

Westernmost Bodies

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Thesis directed by Professor Ruth Ellen Kocher

Westernmost Bodies is a collection of poems orbiting themes of violence, memory, and desire playing out on a supremely haunted frontier. The various sections are structured by the narrative of death—the opening image of “two alpacas” represents the mirror image of femininity developed in the manuscript. One image of the women explored through the confines of the domestic home space and the other image interacting with wildness in a natural environment. Together, these images are in conversation through traditional lyric and methods of fragmentation. The fragments mimic the humming described in the first poem—an emotional resonance of a continuous narrative that traces itself through the manuscript. The meeting of the natural world and the domestic space in the poems meet at the frontier of violence, subtle rage, and a space of unease. The mood is meant to be unstable—a constant uneasiness—culminating in the end in a fruition of terror and breakdown.

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Scottsbluff, NE

Because I am going where it's empty, I am bringing a prairie. The long flat *dusk light* across the fields. Listen, it's red. It is a bad land. Each person is a barrack of wind. I saw a man and a horse vanish into the riverbed and not drown. It was wind. Coming to barracks in winter, the high plains will hide you. Nebraska, rather than have me, my mother headed the roses a bit longer.

Pine Pearl

The most common sound an alpaca makes is humming. A sort of purring. There are two alpaca bodies—one drug through the snow, over the rocks, to the river basin. Pieced apart, consumed, and tucked back into her carcass for the lion's return. The other body kneels in the barn and hums for the rest of the spring. Ghost lions in ghost mountains, capable of breaking the neck, bearing the animal to the ground. The trees fill up with ghosts and watch the way you become small. They do not sleep in winter and melt back into the cliffs fast as bloody snow drying near the broken body.

Hyperphagia

Consider the westernmost bodies
each bone, a cupboard
full of wolves.

Here in the outstretched
woods, know you will be
watched from the dark
as if each night
were windowless.
I'll own my silver, he says,
if you'll swallow
the cities whole
bearing down a subtle body
in an ecstatic version
of returning.
I have winters for hands
blowing in from the
wild basins.
But you're like
an amazing
early spring.

Are the *wildmen* setting fire
to ward off the devils
or bring them close.
Love is effigy
deep flame
lacing the pines.

You will tether
my bones to the base
of the woods
a winter for each wolf.

Behind me is a rising
and falling sound of
something built to howl.

As though putting your hand
into the mouth could conjure

a necessary forest

as though
the moon is an extinguished
palace set behind the mountain.

The things we cannot see
in the woods at night
are *wildmen* setting fire.

Night settles
into trees, quiet,
not an omen
but the coyotes
exhaust
in daylight.

Was it moving water
or voices
in the woods

if a man waits
long enough
what would
the man do

the man would float.

Every night
of
the flood
I knew
that you
bent near
the banks
to drink.

The surest way

to dry the house

is to burn.

Watch the fires flash
on the ridgeline,

to say
you would stay

would deafen these evenings
broken within me.

As the flames came to
the riverbed
they did not
consume every tree

a mouth expanding
with an inward sky

the sun of everything.

When she paces, she lifts
each hip in a way
that suggests the spring
will bring flowers
in a manner of
tremendous heaping.

I have knelt at
the roadside taking it
into my mouth
 the poisonous sumac
 beating my lungs
 together as wings.

What if I come
to a stand of pines.
 There is a bear
 made of the faces
 of every man I've known.

The bear can give me anything
I want but all I can have
is a skeleton made of trees
the lungs sunk
 meadow grass flat
 from a bedded down
 animal.

Mother Mountain

I'll agree to live in the many windowed house. I should winter this place. Move back to tell me a wide line of hills still evening here. Less time spent talking to the mountain when there are bats in the walls. Every ridge is the outline of a sleeping man. I did, I walked to the mountain, pressed my face to the shoulder and spoke. Later the fires smoked out. In the morning, cool ice up the inside walls and the bats. I should have some idea how I repeat.

Pine Pearl

In daylight, I bring the horse to the riverbed. A quiet ceremony to build this grave. Sensitive to the lions, the horse will smell them from long distances or in certain wind. In the basin of dim river light, I am bait. I brace myself for bucking. The basin is surrounded by five hundred feet of sunned rock. Red and cliffed for preying. My breath begins to move at the pace of my horse's exhale, watching the slow bulbs of his eyes scan the place of ledge meeting descent meeting our tearing. There are two horse bodies—one tied to the tree shadowing the grave. And my body, arched in a silhouette of bucking.

Milk Cupboard

Woke to a blank man in the doorway
seeing the streetlight through him
was enough to bear
where else is there to go
once the little house
blossoms on its own
the cupboards opened
and closed
and I could not see who
a room full of your wide, flat hands
but it seems empty in here
only streetlight stretching the doorframe
it's my own pleasant strain
to stand still
at the sink pouring milk

Mainstem

Tell me you are awake
tonight sifting
through something.
That wall shown antlers
with a tall rabbit face.
And what was
didn't seem
tremendous.
There are over one hundred bayous
inside the body.
It is a burned ocean container,
and fed light or will or coral
becomes more slowly *fish burden*.
Each bayou heavy,
none the less
it moves.
And like the man
with the axe
you will cover all the mirrors
in the house
so you cannot watch
yourself do what you
are about to.

Abattoir

At any given time
that man stands
behind the hedgerows
of the lawn looking up
even if it doesn't
suggest flowering
full heavy oranges
break their boughs
when the trees are
walked through
how he even got to
the sheets on the line
are cleanest outside
the house behind the hedgerows
of the lawn looking up
at any given kill floor

For Hunger

After watching your exorcism
I put all the devils inside
my mouth, swallow.
I furnish my bones
for them.
The mountain spoke of heaving,
of fastening myself
to undergrowth.
I consume forest until bloom, each tree
roots to bone. I have come
a long way for the flowerings to
only fall.
I have furnished my bones for you.
When the deer comes, she bends low
its pink lips pool like fangs,
the shape a human mouth
makes in waiting.
The devils speak to each other
so I cannot hear
asking each other, 'Is this joy'
when joy is only another sound for hunger.

How I Can No Longer Let You Stay

I suppose I should tell you
how I watched a real man
get sentenced to death and how
the body after violence
keeps screaming.

All bodies have hollow
places to wait. The bodies
pack dirt into their mouths
to be still.

I do not think of the dead man
anymore, only you, undressing
near the bathtub.

If you want me
to be a killer,
I will.

You do not resemble him
but sometimes my head
catches fire. Inflate a lung
near kerosene and you'll see.

Billow the Sparrows

Sam,
it's starting
to rain. I cannot
sleep knowing
the white barn
behind the house
is supposed to mean
fever. It unlocks
itself, the fever breaks.
Let me
come,
Sam.
This wound,
torn birds flying
into the atomic cloud.
To create the sensation
of drowning,
a body involuntarily
saying
ocean.

Little Hells

The door to the field
slamming open
means I've held this
weather in. I must
attend to what pleasures
are left
if any.
Behind the house
a man stands over
a thundering.
You are the man
filling my trees
with little hells.
Call back
your winter
so I can number
the excellent dark skies
in acres.

Haint Blue

Let's summer here
 waist deep at the floodplain
 in a pale blue house.

Hauntings cannot cross water
will mistake the blue
for a frequently humming river.

Do you like it
when I
watch
the drowned house drift.

Lay down in each
throat sound I make
a taking in
of a thousand small hems
the letting in
of something that can't
be let out
smoking cigarettes
in the kitchen
with the windows
closed.

Do you
like it
when I
watch.

Build me a ship
for the beekeepers
to hide their loudest hives.

Pine Pearl

Today it is warm enough to sweep the dust from the doorframes. Today is a false spring in that the leaves are unhinging and the snow will set soon. Hungry with winter, the lion has returned to the grave by the river. I imagine her at night, collecting the corpse dust into her mouth, waiting for meat to grow. Today, we take the horses deep into the forest to see if they can sense her stirring. From the dense ridgeline, we see the fog rolling up the backside of our mountain. Everything in late fall smells of burning earth.

Balché Ritual in the Bee Fields

With certainty you can say she is not a rooftop brimmed honey slowing down the veins—a slow eastbound ocean—but the lawn behind it sloping into the sea.

Dropped her so heavy pinning clothes on the line outside the *god room*—
surely bed sheets and her long, salted hair. A semblance of mornings
smoking cigarettes in the hedgerows watching other girls on the shoreline
soft and happening through the whine. In how many lives was
she too a cache of ocean creeping toward land lock eventually and
wakefulness like gunfire in a poem. A manner of speaking in tongues.

Drown the end lines—green sky a man standing on the horizon—the only way to see a boat in the wasting space of sea. Boat hand drove her all the way out to drift—there's deep caves under the water that call themselves James.

The yellow curtains pull even more bright sun—this morning room—a bright supermarket saying the Spanish word for *more* into the outstanding sun. Men sell shoes in front of the supermarket and what is not astounding is that she asked for this wide emergency.

In the last life she wove flowers into the table by hand so the bees could
swarm into its hollow middle & carry into her slow veins. As you would
expect, the man has a disfigured right ear to listen more carefully to the
wreathing hives

más, más, más, más

she says

letting her shaman pool

he gave her the jungle.

Having disguised the ruins as watchtowers, she overgrows. Blood on the doorframes and no doors left. She is slender and she is looking over black ocean saying which boat to hit the rocks. The only travelled night she bothers remembering is a bird at the window, lime yellow red colored— *heaven faced* hung so heavy the palm bows just above the sand. The bird is a disguised moon that knows the name of every

and speaks every one of his names—a lovely sea singing to itself.

Sink her by filling the boat with every other word for adrift. Or the hurricanes—so happy to baby the tender water. Alijandra, did you stay five—or the hurricanes. A little blue motoring past the peninsula to the bee god's hush—fill her up with Alijandras so heavy to sink the boat.

Hell, that sea was wide. Too tempting not to count her flowers underwater from its north limit to its south. That the men turned their long black rifles on her was only a better way of saying undertow. She had no way to explain Punta Allen. Smoked cigarettes under the palms. Fed herself fish. The men watched her be still. What part of the boat—

The men steal the light bulbs while she stands right there and never sees them. Everything happens to them this way. There are cellars in the house that are on fire. And her dark legs, a gladness. Wind gathering the sand against the house. Her dark legs a balché ritual, emptying the honey wine in the bee fields behind the house. Men's heads in the bee fields, smiling, before they knew what was being pulled from them.

She was born in a boat. There is no such thing as darkness outside of that.

Whatever is going to happen by now—a dozen exquisite bloodwood trees pattern the lawn—is already happening. A complex weather and a boat drifting from it. A lush storm suggesting she is not coming home to you.

Canyonlands

Just to see what I have, my suspicions. I understand the proper use of the word *loam*. Must be this soft river. An evening supper before misplacing the people from the false islands. Cleanly, every one fast as sky. There is certain energy to piece apart the language of hallucination. Must be this soft river who I consider a strange noise speaking inward. Loud as an aviary, in lieu of myself.

The Far Country

I ready myself a widening desert
mistake the sandstone shadows
for lepers tangled in positions
we assumed

What became still
a fawn in the desert
only Christ

Undertow in the canyon

swept from the mouth

I am still

you

left the mangos

in the fire

a million sand violets

as shadowed birds consume dark

sometimes there is collapse

The *cliff rose* mirrors
on the canyon floor
roots till the ground
tearing from rock something
distant and less
gold

Be my night

the desert said

leave the fire

lit to see what moves the canyon

walls at night

I spoke to the fawn in the desert

he said

put the cactus

into your mouth,

drink

Pine Pearl

We come to a creek and the horses startle. Somebody throws a rock to watch it sink. Horses have no depth perception and they have to know there is a bottom. Once, I saw a horse lay down in a puddle with a rider tucked into the saddle and roll because she could see the bottom of the shallow water. She wades in, almost floating in the water clear up her back, my waist wet on the monstrous, breathing ship. She pulls herself up on the bank, stands heaving. The other horses will not cross. My horse begins turning circles, rearing against being alone on this side of the river. Or rears against lions. Or the tree of ash she ate burning up through her limbs. I cannot put her feet on the ground and don't realize I am humming, saying 'no', my neck bends to the rock ledges over the river. I imagine my body flung, bearing the animal to the ground.

Torrington, WY

I was born near Wyoming and I'm telling you this so we can imagine me coming to in a vast space of hooves. For each person there is an acre of hunkered down moons. I tend my moons, hungry—I'll tell you why the wolves circle the canyon floor. Cheyenne, I've covered you with the vanity of lungs exhaling dust from the moon fields. I was born a wide sky, here is the exit wound and the horses spill out.

Burn the Little Items of Your Field

I am a panic of you
hush bones hush what wives
me to you

,

An evening woke
stitched to a spectacle
of want.
I tuck limes beneath
the soil to
facilitate rot.

Some ache
talking to itself
in the flower rows.

Did you feel my troubles harvest did you
bend into the high grass

 I have undone
 the husks
to build modest lingeries of their silk I wear for you

body in the dark carved space body in the high grass

you turn beside me as I turn in my sleep
 the casual appetite.

A haunting strains itself against the dusk
close her in the milk cupboard in the morning
my hands temper the latch
thunder in the cottonwoods.

The tabernacle beneath the house
holds only cigarettes.

I have wintered
too long in little cellars
willing some lost thing
to become phenomenon to come back.
Smoke the cigarettes over the sink
when the ashes fall
the field doesn't catch fire

What was the name of the moon that glowed the field
bright enough for walking to the centermost furrow
resting there
to hollow out the head
to let the air in.
A lantern illuminates a yellow wall
smoke coming in the wood frame door.

Burn the little
items of your
field.

Stack the woodpile to recognize the stirring
of a separate forest sound of snow
falling heavy out of trees
 the sound of a body flung.
Some days I am a wife
to my own sadness.

Situate ourselves against each other
a house built on a hill facing west
to anticipate the sun.

Spare the row of uncut trees
 the silence
between warships
 glancing off the eaves.

I never sow
blue

a sea contains
wandering

the body pollinated
by a coast

the gulf of one body
away from another

until you have carried
want in your teeth all
this time you will never.

What wanted to be said
 hung like drying peppers
the duration of speaking
as long as flame
 moving down the matchstick.

Pine Pearl

The horse is dead, was the news I heard, *died of colic*. *We buried her in the pine grove*,—bones soaking into the roots and some feathers. The sand collected into the grazing as she filled herself with uncut hay and earth. Her stomach, a basin of sand, took to burning when screaming intensified in the evening. She sat down heavy, letting the flies rest on her back. From the valley, I can see by the way the clouds are pushed away, it is a false winter on the mountain. We will have to wait months till sun thaw to unearth you, a pine pearl in the roots.

Lunations

When you call me Helen
the night renames itself.
The moon,
a *lung set* illuminated
from the center—
water in winter
taking in
the canyon light
until it torches.
It's alright if you
panic like me.
The heavy moon
in the yard
was something
I never shook.
Urging me to say
this is the best way
of being vast.

Evening Come Apart

In the space between my skin
an orange grove assembles itself.
You want to run your hands
through the field,
you want to walk into
the sea, drinking it
as you go.
Tell me I am California
a breathing coast
of trees,
build our house
in the orange grove.
Here is how
the birds come to
land on water.
You will demolish
the house.

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