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## Moons in Our Bellies: A Collection of Earth Poetry

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# Moons in Our Bellies

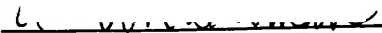
a collection of earth poetry

Alyssa Von Lehman

WWU Honors Senior Project  
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## *HONORS THESIS*

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*For Mom*

As women connected to the earth, we are nurturing and we are fierce, we are wicked and we are sublime. The full range is ours. We hold the moon in our bellies and fire in our hearts. We bleed. We give milk. We are the mothers of first words. These words grow. They are our children. They are our stories and our poems.

Terry Tempest Williams, *An Unspoken Hunger*

## *Stillborn*

*These poems do not live: it's a sad diagnosis.  
They grew their toes and fingers well enough,  
Their little foreheads bulged with concentration.  
If they missed out on walking about like people  
It wasn't for any lack of mother-love.*

*O I cannot understand what happened to them!  
They are proper in shape and number and every part.  
They sit so nicely in the pickling fluid!  
They smile and smile and smile and smile at me.  
And still the lungs won't fill and the heart won't start.*

*They are not pigs, they are not even fish,  
Though they have a piggy and a fishy air—  
It would be better if they were alive, and that's what they were.  
But they are dead, and their mother near dead with distraction,  
And they stupidly stare, and do not speak of her.*

Sylvia Plath

## *Contents*

**5     *Foreword***

**9     *Mapping***

10    *The Swimmer*

14    *The Longevity of Ice*

16    *The Dead and the Living of Home*

18    *woman, etymology of*

**19    *Moons in Our Bellies***

20    *Uniformitarianism*

22    *Artemis*

23    *Invisible World*

25    *Time Zones of a Rare Place*

26    *Repentance East of the Mountains*

27    *Bog City*

30    *The Roundness of Oceans*

31    *Emily's Screamers*

33    *Sauna*

34    *Extraction of an Arrowhead*

35    *Nocturnal Contact*

## *Foreword*

Women writers from Sylvia Plath to Terry Tempest Williams to Tori Amos have described the poetry and stories they create as their children. Creating poetry is an organic, natural process and the result, the living fruit of our labors, is always intimately connected to its creator. If it fails, stops short of fulfilling its purpose, we are disappointed, our pride bruised, our abilities as mothers questioned. We did not nurture this one enough and its heart stopped before it ever opened its eyes; a stillborn, as Plath says. Or we may say that this one somehow has that intangible breath blown into it and stands on its own, alive. We work on them as much as we can and then let them go, hoping for them to walk on two legs.

In writing this collection of poems, my role as mother to my words never left my mind. Indeed, the revision process was much like getting a two-year-old to eat cooked carrots. Switch two stanzas here to trick them into flowing together, squeeze words into a line that won't budge its lips, trash this line altogether, recede from the highchair for a moment, and gather strength for the next ingenious attempt. It is all improvisation, stabbing at the unlikely. Whatever works. Perhaps this doesn't sound too professional, but this project has taught me that the materials for writing are quite alive, often stubborn and difficult, thus requiring a creative and serendipitous approach to nurture them into proper poems.

In the first section, "Mapping," I wanted to address the difficulties my own mother faced in her battle with breast cancer. The first person voice in this section is not necessarily intended to be my mother, but a woman in her position, struggling with a way to articulate her disease. During the last couple years, a great number of the poems or

essays I sat down to write evolved to concern cancer. I let these forces take my writing where they would rather than try to fight them and stay within a certain scope. It was the child with its own will kicking at the inside of my belly again. She would have her way. Terry Tempest Williams' *Refuge*, her memoir of her mother's struggle with breast cancer, was a major influence on my writing, as were her other essays in the collection *An Unspoken Hunger*. She explicitly draws connections between the sickness of the earth and the rising rate of breast cancer in industrial nations where the earth is being most heavily damaged. Our own practices have brought on the sicknesses of our planet and of our people, especially women. These ideas arise often in my poetry as well, particularly in "The Swimmer" and "The Longevity of Ice," where the female persona is compared to a whale and a bear, respectively. The title "Mapping" refers most obviously to its use in "woman, etymology of," where both mapping of genes and word origins take place. Mapping also refers to attempts to become more familiar with the body the way a geographical map allows us to memorize a landscape; discovering what heals us the best, pinpointing pains, whether physical or spiritual, to their precise causes. It is about a woman learning her own language; becoming intimately knowledgeable about herself and finding what heals, no matter how unconventional it may be in terms of the institution of modern Western medicine we have become so blindly dependent on.

"Mapping" ended up being a shorter section than I expected because as I revised, several poems of the first section seemed to fit better in the second. And given more time to revise and reorganize, I'm sure this collection will morph into many shapes before, if ever, it reaches a final stage.



In the second section, “Moons in our Bellies,” I explore more fully the connections between the female body, spirit, memory, and the earth. I quote Williams again at the beginning, as her influence persisted through the writing of these poems as well, and in particular, the poems “Artemis” and “Nocturnal Contact.” I also found inspiration in the poetry and prose of Canadian author Anne Michaels, especially her comparisons between human memory and the geologic structure of the earth. “Uniformitarianism,” “Bog City,” and “The Extraction of an Arrowhead” all deal with “reading” the earth and similar ideas sparked by Michaels. I relate to the childlike curiosity and love of the natural world held by the Canadian painter Emily Carr, and this simple admiration of the natural world shows through in “Invisible World,” “Sauna,” and of course “Emily’s Screamers.” In this section I celebrate the kind of small, observational eye that can recognize and appreciate our connections to the natural world; a spider weaving a web in your lap, deer in the dark, the mourning of forests, the desire inherent in water’s unending movements.

Ideas of storytelling, story-listening, and re-telling surface frequently throughout this collection. Absorbing stories, like taking in water, refreshes and cleanses us. Tim O’Brien, who wrote mostly of Vietnam, said that “telling stories seemed a natural, inevitable process, like clearing the throat,” or like giving birth. O’Brien also said “a true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe.” I think that any good writing will make the body believe. Your mouth can take in the sounds of a poem like a foreign food; move them around with the tongue. They tiptoe or stomp across your eardrum, move liquidly or unexpectedly vibrant before your eyes. You may feel it everywhere, or in surprising places you never thought had anything to do with reading. And the muse for

this writing is equally alive, whether it is the memory of a sailing trip, a spider, cancer, the ocean, or a small arrowhead. My muses for this collection were also the authors I have read, beyond those I have already mentioned: Annie Dillard, Michael Ondaatje, and Daphne Marlatt, as well as the mentors and teachers I have learned so much from and to whom I am grateful for their guidance and support: Gary Geddes, Suzanne Paola, Brenda Miller, Nancy Pagh, and Kathleen Halme.

There is still much more to say of the earth, the body, and memory, and so much that has already been said by the women gone before me, that I cannot think of this collection as complete yet. There are so many more ends to tie, and entirely new threads to pick up. What I must do is hope that I have nurtured these poems enough that they stand on solid legs, supporting pillars to some of these complex cables our discourse runs through.

## *Mapping*

the silence of trees  
the silence of women

if they could speak  
an unconditioned language  
what would they say?

the sins of the mothers. hating our bodies as if they had betrayed us. but the words for our bodies betrayed us in the very language we learned at school. handed down from friend to friend, sister to sister, mother to daughter. hand-me-downs, too small for what i really felt.

Daphne Marlatt, *Ana Historic*

## *The Swimmer*

I slipped into life gasping,  
dangled skinless in cold, dry air.

I held the tides in my core,  
the ocean's land-sisters, strong-willed rivers  
in my veins. The skin restored,  
floating anonymity,  
stories gouging bedrock.

Dissolution of atoms through that free way  
in which liquids fill their spaces.

\*

He and I ease from the berth  
between *Cinnamon* and *Epiphany*,  
for the one thing we still enjoy.  
We leave the elastic rainbow film of the marina  
for the plastic shimmer of open saltwater,  
the surface a window into a black room,  
thirty feet from where our hull slits the surface  
like a scalpel's delicate unknitting of skin.  
Scent of pickle on the tongue,  
guffaws of gulls in protest or disbelief.  
The jib pillows out and the sails  
grumble their rough acquisition through my ears.  
Him with his hat clipped to his jacket,  
having lost too many to the sea's appetite,  
his insistence on wearing white-soled shoes.

Notched hump of a gray whale, almost behind us,  
surfaces in spray, dives back under glass,  
ambivalent to the city embroidering  
the rim of the bowl-shaped bay.  
She is not here to perform,  
she comes to this intersection  
only for plankton swept up to midzone.

We tack to get closer, her slow back again.  
This time I see the barnacles suckled to her skin  
like open mouths, canker sores, leaching disease.

Motorboats with their own clicking and squawking  
answer her fears, oscillate across her thick celluloid skin,  
vibrate in her like the chemical rivers  
pressing through my own veins  
under the pretense of healing.  
She is stuck in this net of machinery too,  
lasers carving shapes in our breasts.

Our bodies blossoming with mouths  
that speak a vulgar language of loss.

I am grateful, at least, to sit quietly  
in the softest of his toys,  
moving anciently with wind.

\*

I sit in a breezy gown the chalk blue  
of a drowned face.  
Thirsty in the liquid glare of the pre-op room,  
and not a drop to drink.

The dull landscapes of jigsaw puzzles  
build themselves out of shattered glass  
and crab claws. The pink of one chrysanthemum  
indistinguishable from all others,  
a node grooving into a cove,  
homogenous lemon grass and camouflage fence.  
Outlets and inlets form continents  
and the image congregates  
as we slowly turn to belief.  
Nervous fingers create them  
ten minutes at a time, each piece  
anxious to feel complete.

\*

He calls from his cell  
to tell me about the beached whale.  
*Do you want to walk down to the bay and see it?*  
The cause of death was malnutrition  
according to the newscast.  
Perhaps, I seconded, plankton  
filter-feeding toxic waters.  
My own face in the morning mirror  
in overcast dimness,

tepid clay skin patched with sand,

the gross curiosity  
in the suffering of beautiful things.

Onlookers shoo away gulls  
to get a clean shot.  
Opportunists.

\*

I leave him in the house for the warm nothingness  
of the dock, the real splinters of weathered wood  
easier to handle, each carrying  
the illnesses we are unable to see past.

The dock over the silent water is my doorway home.  
Mud between my toes  
when I touch bottom, a ring of disturbance  
peels up, settles back. Weeds wrap  
like silk scarves loose around ankles.  
Life moves slower than the dry buzzing above.  
The tiniest trout flutters in front of my eyes.

\*

As I am becoming water.  
A highway of spices, perfume.  
Worthless and salty.

Water keeps its secrets impossibly deep,  
so dark the water creatures have invented their own  
means of seeing, of being seen.  
They swim without sails, sail without profit.

I am not a discoverer:  
as he, outside eyes honing a point of shore  
through circles of convex glass.  
Seeing mirror-glass walls erect and flat within  
the cedar trees, a sleek motorboat bobbing on reflections.  
Oil-stained asphalt and dead whales.

I hold the lake's nuances in my watery limbs,  
roll into eddies, naked and weightless,  
my swimmer's spine curls around  
the arcs of current.

Disintegration of fin, skin, tail, heart, breast  
into bare elements, stark architecture of body.  
A fine map sketched by scars over my skin  
is the map of the ocean floor.  
This foreign man in his own machine-netted skin, transparent,  
braces his ribs against the shore, unable to swim.  
The whale and the woman opaque with our sicknesses  
and our anticipation. We are everywhere,

uncharted, exploding like larvae  
within the sea, a body whose arms dissolve our deaths.

## *The Dead and the Living of Home*

To assuage a body from its cure  
I turn from broken bones  
of the coast, a crumpled landscape  
of upheavals, and go to where  
the earth's cragginess is covered  
like sleeping bodies curving under quilts.

The Kentucky hills roll like hips  
stitched with mulberry, sycamore,  
cucumber magnolia.

Women I shared youth with transport voices  
strung and swaying through phone wires,  
fading distant into crackle as if from a hard wind.  
Four gone the way of cancer already.  
I turn to my sister, grateful that in this bloodline,  
I am the unlucky anomaly.

Linda elicits existential forces,  
grasping long pull strings to stars like light bulbs,  
appeals protection from bad cells  
and the efficient cleansing  
of her older sister's breast ducts.

I am as dedicated to hospital wards  
as a farmer to his fields  
eyeing the mercurial aging of beans.  
Ingratiated by lasers day by day,  
my vacation a quick reprieve, (knowledgeable fingers  
ruminating the soil).

She stops me, opens a cabinet, thin brown bottles  
line the inside panel in a homemade wire rack.  
*Nature, she says, is much less intrusive.*  
*Herbals work, like so many things,*  
*when you believe they will.*

A two-inch-thin lead sheet  
with keyholes the shapes and positions  
of my tumors a sturdy door to my heart.



I tell her the holes,  
and so my scars,  
form an elongated pear, a peanut shell,  
a cat's paw print in relief.

## *The Longevity of Ice*

The irony of the freezing is lost on me,  
blighted eyes at a kitchen window.  
The hardness of water, obelisk stubbornness,  
moves in like a cancer.

I noticed the chilling, the nearing solstice,  
deciduous stripping, evergreen resting,  
being taken indoors and dressed up  
like a gaudy lady at the opera.  
Now I feel its locked knuckles underfoot,  
the whole lake is unfeeling and impenetrable.

The bear who rests on haunches beside the lake,  
mocked by fish safe under feet of glass  
pulls close her new fur, separating the turgid warmth  
of her body from the sinuous chaffing of winter wind.

She turns into the coated forest, hunkers within  
the abdomen of a deep cave  
and sleeps within her body until spring.

I am boiling egg whites.  
I have strung lights like silverfish gleaming  
along the angles of the roof. I have wrapped presents  
I will later return, thawed a robust grocery bird,  
and will fill tin pie pans with custard.

I dream of a swim, the familiar summer motion  
buoyant within my spirit, outstretched arms and legs.

The bear birthing from the cave, dusty-eyed,  
thin and ravenous amidst abundance.

She rubs her back against the bark of an alder,  
strips layers to an essential core,  
releasing heat like song loosening from the throat.

I fall away by pounds, too soon, amidst the chill.  
My fur tufted in the teeth of my comb,  
wastrels silent and limp on my pillow,  
fish slipping in figure eights through fidgeting fingers.

Left bare, grasping at whatever, loose notes, frozen leaves.  
How would the bear survive winter in a body like mine,  
leaving the cave mid-freeze?

Wasted too fast and ready to be filled,  
in a body that mistakes her dying for rebirth.

*woman, etymology of*

Mapping the bloom back  
to the precise chromosomal glitch,

my derivations and deviations  
begin to define me in strange ways.

To a metropolis circled in red  
on the skin's topography,  
a too-rigorous life like urban sprawl.

Cells pile like skyscrapers,  
they come from inside, the materials we build with,  
the cast iron frames, double helix blueprint.

Cities poke their too-large phalli to the sky.  
Perverse, contrived, yet like everything, natural  
if the elements are traced back far enough.

I come from an Old English word without sex: *Wif-mann*.

Facing a machine, not a plain,  
field, meadow, or forest,  
my derivation, a sex I acquired  
sometime in the eighteenth century,  
flicks on a flat computer screen,

*"Woman" itself has a curious  
history, which may be of some  
consolation to female readers,  
since it shows that they are not,  
linguistically at least,  
derivatives of the other sex.*

Not necessarily wife plus man,  
man plus object, skin plus armor.

"Wolf + man," a sidebar utters,  
and I find myself thinking,  
in angst with my skyscrapers,  
that's more like it.

*Moons in Our Bellies*

I was the flood, bursting through grief. I was the rainbow at night, dancing in darkness. Hands on the earth, I closed my eyes and remembered where the source of my power lies. My connection to the natural world is my connection to self — erotic, mysterious, and whole.

Terry Tempest Williams, *An Unspoken Hunger*

## *Uniformitarianism*

(def.) 1. The concept that the processes that have shaped Earth in the geologic past are essentially the same as those operating today (e.g. plate tectonics, the water cycle, the laws of stratification.)

2. Concept that present is key to the past

*We do not descend, but rise from our histories.*

*If cut open, memory would resemble*

*a cross-section of the earth's core,*

*a table of geographical time.*

Anne Michaels, "Lake of Two Rivers"

Rocks read top to bottom under the skin of earth  
our oldest collective story.

Along the cross-sectioned, gutted rock  
our most innocent layers lie closest to the core,  
and this chronology is all we are sure of.

The downcutting arms of rivers  
uncover horizons of shale and dolomite.  
Prehistory's inscriptions, our known methods  
assume life from fossils that echo death,  
memory of body the bone of time,  
a record of our small forces.

Earth tells time without minutiae.  
The way ants haul seeds to peaks,  
and we translate empires to small blemishes  
on the comfortable rubric of patios.  
The way we say *remember this moment*  
as if *right now* was not a lie,  
was more than wind circling atmospheres,  
when this moment is the memory of hundreds,  
but could slip away, lost as our own,  
but for the permanence stored in pens.

A long monologue of rhythms:  
striations in riverbeds like script across obsidian pages  
echo in unfaltering instinct,  
the clip of gravity, hardness of quartz,  
water's obsessive drive for anonymity in the ocean.  
Our rivers of storytelling are constant yet ever-changing,  
like rain drumming the river, sounding clipped in the shallows,  
short of breath along the rapids,

metallic as it shudders against rocks on shore,  
long and desirous at the mouth, in anticipation of salt.

A river-rubbed rock is a story well told,  
the most knee-bending force on earth.

There is a certain comfort in formula,  
in what is always true and recoverable.  
There is no place we have not been,  
no story not heard,  
and all we have forgotten of rivers  
is stored in the canyons of our palms for quick retrieval.

## *Artemis*

I sleep under stars  
that pull me back into orbit  
from a jettison of spirit.  
There is a great silver bear,  
the moon above her head  
like a word bubble  
calling to the water,  
rousing tides.

All these goddesses  
of the wild, reminders  
of my own spherical  
movements,  
the tidal oscillations,  
the moon,  
that magnetic star,  
shining silver on the back  
of Artemis.

Lying on the transient space  
between granite and salt  
the tides tug  
on the sand,  
lure chattering rocks  
back into motion,  
sew a salt film  
over my pores,  
wash against  
my shell-shaped ears.



## *Invisible World*

As I lie in grass,  
knees up soles pressed  
to earth, an unnoticed spider

tethers from knee to knee  
the small, strong threads  
of her invisible world.

My usual footsteps are falling  
bricks spitting thin wisps  
in fluted glass. The heaving

of my brain-bags and water-logged  
physiology sends shock waves  
through a spider's reticence.

I am big with excess, swollen  
to useless.  
I break all surfaces I tread on,

I am earthquake, mudslide,  
careless creator,  
ungrateful destroyer.

Stumbling web wrecker.  
Rebuilding, rebuilding,  
a spider's persistence.

When I am finally still,  
the spider is relieved,  
I am briefly redeemed.

She makes use of me  
(of anything still or  
with roots)

mistakes my limbs  
for those of alderwood  
or salmonberry,

my scent the lure  
of oblivious prisoners,  
their sticky, thrashing wings.

She spindles in spirals  
mid-air across my lap,  
legs twitching with instinct.

My thighs are the pilings  
of her delicate architecture,  
solid ground

at each end of her bridge  
where she may touch  
down between crossings to rest.

## *Time Zones of a Rare Place*

I sit in the locks among boats  
that sink and rise at whims of engineers.  
Water split salt from fresh,  
hydrogen from oxygen, mathematical miracles.

Salmon churn before fish ladders  
leaping from gray water like glistening spits of metal.  
I can make out head, fin, tail,  
or only flashes of light and sound,  
stars that move in the far corners of vision.

Blue herons plentiful as gulls burn holes in daylight.  
The solitary flock, long necks pump esses,  
blue wings broad as scarves knotted around the necks of children  
who imagine they are superheroes.

Low tide offers picnics to grebes and ducks,  
abandons the naked legs of docks  
that jut out comically into midair,  
the wet earth thirty feet below the swimmer's or fisherman's ledge.

Like the oil lantern leveling itself  
against the list of the boat,  
I lean into swells just to feel upright,  
terrestrial gravity held like mercury in the stomach.

The ocean tells my time away from home,  
each wave a lapping second  
between the dryness at dawn and the floods of noon.

I rock with the ocean so long my body holds its rhythms  
like speech absorbing the accent of a foreign place.  
Later, at home, living by a foreign clock,  
every sight is a teetering horizon,  
every sound a loose clip tinkling against the mast.

Even in sleep I am buoyant,  
a creature of land with a sea inside my dreams.

## *Repentance East of the Mountains*

The ground was dry and crackling under small booted feet as I followed my father through the yellow-bellied jack pines and Douglas-fir with the old faces folding in their trunks. He was up ahead, his heavy boots rustling through the brittle ground cover of cheat grass and decaying wood. Typical summer of no rain. I followed twenty long strides behind, my smaller legs taking three steps for every one of his, feet tangling in the brush, stumbling like a newborn fawn.

He found the tire ruts in the earth a quarter mile east of the rock barn. He bent down and laid his palm in the deep, hash-marked groove. Looked at me with a sloping shadow of shame in his eyes, as if he had accidentally cut the skin of someone he loved, his wife or his only child.

Crouched over small as a boy confessing his mischief, spine-rounded reverence in the dirt. Even the atheist knew of forgiveness. He stood up and walked over to where a fallen trunk was melting back into the ground. He fit both arms round it, clasped fingers underneath, cradling it like an infant. Easy to lift from the tangle of bluebells, he dragged and placed the trunk in the rut where the truck's tires had spun. He did this again and again, filling the grooves with trees until the land forgot the machine's ever-heaving insistence.

He lifted me on his shoulders and I held on to his ears as we walked home. From this height, level with the heart, it was a softening of footsteps, and grooves the woods etch like scripture on my father's bark-like skin.

## *Bog City*

The lights of Las Vegas outshine stars into madness.  
You stand within its trembling chambers, keep drunk enough to feel sane.  
Geology lessons in your brain:  
laws of stratification, subduction, tension,  
erosion of finest particles.  
Igneous, sedimentary, and metamorphic rocks cycling like angels around the moon.

You think this city has no place in this desert.  
You entered the city from the Grand Canyon where you ran fingers  
through centuries, dusted yourself with timeless debris  
until your eyes watered and carved canyons down your face.  
You held old tools in your hand, trembling at the thought of its perfect use  
in a past culture, an iconic emblem branded onto your soul,  
ravenous to know them.  
You fantasized of ice, it's capacity to preserve even the soft tissue.  
You think it has the potential to store spirits,  
although you are hesitant to share this with your scientist friends.

You were a god, aching with evolution's ecstasy among the living dead.  
You were spectrum of time and position,  
stretched palm to sole around all existence.

You entered the city hoping for meadows, as the name deceives,  
*the* meadows, soft loam and tall grasses and wildflowers  
feathered and delicate as sunlight.

Now you squat upon a snag,  
an angry burn on the landscape from a cigarette  
dropped by the same careless, yellow fingers that toss sphinxes in American sand.  
A mad chemist colliding cultures like elements  
with unknown properties, braced for an explosion.

One hungry eye in the sphinx's forehead, a portal to gods and security cameras,  
glowers toward crowded streets of strangers, glittering and naked.

In this precarious state of here-and-now, life begins anew  
every half-hour in chapels with speakers in the ceilings,  
removable walls, a lobby desk where beings like you are ritually anointed  
with free champagne. Screaming organs, needle stuck  
in the same shallow groove as bride after bride swoops  
in fantastic flair down carpet, savoring  
the twenty-three minutes that are hers alone.

Can no one call this place home?  
You are a stripper, bar tender, cab driver, performer.  
Trenches are filled with old eyes, ancient imprint,  
yet the ones who keep you going never stay.

In the oasis of the air-conditioned hotel lobby you can't see the ceiling.  
You could be in the temperature-controlled belly  
of Egypt, all this worship around you;  
screams to saviors and blinking lights like sparks of a sacrificial fire.

You begin to fantasize again. The people are all bent over  
and contorted as if they're being burned,  
dancing to avoid some invisible poison or insect.  
Their eyes are removed, the holes filling with sand.  
Archeology takes over, and this strangely pleases you.

It is a Pompeii. You are sending the lava in  
so fast that centuries later an evolved strain of dolphin or gorilla  
chip away layers of time and tuff and basalt  
and find the beings of your image splayed face-down over tables,  
split open on chairs, their erections preserved like wells  
in the surrounding rock, wound like dough around square machines,  
the bones of each right hand fossilized on an aluminum lever.

And what legend do the dolphins and gorillas weave from these fragments?

*This is the best-preserved evidence  
of Homo Sapiens culture. It is as if  
the earth pulled its layers like blankets  
over this city's sleeping child. Yet it is safe  
to assume that the culture here was quite unique  
among desert civilizations. Humans,  
parrots, lions, currency. Let us discover  
them in their waste. What did they eat?  
Why were they here?*

What gluttonous assumptions could do us justice?  
Although you are god-like you still think in terms of us  
because humans are your likeness and this you cannot escape.

You think of Newton and rock cycles. You remember  
that matter is buried, weathered, burned, flooded, eroded, rubbed, and broken,  
but never disappears. The land is a page permanently scratched  
with such violent and magnificent characters.  
Like writing on real paper with the thick starkness of ink  
or hot, hard-won blood, the old-fashioned way.

Every building that has ever sunk into sand  
tattles on our love of pirates and kings, castles and pyramids and MGM Grands.  
You think, feeling humble and irreparably human again,  
that we should have stopped at the lodge-like tourist center at the Grand Canyon.  
Permanent as bone, real as continents, this is how they will know who we were,  
as a man in ice is known in a warmer time by the tools on his body.  
And the pesky foul soul he was sure would vanish at his death  
is found, preserved according to the laws of a phenomenon  
with many syllables and triple vowel instances  
that was named after you. And it would scream its honest causes.

This city is an offense to all laws you cherish,  
your worship of pattern and explanation.  
Exceptions always shatter your hard belief, bit by bit.  
You like that all artifacts have a use, specific and essential.  
You hope your theory is wrong; that perhaps, when the flabbiness corrodes,  
it will be better. The sparse deception will paint us brighter;  
the silly legacy we leave behind  
will send the next Darwinian fittest spiraling off dizzy into a new era.

## *The Roundness of Oceans*

It plays in loops rolling over each other,  
eddies over your toes and fanned foot bones,  
samples the shore like a cat's tongue

pushing milk that worms down her throat.  
Brine filming over lungs. Water undulates like dough

running under purple-veined hands into an oblong loaf,  
or pools to float buoys like cheerios.

Grinding rocks down to flat globes,  
sculpting driftwood ovaries, softening

glass. Shards of an old beer bottle,  
after its sleep with the water, cannot cut  
into the bottoms of feet—  
a terse blade that has lost its nerve.

The source of cycles, bruising into coves,  
molding tombolos in the sand, upthrusting the archipelago,

curling fingers against the back of the moon.

You who lets the ocean break over you  
will lose your edges soon enough,

knives blunted to marbles  
falling dull on a pillow  
by a sleeping face.



## *Emily's Screamers*

Emily called them screamers, the splinters  
that take the whole weight of the tree,  
snapping just before the trunk  
smacks into the earth.  
Sharp and thin, they mourn their arrival  
with long calls to the pin-light of weak stars.  
Cedar and fir sing these low solos  
from the clear cuts out into an erased overstory.

As a child Emily saw fairy tales in the clear globes  
of white currants, disgraced the puddle-skirting cow  
by kicking up her own mud. Never forgot,  
even as she aged, that fir trunks  
looked just like old faces.

The forest is all whispers,  
but the longer I listen the louder it gets.  
She could hear them, ears tuned  
to the earth's silent hum,  
and painted the sounds.  
The screamers are a hot orange  
against cerulean, willow, and aquamarine.

After painting she would return home,  
always alone. Chairs roped to ceilings  
like stage props graciously lowered for the rare guest.  
Gifts of trees, stumps,  
totem poles, one called "happiness"  
for the bewildered actors.  
Upon exiting with canvases tucked under arm,  
chairs are restrung, lofted into the gallows  
like wooden skeletons.  
There was redemption within the hemlock,  
in the forgiving droop of arms  
falling round her like a heavenly dome  
for the grim performance of human gesture.

I walk into the clearing cluttered with stumps.  
Who among us deserves atonement?  
I hear the elegies rising  
from splinters in crescendos.

Cross-legged in the salal and maidenhair  
Emily and I are painting the denouement in plentiful strokes  
and depth-catching swirls, offering voices.  
I listen to the screamers' songs,  
my small voice mixing with the last words  
of this broken, bodiless choir.

## *Sauna*

I heat up til  
I almost explode,  
skin leaking  
desert springs,  
then emerge,  
covered in coarse salt  
of my own  
residual ocean.

*Extraction of an Arrowhead  
for Kanyon*

We watch for talismen  
in starlight skittering across the night sky,  
in heavy leaning of mountain-shadows,  
in the sudden gloaming dorsal fin of an orca  
black against a purple and gold sunset.

Our muses stagger  
from nature's collisions and explosions,  
glide like angels on pearly clouds  
over the fall-out of the fantastic.  
We punch out prose  
to fill our large spaces  
left by mysteries we try to reinvent.

Rocks shaped by old hands,  
precious and worthless,  
lie beneath humble surfaces.  
A pinched tear drop rising  
from the earth as if evoked  
by the sky or drawn, quietly miraculous,  
by an intent moon.

I bend in red dust,  
my back to a gorge, the ancient  
oxbows of the Columbia River.  
Eyes to dirt, I find the thing that calls me  
near the place from which I too am extracted:  
a simple chip of vestigial labor,  
a small, brown wedge of attention.

## *Nocturnal Contact*

The sounds leaping over the fence  
from their darkness into mine  
erode in my ears, sink into skin like heat.

Deer sounds, uncountable, could have been two, one, four.  
I stop. The dog stops his jaunty ringing  
and the bodies scatter  
through salmonberry, foxglove, and fern.

So many cool, silent things sway in night air  
as if the opalescent moon  
was far brighter than the sun, far more compulsive,  
drawing life up from day-sleep.

I could not see their bodies, darkness  
and a tall fence between us,  
could not judge the length or mass of antlers,  
the number of prongs  
extending from spirit in bone.

Invisibility brings us almost into contact.  
Human and deer abandon our roles so we both are startled,  
both target and predator.

I am eavesdropping on their language,  
how they sense danger, communicate food,  
sooth newborns into standing on wobbly rods,  
bend to lick salt off rocks at low tide.

Havens of shadow on opposite sides of a thin wooden fence,  
the dog and I on the sidewalk, they in the mossy woods.

The moon shines down on both sides,  
their light divided by canopy,  
speckled motion of leaf-whispers across silver backs,  
mine glaring on stark concrete,  
all elements erased but the human.