Gravel ghosts: Selected poems

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GRAVEL GHOSTS : SELECTED POEMS

By

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Bachelor of Communications
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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
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Entitled

Gravel Ghosts

is approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Examination Committee Chair

Dean of the Graduate College

Examination Committee Member

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ABSTRACT

Gravel Ghosts:  
The poetics of landscape

by

Megan Merchant

Dr. Aliki Barnstone, Examination Committee Chair  
Professor of English  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

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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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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 spirit 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

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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 lessoning, 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 to 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

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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 18th 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--
one 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 it’s 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 an 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 a bus headed through 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.
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.
VITA

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