicago, the depression,  
apprenticing for a dime a summer, how you learned to speak  
in a way that disguised everything the world owned.

Grandfather, tell me now about how you learned to box,  
your father's taste for blood and booze that drove you  
to the ring, and each man who swung at your face, nicked your lip,  
was him, swatting down the door, was him, climbing the stairs,  
was him. No Grandfather, it was you. Tell me more about the blood,

how it flows thicker in Russia. What forceful vowels hide  
there, what ghosts, what songs--doesn't your favorite comedian  
call them Ruskies, Pollacks. I feel the way your lip tightens,  
it means you have more to say.

Tell me about playing baseball for a living,  
playing Cherokee dirt towns, farmland fields, open seasons,  
tell me what it was like to dance with her, the first time you  
held her in your arms. Grandfather, when did that dizziness  
become shelter, how many of the eighty nine years have you lived

alone, what keeps you when you sleep in separate rooms ?

Grandfather, the day you fell in the prickly pear cactus,  
we pulled slim needles from your knees, hands, back,

what made you grasp so hard at the roots--balance  
is a temporal waning.

Do you remember the day we planted ghost flowers  
in the desert lot, between the empty propane tank,  
old coke cans and weeds, how you drove the shovel  
to the earth, dug the tip and were pitched three feet,  
mid-air as it hit something solid, buried.

I remember the grave way your bones gave into the ground,  
how your body flattened the grass tips for an afternoon.  
Grandfather take me back there to see the whiteness  
of their bloom. It's May, there's time for days like these  
again.



**Tepals**

Tepals

“Referring to parts of a flower that resemble petals  
but technically are not petals...”

--A Falcon Guide to the Mojave

I.

There is no such thing as a false start,  
what could be more existent than a beginning ?

II.

I am committed to every small beginning,  
each beginning is a little death.

III.

Ride west until you reach the sign for Rattlesnake Valley  
where there is an emptiness--so empty-- that the red clay sand  
makes it enough. How much do you really need  
to get by ?

IV.

What the body takes, it returns in mysterious ways,  
no Trinity or Holy Water, blessed forehead, bread  
or wine--they are nothing more than bread and wine  
to a tongue, the transformation occurs elsewhere.

V.

You fault believing in a day, in time, in history--  
yours-- because those who tell it are faulty,  
have been shaken by so many shards of life,  
loves, deaths, forgetting. What lasts ?

VI.

When your head is fully submerged you can still hear,  
even if its just water.

VII.

What part of choice ignites belief, love ?

VIII.

I have always loved driving  
through dark tunnels, the way  
headlights flash just fast enough  
that you only catch  
a fraction of light.  
It's even more reflective when holding your breath.

IX.

Time is always  
where my body is not.  
The way I fit, *perfectly*  
when motion  
stops.

X.

The necessity for metal is a sign  
of aging.

XI.

You drape your shirt, a white weave with buttons,  
across the chair, removing reason from the moon.

XII.

If I were blind would I still starve for beauty ?

XIV.

Form is never more than an extension of culture.

XV.

Sometimes it requires a letting go,  
more than letting go allows.

XVI.

In the desert, leaves simply fall  
from the trees, still green.  
Their announcement un-debatable.

They become what they are  
and then what they are,  
just like that.

XVII.

Once you said, this is fire  
everything is fire--  
and still you hold your breath,  
wait for it to dissolve or  
burn itself to exhaustion.  
I blow right at it,  
wanting to be devoured.

XVIII.

Sleep and dreams do not always  
arrive at the same terminal

XIX.

In you I have traveled the lengths of where I being  
and begin to end.

XX.

Sight replaces what sound promises.

XXI.

Little Copula,  
those born under you sign  
are plagued by blindness,  
strong passion--which  
arises first ?

XXII.

The fresh vase of desert lilies  
on the morning table  
are leaning to the side of the house  
where the sun is rising.

Their name, *Hesperocallis*  
means western beauty, as if they  
too are rising for this life to set.

XXIII.

Silence is the only space  
that cannot be owned,  
stolen.

XXIV.

There is an odd desire for the things that don't want us.

XXV.

You cannot touch an asking,  
or fill a stomach with echo.

XXVI.

I want nothing  
in owning  
the everything of you.

XVII.

The morning will never stop leaving you.

XVIII.

Fire ants build shelter  
from discarded particles  
on Banyan roots,  
withstanding winds  
even they hold together the unseen.

XXIX.

I water the hydrangeas  
to watch the water disappear.

XXX.

Mother, you were always so diligently  
black, your onyx heart loved me in ways  
you never wanted to love yourself.

XXXI.

Who collects pennies from the fountains  
when they are full? I want to be that  
important, the man who lightens water.

XXXII.

You come home from work, loosen you tie,  
walk room to room , leaving lights on  
behind you, because there is no one  
left to remember the places you  
once were.



**In·flo·res·cence**

: the budding and unfolding of blossoms

## Roots

The other day we were riding in the car  
on the way to buy transported elms,  
Japanese plums, Mexican palms,  
when I pointed to the clouds spilling down like stairwells.  
And in the middle of all intelligence, a God.  
You, atheist, who has faith in everything  
unexplained, lectured me about the weather patterns  
of cumulous clouds and how water vapors become trapped  
between hot and cold layers, naturally.

Pilot, some days are made for flying.

## Lost

I hear the Japanese maples  
slowly growing, dancing close  
and shallow with the moon  
under courtyard windows,  
open to the trains.

I face their sounds--the ticking  
song of things lost,  
misplaced, as if the mere  
melody could unearth desire.

And then everything turns  
to wine, tongue slowing, train passing,  
maples winding their way back  
into the afternoon I wore, you wore,  
the afternoon we made love on.

All days leave without asking.

Small birth. November 22, 2004

When you leave a room is there an echo  
of light where your body was, a sulfur or flint  
that, when pressed against granite, sparks ?  
Were you light, my baby, or rock ?

We had one conversation in a dream, in an unborn language.  
It was fall. You pointed to the changing maple trees  
on the roadside, little painter, and accused God  
of getting it all wrong. *It wasn't supposed to be that beautiful.*  
Nothing that stays with you ever is.

I asked the doctor how the unborn are able to breathe,  
tucked in a body. How much landscape they remember,  
what elements they already understand. *The same  
sorrows about life that you do*, he said, inherent.  
They breathe your emptiness.

Small sculptor, the size of the thin scar  
on my right arm. At three weeks,  
you came from soil. Wide empty spaces,  
with a cold history waiting for your little un-birth.  
Sweet child, sleep next to my granite heart.

Sappho

I am accustomed  
to throwing lit matches  
into water  
just to hear  
the quick sizzle,

sound and sight  
extinguished  
in one line-

*it's not you,*

an inexactness in body,  
composed 80 % water  
20 % words-

that hold  
until summer,

when splinters of dust  
come in hot winds

and pavement compels feet bottoms  
to water,

where I float palms down,  
*Cristo Redentor,*  
stone arms in waiting.

Only Sappho really knew  
the beauty of not being  
able to throw her arms  
around the world.

Even after the clergy  
burned her short  
lines ,  
I can hear her  
Greek floating--  
these inadequacies  
ignite us.

## Late Night

Promise me this,  
when you imagine being with other women, never give them names.  
Assign your fantasies body  
parts, only.

No absent noon's  
spent throwing underwear onto the ceiling fan,  
screaming favorite movie lines into open windows,  
addressing small dark scars along shins, hiding  
homemade fortunes in drawers for luck, eating cold  
egg foo young off discounted china, counting trains  
that pass Easterly each hour, kissing the curve  
that streams along your shoulder blade,  
wiping tears from her eyes with your thumb  
when she leaves for a hour, after the first time.

Say anything, but leave the image empty.  
Leave it beautiful.

## Explaining the Disaster To My Five Year Old Cousin.

If you stand long enough, you'll move. Like the earth did, on its axis.

It shifted a little less than a breath, held softly. The waves didn't release, they expanded--I explain to my five year old cousin. We watch the bath tub water rise when I lift her into the bubbles and hold her little head from slipping back and say, that's how it happened. There was no warning, even that was overcome by water filling into the shapes of the land. Recklessly. And people died. But not like this. *Not like this*, she says throwing a handful of bubbles onto the rug, laughing softly.

Southbound *Turbus*

We drove all night,  
on an bus headed though the Andes mountains,  
the darker sides of snow, shadow and arcs winding  
such steep falls, the way the tires hugged the road,  
*te amo, te amo*, I never thought of our bodies as climbing.

I prayed for permission, safe travel, possibility  
at the other end. The strangeness of leaving one  
country for another when neither was my home,  
and the little *Los Andes* town at the basin  
where we stopped for morning, to stretch, refuel.

I sat along a wood plank watching children dash  
after an orange ball, between fence posts and piled rocks,  
a polluted sunrise the color of the most monolithic buildings,

and wanted to yell out to the children--what do you do  
once you get the ball, kick it again--hoping they would  
understand, that they would not laugh at my dropped  
endings, erroneous words. Instead, I board the bus,

hug my arms tightly into themselves, in part for warmth,  
part comfort. Afraid to look with blue eyes, at the small dark  
woman who spits out my name, *gringa, gringa*, tries to wring it out  
with her tongue, *Americana*. I am sorry. Wait, let me say it  
with more history, *lo siento*.



*Permiso*, I am lost in the background noise  
of conversations, every sound borders another  
that I do not recognize. Only this body,  
close and familiar amongst the shape  
and fit of others.

Letter Home, Santiago.

When I woke this morning

I gave you a name,

used it when the old man

in the elevator asked me *¿qué piso?*

I took my shoes off, pressed my feet

to the ground then promised the hour

to abandonment. Your name

was the language of the earth,

the polluted sign of sky hiding

my Andes shadows, and it blew below

the hidden darker things of the day;

umbrellas, cypress branches, teenagers

coupled on park benches, a single phone booth

out of order, the street sign that made sense

of directions, but not sounds. A brassy jazz band,

children with drums and cymbals strapped to their backs,

dancing copper coins on pavement in the Plaza de Armas,

where I pushed through the gathering crowd,

awaiting the next train, pressing shoulders and backs,  
shoulders and backs, invisible prayer wheels,

and every time I touched a stranger,  
I quietly let you name catch in the back

of my mouth

*Permiso.*

Ascinado Bush

You touch  
the spray painted  
bank wall  
without fear,

walk one-ways,  
lost, uphill  
away from  
the guttural noises  
crowding the market streets  
of San Jose

into the discord  
of people and cars grinding  
grainy air that sticks  
to gums and teeth

even feet. Confidently  
tell the cab driver  
that you like his virgin  
Mary stick shift, and yell  
*basura* at a pile of trash  
because it makes you  
feel alive,

local. And when you  
drive five hours

to *Playa Negra* for just  
one wave,  
you contemplate  
how many kilometers  
you are from the point  
where the water  
does not end  
exactly.

Body, Moon, Mongolia

*For S. Abbott*

You cross continents,  
oceans, leave the country  
but stay behind  
in so many places  
for him,

    so many  
words without chords  
to pull, play-  
even the moon  
misplaces its aria,  
notes forgotten after  
one year, remembered  
after two.

How do you play  
a memory without  
    words ?

Hands remember-  
to hold, to press  
to let go, let you slip  
below his night,

    and wait  
just long enough  
to feel the rift of continents  
from his open window  
where every night  
he plays you  
Body, Moon, Mongolia.

## Green Mill

When the street lights pour  
into the bar alleys of downtown  
the brass city plays like notes  
to the saxophone's call  
of early morning cadence.

Fist riff of twelve bar blues  
sip like dry olive,  
flirting with my top button  
until I am  
all  
undone.

The saxophone curves its lips  
and dives  
down my spine--  
Play on  
Play on  
then tap tap,  
the heat flushes the room electric.

Train station pick-pockets  
sip the overflow from the door  
cracks, as the trombone mellows  
the moon into submission.

Neon wails growl,  
freedom vocals color the piano walls  
in blue notes,  
bent notes  
scat scat,  
Jazz becomes me.



## The Lies Your Shadow Tells

unfold in the newsprint Sunday,  
shredded bark of palm stumps, metallic  
nails in rusted Sanka cans, discarded  
beetle wings on a transparent day,  
this day they unfold all around you.

In charcoal smudges on brick and white  
walls predicting art and arrival. They are there,  
looking into stains of glass before the sun  
crosses mid-day, when a man climbs a tower,  
rings an aged bell, then sits in the shaped silence  
that follows. Little non-believer, can't you hear  
them in such loudness. In the shower  
when you touch your stomach and find a grain  
of sand, when a child bends to the ground  
in the middle of a narrow street for a coin  
you cannot see. Yes, they are waiting.

In the folds of concrete, in the forehead  
creases of an old man playing checkers,  
who listens for hours to the directions  
of passing cars. In the emergency of sirens  
at midnight, the swarm and clamor of flies,  
the stillness of waking, the loudness of waking,  
the need in waking and not owning anything  
other than a beginning. They too begin.

In fist and palm, in water that erased the ink  
of a poem, but not the need. In the shape of a prayer,  
in the shape of wind, in the rawness of body when someone else

begins to give it shape, tucked in the soft crook  
of an elbow, when hands are broken, when bones  
are thin, when grapes grow temperamental  
and your left waiting under a lamppost  
that constantly flickers, swishing darkness. Yes, they  
asking you to listen even though you refuse,  
believe, *they are just lies*, say out loud, *they*  
*are just lies*, giving them a name.

Who is to say they are not all the more real.

## I Deserve the Madness of a Loud Ending

Mid-sleep, you sit up, utterly displaced,  
trying to identify the naked body laying in your sheets.

I wake in the space of nothingness waiting  
for recognition. Instead, you run your hand through my hair-  
*it's all right...*

My mother chose my name from the book  
she was reading while pregnant-

*Meggie*, the scandalous heroine who seduces a priest,  
loves fiercely the unattainable

and suffers romantically for four pages of bodily lust  
that sustain an entire epic.

The legend of the thorn bird who impales  
its sleek breast upon the longest, sharpest thorn

while the world stills,  
listens to its song.

Before deciding she tried it out several times  
at the top of her lungs, *Meggie*

loving the sound of anger it carried,  
almost as much as the story defining it.

Somewhere between sleep and waking  
you do not recognize my face,

even after holding onto you, eyes closed,  
I can describe the exact shade of your eyes, hair, strangeness...

My name goes here.

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