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# Engine Song

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The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author.

# **Engine Song**

An Honors Thesis

presented by

Laura Jo Hess

to

the English Department

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for

Honors in the Major Field

**Connecticut College**  
**New London, Connecticut**  
**May 2007**

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## **ENGINE SONG**

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Laura Jo Hess

## Table of Contents

### I.

Forecast.....	1
Foreign Deed.....	2
Sunday Sincerity.....	3
One.....	4
On Achieving Loneliness.....	5
The Fortune Teller.....	7
The Lost Son.....	9
Atheist Love Son.....	10
Age, Revised.....	11
Even Spaces.....	13
Transplant.....	14
To Susan Sontag.....	15
Waking Up Happy.....	16
City on a River.....	17

### II.

Radicality.....	18
Disposition.....	19
Vina.....	20
Memory Lapse.....	21
Deceased.....	22
Haven up North.....	23
Injury.....	24
Floral Bandage.....	25
Mobile America.....	26
The Earth is Not Quiet.....	27
Discourse.....	29
Empire.....	31
Deliverance.....	33
Metropolitan Nightmare.....	34
You, Who Broke me Down.....	35
Annihilation.....	36
Let Me.....	37

Thank you.....	38
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**I.**

## Forecast

here is the water they warned us about  
the instant rumbling and the ground  
opening three miles across

long land where children stick  
their toes in sand and balance  
heads on their mothers' right hips:  
this is the land

and here is the water,  
crested rock formations  
that remind me of tear ducts  
or broken violin strings

my sister walks in crooked strides  
across the cityscape scoping  
grooves in bridges and whispering  
in beat with traffic lights

meanwhile, I haven't loved  
the city or found pleasure  
in reflective surfaces or chains  
that hug the ground

*watch this water and fear it:*  
the speed and the intrusiveness  
and all that remains.

## Foreign Deed

A bird flies north  
at a train station,  
his wings parallel  
to the tracks, his beak  
separated by air.

Ahead, there is a window pane.  
The bird continues.  
He is crushed, head-first  
bringing his feet through to his mouth  
in one swift movement.

He falls evenly to the ground  
and lands squarely inside a gray tile.  
Two girls rush to him,  
bending at the knees  
eyeing his face  
fingering his small feathers (almost like fur)  
thinking, what could hurt so badly  
to make a bird commit suicide.

## Sunday Sincerity

Mother, I've stolen something  
and lied about it, after  
the librarians chased me outside  
when I set off the metal detector  
with a stapled *New York Times*  
tucked under my arm

    No, no this is mine  
I said as they patted me down  
    This is my paper  
    I'm a good student  
    an honest liar, I swear  
Until they let me go, convinced.

I've detoured  
on the way home, peered  
in a first-floor window  
at a face and a long body,  
poured wine past my lips  
and blinked hard at a stranger  
who has the wrong eyes  
and a different history.  
For this, forgive me.

I'm sorry  
I shaved my arm in the bathtub  
when I was fourteen  
while you were reading  
a hardcover book in your bedroom.  
The razor in my hand to my wrist  
all because my friends  
were gone and I was lonely  
in the bathtub on a Friday night.  
I cried to you and you  
held my head in your lap  
and loved me no less  
with my inch of a hairless arm.



## One

I wake dreaming of \_\_\_\_\_, my head against  
the vinyl of a seat cover, my mouth open  
on a bus eastward.

Tell me there's not two of me:

One with straight shoulders and strong feet,  
walking over splatter-painted bricks,  
reaching down to retrieve a coin from the asphalt,  
slapping hands with a stranger, touching his cheek on both sides

The other closed eyes and timid hands  
leaned at an angle against a tree in a place  
where birds make confessions with rhythm:  
1, 2, 3 chirp.

Tell me I'll not believe you.

So what if one stopped walking  
and sat on a curb with grass  
between her fingers

and the other stood,  
shook her head of branches  
and took three steps to the road.

Then, they reach their respective hands  
to cast a shadow on the ground,  
Thinking: *one one one.*

## On Achieving Loneliness

I think of you mostly when I am cross-  
legged in my bedroom or when  
I am made of centimeters that don't add up,  
when you leave footprints on my backside,  
moments you loved the hardest.

My father's got doorways for ears and I think  
they only open when his mouth does  
and so I'd like to tell you about being five:  
about giggling when my parents kissed or  
riding on my father's shoulders with my legs  
dangling near his cheeks while he held my ankles—  
I want to tell you this mostly because I don't remember,  
because it never happened.

Today he asks me to walk but I'm lonely  
so we sit in rocking chairs and I fold my feet  
beneath my thighs and balance on wood-  
strips thinner than your fingers.

3 times my mother asks me why I hate home  
but she's got orchids for eyes and they plead for me  
to tell her something good, but all I remember  
is finding a blonde woman in my dad's apartment  
and my sister draping the word *manipulative*  
from the chandelier in the dining room.  
My mother used to sit in my doorway,  
knees to chest, quietly wondering if the bitter  
taste under her tongue was depression or strength  
and if I would ever fall asleep without her.

Sometimes you are the instant when a blond boy holds a cigarette  
to his lips and inhales so slowly until he sits with me  
in an abandoned hallway and draws diagrams of the past  
on his thigh; Faye says not to be scared of gravity  
so I stay there and you fade to four years from now.

For today, I'll write with light produced from your elbows,  
shining from Missouri where girls press their bodies  
to your shoulder like drowning fish and finally:  
my mom's got this lover who feeds her grapes  
across the phone line.

A man says he has to be practical so he wears  
his wedding ring on his forefinger;  
he's got a black tulip bulb for a son and he's preaching  
laughter into centuries too far away to touch.  
There goes Faye on the trampoline, closing her eyes  
and counting to France because she hasn't got a vessel big enough  
to hold words like *entropy* or *subjunctive*  
in this lifetime.

Faye & I compare lists of solitude and  
sometimes we lie on concrete and let  
the heat numb us while we listen  
to a boy read a gasoline can like it's a love song.  
It makes sense that you wouldn't  
know what it tastes like to be a liar or a drunk,  
but you should recall the shape of my feet on wood.

I am jealous of people with no ending  
as I watch the way a man's eyes follow  
his wife as she walks with one foot constantly in front of the other.  
He's floating there above his body,  
as if his arm might break off just to touch her skin  
for an instant. I bet he doesn't believe it's love  
when you exist in one plane at a time.

Even if there are still post-it notes from you  
in my underwear drawer and if I'm obsessed  
with symmetry so what if it ends  
tomorrow like this.

## **The Fortune Teller**

*After Lawrence Raab*

It may hurt for a while,  
the land, the water

your feet will be heavy  
with dirt and you'll cry

over a dead bug or your son  
who is eleven now

Be cautious with materials  
and goods that come in boxes,

hold your wife's hand  
across the arm rest

in the movie theater  
see tears fall in ovals

down her cheek, recall  
beauty in a pale

shoulder blade  
or uneven knuckles

Your eyes are half-open  
and your hands tremble

with down-turned lips  
sun-burned cheeks

Your palm is blurred  
lines jagged and crossed

which means  
you're mourning

the death of a lover  
or someone you need

Leave here with your head  
and your fingers

all your teeth and  
forgive me for my honesty.

## **The Lost Son**

Sadness for the void left in the backyard, the stairway,  
(This is for mothers who let their children walk alone in the dark.)

I lost God to the sidewalk cracks forty years ago  
but tonight, tonight I bend my knees over my bedside  
and hold my palms together.  
I stare into the ceiling tiles,  
count them aloud, practice comfort.  
Tonight I cradle a plastic phone to my ear  
while I draw pictures of you in the sink water, window fog.  
A woman will speak to me in low tones and tell me  
she's so sorry so sad so sick so empty for me.  
Sixteen is far away and February is so cold when the television blares  
about wars and fear and poverty, but I bet the weatherman doesn't know  
what its like to sit upright on a couch in a room with one window  
and wait for the door to fall ajar  
and your fingers to curl around the side,  
your face to appear in centimeters,  
for my feet to touch the ground and my throat open up,  
for the woman three states over to start smiling again.  
Here I am weeping to the threads in my pillowcase,  
assured that tomorrow is the last day  
to trace your eyelids in black ink,  
because tomorrow you will sit with me at the dinner table  
eating turkey and potatoes, swinging your feet  
slowly under the table cloth.

### **Atheist Love Song**

Sinners in a holy city  
breathe in holy light, make motions  
with their holy heads.  
This year, Passover is in the forest  
kneeling among empty dirt mounds  
and dying blades of grass,  
dreaming of dinner at Eaka's,  
of hard eggs and bitter herbs dipped in salt water  
that evaporates from the tongue.

In Israel prayers are written on lined paper  
and placed in a cracked wall facing east.  
Tip-toed men sway back and forth:  
*Mazel Tov* to waking up each morning,  
to worshipping a worn Bible  
and wearing a talus across the shoulders.

For my birthday, Sarika sacrificed a goat  
atop a Baltimore mountain  
slitting its neck and watching blood  
flow from the summit to the base.  
For my birthday: a broken neck,  
a perfect ritual.

### **Age, revised**

How much older we will feel  
once Tuesday brings rain  
and shelter beneath your shoulders,  
when we've wandered over necklines and bed-frames  
far away from our home towns and lovers.

My mother stares at a chipped tooth  
and thinks of precision  
translated into loneliness, happiness to change.  
She's crawling across the phone-line,  
sending medicine in a cardboard box,  
trying to understand the difference  
between grass and cement  
and why my face has become so solid, gray.  
I blame it on Switzerland and springtime,  
the perfection of your gaze and the size of your hands.  
I blame it on knees touching under a table  
and the ability to laugh.  
I blame it on landscape.

Morocco is whispering about the sidewalk cracks and graffiti walls,  
how it's falling over in love with you, can't even feel it's feet,  
how even if you wanted stillness, it's too late.  
There's already a French girl tracing your footsteps in the sand,  
brushing fingers through your hair  
as you sip coffee and read dialogue.  
She's already you how to dance at the nightclub downtown  
and feeding you homemade chocolate and fruit.  
Before long



Let me start over:

In Jamaica, the security guard sits in the back room smoking a joint.

*Don't be afraid, girls* he puffs as we approach him, side by side.

He's working the late shift, twelve hours of drunken Americans and sin.

In the morning, he'll ride his bike to the construction site  
where he'll piece together slabs of wood in the sunlight.

He may sleep for an hour in between, but he doesn't depend on it.

My sister is holding my hand, feeling older than me, more mature.

She's recalling Missouri, New York,

sporadic weather and high-rises, Americans and snow.

*I like it here* she whispers.

Even in Jamaica, you came to me:

Crawling out of the water to sit with me on the cliffs,  
wringing out your clothes and shaking your head.

I'd sink down, letting my spine take the shape of the rock,  
and maybe you'll watch me away, floating and silent.

## **Even Spaces**

Through the glass mirror  
from a room with couches and chairs  
the white rail balcony  
looks oddly lonely.

Vertical posts latch  
onto wood beneath,  
an overturned glass  
collects ants and leaves.

Rain has tattered the paint  
brown chips that used  
to be white, cracked corners  
once leveled.

It's all still sturdy,  
holding the body  
leaning, imagining  
the ground below.

## **Transplant**

I dreamed you in a bed two feet above a linoleum floor  
in a pale hospital with white sheets and curtains

dreamed a scratch on your chest in the shape of an anchor  
and your sister in Be'er Sheva, kneeling and loving you

dreamed religion from your mother's mouth and songs  
from your father's, words sifting through waiting room walls  
to your face and feet, letters in black ink read like prayers.

Hearts come quickly and like this: enclosed in a Styrofoam cooler  
with your name in bold print on the handle.  
You're watching the World Series when the phone rings  
and your mother answers in a soft voice and minutes later  
you're driving east with wind through the window cracks.

A bird perched on the sill sings currents through panes  
—Even he knows you, needs you.

## **To Susan Sontag**

to cleaning out Susan Sontag's penthouse in Chelsea  
to throwing away receipts from taxi cabs and movie theaters  
to Susan Sontag at a bookstore  
Susan Sontag wearing K-Swiss to the ballet.

I'm leaning against a radiator fingering financial papers.  
I've got a box of tissues under my arm  
because someone has died.  
Three-thousand to Princeton, for my son  
Four-thousand to my assistant, who I cherish  
Two-thousand for a bracelet, because it's beautiful.

Susan Sontag's name scrawled on boxes and papers;  
Susan Sontag—rolls off the tongue.

On a balcony with a pen between her fingers, or  
speaking French and German on an airplane, asking for free flight bags  
Susan Sontag lecturing at colleges to wide-eyed students  
Susan Sontag with her lover, eating eggs and lox  
at a table with three wicker chairs and a candle.

Everything works in pairs:  
the number of lamps in a foyer  
the birth of babies in countries where bodies are calculated;  
Susan Sontag: life and death.

## **Waking Up Happy**

Dad, I say, I just want an education, a digital camera,  
summer camp and sleepovers.

I want what you had, because you had it.  
Your father didn't tell you he loved you  
but he didn't hate you, since  
he loved you enough to send you away  
to Holland where you couldn't fail.  
But you did, chasing an orange down the hill,  
broken elbow and all.

It isn't the lack of employment that hurts,  
but the interviews, over and again until you're reduced  
to college clubs and the family business that you sold.  
In the house where you grew up, there's a story  
about a space with your name etched on wood and it goes like this:  
When you were eight your father told you to talk faster  
and you ran upstairs and hid in the closet,  
camouflaged between shirts and shoe shiners  
and engraved your name in ink as slowly as you wanted.

Pencil me a way to remember you, with your schedule  
book in the front seat of your silver vehicle  
and a magnet from your youth recalling success.  
Or golf days, with shorts that end above your knees and socks  
that cut-off at your calf and half  
your face covered in sunglasses.

These here are my fingers memorizing songs  
in beats on the backside of a notebook.  
And this? This is my face, watching movement across  
the dinner table where a man I love sips water.  
But it doesn't end like this, so listen close.

One summer we sat in grass with our legs crossed  
and you told me about a woman that hugged you  
like your mother would have if she hadn't been in the car  
in 1982 when the brakes went out; and keys  
dangled from your fingers and you loved me, I think,  
like you always should.

## City on a River

1.

Head westward  
alongside flattened cornfields  
and static-faced cows to see  
the consuming metal cross,  
preaching Jesus to  
the highway drivers:  
women with large mouths  
and broken hearts and children  
who doodle stick-figures  
in the backseat.

2.

At the fountain in the park  
the homeless hide beneath  
cracked leather coats  
near shopping carts with canned beans  
blessed by local rabbis  
and priests, shamans and monks.  
It's too cold for prayer  
in a city with rivers  
and paths paved with matte  
stars and abbreviated biographies.

3.

Silver creeps skyward  
arching over heads  
and waistlines,  
over grass dented in summer  
and frozen in fall,  
imprints that change shape  
with the shifting sun:  
I've waited years for such romance.

**II.**

## Radicality

A flat frame on a white-washed wall  
says we're going to die, cries we're not  
at a ballet or the baseball game  
and that we better understand evolution  
before the city is drowned in seawater,  
but after, a woman pulls a sheet  
of paper from her vagina  
and it's hung by a curator in a case  
transcribed, idolized.

Position me behind this, beneath it,  
where I can draw the faces of men  
in moonlight who hate the sun  
but love punk rock and whose spineless journals  
are displayed under thick glass  
I can't touch, or shouldn't.

Mapped out in the gift shop, there we are,  
thirty years back with bandanas  
and dull pencil points inside  
leather pouches draped over our shoulders,  
rubbing lined paper and shattered pills.



## **Disposition**

Days past, I've craved the sun, too—  
taken it in breath, tattooed it  
on my chest. It's better  
this way: constant  
warmth taking over,  
the body gone.

It's either a pill in the morning  
or sun in the afternoon:  
a mid-day breakdown  
over a break-up that  
hasn't happened yet;  
or dangling feet from a park bench  
loosely and content.

## Vina

She's holy for you: you in India  
arms folded across a hospital bed,  
breathing with the heavy sound of tambourines  
and church bells every couple of seconds.  
She, dancing on bars/tables in Georgia,  
crumbling beneath the ceiling paint,  
grimacing when angular men clasp their hands together,  
she, thinking *as if this were pleasure*.

You in a taxi cab riding slowly through the streets of Delhi  
watching houses burn quietly, dreaming  
of father's dangling from ceiling fans  
and the only boy who stops to photograph it.  
She waking to cobblestone doorsteps in houses she doesn't belong:  
down pillows, fingerprints, agelessness at seventeen.

All this, while unprayed for women appear at your bedside et cetera et cetera  
preaching about earthquakes and all the times you won't survive,  
how they're a collision of two worlds, two peoples.  
She, she's got Billie Holliday playing in her headphones,  
skipping feet over cement walkways, not forgetting you every single day,  
not wondering when she'll next lean over the metal bar parallel to your body,  
push the plastic life support aside and whisper through your broken eyes,  
*come back, come back now*.

## Memory Lapse

I've forgotten the city  
for a moment, Shelby tells me,  
forgotten the streetlamps  
the men with paper cups  
shaking coins in the cold, forgotten  
them in an Eastside high-rise  
sipping water on a water-stained  
couch legs crossed eyes closed.

Forget the city and recall  
fifth grade, how every week  
I'd slip out of history class.  
Shelby, I can tell you  
now: it was therapy  
and I went with my sisters  
my Dad and I sat still  
in the same chair every hour  
between the tissue box  
and the origami shapes.  
I held my knees to my chest  
when Alison told me I was sad  
because I wore all black  
and cried when winter came.  
She said I was too young  
to be so sad so I got sad  
more silently.

Let us forget the city  
to remember the fifty states  
and pathways west that become  
triangles at the horizon.

## **Deceased**

You know death  
because of the crowd  
outside the funeral home,  
the way they hold hands  
and weep onto patterned shoulders.

That must be his mother:  
the one with limp neck  
and prayer book  
sitting near the doorway,  
too weak to stand.

Someone has died  
while you sip coffee  
in a car at a red light,  
turned towards  
the window, breathing lightly.

## Haven Up North

He pulls me aside,  
wipes his glasses on his tee-shirt, trembling:

I'm busting tires  
at the local tire shop  
waiting for cancer  
to step outside and stop  
haunting me, stop hanging  
on the strands of my hair  
and telling my son  
he's different and lesser,  
darker and more difficult.

I'm on a bridge in a haven  
in Michigan where feet wind over wood planks  
and I employ language into the backs of my palm  
or the picnic table.

I've fallen in love four times over  
and believe me, I will sit  
in the bone marrow unit  
and watch her hands wither away;  
I'll live in a house  
with broken doorframes and drive  
a beat-up truck just to feel God  
at the bedside—  
not taking her;  
not ending me just yet.

At lunch time, I watch him wait  
at the oak tree outside their cabin.  
He's got pages taped to his fingers  
and ink printed across his lips  
and I wonder how many women  
know such permanence.

## **Injury**

hurt you under  
water, out of depth

hurt where fingers  
touch backsides

bound for paper-thin  
bed sheets softened

and new, shelved  
with t-shirts hanging

behind a doorframe  
with your inheritance.

Quiver now,  
won't you.

## Floral Bandage

The flowers must not understand  
the weather when they bloom  
in March by a picket fence  
painted gray to match the clouds.  
Purple velvet soaking sunlight  
vertically to the stem: a crucifix of leaves.

My sister buys lemon trees  
and keeps them by the window  
making sure the leaves  
stay green, the stems stiff,  
promising a healthy plant  
as a 30<sup>th</sup> birthday present:  
full-size lemons on a miniature tree  
branches sagging with the weight  
of a sour symmetrical ovoid—  
a tree transplanted from the ground  
to a windowsill, from one  
pane of city light to another.

In Malawi, my other sister  
gives stickers to barefoot siblings  
and learns the language in three days.  
In the morning, she transfers blood  
from a plastic bag into a dying woman's vena cava.  
Lips pray slowly by the bedside.

All this while I'm mapping cities,  
clinging arms and elbows  
meeting eyes mid-street holding stares  
till the curb comes beneath my feet.  
On the side of the road two girls hold hands  
against the median  
dialing numbers before whispering  
*mother, there's been an accident*  
and waiting for the ambulance  
to haul the bodies away.

## Mobile America

En Route to El Jadida,  
you must stop for meat.  
Let the men with dirt-stained shirts and hats  
to cover the small of their heads de-board  
and wait for their very own  
chicken head or mutton body.  
Let them run after the bus, slapping their hands on the sides,  
yelling angry phrases in Arabic.  
The men here don't understand us.  
They don't try to sell us magic cream to clear our skin;  
they can see our legs and it's baffling.  
Ramadan makes us wither away,  
the ladies in the hotel still serve us breakfast:  
juice from orange trees and bread from the land.  
I hide Rushdie between my knees,  
not sure if Satan is allowed in Morocco  
during Ramadan, or ever.  
A bus was bombed in Iraq: eleven killed.  
Let me arrive safely  
to El Jadida,  
to the cinema,  
back home.  
Let my mother see this bus—  
brown leather head rests,  
tattered velour seats,  
unraveling curtains.  
And she was only worried about filth.



## **The Earth Is Not Quiet**

*for John Rybicki*

In the hospital I wait with my feet up.  
Next to me is a chemical burn,  
across the way a bruised face.  
Jerry Springer takes the background:  
DNA tests to find foreign fathers  
teenage girls stripping in the audience  
grown men wide-eyed in boat shoes.

*My father is Detroit,  
and he couldn't bug me  
so he hit me—*

It figures I'd find the hospital  
after reading Rybicki  
pinpointing why he likened  
the moon to a biscuit  
and survived the cancer unit  
for three years in a row.  
His first book recounted  
courting his wife:  
the ice cream cone in the park  
his hand holding her mouth, her eyes,  
loving her in the mall parking lot  
because he couldn't  
wait for the bedroom.

*Opposite sides of the same wall  
we were banging our fists  
wiping our cheeks on fresh paint*

If his father is Detroit, then  
mine is Missouri, inhaling  
Forest Park and sending me  
forty dollars for a missed birthday.  
I choose my mother  
to phone from the waiting room  
close my eyes not to cry  
at the ninety-two year old woman  
in a winter hat and a wheelchair.  
On the x-ray table, I want my mom  
even though it's just a photograph  
of my insides, from the outside in.

## Discourse

I waited on you again today,  
throwing ribald words at my nose, my mouth,  
fingering a brick behind my head  
in a stench-filled street with half-painted walls  
where your father goes to meditate.

Spit me a song  
while I hold a static phone to my ear  
praying air will come when I lie down at night,  
and that bread will be soft and served with jam.

It isn't you I serenade.

In the evening, the streets echo Elton John  
and men with knapsacks follow my foreign feet.  
It's past nine when you find me  
avoiding stares from wide-eyed  
locals whom you call your brothers.

Take me to the graveyard and recite passages  
from your holy book and listen close  
when I teach you words used in the west,  
like lightning, armpit, phallic.

Hear this: my lover  
has five fingers and a head  
and he dreams me, exclusively and often.

## Empire

Beneath broken lights and up-turned houses, I sit.

while a woman on the train curses me  
for helping the homeless, taking glasses from her chest  
and placing them upon the contours of her face, howling;  
while there's firefly flames burning houses down  
to the green grass and my father is on a bus,  
crossing from the cold to the warmth  
holding elderly women by the shoulder,  
leading them towards homes with roofs  
and windows made of glass;  
while streets are consumed by polygons and thick air

let us study beggars in cities, on subways:

1.

Dark man with shopping bag. *I hate doing this*, he says, *I mean no disrespect*,  
to you, who will not look at his face, at his mouth  
to you with tie-dyed eyes and twisted feet, a magazine in your lap  
to you with sun-soaked skin and expensive flip flips  
to you, unloving hopeless ruin in the corner.

2.

Old Parisian woman in a tank top, *j'ai bien travaillé*, she says,  
calculating the angles between her palm and the doorway,  
learning to breathe when four-eyed business men turn away,  
breaking her gaze with the crease of a newspaper;  
learning to bend at the knees to retrieve  
the discarded baguette in the warped silver trashcan;  
learning how much you hate her.

It has become tiresome to watch this unfold:  
a lexicon of failure, but here  
I am sitting up-right at a table  
with three strangers and six empty cups  
and a girl I want to save.

She breathes evenly through her nostrils  
about the sky line and the damage  
a bank building does to a quaint town,  
understanding she has been altered  
by the sound waves and the heat,  
barred windows and the infinite depth of potholes.  
With mornings come aching feet and poverty,  
come Israel crying for lost soldiers  
and wind that will uproot tent stakes and mobile homes;  
come myself, chin up head down, pacing.

## **Deliverance**

I dreamed this house, these windows,  
dreamed till my mouth went dry, my eyes

dreamed a country of broken canes and baffled eyes,  
yellow faces peeking through barred windows

a land hilled with dirt and absence,  
where a leafless plant rests on a windowsill

and drugs hide at a street corner between two mosques  
where fathers exit through an arched doorway

into a crowded street, while mothers rest their knees at home  
in a living room reversed and dim.

## **Metropolitan Nightmare**

I've taken to ruining things  
like the city and the skyline  
tainting the sidewalks  
and windowpanes  
as I crawl by storefronts mid-day.

I raise my body to a lamppost  
feeling it groove my back,  
wondering why no one else finds lack  
in the light of intersections  
or the depressions in grass  
from too many feet.

The city leaves room  
for no broken limbs  
or the imagined life of a man  
with an artichoke tattoo on his forearm.  
I love a place  
that forgets me as I leave.

## **You, Who Broke Me Down**

I like the lone pine tree  
in the parking lot,  
how it stays upright  
only leaning slightly  
as the trunk thins out,  
weeping with the loss  
of needles to the cold  
tar-covered ground.

This week I learned  
about your father  
your mother and your  
two brothers,  
about the last time  
you cried: a fist to your  
broken face.

Abroad, I'd call  
from the streets,  
hold the phone tight  
with both hands  
as carts rolled by:  
boys selling nougat  
or scented soap.  
I'd force a smile  
and cradle you to my cheek.



## **Annihilation**

Ketamine works just as well  
as Morphine or Codine,  
my sister tells me, for children  
with severed limbs  
or snake bites to the neck.

In the night, she feels safe  
under mosquito netting  
with security guards  
posed at the front door.  
They speak little English,  
but they love her  
pallid face and fear  
of cockroaches on the ceiling.

In a decrepit hospital, she missed  
the Virginia massacre:  
a sad, engine-eyed boy scout  
aiming bullets from a handgun  
into chests of students.  
She concentrates  
on inserting plastic into a still  
breathing set of lungs.

In Malawi, my sister  
takes her time  
attaching the IV  
to the boy with meningitis.  
She smiles white teeth  
and makes soothing sounds  
piercing his blue-veined arm.

Newspapers published  
the double-gunned shooter  
front page alongside  
Africa: vertical and  
colorless in the sidebar.

## Let Me

know not unfinished landscapes,  
but the curvature of a body on a couch near a fireplace;  
not blankets flattened against a cement floor, but a mattress  
pedestalled upon wood and drawn with satin sheets.

Not cleft lips or cardboard that functions as a sailboat, not  
a tent for urination or a solar panel for light. Not dirty fingers  
and fourteen different types of bread, not gutless fish  
in the street on the way to school, and not  
deprivation or pain.

I know what the sun looks like on paper: the placement  
of yellow, perhaps orange, circular,  
with rays bursting from the center.  
This is always the sun, always the light.

Thank you.

Charles Hartman and the English department for their support  
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Zach, my rock  
My family because they love me all the time