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Fifteen Poems

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FIFTEEN POEMS

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FIFTEEN POEMS is a thesis consisting of a critical introduction on the development of my understanding of craft, the poetic influences which have shaped my poetry, as well as a collection of poems. The essay addresses both the form and content of the collection, as well as my history with poetry. It provides details about the process of creating this collection, and it portrays some of the vision that motivates it. The poetry which follows is a reflection on myself, my body, and my landscape, as I ask the question, who am I in this place? Situated in Lincoln, Nebraska, it seeks to grapple with my relationship to history, lineage, Christianity, whiteness, settler colonialism, and violence in the present moment.

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INTRODUCTION

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Growing up, the only poetry that I remember encountering was Scripture. I remember standing in the hallway of my elementary school, singing the Proverb: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, / and lean not on your own understanding, / in all your ways acknowledge Him, / and He will set your path straight” — my six year old body doing the choreography, leaning on one leg with my arms spread wide for balance, then jumping onto two feet like I had just leapt off the balance beam in the Olympics and stuck the landing.

I remember as a ten year old, sitting on the blue ladder that straddled my family’s above-ground pool in our backyard, reciting Psalms that I had memorized to my mom. She would check my work based on her memory. Those words, ingrained in her heart, as they slowly made their way into mine. Looking back now, it’s clear that poems, and their teachings, were central to my experience as a child. They were meant to be written on the tablet of my heart, meant to be carried in my living.

I remember sermons and lectures during my undergraduate years at Colorado Christian University that explained the form of the Psalms. I learned that the Psalmist’s poems were prayers that began in doubt and ended in faith. The final lines were meant to pronounce a resolution of praise, a statement of belief. The structure of the Psalms entailed a development in the tone of the poem from uncertainty to certainty, thereby creating a sense of transformation. Going back through my old journals, I can see this pattern and structure in my poetry. I would write prayers, beginning with some kind of emotional turmoil and ending with a statement of belief.

In that way, poetry functioned as a form of transformation for me. Even when I didn't believe, the form required it of me. Poetry was the place where I went to be spoken to—the final lines preaching back to myself who and what I wanted to be. Poetry became an act of faith. And even as some of my beliefs and values have shifted, poetry continues to exist in that way for me, even if unconsciously. I continue to be influenced by that psalmic tradition of poetry as prayer, in which I seek both inner and outer transformation through the act of writing. Honestly, I'm trying to both resist and press into that influence. At this point, I'm just trying to be aware that it is present in my work, and as I continue to write, I want to be able to appreciate it, celebrate it, manipulate it and problematize it.

—

As I think about poets that influence me, I think of Layli Long Soldier and Tiana Clark. In Layli Long Soldier's poem, "38", she writes,

> "The Dakota 38 refers to thirty-eight Dakota men who were executed by hanging, under orders from President Lincoln.
> To date, this is the largest 'legal' mass execution in US history.
> The hanging took place on December 26, 1862–the day after Christmas.
> This was the *same week* that President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation.
> In the preceding sentence, I italicize 'same week' for emphasis."

In this excerpt, Long Soldier uses plain-spoken lines to speak about important political moments in history, as she navigates the complex terrain of her audience and of history itself.

She discusses these events while providing a meta-commentary on her own narration. She comments on the reason behind italicizing the words “same week”, which draws the reader’s attention to the juxtaposition of the Dakota 38 with the end of slavery. This demonstrates that while slavery ended, violent racism in America had not. Her meta-commentary also emphasizes the importance of the way that people write about and narrate events. For example, she writes, “I feel most responsible to the orderly sentence; conveyor of thought. / … I may jump around and details will not unfold in any chronological order. / Keep in mind, I am not a historian.” By explaining how she intends to write history without being a historian, Long Soldier poses the question, who has the authority to narrate history? Moreover, she demonstrates a way that poetry can speak truth to a story that has been marked by the historical erasure of Native American voices.

After reading that poem, I started thinking about the importance of being honest and straightforward. Inspired by the voice of her speaker, I began to be drawn to the use of plain spoken lines that seek clarity above imagery, especially if the subject matter is about an actual event that needs to be explained. In one of my poems, “Not the immigration story I was told,” I try to approach a similar subject, the narration of my own family history, by being direct and clear. I write, “I must be tender / but I must be honest / in 1875 the Pawnee Nation was removed from Nebraska / two years / after we arrived.” Like Long Soldier, I break the fourth wall and draw attention to my narration, which is personal. That technique removes the expectation that I speak with absolute authority, but it still asks for and invites a listening ear.

I am thinking, too, of Tiana Clark’s poem, “Soil Horizon.” In it, Clark reflects on how history impacts one’s view of the landscape and how history shapes the present. Throughout the poem, Clark repeats the question, “*Can’t we just let the past be past?*”, which is a question that

her mother-in-law asked when she pitched the idea of taking a family photo at a plantation. As Clark uses this repetition, she narrates the history of the plantation, explaining its role in slavery, as well as its role as a field hospital for the Confederate Army during the Civil War. She writes, "How do we stand on the dead and smile?" And later, "Even the dark / layers of dirt must testify". By carefully using tense, as well as markers for time and space, the poem navigates past and present with clarity, holding several moments together while still keeping them distinct. There is the moment in which Clark is on the phone with her mother-in-law, the moment when the family is taking the photo, the historical events of the Civil War and slavery, and by the end, all of these moments are juxtaposed as the family stands on the layers of the soil and smiles. The image is haunting, and it artfully poses the question, how does one write about history and landscape? A question that is central to Clark's collection, entitled, *I Can't Talk About The Trees Without The Blood*.

In my poem, "I think of a white man breaking", I attempt to write about several different moments: observing an oak tree by my apartment, seeing a fox from my porch, my ancestor encountering a wolf on the prairie, the construction of my apartment in the early 20th century, and the removal of the Pawnee Nation from Nebraska. In all of that, I want to follow in Clark's lead, as she understands the importance of not muddying everything together, staying true to the distinctness of each moment in time and space, creating juxtaposition rather than assimilation.

—

The more I think about the process of writing these poems, the more I notice the work and care of other people. While I write, I typically have some music playing. Artists, with their stories and emotions and creative visions, spill into my ears, intertwining and mingling with the words

forming in my mind. Ezra Pound once wrote that “Poetry atrophies when it gets too far from music” (61). And while I am writing poetry that isn’t using any strict meter or rhyme, I want to continue to look for musicality in my language.

In my first workshop in the program, Prof. Wabuke asked me to take Bon Iver’s song, “Skinny Love,” and write it in a way that captured its rhythm and tone. Then she had me do the same thing with Birdy’s cover of the same song. In that, she encouraged me to think of the musical quality of not only the words themselves, but of punctuation and spacing.

I am drawn to contemplative, ambient, spiritual music like Bon Iver and Penny & Sparrow. In a similar fashion in my own work, I am trying to use spacing, caesura, and punctuation to create moments of silence, giving it a contemplative tone. In this, I am drawing from the inspiration of Safia Elhillo. She sees the use of caesura as little “visual bits of silence scattered throughout” the poem (“Safia Elhillo vs. Shame”). Following her lead, I want to produce both the visual and auditory effect of giving the poem space to breathe.

Beyond that, I’ve been drawn to the rhythm of the short line. I think the short line has helped me to look closer at each line and each word, to then examine what the words are doing in smaller chunks, even though I’m interested in using longer lines in some places as well. In my poem, “There are times I say to myself”, I write with an attention to the syllable count of each line, and the spaces function like rests:

“I say to say to incantate

You’re in the night

The air around a litany”

Beyond punctuation, syntax, and spacing, the use of rhyme, assonance, and alliteration can also add to the musical quality of a poem. I’m interested in what June Jordan calls “vertical

rhythm", a rhythmical structure developed by black poets that "depends upon the exploitation of musical qualities inherent to each word, and existing between and among words as well" (38). She writes, "Assonance or alliteration, for example, can produce a smooth movement from one word to another, from one line to another, and can even propel a listener or reader from one word or one line to the next without possible escape… Typically, the use of vertical rhythm will exploit the positive musical value of words (e.g. assonance or alliteration) in order to speed the reader all the way to the conclusion of the poem, and in order to make the reader's progress through the poem a pleasurable rhythmical experience" (*Poetry for the People*, 38).

In my poem, "Homesteading", I use assonance throughout the poem in order to move the reader through. I write, "grandpa / tell me of love / tell me of a good God / who dies for the world / tell me that a home / is in your hands / that they are soft / and have not harmed / a single soul." In this, I'm using long *o* sounds, which Cristina Rivera Garza explains "take on a low, solemn tone" (42).[1] Even though I wasn't thinking of this in the process of writing it, looking back now, I can see how the stacking of "love," "of", "good", "world", "home," "your", "soft", and "soul", gives it a mood and tone that matches my feeling of longing, prayer, and song. That assonance creates a sonic effect that makes the poem feel a bit like the deep, whole notes of a hymn. In this, I'm realizing more of what Mary Oliver meant when she wrote, in her book *A Poetry Handbook*, "words have not only a definition and possibly a connotation, but also the *felt* quality of their own kind of sound" (22).

As I think about how sound impacts my work, I think of the closing lines of many of my poems. At the beginning of my Masters program I took a class called Renaissance Lyric Poetry,

[1] In this quotation, Garza is paying close attention to the power dynamics of language, especially between the particularities of Spanish and English. The full quote is as follows, "In English, The O takes on a low, solemn tone, intensified in book-knowledge and provost-power; in Spanish, it leads us straight away to the world of madness and mayhem."

in which I was tasked with close-reading several sonnets. Looking back, I can see how much of an imprint that class had on my understanding of how to craft a poem. I am drawn to the rhetorical structure of the sonnet, how it develops an internal conversation and builds to a realization in the turn of the poem. While I don't use quatrains, and my poems vary in length and spacing, they often develop the narrative or images toward something like a Shakespearean volta, followed by a rhyming couplet.

For example, in my poem, "A Field of Magnolias", I end the poem with the couplet, "I want instead to give my breath / I want instead to give this theft". Though it relies more on assonance than on a perfect rhyme, I am still relying on the sonic effect of the *gg* end rhyme, which I think makes the words ring in the ears even after reading the poem, providing a sense of closure.

In another poem, "The first time she held my hand", I rely on internal rhyme to set up the last word of the final line, trying to produce that double end-rhyme effect in a more subtle way. I write, "I think this is what it looks like to pray: / paralyzed and holding. The clasping of our hands / as we lay on the ground trembling." The repetition of "holding", "clasping," and "trembling" is meant to give the last word that sense of finality. Additionally, in the third to last line, the poem turns toward the epiphany. That is, in the last two lines I realize that the poem has been about what it means to pray. In that way, the poem turns in a similar fashion to a sonnet.

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I have been drawn to landscape poetry for the last several years, especially the nature poetry of Wendell Berry and Mary Oliver. The mystical lens through which Oliver sees the world inspires me, and it resonates with my feelings. She wrote of a landscape full of sacred mysteries, a world

that had possibility. In her poem, “What Is It?”, she writes, “The salamanders, / like tiny birds, locked into formation, / fly down into the endless mysteries / of the transforming water, / and how could anyone believe / that anything in this world / is only what it appears to be.” In this, her observation of nature is coupled with an openness to not knowing. This acceptance of and attention to mystery feels similar to my understanding of prayer or worship. In many ways, I am shaped by the eye that Oliver has for the world, and I think it frames the way that I approach observing my landscape and space.

I have always thought my landscape is beautiful, but now I see my city as a place that is still dealing with the negative effects of segregation, redlining, and settler colonialism. I can’t see my landscape the same anymore, a feeling that is again reminiscent of Tiana Clark’s title, *I Can’t Talk About The Trees Without The Blood*. So I enter this project looking at my place, at my landscape, history and foundations, asking the questions: How do I write about this? What does it mean that I think it is beautiful? What if the place that has shaped me into the person I am, with all of my loves and visions and imaginings, isn’t beautiful? What if it conceals a terrifying truth? What if this concrete, and all of its silences (to echo Audre Lorde) does not actually protect me? In all this, the subject of my collection is not only the landscape, but my imagination of it—as in, the way I perceive it. That is, as I look outward, I am looking inward.

As I write, I often find myself looking out the window. In front of my desk is the view of a tall oak tree which stands catty-corner to my house. It fills up most of the frame with its thick, sprawling branches. This particular oak is worth mentioning because it is the natural image that serves as the landscape for several poems in the collection. I think it is important to write about this particular tree, because it is the view that I have of the world. The government of Lincoln planted it and owns it, and some days, I’ll see people with neon yellow t-shirts trim back its

branches, taking care of it. In that way, my project is connected to those caretakers and planters, to the landscapers who work to create the beauty in my neighborhood. In a sense, my city wants me to see that oak tree. My city wants me to view that particular landscape.

So to write about landscape in this setting means to write about my relationship to my city, to politics. It means writing about the government which plants an oak tree on one day and then imprisons innocent men only a couple miles away on the next. It means writing about myself seeing God in the tree that was planted by the government which distracts me from the stories behind it.

—

At the heart of my collection is a question that I've read several poets wrestling with, including Tiana Clark, as I mentioned above. I am thinking, too, of Bertolt Brecht's poem "To those born later". In that poem he writes, "What kind of times are these, when / To talk about trees is almost a crime / Because it implies silence about so many horrors?" Writing during World War II, Brecht is wrestling with the ethics of choosing a subject to write about. The question is profound, and it makes me think about how to choose a subject, as well as how to look at a subject.

In the spring semester, I took a fiction workshop in which we had a discussion about the poem "Fuck Your Lecture On Craft, My People Are Dying", by Noor Hindi. In that poem, Hindi writes, "Colonizers write about flowers. / I tell you about children throwing rocks at Israeli tanks / seconds before becoming daisies." That poem, and my professor, Timothy Schaffert's lecture on it, echoed the conversation about trees that Brecht was writing about. And I was trying to piece through it myself. Could I write about politics? Could I write about something other than politics? I wasn't sure, but I remember being drawn to Hindi's poem.

In conversation with Brecht is Adrienne Rich's poem, "What Kinds of Times Are These." She writes, "because in times like these / to have you listen at all, it's necessary / to talk about trees." In this, Rich is making the argument that the question shouldn't be: can I write about trees? But instead: how should I write about trees? Or even better: why would I write about trees? For her, it is to get readers to listen, to show the subtle connections, the politics of the trees themselves. I think Rich's poem reveals how interconnected landscape and language and politics are. That there isn't always a way around that entanglement. For me, I've begun to think that I can't write without talking about politics, so I want to write about them—but I want that to come from my life, to be about my landscape.

In truth, I am embarrassed about my relationship to landscape. I feel ashamed to be from a Nebraska suburb in which we didn't have many trees, in which I didn't learn the names of the ones we had. I wish I grew up connected to that landscape, but I grew up in a world of separation and distance. A white world, which was characterized by cars and garages, Starbucks and Chipotle. Many of my rituals involve church, or sports, or TV, or fast food.

In this, I'm reminded of Ted Kooser's poem, "A Person of Limited Palette." He writes "I would love to have lived out my years / in a cottage a few blocks from the sea, / and to have spent my mornings painting / out in the cold wet rocks … / If you should come looking / for me, you'll find me here, in Nebraska, / thirty miles south of the broad Platte River, / right under the flyway of dreams." I have felt that same longing. I wish I lived on the coast and wrote about foggy beaches and sea-birds like Mary Oliver. I wish I had a prettier picture to look at, but I think the advice of Addonizio and Laux is good. They write, "this is where we begin, by looking over our own shoulder, down our own arms, into our own hands at what we are holding, what we know" (20).

For me, this means that I write about my landscape. It means that I write about the table in my apartment, the oak tree outside my window, the book in my hands. It means that I am writing about my memory and history, about my experiences in my childhood. It also means that I'm writing about my faith, which is a thing that my advisor, Kwame Dawes, has given me space to do, even though I at times want to distance myself from it. It means that I'm writing about my self.

—

I should mention that I had a profound paradigm shift during my Master's program—a shift which began but hasn't ended, as I continue to discover how to "stay in the poem" as Kwame Dawes has suggested. The shift has come as I have thought about the subject of my work. As I write about subjects like politics or other people's experiences, I want to maintain an awareness of my own positionality; that is, my relationship to those subjects. So one of the primary questions of this collection is: who am I in this place?

Recently, I've been reading about the Fireside Poets, who were middle class white, Christian men who wrote at the time my family was homesteading. Interestingly, the town where my family homesteaded was named after one of them: Lowell (after James Russell Lowell). These poets' subject matter was slavery and westward expansion. They were social justice oriented Christians, like myself, so I am wrestling with how my work is in conversation with theirs.

I'm thinking about Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's piece, "The Song of Hiawatha," a book-length poem which tells the tale of Hiawatha, a fictional character from the Ojibwe people. In his work, Longfellow removes himself from the poem—narrating through a Native speaker

rather than his own voice as a white man. In a way, the poem is like a translation that seems to conceal the role that the translator has played in the making of the narrative. Longfellow seems to see himself as an unbiased vessel, and yet this has the effect of removing himself from the story. Which is misleading, and it hides his own implication in the reality of settler colonialism (in his own state of Massachusetts, as well as in the West) which backgrounds the poem. In this, I have come to realize that disappropriative writing, in my case, looks like not removing myself from my work.

Throughout my time in the M.A. program, my peers and advisors have consistently asked, "Where are you in this poem?" Which I think continues to be one of the most important questions that I want to keep asking of my work. Oftentimes, I find myself hiding behind abstraction or persona, which I have come to see creates a kind of protective privilege. That is a tendency that I want to continue to work to resist. I want to be present in my poems. Which I'm still learning how to do. Even this month, the feedback on a poem for workshop was that same question: where are you in this poem?

Kwame Dawes once told me the story of a white woman who wrote a collection of poems about her time in Rwanda, but the issue with the work was that she wasn't present in any of the poems. This struck me, because I have done something similar. Before I went to UNL, I worked as a storyteller for a non-profit that does education and health projects in India, Kenya, and Uganda. I could go back and find multiple poems and stories in which I wasn't present, and what that distance creates is a removal of my own implication in and relationship to the subjects that I was writing about. And that reinforces my innocence and untouchability, while simultaneously portraying the subjects as people in need of my help. This positionality creates and perpetuates a

white savior complex that is colonial. I want to actively work to deconstruct that tendency in my work. Writing as a white, Christian man, I find it even more important to enter the poem.

One of the books that has been important to my work is Ada Limón's, *The Carrying*. Through reading that book, I noticed her deployment of the "I". Throughout the collection, Limón navigates the relationship between the personal and the political with vulnerability and trustworthiness. She can turn seamlessly from something intimate and bodily to something external. For example, she writes, "I'm trellising / the tomatoes in what's called / a Florida weave. Later, we try / to knock me up again. We do it / in the guest room because that's the extent of our adventurism / in a week of violence in Florida" (from "Trying"). Here she shares her own grief with vulnerability, while simultaneously contextualizing it within a moment of a shared pain. And I think that this process of weaving the personal into the communal helped me to see how to navigate my own relationship to political moments and historical events. Inspired by Limón, as well as by Kwame Dawes' advice that I consider myself the speaker of my poems, I began using the "I", placing myself in my work. And I think that has been helpful for me, as it has stretched me to manage the pronouns, the tone, and the sense of myself as the speaker in my poetry. I think that technique also has helped me to write into the conversation on social justice from a more honest, helpful, and vulnerable place.

As I mentioned above, this year, I read *The January Children*, by Safia Elhillo, and I was drawn to how Elhillo's "Self Portrait" series frames herself as the subject of the work. This form helped me begin to conceptualize some advice that Kwame Dawes had given me, that I continue to think of poetry as a reflection of the self. In one meeting, he gave me an example of this, explaining that he considers his collection of poems about his brother to actually be about himself writing about his brother. In light of that, I began considering my poems to be self

portraits, even when I don't call them that in the title. In that way, even when I write about the landscape, or about whiteness, or about history, I am thinking of myself as the subject. I've tried to signal that with the use of the "I", with framing constructions such as "I think about…", "I imagine…" "I want…" etc, as well as with the naming of poems and the collection as a whole.

—

I have written these poems on my laptop, sent them to friends and classmates and professors over email, revised them back at my desk with coffee, and now I have compiled them into a collection as a thesis. As I thought about how to organize it, I again became interested in that Psalmic progression from doubt to faith, not only at the level of individual poems, but also at the level of the organization of the manuscript as a whole. Inspired by the Psalms, I wanted to begin my collection in lament and end in faith. In that, I hope that by the end, myself and my place undergo some sort of transformation, which gives the collection a sense of hope, though it is a fraught sense of hope. The first poem is called "I don't know how to imagine God in my world", and in it I lament the absence of my God. The last poem is called "A Prayer", and in it, my life is animated by wind, which is a representation of breath and spirit.

By ending the collection in that way, I feel unsettled. In one sense, I think that is a feeling I'm okay with, because even the word itself captures a potentially adequate response to the history of settler colonialism that I find myself writing about. I mean, it might be a good thing that I feel unsettled. On the other hand, I think my feelings toward the ending also demonstrates that my work is still very much in-process. My thinking and my writing are still developing as I keep working on my poems. So even though there is some finality to the thesis project, this doesn't mark a contained and finished collection of poetry for me. As Kwame Dawes has advised me, I hope to continue revising the poems which follow, as well as generating new

poems, letting the project go in whatever direction my self-reflection takes me. Moreover, I hope to continue the project, which is a search that goes beyond the page, a search for a way of living which would bring love to the shared ground on which I live.

POEMS

I don't know how to imagine God in my world

The water is dripping slowly.
Clogged somewhere in the pipes.

Outside, I can see the holes
where the brown clods of ground

have been lifted by jackhammer
and hoe, machines that shake the house.

I know now where the water flows.
That blue pipes and yellow vested

men tunnel it in from a tank
that's government owned. Still

as a glacial lake we stand and peer
into that black hole beneath, the muddy

edges of earth open to our eyes—
its nerves provoked by the insertion

of cast iron. I wonder. Totally
ignorant and curious, a poet who thinks

the mouth of earth exposed in my front lawn
might be gasping, who at least knows

that all three of us are sweating,
our hands braced on our backs.

In the poem, or the prayer, I want
to go into the earth. I want to tip

my cap to the men holding their hard hats
and dive into the abyss where I hear

that the waters are gushing. Where
the hard rocks are licked smooth from excess.

I want to dig my feet into that black sand
and connect the dust I am to the particles of dirt

coursing through the ancient veins
of a body coated in concrete. Concrete.

The glass in my hand waits under the faucet
the way I wait on my knees for God

and I come up to the surface gasping for air,
wanting, again, that wellspring that never dries.

Long ago, rivers were metaphors
for divinity. Now, I write about tap water.

At the sink I hear the engine starting up,
the backhoe ripping. That sonic reminder

that water is no longer something which flows
but that's taken. God has become mechanical,

commercial. His mercies come through pipes,
not rivers and to drink of this fount

is now to question the source. I want to ask
God, where are you getting your resources?

Where in the caverns of this stolen land
are the waters that are giving? I look, hoping

into the faucet, that somewhere there'd be life
where there is government water.

That somewhere in my world, there'd be
mercy. Water rushing. And yet I know,

from feeling, that the land is cracking.
At least, I know that all of us are sweating.

I am trying to start a garden

This morning I went around to the side yard
where I hoped to find some fruit on my zucchini plant

but instead watered the dirt with suspicion, of the ground first—
what is your problem, dirt?—and myself second—who I now am

realizing knows nothing about plopping a plant straight
into the yard and probably should have consulted Google

or the woman working the cash register at the garden store
but have instead found myself looking at the ground

like it's the prairie and I'm my great ancestor, Anton,
surveying the landscape at the end of the railroad.

I think my imagination is poisoned and so is the ground.
I've read that love "steals into the heart with feet as silent

as the lightsome dawn" and I have been told that Anton stayed
because he wanted to make something of himself. I wonder

if he looked into that dawn and thought about how to love,
how to care for Maren and his baby on the way, if he then prayed

into the soil with unsure, but trusting hands, working to grow
some sort of a life. The photo I have of him shows him with long

hair and a mustache, just like me, as I look now into that same
Nebraska dawn and hope the ground will grace me, too, with a life,

a slow love that fruits beyond the last tracks of the railroad
like it did in that town called Lowell, named after the poet who looked

at a landscape and saw grace, an abolitionist who knew
the ground carried scars but hoped that continuing to work

might bring some kind of love, some kind of liberation.
And now time has gone on and there have been harvests

and frosts and farmers have become businessmen and businessmen
have become millennials and now I return, even more foreign

than a young Danish immigrant but with time and abandon and care—
trying to learn, here, what it means to pray into ground.

Sea of Red

My city is red t-shirts and jeans swimming across a street like a school of fish, a crosswalk overflowing with bodies on a Saturday like Shibuya or New York or somewhere in the Gulf where red snappers make a midwestern sun against a deep blue storm.

My city is a dad tossing a football to a boy in a lawn. The seconds in time announced on the radio in the boy's mind.

My city is a mass of people moving in place, a fast current swaying bodies like red anemone.

It's uncles and grandmas cursing the TV. Kids lunging for a catch in a sea of red. The seconds just before delirium. The silent moment when the ball's in the air, the people quiet, 90,000 prayers. It's the double hi-fives, the sousaphones back and forth, the golden flashes of sun.

It's seconds of time, my city. Ecstatic time that trickles like slow rivers into soil, the dark thick stuff that my ancestors called rich. A plant watered by a legend, by a feeling. Anemone. One moment of blood coats it all.

Deep deep red. The color of evening in the clouds and on the walls of a shopping mall. It's the grasses cleared, the peoples removed.

This is where I grew up.

It's the land where white kids like me
dive into squares of grass
called lawns
separated
by driveways and streets.

It's the driving up 10th street. The never turning right or left. It's the neighborhoods I didn't go to as a kid.

It's a well known fact: the ocean has barely been explored. The sea is a mystery of stories. The same goes for a cardboard box with a Valentino's pizza. I want to dive in. I want to go swimming

but I'm afraid that my city is an ocean of blood.

A couple weeks ago, I saw 10 squad cars flood down my street to arrest a man who was mentally unstable. I watched one of them take his head in his hand and bash it into the car window like he was spiking a football.

And I stood fifteen feet away safe.

I watered my plants. Trickled seconds into soil and wondered what a place like this will continue to grow. A watermelon cracked open. Red is the meat is the clay.

This city is the words we don't say. It's a sea of red that's covered in white.

It's the silence the noise the question: how do I reckon with history
how do I talk about blood anemone is a flower known for
death and forsaken love and I just learned of it in a Google search
this isn't about things that I know just things that I feel

like a red and white flower like a red and white boy

Red for the blood. White for the hands.
Red and white for the blood on my hands.
Red for the blood that trickles into land.
White for the hands that covered it made a city where I stand.

Not the immigration story I was told

I want to tell the story of my founding of a white family
who immigrated from "considerable wealth and comfort" back in Denmark

[a line in quotes because it comes from the narration
given me by my Grandfather in a book about our history]

to find almost immediately a plot of land in America

I want to call it what it is—

immigrating from privilege to privilege

[I want to repeat the word to question it to give it apparitional properties]

we are so *privileged*

my family left a fine cottage with a farm and free time

and chose to come here because of the opportunity
because of our desire for money for souls

I must begin here a 5th generation Nebraskan because I'm trying to learn
how to live in a way that does not kill people

I must be tender but I must be honest

in 1875 the Pawnee nation was removed from Nebraska

two years after we arrived

in 1823 the Supreme Court ruled that Native Americans couldn't own land
because they weren't Christian

and this is not the story I was told

this is now the story I have to live on

At the Market to Market Relay in Nebraska

In one moment
I'm jogging

and the wind is light
and the corn rows

the color
of last things

are swaying
as sunflowers

and in one moment
I'm reading a headline on my phone

as protesters
run

into streets
in Georgia

and the sun is weaving
in the cottonwoods

by the river
and I say

this
is so pretty

and I think
about daylight

and the dust
kicked up by tires

like smoke

over fields

and the tear gas
in the lungs

and my body
and my skin

and the coughing
and the reaching for air

and in one moment
I'm catching my breath

as a turkey vulture
circles overhead

and not once
do I think about dying

and in one moment
I'm jogging

through a neighborhood
not my own

and the dog-walkers
wave

and I think
about crossing

the border
on foot

and the vulture
crosses the river

a shadow
in the sky

and in one moment
I'm praying

as I'm panting
for mercy

and in one moment
a shot echos

in the daylight
and a jogger

my age
is killed

and a white man
my skin

is holding
the gun

and in one moment
the dust is golden

like clouds
in the lungs

and I'm breathing
and I'm coughing

and still not once
do I think about dying

not once
do I think about dying

I think of a white man breaking

prairie, that moment of silence when
my ancestor stared into the eyes of a wolf,

as I sit on the floor, laid from the heart of an oak,
like the one across the street from my house,

which was built 100 years ago, and I wonder
if wolves wove in a ravine of oaks, then,

if they slunk between the trees and the people
laying bricks, like the fox I saw from my porch,

paused in the middle of the street, of the night, its eyes
two reflections of the moon. I wonder if he heard

his breath in that quiet scare, before he threw a tool
at the wolf, before it turned away. I listen to the night,

imagine a howl, a cry, and now it rings in my ears—
the sounds of people crying as white settlers

forced them out of their homes. I don't know exactly
which tool my family used to get the Pawnee to move,

except that they are gone, with more of their blood spilled
than the wolves on their flag. I know that a nation was removed

for my family to take root. I know that my flag
was planted in their place, and I want to unlearn

the way he looked at the land, my ancestor planting
a life in a field silent with who wasn't there.

I look at the street, the ground he called a belonging,
which is a way of stealing a life and calling it his.

That is, my place is a stolen life. That is, this place
is not a gift, not mine, it is someone else's home.

Self Portrait as Church Body

The grapes are poisoned

I take communion the week after

George Floyd is killed

drink grape juice

with members of a white body

who say nothing of grief imagine

a world where blood

is grape juice in plastic

a world where we drink blood

and say nothing of grief imagine

a world where we refuse

to imagine the body

we killed

I'm looking for space to lament

Last summer I learned that a white body can choose

to never lament

choose instead
a silence

I asked my pastor if he's thought

about repentance that me and him are white

and American

and Christian

and in our body's silence

is a wake of grief

last summer our neighbors screamed outside

while we were worshipping

I am part of a communal erasure of lament

and sometimes I think

to love is to leave

my pastor answers: we can't make everyone feel bad

and a friend of mine asks

how long?

like the lament:
How long O Lord?

how long would our repentance have to go on

when could we get back to living?

which is a question that echoes

in our silence

when can someone who has been

killed

get back to living?

These Hands

I lift a cup with my hands
and bring water to my mouth drink into the body I follow
the mouth of a river where layers of rock tell a story to new droplets
of some body rushing the sound of earth changing
and grieving I was told once that learning is a form of grief

and in my hands rests a book by my Grandpa whose hands I can't picture
but now hold a body is changing new droplets erode the walls of my skin
I open to stories of hands digging and molding the mud into home
I look at my hands like a book and read layers of rock meld into dust

I learn (remember, I grieve) through the white of a page
his touch a transmutation in print the book "These Hands"
given two palms open are words and knowledge is touch
the texture of pages felt when rubbing my fingers in circles
the lines of a story repeat this is not an oral history
the white of a page my story the white of a space

the white of my hands I've never heard the color spoken aloud
only seen it backgrounding ink the story written on palms
a future told without words unraveled I write and open my hands
I lift stories like walls to my face cover my mouth
my head in these hands learning grief and
a river the water pooling and dripping from hands

The first time she held my hand

We end up in a field at the beginning of summer.
Prairie grasses lay beneath a blanket in sun.
We talk about trees and whether or not we believe in God
as I pluck the seeds off a stem of wheat. Her shoulders,
bare, welcoming the first pink feeling of heat.
She looks at me with everything. Her fingers timidly
sneak into mine, and all those wounds I thought I dealt with
start throbbing again inside. Dandelions trembling in the wind.
Everything starts to bow. My head drops to sternum
and my gaze fixates on the black night of my eyelids.
My hand, a limp petal as I tell myself in circles:
She thinks she is going to love you, but you know that she won't.
Her love meets my own weapon of grief,
my own walls between nerve endings and flowers:
The numbing of the body once you stop
believing in touch. I told her earlier that this was the year
I started noticing flowers. I didn't tell her why it took
me so long, that loneliness makes more sense
to me than love. I think this is the fear of God.
I think this is what it looks like to pray:
paralyzed and holding. The clasping of our hands
as we lay on the ground trembling.

A Field of Magnolias

I am trying to learn how to love

which I think might be closer to plant
but the lilies are gone
the fields have been mowed

I see only the absence of God in this city

and sometimes I think all I can do is keep my body in place

I have lost the ability to pray

I can no longer imagine

love in this world
like a tree grasping the sound of the wind
I try to grow it

I let my place become a sanctuary
and learn being here
is a liturgy

but I read in my body lament
and I don't know how to stay

sometimes I have this dream
where I'm withering away
I imagine the field
cleared
and all that's left is dust
and my body
becomes a brief
swirl of dirt
in the sky

I don’t want to be white again today

but I know loving a body cannot be leaving it

love must be flower and fruit planted

love must be
in the roots
in the way they rip and rive a river under the street
bubbling up with a breath

love is in the ground
and someday
it will be shared

I wonder if I can write words
that might become roots

if they would not again
poison the ground

I dream I’d be magnolia

that I’d be bloom and root

I dream I’d be open petals like hands that I’d be changing
and that my feet would still be staying
still be giving my life to this place

I want to believe there is joy here that my presence
would not be violence would not bring death

I want instead to give my breath

I want instead to give this theft

Homesteading

> *"Take me to the water, to be baptized" —African American Spiritual*
>
> *"Although the Sioux had been placed on a reservation well north of the Platte east of the Black Hills, they claimed the right to hunt in the Republican River country, south of the Platte, by virtue of the Treaty of 1868. As settlers moved into the area, they demanded that the Army remove the Indians." – Nebraska State Historical Society*

take me to the river
grandpa
take me to the place
where people
were removed

tell me
the meaning of our hands
the meaning of this land

take me to the river
grandpa
walk me through
the story
of our settlement
help me understand
how it is
we made a home

tell me
what we hold in our hands
what we call
our property

I want a sermon
grandpa
I want the words
to soak into my body
I want to hear you say
swords were turned into plows
and I want to believe

that it’s true

but I am afraid
that when swords turn into plows
the plows are used as swords
grandpa
it was a forced removal

there is always a sword
hiding behind the plow
the plow is always meant to cut
a body in two

grandpa
take me to the river
and touch the ground
with your hands

take me to your hands
and let me see them
in my own

take me to your heart
and tell me who we are

are we an army of God
or a body of blood
are we harvesting a blessing
or are we plowing a life
into mud

grandpa
tell me of love
tell me of a good God
who dies for the world
tell me that a home
is in your hands
that they are soft
and have not harmed
a single soul

tell me I can fall into your arms
and trust in your love
tell me
somewhere
there is a love
in which I can still
make a home

After Racial Profiling Puts Two Black Panthers in Nebraska Prison

Every week I take Nebraska Highway to get to church where
we are really passionate about this thing called ‘Prison Ministry.’
I pass Lowes and Home Depot and cars wrapping the building
at Canes, and in my periphery sits the State Penitentiary
where an innocent man named Ed has sat for two of my lives.

I’ve lived on that road. My high school shares the same sidewalk,
and now I know that concrete is meant to hold people in place.
I remember the sentence my friends and I used to say on the way
home from Youth Football practice: “What are the boys
doin' today?”

I didn’t know I was talking about him, and his friend
Wopashitwe Mondo Eyen we Langa, who wrote a poem in the pen
that said he was tired of kneeling to pray to a God who looked
like the cops who wrongly convicted him.

I had no idea
that on those weekday evenings in the fall of ‘05 driving
south on 14th, those “boys” were inside publishing the work
of their pen. I wanted to see them play ball in the yard,
but they were inside writing books for at-risk youth,
developing programs to discuss the problems of domestic abuse,
writing plays like “Talons” and “Shakedown Blues.”

I was a kid
who referred to his elders as “boys,” like I learned
how to talk from a God who looked like the cops.

I sat in the back
of that car, laughing with friends, but it was that kind of sentence
that sentenced them. A sentence that racially profiled two black
men and kept them held in the pen. It was my sentence.

It should have been.

There are times I say to myself

You’re in the night

You’re in the night

You’re in the wind

You’re presence against

The cold swimming

Along your skin

You’re in the night

The moon alive

The bugs a sound

a blip of quiet

I say to say to incantate

You’re in the night

The air around a litany

Your arms spread wide

The dark so dark

All to reclaim

That you are in

That I am in

The lonely silence

That I am

in

A Prayer

I sit on my knees

in my room let my fingers

make tables on the oak floor

it is spring the oak outside is green

I breathe

its oxygen into diaphragm

the air boughing through my body

winding into fingers into tables

the tree across the street touches my blood

I take in its death
its life

and sometimes I pound a fist

into oak

try to muscle my body into change

once outside the hospital

I clenched my hands and emptied anger

into the steering wheel

so afraid

that another person might be trying to leave me

that I'm not in control

I know a rage

unleashed

trying to violence the meaning

wrestle God into submission

let me have someone to love

let me have someone
who won't

be oak leaf

falling into street

blown in the wind

I have heard the sound of a body scraping concrete

I know
it does not sound like

dried leaf

this morning I know
I have been the violent wind

leaf from tree

skin from bones

I know there is not a tree on my back

I can’t feel it pushing up the skin

of my spine off my ribs

but I breathe it

the shards of glass

I breathe in lash after lash

so often I am the one

to clench tables into fists

balled around a whip

this morning I am still a white man

still the portrait of a hand planting trees in someone else's back

I am the memory stored in my hands

of a white man watering a field

with someone else's blood

I know a body is flesh and blood

that stories are carried in the skin

that bodies are meant to touch

I cannot put the tree on my back

but I can flip the table

I can open my hands

let this life breathe into mine

this morning I imagine a field

of bones

imagine the dust in air

I walk out of my house

and see wisps of light
falling from
the oak tree

there are particles

swirling in the
wind

today I open my hands

I cannot be who I am

I let my life blow in the wind

NOTES

I am trying to start a garden quotes the poem, “Love”, by James Russell Lowell. The town, Lowell, Nebraska, which is referenced in the poem, was named after him.

Sea of Red was inspired by Tiana Clark’s poem “Nashville.”

Not the immigration story I was told references the Supreme Court case, *Johnson v. McIntosh (1823).* The information about the removal of the Pawnee nation comes from their website, https://pawneenation.org/. The poem was inspired by Layli Long Soldier’s poem, “38.”

At the Market to Market Relay in Nebraska was inspired, both in form and content, by a poem that Chaun Ballard shared during a Creative Writing workshop at the University of Nebraska.

I think of a white man breaking is inspired by one of the few journal excerpts that I have from my Great-Great Grandfather, Jens, in which he describes encountering a wolf while breaking prairie. The information about the removal of the Pawnee nation comes from the website, https://pawneenation.org/pawnee-nation-flag-and-seal/.

Homesteading was inspired by June Jordan’s idea of “vertical rhythm,” as well as one of of her student’s poems, entitled “Tío Juancho” (from her book *Poetry for the People*). In the epigraph, it references the African American Spiritual, “Take me to the water.” It also quotes the quarterly journal, *Nebraska History*.

After racial profiling puts two Black Panthers in Nebraska Prison references the wrongful conviction of Edward Poindexter and Wopashitwe Mondo Eyen we Langa (David Rice). The poem that is referenced, which we Langa wrote, is from his book, *The Black Panther is an African Cat*. Wopashitwe Mondo Eyen we Langa passed away in prison, and Edward Poindexter is still in jail today. The information in the poem comes from the website, “Prisoner Solidarity” (Edward Poindexter | prisonersolidarity.com).

A prayer was inspired by a section of *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, in which she refers to the scars on Sethe’s back as a tree. The poem was also inspired by the sermon, “I Can’t Breathe,” by Rev. Charlie Dates.

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