

May 2007

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,
crested 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 cross-
legged 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 wood-
strips 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 30th 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 bug 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 banging 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