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# Engine Song

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## **Engine Song**

An Honors Thesis presented by Laura Jo Hess

to

the English Department
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
Honors in the Major Field

Connecticut College New London, Connecticut May 2007

## **ENGINE SONG**

Laura Jo Hess

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I.

#### **Forecast**

here is the water they warned us about the instant rumbling and the ground opening three miles across

long land where children stick their toes in sand and balance heads on their mothers' right hips: this is the land

and here is the water, cresting rock formations that remind me of tear ducts or broken violin strings

my sister walks in crooked strides across the cityscape scoping grooves in bridges and whispering in beat with traffic lights

meanwhile, I haven't loved the city or found pleasure in reflective surfaces or chains that hug the ground

watch this water and fear it: the speed and the intrusiveness and all that remains.

## Foreign Deed

A bird flies north at a train station, his wings parallel to the tracks, his beak separated by air.

Ahead, there is a window pane. The bird continues. He is crushed, head-first bringing his feet through to his mouth in one swift movement.

He falls evenly to the ground and lands squarely inside a gray tile. Two girls rush to him, bending at the knees eyeing his face fingering his small feathers (almost like fur) thinking, what could hurt so badly to make a bird commit suicide.

#### **Sunday Sincerity**

Mother, I've stolen something and lied about it, after the librarians chased me outside when I set off the metal detector with a stapled *New York Times* tucked under my arm

No, no this is mine
I said as they patted me down

This is my paper
I'm a good student an honest liar, I swear
Until they let me go, convinced.

I've detoured on the way home, peered in a first-floor window at a face and a long body, poured wine past my lips and blinked hard at a stranger who has the wrong eyes and a different history. For this, forgive me.

I'm sorry
I shaved my arm in the bathtub
when I was fourteen
while you were reading
a hardcover book in your bedroom.
The razor in my hand to my wrist
all because my friends
were gone and I was lonely
in the bathtub on a Friday night.
I cried to you and you
held my head in your lap
and loved me no less
with my inch of a hairless arm.

#### One

I wake dreaming of \_\_\_\_\_, my head against the vinyl of a seat cover, my mouth open on a bus eastward.

Tell me there's not two of me:

One with straight shoulders and strong feet, walking over splatter-painted bricks, reaching down to retrieve a coin from the asphalt, slapping hands with a stranger, touching his cheek on both sides

The other closed eyes and timid hands leaned at an angle against a tree in a place where birds make confessions with rhythm: 1, 2, 3 chirp.

Tell me I'll not believe you.

So what if one stopped walking and sat on a curb with grass between her fingers

and the other stood, shook her head of branches and took three steps to the road.

Then, they reach their respective hands to cast a shadow on the ground, Thinking: *one one one*.

#### On Achieving Loneliness

I think of you mostly when I am crosslegged in my bedroom or when I am made of centimeters that don't add up, when you leave footprints on my backside, moments you loved the hardest.

My father's got doorways for ears and I think they only open when his mouth does and so I'd like to tell you about being five: about giggling when my parents kissed or riding on my father's shoulders with my legs dangling near his cheeks while he held my ankles—I want to tell you this mostly because I don't remember, because it never happened.

Today he asks me to walk but I'm lonely so we sit in rocking chairs and I fold my feet beneath my thighs and balance on woodstrips thinner than your fingers.

3 times my mother asks me why I hate home but she's got orchids for eyes and they plead for me to tell her something good, but all I remember is finding a blonde woman in my dad's apartment and my sister draping the word *manipulative* from the chandelier in the dining room. My mother used to sit in my doorway, knees to chest, quietly wondering if the bitter taste under her tongue was depression or strength and if I would ever fall asleep without her.

Sometimes you are the instant when a blond boy holds a cigarette to his lips and inhales so slowly until he sits with me in an abandoned hallway and draws diagrams of the past on his thigh; Faye says not to be scared of gravity so I stay there and you fade to four years from now.

For today, I'll write with light produced from your elbows, shining from Missouri where girls press their bodies to your shoulder like drowning fish and finally: my mom's got this lover who feeds her grapes across the phone line.

A man says he has to be practical so he wears his wedding ring on his forefinger; he's got a black tulip bulb for a son and he's preaching laughter into centuries too far away to touch. There goes Faye on the trampoline, closing her eyes and counting to France because she hasn't got a vessel big enough to hold words like *entropy* or *subjunctive* in this lifetime.

Faye & I compare lists of solitude and sometimes we lie on concrete and let the heat numb us while we listen to a boy read a gasoline can like it's a love song. It makes sense that you wouldn't know what it tastes like to be a liar or a drunk, but you should recall the shape of my feet on wood.

I am jealous of people with no ending as I watch the way a man's eyes follow his wife as she walks with one foot constantly in front of the other. He's floating there above his body, as if his arm might break off just to touch her skin for an instant. I bet he doesn't believe it's love when you exist in one plane at a time.

Even if there are still post-it notes from you in my underwear drawer and if I'm obsessed with symmetry so what if it ends tomorrow like this.

#### The Fortune Teller

After Lawrence Raab

It may hurt for a while, the land, the water

your feet will be heavy with dirt and you'll cry

over a dead bug or your son who is eleven now

Be cautious with materials and goods that come in boxes,

hold your wife's hand across the arm rest

in the movie theater see tears fall in ovals

down her cheek, recall beauty in a pale

shoulder blade or uneven knuckles

Your eyes are half-open and your hands tremble

with down-turned lips sun-burned cheeks

Your palm is blurred lines jagged and crossed

which means you're mourning

the death of a lover or someone you need

Leave here with your head and your fingers

all your teeth and forgive me for my honesty.

#### The Lost Son

Sadness for the void left in the backyard, the stairway, (This is for mothers who let their children walk alone in the dark.)

I lost God to the sidewalk cracks forty years ago but tonight, tonight I bend my knees over my bedside and hold my palms together. I stare into the ceiling tiles, count them aloud, practice comfort. Tonight I cradle a plastic phone to my ear while I draw pictures of you in the sink water, window fog. A woman will speak to me in low tones and tell me she's so sorry so sad so sick so empty for me. Sixteen is far away and February is so cold when the television blares about wars and fear and poverty, but I bet the weatherman doesn't know what its like to sit upright on a couch in a room with one window and wait for the door to fall ajar and your fingers to curl around the side, your face to appear in centimeters, for my feet to touch the ground and my throat open up, for the woman three states over to start smiling again. Here I am weeping to the threads in my pillowcase, assured that tomorrow is the last day to trace your eyelids in black ink, because tomorrow you will sit with me at the dinner table eating turkey and potatoes, swinging your feet slowly under the table cloth.

#### **Atheist Love Song**

Sinners in a holy city breathe in holy light, make motions with their holy heads. This year, Passover is in the forest kneeling among empty dirt mounds and dying blades of grass, dreaming of dinner at Eaka's, of hard eggs and bitter herbs dipped in salt water that evaporates from the tongue.

In Israel prayers are written on lined paper and placed in a cracked wall facing east. Tip-toed men sway back and forth: *Mazel Tov* to waking up each morning, to worshipping a worn Bible and wearing a talus across the shoulders.

For my birthday, Sarika sacrificed a goat atop a Baltimore mountain slitting its neck and watching blood flow from the summit to the base. For my birthday: a broken neck, a perfect ritual.

#### Age, revised

How much older we will feel once Tuesday brings rain and shelter beneath your shoulders, when we've wandered over necklines and bed-frames far away from our home towns and lovers.

My mother stares at a chipped tooth and thinks of precision translated into loneliness, happiness to change. She's crawling across the phone-line, sending medicine in a cardboard box, trying to understand the difference between grass and cement and why my face has become so solid, gray. I blame it on Switzerland and springtime, the perfection of your gaze and the size of your hands. I blame it on knees touching under a table and the ability to laugh. I blame it on landscape.

Morocco is whispering about the sidewalk cracks and graffiti walls, how it's falling over in love with you, can't even feel it's feet, how even if you wanted stillness, it's too late.

There's already a French girl tracing your footsteps in the sand, brushing fingers through your hair as you sip coffee and read dialogue.

She's already you how to dance at the nightclub downtown and feeding you homemade chocolate and fruit.

Before long

#### Let me start over:

In Jamaica, the security guard sits in the back room smoking a joint. *Don't be afraid*, *girls* he puffs as we approach him, side by side. He's working the late shift, twelve hours of drunken Americans and sin. In the morning, he'll ride his bike to the construction site where he'll piece together slabs of wood in the sunlight. He may sleep for an hour in between, but he doesn't depend on it. My sister is holding my hand, feeling older than me, more mature. She's recalling Missouri, New York, sporadic weather and high-rises, Americans and snow. *I like it here* she whispers.

Even in Jamaica, you came to me: Crawling out of the water to sit with me on the cliffs, wringing out your clothes and shaking your head. I'd sink down, letting my spine take the shape of the rock, and maybe you'll watch me away, floating and silent.

### **Even Spaces**

Through the glass mirror from a room with couches and chairs the white rail balcony looks oddly lonely.

Vertical posts latch onto wood beneath, an overturned glass collects ants and leaves.

Rain has tattered the paint brown chips that used to be white, cracked corners once leveled.

It's all still sturdy, holding the body leaning, imagining the ground below.

#### **Transplant**

I dreamed you in a bed two feet above a linoleum floor in a pale hospital with white sheets and curtains

dreamed a scratch on your chest in the shape of an anchor and your sister in Be'er Sheva, kneeling and loving you

dreamed religion from your mother's mouth and songs from your father's, words sifting through waiting room walls to your face and feet, letters in black ink read like prayers.

Hearts come quickly and like this: enclosed in a Styrofoam cooler with your name in bold print on the handle. You're watching the World Series when the phone rings and your mother answers in a soft voice and minutes later you're driving east with wind through the window cracks.

A bird perched on the sill sings currents through panes —Even he knows you, needs you.

#### To Susan Sontag

to cleaning out Susan Sontag's penthouse in Chelsea to throwing away receipts from taxi cabs and movie theaters to Susan Sontag at a bookstore Susan Sontag wearing K-Swiss to the ballet.

I'm leaning against a radiator fingering financial papers. I've got a box of tissues under my arm because someone has died.

Three-thousand to Princeton, for my son
Four-thousand to my assistant, who I cherish
Two-thousand for a bracelet, because it's beautiful.

Susan Sontag's name scrawled on boxes and papers; Susan Sontag—rolls off the tongue.

On a balcony with a pen between her fingers, or speaking French and German on an airplane, asking for free flight bags Susan Sontag lecturing at colleges to wide-eyed students Susan Sontag with her lover, eating eggs and lox at a table with three wicker chairs and a candle.

Everything works in pairs: the number of lamps in a foyer the birth of babies in countries where bodies are calculated; Susan Sontag: life and death.

#### Waking Up Happy

Dad, I say, I just want an education, a digital camera, summer camp and sleepovers.

I want what you had, because you had it.

Your father didn't tell you he loved you but he didn't hate you, since he loved you enough to send you away to Holland where you couldn't fail.

But you did, chasing an orange down the hill, broken elbow and all.

It isn't the lack of employment that hurts, but the interviews, over and again until you're reduced to college clubs and the family business that you sold. In the house where you grew up, there's a story about a space with your name etched on wood and it goes like this: When you were eight your father told you to talk faster and you ran upstairs and hid in the closet, camouflaged between shirts and shoe shiners and engraved your name in ink as slowly as you wanted.

Pencil me a way to remember you, with your schedule book in the front seat of your silver vehicle and a magnet from your youth recalling success. Or golf days, with shorts that end above your knees and socks that cut-off at your calf and half your face covered in sunglasses.

These here are my fingers memorizing songs in beats on the backside of a notebook. And this? This is my face, watching movement across the dinner table where a man I love sips water. But it doesn't end like this, so listen close.

One summer we sat in grass with our legs crossed and you told me about a woman that hugged you like your mother would have if she hadn't been in the car in 1982 when the brakes went out; and keys dangled from your fingers and you loved me, I think, like you always should.

#### City on a River

#### 1.

Head westward alongside flattened cornfields and static-faced cows to see the consuming metal cross, preaching Jesus to the highway drivers: women with large mouths and broken hearts and children who doodle stick-figures in the backseat.

#### 2.

At the fountain in the park the homeless hide beneath cracked leather coats near shopping carts with canned beans blessed by local rabbis and priests, shamans and monks. It's too cold for prayer in a city with rivers and paths paved with matte stars and abbreviated biographies.

#### 3.

Silver creeps skyward arching over heads and waistlines, over grass dented in summer and frozen in fall, imprints that change shape with the shifting sun: I've waited years for such romance.

II.

#### Radicality

A flat frame on a white-washed wall says we're going to die, cries we're not at a ballet or the baseball game and that we better understand evolution before the city is drowned in seawater, but after, a woman pulls a sheet of paper from her vagina and it's hung by a curator in a case transcribed, idolized.

Position me behind this, beneath it, where I can draw the faces of men in moonlight who hate the sun but love punk rock and whose spineless journals are displayed under thick glass I can't touch, or shouldn't.

Mapped out in the gift shop, there we are, thirty years back with bandanas and dull pencil points inside leather pouches draped over our shoulders, rubbing lined paper and shattered pills.

### Disposition

Days past, I've craved the sun, too—taken it in breath, tattooed it on my chest. It's better this way: constant warmth taking over, the body gone.

It's either a pill in the morning or sun in the afternoon: a mid-day breakdown over a break-up that hasn't happened yet; or dangling feet from a park bench loosely and content.

#### Vina

She's holy for you: you in India arms folded across a hospital bed, breathing with the heavy sound of tambourines and church bells every couple of seconds. She, dancing on bars/tables in Georgia, crumbling beneath the ceiling paint, grimacing when angular men clasp their hands together, she, thinking as if this were pleasure.

You in a taxi cab riding slowly through the streets of Delhi watching houses burn quietly, dreaming of father's dangling from ceiling fans and the only boy who stops to photograph it.

She waking to cobblestone doorsteps in houses she doesn't belong: down pillows, fingerprints, agelessness at seventeen.

All this, while unprayed for women appear at your bedside et cetera et cetera preaching about earthquakes and all the times you won't survive, how they're a collision of two worlds, two peoples. She, she's got Billie Holliday playing in her headphones, skipping feet over cement walkways, not forgetting you every single day, not wondering when she'll next lean over the metal bar parallel to your body, push the plastic life support aside and whisper through your broken eyes, come back, come back now.

#### **Memory Lapse**

I've forgotten the city for a moment, Shelby tells me, forgotten the streetlamps the men with paper cups shaking coins in the cold, forgotten them in an Eastside high-rise sipping water on a water-stained couch legs crossed eyes closed.

Forget the city and recall fifth grade, how every week I'd slip out of history class. Shelby, I can tell you now: it was therapy and I went with my sisters my Dad and I sat still in the same chair every hour between the tissue box and the origami shapes. I held my knees to my chest when Alison told me I was sad because I wore all black and cried when winter came. She said I was too young to be so sad so I got sad more silently.

Let us forget the city to remember the fifty states and pathways west that become triangles at the horizon.

#### Deceased

You know death because of the crowd outside the funeral home, the way they hold hands and weep onto patterned shoulders.

That must be his mother: the one with limp neck and prayer book sitting near the doorway, too weak to stand.

Someone has died while you sip coffee in a car at a red light, turned towards the window, breathing lightly.

#### Haven Up North

He pulls me aside, wipes his glasses on his tee-shirt, trembling:

> I'm busting tires at the local tire shop waiting for cancer to step outside and stop haunting me, stop hanging on the strands of my hair and telling my son he's different and lesser, darker and more difficult.

I'm on a bridge in a haven in Michigan where feet wind over wood planks and I employ language into the backs of my palm or the picnic table.

I've fallen in love four times over and believe me, I will sit in the bone marrow unit and watch her hands wither away; I'll live in a house with broken doorframes and drive a beat-up truck just to feel God at the bedside—not taking her; not ending me just yet.

At lunch time, I watch him wait at the oak tree outside their cabin. He's got pages taped to his fingers and ink printed across his lips and I wonder how many women know such permanence.

## Injury

hurt you under water, out of depth

hurt where fingers touch backsides

bound for paper-thin bed sheets softened

and new, shelved with t-shirts hanging

behind a doorframe with your inheritance.

Quiver now, won't you.

#### Floral Bandage

The flowers must not understand the weather when they bloom in March by a picket fence painted gray to match the clouds. Purple velvet soaking sunlight vertically to the stem: a crucifix of leaves.

My sister buys lemon trees and keeps them by the window making sure the leaves stay green, the stems stiff, promising a healthy plant as a 30<sup>th</sup> birthday present: full-size lemons on a miniature tree branches sagging with the weight of a sour symmetrical ovoid—a tree transplanted from the ground to a windowsill, from one pane of city light to another.

In Malawi, my other sister gives stickers to barefoot siblings and learns the language in three days. In the morning, she transfers blood from a plastic bag into a dying woman's vena cava. Lips pray slowly by the bedside.

All this while I'm mapping cities, clinging arms and elbows meeting eyes mid-street holding stares till the curb comes beneath my feet. On the side of the road two girls hold hands against the median dialing numbers before whispering mother, there's been an accident and waiting for the ambulance to haul the bodies away.

#### Mobile America

En Route to El Jadida, you must stop for meat. Let the men with dirt-stained shirts and hats to cover the small of their heads de-board and wait for their very own chicken head or mutton body. Let them run after the bus, slapping their hands on the sides, yelling angry phrases in Arabic. The men here don't understand us. They don't try to sell us magic cream to clear our skin; they can see our legs and it's baffling. Ramadan makes us wither away, the ladies in the hotel still serve us breakfast: juice from orange trees and bread from the land. I hide Rushdie between my knees, not sure if Satan is allowed in Morocco during Ramadan, or ever. A bus was bombed in Iraq: eleven killed. Let me arrive safely to El Jadida, to the cinema, back home. Let my mother see this bus brown leather head rests, tattered velour seats, unraveling curtains. And she was only worried about filth.

#### The Earth Is Not Quiet

for John Rybicki

In the hospital I wait with my feet up. Next to me is a chemical burn, across the way a bruised face. Jerry Springer takes the background: DNA tests to find foreign fathers teenage girls stripping in the audience grown men wide-eyed in boat shoes.

My father is Detroit, and he couldn't hug me so he hit me—

It figures I'd find the hospital after reading Rybicki pinpointing why he likened the moon to a biscuit and survived the cancer unit for three years in a row. His first book recounted courting his wife: the ice cream cone in the park his hand holding her mouth, her eyes, loving her in the mall parking lot because he couldn't wait for the bedroom.

Opposite sides of the same wall we were hanging our fists wiping our cheeks on fresh paint If his father is Detroit, then mine is Missouri, inhaling Forest Park and sending me forty dollars for a missed birthday. I choose my mother to phone from the waiting room close my eyes not to cry at the ninety-two year old woman in a winter hat and a wheelchair. On the x-ray table, I want my mom even though it's just a photograph of my insides, from the outside in.

#### **Discourse**

I waited on you again today, throwing ribald words at my nose, my mouth, fingering a brick behind my head in a stench-filled street with half-painted walls where your father goes to meditate.

Spit me a song while I hold a static phone to my ear praying air will come when I lie down at night, and that bread will be soft and served with jam.

It isn't you I serenade.

In the evening, the streets echo Elton John and men with knapsacks follow my foreign feet. It's past nine when you find me avoiding stares from wide-eyed locals whom you call your brothers.

Take me to the graveyard and recite passages from your holy book and listen close when I teach you words used in the west, like lightning, armpit, phallic.

Hear this: my lover has five fingers and a head and he dreams me, exclusively and often.

#### **Empire**

Beneath broken lights and up-turned houses, I sit.

while a woman on the train curses me for helping the homeless, taking glasses from her chest and placing them upon the contours of her face, howling; while there's firefly flames burning houses down to the green grass and my father is on a bus, crossing from the cold to the warmth holding elderly women by the shoulder, leading them towards homes with roofs and windows made of glass; while streets are consumed by polygons and thick air

let us study beggars in cities, on subways:

1.

Dark man with shopping bag. I hate doing this, he says, I mean no disrespect, to you, who will not look at his face, at his mouth to you with tie-dyed eyes and twisted feet, a magazine in your lap to you with sun-soaked skin and expensive flip flips to you, unloving hopeless ruin in the corner.

2.

Old Parisian woman in a tank top, *j'ai bien travaillé*, she says, calculating the angles between her palm and the doorway, learning to breathe when four-eyed business men turn away, breaking her gaze with the crease of a newspaper; learning to bend at the knees to retrieve the discarded baguette in the warped silver trashcan; learning how much you hate her.

It has become tiresome to watch this unfold: a lexicon of failure, but here I am sitting up-right at a table with three strangers and six empty cups and a girl I want to save.

She breathes evenly through her nostrils about the sky line and the damage a bank building does to a quaint town, understanding she has been altered by the sound waves and the heat, barred windows and the infinite depth of potholes. With mornings come aching feet and poverty, come Israel crying for lost soldiers and wind that will uproot tent stakes and mobile homes; come myself, chin up head down, pacing.

#### Deliverance

I dreamed this house, these windows, dreamed till my mouth went dry, my eyes

dreamed a country of broken canes and baffled eyes, yellow faces peeking through barred windows

a land hilled with dirt and absence, where a leafless plant rests on a windowsill

and drugs hide at a street corner between two mosques where fathers exit through an arched doorway

into a crowded street, while mothers rest their knees at home in a living room reversed and dim.

#### Metropolitan Nightmare

I've taken to ruining things like the city and the skyline tainting the sidewalks and windowpanes as I crawl by storefronts mid-day.

I raise my body to a lamppost feeling it groove my back, wondering why no one else finds lack in the light of intersections or the depressions in grass from too many feet.

The city leaves room for no broken limbs or the imagined life of a man with an artichoke tattoo on his forearm. I love a place that forgets me as I leave.

#### You, Who Broke Me Down

I like the lone pine tree in the parking lot, how it stays upright only leaning slightly as the trunk thins out, weeping with the loss of needles to the cold tar-covered ground.

This week I learned about your father your mother and your two brothers, about the last time you cried: a fist to your broken face.

Abroad, I'd call from the streets, hold the phone tight with both hands as carts rolled by: boys selling nougat or scented soap. I'd force a smile and cradle you to my cheek.

#### Annihilation

Ketamine works just as well as Morphine or Codine, my sister tells me, for children with severed limbs or snake bites to the neck.

In the night, she feels safe under mosquito netting with security guards posed at the front door. They speak little English, but they love her pallid face and fear of cockroaches on the ceiling.

In a decrepit hospital, she missed the Virginia massacre: a sad, engine-eyed boy scout aiming bullets from a handgun into chests of students. She concentrates on inserting plastic into a still breathing set of lungs.

In Malawi, my sister takes her time attaching the IV to the boy with meningitis. She smiles white teeth and makes soothing sounds piercing his blue-veined arm.

Newspapers published the double-gunned shooter front page alongside Africa: vertical and colorless in the sidebar.

#### Let Me

know not unfinished landscapes, but the curvature of a body on a couch near a fireplace; not blankets flattened against a cement floor, but a mattress pedestalled upon wood and drawn with satin sheets.

Not cleft lips or cardboard that functions as a sailboat, not a tent for urination or a solar panel for light. Not dirty fingers and fourteen different types of bread, not gutless fish in the street on the way to school, and not deprivation or pain.

I know what the sun looks like on paper: the placement of yellow, perhaps orange, circular, with rays bursting from the center.

This is always the sun, always the light.

Thank you.

Charles Hartman and the English department for their support Jordan for my sanity and his Zach, my rock
My family because they love me all the time