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Electric Banana, Mongolian Sky

Stacey Abbott

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ELECTRIC BANANA, MONGOLIAN SKY

by

Stacey Abbott

Bachelor of Arts- English
Minors- Creative Writing and Art
Mercyhurst College
Erie, Pennsylvania
2002

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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Entitled

Electric Banana, Mongolian Sky

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ABSTRACT

Electric Banana, Mongolian Sky

by

Stacey Abbott

Dr. Alik Barnstone, Examination Committee Chair
Professor of English
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Although these poems stretch from Las Vegas to Mongolia—two peculiar and exotic places—and a few points in between, they remain tethered to the quotidian of life. They illustrate familiar details of the human experience such as love, learning, distance, and change. The poems of *Electric Banana, Mongolian Sky* aim to, as William Wordsworth states in the *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*:

choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, as far as [is] possible, in a selection of language really used by men; and at the same time to throw over them a certain coloring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way; and further and above all to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them...the primary laws of our nature.

It is in this spirit that these poems were composed, even as the speaker moves between being both an outsider and insider, at home *and* abroad *Electric Banana, Mongolian Sky* captures the lyric musicality of the usual in unusual ways.

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One

Christmases

There were the years after I'd grown up;
just a few adults passing packages,
talking about when the kids were young—
how everyone spent all day
putting together that new puzzle,
or when we all went outside in our pajamas
to watch my first ride on the new bike,
black tires crunching through white snow.

It was over quickly those adult years;
onto breakfast, then waiting around
for the turkey to be done.

And the first December I spent
in Mongolia—half the adults had died
and the ones left didn't even want
to put up the tree—but they did—
and were quiet all morning long.

First Meeting

We've only been acquainted an hour
when the grey-haired, 60-something
version of you, leads me to his backyard garden.

It is night, springtime, and a little cool.
He switches on white lights intermingled in leaves;
dim glow erases the 35 years between your faces,
showing the mouth and chin he gave you.

Speaking low, from the back of his throat,
he tells me about each thing he's planted—
the slow-growth of the squat Japanese maples,
intricate flowering of bleeding heart bush.
He pets bark, fingers blossoms—showing me,
as if giving me, all he's sown.

Climbing back up the porch steps
the great mystery of my own father
comes to me. The patience he could never have
for such slow growing trees,
the beauty he could never see there—
delicacy of petals lost to him.

Like the many hours he has passed
near to me, showing nothing of himself.
The smooth, almost whispered tones
his voice could never, ever speak.

San Onofre, June 2004

You tasted like the ocean that night
in our small blue tent
after having spent the day
below the bluffs at San Onofre.

Salt in your skin,
eyes polished stones
licked clean
and dyed green
by so many ebbs and flows.

We copied the waves
with our bodies,
salt water pooling
behind knees
and in elbows.

Washing— California, Mongolia

Today on the phone
you told me Death Valley
got rain— first time
in years. Some roads
washed away,
some parts of the park
closed for repairs;
but how happy
the photographers were!
All the peaks rinsed clean
of desert dirt,
shining in fresh,
vibrant colors against the sun.
Artist's Palette with all new
shades of paint,
Marble Canyon like ice and glass.

I think of this squatting naked
in my green plastic wash tub—
my Sunday night ritual of cleanliness—
first stacking the stove with wood,
heating water on top,
then scrubbing a week's worth of dirt
from my skin
till it is a shiny pink—
glistening in these few
delicious moments
of wet nakedness—
shining maybe
like Death Valley today,
but with no one
to take my picture.

A-440

He tells her
about the tuning
of the universe,

that regardless
of continents
and countries
and time
we all live
on that same island
of A-440, all attuned
to the music
that's been playing
forever, music
that no one can hear.

"It's the rhythm
that makes the difference,"
he says. The chords
don't change much
when we play
by the rules
of harmonics,
a lesson in progression
learned in the first
five notes of Strauss' tone poem.

She believes it when,
so far from him
she sometimes hears
a pitch, a tone
the color of his guitar,
in the rhythm of his hands.

Evening

When houses speak
with their blue-lit mouths
and the trees bend to listen,
grass gets softer, cooler;
the scents of suppers weave
between leaves and hang above sidewalks.

This is the hour of reunion:
mamas and babies; lovers,
wives, and husbands—
recovering the time day takes away
from all this evening ease.

Earthquake

His landlady's daughter was beautiful—
he had certainly noticed her before.

When she came for the weekend
to shop for her wedding gown—
because the stores were better
here in Santa Rosa than in Guerneville—
he wasn't surprised
when he heard her knuckles
rap softly on his upstairs door
at some dark hour of morning.

Next day the landlady asks
if they felt the slight 2:00 am earthquake.
Did she hear us? Is this a sick joke?
Their bodies otherwise engaged,
were unable to feel the slight quaver
in the Earth's turning.
“Guess not,” he says.

On the way out the door, he hung
the huge mound of white lace and crinoline
on its coat hook—which sat on the floor
all night like a slumped over bride.

Laps

I.

What happens when religions
run laps around the world?

In spring in Mongolia,
my student asks me if I believe in Jesus.
I tell her my family does,
that I was raised to believe.
Happily, she tells me about Jesus—
Yay-sus, as she says— meetings on Sunday mornings.
In an old garage
people stand on a cement floor
under fluorescent light to hear the Word.
She pulls out a tattered hymnal,
hard cover worn, gold lettering
only faintly visible.
Frayed, red ribbon
marks page 48, "Beautiful Savior."
Engle heel doe "An English song,"
she says, revealing a crumpled piece of paper
where she has laboriously copied
the words in pencil.
I help her fill in the Mongolian trans-literations.
She sings, *Boo-tee-ful Say-ay-ver, Kig off*—
I help her pronounce the diphthongs.
Eyes closed in concentration,
she repeats, "Byoo-ti-ful Say-ae-vyor, King ov"—
we go on like this and I think of Saturday mornings
in Catholic CCD, a mix of fright
and wonderment at the pictures
of Hell they showed to scare us.

How strange that here
in the center of Asia,
I am speaking of Jesus.
"I want to be a Christian,"
she says. When I ask her why,
she tells me that Christians are kind,
that they never lie.
"I want to marry a Christian too,
so we can go to Heaven together."
I am stunned, blinking
into her earnest face.

II.

On Monday nights
we gather at Sara and Richard's house,
their front room serves as Sin City's
Diamond Way Sangha.
She burns incense on the altar
where candles alight pictures
of the 16th Karmapa, Lama Ole,
figurine of an athletic Buddha.
The 7 or 8 of us sit on the floor
softened by our meditation cushions—
someone gives a talk on the Dharma,
or maybe we watch a video
of Lama Ole giving a lecture somewhere.
Then Sara leads us through meditation
with her soft, liquid voice.
We visualize the black-crowned Buddha
moving from golden
to rainbow light
and join in for long, slow syllables:
kar- ma- pa- che- no.
Then the buzzing erupts—
each of us at our own hurried pace
sounding the syllabus in fast mumbles
like tiny swarms of bees
hovering just outside our mouths,
the breath from each word keeping them
from stinging our lips.
Whispered, buzzing mumbles,
and mala beads slithering through our hands
ring in my ears like an electric alignment
with every person,
the microscopic bugs inside the carpet,
and each blade of grass outside.

After the chanting we sing
a Tibetan song—an invocation
of the protectors of the lineage—
our tongues get tricked
by the intricate consonant combinations.

I stay quiet during this part—
our own version
of *Boo-tee-ful Say-a-ver*—
the remains of one lap

so you so

me so
we so ahh
all fall
all winter
all spring
in we, we
two, so
strong in me
you, so wet
with wild
me, you
so more
all fall all
winter all spring
want
all summer
so far
we, all fall
all winter
all spring
so ahh
to you,
see me
to be
we again
come summer.

halfway around the world,
our own worship of the exotic.

Southwest Night

Sunset brings relief from the blaring trumpet
of day-long heat, and evening slides in
wearing her pink skirt, yellow hair
loose around her shoulders.
She leads us in exhaling
the sun down. It's the hour
of coming home, coming to comfort
after a day of tense foreheads and crossed legs.
The renewal of dinner and slow music.

Darkness, warm and still
smoothes our daytime squints
as evening changes
into her little black dress.
She dots her neck with perfumed blooms
just before they blink shut.
Palm fronds shine green-black
in moonlight, the Sierras a jagged line
drawn across the sky.

The desert gives off the heat
it saved up for us all day—
when we had to be inside
working at our desks—
gives it to us now,
the hour for us to loosen,
outside in lawn chairs without shoes,
breathing in the perfect, still warmth.

Joshua Tree Sky

Above the Joshua trees
there were more stars
than I had ever seen,
pressed into the soft black bowl
of night sky. We built a fire
and fed it with our breath
cupped between our hands,
making a star
for the black bowl of Earth.

October

Here in Vegas,
October blazes
at 97 degrees—
these tropical trees
know only green.

Back in Pennsylvania,
the hazy smear of fall color
bruises new shades of orange,
and gold into leaves
before they fall quietly
to the hard ground.
Soon they'll dry,
turn brown and smell
like smoke and old books.

Electric Banana, Mongolian Sky

Tonight the moon is an electric banana,
peeled and glowing in yellowish-white light.

My American city, where every night
stars are defeated by neon,
seems a lifetime away.

Right now is all full of inky black sky
glittering with specks of things
that look alive.

Without streetlights, headlights—
the stars nearly double in number.

To My Mother

What's it like
to use your blood,
your food, your skin
to make a new body?

To use your body
to grow it, weighing heavy,
hot in summer, then autumn
it comes bursting out,
bloody and painful to you.

You do all that to make
a babygirlchild
who spends her whole time
waiting to be grown enough
to leave you. Wanting so bad

to see anything
but the little house
you grew her in.

Up north first to snow,
then west to sunshine
and now east, east, east—
so far to a country
where she's a full day
ahead of you.

What does it feel like
when you give yourself
to make someone
who is always needing
to go away from you?

Holiday

The year of the monkey leaves tonight.
I was told last fall
that this would be a harsh winter
because the monkey doesn't have
a thick coat of fur. Tomorrow
begins the year of the cock.
Maybe the country will start
to produce more chicken.

It is the biggest holiday of the year
for Mongolians, but I am indifferent at best—
annoyed, bothered, even that tomorrow—
and likely more days, I will have to endure
the formula of Mongolian parties:
mutton + vodka + singing = fun. I'd prefer
to catch up on laundry or poems.

I tried to feel the spirit of it
in the market this week. Sure,
there were more vendors;
more candies, stacked breads,
underwear sets, scarf and hat sets,
and certainly more people—
more grannies knuckle-steering me
out of the way, more men cutting me off,
close enough to make me stumble.
But I couldn't really pick up
on any fizz of holiday joy.
Perhaps it was because my American self,
nostalgic for the red and green warmth
of December, the inexplicable mix
of anticipation and delight that glows
from lit trees and candles in holiday America.
Of course, there is more pounding
on fences gates—friends and family paying visits—
but I can't find any Christmas-style romance.

Bulgan Mountain glows like a magic rock tonight—
so many tiny candles placed there to light the way
for the new year— though I only glimpsed it
on my way to and from the outhouse.
Once the ger is warmed for the night,
it is hard to put on all those clothes
and go out into the biting cold. So I stayed in,

and read 165 pages of a new book—
to the very end. I made a cake,
I scrubbed my floor. I hoped all the footsteps
in the yard would avoid my door—they did.

They say that Tsagaan Sar
ushers in spring, though it seems it is still
far away—at least 6 more weeks
of fires all day and freezing, dark mornings.
And even then, the melting snow
only gives way to dust storms.
By February one has to look forward
to something closer than June,
so indeed, why not spring?

Heavy

So heavy with words today,
the burden of a night with you.

Try to exhale all things sharp.
Chest up

down,

then
out

out
out.

Spent all morning
wringing the scent of you from
my hands, hair, sheets.
Tucked smiles behind lips,
clenched joy between teeth.

Fists full of yellow—
the color of luck,
kept shoved in my pocket.

Weight of sounds and shapes
too profound for straw feet
and paper hands.

Shamble outside to digest
the din of churning clouds—
loud, clumsy.

I find a sky full
of brand new blues
and hues of you.

Interlude

How quickly time erased itself
at our chance meeting
five years after the harsh words
of our parting.

Exchanging stumbling apologies,
allowing access to memories
and lessons we'd forgotten.
How quickly the muscle memory
of the heart remembers.

The vocabulary of our private quips—
an oral history of our kinship—
passed between us
as if those angry ending
conversations never happened.

Though each of us now
with current, permanent lovers
I wanted to know
if you still thought I was pretty,
or if I had faded into ordinary.
I wanted to ask how you felt,
finding my stray hairs on your couch,
in the shower, my mate-less socks
at the bottom of the hamper—
did you cry? Or curse? Throw them away?

All the love I never permitted,
I try to repay with a burger
and a beer at 11:00 pm
on a Thursday in March,
in a city where neither of us live.

Cut

Looks like a grand fluke
from way up here
where we sever the strings
of puppets and watch
them slump into disjointed lumps.
Zeal of molten irony
drunk on topaz and amber
melted to a thick liquid.
It's like Vaudeville—
a sanctum of sorts
for plaids of all kinds,
and wide-brimmed hats.
A recital for glossed wood
painted in bright, oily colors—
round, red cheeks catching the glare
of our small, sharp knives.

Hands

When I return from my Mongolian language class
to the small house I'm sharing with Soyhmaa and her family
I smell fry oil, hear its sizzle and hiss.

In the cookhouse, she squats dropping
mutton dumplings—khoshuur— into the roiling grease.
She smiles up at me, motions to the remaining small balls of dough
she's formed and floured. It's my job to roll them flat.
They look like miniature Australias when I do it—
ragged, irregular edges—
next to her perfectly round ones on the cutting board.
She laughs at them, and asks *Onoodor yuu heedge vay?*
I tell her we learned directions, how to say "turn right,"
"turn left," "go forward," and "stop." *Zogs! zogs!*
Stop! stop! she jokes, indicating the start of another misshapen dumpling.

Inget, inget "like this, like this"
she says, pinching the edges to keep the meat inside.
It looks like a braid on a marching band uniform
when she does it. I watch her fingers, nimble and quick,
and think of the fingers she must have watched.
How lucky I am to join this kinship of hands.

On the street this morning I

passed a man wearing your face—
fine lips, dark-rimmed eyes.
I fall in love with strangers
almost every day.

In which

city dumpster
do the skinny women
keep their bags
of fat?

Wearing

a pink knit hat like a wig
and cellophane sleeves
stolen from saltines,
I pose next to the telephone booth,
both of us pretending to be sexy.

Strangers, like sugar cube rewards
stop to notice us—
chic fashion of red paint,
like the ones you see
in pictures of London
and the panache
of my plastic and yarn.

We smile at our adoring fans,
that booth and I, and when it is all
too much, I go inside the glass doors
and feed the loose, naked crackers
to the little black machine
while it drones on and on
in the same glorious monotone.

Autumn Snow

“Hey, your ger looks like a cake!”
Diana says too loudly to Amy and I,
ducking back inside
from a snowy trip to the outhouse.
Autumn’s first snow
lays like icing on my round ger.

It is Mongolia outside, but inside—
laughing our English
back into memory this night—
we could be in any American dorm room,
city studio apartment.

For this evening it’s not Mongolia
and it’s delicious. There are no
drunk, angry men or sour smells
of airag and raw meat.
We three, from different corners
of our country, different families,
different lives— sharing
an Americaness
we never wanted to admit to owning

Holes

In December—I had been gone
seven months by then—
you bought an accordion
and in January, a juicer.

I conjure up funny scenarios
of how these two could mingle:
Brahms *and* oranges
simultaneously squeezed
from your brand new, Hohner Corona.

Around the same time I,
oven-less in Mongolia,
started experimenting
with making cakes in my rice steamer.
The third try actually tasted like a cake,
couldn't get the proportions right—
too much egg, too much flour.
You won't believe how moist it is,
I tell you on the phone
because it's the steam that cooks it!

*This morning I juiced cucumber
and pineapple together, sounds gross
but it was really good, you say,
swapping our stories about what
we've found to fill the unnamable holes
we left in each other, about the ways
we try to fit things together,
now that we are apart.*

Corfu

I'm listening to my mother-in-law
tell stories of when she was young—
how she hated her wedding bouquet when it arrived
from the florist, but how she carried it anyway
because it wasn't a big deal. And how,
before there was a wedding bouquet
or even an engagement, she went to Europe
with her girlfriends. The beachside hostel in Greece
they could never find, the one they settled for
because it was late. And how she marched them—
all four, hungry and weary—to the kitchen
making awkward signs in request for food
and finally her word *omelet* understood
by the caretaker. And as they were finishing,
the other tourists—European boys just back
from the bars—heard their English
and immediately put “Peggy Sue”
on the record player. How they laughed
at the association, but got up anyway
twisting and jerking to *uh oh Peggy, my Peggy Sue-u-u*
till they all forgot they were *inland*
on the beautiful island of Corfu.

I see that girl, the long, dark hair from the pictures—
the one she was before the house, the children,
the cancer—flickering behind her glasses,
tucked into the creases around her mouth.

Half -Time

Those nights when the lusty jungle
of my hot insides would somehow
call out to you with all the monkeys
and toucans that live there,
waking you from your liquid sleep
in those nether hours before sunrise,

it felt like the whole earth
was deep in its curled-up slumber,
entombed in blankets and sheets
and we were the only ones alive,
moving to our crazy-love-rhythms,
in the midst of so much stillness.

Perfectly, we'd exhaust ourselves
for the last half of sleep,
the slow weightless sinking
to the bottom of night's dark sea.

Designer Lettuce

On Saturday mornings
while he teaches
the beginnings of Bach
to 10-year-olds in our living room,
I go to the little grocery store
that sells healthy delicacies:
organic veggies
and corn chips with soy
and flax seed. I am here
with the other young wives
of Saturday morning errands,
wearing our tight T-shirts
and flip-flops, hair
balled into careful messes
on the tops of our heads,
on the way to or from
the gym, the tanning bed.

I buy the obligatory bag
of designer lettuce,
and I imagine the gasps
if a head of iceberg
were to unexpectedly roll
through the door of this store.
I marvel at the broccoli-
cauliflower hybrids,
contemplate buying all-natural
pre-made simmer sauces of all kinds:
korma, marsala, mole, chipotle.
Fair-trade, Espresso blend coffee
that says it contains beans
from 7 different countries
finds its way into my cart.

A woman reaching above me
for a box of quinoa
catches my eye. I fear
she will find me out,
that she'll see my flip-flops
only cost \$3.50,
and that I was raised
in rural Pennsylvania
on iceberg and Folgers,
that she'll tell everyone

and my right to buy
cashew-macadamia-nut butter
and Peruvian baby sea scallops
will be revoked.

Whack

The summer I first started thinking
about joining the Peace Corps, I was sleeping with a man
twice my age. I told him about it one night
out on the deck of his big house,
a cedar A-framed giant on the edge
of some Pennsylvania woods. “Peace Corps?—
you’d *hate* that,” he said. “Why would you
volunteer to dig ditches and get malaria?”

I pursed my lips on the edge
of my wine glass, looking into his face—
wrinkles masked by the glow of bug candles
in fashionably painted buckets.

Two months later I drove away from that house
for the last time. He’d said “I love you,”
and I’d forgotten the next line.

Now, years and continents
between that scene and my new life here—
a life that requires work
I’ve come to adore, relish in, even—
I think of him and wonder
who he’s entertaining in that big house.

I think of him especially
when I’m outside in fall’s chilled air,
feeling so enlivened, so empowered
by the loud thwack of the heavy axe
whacking the wood apart—wood
I’ll use to make the warmth I’ll need,
the heat to cook the food I’ll eat.

Sometimes, I drive the axe
right through his head,
splitting it into two rolling halves
right down the middle, making his two lips
into four thin, pink strips—
the mouth that said “You’d *hate* that.”

Two

After/before

I. After the downstairs neighbors started fighting

but before I burned the chicken

I showed you a new tap step:

flap-flap-flap ball change

shuffle ball change

flap-flap.

We practiced it on the kitchen floor

till they forgot about their fight.

Later, full of burnt chicken,

we drew on the air

with our toes.

II. After we threw cake at the cat

but before I sang you my new song

in D flat Asia Minor

we wondered about the wings of things—

our own arms impossibly opaque—

which is probably why we can't fly,

not even with the strongest engagement

of moola bhandas. Soon,

the moon turned

almost completely to honey

and the mountains were strips of paper,

ripped where I had written lists.

III. After we watered the plants

but before I modeled

my open kimono,

we planned our trip.

We booked

two tickets for Tuva

to listen to

the Genghis Blues

sung

in so many long tones

by just one throat.

In the closet

I found shirts to wear

and the ones we'd take with us,

all in the colors

of countries on maps.

Hear

Today, when I looked at the picture
you sent to me here in Mongolia,
I froze at the sight of your face.
Though I have plenty of other pictures of you,
and certainly haven't forgotten what you look like—
there was a sort of naturalness to you gesture
that captured so much of you, it was alarming:

the inclination of your head,
dense dark lashes shading your eyes,
the evidence of working muscles in your arms
as you sat with your guitar,
playing something I am sure I could hear.

Grow

Mountains grow
from tiny movements.
India pushes under
the rest of Asia
to make Nepal higher,
Mt. Everest grows
a $\frac{1}{4}$ inch each year.

At the top of Dante's Peak
we put a small stone
on the pile of rocks
people like us have built—
to help Death Valley
stay under the sea,
growing our own mountains.

Halt

The day smelled like a dandelion
and tasted like a Saturday,
there were at least
a million evenings—
so many that we had to remind
the moon to turn on its light.

The night was a vapid mix
of cryptic quips
and dangerous portrayals
of things we'd never even seen.
When all the fashionable snacks
had finally been eaten,

a violin somewhere
screeched everything
to a halt,
which we were more
than grateful for.

Summer Heat, Mongolia

What's it like
to fuck in Mongolian?
Nashir...nashir, minee ekhnair
Does this harsh language
get soft and wet
when the young village men,
brown and lithe
undress their new wives?
...chi mash ikh horkhun bainaa.
Are the words even more
urgent and fervent
when bare skin slides and smacks?
Be chamd hartai.
Does it happen on rugs
on floors? Or maybe
on sagging beds,
beneath sheets
wilted from summer heat?

Numbers, Trees, Words

Dad spent all day teaching other people's kids—
a banner proclaiming "Math Is Beautiful" above the chalkboard,
but I was a pile of words he couldn't read.

I swore off numbers early on
when my second grade teacher tried to explain $8 \div 2$
using a forest as a metaphor—
some idea about the forest only being able to hold 8 trees.
The whole thing just seemed ridiculous
because I somehow knew that a forest
kept secrets and regardless of its size
the number of trees inside
was something that could hardly be counted.
I had no use for such absolutes,
so I gave it all up for play with words.
Who could use *appall* or *contemptible* in a sentence?
It was terribly funny during Dad's kitchen table history lessons:

This bowl is Germany, the spoon is Rommel.

The Nazi's appall me! That Hitler is contemptible!

During long sessions at the same table
I could never understand
the x 's and y 's of seventh grade algebra,
too many abstracts between us.

Last night on the phone, three time zones away
he asked me *So, do you write many poems?*

Puking in the bathroom

of the student union—
even as I feel everything inside of me
heave up and out—
I'm thinking, *this is a poem*.

I offer silent apologies to the girl
in the next stall—peeing curtly,
tinkling the music of liquid hitting liquid—
for the almost inhuman cough and gag
that accompanies it all,
a sound made only when in the grips
of the rocking boat of nausea.

Is this what Sartre meant,
the strange burning in the nose
and throat, the watery eyes?
Or, rather the strangeness
of this public yet private,
new but old occurrence—
the hand around a doorknob
for the very first time.

Love—America, Mongolia

Everyday you look at me
with so much lust for an America
I couldn't wait to leave.

You build your body like the West—
a firm, rippled stomach is skinny here,
where national wrestling stars
look like beer league softball players.

It isn't me you are so attracted to—
it's scenes from movies you see,
dubbed Russian or Chinese—
sidewalks, and streetlights,
fancy bars, fast cars.

The only women you've known
are these stringy boy-bodies—
straight boards with tiny little tits—
then I swing in, all lips and hips,
round ass wagging in front of you.

How long do you think
we could love on our looks,
on your ideas of me?
A year, maybe more?
People have loved for longer on less.

Sometimes I see flashes of it, too.
I could wash this village from you
in one big Roman tub, dress you

in tailored pants and glossy black shoes.
Drive you down a freeway
below a canopy of light
just to see neon reflected in your teeth.

Or maybe you see us here
in the village—me digging potatoes,
hauling water, squatting over a tub of laundry,
wringing your shirts clean.

Occasion

Sunshine is an occasion in Erie, Pennsylvania.
The first day of it brings the students
from the college on the hill out in droves.
Lacrosse across the lawn, next to the girls
on their spread blankets pretending to study
their books. Pale tummies long since shaded
by sweaters and coats make their debut today.

Just the same, rain is an occasion for us here
in the desert. We relish the darkness at midday,
hint of dank secrets hovering in clouds; delighted
by this snug phenomenon of occasion.

She dressed

in carmine-colored linen
and smelled
like ripe casaba,
a scent that
serenaded the air
around her hair—
long, loose—a black lather
washing her shoulders,
back shaped
like a valentine.
She moved like liquid—
fluid as hope,
quick as night.

Early Hours

You let me care for you
in these dark,
early hours of morning
between sleep and dreaming.
The woman and man
in each of us fades
into the mother I'll be,
the boy you've been.

Tongue to neck
to hand to breast.
Night tints your skin
blue. I am so warm with you,
lulled into a slow frenzy
by the strength of our motion.

Eyes like green
sea water magnets,
slick skin between us—
swimming fluid strokes
in the warm waters
of the nude moon.

Your head heavy on my chest
breathing in my skin,
lines of eyelid, lip, and chin
blurred to me as beauty.

Liquid Life

In sixth grade science class
they tell you everything
is either a solid,
a liquid, or a gas—
that water can be all three—
and that liquids take the shape
of their containers.

In a country no one ever comes to
or hears about, these four people
and me in three tiny rooms.
Our *haasha* with its sad dog,
old cookhouse, old outhouse.

My life is shaped like the lattice
of dirt paths here— fashioned
by footsteps and horse hooves—
the crumbling buildings
which are simply permitted
to crumble, the kids
in their plastic sandals.

My liquid life, in the shape
of this tiny village.

Music

Neon music like noise
small naughty hand on him

gorgeous pleasure of touch
a gift of enormous heat.

Just behind sordid sky
manic star
stains night bright black.

Wet breath
dresses lust
in warmth of gentle sweat.

Rhythm drips from his tongue
until her moan is music.

Bless You

I read somewhere
that physiologically
a sneeze and an orgasm
are very similar,

that the body responds
twice as much
to one orgasm
as it does to one sneeze.

I figure if this were really true
we'd enjoy having colds a lot more.

I think of all this
lying in the dark with a new lover.
He is showy and selfish in bed—
needs too much praise afterwards.
Two good sneezes
would have almost been better,
I almost say aloud.

He struts into the bathroom
in post-coital preen,
and I hear him sneeze
as he closes the door—
“Excuse me.”
“Halfway there,” I call.
“Thank you,” he says,
selfishly assuming
I'd said “Bless you.”

“And then what happened?”

“Well the mother of the bride pulled out her tuba—
really started honking away—
and the whole place came unglued.
I grabbed a bottle of merlot
and bunched myself up under the nearest table,
thankful for the too long linens.
I didn’t know how any of it got started,
but I was sure the answer would be clearer to me
once that bottle was empty. And it *was* much clearer,
as I led the last polka of the night,
recalling lyrics from the Moose Lodge or fire hall—
*...two peirogies in a pot, one is cold and one is hot...
la la la la la laaaa.* I was, of course used to such gaiety
after a hearty hunky-wedding feast: rigatoni and meat balls,
fried chicken, halushki, halupki; but I summoned the same strength
from the stuffed endive and smoked salmon crostini;
dainty morsels for this once somber affair.
The kick line went on late into the night.”

Ode #2

what exactly lies in the spaces of a caesura?
perhaps it all
flows time enough
to look up words
like lacustrine
(latrine latrine latrine achool!)
and paludal and alluvial and effluvial.

maybe caesuras are the stops
in the tap dance done by our friend
the tyrannous thesaurus rex.

then come
a few bars hummed
or strummed
or thrummed with a thumb
and a parumpumpumpum
little jack horner sat in a corner eating his curds and plum.

and the punctuation gets smarter and smarter
sprinkled like salt salt and the repetitious parts
parts are probably the smartest.

Love Poem

“I feel so manipulated by his good looks,”
Amy says between sips of beer
about the man she sleeps with
every so often. It’s not what he does
or says, it is the simple fact of his beauty—
which she hates to admit.

“Yeah, *he* came by last night.
I told him he shouldn’t stay over,
but of course he did,” I say
about my sometimes lover. Loneliness
we never speak of, but are slaves to.

“It’s OK, I boned *that* guy again,”
Diana offers. She does it
to remind herself that she’s still in love
with the man she left back in Chicago.

When the three of us get drunk together
we talk about all the things
we’ve learned from men
that we never wanted to believe,
and everything we already knew.

Darlings

Whenever you feel an impulse to perpetrate a piece of exceptionally fine writing, obey it — whole-heartedly — and delete it before sending your manuscript to press. Murder your darlings.

--Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch

My poet friend and I exchange little bits of paper,
scribbled with lines of poetry—
like teenage mothers we want some other,
more fit poem to take them in—
darlings we can't quite murder:
when I peel a mandarin
I can feel my mother's heart,
or cacti pretending winter.

We seek other lines to conclude the notions
we orphan, discard, but still think of fondly.
Grateful when we stumble across these awkward,
out of place parts of ourselves—changed,
in a poem we never knew.

Mongolian June

Sun sets slow
stays low
till almost midnight.
Soon the moon
punches a hole
in the sky.
My window
runs out of light.

Planting

In the heat of Mongolian July
Solymaa and I watch
as the rusty tractor
tears open a rectangle
of earth in the yard.

“Odoe, denduu khalun bain,”
she says. *Right now, it's too hot.*
When evening comes
with its low pink sun,
we go out to smooth the ruts
left by the huge tires.

Each with a tool
older than both of us,
we drag and push
the earth until it is
a smooth brown plot.

The mosquitoes dine heartily
on our necks, shoulders,
and arms as we sow summer
into ourselves.

Her children come home
to our work in time
for the first seeds.

Soylmaa, in the far corner
scores thin trenches
into the soil
for onion seeds.

The children and I
become an assembly line:
Boldo bending to scoop
dents in the earth,
flinging dirt with both hands
through his wide spread legs.

I, with my paper cone
of tiny black turnip seeds
sprinkle a few into each divot,
then Uryangaa, her tiny hands

coiled around the water bucket,
floods each one.

We pat the seeds into the earth
with the backs of our hands.

Andalusia

July midnight in Cordoba—
open air dance.
Duende glistens in the flirts
of the dancer's skirt,
in the flower behind her ear,
between the grace of each finger
flared to the music
of a striped guitar played
in tune with thirsty olive groves
and musky cypress.

Firm and Shiny

The lilt of assembled star power,
boning up on small wonders.
Swanky and sweaty, flipping through
the style file for a charged-up superchange.
All aglow with all things firm and shiny
and wearing the hair they were born to wear.
Just takes a long short story
and a little asset management.
Denizens of glass rooms
with perfume bottle floors.
They say “Fuck off” and guffaw—
“Kudos to all involved!”

At Holtzer's Deli

When I was a kid at Holtzer's Deli
I would shyly slide a pack
of Juicy Fruit on the counter.

Will that be all?

I'd nod yes, clutching
the sweaty dull-green dollar
in my hand and finally releasing it
to the lady with the too thin lips—

my sister and I used to call her
“the thin lipped lady,” but maybe
it was just that her teeth were too large.

After this exchange—
that's when the miracle happened—
she'd type a secret code into the register
then the drawer would ding open
and from her hand to mine
a glorious jingling of shine,
different sizes of clinking wonder.

I think of this wonder—
of what it means here, in bed with you,
sweaty after we come hard
and often like new lovers do—
of the miracle that happens
after the exchange.

Messages

Around the light bulb—
bare, hung from
the open ring of my ger—
a moth performs
manic spirals and zig-zags,
up and down, casting the shadow
of some giant bird
on the pages of my book,
on my spoked ceiling,
the painted wooden floor.

Big hawk, tiny moth
needing light,
so frantic to get close
to what burns.
Your shadows
write messages
faded by sunrise.

Scissors

During crafts hour
you were the only one
allowed to use scissors,
you tell me months later,
presenting me with a purple
and green bracelet you wove there.

I try to picture you
mingling with the other girls—
the anorexics, schizophrenics,
failed suicides, and junkies—
each telling her story
over plastic trays of mashed potatoes
shaped by ice cream scoops.

When it's your turn,
you tell them of cheating the egg timer
five minutes longer than was allowed
for your phone conversations,
and the big night when you got caught
sneaking your boyfriend in
through the bedroom window.

They blink in disbelief—
probably because your story
sounds like a sitcom episode.
“Well, that's why she's allowed
to use the scissors,” the anorexic says,
pushing peas onto her mound
of mashed potatoes. “Mmm hmm,”
you say knowingly, draining the last
of your milk from its carton.

Snow, Mongolia

There is no joy in the first falling
when everything starts to look
like a Christmas card—
probably because
there are no Christmas cards.

No excitement of a new winter
when lessons stop in classrooms
for children to press their faces
to windows—steaming them
with their warmth—the first
white magic of winter
sprinkling the grass with clean,
shimmering mystery.

It doesn't happen here
because we have no warmth
to steam windows with.
We keep coats and hats on
during lessons in this old building
with little heat and drafty doors.

Snow has lost its magic here
because there is so little distance
between us and nature.
This extreme cold, the biting wind,
snow soaking through my ger walls
trapping in a chill—the biggest fire
never thawing the cold that lives
in the joints of my fingers,
on the tip of my nose.

We were spectators
to Pennsylvania's winters;
all that snow. We rolled down hills
covered in it, and rolled up men made of it,
always knowing there were warm rooms,
hot showers, hot chocolate, waiting somewhere.

Here the walk to school seems so long,
that some mornings I think
perhaps snow is like love;
it's closeness, the lack of distance
that takes away the mystery, the magic—

snow cutting
under my hood, seeping into my boots.

Hum

Talking enough dirty
to smear walls clean.

Writhing

in rhythm of sweat.

Flesh smacking hands,
bass line of music in moans

Dance of tongue

breast

lip. Hum.

Three

I. Making poems out
of used dirt and new water
soon they will be mud.

II. Last week this sidewalk
was a hole, men with hard hats
digging far below.

III. Bright mornings, too warm
with sun and thick heat, our skins
share blankets and sweat.

On October 12th Megan sends me three cards,

a pair of socks and a book.
She probably actually sent them
about five weeks ago;
today they've arrived
here in Mongolia.

The cards are for my birthday,
Halloween, and Thanksgiving.
Each is full of cryptic quips
I can hear her saying
out of the corner
of her mouth—
where sarcasm and humor
have taken up
permanent residence.

*Hope no one steals your yak
on your birthday, This year
I'm dressing up like a Mongolian,
and Happy Fat People's Day
to celebrate each occasion.*

The book is poetry,
the new Tony Hoagland
collection. I'll probably
read it all before bed tonight.

Photos drift out
of the front cover—
shots of her trip to Chile
and a vacation to Costa Rica.

She shows me Neruda's house
and the city sprawl of Valpraiso.
Another is of tiny monkeys
high up in trees.

And one of her and her lover
in front of lush rainforest
in Quepas. I am stunned
by their freshness, the nubile glow
of their arms and legs,
browned from a summer
of Central American sun.

It is wonderful to see
her life going by
in four glossy squares.
Makes me think
of what I'll show her
of here, the stories I'll tell.
This was my house, crazy huh?
I'll say between sips of beer,
pointing to the cone of white canvas.
And this is from my first Naadam
when a horse side-swiped me
I'll say, pointing to the small scar
above my right eye.

Or maybe I'll first tell her
about tonight. Sitting
on a wooden stool in my ger,
carefully holding her photographs,
a pair of socks
decorated with jack-o-lanterns
draped over my leg.

Reading her words
makes me feel happy and sad
all together, in the space between
laughing and crying
where the corners of my mouth
can't decide to turn up or down.

I poke at the fire,
breathe onto the glowing coals
to re-ignite flames
and to steady my own breathing.
Winter has started already,
I'll need these flames to last.

Maybe first I'll tell her
that October 12th
was cold and to warm my feet
I put on two very good, black socks.

Symphony

Waiting for sleep
under a blanket of wild dogs,
this bed of language
becomes a stage, the moon
a spotlight on restlessness.

No one, no thing, wants sleep
tonight. Fists pounding
fence gates, opening
and closing all night;
rousing the dogs and the drunks,
sending their dissonant symphony
up to the stars in one long, strident howl.

Amuser

Contradictions of the amuser
and the time it takes to tease her
into something she's always wanted.

The fors and hows of it all
come all undone
and full of some long longing.

Two soft pears,
one halved peach.
She is his Goblin Market.
Fruits he will always bargain for,
barter for.
For, what comes from the tree of her
is sweet and slick with pleased.

Guitar Music

You're in the kitchen playing Bach,
I'm writing this poem in the bedroom.
I come out for more coffee, to listen and watch.

Yum digga digga dum digga digga dum,
you sing through the rests,
eyes squinted, head pulsing the rhythm.
Jeans torn and frayed
where the bout rests on your thigh,
bare toes curled into the carpet.

You look up and smile,
lips closed, running a hand
along my side, shoulder to hip—
along the parts of me
shaped like a guitar.

To the River

Soylmaa and I
to the river go,
to the river our tubs
and yellow soap
go, *cho cho*
to the dog at our heels
as we to the river
go washing the river
into our clothes,
where our hands work
like water flows.
Out of the soapy tub,
and into the river
go socks, shirts, towels,
my hair even too,
into the river
your fingers, Soylmaa
laugh at the tangles
curled over and through,
as you go washing
river into me, into you,
when we to the river go.

In late March

the great see-saw of seasons
tips gradually toward spring.
We silently congratulate ourselves
for surviving another winter,
so grateful for the sun,
drying five months of cold
from our bones. We walk straighter

in the streets now, no longer scrunching
into our heavy coats, hunching
against the whipping wind.

Each day steals a few more minutes
from night, we are alive longer
in the brightness; our bare heads
gather heat in our hair once again.

We nearly forgot
our warm weather lives,
which spring reminds us of,
just in time. The blessing of change
that we all, for once, embrace.

Some Nights

Some nights she goes places
where he can't find her,
when she tries to dig
a piece of Mongolia
out from under her fingernail,
something that hasn't yet left her:
the comfort of warmth,
such an arduous task some mornings,
the lone light bulb
only sputtering its glow most nights.

APPENDIX

MONGOLIAN LANGUAGE GLOSSARY

airag- a popular drink made from fermented mare's milk.

ger- traditional yurt-like dwelling of nomads, now also lived in as permanent residences in villages, town and cities of all kinds.

haasha- fenced-in yard adjacent to a Mongolian home.

khoshuur- fried, meat filled dumpling, a very common food.

Tsaagan Sar- literally means "white month," or "white moon." Mongolia's New Year holiday celebration in February.

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