

love songs to the desert



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## CONTENTS

### *Poems*

1. Wild Places
2. Eureka Valley
3. Windows
4. *Canis latrans*
5. Feral
6. Laccolithic

### *Conversations*

1. Jackrabbit
2. Fox
3. Stream (Ghosts)
4. Crows
5. Moth
6. Harbingers
7. Love

*I asked the jackrabbit: Where are you going?  
and she said:*

*You can keep running forever and ever and ever  
as long as no one can catch you.*



## Wild Places

Dry sand wheels across rough rock,  
burnt umber by the scorching sun.  
Soon, your footprints in the wash will be blown back to smooth,  
while in the black soil  
the red steps of those who came decades before  
will, someday, fade.

The desert forgot them, too.

Canyons wind like the bodies of serpents  
to meet walls sheer and straight, the joints  
of some great being too big for us to see.  
Between, branches reach up for the brief angle of sunlight  
that comes once each day,  
mahonia flowers perfuming the air,  
their sun-yellow petals scattered on the sand below  
like love letters.

Listen:

There is no heart big enough to hold the desert.  
You can worship it, but it will never love you back.  
You can try to hold on, the way juniper roots  
clutch at the earth, clinging for centuries  
before the sand wears away,  
leaving empty air beneath arching wood.

The canyon-wren sings her mournful song,  
notes tremulously descending,  
as though if she can sing low enough,  
the silent rock walls will finally hear her,  
and welcome her home.  
Above, the sky churns, storms shouting  
their devotion each spring,  
the crash of clouds returned once every century  
by the fall of boulders.  
A person could pass an entire lifetime of listening,  
and never catch this reply.

Breath by ragged breath,  
the land turns relentlessly onward,  
leaving clouds behind to face  
the clear, cold emptiness of night;  
as though the darkness is saying,  
here, wait, and I will show you my stars.

Beneath the yellowing grasses, toads slumber,  
bodies still as stone,  
dreaming their memories of water.  
Here, you can see a sharply curved bank,  
there, a boulder shaped smooth  
by currents that come once a year—  
twice, if you're lucky—

echoes of the sky's last  
love songs to the desert.

“I remember,” you will sigh in descending pitch,  
in some place other than here  
in some time other than now  
inhaling your memory of the sharp, sweet scent of sage  
and still waiting for the crash of a rockfall  
that never comes.  
You’ll get a century, if you’re lucky.

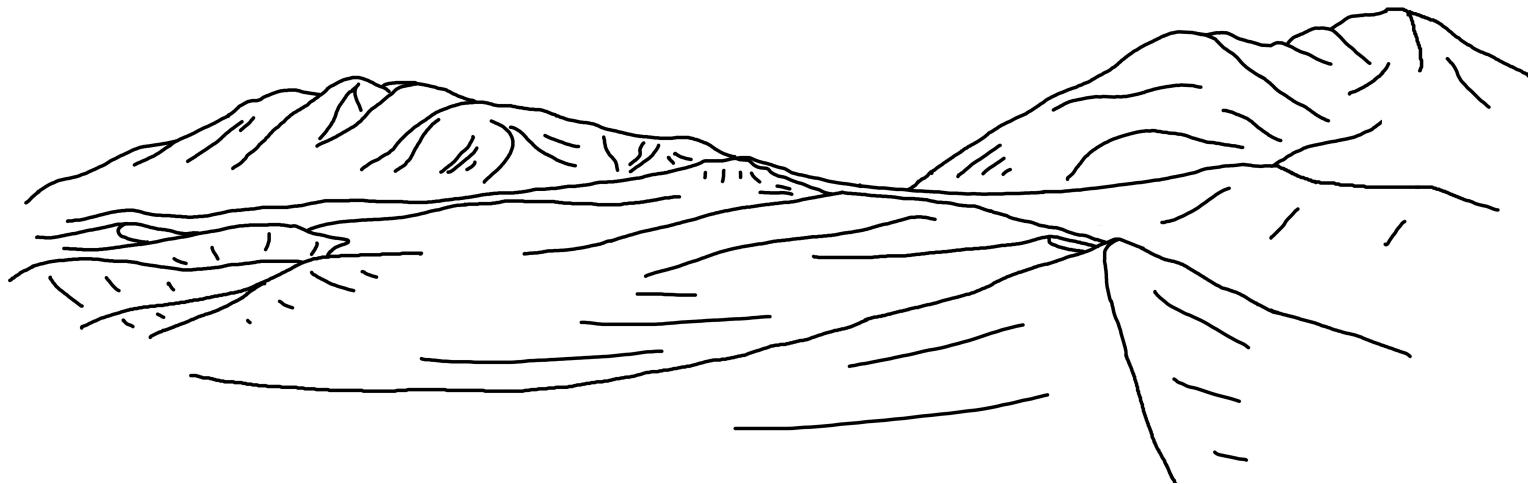
Somewhere, beneath the red crust,  
seeds turn against the soil, green shoots  
blooming orange as rock and yellow as sunlight,  
as white as stars,  
petals slowly turning to face the sky.

“Listen, listen,” sings the western solitaire.  
“Only mortals need to hear ‘I love you’ in reply.”

*If you walk far enough,  
you can taste what it's like to never go home,  
the kit fox pants through gleaming teeth.  
If you head into the desert and never turn back,  
you'll find the place where water comes from, eventually.*

*How many years have you been running?  
I ask him,  
and when he looks at me  
his eyes are a full moon hanging low on the horizon.*

*How long have you been alive?  
he asks.*



## Eureka Valley

1.

Leave what was once your home:  
There is snow on the ground.  
Three days later the desert is 70° and sunny—  
impossible warmth, so early in the year.  
“Is it?” new faces reply, blurring together  
like heat shimmering up from asphalt.  
“I thought it was a bit chilly.”

2.

You’re hiking through Death Valley  
and nothing has ever been this hot.  
100, 105, 110° —  
Each step laborious, sand-surface crumbling as you  
stumble into rodent holes, lungs burning like your skin.  
Dust clouds billow on the horizon, another lost soul  
approaching in this wasteland, guided by the gods of  
four-wheel drive and air conditioning.  
The window rolls down, bleach-blond hair ruffled  
from the frigid blast that escapes into sweltering sky.  
“Did you come through Steel Pass?” he asks.  
“What was the road like?”

3.

No one knows where the dust devils are going.  
They do not follow the roads.  
They will not stop at traffic signals.  
They wind relentless, regardless of what lies ahead.

Swirling eddies spin through you,  
grinding grit into mouth and nose,  
hammering head and hand and heart.  
Just as suddenly it vanishes:  
Papers scattered and dirt in your eyes.  
The dust devils have right-of-way.

4.

Sand everywhere:  
your hair, clothes, backpack,  
parts of your person you are absolutely certain  
sand has no right to be.  
Empty your shoes: more sand,  
and you are beginning to worry  
that soon there will be no room left for feet,  
for your body, for anything but  
the shifting dunes and the songs they sing  
as you slide across their surface.  
Open your lunch: more sand. Eat it anyway.

5.

The heavy moon scrapes against the valley floor, a second sun  
silver instead of gold, no less bright.  
White sand glows like beads of mercury,  
sifting liquid through your fingers.  
The dust-faded creosote stems are cloaked grey-black,  
tall shadows scattered across the landscape  
like the dinosaur-memories whose bones lurk below.  
When the moon is full you can’t even see the stars.

6.

You can remember nothing but the dunes,  
the heat, the sun's relentless pressure against your skin.  
But even now, the dead dregs of summer,  
when you look up you can see the mountains—  
their crowns still haloed  
in the miracle of snow.

7.

The sun has long since set  
yet the world still hums to the tune of 80°,  
radiating warmth up through  
your tarp ground pad sleeping bag bones,  
your skin bare against the darkness.  
No insects here disturb you,  
only the gentle ripple of wind.

You think:

*nothing between me and the sky,  
nothing holding me to this shell of a planet  
but the weight of my body pressed into it,  
nothing around me except shuffling leaves of yucca  
and tiny, dark shards of obsidian, mixed into the pale sand.*

You think:

*this is what it means to be alone.*

8.

Everything is white, shifting, scorching.  
Pale sand stretches around you for miles,  
interrupted only by dark splashes of creosote  
dotting the landscape like ragged breaths,  
twigs trembling in the heat.

The desert is silent.

The desert is vast.

There has never been such a thing as a sea.  
The country could descend into apocalyptic ruin,  
fire brimstone ash, yet none of it would ever reach us here.

We stand at the edge of dusk,  
sun descending over the black peaks  
that encircle us like cupped hands,  
contemplating the nature of endlessness.  
Shadows creep in, the sun-tattered leaves  
of the evening primrose lift themselves slightly,  
their nodding buds rising like tired faces  
as the sky grows gold, then orange, then purple.

There is a tremble in the earth: behind you  
a bone-white jeep crests the small hill,  
motor hissing as it slows to a halt,  
a messenger from the world beyond  
rolling down the window to stick her head out.

"Did you come through Steel Pass?" she asks.

"How was the road?"



*Where do the frogs go when it's dry?  
I ask the wash  
and it says:*

*Have you ever loved something so much  
you buried it in the sand  
so no one else could ever touch it again?*



## Windows

There are certain places where you can forget  
the earth is more than a surface,  
but this is not one of them.  
Here, it cracks open like dry skin  
and we descend into its flesh,  
touching the rocks with soft fingers.

Look,  
you say, palm pressed  
against a ring of red stone,  
a hollow chamber where once  
the world's vein wound through  
what is now empty air.  
You can see the sky through it.

I am telling you a story but I am getting it all wrong.  
I am trying to say: this harsh loneliness is my fault.  
Open your eyes. Close them. Open them again.  
There's a streetlight in town that  
goes out every time I walk under it  
and I'm beginning to think, maybe it's a sign.

Unnamable rocks rise around us,  
great gargoyles of shadow looming like the sense  
of something we have long since forgotten.  
There is a stillness to the stones  
that makes even the stars look blurred  
as the sky wheels overhead.

Sun blisters against salt-rimed skin  
and I think I could grow to love this kind of haunting,  
as the things the earth swallowed millennia ago  
rise back to the surface, unburying the past  
layer by sand-shifting layer.

Aren't you tired?  
you ask me.

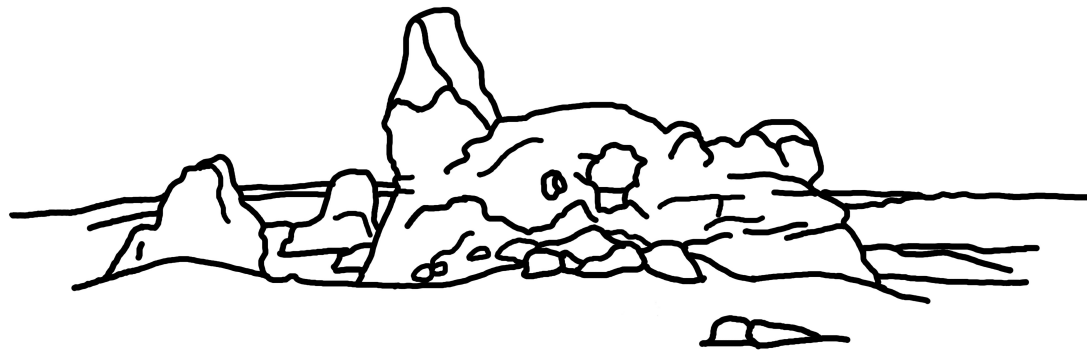
Who isn't?  
I reply.

*Where do you think you're headed?  
laugh the crows.  
You can't fly unless you  
abandon the earth and everything attached to it.  
Let it turn away without you.*

*Those feelings are too heavy to hover  
on the heat that slides off the rock like waves.*

*Put them down.*

*Give up. Give up. Give up.*



*Canis latrans*

You can hear them singing late at night  
from where you lay, sleeping bag unzipped  
and the star-scattered sky spread out above you  
like a sheet.

Your eyes should be closed but you can feel their cries  
thrumming inside your chest like a drum,  
reminding you how to be feral,  
a bone-ancient music called up from that ancestral abyss  
of memories from a time when it was we  
who crouched, sand between our teeth,  
the wind whipping our hair like a coat.

Wide-eyed in the dark, you listen,  
and the coyotes are saying:

Hey, now,  
stop swallowing your howls  
and we'll go eat up the whole night sky,  
both of us together.

It tastes like everything you ever wanted.  
It tastes like never being alone again.

There is something primal here,  
not in the tight shiver of fear behind your breast  
but the absence of it:  
your heart pounding against your ribs like hoofbeats  
and your fingers digging into the dirt like the claws  
you always wanted,  
pebbles cool against your palms.  
There are teeth against the back of your neck  
and you can feel the warmth of a throat  
waiting behind them.

Tell me,  
the coyotes whisper,  
isn't this what it means to be alive?

*Where does the moon go?  
I ask the moth,  
beating her white wings against the dark.*

*what is a moon?  
she asks,  
her body fluttering clumsily between the night-blooms,  
their perfume curling into the sky like smoke.*



## **Feral**

I know,  
says the earth,  
that I gave you those teeth  
and your snarl which says  
the blood you spit out from between them  
is not your own.

You have broken the beast of your body  
into all its parts, and yet  
still, you flinch at an unexpected touch  
no matter how gentle.  
You traded claws and howling for language  
and straight, sturdy walls  
but there are no words to the keening wail  
that escapes you, trembling, in the dark.

You thought you could partition away  
those old remnants, the genetic lineage  
that told your ancestors to fear  
the things lurking in the shadows  
behind the dark, jagged rocks.  
You walled away these wild places  
between highways and visitor booths,  
so that you can go and visit your past  
and then so you can leave it behind again.

But oh, my child,  
the walls you built inside yourself  
could never have held back  
that primal rage lurking inside your chest.  
Civilization is a lie you tell each other,  
a pretense to keep everything running smoothly  
while you recoil from the animal, unnamed things  
inside your heart.  
You could never hope to hide them from me.

Listen: the water flows, endlessly.  
Listen: the leaves shiver above  
before they fall back to the dark soil.

There is nowhere else for you to go.

So come,  
says the earth,  
crawl back into the open chest of my caves, the  
arms of my crooked branches.  
Yes, there is a darkness to the universe  
and it comes from inside you, not out.  
You can take what you want from nature  
but it will always take you back.  
You belonged to it before anything else.

Here, there is grass, soft and cool  
beneath the heat of your skin.  
Above, the birds are singing,  
plaintive and wordless.

*The pronghorn says:*

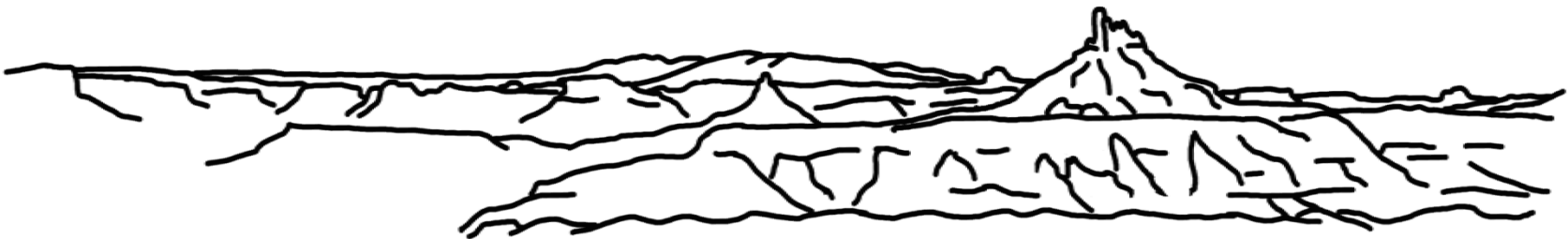
*Once upon a time, we were gods.*

*The raven says:*

*Nothing will last,  
not even flesh.*

*The vulture says:*

*Stay for as long as you like.  
It's fine.  
I'll wait.  
The earth wants your bones, oh yes,  
but it will keep longer than I.*



## Laccolithic

I am dreaming of mountains.

Dark grey slabs rise from the rusted skin of the earth,  
pushing up through cracks in the crust like a broken bone.  
Long ago, something full of rage and fire  
lingered here, waiting beneath the surface  
the way a slumbering whale drifts upward from the depths:  
a monument to the mantle's last mood swing  
before the continent rolled away, liquid anger cooling  
beneath its skin like heartbreak.

I believe in the holiness of deserts, in the sanctity  
of the river that cuts through rock, down and down,  
gorging itself on the past. The water scours  
the stone. The water scours your skin and  
whatever lies beneath it.

I see silhouettes of trees against my eyelids,  
the shimmer-glow of sunlight through aspens  
burning green-gold over memories of frost.

Whatever gods we carry with us into the wilderness  
will agree on this, at least: in the desert,  
the quiet roar of water counts as prayer.  
Peaks burst from nowhere, ragged spines raised like an offering  
from the pockmarked water-weathered barrens below.  
Look at them: your heart beats against your ribs  
like a bird, fluttering and bruised.  
There's something beneath the surface  
and I don't want it to come close enough to name.

I am dreaming of shallow breaths in the dark  
and the distinction between salt and snow.  
There are ten thousand eyes in the scarred bark  
and their weight presses from above,  
sentinels for this hundred mile scorch-mark  
on the skin of the world.

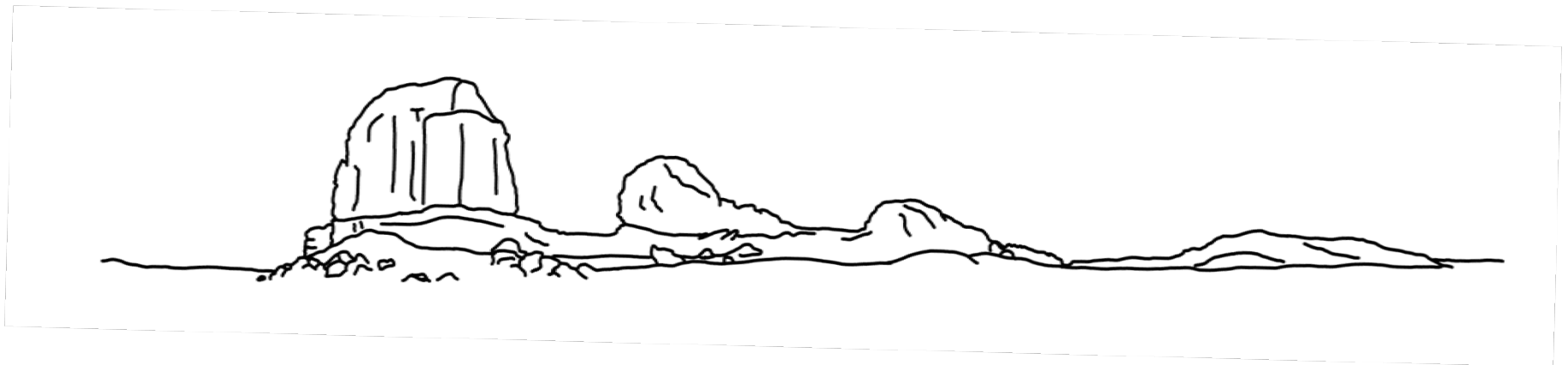
I swear this by my shaking hands:

There is peace here, if with the rawness of a wound,  
from a parched wasteland that still remembers  
what it was like to be a sea.



*I asked the desert:  
Will you remember me?*

*And it said nothing,  
nothing at all.*



LOVE SONGS TO THE DESERT is a collection of poetry written between the years 2015 and 2019, inspired by landscapes within the southwestern United States. The art in this booklet was created by outlining sections of photos I have taken in the deserts where I live and work. Special thanks to Ash Marie for editing help, comments, and moral support.

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