

## Ethno Place Poems for Queens, New York and Southwest Iowa

Deborah Gambs

This collection of poems was initially drafted when I had lived in New York City for about 6 years and was transitioning to feel like it was my home, and that I was a New Yorker. I have revised them over the last two summers after having been here much longer, and come to see them as ethno place poems, expressing my aesthetic awareness of the physical landscape around me, its sights and sounds, as well as the different sensual experiences of food in the two disparate locations. These aesthetics are also connected to my mother, whose death I was grappling with around the time the poems were written. The materiality and sensuousness of that connection was captured in the memory of baking and eating bread with her. She was a teacher and visual artist. As she raised me, I developed my own visual sensibility that for me translates through words. In these poems I want to capture images of rural and urban landscapes.

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**Deborah Gambs** is an associate professor of sociology at the Borough of Manhattan Community College, CUNY. Her research focuses on sculpture and abstract art by women artists that explores bodily experience. She also writes autoethnographic poems and essays that attend to aesthetics, place, space and phenomenology, which have been published in *Qualitative Inquiry* and *Cultural Studies* <=> *Critical Methodologies*. She co-edited with Rose M. Kim *Women on the Role of Public Higher Education: Personal Reflections from CUNY's Graduate Center* (2015) Palgrave Macmillan.

*40th Street*

Litter curls and scratches at the juncture of walkway and  
black wrought iron gates.  
Evening light is dimming, streetlights dangle shadows  
through August trees.  
Heat no longer rises from the brick 3-flats and the air swirls of cool night and  
city oven concrete.

Standing neck to tail down this street a row of cars lines the edge of my path  
Small eyes blinking in the corners of windshields.

All this is periphery  
It is the light of each doorway I am concerned with  
chain of bright illumination  
my eyes jump from entry to entry  
criss cross the street

A red door here  
leading into a worn pink gleaming stairwell

Or up to the wooden rectangular green portal  
two painted gray walls emit a blue glow.

And then several shades of soft white light from windows and openings  
Until another misty pale green or hesitant jewel tone

And like this for the long block of buildings between elevated train trestle  
and the corner where I turn off for home.

Sight never landing on one  
they must be seen collectively  
Each opening is a luminosity against

The dimmed, twilight-grayed brick

*Edge of town, Iowa*

When your body heart and mind are growing

wearry of the millions of feet around you  
when the new tastes each day or week and all the secondhand bookstores  
and the come and go of languages and furniture street finds and  
ideas always at the edge aren't quite enough or are too much

Remember to feel the place  
a few blocks' walk beyond town  
where nature's beauty is neither  
resplendent nor breathtaking.

But there is only the sound of gravel rasping under your shoes  
And birds  
Chweep chweep trrrrrreel  
Chweep chweep trrrrrreel

Where the dead weeds lay across  
green shoots growing underneath  
and an old cement culvert,  
at the base of the hill of railroad tracks  
is covered by scrub  
and from the darkened tunnel came the sound of  
a trickle.  
Nothing spectacular but quieter even than the small town  
Until a train or a horse or a dog makes a cry

Sometimes I say I long for nature  
for fields of tall green corn stalks  
and stubby leafy soybeans  
edged by an oak or two along a stream or gravel road

Acres gone to pasture with  
patches of dirt poking through  
leftover deadened hay  
dotted with clumps of  
cattle slumped near shrinking ponds.

I am in the city  
built with brick and concrete

nature is grown with seeds and earth

engineers, architects

nature society  
plantlife buildings  
sources  
earth air  
water fire

technology is the interlude  
deferring as she would say  
nature to culture  
we build to defer,  
put off, prolong  
to wait for death a little longer  
to distance ourselves from  
that to which we will return

When I roamed the slope along the railroad track I planned to leave

They are both in me.

Hess Diner  
*for Philip and Thomas*

Sit across from your roommates at brunch every weekend and  
revel in the Sunday morning mood  
Quiet sluggishness  
oily hair roots and tangy underarms  
chin propped in palm, elbow on plastic linoleum tabletop

We have come to the diner we call Hess  
It sits tucked behind  
a Hess gas station right next to the Jiffy Lube

On weekend mornings between six a.m. and noon,  
you come for the delight of having  
a waitress  
who repeats your order back to you  
with such distinct, loud clarity  
that there is no chance she will  
fuck it up.

This woman—standing alert  
calm, ready and poised  
has pale caramel skin  
and reddish brown hair pulled half back  
moves in cushioned white walking shoes  
and tastefully fitted black skirt  
cut at the tops of the kneecaps.  
She repeats each order  
so clearly that

Coffee, Small Orange Juice,  
Wheat Toast With Butter, Two Eggs  
Sunny Side Up, Comes With Potatoes

itself stands full-bodied and upright in the air between  
her and the three of us.

And after two more variations on this order  
she moves in efficient paces  
to the empty space cut out  
separating kitchen and counter  
to repeat our orders again  
to the grill cook  
with such precise short hand  
that again our order  
will not be fucked up.

And each diner hears their breakfast peeled out across the booths

It is pleasing and embarrassing all at once  
to know someone so efficient  
has taken care to order  
your food so exactly  
yet exposing  
to know that suddenly if  
the two cigar smoking men in the booth behind  
know I am having butter  
on my wheat toast today  
what else might they know  
about us at the next table.  
We have lost the anonymity of our dining experience  
while gaining the security of  
an order taken and communicated perfectly.

*First Home*

My mother baked dill  
bread when  
we were young.

She would remove  
it from the oven and place  
it on the wooden cutting board,  
which slid out  
from a narrow slot topping  
the column of kitchen drawers.

Resting there, heat conducting out  
of the aluminum pan light  
condensation trapped within  
the squared base and sides,  
rounded top forming a drier crust.

The bread when sliced  
was warm, slightly spongier than  
store bread the dough  
tighter and chewier.

We spread margarine across  
its tweedy surface biting in  
to tangy sour breath,  
not salty, not sweet.

*Sound of a Dry Summer*

They say it's  
quiet here  
but this summer  
has seen little rain.  
The corn stalks beg  
for green,  
thigh high stiff  
wheat colored weeds  
whip in dry wind.  
And so during bright  
blue daylight  
Aspen-like air carries  
cricket chirrups  
singly, with breaths between.  
It is a syncopation I  
never mastered in years  
of piano lessons.  
Grasshoppers have arrived  
an abrasive blue jay haunts  
the backyard honking from  
the clothesline.  
I wonder who it is  
besides crickets which  
cover the daytime stillness.  
Dryness breeds insects  
insects bring birds, moths, monarch butterflies.  
There is no silence here



*Walking Home Again*

Exit the train  
Bricks and mortar, concrete,  
pavement all around.  
An unsmiling woman steps past  
clothed in amber sari.  
Head to the right  
stepping off the cracked curb  
see the storm clouds have not  
blocked the sun completely  
and the buildings are blackening  
upward into the night  
their lights flicker and shout

The Empire State races past them  
its spire beating them all  
Stranded several feet  
away from the curb  
caught and captured by a  
scene of urban nature

Pass into the next block  
and then another  
and come to chain-link fence  
painted chipping black around the playground  
and a boy leaps up  
inches off the ground to block  
a shot and he catches his own  
steal moving his stocky 10 year  
old body to the post and lurches  
his arms upward hoping for a basket.

Watch them through the four foot hole cut into the base  
of the fence their bodies free  
from the outline of black diamonds

their faces crisscrossed with the  
shadow thrown by streetlight.  
Another young woman passes me  
into the street.  
Stuck again a few feet from another curb  
looking west  
I wonder how she can not stop to see.



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