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## Jesus' Shadow

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JESUS' SHADOW

by

Meredith Lee Stewart

Bachelor of Arts  
Northwest Christian College  
2002

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the

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

**Graduate College**  
**University of Nevada, Las Vegas**  
**May 2007**

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The Graduate College  
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April 9, 20 07

The Thesis prepared by

Meredith Lee Stewart

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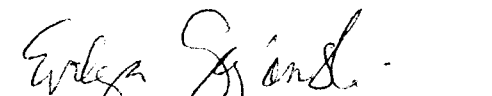
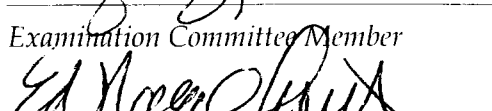
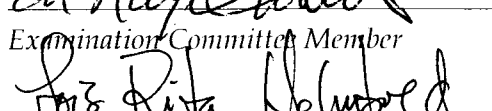
Jesus' Shadow

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

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

  
Examination Committee Chair

  
Dean of the Graduate College

  
Examination Committee Member  
  
Examination Committee Member  
  
Graduate College Faculty Representative

## ABSTRACT

### **Jesus' Shadow: A Sample Abstract**

by

Meredith Lee Stewart

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

The poems in this collection are mainly drawn from personal experience, especially the experience of place as seen through the perspective of the “I.” Many of the poems have overtly spiritual themes. I envision even those poems that aren’t overtly spiritual as being prayer-like because both prayer and poetry require a connection to something outside the self as well as deep honesty about the self.

There are some poems in this collection that are inspired mainly by research rather than personal experience. I focused much of this research on women’s issues and bringing to light women who have been overlooked by history. Though based on research, some still overlap with my personal experience. “Miranda in Las Vegas” is both about Shakespeare’s character from *The Tempest* and my own experiences as a woman living in Las Vegas. Thus, the intersection of several different themes hold together the poems of *Jesus’ Shadow*.

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Thanks also to Evelyn Gajowski for her inspiration and encouragement. Deep love and gratitude to my parents, Kenneth and Carolyn Stewart, and my brother, Daniel Stewart, for their support.



# I. Jesus' Shadow

## Jesus' Shadow

As with anyone under the sun,  
his shadow must have been there:  
lack of light  
creeping beneath his feet at mid-day,  
stretching long behind him in the evening.  
When he preached about a city on a hill,  
ate multiplied fish in Bethsaida,  
went through a wheat field on Sabbath.  
When he told stories, healed people, walked  
from town to town in Judea,  
his shadow followed, acted out  
mock-miracles in gray undetail.  
Did he like to watch his shadow  
in his childhood mornings, running beside him  
on the walls of flat-roofed houses?  
Did he let his shadow sink, when walking on water,  
into soft, lake-bottom sand?  
And were there days when he curled  
up inside his shadow, shrinking  
at the things he couldn't change,  
thinking of his future  
and the darkness of the sixth hour?

## Forgetting Grace

I can no longer remember  
the name of the street across from school  
where the sycamore trees thrived  
and colored themselves  
beyond their own lines.  
What other names will wander  
past the borders of my mind?  
My best friend in the whole wide world of fifth grade.  
The make, model of the car I drove in high school.  
The man in my church I prayed for as he died of cancer.  
The five children he left behind.  
Oh, help me, it's grace, I know, to forget.  
The name of the character  
in the Borges story who never  
forgot and died of it.  
He died, didn't he? What grace.

## Oranges and Rice

I left every morning that week  
without breakfast, an orange  
rolling in my backpack as I walked down Maryland Parkway,  
the cars honking horns and skidding  
to make the left turn light,  
a homeless woman (who never asked  
for money) in her thick coat with the furry hood.  
It was the first warm week in Las Vegas, mid-80s, in only March  
and I wore flip-flops  
every day and had conferences  
with all my students and checked the mail  
with the key my brother had given back: a bank statement,  
charity letter, unwanted coupons.  
Our trash piled up, especially the bags  
from my brother's fast food;  
it swelled to a small pile we had to walk around.  
In class, we discussed New Criticism—  
the divorcing of "I" from the poet—  
I went for a walk among the spring trees  
on the North side of campus, the only place  
with real grass. The neighborhood kids played  
tag around the fenced-off pool. Men congregated  
at the bus stop and whistled when I went by.  
I had rice for dinner, with butter and salt,  
every night, and if I couldn't fall asleep it was only because  
I was thinking of myself.

## Brain Tumor Fantasy

One more evening to keep the fantasy alive.  
Tomorrow morning, 8:45, the doctor will tell me my MRI

was 215 dollars of straight stillness  
and a needle in my arm for nothing more than

migraines. Just migraines.

He will say it like good news,  
like an apostle preaching freedom

from sin on the Roman roads,

like V-J Day, like I'm supposed to kiss the first sailor I see.

He won't even mention the word tumor. Just "migraines."  
But until he says the word I can pretend

something is growing inside my head,  
pressing on it, crowding it like the last elevator out of hell.

Something pushing buttons labeled depression, anxiety, that flush on my face,  
swell of my sinuses, my temples thumping,

my eyes stabbed by light.

Some think the real Count Dracula had migraines  
and that's why he only went out at night.

Too bad for him, but me, I can envision a tumor,  
concrete and inhuman, though fleshy and yellow like fat,

to blame my vampire-like neediness on.

My missed classes and unwritten papers  
I can believe doctors will fix,

will open my brain like a duffle bag,  
reach in and remove the tumor with tongs,

and zip me back up again.  
Then my head will float in lightness above my body.

My heart will stop pumping so much sadness  
and let each beat bring desire for doing and breathing

will come naturally again. I will give  
to everyone that asks it, to every student, every poem,

every friend who needs someone to water their plants.  
They will say, "You seem like a new person. Is this who you were all along?"

And I'll say "Yes,"

to every e-mail, every beauty,  
every cell of my body. Yes.

*The Enduring Vision*

– title of my eleventh grade history textbook

History is a burden, 5.7 lbs and 1,114 pages,  
which I carried in my backpack  
across eleventh grade.

History is a vision  
on the textbook cover: a nineteenth century town  
or a seventeenth century quilt, I'm not sure which.

In class, we spoke of the vision of the Founding Fathers,  
wrote timed-essays on the vision of the West.  
The vision of Reconstruction.

Each week we read America transformed. Into the New Deal.  
The Great Society. The New World Order.  
The Contract with America.

Now, years later,  
the small type blurs on the glossy paper.  
Memory dims like the light of the City on a Hill.

Facts fail me like the League of Nations.  
But I will not forget the weight,  
the imprint of the book

still red on my dozing face,  
left every Sunday before my chapter notes were due.  
Sometimes, when I woke up,

textbook open flat on my bedroom desk,  
I'd think I dreamed America's future  
upbeat as the songs I sang in church.

Then I'd read on:  
witch-hunts, Indian Reservations, Teddy's "big stick," *laissez-faire*—  
each chapter revealed new past horrors endured,

enduring like the child I couldn't shake  
from my adolescent life.  
At seventeen I fought every war as if reborn inside me

even as new wars erupted all around:

first Bosnia, then later, Afghanistan, Iraq.  
A textbook couldn't tell me what was next.

At twenty-four I wake from my adolescence  
in the middle of the night.  
The sense of song still lingers

and I think I see a vision in the dark.



## Late Night Litany

dishes fill sink, cockroaches mate  
on carpet

refrigerator buzzes, lamplight  
shadows slant

window blinds close, outside:  
signs neon messages

and cars pass cars  
in direction sunrise / sunset

and strangers in beds nightmare  
black waves that endlessly

unlimit the ocean

## For R Only

Darkorange: swallow once, no twice daily  
(by no means the most  
a person can take).

When they cut up the brains of the dead depressed  
they find less darkorange chemical  
than a person can take.

Aren't you feeling better? But  
my issues. What issues?

Your insurance won't go through so you must spend Three Days with no  
darkorange.

Day One: I watch the shades of gray change on my  
ceiling.

Do you hear voices? No.  
What is that written on your hand? Things to remember.  
Do you have trouble remembering things? Not when I write them on my  
hand.

Day Two: Will (boyfriend— not his real name) wants  
to cuddle. I want to vomit him  
out of my tingling stomach and queasy skin.

On a scale of 1 to 10—  
1 being just on the edge of happiness  
10 being so depressed you want to die—  
how do you feel? I feel like a 4.

Day Three: I want to  
black out and  
wake up in a hospital, the whole darkorange secret  
explained to someone

who can save me. One can only hope.

## Therapist & You

He is short and bow-legged  
and when he talks his mouth barely opens.  
In the first session, he fidgets too.  
You feel better about not being perfect.

He won't let you tell your life story  
over and over again.  
He is not that indulgent.  
Instead, he tells you to get out of bed

every morning, to eat regular meals  
and to write down your emotions during the day.  
So you set your alarm clock,  
go to the grocery store and you write:

*I feel overwhelmed when I wake.  
I feel guilty when I read "Love your neighbor."  
The stray cat crosses the street and I feel tired.  
The dishes rot in the sink and I feel alone.*

When you show him what you've written  
he doesn't look at it, says  
the exercise is the point, the *doing*,  
not whether or not he reads it.

So you keep writing, and you don't stop  
seeing him. You like it  
when he frowns when you tell him  
you didn't get any sleep last night.

He shifts in his chair,  
tries to give you advice.  
But you don't expect too much.  
He tells you, let good enough be good enough.

## Reading in the Dark

Tonight, no TV shows, no chocolate.  
No turning the lights on  
in every room,  
no messages left on machines.  
I read Vallejo  
and let the melancholy come.  
I read: *Perdóname, Señor: qué poco he muerto!*  
Forgive me Lord: how little I have died!  
The shape of the words is the small of my back  
on a blue chair.

## II. Crush

## Crush

3:00 AM, I wake and don't know why.  
The wind in trees sounds like the ocean,  
like the waves holding me down.

At noon, I swim laps to forget you,  
not lengthwise, but across,  
three strokes each way. I lift  
my head out of water, push off the wall.

When the desert sun sets I walk to the store,  
buy toilet paper and your favorite ice cream.  
I walk back, imagine the cold weight  
in my stomach the whole way home.

## The Ice Cream Man

Imagine the ice cream man,  
hands resting on the steering wheel.  
He no longer hears "The Entertainer" in the tone-quality  
of crackling speakers. Rather, it is the current  
his thoughts run down as the wheels spin on summer asphalt  
sparking lightbulbs in his head.

Imagine a young woman curled up in a big blue chair  
by the window, napping,  
wrapped up in her own dreams of angels who sing  
and paint her toenails the color of oranges  
in December, bright enough to be noticed by  
the guys in her youth group and the first chair clarinet.  
The polish is almost dry. She hears the sound

of children's feet when they hit the sidewalk in quick, staccato beats,  
that match the sound of music played in a white tin can,  
dented on one side, with worn-out posters of grapesicles and fudge bars  
and with wheels that have stopped though the music's still spinning.  
Imagine their high-pitched pleasant screams  
as the ice cream man passes out drumsticks and Eskimo pie.  
The girl wakes from her dream only mostly,  
and "The Entertainer" doesn't drown out the angels.

Now imagine she dreams of the ice cream man  
pushing pianissimo on the gas pedal,  
rolling on to another street.  
Her eyelids flutter gracefully.

## First Memory

Then, red Subaru,  
car seat, upside-  
down. All the muscles  
in my brain flex  
to hold on: *The Little Fish  
That Got Away*.  
I tell the story

at parties of the first time  
my mind became  
soft glue; orange  
beard, a man  
helped me through  
the broken window  
into my young uncluttered soul,  
a red car crashing.



## Cactus Flower

I never knew  
that cacti flower  
until the day  
one arrived  
in the mail,  
its bloated, green body flattened  
onto a postcard and  
in the center  
a single blossom.  
My child hands held the union  
of spike and petal,  
green and pink.  
I couldn't believe it.  
Perhaps the needles had pinned  
the flower there?  
It was a note  
or a flag.  
Maybe a wheel  
turning  
in the washed-out desert sky  
then snagged  
by the plant's pointed-end.  
But it couldn't come from inside  
the cactus' strange hide,  
from layers  
of flesh and  
watery veins,  
held there until the cactus  
confessed its secret:  
*I, too, can break into bloom.*

## Ghost of the First Chair Clarinet

He is here again, orange hair;  
black and silver instrument reflects  
the light of the desert sun.

His fingers flicker  
across the keys and holes.  
His face is a red delicious apple.

I know his tongue feels the pressure  
of air, presses  
on the reed and lifts, presses and lifts with each sound.

He sits next to me to show his technique:  
an alternate fingering for high G,  
the way the bottom lip should curl taut around the teeth.

He pushes his glasses back  
up on his face—a swift unconscious movement,  
every other part of him intent

on the lesson. I don't tell him  
that I have quit practicing for good, that I am the teacher now,  
of words, not notes.

And I don't remind him  
of the pitch of screeching brakes,  
the beat of his head against windshield.

Nothing can muffle the sound of his playing,  
the reverberation of ancient wood  
that skips across air and swells and dips and expands and overflows everything so  
afterwards,

even the silence is music.

## Break

I sit up in bed for a long  
time in the morning.  
Seven o'clock slants  
light under the vertical blinds.  
My cat licks my arm.

I move to the couch.  
My back against Goodwill blue.  
From the window I see your car parked  
across the lot, old gray with a new  
black bumper. It is good  
to know where you are,  
but I worry you are alone  
too much.

If tonight I see your car  
is missing I will be happy  
you are out with friends—  
maybe drinking beer, maybe hearing  
music live, sounds that crack  
from instrument to ear—  
and I will be jealous, staring  
at your parking space,  
empty in the lot.

### III. New Heaven New Earth

## New Heaven New Earth

I wish I could be buried  
without a box  
naked  
my cells exchanging chemicals  
with the dirt  
till the dirt replaces my flesh  
wraps around my bones

Let this be the body that rises  
on Resurrection Day

Or maybe Christ will be so long in coming  
that even my bones give way  
and all that's left  
is the whole earth  
to rise again

## Fires

Translate bones to ashes.  
Wyclif's remains are martyred.  
Mother's tongue licked by flames.  
Fear of her is hot, consuming,  
a gasp for breath, swallowing smoke.  
The people choking on Jerome.  
Their endless chanting, *mea culpa, mea culpa*.  
Sin translates to death. *Mea culpa, mea culpa*.

Translate bones to ashes, Jerome to mother tongue.  
Translate alone, this broken home  
of skin and sinews, cells to holy temple;  
throat to organ pipe to sacred space.  
Translate pain to open up this dusty book again.  
If God's mind overlaps mine in the least,  
it overlaps the least of these  
and with Wyclif I write: grace  
translated gift  
translated blood  
translated adoption fire.

## Psalm of Astronomy

*because of another David*

When I consider astronomy,  
the sky spread out at night above  
the red powdered earth in Valley of Fire;  
when I consider the sky with its constellations, elliptical  
galaxies, orbiting asteroids,  
this work of God's finger, white hot  
star clusters, cosmic grains of sand burning  
streaks against the atmosphere--  
what is humanity that You love us, God?  
Who am I, living on the ground,  
that You think of me?

If I dug under layers of sandy sediment,  
the hardened remains of ancient sea dunes;  
if I went to Andromeda, or walked on the ice of an outer planet,  
or woke with the light of the furthest sun,  
even there You would surround me.  
That dawn would pour forth Your presence,  
the coming darkness utter Your infinitude,  
and speak of the secret, lonely womb  
where You wove me with the same matter  
that used to fill the stars.

St. Christopher  
martyr, third century

When the boy came,  
you put him on your shoulders,

parted the river like a ship's prow.  
It was your daily prayer

to carry people, to keep them  
from the white current and peaks of water.

His legs dangling down your chest,  
chin resting on your head,

should have been a feather-faint yoke.  
But the weight pushed

against your muscles, you swayed, your knees  
buckled. You almost dipped under.

Did you recognize the boy by then?  
Did you see earth in the iris of his eyes?

He told you to plant your staff in the ground,  
and you watched flowers bubble out in newly-dyed, dappled colors.

\*\*

While you were tortured and  
beheaded, your mind saw nothing

but blossoms, bright colors  
from the deadest of wood,

always fresh, always just bursting forth.



## The Christmas Truce

For a moment, no guns snapped,  
no cold fingers flinched.  
From the guts of the trenches  
an old hymn welled up:  
*Silent night, holy night*  
Across no-man's-land the British joined in:  
*All is calm, all is bright*  
on Christmas Eve on the Western Front.

When the sun rose, they left the deep  
earth like an exhale: played football, traded  
cigars, buried their dead without words.  
And laughed like the war was over.

No more than a comma in history: unordered  
the soldiers stopped fighting.  
Like a witness at our trial,  
it cries this against us: we could have stopped,  
we knew how.

And this in our defense: that we believed,  
if only for awhile, in the peace  
of an infant, the distance he crossed.

For the Missionary Woman Whose Husband Died in the Crossfire Between  
the Terrorists Who Had Kidnapped Them and the Filipino Military  
[Spring 2002]

*God is pleased.*

Under stiff brown blankets your body rests,  
lulled by the dripping of the IV into your veins  
and the throbbing of your thigh  
beneath the bleach-white gauze.  
Your mind is sticky  
with the heat of the jungle and crowded  
by large green leaves, trees so thick  
you have no room to breathe,  
nowhere to escape when men press  
cold metal into your back.  
But here in a quiet hospital in Kansas,  
nurses touch you gently with gloves  
and friends send neatly written notes  
saying "Get better soon" and  
"God be with you."

*All this is a part of God's plan.*

The rope-burns on your wrists,  
the dust they made you sit in,  
the rains that finally came,  
warm drops running down your face unchecked.  
Your lips move, forming words out of air:  
"God is pleased. All this is a part of His plan."  
You tell it to the doctors in their clinical gowns.  
You tell it to reporters—

*His plan, His plan—*  
who wear suits and write down what you say.  
*God is pleased—*

but it feels like a lie  
when you wake from that starless nightmare  
and you're alone under sweaty sheets.  
Guilt comes like a gun  
cocked and pointed at your heart,  
like a combat boot pressed against your chest.  
You hide in the emptiness  
of your room, but God is there.

God collects your tears in a jar,  
saves them for his secret purposes.

## Below the Clouds

We sit in a sandwich shop.  
Thin clouds gather like cloth on the horizon.  
I tell you about the time I prayed  
for the rains to stop and Fresno saw  
the third driest December in recorded history.  
*Coincidence*, you say,  
as if this story were my argument against  
all holes in meaning, all spaces  
where words evaporate, unheard.  
*Coincidence*, as if I don't know what this cost  
the farmers siphoning their water from the North,  
making oranges grow out of dust.  
Or their employees counting the lost drops  
at the unemployment line.

We sit together in a sandwich shop,  
guess the why of the clouds  
that weave in and out of the evening light.  
*Arrogant*, you say. I nod.

## IV. Christmas in Las Vegas

## Under the Speed Limit

The harsh sounds of my unused  
Spanish on a night when the dust hovers in the air

clouding out the more distant buildings  
reminds me of all the things that fall short,

that have fallen short.

The pants I had to wear that barely touched my ankles.

The evening walk by the Willamette River  
where everything was right

except I only almost loved him.

I want to be driving in a clear-aired desert

when a friend's hand rests on my shoulder  
and we keep driving until we get to a place with no memories

no currents, nothing  
but new grass growing free from trees blocking out the sun

or the need of sprinklers.

I could make plants grow, I know I could be a gardener.

I know if we never get there

I could love seeing scenes with the top down

passing power lines and resistant rock, no other voices  
in my head but one and it is laughing

and makes me want to laugh too.

Then there would be the porches we'd pass

people sitting at the end of day  
the waitress who memorized our order

but then forgot the pancakes.

If we wanted, we could have pancakes

every evening, wherever we were  
without feeling it a vice

or wishing we were more well-rounded.  
Maple flavor lingering, maybe I'd fall asleep, maybe I wouldn't.

Either way, we will go, we are already gone.  
We will be gone forever

and still make it back before the dust rises  
in daylight, another cloud with no rain.

## Leaving the Gift Store

Before, goats existed only  
in postcards or on the paper bags  
we crammed with magnets and T-shirts  
and handed to tourists for them to take  
to Texas or Boston or Japan.  
We spent hours in the store  
dusting mugs with mountains painted  
on them and stocking the shelves  
with smiling, stuffed-animal goats.

But then we took a step  
outside to plant our feet  
on the face of a mountain.  
And the goats were right there, waiting  
with their heads cocked sideways,  
poised motionless on the trail  
as if they really were just postcards after all.

We hollered at them to get off  
our trail so we could pass.  
But knowing very well whose trail  
it was, they let our voices  
echo off the peaks and die  
on their pointed ears.

Even when they moved and we continued  
on past mountain after mountain  
in the unbroken human awe of three  
who face a world of solid rocks  
grown to the sky,  
we still had no words to touch upon  
something so untouched,  
no words to make ourselves believe  
that we really saw those fuzzy  
ghost-white men with hooves.

So in the end, when we left  
the mountains, the goats  
and went back to four walls,  
we said nothing.  
We opened our purses  
to buy keychains and coffee mugs:



the only evidence we could offer other places  
that the mountains and the goats were really there.

## To Vegas, With Love

I love you, Las Vegas.

I love your excess, your pulsing watts of electricity, your sucking of energy from the waters of the earth.

I love you because I am here  
and there is nothing else but here for me to love.

I love your tall hotels,  
each one trying to out-reach the other, out-shout the other  
each one wearing a different costume, each with its own identity crisis.  
You are Paris, New York, Egypt, Ireland, Venice, outer-space, Medieval Europe,  
and you are more than these things  
and not any of these things.

I love to walk down Maryland Parkway  
and collect the black of your dirt on my toes and knees;  
to cross your wide streets, to dodge the metal that has wheels and blind eyes.

I love that in-between your buildings and above your self-important, frenzied traffic  
anyone can see the mountains in any direction.  
The mountains are bare and indifferent, and I love that.

## Leaving Fresno

### I. Fresno in Eugene

Is wide streets, thin trees and  
rinsed of color.  
Is strip malls and traffic.  
Is when I get out of the car and my back side  
is wet with sweat. I always lock my door.  
In Eugene, the sidewalks  
of Fresno become dirtier. The ghettos  
and gangs grow.  
But also is Laos and Armenia and Vietnam and Mexico.  
Whiteness not everywhere. Orange  
spheres hanging from trees.

### II. Fresno in Las Vegas

Absence of stucco. Grass growing  
green on the side of the freeway in winter and vacant lots.  
Fall, old trees.  
Is curling up in my blue sofa-chair  
while the windows fog up and frost forms  
on the lawns I pretend is snow.  
In Vegas, Fresno hovers  
on the edge of vines  
next to grapes drying on paper in the sun,  
almonds still fuzzy and pale green on their trees.

## It Is Nice To Be Lost Sometimes

when the rain-blurred sky  
hovers near the crest  
of our shoulders; when light-on-earth  
becomes a gentle beam  
we hold in our hands.  
It is nice to be lost  
together and not need to be found  
by anyone but the fuzzy moon or the gracious drops  
that slide off pine needles.  
It is so nice to be lost, we don't think  
of when we'll find where our cars  
are parked, walk on the ground where nothing  
grows. We'll say goodnight under empty sky  
and each drive home alone  
on well-lit roads.

## I Walk Las Vegas When It Rains

Neon fuses with puddles.  
The brown chalk of dust  
washes off walls of sky.

I walk this city when it rains.  
The hunger of cacti is mine.  
Drops soak the dry cracks of my skin.

My sandals on smooth pavement slip.  
A tiny thump, thump pats down my frizzy hair.  
Traffic takes it easy on slick streets.

Clouds are strips of elastic  
holding steel in the wind.  
Today the burden of glamor is lifted,  
gets lost in the gloom.

Today there is hope  
for the hypocrite and for all  
who've trapped themselves in contradictions.  
Wet desert. Electric bath.

I walk this city when it rains.

## Christmas in Las Vegas

I finally pulled two ripe tomatoes  
from the vines growing on my porch rail.  
It's late late November and the rest  
are still tight green balls waiting to turn red.  
So too the leaves are on the trees waiting to turn dead.  
I hear the wind from inside my apartment walls  
and by the weekend it will freeze overnight.  
Poinsettias behind Leno's desk remind me  
that it's Christmas.  
Samuel L. Jackson talks about his anagram and golf.  
The way Tiger Woods can control the ball.  
Everyone wants to be someone else.  
I want to be a person walking  
past bare branches, noticing the tips  
are twigs encased in frost,  
noticing the color (whatever it is)  
of the sky in between  
over some other North American city.  
The Tonight Show is broadcast in all of them.  
But none have skyscraping casinos shining at night.  
In the undarkness of so many purely human lights,  
who needs a Christmas tree?  
Who needs a Star in the East?

## V. Eve & I

## A World of Evils

for all the scolds and shrews

Think of your tongue  
against the roof of your mouth,  
pressing on your teeth,  
rising and falling as you speak.  
Now think of an iron bar  
with an iron bulb  
and nine iron barbs  
lodged in the back of your throat.  
Your heart beats in your tongue.  
Your tongue tastes its own blood.  
It tastes acid from your heaving stomach.  
Your tongue is full of holes  
you know will heal.  
But you will never use it to speak again,  
not even to tell this story.



## Mileva Maric Einstein

She has a baby and a husband who's obsessed  
with light. She has laundry, their tight apartment  
and checking his math  
at the kitchen table at night.  
Her failed exams, unearned degree, a sacrifice  
unequal to his so great gift:  
the unity of everything,  
ideas that bend our brains to God.

She is at a train station in Germany  
holding the mute hand  
of their son. Creases on her face fold  
back the tedious dust of days.  
Now he is famous.  
Now he gets on the train.  
The spinning. The speed. The light hitting  
her face in between the cars as they pass;  
faster and faster he leaves her.

## To Lavinia

I am wresting an alphabet, a language of convenient lies.  
I am wresting a book, a best-seller, a million copies  
from your mutilated flesh, which is so bloody it's blank,  
so silent my Shakespeare seminar hears long speeches,  
edicts of revenge, cries asking for your father's hand to murder you.  
Still I am wresting an alphabet, an autobiography  
of my body; my hands sew samplers no one sees,  
my tongue is so articulate and poised  
that men go deaf, read my words as if a mirror,  
force their thoughts inside me.  
I am wresting this alphabet, these words  
from gestures I can't see, from songs I've never heard,  
hoping desperately to learn  
your language sounds like mine,  
hoping somehow I can spell  
"truth" and "voice" and "peace."

## Ophelia to Laertes

I say rosemary breeders and mirth-sister skull.  
I say bearded head-hunters, the post-script  
of angel wheels.  
Call me a document in madness,  
call my sense unshaped,  
my song insanity.  
Still, I will not fail to willow away in water,  
purge myself with nettles and crow-flowers.  
Still, I will lose the earth-garments,  
learn laughter from the grave-digger.  
Speak at my funeral— it is no more than a dumb show,  
an apparition of tongue, a portent of sheeted death.  
Sharpen your sword— it cannot fight  
against violets, against pansies, daisies, rue.  
You can patch these words together,  
make them say revenge.  
I say eclipse of the after-life.  
I say worms are my only kin.

## Miranda in Las Vegas

Here in this island  
in an ocean of dry mountains,  
the wind kicks up a tempest of dust,  
my shadow falls on pictures of naked women  
flexing their greasy muscles.  
Here in this disconnect of the Mojave desert  
cocktail waitresses flirt, bars never close,  
hotels etch with steel  
the borders of the sky.  
*Here* is peopled with a thousand Calibans  
of every color, their heads hanging  
from car windows,  
their eyes stripping me.  
I long for a home I've never seen: a true continent  
of endless land, solid, unfragmented.  
And a sister who will befriend me, tell me  
I've been dreaming this whole island life.

## Moses' Mother

Without her, no reed basket  
no Red Sea parting, no  
“Let my people go!”  
The little girl in Sunday school insists  
Moses' mother is the most important person  
in the story and wants to know her name—  
a question which will never be answered.  
The girl bows her head, gives thanks  
for the Nameless Woman  
without whom the burning bush  
would have cried out  
to the deaf ears of sheep.

## To Junia

Miracles leapt forth at the touch of your hand.  
You spoke God's Word,  
forgave sins, taught  
in house churches lit by oil lamps.  
You sang in prison,  
traveled the Mediterranean,  
sleeping on the deck of a wooden ship.  
You were outstanding among the apostles.

Then a Medieval Archbishop  
added an 's' to your name  
and made you a man.

Junia, where did you go?  
Did your flaming body light up  
Nero's garden at night?  
Did you die in prison, organs failing  
from disease?  
Or of old age, while preaching  
in Panonnia?

Junia where did you go?  
Pious people pass you by  
flipping the pages of their Bibles.  
Canons omit you,  
religious leaders ban you  
from their podiums  
and feasts.

I want to go to the churches—  
to the white ones with the steeples,  
to the holy rollers speaking in tongues,  
the twenty people meeting in a mall,  
the stain-glassed and stone;  
I want to shout in the microphones  
of the megachurches,  
above all the organs and the drums,  
until everyone has heard your name,  
your female name,  
which is outstanding among the apostles.

## Eve & I

I walk to the store  
to buy petfood and flour  
and Eve walks with me.

I bake banana bread  
and pumpkin pie  
and Eve bakes with me.

I sit down to watch T.V.  
Eve sits beside me.  
She prays with me.

She sings with me.  
She hovers over my desk  
and together we re-write history.

## Notes

“Reading in the Dark”: The line “*Perdóname, Señor: qué poco he muerto!*” comes from César Vallejo’s poem “Ágape.”

“Fires”: John Wyclif (1320-1384) directed the first translation of the Bible from the Vulgate into English. In 1424, his bones were dug up and burned in protest of his revolutionary act.

“A World of Evils”: This poem was inspired by Lynda E. Boose’s article “Scolding Brides and Bridling Scolds: Taming the Woman’s Unruly Member.” The article describes the scold’s bridle, an instrument of torture used in England from the late sixteenth century till as late as the 1830s to punish women who spoke freely. The device is an iron cage fitted around the head attached with a bar made to press the tongue down so the victim could not speak. The poem focuses on one bridle in particular, the ‘Stockport Brank,’ which had barbs attached to the bar that went into the mouth so as to wound the tongue severely. The title of the poem comes from James 3:6, “The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body” (NIV).

“To Junia”: Information for this poem was taken from *The Lost Apostle: Searching for the Truth About Junia* by Rena Pederson. In Romans 16:7 Paul lists Junia (a female name) as “outstanding among the apostles,” but now in many churches women are banned from having such leadership roles. Pederson uncovers how early church attitudes toward women in leadership were gradually changed and traces what evidence is left about Junia’s life.



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