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With Papers

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Writing

by

Mara R. Flaccavento

Committee in charge:

Professor Anna Joy Springer, Chair
Professor Rae Armantrout
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The Thesis of Maria Flaccavento is approved and it is acceptable
in quality and form for publication on microfilm and
electronically:

Chair

University of California, San Diego
2015

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

With Papers

by

Maria R Flaccavento

Master of Fine Arts in Writing
University of California, San Diego, 2015
Professor Anna Joy Springer, Chair

This project is the product of a ten day road trip along the US-Mexican border, from San Diego, California to Brownsville, Texas and back. It explores experiences of border crossings and citizenship from a highly mobile, North American perspective. Using poetry and prose, this manuscript engages with geographical and psychological boundaries, in an effort to problematize some of the structures of difference and privilege therein. It is also concerned with orientation and manifestations of authority in the touristic narrative. The

writing here seeks to draw from a range of creative devices—documentary poetics, personal essay, rhetorical structures and what may be considered the neo-lyric—as an ethnographic gesture toward holism that remains, above all else, conscious of its own limitations, and optimistic about the generative potentials of failure. Ultimately, this project is interested in reconceptualizing the US-Mexican border as a product of political contestation and contrivance, rather than a marker of innate or finite cultural difference.

Chapter One

The child asks, *¿eres del otro lado?* I look at her mother, who sips her Clamato and nods. *She wants to know if you are from the States*, she translates, and I think, right — lado; lateral; pertaining to a side. We're going to the pulga. Once we arrive the child will skip happily from booth to booth. She'll ask her father for some pesos, get a new faldita, tuck her shirt into it later at the house. We jostle along in the backseat, the quick turns and dips in the slick road. The child and mother and me in the middle. The child and mother and me in the middle.

Queremos ir a la playa. *Cien pesos* says the taxi libre driver. Cerca de la border por favor. ¿Cómo se dice border? *La linea* he says *pero todos entienden border*. On the highway with the windows down my hair whips back and forth, I try to tuck it down, *hay mucho viento* he says. Says something something *pelo*. Y ¿cómo se dice viento? Wind. Everyone understands wind.

Men in the front seat. Mud in the tires. *You don't listen to me mi amor* she's saying. He says to the man beside him, *see how I'm givin it gas now?* and the man goes mmmm, and the engine goes — And the child's saying *¡muy bien father very good! very good father*, and she's leaning out the window. And the mud spits the sides of the Jeep and the windows and speckles the child's face. And the child shrieks excitedly. Her mother going *ay Dios ay Dios. You don't listen to me baby*. And the man going *now what I'm gonna do is* — And the other man goes — And the engine goes — Then we lurch forward, out of the mud. We go up on the grass where he drives us in wide circles, giddy with unstuck. With the wind at our backs, free to move along.

CHECKPOINT

This time they take your camera phone. He asks, why were you taking pictures of the primary? You say the what? He says step over here to the side. Secondary inspection reminds you of a bank, all bright and tiled, tellers at their windows and number-flagged people who wait. What seems to be the problem here, the room asks. A rhetorical structure, a principle's office. Reminding yourself this is serious, serious. Reminding yourself you're a free, single agent. Wait a minute, you think, I know my rights, and you repeat this to yourself as your camera phone passes between hands, between chains of command, and later as they eye you over the tops of your papers, a kind of vehicle between your faces. I know what I am, you think, I know where I'm going. Your passport tucked into some strange man's belt.

There's a gap in the fence where the river once flowed, now it's just a dried up ditch. *Couple months ago*, George tells us, *we had a big rain. And it flooded the ditch, right? And everybody knew the sensors would be going off already so there was like a...mass exodus, you know?* He shakes his head. *Next day my buddy calls me up from Colorado.* George makes his hand into a telephone — *'Hey mijo! Shoulda come with us man, it's beautiful up here!'* He puts the phone down. Sips his beer. Shakes his head again. Says *Me? I like Virginia. It's beautiful up there too. Rolling hills, the farmland...kind of humbling you know?* Right — humbling. The ground there.

This is where the river meets up with its tributary and gets refilled when it runs dry. La junta. The joining. The hills around the town. The stray dogs and the houses with the washers in their front lawns out for sale. We drive around it, aimless. Decide we'll eat burritos. At the roadside stand we ask the señorita what's her favorita, and is it picante? Dos, we tell her, por favor. They're smaller than burritos on the other side. Y bien picante. Licking our fingers and sniffing. Wiping the sweat off our foreheads, saying wow. Saying oof qué bueno, kissing the air, and she's laughing.

Estamos buscando el río. We keep asking people if we're near it. *Sí sí*, says the barkeep, *abajo del puente*. *Oh claro que sí*, says the taco stand lady, *allá* she says, jutting her chin out. Sweat beading the length of her jawline. Then a woman perched on the slope up ahead sees us, skips down the grass to us, says that she's hungry. ¿Tú sabes, we say fishing our pockets, donde está el río? and she says *el río sí sí sí, aquí*, and points at the highway, sweaty dollar crumpled in a half furled fist. A shiny blue-green wetness bleeds the cracks along the sidewalk, muddies the mulch around the plant life where we walk. Cars peel past. Sun fills up the bowl of this place. T-shirts wet with salt. There's a man sitting under a stop sign at an intersection up ahead. Where's the river, we demand, we wanna see the river. Sweaty, handing him cigarettes, loose change. *The river?* he laughs, *this is it*, and he nods to the pebbly median, its palm trees scorched and stillborn-looking in the sun. El río, we say, no hay agua? He chuckles again, *No hay agua en el río, sí*. Says *gracias* putting the smoke to his mouth. One of us lights it, says de nada. We'd like to imagine we're learning. I'd like to imagine my skin getting thicker, more a vessel collecting the heat. Still everywhere we go I am the sweatiest gringa in town.

CHECKPOINT

Coming in nobody checks nothing. Few bored-looking guys in camouflage, big rifles hanging from their chests. Your first time in this country. The children on the bridge, they hold their hands out to you. They open their palms out. They reaching their small hands. You reaching your oversized hands back. You think you can replenish something. You think you are an echo in a well. You think that you have entered something.

¡CHINGA LA MIGRA! That's what the concrete says under the wall. A painting of a young boy with a Nike backpack on a donkey and a grim reaper before him, scythe and all. He looks over his shoulder, scared, this built into the wall. And cameras built into the wall. And metered parking spots along the wall. And ¡NO FRONTERAS! written on the wall. And ¡NO MAS MUERTES! written on the wall. And churros stands and boys with guitars here and there along the wall. ¡JUSTICIA! at points along the wall. The laundry hung up on the clotheslines of the houses built before the wall came. Candles painted on the wall's bars that recede into the hills.

Alberto works the shoe grease down into my boot seams with his fingers. *Hey 'mija*, he'd called out, *wanna shoe shine? He's paying for it*, motioned to the man I'm with. We laugh. We fish our pockets for a buck or two. Alberto has already knelt, and propped my boot heel on the handle of his wooden box, from which he's pulled a thick brush, and he dusts the toe tip in a few good swooshes. *You got a cigarette 'mijo?* He pulls a cloth out, gets in all the creases. When he says what his name is the PallMall 100 that's fixed in the mouth's corner bobs at the B in Alberto. He says *Oh yeah, I got kids. Most of them back in Chihuahua*. Gets into the stitches with a toothbrush. Repaints the boot soles thick black. *Used to be* he says *that if you wanted to go make some money on the other side you just walked out toward the hills and through the grass there once the sun set*. When he's finished I say *muchas gracias señor*. *Qué bonita* I say to my boots and him. Alberto says *de nada*, packs away his tools, he stands, says *bienvedios a México guys*, then he's gone.

QUESADILLAS says the wall, bright orange, but we get some tacos al pastor instead. Dos tacos al pastor, we say, por favor. *¿Maíz?* she asks. We say, sí. *¿Para llevar?* She asks. Para llevar, we say, sí sí. Say gracias. This is how we learn, to go, as in, to take with.

CHECKPOINT

It's just suspicious, that's what they keep saying. They say you've come to the ugliest part of Texas. They say this in multiple Texas locales. They ask for your hat and you give it over, sweaty and flushed, and they're checking your papers. They're checking your papers, they're checking the sweat off your papers. They're checking your pack, checking your notebook, checking your pink cheeks. They're checking you out, checking you up and down, checking the same place twice. This is sometimes how people show they care. This is sometimes how one protects the things it loves. One serves, one observes, one will fight for.

The center of the deepest river channel. The deepest center of my. Middle of the water where it. Standing in the channel at the. Deepness of the river at this point. The halfway point between the river and its banks. The silty mud slope leading down into it on the one side. On the other side the pebbled beach. Then standing in between them at the midway point. My feet there. Middle of my two feet. The center of the deepest river bend. Halfway along the channel of this mote. Midway along the bended river's path. Its widest center. The space between its in-between space. Then the center of this middlemost point. The fineness of this point. Its pixels.

Bar 13 Negro with the floor fan trained in our direction, some guy asks us if we *buscas algo*, *anything you want* 'mijos. Says *hey* 'mijos, *be careful around George though, habla mucho you know? He talks to people. Cuidado.* George said the border guys couldn't wrap their heads around it second time he got deported, *because my English is so impeccable you know?* And it was, or it is, impeccable. Hell, it was better than mine, which is what I sometimes say to people when I talk to them about George.

CHECKPOINT

This time they've told you, drive around here to the side and wait. While you wait, men bring out leashed dogs, tap the car in places that the dogs jump up and sniff. Confused by the traveling of sound, you think for a second they're tapping on you; you feel shy and attuned to this primal olfactory instinct. They've told you to empty your pockets and exit the vehicle. You do what they tell you. You sit where they tell you, you empty the car where they tell you. You yes sir. You steady the cool metal table that waits. They ruffle through your atlas, glove box, dirty clothes. They start to look bored. They just want to be done with it. They tell you to pack it back up, move along.

The dulces man comes towards us, styrofoam box balanced on his head. He's going *DULCES! DULCES!* Going *hola 'mijos*, sets it down. Inside's a bunch of sugar cakes, all caramel soft and plastic wrapped, with coconut and pecans pressed into their golden centers. One the shape of a heart. The man I'm with says *ella...quieres mucho*, and it's broken but the dulces man, he gets it, nods, says something like *¿te gustan los dulces?* and I tell him *siiiiiiiiiiiiii*, and he points to the one with the peanuts, tells us this one is the mejor. Bueno. Cacahuete.

Once we've crossed we just walk straight ahead, stare straight ahead, don't point, each holds the other's hand. We see an open square, we go to it. Men sweeping the trash to the sidewalks, up into their buckets. Sipping our jamaicas, sweeter than the last ones. We go into a church ahead, we follow suit: kneel at the pews, are silent. Eat greasy hot gorditas on the way back to the crosspoint. People have painted on the hills, *la biblia es/ la verdad/ leela*. At the turnstiles a man rushes up from his street cart, insists that we need change to cross. We fish our pockets hesitant, there's always the chance you'll get ripped off. He hurries back in earnest, pesos in his outstretched hands. We take back the monedas, say the rest is para tuyo when we should be saying para ti, and he's *gracias gracias*, filling our palms with his Chiclets. For you, like we're gifting him something.

CHECKPOINT

Both U.S. citizens? he asks, you offer him your passports through the window saying yes sir though he doesn't take them, only shines his flashlight quick around the inside of the car, over your hot white faces. Good enough for me, he says, he waves you on into the night.

Barkeep won't let us drink here. He points to a sign on the door, something about *mujeres* and *aquí*. *Oh yeah* says our guide later, *whore bars. All the women that go in are prostitutes* he says, *they gotta have their papers to prove that they're clean, or maybe prove that they won't give you something*. He says *they thought you was a hooker* to me, laughs. Or else, they thought I'd give them something. What I give is more benign. My foot traffic. My pocket change. My grabby hands. My gringa sweat. My curious. My *por favor*. Which is to say, I give nothing.

Chapter Two

Do you have any items to declare?

What was the nature of your visit?

When was the last time you crossed?

Any illegal weapons or substances you wanna tell us about?

What are you doing down here?

What are you doing down here in the middle of nowhere?

What have you got in your pockets?

What are you taking notes for?

And you came here because why?

You know about the cartels don't you?

You know about the violence down here don't you?

And you know each other how?

And you came here because why?

You like that gas station Horchata.
You like helados de coco and agua de jamaica.
You like trying new things.
You like circling names on the atlas.
You like saying más o menos.
You like saying ¡qué bonito! and ¡qué bueno!
You like sticking your arm out the window and feeling the hot air whip
past it.
You like passing your arm through the hot air.
You like feeling the line of your arm and the hot air whip past it.

Are you aware of yourself?
Are you aware that you're blushing?
Are you aware of the edges the blush infiltrates when it grows up?
Are you angry right now?
Do you want to put all of your might into something?
What do you mean when you say por favor?
How does it feel to say esta bien?
In the arduous length of your hot throat, then mustering strength at
the mouth?
Does it make you exhausted, feel washed out?
Or would it be reddened?
Or would it be leathered — perhaps, simply worn?
Would it settle itself, quiet down on the dusty dirt floor?
Are you angry right now?
Is it lifting you out of your seat?

You offer her gum at the concert — ¿QUIERES CHICLET? — you shout to her, over the sound.

It's peppermint gum, you learned this word from her outside an hour ago with your cigarettes.

DON'T TELL ME, you shout to her, touching her arm, and she looks at the packet of Trident, its blue languaged casing — ¿OH QUE,

YERBABUENA? — she shouts back, she laughs some.

YERBABUENA YERBABUENA.

You smack yourself, side of the forehead.

This is how you put the word into your own skin.

Have you thanked the day for its consistency?
Have you thanked the highway even once?
Have you thanked the many farm roads?
Have you thanked the road that turned to desert shrub and made you
go back out the way you came?
When you were thinking you would come a new way?
Did you thank the officers that warned you of this?
Weren't they friendly to you? Kind?
How far'd you think you'd make it in your hatchback?
Do you have any service out here?
Do you have a spare tire in case?
Do you have enough water in case?
Do you know where you are?
Do you know where you are on the map?
Do you circle on the atlas as you go?

You find a little bar with pool and BEST MARGARITAS EN MEXICO
Saddle up to the bar stools and plant yourselves, sun wilted hot yellow
weeds.

You ask for margaritas and some agua por favor, you chug it down, go
ahhhhh!

You say, tenemos mucha sed.

The bar man says, in Español, it's hot, and you say, y estamos gringos,
and he laughs, and then you put some money down, go play some pool,
bask in this small success of language.

Do you know where you are on the map?
Do you know how many miles?
Do the miles help you to locate yourself?
Do they become something you claim, some deeper part of you, your
own skin?
Don't you want to get up, step up, speak?
How do you say 'cat got your tongue' in Spanish?
What have you brought into this country with you?
How have you equipped yourself to penetrate this country?
And have you ever sweat so much just entering a place?
What was the word for sunset? Pillow? Curious?
Do you feel like a criminal?
Do you feel like a sore thumb?
Do you feel illegal?
Do you mind exiting the vehicle?
Do you have any insights to declare?
Do you have your papers?
Are these papers an accurate representation of you?
Are these papers a representation of what you believe?
Are these papers the sharpest, most frequented tool in your tool box?
Are these papers the narrative gesture you're pressing against?
Are these papers the black box you're struggling to pry open?
What will you do when you open it?
Tell the world?

A man in a Scarface snapback with a weathered pocked face and red shopping bags from HEM, he says it helps you relax? scribbling the thick air.

I am a writer too he says but only songs. Mexican songs. It doesn't pay that much you know, and you have to make a lot of changes, whatever they want, you know.

You keep writing he says, even though someone as beautiful as you don't need to do nothing, just sit there and look beautiful all day and you laugh, you say graaaaaacias dabbing the sweat off your forehead.

Would you say you bruise easy, you redden?
What do you do with all those shades of pink?
Do they go in containers?
Are you a container?
Are you approaching capacity?
Tienes vacancy?
Tienes ready hands, a working mouth?
And what work does the mouth do?
It settles the line when it cools down?
How long til you cool it?
How does it feel, asking for the river in this Oxxo?
When you walked in and said hola?
When you tired of trying and asked if she habla-ed ingles, and she
stared at you, how did that feel?
Do you feel it right now?
Do you feel that?

A fight breaks out at the bar – one woman pulls at another one's hair from behind then they're yelling and flailing and men step in. The attacked woman runs round the side of the bar, crouches down by your knees, grips the stool's leg, looks up at you frightened and you — Dios sabe por qué — you reach down, touch her hand.

Chapter Three

.

I walk around in the place that I live. It is a nice, safe place to walk around in. I wander leisurely from here to there. Some places saunter, brisk. Some places that I walk I keep a knife inside my pocket with the notebook. Some places I walk into and I walk until I've reached the highest point. Or charge into the middle, rest. Some places that I walk I just stare straight ahead, don't point, I put my hands into their pockets. Feel the knife there, the knife in that place. This place, I idle freely from points. My comfortable feet on the pavement. The comfortable blindness of steps.

•

One night we're crossing back, it's evening; warm. We're fighting, but he reaches for my hand as we climb steps up to the bridge. I take his hand. We quicken together.

•

I walk from my place to the movies. Reese Witherspoon's face all
glistening blonde on the screen. She's trying to find herself,
backpacking, carrying books with her, poetry quoting voice-over
surround sound. Montage of her hiking, her sweat, zoom in on the eyes
brimming, tear-filled, zoom out and her smallness exposes itself then
dissolves in the denseness of place. She says I'm gonna put myself in
the way of beauty. At one point on the highway with her thumb out. I
walk home and the cars peel past. I'm gonna put myself in the way of
myself. I don't stick out my thumb, but I wonder.

.

In the movies Julia Roberts wants to go someplace where she can marvel at something. She gets down on her knees and prays, asks for direction, something, anything. Zoom in on her tear-streaked cheeks; out on her open arms like a vessel. She flies to Italy, peruses the old streets, her sensible traveler's shoes on the pavement. Meanders. Montage the nonnas gabbing from their windows and the laundry lines between them in the streets. Cut to Julia strolling casual her hands inside their pockets. Moving along freely; taking the sights in.

.

I've been told I'm a nervous person. Who doesn't feel a little iffy with so many options out there. Sometimes I go to the ocean and don't even touch the water. Sometimes I'm out for a walk and I just wanna throw up my arms open, sink there right down to my knees. It's like a prayer in ways. In other ways it's like It's like a montage. Cuts from urban landscape to the 83. The 2. The land there. Driving along on a road through the land there. Getting out of the car, walking up to the edge of the land and the edge of the land right beside it; putting the feet there. Planting the two feet.

•

And then the body's great ambivalence toward swells.
Sometimes I go to the grocery store just to stare at its
wall full of soups. On the phone with a girlfriend, she says
*I've been having that dream again—the one where I get in
my car and then drive to the airport and fly away?—* The
vacate in vacation. A mistake is leaving the luggage at
home. A blush is A comfort zone feels like A heart is a
circle that bends to itself. A mouth is a similar shape.
Then the falling to one's knees; the palm-bottoms up of
the feet. *Is that living?*

•

This ease in This accumulation of This taking in
 around These ways to make an image. How to go
 about taking an image. One way is to squint. One way is
 to close both the eye holes. One way is to gander. One
 blurs. This one sheened, this one over-exposed. The
 fracturing The fragmentary nature of the hyper-mobilized.
 The going rate around here. Once I was told I don't finish
 my sentences often. The next time I do it, I hear it, as
 soon as I've stopped, and I blush – zoom in: shape of the
 moving mouth, circles; slow-mo line of the mouth – which
 is also to say that I redden. I cover. I torch.

•

Dear comfort zone. Orquideas & Colegio Militar. The freedom to dawdle, putz around. Sometimes I'll start to peel an egg then throw it out halfway through. Grabby hands, great pockets. This circling points on a map. 2 lanes in 4 lanes out. 1 lane in 3 lanes out. 9 lanes out. Saturation of the pigments thick and representative. Arm out the window, wind whipping around it. Flushed cheeks by the motion. 3636.1 mi. \$40/La noche. \$5/día. One easily *loses* oneself. One has multiple *flights*. One in this case is struggling to *bind* some elements together, fumbling, wide eyes in the mouth hole. Found Chihuahua. Ropas for Todos.

•

A blush is a small cut of land. Is 889-1248 mi. depending.

Is a mispron A misconj A mistake. A steak taco
 muy auténtico. Is happening outside the frame. Is a circle
 shaped mouth. Is the shape of a word, of a cognate. An
 opening. Heat lines that bend in the photogr The
 cou The puente. The warps in it.

•

What this fosters is something cocoon-like, an experience
of visual gratification. From my point of view,

From where I'm standing, Exchange. Each time I
purchase. Time I open up my mouth. The ripeness of this
sensory geography. An image of the self projected via
space eng The logic of the place embodied by

the image and by fleeting moments of co-habitation. The
want to travel's deep roots in the body, heightened by the
ennui of material life. 801,164 acres. Parking \$10 X-Hora.
The Costco. The 7-11.

•

Two times a day. Two times x steps a day. Nearly 100% of
all steps. Walking across a big pink gulp in the throat. If
we use metaphors to navigate boundaries of various kinds,

If we use travel to reconcile certain
metaphorical boundaries, If we navigate systems
of power in travel with metaphor, 118 mi. Nestle,
Coca Cola, Mistubishi. 1896 mi. $\approx$ 360 mi/day x 10. Eight
pesos for this meal. Thirty five cents to leave this country.
\$3 Autos. When crossing the line, In a
crossing there are certain In a line are
varying degrees of permeability. In motion such degrees
bend to their difference. What's missing from the
photographs is how round, how far down

.

Sometimes I'm walking and I wanna just go here I am!
 with my arms open, maybe the knees dropping next to the
 ground. It's like a pr It eats itself. Half circle of the
 BIENVENIDOS archways. The numerous and
 intersecting lines internal and external to the body,
 bedded in post-modern metaphorical procedure.
 Roadblock, for example. It generates a sense of pr
 A sense of privilege. A graphic frame of reference as a
 means of individual negotiation. A tension between
 language and the shapes of mouths that language makes.
 What's grown, what's picked, what passes through. This
 in turn creates a certain burden. The issue thus becomes
 one of a mooring. Se Prohibe Tirar Basura En Esta Area.
 Certain areas or certain sides of certain sided areas.
 Certainly all this means Certainly
 all this makes for likeness. In certainty such likenesses
 bend to their mirrors. For example, two lips in a convex

arrangement that making a word Example, the
 fence that goes out in the ocean. A sore th A
 finishing. Bueno / Bonito / Barato.

•

Sometimes I wake up and I can't br It's like the wind's
 knocked outta me — what wind though, what wind where.
 Circles of the eye holes climbing trees they've planted in
 their sleep, right here in all the public squares. To focus
 on the threat of something rather than to reconcile with
 the underlying reasons for it is a preferab More
 comfortable endeavor. A quick blush bleeding out quick as
 it rushed in. A rush is a sleight of the hand. A hand is a
 shape that confuses itself. Is a foot in the mouth. Each
 crossing Each said word a shape-shift. The capacity
 or incapacity to move. Not lines on a map, but as spaces of
 inclusion and exclusion with specific im Elusive
 imp With implications. The realization of certain
 human aspirations through the ease or disease of a body's
 transit narrative. Sometimes I count my steps to track
 myself. It's like a picture. Boundary versus border versus
 frontier. The differences between these zones is in their

shapes. A strict separation gives way to more gradual divisions of contact and then ultimate sparseness. This is also to say that a line opens up to a circle strategically, chewing itself and then spitting itself out.

Chapter Four

You get to a town where no-one's speaking
 English, not even to you, and you're glad for it.
 You slept last night at Siesta Lodge
 Or was it Executive Inn
 Or was it passing the night in casinos
 Or was it Lake Casa Blanca, you leaving
 a clothes trail to get to the water

Or was it itchy on the borrowed mattress,
 having gone before the rest to bed, you
 listen to their voices on the porch outside
 and wait for morning comes you quick to rise,
 only the child up, hola, you whisper,
 and hola, she whispers back.

Or was it paying for the room with crumpled
 pesos, crumpled USD, the crumpled
 man that came out when you rang
 the bell with sleep in his eyes and his
 hair saying esta bien, esta bien, waving you
 on with your key, going back to the dark
 of the lobby and pulling his striped robe close to himself.

Or was it the camp with the nice outdoor
 shower, a swarm of photographers passed
 through, him cooking your dinner
 that night in the group kitchen, what
 was it, steak? and you washing the dishes
 with bar soap, cut cups for wine from water
 bottles, and him taking a nap in the hammock that morning.

Or the historic downtown motel with the two
 framed pictures on the room's walls, one a sprawled
 out woman on a chaise lounge, one over the bed,

a little blonde girl with her two feet
swallowed in a pair of women's heels, and pearls,
and STEPPIN' OUT in block print at the bottom.
You'd gone in shy, asked for a cuarto, room was
dim-lit and the cobwebbed plushness
of the icon-ed entry space felt made for you,
the two of you, for your kind, you feel sensitive
to this. You nervous and sure of yourself, you
estranged and familiar enough, you alien you are,
saying gracias, gracias, closing the room door behind you.

You are the only ones here
that's what the man at the park welcome

center says, tells you you won't have
trouble making camp, tells you to watch out for

the javelinas, make sure that you've
locked your food up good and tight before

you go to bed, you nod your heads,
accept the map he hands you, thank

him, thank
his hands.

In the car on the way to the site you snap
photos with the Nikon out the window, ocotillo

and road runners, hard to catch, him slowing
the car and you focusin, you work together

to create this moment. You create
many permanent moments. You create

many traces of time and space.
You pour cool water down your

front, your crown, you shake it all off like a dog
then after supper wash the table and its bench

chairs down in case of javelinas
and read til the light dies

tossing and turning the hard night,
nervy in the fit sleep, finally

the morning, forgetting
yourself as you blink open

seems from the sound of it someone
has made camp, not far off, you rubbing

your eyes and then there are your two feet, your crown.

Good morning desert

Good morning crown.

On the bus his
knees against yours like
a carpet, the sun already
so high, in between
two speakers wedged
under the bus seats there's
a man who's dancing and singing
along, his arms and his feet

and his head make a church
so this bus is a region, a small town,
is bound for the puente. You enter
your country
a breath, and regardless.
You're splashing yourself
in the sink at the Stripes
then eating breakfast tacos
from the made to order
line, together at the slick red
tables, plotting out
how many miles
this day

A line begins to mean
so much, you toss and turn
at night. You deviate
shapely to keep on.
You speed to the ocean, observe the mute
sunset line, water
line, feet in the sand
and the toes of them rounded lines, is this what
pressure means? Is this

what fabric means,
to cover? You kick it off,
hot in the night.
You tilt back the neck
close the eye holes
you trace with your mouth
that which enters and exits
exists around, this local
space and its deftness.
You mean its difference.
You mean the distance.
You put yourself
in the way of yourself
pressing on through the middle.
There you are.
There you are.
There's the proof of you.

Making notecards at the small round
table by the window in the motel
room. You've drawn the curtains but
the window does not open. La ventana.
Is there anyone here who speaks
English? Can you tell me please,
where is the nearest tourist center?
The man from the lobby comes, knocks
on your door. Can you tell me where
is the parking lot please? Please
sir. The window does not open.

Chapter Five

like looking for a bear in the woods he says — if you look long enough
— or is it, you want to find one enough
what is it again? — wait,

we notice once we're out of Texas — it's like the air feels lighter
zooming along, the windows down — a steady moving blue dot on the
Google map

New Mexico stopping for gas and a Dairy Queen blizzard, pulled in by
the billboards from exits away
why not — he says — we're on vacation

crossing into California after midnight—this is where we stayed
paid for the room in crumpled pesos and USD
sleepy viejo in his bathrobe waving us in, saying ándale

an Arizona sunset backlighting the cacti, muted
muy romantico

— there is a photograph that shows this

this is a photograph of us along the sand bar in the river — one foregrounded, holding the camera, the other small in the background and holding its shoes — and then the space between our two points

in this one are two boys fishing alongside the farm road

one's arm bends to the pole, this motion frozen in the crease lines of his
t-shirt

the blurred line of asphalt and grass underneath them

this photograph is me taking a photograph — obligatory side
view mirror shot, somebody calls it

this one I have taken of him writing in the car

the line of his pressed lips in profile leads into the line of the half open
window

line of his brow leading into the highway

In this one a man on a yellow motorcycle has entered the frame at the moment the shutter snapped

tall coppered bars of the wall
and the blue sky behind them

this one he has climbed into the backseat while I drive to take — a
succession of twenty or so shots

I have chosen the shot that I feel most describes this
by way of its natural framework

this is the photograph I didn't take of the burrito stand lady
she leans her elbows on the weathered green paint of the counter wood
a mustached man off to the side in his sombrero
both stare at the camera directly
having been asked for and amenable to this

the exactness of this middlemost point

like looking for a straight line in a current — first, believing this line
to exist

— and for what?

— and then planting my feet in the face of it — as if this reified smallness might loosen, expose itself, pink in the newness, and make good

American plates

Americans en route

An American atlas

An American made piece of clothing

An American willingness to

An American ID

An American section of land

An American sleight of the hand

An American buy

An American shuffling of papers

An American interest

An American mouth