Desert Body

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DESERT BODY

by

Lauren McKinnon

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

ENGLISH

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Logan, Utah

2023
ABSTRACT

DESERT BODY

By
Lauren McKinnon, Master of Science in English
Utah State University, 2023

Major Professor: Michael Sowder
Department: English

This thesis is a collection of poems examining certain paradoxes of living in my body. As a survivor of sexual violence, my body relives trauma which makes it feel uninhabitable. I compare my experiences with the Southern Utah desert. The physical beauty, destruction and inhabitability of the desert teaches me to accept my body as both beautiful and full of grief. The poems move chronologically through my life, beginning with an abusive relationship at the age of sixteen, a move to Moab at nineteen, and becoming a mother at twenty-five. Ultimately, with the desert as my guide, I learn to accept my body as unfixed and empowered through the use of my voice.

(86 pages)
This thesis is a collection of poems examining certain paradoxes of my body. As a survivor of sexual violence, my body relives trauma which makes it feel uninhabitable. I compare my experiences with the Southern Utah desert. The physical beauty, destruction and inhabitation of the desert teaches me to accept my body as both beautiful and full of grief. The poems move chronologically through my life, beginning with an abusive relationship at the age of sixteen, a move to Moab at nineteen, and becoming a mother at twenty-five. Ultimately, with the desert as my guide, I learn to accept my body as unfixed and empowered through the use of my voice.
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all the meals you cooked and the freezer you stocked with aloe-vera pads when my birth went so hard, and thank you Mom, for holding my hand during Joe’s birth.

Thank you, especially, to my husband and love, Matthew. Your devotion to me and Joe is a love I never knew I was worth until I met you. Thank you for caring about my dreams just as much as I do, and for believing in me. There are not enough words. I love you. We did it!

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Thank you, my little Canyon. You have changed my world.

Lauren McKinnon
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The desert and I laugh at “boys will be boys.”

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REFERENCES
It’s July, hot. My son sits in the wire cage of a shopping cart. One of the wheels is tangled with hair, so I hunch over the handle to prevent us from circling. In Walmart, there are two aisles of toys. One for the boys and one for the girls. We are buying a birthday present for my niece, who is often dressed in pink sequins, so I try my luck with the girl’s aisle. The walls are decorated with wide, blue eyed baby dolls, plastic makeup sets, bottles the size of my pinkie sloshing with real, white liquid.

“You got to be shitting me,” I stop the cart and stare at a dozen mini, plastic powder blue crockpots lining the wall. Complete with pink nobs, fake timers, plastic potatoes and sausage links. Joe looks at me, expressionless. Perhaps wondering why I stopped pushing the cart. I’m waiting for the red curtain to lift with the real toys behind it, y’know, hula hoops or chalk or bubbles or anything which might imply that a girl’s identity measures beyond slow cooking, birthing, or slapping on makeup. I glance around, searching for someone to laugh with. There’s only one other mom in the aisle. She looks as tired as I feel, tosses a Barbie in the cart for her daughter whose lilac cries rise like tiny bubbles in boiling water.

I walk on. The boy aisle is no better. Guns everywhere. Neon orange and blue, large and small, sponge bullets that won’t leave a mark, at worst a raised welt. The guns are bright, eye catching, handheld emblems of violence our boys should not wield, but appear normal decorating the aisle. Something wild beats inside me. I push past the
plastic and let my son pick out a plush, stuffed lamb from the baby aisle and toss a packet of soft, chewable alphabet for my niece.

Recently, our son’s mouth curled into a gray, wet cry and his almond slits blinked for the first time. The day he was born, gravity looped my body to his hummingbird heartbeat, his kissable pumpkin tummy, his soap soft tufts of strawberry blonde hair, so perfect, so perfect, so perfect, I wouldn’t have it any other way, but. The midnight rocking, the heart wrenching crib training, the opposite work schedules my husband and I balance to meet the bills and achieve every one of our dreams. It all seems to suck us into shadowy forms of ourselves, figures who drift noiselessly like deflated balloons. Or maybe that’s just me, my warped perception, the postpartum depression vacuuming reds, oranges, and blues out of our bodies, the air, landscapes, leaving an angry woman cussing at plastic crock pots in a toy aisle, feeling further and further away from the landscape I once healed in.

Five years ago, I moved to Moab. Walked miles under the noon sun among petrified sand dunes. Slept under a black knitted sky on the cool, desert sand. Sweated, cried, consumed poetry, and something in me shifted. If you listen closely, the desert vibrates with you. Maybe an old song of grief. A wail. Perhaps a celebration. The land is honest, unapologetically blunt and vibrant. It is also dead. Cryptobiotic desert soil, which takes hundreds of years to grow and preserves precious water, is often crushed in boot prints. Cracks choke the ground like bloodless veins. The people who wake at three in the morning with nightmares of hands on their throats will understand why, this lifelessness, makes me weep. The ancient, dry, thirsty, used landscape makes me cry because it makes
me feel seen. It makes me cry, because I have never witnessed anything more beautiful than the spines of petrified sand dunes, stretching for miles. The ability for something based entirely on survival to paradoxically still be beautiful gives me hope for my own body.

During sex, my body often freezes in lifelessness because PTSD flashbacks teleport me back to when my body was used as an object. I was raped at sixteen. I was molested at eight. My body cannot move past these moments of trauma because something as well-intended as a hand on my back can trigger a flashback. My memories make me feel like my body is uninhabitable. I write above this lifelessness in my poem, “Drought,”

Silly girl.
My body, your body
Our bodies
have been signed in anything mangled
and used
for refracting.

Here, I acknowledge that my body has become a vessel for violence. I feel signed and stuck as a broken, mangled thing, and a reflection of a cycle of abuse. This brokenness is translated to the drought I witness in the desert when I write of a time I had to leave a dress rehearsal for The Vagina Monologues;

When one of the actresses recited the lines: my body will no longer be smooth waters
I squeezed past eight gray, squeaking, roller chairs,
and each actor had to stand to let me walk past
like honoring the dead.
I looked each woman in the eyes and apologized
for the space my body begged for in running away.

I didn’t make it far,
walked down tan hallways
until I collapsed behind a fake plant
and watched my hands erode to sand

As someone who has experienced sexual violence, my body feels like a desert. During sex my body clenches, dries, aches. I feel emotionally uninhabitable because the trauma makes me feel like my body is not mine, is dead, like I am hardening to stone. No matter what I write, it always bends back towards the violence, like a broken shopping cart. I write and circle back, I write and circle back, I write and circle back. Of course, this is unsurprising. Attaining a vocabulary to name your sexual violence is healing—but it is not freeing. I cannot write into existence a door that will separate me from my body that has been abused. My life is no longer linear. Trauma touches everything.

Despite the metaphorical drought of my body, I am surprised at how beautiful and alive I still am. This last year, my body transformed into boat when I carried and nursed my son. The feeling of love I experience with motherhood is described in, “what I learned from the mothers”:

His swelling, high cry punctured my own breath, gravity tilted,
when the doctor lowered him on my chest.
His half-moon eyes opened, he mouthed down my breast.
Perfect, perfect, perfect.

Motherhood reminds me that my body is still alive, of love, and needed in a way that is lovely. When my son “mouthed my breast,” my body is used a completely different way as I create, give, and support life. The desert parallels this love. Six hours inside a slot canyon, when my sandals have hit nothing but stone for miles, the desert surprises me with softness. Two delicate caps of white mushrooms, growing tender out of the crack of lifeless stone. Molted feathers gathered at the base of a canyon. The desert body teaches me that I can exist as both contorted and beautiful, uninhabitable and alive. These
paradoxes give me hope that my own body can exist in a similar paradox and enable me to accept my body as not a fix to one thing: I'm neither completely healed, nor completely broken. The body that was abused will never go away, but it can still be a body that experiences beauty and love.

Accepting that my body has no final act of healing is hard. I want to be healed. I want a final ending. But as I relapse with depression after the birth of my son, I use the desert as a teacher to accept it as something dark, unfixed, and beautiful because out of my body comes my voice, this voice. Doireann Ní Ghriofa addresses the paradoxical sacrifices of motherhood in her book, *Ghost in the Throat*:

In choosing to carry a pregnancy, a woman gives of her body with a selflessness so ordinary that it goes unnoticed, even by herself. Her body becomes bound to altruism as instinctively as to hunger. If she cannot consume sufficient calcium, for example, that mineral will rise up from deep within her bones and donate itself to her infant on her behalf, leaving her own system in deficiency (35).

When I carried my son inside me, my body transformed itself into a landscape of nurture. My food became his food. My body became a place of healing and growth. While motherhood watered my body with life in a way I was not expecting, it also caused a relapse into depression, and self-care took a backburner as I cared for my son. Doireann Ní Ghriofa describes this paradox as the “female body serv[ing] another by effecting a theft upon itself” (35). On a psychological level, an erosion of identity follows.

My thesis aims to describe the paradox of love and grief I experience simultaneously or serially in my body, and to describe how this paradox mirrors the Southern Utah desert. My perspective as a survivor and mother informs the question I investigate: how do the paradoxes of the desert help me see the paradoxes of my body in a way that gifts my body a new acceptance? How can voicing my body as a paradox, one
that is both uninhabitable and full of life, gift myself space to exist as something darkly beautiful? The poems in my thesis are an extension of my body. Trauma and mental health struggles are shifted into a frame so readers can witness how darkly I ache. Ultimately, by the end of my thesis, I learn that overcoming my trauma is not what makes me beautiful, because there is no overcoming. I can never exit a body that was raped. However, the miracle is the love I still experience in my body, a love gifted by the desert, gifted by my child, and by my own voice. Forged in the heart of the desert and the crucible of motherhood, I speak myself into this beautiful brokenness.

Finally, my thesis aims to honor the desert. I met my partner in the desert. Together, we’ve had our son, Joseph Canyon, who is named for the desert. My son is the embodiment of the healing that could not have happened without Moab, Utah. Hiking under the red rocks helped me acknowledge a trauma I could not articulate when I was nineteen, just a girl, hiding from a rape which happened to me at sixteen. From a molestation that happened to me at eight. I had no soft, alphabet letters to articulate the flashes of a basement, stairs, a backseat, and a boy, flashes that attacked me waking and asleep. Before Moab, I spoke to no one about my trauma because I blamed myself.

In Moab, something inside me shifted. I waded knee deep in the Colorado and shouted my secrets to the moon. I hiked for days and sweated out every sword of self-blame I swallowed. The open, wild space seemed to give me permission to speak my truth without fear because I no longer felt so afraid. Instead, I experienced reverence for the ancient canyons, and something holy untied. The power my abusers used to control me whittled thin with miles of distance and open, clean air. In the desert, I also met my husband, Matt. My thesis moves from the abusive relationship I lived in at sixteen, to
meeting my spouse in my twenties, to becoming parents in our mid-twenties. Our healthy relationship is a testament to the fact that a cycle of abuse can be broken, and our son is a gift of love, given by the desert. For this reason, my thesis celebrates the desert by describing it in thoughtful, physical details. I hope anyone reading my thesis can feel their toes wiggle in pink sand, see the spires of orange rising in a backdrop of blue, and experience wonder like a child. I hope my words inspire reverence for the red rock landscape I have been lucky to call home.
Mary Oliver

Mary Oliver is the bread and butter of nature poets. The first time Mary Oliver’s words reached me was during my undergraduate studies. I was new to a creative writing program and clumsy with my knowledge of poetry. Eager to learn, I invited a dozen undergraduate creative writers I barely knew to my apartment for a poetry reading. We sat in a circle on my old carpet because I didn’t have enough chairs. Everyone took a turn reading a poem they loved, and something they wrote. One girl pulled out her phone and read “Wild Geese.” I’d never heard of Mary Oliver, her words hung in the air. She writes:

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
For a hundred miles through the desert repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
Love what it loves (110).

This is the first moment a poem literally took my breath away, and several of my peers breath away, as we sat staring at one another, sharing a knowing ache. As a survivor of sexual abuse, I feel a lot of shame. All the time. I feel like my body is used, dirty, and I cannot tell you how many times I have combed over in my mind what I could have done differently to prevent my rape. Mary Oliver’s words gave me permission to let go of this shame in such beautiful, simple terms. It felt like scripture written on my heart. Her words carry the intimacy of a mother who loves and knows you and wants you to be who you are without shame. This is the first poem I memorized and is one I recite to
myself often when trauma makes me feel used, shameful, and dirty. It has become my mantra.

The power behind her poems is intentional and calls to survivors because Mary Oliver is also a survivor. She began writing poems as an early teenager (Poetry Foundation). During this time, Oliver would flee to the Ohio woods behind her childhood home to escape a house of abuse (Sandage). She built huts out of sticks and grass and spent days outside writing poetry (Poetry Foundation). The solace Oliver finds in nature is hopeful, but not all encompassing. I admire her writing because she does not offer nature as a fix all for her pain, but instead, gestures to nature as a safe place to escape, acknowledge moments of beauty, and connect with the natural world. This is exemplified in her poem, “Poppies,” from Oliver’s *New and Selected Poems*. Oliver writes in a section of this poem:

> The poppies send up their orange flares; swaying in the wind, their congregations are a levitation of bright dust, of thin and lacy leaves. There isn’t a place in this world that doesn’t sooner or later drown in the indigos of darkness, but now, for a while, the roughage shines like a miracle as it floats above everything with its yellow hair. Of course nothing stops the cold, black curved blade
from hooking forward—
of course
loss is the great lesson.

But I also say this: that light
is an invitation
to happiness
and that happiness,

when it’s done right,
is a kind of holiness,
palpable and redemptive.
Inside the bright fields,

touched by their rough and spongy gold,
I am washed and washed
in the river
of earthly delight— (39)

This poem uses symbolism and imagery to establish nature as escape from pain. Mary Oliver describes poppies as an “orange flare,” which suggests the flowers are a signal for help. She continues to describe the poppies in lilting terms such as “swaying in the winds” and “levitation // of bright dust” the bending motion of the flowers suggests a willingness to bend to natural powers of the wild, and the image of levitation suggests an ability to rise. The image of bending and levitation answers the call established in the first line by suggesting that allowing oneself to become connected with nature can create a rising, a resurrection, an acceptance, and perhaps a healing. These ideas are reinforced throughout the whole poem. She writes:

Of course nothing stops the cold
black curved blade
from hooking forward—
of course
loss is the great lesson. (39)
Oliver suggests that healing is not as simple as being in nature. The “cold // black curved blade” will continue to be “hooking forward.” Night will always come, which symbolizes that pain will always exist. Oliver does not suggest that nature erases pain. However, she does affirm, that witnessing the simple beauty of nature, can still be “a kind of holiness / palpable and redemptive. Inside the bright fields”. She writes the sunshine on the poppies washes her “in the river / of earthly delight—” which suggests a sort of baptism in the ordinary, physical delights of nature. Mary Oliver describes nature in beautiful images full of color and life. She emphasizes in each stanza that healing is found in nature not because our pain can ever be taken away, but that nature can become a sacred place of beauty that we can enter, appreciate, and be washed in.

I have strived to capture the idea of nature being a baptism where one can accept their own body as both broken and beautiful. I describe this in the poem, “It took a while but here we are”:

Lived quiet. Learned the sound of my own breath bouncing off the canyon walls. With each step, the hands of rock scrubbed my feet raw. I shrunk under the bones of ancient beasts. My smallness no longer a tool for power, but a taste of wonder. Wandered two summers down riverbeds, rubbed every blue bruise brown until my skin soiled clean with smears of dirt and wisps of tamarisk weeds.

My imagery attempts to mirror Oliver’s message of solace in nature. Similar to her poem, “Poppies,” I describe nature in specific, descriptive images such as “smears of dirt” and “wisps of tamarisk weeds.” These images are intended to seem unruly yet beautiful, and offer the reader peace as I describe a sort of baptismal self-acceptance when I write, “Wandered two / summers down riverbeds, rubbed every blue bruise brown / until my skin soiled clean.” Similar to Oliver, I symbolize the message that while nature cannot
clean away the abuse my body has been through, it can offer me something better. I can identify a beauty in my body that exists in spite of trauma. Here, the natural wild landscape teaches me to accept the parts of myself that may feel “dirty.” The ability to identify beauty in the natural world around me is healing, because it allows me to accept myself as someone who is both broken and beautiful.

Identifying oneself in nature is a theme Mary Oliver often returns to in her writing. In her poem, “Rain” from *New and Selected Poems*, Oliver describes herself as nothing more or less than the natural environment around her. She writes:

This morning the water lilies are no less lovely, I think, than the lilies of Monet. And I do not want anymore to be useful, to be docile, to lead children out of the fields into the text of civility, to teach them that they are (they are not) better than the grass. (5)

Not only does Oliver here identify with her natural environment, she describes nature with such reverence it becomes a gift. She alludes to Monet which allows readers to imagine lilies in pastel shades of watercolor. The image of lilies, fuzzy and floating in shades of blue and green, helps readers accept that there might be something sacred and beautiful in being a part of nature. The ability to accept that humans are not any more important than the natural environment can be freeing. With Oliver’s descriptions of interconnection with nature in mind, I describe my own unique relationship with the Southern Utah Desert. In my poem, “Climb,” I write:

Cheek pressing canyon
a thousand stories vibrated, and I gasped.
The smell of rock cooling in the night reminded me
of a grief hidden in my body. Ancient and slow.
I wanted to thrust back my head, wail to the syrup moon,
bathe naked in the dark and let the venom of a named constellation
kiss my collarbone and eyelids awake because I never again wanted to feel alone.

The lines, “The smell of rock cooling in the night reminded me / of a grief hidden in my body. Ancient and slow,” reveal the way the desert helped me uncover the grief that lay unreachable within me before I moved to Moab. The rock is unmoving, ancient, and slow to change, which all describe my experiences with grief. I grieve the trauma my body has endured. By recognizing my own grief in the natural environment, my poetry is similar to Oliver’s ecstatic leap into acceptance. I, too, like Oliver “thrust back my head” and “wail to the syrup moon,” “bathe naked in the dark and let venom of a named constellation / kiss my collarbone and eyelids awake” to show my experience as a survivor as recognized by the body of the desert. The desert and I experience grief for the cold changes of our bodies. Like a named constellation, the desert and I recognize how paradoxically freeing and trapping naming our trauma has become. The name of a constellation can never correctly capture the experience of several dying suns. These are explosions that are deathly and difficult to comprehend. In the same way, voicing my trauma as a rape survivor is limited. The word survivor is tidy. Strong. Though the desert allowed me to face the trauma I was hiding from, naming myself as a rape survivor can never correctly capture the days I have gone without sleep because I am terrified of returning to nightmares. It cannot capture how out of control I feel when the triggers stack on top of each other and I yell, weep, and push my husband away. These experiences feel like an awful explosion. The act of claiming my voice as a writer is limited, just as the names of constellations such as Scorpio are venomous, because naming a collection of exploding stars will always be limiting. However, there is solace
in seeing my grief mirrored in the landscape, and I acknowledge this solace as I end the poem, “because I never again wanted to feel alone.”

The embodiment of nature leads to a greater understanding of myself as my eyelids are kissed awake and “I never again want to feel alone.” The ability to recognize my grief in the landscape allows me to feel solace and a mutual understanding of pain.

**Audre Lorde**

Lorde is a feminist poet who often writes about race, gender, and her experiences as a queer woman. For my thesis, I focus on her poems in praise of anger and motherhood and connect these poems to how I feel as a victim of abuse and new mother.

Audre Lorde came to me when I became a mother. Her books lived, dog eared, next to the rocking chair in the nursery. The twinkling lights strung around my son’s room illuminated her words while he suckled in my lap. She writes about birth in her poem, “Bloodbirth”:

> That which is inside of me screaming
> beating about for exist or entry
> names the wind, wanting winds’ voice
> wanting winds’ power
> it is not my heart
> and I am trying to tell this
> without art or embellishment
> with bits of me flying out in all directions
> screams memories old pieces of flesh
> struck off like dry bark
> from a felled tree, bearing
> up or out
> holding or bring forth
> child or demon
> is this birth or exorcism or
> the beginning machinery of myself (198)
I believe this poem can be read in two ways. A reader could assume this is a poem about a physical birth. The comparison of her children to a demon is surprising, but the comparison is relieving. As a woman who experienced a 24-hour labor, I can sit with the relatability of a body falling apart for your child. Lorde does not shy away from the pain surrounding this event, describing it as “bits of me flying out in all directions” and “that which is inside of me screaming / beating about for exist.” The physical destruction of the body refuses to be washed away like the afterbirth.

However, this poem can also be read as an owning of voice. Just as the birthing imagery evokes hellish descriptions here—much of Lorde’s writing comprises a refusal to coat herself in false palliatives. Once, in an interview, Lorde commented:

“I have a duty to speak the truth as I see it and to share not just my triumphs, not just the things that felt good, but the pain, the intense, often unmitigating pain (Tate).”

Out of this context, readers can view this poem as an acceptance of self in all its broken ugliness. Her refusal to write to appease, white expectations is apparent when she writes: “that which is inside of me screaming / beating about for exit or entry / names the wind, wanting winds’ voice / wanting winds’ power.” If the birth is a symbolic birth of her voice, Lorde describes that voice as something beating its way out of her. The wind symbolizes the power of vocalization. She continues:

    with bits of me flying out in all directions
    screams memories old pieces of flesh
    struck off like dry bark
    from a felled tree (198)

In this poem, the birth of her voice appears to be violent, with “bits of me flying out in all directions” and “old pieces of flesh / struck off like dry bark.” Voice has become violent
and messy, and at time, destructive to the self or identity. As a woman who writes of sexual violence, I relate to the reliving of trauma which occurs when I voice my own story. It is not pleasant. It may even seem angry and violent on the page. But it is necessary, because this use of voice is what pulls me out of passive objectification from past abusers.

Lorde has often embraced anger as a necessary part of her voice. Lorde’s essay, “The Uses of Anger, Women Responding to Racism,” discusses anger as a tool for survival.

My anger has meant pain to me but it has also meant survival, and before I give it up I’m going to be sure that there is something at least as powerful to replace it on the road to clarity (63).

With this in mind, Lorde’s poem, “Bloodbirth,” is a wail. She allows her anger to become power through the act of writing. Her poem, “There Are No Honest Poems About Dead Women” reiterates the idea of owning your voice, regardless of how pleasant or unpleasant our voice may be.

What do we want from each other
after we have told our stories
do we want to be healed     do we want
mossy quiet stealing over our scars
do we want
the powerful unfrightening sister
who will make the pain go away
mothers voice   in the hallway
you’ve done it right
the first time     darling
you will never need to do it again (333)

Comparing silence to moss stealing our scars is breathtaking. Lorde symbolizes the idea that refusing to voice our pain steals away our trials and paints our experiences in a false light: we are healed, we are whole. The pain is important and deserves to be
voiced. When she writes, “you’ve done it right / the first time   darling / you will never need / to do it again,” I feel like Lorde is telling me to keep my messy first drafts where I am angry, in pain, and writhing in my writing. I do not need to censor. This voice is what will free me. Though my thesis is not focused on racial inequity because I write to my own experiences as a white woman, I try to mimic Lorde’s reclamation of voice. In my poem, “recipe for generational trauma,” I write:

Like a lunatic,
I smear peaches
on the floors, walls, and sink
there are three generations of art colored blood
sticky on my hands
and I laugh, lick and spit
at the table full of eyes,
who label the mess as mine.

Here, my voice, wild and untamed, demands to be acknowledged when I figuratively “smear peaches / on the floors, walls, and sink.” I also nod towards the three generations of women in my family who have experienced sexual violence, which has likely perpetuated the cycle of abuse. The poem ends with this realization:

I only feed monsters
when I rise sweet.
I only feed monsters
when my body is beaten
into a thing
to eat.

Here, I attempt to capture the idea that silence in the wake of sexual violence reinforces my body as a passive object easier for the oppressor to use. I write: “I only feed monsters / when I rise sweet / I only feed monsters / when my body is beaten / into a thing / to eat.” I acknowledge that often shame is a tool of the oppressor. Shame creates
silence which enables the continuation of the violence behind closed doors. Being vocal about sexual violence is not a save all, and it won’t stop all violence. However, this poem attempts, as Lorde does, to capture my harnessing of anger. Anger can be powerful. I do not need to pretend to be sweet.

Alongside Lorde’s poems about acceptance of pain, there are poems in which she can describe the sweet awe of becoming a mother. In her poem, “Now that I Am Forever with Child,” she writes:

How the days went
While you were blooming within me
I remember each upon each—
The swelling changed planes of my body—
And how you first fluttered, then jumped
And I thought it was my heart.

How the days wound down
And the turning of winter
I recall, with you growing heavy
Against the wind. I thought
Now her hands
Are formed, and her hair
Has started to curl
Now her teeth are done
Now she sneezes.
Then the seed opened.
I bore you one morning just before spring—
My head rang like a fiery piston
My legs were towers between which
A new world was passing.

From then
I can only distinguish
One thread within running hours
You… flowing through selves
Toward you. (185)

Lorde writes about motherhood with reverence. Her body is a vessel to help her baby become. She accomplishes this by listing the sweet, physical details of her pregnancy.
She writes: “Now her hands / are formed, and her hair / has started to curl.” Listing the physical details of her baby creates an intimate knowing. No one knows her baby’s body as intimately as she, because, in many ways, this body is an extension of the mother. Many of my poems attempt to describe motherhood with similar reverence and intimacy. In “Drought,” I write:

and then, all at once, my son’s suckles smack into a sigh,
he throws his arm over his forehead and peers up with one, half opened eye.
Milk dribbles down his chin in pearls of white,
His body seems to say, thank you, I love you, I love you.

He is the gift,
the desert gave me,
he is the life watered back to my body.
Thank you, I love you. I love you.

Similar to Lorde, I try to create a feeling of intimacy with my son. I describe his physical movements when I write “he throws his arm over his forehead and peers up with one, half opened eye.” By describing his physicality, I convey a careful watching of my son. This attention shows readers how deeply I cherish him. I also compare the milk of my body to pearls, a nod to the ocean. The poem was written in Goblin Valley, which was once full of sea water. Now, it is a desert. In previous poems, I imagine the desert grieving the loss of life and water within her body. I compare this loss to the grief I experience in being raped: my body lifeless and stuck in a drought. By comparing his nursing to beads of pearls, I acknowledge that my son’s love gifts me with water I’ve been seeking all this time, and truly, I would never have had my son if it weren’t for the desert because I found healing and met my partner in Moab, Utah. I attempt to end my thesis with gratitude and a sacred reverence for motherhood, my son, and the desert.
Sylvia Plath

Born in 1932, Plath wrote in her novel, *The Bell Jar*, and in *Ariel* like she was on fire. *The Bell Jar*, an autobiographical novel, suggests that Plath was a survivor of sexual assault. Plath also lived through a toxic marriage with the famous poet, Ted Hughes. For these reasons and countless others, I leaned into her poetry when writing my thesis.

Plath writes from a feminist perspective that leans into sound and unexpected images. In her poem, *Ariel*, she writes:

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Status of darkness
Then the substanceless blue,
Pour of tar and distances. (194)
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She creates a hissing on the tip of your tongue which she refreshingly interrupts with the word “blue.” Blue pulls your lips shut with the “ba” sound. The sounds mimic the meaning of the lines. She exists in a same status of darkness, undisturbed, until she sees the sky and riding her horse changes her, briefly, for a moment into something beautiful, godlike, and suicidal. The interruption in the established patterns of sound suggests there is a change happening, and indeed, there is a mighty change which occurs when Plath grows one with her horse, Ariel, and then becomes like an arrow, shooting forward, suicidal as dew.

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The child’s cry
Melts in the wall.
And I
Am the arrow,
The dew that flies suicidal (194)
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Plath’s ability to pair sound with thematic meaning is evident in many of her poems. “Daddy,” has always struck me as a poem which juxtaposes horrifying images with a nursery-style rhyme:

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You do not do, you do not do,
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Anymore, black shoe
In which I lived like a foot,
For thirty years, poor and white,
Barely daring to breathe or Achoo. (183)

The repetition of the same line, “you do not do, you do not do” rhymed with simple words such as “shoe,” creates an eerie, nursery song cadence. The lines sit with me because their sounds reverberate in my mind, much like, for thirty years, the treatment of the father figure in this poem seems to have reverberated inside the speaker’s body.

Although I cannot begin to compare my writing with Plath’s, I’ve often been told I lean into my poetry with my ear. When I write poetry, I recite each line out loud to myself, so I can hear how every line stands out on the page. I pay a lot of attention to the sounds of the words, and often, enjoy playing with rhyme. In “eat,” rhyme is utilized to give the poem a nursery-rhyme cadence.

feeding me is feeding you.
feeding me is feeding you.

fill your plate, darling, don’t go hungry.
(but my stomach rolls soft, and that measures me ugly!)

untie the lies, little girls learn.
but do it quiet, like little girls learn.

As Plath demonstrates with her writing, establishing sound, rhyme and rhythm allows your poem’s meaning to be enhanced, and enacts a kind of incantatory, almost hypnotic effect that is often more powerful than any literal “meaning.” By making “eat” carry a simple aa, bb, cc, dd rhyme scheme, the poem attempts to mimic simple rhyme schemes used in nursery rhymes. The dark imagery of starving oneself is contorted with the seemingly happy sounds. The intention is for readers to feel unsettled and reinforce the idea that objectification of women’s bodies begins at an early age.
Plath’s poem, “Morning Song,” directly inspired me to write the poem “love my mother softer,” which may be my favorite poem in my thesis. Plath writes:

All night your moth-breath  
Flickers among the plat pink roses. I wake to listen:  
A far sea moves in my ear. (138)

The idea that a baby’s breath is tiny yet monumental enough to move seas, is a paradox which reminded me of the love I feel for my son. When he was born, my life became tethered to his breath. But his breath didn’t feel ordinary, it felt like a miracle. Many nights, I woke simply because the pattern of his breathing shifted, and I slept with a hand flung over the bed, touching his chest to make sure he was still breathing. I tried to learn from Plath’s style in “Morning Song” by describing the physical details I noticed about my son.

My baby’s head bobs back and forth,  
raspberry lips bubble drips of spit and  
fleece footed legs kick beneath his bum

Much like “Morning Song,” my poem attempts to connect the physical description of my son with the theme of motherhood changing me forever. This is bittersweet. Plath compares this shift in identity to an erasure as the self. She writes:

I’m no more your mother  
Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow  
Effacement at the wind’s hand (138)

Plath acknowledges a grief which comes with her new identity as a mother, because ultimately, her child’s existence signals her own demise and eventual death. Similarly, I attempt to balance grief and love in my poem “love my mother softer,” as I mourn no longer sharing a body with my child. I was surprised by how much this hurt. I missed having my son inside me all the time. My heart felt torn in two every time I left
the house without him. However, his physical separation from me also enabled a love I could not have previously comprehended, and surprises me with a gift of empathy for my own mother which I had not anticipated.

Drum tum bulges,
arms stretch above his head,
the tips of his nails brush the lace pillowcases lining my bed,
his face scrunches as he sucks in new breath.

His body creases like wisps of scripture
in the week after we met, I wept,
cradling his head in the crook of my arm.
He arrived home to neatly rolled towels waiting in drawers,
hand-me-down shoes, cord baskets filled with wax-colored books,
wash cloths stacked by the side of our sink—

Beneath the folds of his river stone skin
I rubbed water and cloth beneath your chin. Wiped away
residue strings of white which hours before, poured down my thighs,
the last spider web constellations connecting your body to mine,
I wept, I wept, and loved my mother softer.

Repetition of “I wept, I wept” and the line, “I loved my mother softer,” demonstrates the significance of the change in myself. My son’s existence and the trials of motherhood enable me to view my mother with greater empathy. This paradox is one I write often about throughout my entire thesis.

Kate Baer

Kate Baer is a modern, feminist poet. She is a third-time best-selling author and has written three books of poetry which sing both the praises and frustrations of modern motherhood (Bennett). Her book, What Kind of Woman, was published in 2020. The book dives into themes of body positivity, motherhood, depression, and the paradoxical
happiness and grief which comes with motherhood. In her poem “Moon song,” she writes:

You can be a mother and a poet. A wife
and a lover. You can dance on the graves you dug
on Tuesday, pulling out the bones of yourself
you began to miss. (10)

I read these words while sitting in the hospital, waiting for the results of an MRI of my brain. At the time, extreme sleep deprivation had manifested itself in strange symptoms: blacking out, dizziness, and shaking hands. For a while, I didn’t know what was wrong with me. Ultimately, the test showed that my brain was fine, I just needed more sleep. But it didn’t feel fine. Her words came to me when I felt like a vacuum-sealed version of myself: crusty, unsure, and lifeless. I cried in that little waiting room, reading her words, because she wrote of hope. She wrote that it is possible to be a mother and return to the woman you were before motherhood. Similarly to Lorde, she gives me permission to express the exhaustion of motherhood without apology and rejects the idea that the woman prior to motherhood no longer exists. This was a relief. I needed to feel that I could return to myself. Much like Baer, admitting the difficulties of motherhood did not make me a bad mother.

Similarly, Baer’s poem, Some Nights, gave permission to disregard what others might think of me, and accept that most moms, at no matter what point in life, don’t have it all together. She writes:

Some nights she walks out to the driveway where the lilacs bloom and
lies down on the warm pavement even though the neighbors will see and wonder
What kind of woman does such things.

There she stares up at the slender moon
and things about the baby albatross filled
with discarded spoons or the time a friend
asked what she was working on these days
and she answered, “Who has the time?”
even though she meant something else
entirely. (30)

Baer’s simple, free form rhymes make her poetry stick in my head like a song. I like her poetry because it is not overly dense or flowery. She writes what she means, and as a mother who does not have time for decoration. Every word needs to earn its place on the page like a punch, because her whole book was written in moments stolen from her children, sitting at a coffee shop, desperately trying to type as much as possible before returning home. Her words are accessible to an audience unfamiliar with poetry, and to mothers who only have time to read a poem or two while they pump and don’t have the emotional energy to connect symbolism and bemuse deep themes. Her writing paints a simple narrative in readers’ minds. Her writing emphasizes honesty without fluff: I am mother, I am struggling. My poem, “First walk with baby,” is similar in its honesty, and story-telling style. I implement simple, free form rhymes and a narrative story of breaking down on a walk with my child.

I am shocked
when a guttural, child-like cry splits from my chest,
like ribs cracked in two. I wipe strands of snot from my chin,
stagger my breath, so the baby won’t wake.
Bewildered, I laugh at the tears dropping, one, two, three, four, down my cheeks,
plopping onto baby’s head.

A circus of infant need, leaky boobs, barf matted hair.
Most days I don’t remember when night shifts to morning, to mourning,
to shuffling past strangers and watching
myself weep over a memory that doesn’t exist,
a memory I’m not a part of but could have been,
might have been.
“First walk with baby” attempts to describe the surprising grief I experience as I watch the world around me, no longer feeling like a participant. I lean into sound by using repetition of the word “morning” and “mourning,” to mimic how tired I feel and the rhythmic shuffle of feet as I continue walking, moving forward, despite my grief, because I do not feel have the time to express sadness when I need to care for my child. A similar feeling of being overwhelmed comes through in my poem, “Do all mothers feel alone?” In this poem, I’ve established a narrative of attempting to lower my child’s crib rail.

I twist and twist, but the last screw is warped, the metal rusty, it won’t come out without another hand holding the crib steady, Joe starts to whimper, just one more sec hon, then you’ll have a safe place to sleep, Joe presses his cheek against the carpet, trying to grab my feet. The screw won’t budge. I yell. Wishing I could do it all on my own. Because I don’t know when my husband will be home, but now its bedtime and Joe’s bed is broken, he misses his dad, and I’m so tired splotches of yellow and gray firework my vision, yesterday I thought I saw a ghost, thought I saw something funny or familiar or old or crazy, crouched over a crib weeping.

Both poems were written during a sleepless, depressive episode, and do not coat my pain. My words attempt to capture honesty, in the hope that perhaps another mother may read and not feel so alone in their own sadness.

Edward Abbey

Edward Abbey, born in 1927, was a desert writer and environmentalist. He is famously known for his nonfiction book, Desert Solitaire, written after working in Moab,
Utah, as a park ranger in Arches National Park before the park was developed. He is known as a founding father of environmentalism in Utah, the West, and the country, and many locals revere him as the desert’s bard, advocate, and father. He stresses the importance of wilderness preservation and recommends submerging oneself in the wild, free of cars and electronics. In *Desert Solitaire*, he describes the healing the desert evokes:

Strolling on, it seems to me that the strangeness and wonder of existence are emphasized here, in the desert, by the comparative sparsity of the flora and fauna: life not crowded upon life as in other places but scattered abroad in spareness and simplicity, with a generous gift of space for each herb and bush and tree, each stem of grass, so that the living organism stands out bold and brave and vivid against the lifeless sand and barren rock. The extreme clarity of the desert light is equaled by the extreme individualization of desert life-forms. Love flowers best in openness and freedom (31).

Abbey acknowledges the healing that occurs when an individual is surrounded by nature. Abbey claims, “Love flowers best in openness and freedom,” meaning, it is easier to love oneself and one’s surroundings in an open, natural world. His book teaches that taking time to be away from civilization in the wilderness brings peace to individuals as silence and isolation force humans to face their inner selves. I attempt to mimic Abbey’s ideas of the desert as a sanctuary of healing in several of my poems. In “Joe Canyon,” I write:

There are no footprints in the slot.
The walls are carved from water.

Follow the ribbons of red, yellow, and black, until all sound is swallowed.

The sun is so thick, it buzzes.
Alone, you will hear your own heart.
Here, I encourage my son, Joe Canyon, to submerge himself alone in a slot canyon. I say that this will bring him wonder and understanding of his own identity as paradoxically precious and small within the spectrum of his environment. These themes resonate with Abbey’s message. Abbey often expresses a joy that is found in the desert because of the landscape’s isolation from civilization. Though motherhood often does not lend itself to such privileges, I try to express the idea that being alone in a canyon allows you to be with yourself. This act of solitude offers a space for healing as it allows you to understand who you are and to become at peace with your identity. It is one I miss when I become a mother and trips to the Southern Utah desert require less spontaneity.

Abbey has also taught me to spend time physically in the desert, to breathe in the love I have for the landscape I am writing about. Abbey calls readers to be physically outside, moving their bodies, away from distractions. His writing attempts to refrain from projecting his own human wanting onto the landscape. As I wrote my thesis, I took multiple trips in the Southern Utah desert, hiking with a notebook and my family, and practiced writing physical descriptions of what I saw free of similes and metaphors. Abbey applauds this kind of writing in his book, Desert Solitaire:

In recording my impressions of the natural scene, I have striven above all for accuracy, since I believe there is a kind of poetry, even a kind of truth, in simple fact (x).

When writing my thesis, I have often forced myself to slow down and describe in physical, sensory details what the desert looked like, smelt like, sounded and felt like. Here I describe how sunrise illuminates morning glory arch after I snuck into Canyonlands National Park late at night and woke just a few miles away from the trailhead:
Flicker of morning lit
a skyline of sandstone fins.
Miles of canyon glowed like the foam-peak
crests of sea, ethereal, every layer in the horizon
iridescent in lines.
Ancient and unspooling like gold yarn in a maze.

The act of observation without emotional projection is practiced in several other poems,
including “Renaissance of the Desert Body.”

Behind, fishbowl walls cup miles of thirsty, red sandstone,
twisting with the brittle wrists of juniper and sage,
trails of crypto crunched in footprints
vein the cracked clay.

By describing the desert with clear, physical details of plants, rocks, animals, and
weather, the landscape in my poems exist as their own world. My hope is this will create
a concrete image of the desert in reader’s mind and help them experience the reverence
Abbey and I share for the Southern Utah desert.

**Terry Tempest Williams**

Terry Tempest Williams is a Southern Utah nonfiction writer and
environmentalist. She is known for writing about Utah landscapes, grief, birds, leaving
the LDS religion, and her relationship with her mother. Her book *Red* focuses on her
mother who is diagnosed with terminal cancer. She describes motherhood as a point of
origin,

What is it about the relationship of a mother that can heal or hurt us? Her womb is
the first landscape we inhabit (50).
Here, Williams compares the mother’s body to a place the child first inhabits. I write about my own genesis of identity and how this relates to my mother in the poem “Origin”:

I cannot write of my mom without circling back to our bodies, a splitting, feminine genesis of love and grief.

The connection I have with my mother is mixed with grief and love. There is a pattern or “circling” back to a disconnection that is both physical with birth and emotional as my mother emotionally withdraws. My thesis touches the severing William’s describes, both with my own mother emotionally, and the physical split between my son and I during childbirth.

Williams also writes of the desert as a female body. In her book Red, she describes the Southern Utah desert:

There are dunes beyond Fish Springs. Secrets hidden from interstate travelers. They are the armatures of animals. Wind swirls around the sand and ribs appear. There is musculature in dunes.

And they are female. Sensuous curves—the small of a woman’s back. Beasts. Buttocks. Hips and pelvis. They are the natural shapes of Earth. Let me lie naked and disappear. Crypsis.

The wing rolls over me. Particles of sand skitter across my skin, fill my ears and nose. I am aware only of breathing. The workings of my lungs are amplified. The wind picks up. I hold my breath. It massages me. A raven lands inches away. I exhale. The raven flies. Things happen quickly in the desert (109).

Williams depicts the desert as a female body by comparing the swirls in the moving sand as feminine curves. She also slows down her writing by physically describing the desert in concrete, specific details, much like Edward Abbey. My writing similarly compares
the desert landscape to motherhood by describing physical details I notice in the landscape. In the poem, “Slot Canyon,” I write:

She is a mother.
Ten thousand gallons of water
flooded into stone.

From between her legs burst
mud and roots, her skin eroded in stretch marks,
she snapped open and screamed.

Till summer poppies
and cactus blossoms
perfumed dried beds of clay.

Similar to Williams, I allow the physical descriptions of the desert to parallel with femininity. Slot canyons in Moab are eroded in lines of white, yellow, black, and orange. The walls are smoothed in lines carved from past flash floods. I allow the visual of water gushing through a slot to be reminiscent of birth. The images of “skin eroded in stretch marks,” connects with the literal carving of water in stone, and the metaphorical changes the body endures when giving birth. I continue to establish the desert as a woman’s body throughout my thesis and refer to the Southern Utah desert as “she.”

Overall, the themes of my thesis borrow ideas from a multitude of desert writers and poets. I write of the body, motherhood, survival, trauma, and landscape. I hope to position the desert as a feminine landscape, deserving of recognition and voice. I hope to continue to revise my work and submit my book of poetry into contests for publication. If this bears no fruit, I will also consider self-publishing. If I were to self-publish, I would like to include pictures of the desert I have drawn to accompany my poems. Overall, the past two years have taught me how to continue to prioritize writing even when there seems to be no time at all. Like juniper in a drought, my art has survived despite the
challenges I’ve faced. I’m looking forward to continuing using writing as an extension of my voice.