The myth of gravity

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The myth of gravity

by

Emily Lupita Plum Guclu

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Creative Writing and Environment

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for Juana Maria Gutiérrez & Jane Plum
my mom
Treat me as a solar myth, or an echo, or an irrational quantity, or ignore me altogether.

- James Murray, Editor, Oxford English Dictionary, ca. 1857
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In The Story She Tells
**In the Story She Tells**

- Monroe County, Iowa

In White’s Creek my mother stands
on a mound of sand she led me to years ago.

In the story she tells I climbed up the bank,
looked down to find my first arrowhead, wrapped

my thin fingers around the delicate point, held it
in the air, gave a deep, roaring cry before leaping in.

She didn’t know that in autumn, at this very spot,
the swimming hole had no bottom. Water endless.

It was here I learned of love, in this space alone
with the giant fish, their scales windows of light.

I found a new world of mud, leeches sucking my skin,
the sweet smell of water, dirt, and blood filled my lungs

until she, my mother, pulled my body up from that hole,
gave the air back to my mouth near a small stream in Iowa

in that time of year when leaves take a journey,
land where the wind brings them.
Standing in Line

there are different kinds of poor
and we were more than one:

standing in line for cheese poor
or lighting candles at dusk poor

or cutting up our own squirrels
to eat poor. we didn't know:

we thought we were timber fairies,
mud monsters, warriors, invisible.

elementary school made us poor,
a certain kind: standing in line

at recess in winter with snowsuits
the wrong color, a bit too small.
Tortuga

In the egg I asked God to make us palomas
so we could nest, stay put. Instead
we grew shells. Hid in them,
edged toward the sea, held tight
to each other’s backs, our own isla.
In the Mariana, miles below the surface

where, in raging total darkness
even crustaceans pull out their own eyes,
you let go, slipped away.

Now I paint canvas, vistas
of open ocean where, hidden from view,
two continents, having forgotten each other,
touch under the water somewhere
between the warm Aegean
and the long, dense Great Divide.
Not This
- Madrid, Spain

on the tour bus
going back to Madrid
another joke
about Mexicans and how,
when we are drowning
in quick-sand, we are so much
like bean dip.

again

everyone on the bus laughs.

and I want to go home
after this trip and remember
the stone flowers of Segovia
on the inner curve of the cathedral ceiling,

how the light fell from the red stained-glass
dress of the Virgin and spilled out
on the marble floor in soft, pink circles.

not this.

I want to say to my mom,
a Mexican back home in Iowa,
that my journey to El Escorial
filled me with grace. Tell her
of the blue tiles in the Reyes' best rooms
the great carved bed of Isabella, Spain’s Queen.

the delicate stars,
curved pieces of wood
matched together with a hundred hands
to give a whole heaven of light
there on her ceiling
for Fernando to point toward
in the night.

not this.
I want to tell of the armory holding five-hundred year-old weapons of war,
burned and pounded at El Alcazar into flat cutting edges, long rounded points,
the low helmets, gloves of steel, blunt corners and spurs for wounding. Intricate,

the design of protection and the ability to wound melded into these suits of armor
a shield in one hand,

a sword in the other.
Every So Often

I open it and there you are
in those fancy shoes, a gift on your birthday,
your eyes looking down, laughing

with a woman who isn’t me. You are holding her
at the waist. The silver stars falling across your
soft blue tie match the neckline of her long dress.

The two of you are standing in lamplight
where the Mississippi bends one final time,
spits her dark water into the Gulf.
Like Mo Ye

If only I had known her story
so as not to repeat it

when your smelting fire was in need
and you asked me to sacrifice.

I gave freely all that could be cut off:
my fingernails, my long hair.

This small puff of smoke was not enough
and, not knowing Mo Ye’s story, I gave freely

my clothes and jewels, piled up
box upon box of colorful belongings,

stood to tend the bonfire, sat next to you
as we both took pleasure in my nakedness.

But the temperature was still too low to mold
the long thin blades of your fighting swords

and, like Gan Jiang, you could not resist,
asked me to give freely what I had left.

From inside the fire I watched you scream,
reach your hand toward the flames.

Once I am ash you weep,
sit alone with your work.
Wind Gathering

{ I }

You, the rugged land at the meeting
of my plains and my mountains. The screeching
of owls at night, the beauty of their voices,
the fear that they have come to take me.

The cuts on my legs from walking in witch grass, you
wet and sandy after swimming naked all day
in the little creek behind our house until moonlight
brings you hungry up the field again.

The sweet corn in my garden,
how I want to husk you as the rain comes down
in droplets, the walls of wind gathering to sear the color
from this house we built with our hands and called home.

{ II }

I was ruthless.

A tornado
breaking windows
house in ruins
ripping oaks from their roots.

How could I expect you would survive
such a storm.
These Corners So Long Covered

-for VB (my own Whitman)

She always said, “Mi amor, my fleeting princess, my Mexican dish, love is a game, easy to start and hard to finish,”

And she’d squint her eyes black as we’d lean back giving the world a glimpse of our ravishing voices in the night. Life

with Vero was koan-esque: profound without the connectedness. Sometimes Vero would wear dark lipstick and

slick her hair back and puff out her mouth and line her eyes in purple, play Jamiroquai, slip in those little tight black pants and

Man! could she dance. Graceful arms fling’n, shoulders slipp’n, knees dipp’n, she impressed me — this Latina beauty queen, this

short-haired glowing wonder, this lavish swinger shake’n, mov’n her hips around the chaotic swirlings of two young minds in one young bodily night.

Every day the swelling fate,
    (the spirit was soaking into us.)
Every night the gleaming wonder,
    (the spirit was soaking into us.)

We! the expanding seeds. We! the dripping sponges absorbing those edges of our very own overly stimulating and ultra-retro invigorating Mega Life

until the patterned engulfing shifted toward us, until we found ourselves in these corners so long covered and silence awaited (as Jesus said it would) like a thief in the night.
The Market Where Blankets Bend

-for GAH

Here
in the wind where busses without mufflers
at four in the morning fill with grasping hands
headed to the chicken factory until nightfall,
to the small lines of sewing machines,
to the smooth backs of farmers in the sun,
here I wait for you in the crowds
at the market in front of the great church
where you once stepped out of this blue doorway
smelling as you do (and we met suddenly)
hazel eyes as you do (and we loved suddenly)
breathing mouth open
as you do in the market with small piles of peanuts
covered in sugar where the blankets bend down hill
like colored lashes on the great black eye of God.

It was here I first heard you speak.
I remember the way your eyes never moved past me,
I remember my mouth uncertain, swallowing hard
to imagine the words you spilled over me
in drops, they caught fire.

The child, you said,

the child crushed between sharpened sticks
staked to the ground, ankles sawed off
to send a message down to you from rounded hills
where mothers walk looking over their shoulder.
But the people, they gathered anyway.

And after your words came and sat on my tongue
I could not dream without them.
My dreams, they began to smell
like something rotten resting in these sunsets
of tropical orange behind barrios,
rising amid these gentle flute songs at funerals,
growing under these embroidered flowers
on the huipiles of hungry children.
No. Even as you were sleeping
but I was not, the taste, that taste
of week-old MeSeCa tortillas
of fish tacos sitting all morning in sunlight
of water and chlorine and Coca Cola
came to rest in my mouth
and I closed it tightly so no one would see
your words leaking out of me.

I wanted to show you, how your words,
they were growing inside of me and so
I could not leave the city as you asked.
I came here to the market to find you
where you always sit and saw them do it.
They led him with a burlap bag over his head,
punched his torso, kicked him in the knees,
tied the bag up. Threw him over, into the back of the truck.
No one spoke as they drove away.

I saw in the newspaper, this morning — the bag.
Four long machetes pierced it through,
it was on fire. The young man inside,
he made no cries as he burned, his lips
sewn shut with the thick threads of liberation.

And as I wait here for you now
where the corner tiles are painted in pink crosses,
where women more beautiful than the sky sit cross legged,
selling food to passer-bys carrying boxes on their heads,
fleeing this broken city, I am surrounded
by the sound of their voices whispering your name,
by their heads shaking, no. They have not seen you.

My hands swell,
they leak out these words here on paper.
I remember your knee touching mine,
the nothingness between them.
I think of you in your sandals walking on grass
and in a river somewhere I have never been.
La Sierra is nice, you said.
And on this day as winter creeps up,  
on this day as leaves fall, how I would love  
to be with you walking there  
the mountains stretched around you  
the space between us valleys of smoothness,  
the sound of your slow walk echoing here  
in my mouth.

But the sellers in the market, the old men  
in hats hunched over their baskets,  
the young women flapping their long tablecloths,  
the colors seeping into the hill,  
their children sweeping spice into bags  
flattening the rounded piles of cumin and pepper,  
of sweet dried apricots lining the stalls,

ey they make a tunnel with their words,  
“Get on the bus!” It is the last one,  
the only one out, the very last moment  
for salvation, for safe passage, for continuance  
and so I jump in just as the tires move,  
just as this torn bus pulls away.

I sit facing the window  
as the sound of the jungle in its infinity,  
as the sound left by the sellers not speaking,  
by them watching, of their eyes,  
follows us beyond the curve of the mountain.

I see only myself  
and flirting branches deep in the jungle  
turning, making love  
to sunlight.  

It’s not time for you to come here. You  
ever do. You never do.
Wing by Wing

-Peace Park, Hiroshima, Japan

There are no old houses in Hiroshima except this one circled in flowering trees, the leaves a green I’ve never seen before, they look watercolor, dripping with shine

but the building, the dome, its shell, frail metal, aches from the weight of all those spirits falling like rain, all the leaves and hair, bits of fruit left on kitchen tables to burn, wash away.

Life flourishes past the dome near the river. Past the Coca Cola truck parked in the road, past the boy in a yellow hat waiting for his mother, past an old man smoking, past two hippies

smoking grass in Bob Marley shirts, past the Yahoo BB sales women in short red skirts, past a young man in khakis sleeping on a bench stands a cement angel, her wings bent back in the wind.

At her feet thousands of origami peace cranes from Russia, New Zealand, Maui, and Peru, cranes of gum wrappers colored purple, of cardboard painted gold with blue trim,

of paper drawn carefully with small pink flowers stand naked in the approaching storm. Each waits for the peace bell to ring, to summon Japan’s dust children to pick them up, wing by wing, and play.

This angel stays. Watches. Stands tall over the thousands of tiny birds, protects them from the rain. As the bell rings she spreads out her wings, gathers her children turned to ash.
This Great Fear

My eyes have lost color, shape, desire
for things beautiful except for your face

I drew over and over in my young mind

on endless bus rides in the deserts, the mountains,
the long back-wood dirt roads of this world.

Life without you shifted by

and I labored for hours on the curves of your jutted teeth,
smooth and tapping against warm lips, ears tilting

slightly outward, shuffled hair, lines stiff.

I sit watching my reflection in this bus window
become your wrinkled face, your open mouth saying,

I have traveled and found nothing.

You slide into me and the warmthness comes
but I am old and dreaming and dying just the same.

I, too, have traveled and found nothing.
Her Mexico Blurs
you made soup
of peeled tomatoes

asked me how it is
the skins attach

themselves so closely
to the fruit, how

it might be you could
make them let go.

the trick, I told you,
wanted to glare at them

from across the room
and in a few years

your eyes will boil
their skins clean off.
A Void Como Agua

past the sweet linger that is despair. if only
you knew that thick path to my house
if only the curves surrounding me were gentler.

here between us, el silencio
the absence left by the night. sleep is beyond
unreachable, untamable leones of restlessness
here in my bed. do you know the story?

cactus flores in the morning,
how their petals collect drops of dew
hold them with their eyes closed, taste
them con ojos cerrados.

this void in my mano can you taste it
creeping por dentro beyond the feeling of leaving?

this leaving,
each breath it takes me toward montañas.
why am I always flying toward montañas in the night?

in your eyes are peaks, sabes
in that small part of your eye you cannot see.
mirrors lie lo sabes mirrors
flat globes of a rounded truth. of reflected knowing.
of a moment just past in emptiness.
In the Karate Dojo Sensei Teaches Emptiness

Deep in our capillaries are tiny rooms filled with air from our youth:

from the fields where we stood looking up at the grass waving, from the school yard sitting on steps breathing hard from running, from those long walks to get candy and fruit with our grandma to a little grocery store.

They will never leave us, these memories and rooms of air. They remain to rescue us as we are drowning or lost deep in space.

Push out until you are suffocating, until there is nothing left to form an outline of suffering:

ume no hana free of her petals, a volcano empty of lava.

Now wait for the rain, Sensei says. Wait for what will, inevitably, come to fill you.
Intersection

once we held lists in our hands
telling us how, in exact detail,
to get the attention of the Gods:

ordeal of fire
lewd dance
basket of rice
shower of auspicious waters
public communal offering

written in symbols on paper,
so many pages they became like sand
on the desert floor filled with a dull wind.

these days in the city we gather and debate,
show PowerPoint slides and video clips,
bring notes written over hearsay, epic stories.

we form caravans, ride on camels,
pat their strange humps,
consult our maps and wander off

into mirage after mirage after mirage.
Enough

it is said
since they have no womb
men give birth from their heads

at times
I want to have been born as Athena from the head
of her father, split open after a migraine

so when
you looked at me on that day you’d have seen a brush stroke,
a way of weeping, a hand just exactly as your own

and then
as all the Gods were awed by Athena’s radiant light
so Zeus stood before them with undying pride

at last
this was enough that he, that Zeus,
could not bring himself to abandon her.
The Empire Does Surgery on Kuan-yin

sexiness is excess,  
and you know it  
so we’ve taken it out:  
rowdy, outrageous, untamed.

what we’ve put in is children,  
as many boys as will fit,  
cut out pleasure and stuffed the hole  
with rags of blood to wash in the river  
alongside the other girls.

we have pulled off your face, repainted.  
you may not recognize yourself in the mirror!  
we have stitched your wide mouth shut,  
forced inside your long red tongue for licking,  
broke your feet, had them bound.  
no more dancing with your clothes off!

you have a new name.

shush, now.
Two Islands

Late at night he would scream out, high pitched like birds dying, clutching the mattress with his claws,
pulling up the foam and feathers beneath him.

In the early mornings while he slept I gathered herbs in the mountains carrying a light I kept hidden in my throat.

I dried the leaves between my ribs, breathed them a soft grey.

Now I cover his body with my herbs, scatter my stems over him.
I light them on fire, chant until he becomes silent and stiff.

I cannot sleep. I watch him burn.

By daybreak my paints are ready, the powders carefully chosen and mixed, my brush swollen and bursting.

I wait for the sun to rise, arms outstretched,
a small cloud of smoke rising as thick ink drops fall,
forming oceans on the floor around us.
These are the Things We Have Done

a man, young
and strong, pulling fire
from his mouth, rage!
the fire it rages!

a candle falling asleep
next to a small pile
of dirt – for building
or burying.

in the countryside
an old woman sitting
on an old chair
just waiting
for God to claim her.
I Want to Pretend I Have Never Been to This Place

- After visiting the Atomic Bomb Peace Museum, Hiroshima, Japan

Past the metal twisted,
the great cloud billowing,
past Sadako’s cranes and the photo
of children burnt all over, flesh peeling like scales,
past the giant photo, blown up to the size of the wall,
to show a man’s mouth, lips fried off,
teeth surrounded by tiny grey bubbles,
past Mother Teresa, Harry Truman,
the sketch made by an eye witness drawn
with colored pencils, the victims of the atomic bomb
lying shoulder to shoulder in neat exact rows,
waiting in an auditorium for bandages,
the nurses’ white robes scratched in red,
outside, I wait in line for the train.

An elderly Japanese woman stands next to me.
She looks at the ground.
I look at the closed doors of the train as it arrives,
sits in this immovable moment.
I want to say something to her to cleanse,
an ointment of words to stretch around my face
in this line waiting for the train away from the museum.

Osoroshii, I say.
It is all I know, this one word,
it means, awful, horrible, dreadful, terrible, fearful, frightful.

She bows to me.

And I bow to her,
bent head and my bent head nearly touching
as the train doors open and a small voice
behind me says, Purezu, gou ahedo,
and a group of giggling teenagers step on,
the glittery letters of their small t-shirts read,
USA, Just try me! and Get Back!
On Children’s Day
we who have no children
walk together for hours up the side
of Mt. Kirishima in Kyushu
to find this tiny hot mud bath
surrounded by ancient rice gardens
that grow even in winter.

The locals we meet
say the mud works a slow magic,
rising up out of our skin for weeks.
The ash will preserve our youth,
make sochu taste like wine and pigeons turn
to any other bird. This mud, they say,
can make any wish come true.

In the garden I lean back
on rocks next to Mizu no Kamisama,
naked and mud drying from ankle to eyebrow.
I make my silent wish to her
as the obachans gossip in waves of whispers
and great, roaring voices.
I Discover While Traveling

The bus is late
the stench of fish
rotten papaya drying on my shoe.

I begin to write to you and you
must know these are my songs.
My words are needless

my structure faulty. I am
privileged and now each phrase
– a battle for integrity.
Her Mexico Blurs

Here
on the second-class bus,
on the red dirt roads of Mexico,
here Mama is eating carnitas from a brown sack.
She’s eating tongue, chopped after being broiled
all day in grease.

The taste is a memory of her father, of his fires
and big copper pots, his tortillas wrapped in newspaper,
his hands rolling the carnitas up, juice spilling over the sides,
of his straight teeth biting down, of his handsome grin.

When he died the mortician tried to remove those straight teeth.
He pulled and yanked but they were not plastic.

My mama weeps when she tells the story
of how the mortician used pliers and a knife,
but still the teeth would not uproot.
The story of the mortician afraid of my grandfather’s grin,
of his head bursted! open from working too close
to the hot liquid of a steel mill near
where I was born in Iowa.

“You will be the one to get a good job,” Mama says
as the carnitas get caught in her teeth.

I am a whole half-Mexican but am too skinny, she says.
I need to eat more tongue instead of that processed fat-free tofu,
have something in my mouth I can really feel,
really bite down on – hard.

I tell her how the tongue feels in my mouth, salty and thick,
how I cannot chop it up with my teeth, touch my own tongue to it.
How I cannot embrace it, suck on it, swallow it,
make it a part of my own body.

Not even for a taste.
But she is listening to someone else's voice.
She is remembering her father, the way he said to her once,
“You will be the one to get a good job.” The way
he cradled those final words just over his lips
as if they were the last drops of a holy drink.

I am remembering the first day
I saw my mama bending over someone else’s toilet,
scrubbing, rubbing out all the feces and hair and urine,
flushing them away –
housecleaning,
dishwashing,
changing old men’s beds,
cooking for college kids,
testing gas valves in a factory cell
with safety glasses, ear plugs, and, soon after,
a hearing aid.

On the bus
Mama spreads out her arms
as if reaching toward Abuelito or God or Mexico
or someone else she knows and I do not.

She looks far beyond the roadside,
reaches for the big orange flowers of summer,
the cool tile floors, the clay jars filled with tamarindo,
with calla lilies. Her Mexico blurs outside the window;
Mexico is right in front of me. “Look!”
She is mouthing the word over and over,
but even as I press my face against the glass
and push toward the mixing colors beyond,

I cannot touch her.

Mama weeps for the blurred colors flooding past me
without touch, without smell, without memory.
She is preparing to return to near where I was born
in Iowa. The pro-American, anti-
Mexican free the country from the ravages of the migrant
worker, stand up for all that’s clean, proper,
decent – save our children from wetness and
grease sentiment on TV and radio, just
waiting for families to embrace across
America

has pierced her like the green tips of henequen drying in the sun,
like the sharp, hard corners of piled red stones on the roadside –
edging their way through her, pulling, yanking, and twisting.

She is not dead.

Mama walks on these stones, sleeps on these stones,
eats these stones and cleans them out of her flesh.
She pulls them out and washes them with her own tears
until they are a soft gray.

I have seen her do this miraculous thing.

Now, these same stones well up inside me here on the bus.
Here as my lips drip in the heat of rural Mexico
I catch them with my tongue. I bring them into my mouth
and they taste like home: like chiles, like corn on the cob
and mashed potatoes, like sopa de fideo.

And I bite down on that taste,
take it into my mouth and bite down hard and strong.
I touch my own tongue to it, swirl it around,
make it part of my own body, of my own belief,
of my own faith in America, in Mexico,
in our two lives wrapped between these swirling,
blurred places and no twisting, no pulling or yanking
or cutting will ever uproot us.
**Solar Myth**

There are only two ways
stars die: run out of fuel and fade
after billions of years, float away into space.

Or explode: create a black hole
when no one is watching, pull
into their emptiness the whole universe.

It was no coincidence, then,
when you said I was your sun.
And you, my supernova.
Drop [In Two Voices]
-Kirishima Mountain Shrine, Japan

no one speaks here
vermillion stairs up the mountain
a mother and her son stand on opposite ends
beneath the bell for ringing

they hold these shadows, the shrine and trees,
linger somewhere in the distance
stand close together and bow deeply
breathe volcano smoke

the mother and her son weep
where dropping someone is the only sound
let the water drop, fall away
no one speaks here

someone who held you too closely,
roll devils in your mouth
burnt you, calloused you, made you stink
spit with bitterness

her son cannot stop his weeping
the bell cannot stop its echo
once begun, an endless motion
of moments to come after

no stopping the echo of tears,
the weeping of the bell, of silence filled
of the melting – your hand into mine
no stopping the path now ahead

lanterns in flames behind you
all that is left, empty space in which to step
onward, we promise each other.
toward that hold no longer dark.
The Myth of Gravity
The Myth of Gravity

- Then one day the Gods kicked out that ladder leading up to heaven.

Laksmi remembers it as the morning elephants lost their wings & fell from the sky & we began our hunt for those distant cousins of our now rumbling & wingless elephants,

tracked their paths in the sky, gave them names, called them *cumulus, curl of hair, stratus, rain.*
“Oh, this will never do,” Visnu agreed with Laksmi & together they invented the myth of gravity.

Grounded until the birth of Vin Fiz & Kinner Airster, we were on our way again to heaven with Orville, Wilber & Amelia long after Icarus had failed. “Impressive,” Visnu said as he nodded to Laksmi sitting peacefully on a lotus risen up out of the muck. If you’re ever in an airplane, look out the window to see them atop their winged elephants, flying from Calcutta to Atlanta or wherever it is they’re going.
Orange Robes Folding
-Angor Wat, Cambodia

we weren’t meant to die on this day,

he said, bowed deeply to the young men
in orange robes who sold us bottled water
as we stepped into their balloon ride.
they sold us stones for luck and prosperity,

for calm while waking in mornings,
calm wind, calm gasses of air rising
in the heat then dropping, cables snapping,
the basket in which we are standing then

our memories scattering    look!
you can see the universe all at once here.
look! people are dying here. orange robes
folding in the wind as they fall

each robe, each strand of colored thread, each
stitch sewn shut a small parachute lifting the body,
lifting the body towards sunlight slightly.
it was not enough.

no one
was watching until the bodies
began to land with dullness
around them.

on their knees beneath our broken balloon
the monks who were still of the living summoned
the gods of Wind and Earth back to Angor Wat,
begged them to catch us in their long fingers.

Visnu led them as they toured the ancient city,
sat at the giant chairs of King Suryavarman and Jayavarman,
as they rubbed their hands on the fine stones
and debated the merits of our failed attempt to fly.

in the basket of our tilted balloon, we kneeled,
the two who were left, and begged for their blessings,
for their forgiveness and swift intervention.
there wasn’t a ceremony as I expected.

it wasn’t meant to be this way,

he whispered, breathing deeply as our life finished,
as he opened his palm, my fingers slipping out.
I remember his eyes as we fell, stretching out his arms
he leaned forward, we floated in a spiral.
Lament for my Hands

My fingers stretch,  
the gaps between, the universe  
with glowing solar systems, tiny turning planets  
swollen up over bare wrist bones.

Scientists come all the way from Des Moines,  
from Michigan, and foreign lands  
to measure, stand before me in awe.  
They hold meetings and induct me  
into the Great Wonders Hall of Fame,  
make me a household name of envy.

At night in the museum I weep. Even  
continents cannot replace them.
My Brothers from the Sea
- Campeche, Mexico

Waves rise up against currents
in from Cuba, fast and deep,
as this tide slips me into the stillness
at day’s end, the last part of a long breath,
toward us as children on the farm
near Thousand Acres, in the sheriff’s fishing pond
squatting in mud holes (worms and their slime)
to swim and wrestle and flop, slapping on the surface
like frogs, like the tongue of a mama horse,
like the tapping of a tin roof against the rain.

Dad sawing mushrooms from trees,
Mama in the garden, her green watering can
swaying back and forth, potatoes
simmering on the wood stove,
sleeping bag races and tent people,
mud monsters and snowy tunnels,
sucking leeches and arrowheads,
newborn birds,

they call to me on the wall of this castle,
built with cannons and trap doors to protect
the great state of Campeche from pirates,
from the fierce winds, from giant waves.
Here on this wall, they call to me, as my legs,
stretching north, kick up the spit and salt, reach
toward the emptiness of the sea.

I am growing old far from you, far from our time
in the Iowa sunrise light. Yet as morning comes,
I drift away again across the sea to Mani or blue
and yellow Progresso.
Island Woman Dances

Tuning on a faded wooden bench, linen pants shifting in the wind, Street Musician turns, breathes in his scene, leans back under bent cypress trees, he moves slowly. He comes to the plaza at dusk to admire Island Woman dance, her flowered skirt wrapping around legs, delicate and brown.

He watches as the bayou colors fade behind her, red wooden guitar swaying in his hands to the tap tap tap of Island Woman’s feet.

Slight glances from her dark eyes move Musician’s fingers in his lovemaking, his touch quivers on the strings, embracing her.
After Seven Years Gone  
-Monroe County, Iowa

Old barns painted rusty brown  
prairie grasses lingering in black dirt  
smelling like corn yet to come  
gathering up in the blades  
in the plows in the hands  
of old-timers in their overalls  
of blue and white.

Farm trucks and Amoco  
Road House Country Dance Club  
and the Stardust motel  
old trailer on a gravel road  
with a peppered dog and two chickens  
in a pen facing the wind  
only one more mile and home.
His Back

details of a map drawn
on napkins taped together here
he touches the corner
is my country

the muscles in his back
against sunlight against
the curve of my shoulder
and those apples hiding in trees
so excessively red
Waves

In Ephesus it is already light
and so there is no darkness
in you, from a place where light persists
even as night comes to us here
in the deep folds of land covering the Midwest.

Rough beard on my neck looking
to the distance for mountains, for some sign
of irregularity. There is none. *Here in Iowa there is no sea*, you tell me, and that is why
we have no words to express truth in terms of water.

Touching your forehead, spilling
those sounds around me, soft strangers
living here in my bed. *How do you call in your language, moonlight reflecting on the waves?*
A whisper just before sleep.

Sliding your hands around this mouth
that says nothing, holds tight to this silence,
you, voice of salt, *Look here, then*,
eyes of the Aegean, *look here, you moon.*
Open Window

crickets sing, they never tire.
want is their inspiration as night falls,
you in your chair reading graphs, sounds
of the house: door closing, water running,
dishes being put away. I want you to love me
like these crickets sing. to grip. grip. grip.
I Want to be a Latina Badass

I

I want to be a Latina badass:
sitting in a room head high,
lipstick on, riding some
muscular dark-skinned man with
my eyes. Up and down.

I want to be a Latina badass:
to crawl in the ditches of Chiapas,
to swell with justice for the masses,
to seek water in the mountains.

And I look in the mirror straight
then sideways, I am not ready
to be a Latina badass, I just want
to sleep in a big bed with two
mattresses and silk sheets and silk
pants and silk hair ties. I want
to win the Lottery and write a best
selling book about liberation.

II

I catch my mama’s eye in the reflection
behind me, framed in gold, resting on my desk
next to my Midwestern father singing protest songs
in his youth. She is brilliant. A Mexican beauty,
hair falling past her knees, braided flowers, smooth bell-
bottomed legs, carrying me in her womb
through the streets on those longs days of war in Vietnam.

As I look at her
I remember the rainbow at Aguas Azules.
How, on my first journey to Mexico,
slipping into the water, I could feel
a fish slivering over the rocks, grieving
in the great pull of the waterfall,
the babies ready to burst out from beneath her.

Brilliance of color, pyramids hidden in the jungle,
this is what we traveled so far on this road
through the Lacandon to see, yet as we moved
to order *huevos rancheros* for breakfast,
I paused for her pain, for the release
of her children to the world, and shared in it.

III

I stare in the mirror as the lingering smells
of Mexican markets flood the room,
the colors mix into young women
embroidering *huipiles* and stirring *atole*
with wooden spoons. They have come
to sit beside me, to knead
the taste of molded tortillas into my mouth,
to push and wrap these silken memories like clay
like the inside of stones
like the long grainy corners
holding up the convent in Mani – the convent
where pigeons live
where the breeze and children’s voices sing
where the Earth is red
where the pigeons, nesting over me
as I sat to eat alone on the balcony
scattered their white offerings on all of God’s stones.
It was a celebration.

And the stones, how they smelled
like the three-rock fire
the Churchwomen were tending below
like chicken wrapped in banana leaves
buried in red dirt, small brush burning above.

It was there, in Mani where the Earth is red,
Bishop Landa burnt the Mayan books,
where the labors of ancient priests,
bent over in moonlight became blasphemy
and history left us all.

There at Mani in red Earth
where angels weep, circle the courtyard
where grass does not grow, where
people gather this very day to mourn
the sweet ink melted, the pressed bark
returned to sky, there

the slow turns of torture
and conversion drip blood, mixed
into soil forever stained.

IV

Hollowness sits where the Earth is red
cooking meat in banana leaf

as an old fire burns
a hole in that shield

we held once when the Earth
was not so wet with blood,

as pigeon cooing stirs the angels,
wings echoing through large stone rooms,

as an old chair in front of me rocks at a slant,
the floor shifting with strong gusts of wind.

Oh, how the angels are weeping.
V

And there is hollowness here as I sit – vain in the mirror
long hair curled, lipstick on, dreaming of justice
and never having been to jail. no protests no songs
no letters no crossing lines no tank blocks no fights
no flowers no petitions no signs no tear gas no fear no
beatings no witness no loss no weeping no sentence
not even a parking ticket.
Petition

I just want some Cisneros, man,
I say to the committee. Some
Lucy smelling like corn.

Just want one long night with Hijuelos
listening to los Mambo Kings
play songs of love on their trumpets.

Just want to wake up in the morning
feeling the line of the sun on my face;
just want butterflies in my time here,
you know, some Alvarez to talk to, yo!

I say, les digo.

How about Castillo, man? Does the
American Literature class include her
or her Father, the Toltec, or mi madre,
the Aztec, or mi abuelo, the caramelo?

I just want some representation, man,
I say to the committee.

Un toque de sangre,
just a drop.
Spectacle

On stage two specialists debate
the percentages of humanity and divinity
in Jesus Christ while two students (not to be outdone!)
argue reductionist dichotomy versus dynamic polarities,
“Do we believe in the light between sunrise and sunset,
or don’t we?”

Behind the curtain, Khnum sits back down to work,
gets out his cutting tools, his sticks and cup of water.
Onlookers gather their breath as the lumps take shape,
as shadows in the lamp lights move toward each other,
ka holding the body (or is the body holding ka?)

This embrace, I can’t look away.
A Short History of the Word “Metaphor”

The word is not the thing;
the map is not the territory.
-S.I. Hayakawa

noun. 1533.
a seemingly harmless word:
a method, in itself, of explanation
of the unexplained:
a star exploding, the great eye burst
into tears of innumerable lights
then vanished as quickly as they came.
but not lights. and not stars.
and not tears.

words arranged in neat thin lines
strong as axe men in their cuts:
the night, ravenous;
the ocean, without end;
a small butterfly of a memory
I am, I imagine, in the great forest
of your mind.

a pile of sounds to express that hole:
emptiness, space, territorial disillusion
between your one foot placed in front of the other
between your muscles tightened and loose
between your back and my face as I watched,
as I watch, a lighthouse in the fog with my light,
for your return.

a figure of speech: tall, relentless.
with his dark beard lined up against the sun,
his long eyes a soft valley I once stood in
and wept; a word applied to something to which
it is not literally applicable:
food to thought,
tall grasses to your mouth or visa versa,
a sigh heard only in sleep to the curve
of a face long looked away or reverse,
the stem of a flower to that thick,
wandering ventricle of my heart
with its ceaseless pumping. and thank God.
origin from the Greek *metaphora* meaning, "a transfer." but not the transfer itself, not the giving over, the falling, the poor, tragic molecules spaced out, moving further and further apart.

origin especially of the sense of one word to a different word, literally "a carrying over," from *meta-* "over, across" + *pherein* "to carry, bear."

yes, to carry, to bear. *at last.*

but not the weight: only that space between the eternal rock we seek resting here outside us and the vast sky where all the stars and suns and drops of tears go to live or play or die.

only this space where we stand, look at the ground and ponder, hold with great care these millions of well-thought-out maps safely between our lips.
Differential

The scientist I love holds his forehead,
covers his eyes with long meaningful hands,

forms a hundred-thousand calculations
in his mind: width, strain, grains, molecules.

He measures twice and when absolutely certain
writes the answers with a clean sigh of inevitability.

Only when he thinks I am deep in sleep
does he turn from his pages to my curved form,

thighs resting under blankets, breasts hidden
from clear view beneath thin sheets.

The scientist I love leans toward me. He
ponders our depth, tries to determine how it is

we have arrived here. Considers his thick rules
of physics and logic, realizes they no longer apply.
At Some Point Forgotten
- The Library of Celsus, Ephesus, Turkey

The sun, an orange light
inside the inner room of the library
and under this light, a book
made of parchment, smooth skin
pulled tight, painted red.

Two thousand years ago
mysterious words written here
in a language we have,
at some point, forgotten.

Then the Goths
with their fires, chains.
Then the earthquake
one-thousand years later
with its dust and dirt.

Then a young man
walking by kicks up a rock,
pulls from the ground
the fragmented body of Sophia
who stood at the entrance
of the library with her sisters
Apisteme, Ennoia, and Arête,
guardians of the knowledge inside.

This man, he held her body,
treasured it, placed his hands
on her face, healed the cracks
in her bones with his words,
turned her back into flesh.
Frontier

I used to have dreams
of the route you’d take
to leave.

I could see on the map
the mountain collapsing
after you’d driven
right through the middle,
the paper folding up
into thousands of tiny squares
with you still inside.

I’m smoothing it out,
opening the map to find you
but everything has moved:
the borders, the desert,
the long stretches
of flat land, they have changed.

a different language.
a new country.
Pan Dulce

cup of rain resting here
... grass

mariachi songs
in my mouth.
References & Translations

Tortuga, page 4
*toruga*: turtle
*palomas*: doves
*isla*: island
*Mariana*: deepest point on Earth; Mariana Trench
*vistas*: views

Like Mo Ye, page 8
*The Tale of Gan Jiang and Mo Ye, China*: The King of Wu ordered two grand swords from a smith named Gan Jiang, but the fire would not heat up enough to meld the ore into swords. So, Mo Ye, Gan Jiang’s wife, hurled herself into the furnace to enable the swords to be made.  
  —*Mythology*, C. Scott Littleton, Editor

The Market Where Blankets Bend, page 11
*barrios*: neighborhood; the ghetto
*hüípiles*: traditional Mayan clothing
*MeSeCa*: brand name of tortilla mix

A Void Como Agua, page 18
*como agua*: like water
*el silencio*: the silence
*leones*: lions
*flores*: flowers
*con ojos cerrados*: with eyes closed
*mano*: hand
*por dentro*: inside
*montañas*: mountains
*sabes*: you know
*lo sabes*: you know it.

In The Karate Dojo Sensei Teaches Emptiness, page 19
*Sensei*: teacher / master
*ume no hana*: plum blossom
Enough, page 21

Athena: In agony over a terrible headache, Zeus summoned Hephaestus to split his head open, and Athena leapt forth, grown to term as an adult inside Zeus’s head. Zeus had swallowed her mother, his first wife, Metis, when he learned of her pregnancy. -David Kinsley, The Goddesses’ Mirror

The Empire Does Surgery on Kuan-yin, page 22

Kuan-yin - Chinese Goddess of Mercy: Kuan-yin was brought to China from Tibet where She is known in a rather different form as the Goddess Tara. Once in China, Kuan-yin merged Confucian and Buddhist values and incorporated indigenous Chinese Goddesses and heroines such as Sheng mu and Miao Shan in order to become the ideal woman – compassionate and merciful, giver of children. -David Kinsley, The Goddesses’ Mirror

Sakura Sakura, page 26

Sakura Sakura: Cherry Blossom
sochu: liquor made from potatoes
Mizu no Kamisama: Japanese Water Goddess
obachans: little grandmothers

Her Mexico Blurs, page 28

carnitas: chopped meat, in this case cow tongue
Abuelito: little grandfather
tamarindo: tangy pulp beverage
chiles: peppers
sopa de fideo: soup with pasta

Solar Myth, page 31

supernova: A catastrophic explosion of a large star with a resulting short-lived luminosity 100 million times that of the sun. - Webster’s Dictionary
The Myth of Gravity, page 34

*Then one day the Gods kicked out that ladder leading up to heaven.*

Quote from Iowa State University WS450 Women’s Studies Special Topics:

*Godesses with Dr. Nikki Bado-Fralick.*

*Lakshmi and Visnu:* Hindu Gods, the divine couple. Laksmi is often depicted being showered by elephants while sitting on a lotus which represents spiritual perfection. Winged elephants symbolize life-giving rain clouds. - *The Goddesses’ Mirror,* Kinsley

cumulus: heap

curl of hair: cirrus

stratus: layer

rain: nimbus

Vin Fiz: Orville and Wilbur Wright’s first airplane to cross the United States

*Kinner Airster:* Amelia Earhart’s first airplane

Orange Robes Folding, page 35

*Kings Suryavarman & Jayavarman:* Builders of Angkor Wat, an early 12th century city in what is now Cambodia. Angkor Wat honors the Hindu god Visnu and is thought to be a symbolic representation of Hindu cosmology.

http://www.sacredsites.com

His Back, page 41

Homage to Okamoto Kanoko’s, “a cockscbom / so excessively red”

I Want To Be A Latina Badass, page 44

*Aguas Azules:* Blue Waters, a waterfall park in the State of Chiapas, Mexico

*huevos rancheros:* fried eggs with salsa

*huipiles:* traditional Mayan clothing

*atole:* hot thick corn flour drink

Petition, page 48

*los:* the

*yo:* me

*les digo:* I say to them

*mi madre:* my mother

*mi abuelo:* my grandfather

*caramelo:* caramel, one the color of caramel

*un toque de sangre:* a touch of blood
Petition (Continued), page 48
This poem references the following:
Caramelo by Sandra Cisneros
The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love by Oscar Hijuelos
My Father Was a Toltec by Ana Castillo
The Line of the Sun by Judith Ortiz Cofer
In the Time of the Butterflies and Yo! by Julia Alvarez

Spectacle, page 49
Khnum: An Egyptian God; a ram headed potter who creates the ka (spirit) and body of each human. -Mythology, C. Scott Littleton, Editor

A Short History of the Word “Metaphor,” page 50
metaphor: 1533, from M.Fr. metaphore, from L. metaphora, from Gk. metaphora
"a transfer," especially of the sense of one word to a different word, lit. "a carrying over," from metapherein "transfer, carry over," from meta- "over, across" (see meta-) + pherein "to carry, bear". –Online Etymology Dictionary

At Some Point Forgotten, page 53
Library of Celsus, Ephesus, Turkey: Built in AD 114-117 by Consul Gaius Julius Aquila for his father, the library was damaged first by the Goths and then by an earthquake in 1000. The statues occupying the niches in front are Sophia (wisdom), Arete (virtue), Ennoia (intellect) and Episteme (knowledge).
- Eyewitness Travel Guides, Turkey, 2003.

Pan Dulce, page 55
pan dulce: sweet bread
la luna: the moon
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Vita

Emily Lupita Plum Guclu holds a Masters of Fine Arts in Creative Writing and Environment from Iowa State University. She received her Bachelor of Arts from Central College. Emily’s poems have appeared or are forthcoming in publications including the North American Review, The Double Dealer Redux, International Poetry Review, Poetry International, Lyrical Iowa, StringTown, and Sketch. Her poems “Not This” and “Wing by Wing” will be anthologized in Poetic Voices Without Borders 2, Gival Press, 2008. A bilingual (Japanese/English) collection of Emily’s poetry, Water and Stone น้ำและหิน, was published in 2004 by Koumyakusya Press, Japan.

Emily’s poem, “Her Mexico Blurs” won the 2008 Marble Faun Prize for the Poem, The William Faulkner-William Wisdom Writing Competition. Competition judge Nicole Cooley writes, "I admire this poem for its weaving of many threads of imagery and registers of language, and for its vivid details. The poem links the personal and the political in fascinating ways. I also find the poem's evocation of speech/language/tongue very compelling: the poet does a wonderful job of exploring questions about the relationship between speech and location in this poem. Finally, the poem raises important questions about immigration and what it means to be a citizen."

Emily’s MFA thesis, The Myth of Gravity, received a Graduate College Research Excellence Award from Iowa State University, 2007. While at Iowa State, Emily also received the Phyllis J. Lepke Endowed Graduate Award and the Pearl Hogrefe Recognition Award for Creative Writing. Emily’s other awards include The John Allen Writing Award from Central College. Emily has been a featured reader at events including Poetry Iowa!, The Des Moines Public Library; The Central College Writers Reading Series; and the Zanzibar Poetry Reading Series. Emily is also a watercolor artist and a glass bead artist.
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