COMPASS ROSE

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Abstract

This thesis explores the orientational power of language through a collection of poetry grounded in themes of place, landscape, and desire. Language organizes the raw material of existence into the humanizing possibilities of experience and connection. It interrogates, examines, exalts, orders and reorders continually. Much like a physical landscape, it is constantly shifting under various pressures, which operate at variable speeds. By working and reworking themes and images, these poems explore the twin processes of erosion and deposition.

The materials found in these poems are largely drawn from my own memory, perception, loss, and desire. I mean to use language to both represent experience, and dismantle and reconstitute it, which will necessarily occur in the process of representation. There is a tension, as in life, between past and present as one slips inexorably into the other and is then remade in memory.

The thesis is organized around the cardinal directions to indicate that the poems constitute both a world and a map to that world. They are grounded in the physical features and natural processes of the earth, the changing of the seasons, and the weather, all of which are indifferent to our perceptions and yet form some of the foundational metaphors of human experience.
# Table of Contents

**Abstract** iii

**I. East**
- Springing 2
- Connecticut 3
- The year of airplanes 4
- Marriage 5
- I have left 6
- Early days 7
- Divorce 9

**II. North**
- How close 11
- Cleft 12
- River 13
- To be bound 15
- As simple 16
- Lilacs, Chicago 17

**III. South**
- Chellah 19
- Nation 20
- Fasting 21
- Complexity of flesh 22

**IV. West**
- Range 25
- Interlude 31
- Bird 32
- Blood moon 33
- Nevada 34
- Lion 35
- Sorrowful Mysteries 36
- We are seen 38
- Cosmology 39

**CV** 40
East
Springing

from soggy earth
stippled dark bark
swellings too full and
not yet solid with color

I am always forgetting
life is long already and
the legends explain little

cut down branch and twigs, shears rusted stiff into
friction—a nub of heat
my homely lust
Connecticut

drag these square houses
in sparse woods
ivy in snow

I understand
everything now
how
decisions are made

peaked roofs speak
to hare tracks
in sparse woods

woodsmoke
old ways of turning
matter to heat

and ash and light
and vapor and air
The year of airplanes

I.

the year of airplanes
love's simulacrum stretched
loomlike across
call it continent
this land unmaking
sun spiraling toward me
    moon higher where
        you are
airy cycle of
fleshwarm passage pressed
thigh to thigh
    for hours
        four hours

II.

it's wanting that pulls
a gravity anew into
us
oh us that we that
wills itself while
spinning globe indifferent
warp and weft
irresistible centrifuge of
long longing
bodies attract one
another then
nothing then
dawn
Marriage

only this do not be
afraid as the world
clicks softly into place
settles like silt

stillness is not death
it is all
right to sit a while while
things go on becoming
what they are

there in the greening
the creek behind us
yes there was
a series of silent clicks
the moment locking into
reality all full of birds
and branches that we can
never say we
were not there
it was so

reality all full of birds and
branches tiny
flying insects
the gnats day bright
undeniable
I have left

I have left
he is left
behind is left
I alone

this is an
    empty box

rough air
until past
    Memphis
    (pyramid
    river delta
    dog star)

someone
must
come

we have
by miracle
still all our
fingers our toes

he will come home
come calling
his
throat unstrung

strange song
long winter
white teeth in a
white cup
Early days

there is snow already
my parents’ tomatoes gone
here clouds move
west to east

settle low in valleys
spaced wide filled deep

he prays for it my
father for snow

in other times my hair
wet with sweat
the sun is high
blue pools the roads
shimmer with heat you’d think
it water

crickets do not mind
all night singing
scatter when I walk the dog
cockroaches on warm sidewalk

when burned
pinecones crack open
then wait for rain

in November it will be spring again
and flowers and black bees

it is in waiting without
knowledge with
hope  a little
we are little
we wait wide open

a spring becomes a pool
mountains walled around

elsewhere bright houses
stacked skyward

my parents are sleeping
clouded sky all orange
wind and light
all night

it goes
too far

bare trees reach up
as when green
or petal white or
tight budded waiting
Divorce

I.
this is it
it is coming
to a point

*en pointe* the
dancers their bones
grinding float away

this is how
things end

II.
think of small spiders
ballooning on silk
into open air
think of them
North
How close

it does not have to be
difficult it is what
image we are
made in need
tender desperation rending
rendering

three gulls
or vultures wide wings black
white sharp distinct stretched long suspended slow
they
also are looking

inside the bodies of animals
this
this is how close
and quiet

what it takes to be
wordless elliptically still
thermal updraft breath
we slowly spinning
searching hunger for
something shared
familiar flesh
unreadable entrails
illegible dust

this is not ending this
holy throbbing
nameless between
Cleft

winding we

nude soft simian
ungirded

afternoon careful coming
the dog asleep
wrapped in yellow

palm tree flapping like Mylar
like wings
like rain

what isn’t here what
would we want
what world

afternoon coming gentle
sidewalk gravel wet
setting sun
River

a body that winds
around and through the way

bodies wind around
and through the city

the black hairs stick
to my skin my body

pressed against and
through the glass the window

uncurtained the twenty-third
floor the air not space

but air not empty but full
of air of bodies pressed

against and around on the train
running under the street the earth

on stilts through the
air around the city and through

bodies pressed against bodies
pressed against glass

windows uncurtained metal poles
warm with bodies pressed

against themselves over the
river through the empty

street not empty but full
of emptiness 4 a.m.

cold without bodies
moving through against

the wind the air pressing
against my body pushing

back against over the river
I’ve crossed twice today
already and will again three
times again before it’s done
To be bound

I missed spring I was
far far far the haze carried
where I stood

copy machine is miracle
is eye is wire is light is
air is eardrum

arms full of numbers
names

sky clouded out
to out the lake the boats
tiny floating people
As simple

as simple as that
to hover between
equinox and solstice
in dimming light

it is now far and long
ago

body becomes
somehow home

those dark months when you
when we
how can I say

we kept the windows
dark and tight

snow rose off the lake
salt ate through our shoes
corroded cars
my heart my heart my heart
Lilacs, Chicago

I am told I will
feel the lake
will gain lake sense
we gain lilacs
each may when may
and limestone collide

enormous

in the distance ships
suspended between
lake and sky static
boys fishing haul it up

grey and grey
lilacs coming
every may
South
Chellah

the storks have wings
tipped in black and long clacking beaks they’re voiceless
they eat eels in the pool of the necropolis
the breadbasket of empire
a dozen graves a banana tree walls covered with words
field of broken marble
the old workshops under grass
Nation

the hillsides written
with sheep
goats
flesh and
milk and hillsides
a
tally of themselves

the air cracks
into words
built of words walled
and gated language built
carved in profile
of words of god
is king of the nation the
nation inscribed
Fasting

the air from off the sea the
ibises white the storks with
great clacking bills they are called for
the noise they make

the coast is laced with wind

the air is bright as any
    ridden by fat bees

the balcony faces the sea through
palm dust and minarets that
call five times a day

the city is always calling
storks without voices still
are calling
Complexity of flesh

that was where he was where
we were and now return
we are always returning
alone with gulls beaks smudged
red and crying for
fish their bullet bodies
weightless

it is eid say the flags the fasting
is over buckets of sardines
rise from the boats
the port is full of watchers
it has never been brighter
in the desert it is raining

of course there were others who still
bind me into time of course

his skin

the gulls are screaming
no gulls in the desert
where is it raining
the wind is high and I
studded with sand my skin
burns

a wall of open doors
storks glide overhead
men want me to know

the palace is not this way
on rue berrima at sundown
or at ten a.m. monkeys and cobras
take their places

tomorrow I visit the tombs
or watch the sun move hot
across the sky

gardens of oranges
olives
a wreath of figs
I know
now what
a fig tree looks like

the hillsides belong to god
he is king of the nation
this is written in rocks
the earth piled up and made
to speak is calling
calling back to
prayer a forest of minarets

everything is falling
West
Range

day is cool and I'm a fool each star a pool of water

so high above the sea
thin air
thick blood

snow in july
suspended on the long grass
sagebrush

winter without snow
the golf course crackling
the geese don't go

that summer night herons
nest in tall cottonwoods
long necked beaks clacking diving into

the water is low

oh bury me not
on the lone prairie

Sam says Charlie died
it’s about time
I’ll walk I’ll walk it’s fine it’s
autumn

laughing at stars while
blood pools under my skin
flat on my back
the skateboard nearby still rolling

Aaron dead too but
it’s been years
me in Chicago

I loved him
I still say

goodbye old paint I’m leaving Cheyenne
gone south and east and west
toward mountains visible blue
from the viaduct over the railroad yard
coupling like thunder
low slow signals at night
cars you can’t count
dig up the earth and pile it high
stretch out on flat land on
high plains where
you can see a creek five miles off
by the trees
gates swing down
wait half an hour in your car
play the radio
it’ll pass

it’s your misfortune and none of my own

his grandpa in fluorescent basement kitchen
with vodka and cigarettes
we were all men there together
beneath the juniper on the ground
dirt in my hair
still with its berries bluegray
always birds and sometimes foxes
those deer by the mall
black eyed so still
raccoons in storm drains
bat the cat brought in
papery and fierce
mourning dove that
died behind the piano
too heavy to move alone
glass rattling
windowsills dark with grit

where the coyotes howl and the wind blows free
where distance is measured in hours
the roads uncurving

in a borrowed truck
to Laramie by night over the pass
Lincoln standing sentinel

we were so young
left the gas cap behind at
Little America 2 a.m.

we should have been afraid

instead drove forty miles drank coffee drove home
flashing our lights at the trucks
certain we would live

*oh bang the drum slowly*

oh indian paintbrush buffalo
grass scrub oak oh thistle
oh sagebrush swelling my eyes

oh

advice so simple—
chew sap like gum
pour molasses in snow
somehow close enough
to real life

lichen on the sherman
granite technicolor
symbiosis orange gray green
a place
that is rock
air

road

sky sky sky a little
earth
dust in my mouth

buffalo jump somewhere near devil’s
tower they taught us
to tell
rock from bone with our mouths
bone sticks to your tongue
rock falls away

give me a home

half built houses
the prairie lawless just
long grass cigarettes tossed
still burning

the pleiades cassiopeia ursa minor orion

the roots go down twenty feet

Sam says Charlie’s dead
Charlie
he said once

crow creek dry creek peanut pond sloan’s lake stock tank
sometimes a loon
the herons

keep a-movin’ dan don’t you listen to him dan
he’s a devil

he’s a devil

he’s a devil

he’s a devil

billboards at the border
a plywood bison
a herd of them real

oh give me a home

leaving Cheyenne going to

meadowlark black v at the throat

get six jolly cowboys to carry my coffin
get six dancehall maidens to bear up my pall
that’s all

it was a shallow sea
fish in sandstone sheets
field of shells

it was a grassfire
    red red at sunset
    out near Wheatland

brown with drought
the water is low

hazy with cottonwood

sagebrush scent on my hands
smoke in my hair

sometimes the prairie
is an ocean
it is sometimes a wall of fire

before the roads
endless

prairie dogs build
    their towns
    bark warnings
    dig down

a hawk swoops over the highway
hits the side of a truck
is pulled under the wheels

keep moving

men in fringed chaps
wrestle steers to the ground
twist their muscled necks
in embrace

your misfortune

we smoked with the windows up
    burned the upholstery
too cold to care
snow on the road
like ghosts
too bright too high too close
to the sun dust
and then nothing
then the sky

the missile silos underground
pronghorns on the tarmac
long arc of contrails
fuzz into air

the hills stop rolling
spread out
low and quiet beneath
the sky a
dome
aching blue
Interlude

thunderhead rise
up pink above
mountain striped black
gray sky
going purple over
atomic city
Bird

’s stomach full
of stones of
weight just below
pumping ventricles
aortic chasm collapsing
again and
over again

spindle legs
eye cannot make sense
cannot be
even bones hollow
void within the thing

you are born sharp
birth themselves
dig into open air

and bright how bright
how open high up
how feather light
to be
Blood moon

next door the blood
goes its rounds
flicker at the throat

blood moon hangs

it goes its rounds
the fan goes
moths drift up weightless
at the door

blood moon hangs outside
low and fading

doors open
faithless
lunar push pull
soft flicker at the throat
Nevada

de olives love the air
love the sidewalk
love the pigeons their fat greasy necks
love the sunny air

pine tree makes love to itself
profusion of pollen
bees and grackles
a kestrel sits high
Lion

I was young and
the birds so large. Now
pollen dusts my car, blows
away in rivulets
when I go. I want
to go going is hard
I have been alone
what else can I

this is
trust and yet we make
do the grass grows around my
waist we are hunting
grasshoppers to trap in
jars with holes punched in the lids with
hot nails. Power lions
my brother called them power lines
but they might

dangerous

power lions. It is quiet. I am lonely.
Sorrowful Mysteries

I. The Agony in the Garden

here among flowers I say
you know
what I have
done and will do

you your flesh the
twining strands muscle fibers

morning glory swelling fast

o god o god

II. The Scourging at the Pillar

remark the cutting
blood has meaning
we are asked so
to take into ourselves

he loves us he loved us he loved us so

III. The Crowning with Thorns

were you there when they
crucified my lord
were you
there when you

sometimes it causes me to tremble

the brow its blood
my god my god

IV The Carrying of the Cross

now the cellular structure of wood
cell wall jagged
which tree?
V. The Crucifixion

and death is death is circle
we come
we come around
and death is death
is life is coming round is us
and nothing more or less for
leaves on forest floor come
soil
come fecund
I saw it all this is all a
soul could ask
I ask no more
We are seen

he walks beside the water
the water is still
the water is bright sapphire
the water is froth and cobalt
everything is here

the sand is crushed shells
the sand is stone
that will become stone
the sand is solid with water

in the water swim eels
schools of anchovy
flash silver with fear
to drop slow
to no longer need

his hands are empty
the sky does not blink
we are seen
the water is still
Cosmology

remember the ibises
on the banks of
drainage canals

remember the sweat
pooling in the small
of your back

the ant hills
the geckos so small
we saw their hearts
beating backlit at sunset

on the windows of the
house that was broken
into twice where
we made love

you have been in my dreams
these last nights

there have been sounds
that are not your voice

remember the bird that
sang at dawn
the air that clung filmy that
covered us everywhere
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