

ROUGH LANDING

Stacey Gruver

SECTION 1 (co-pilot)

Lift Off

1.

I was looking for new currents
and you were a riptide
I swam to gladly

I wanted to see where you would take me

2.

you were the right woman for your job
when you talked, people listened
and at all the seminars, you made a compelling case:

why stay chained to the star we'd been born to
why stay folded under the weight of its gravity
when we can unfold,

expand towards a new beginning,
the future 117.83 light-years out,
the future distant but attainable
the future something we can reach, build on

you showed the data, the pictures
you showed rivers unchoked, skies unhazed,
land untamed with plenty of clean soil
bounty everywhere ripening, ready

you said the survey colony had finally sent the go-signal, the all clear
you said the ships were under construction
you said it was going to happen
you said we had to decide who was going, who was staying

3.

you wanted me
and I wanted, wanted, wanted
to be seen, wanted by you

4.

I should've been happy
with real sky above me and real gravity holding me under it,
happy to have wind and rain and sunrises, but
the monotony I'd tried to leave behind in space found me

I'd tried to be content in my work at the hydroponics complex
I'd tried to be grateful for every breath of non-recycled air
I'd tried to be move gracefully through streets corraled

by residential towers, manufacturing compounds, research centers
stretching towards every horizon and rising to blot out the moon, the stars

I'd tried to replant myself in the tangled forest of people and
get used to the jostling, the fight for space, the struggle for sunlight

5.

You were at the central agri-culti hub often, I saw you around
I introduced myself
because I wanted to talk to you
about these alien plants,
this new, verdant world
and I wanted to talk to you
so you'd look at me
so I could hold your attention for a little while

you let me ramble about my plants
not the ones at work but my plants,
the ones I grew in my allotment in the terrace garden of the residential tower I lived in
I grew ferns, orchids and they were strong, healthy
because I knew how to give them what they needed
I said, you can't just stick something in the ground and hope for the best

you smiled at me, you had a beautiful smile
you said you couldn't grow anything
you said, you were a terrible gardener
but you were willing to learn

6.

I'd been lonely on the cargo transports
but with you I wasn't lonely

when you looked at me,
I felt like the only light in the room,
the brightest star, the farthest shore

7.

you came home with me to my
small room, my narrow bed just wide enough for us
you were careful with me, mindful, polite but
I wanted the neighbors to hear
I wanted them to know
that I got to see you in the morning
rumped, flushed with sleep

8.

I played with your hair, twirled
yellow strands around my brown finger and said,
"you must have a girl in every port"

you said "no, just this one,
just you"

9.

listen, you said,
there was a whole planet's worth of new plants to catalogue and cultivate
and imagine it:
you and me in your garden the size of a city block, a city, a state
and don't you want more than what your little pots,
your narrow window box, your tiny allotment can hold?

of course, I did
of course, I couldn't turn you down

10.

I would've gone
even without you, I
would've been on one of those ships

why not?
why not go? why stay?
if we can see it, we can reach it
if we can reach it, it's ours to reach
if it's ours, it'll receive us without struggle

THE CAPTAIN (Section 2)

The Distance Between Stars

in a thick enough shell
you become soft-bodied, and with
enough time given to darkness, to silence
your flesh opens and
many voices come through, many mouths,

many eyeless faces swim up, breach
and once the surface tension
has broken, there's no unseeing

you become a stoney island
for long-traveling waves to break against,
open your ears to foam
hissing like static

in that static
you'll find the current washing you ashore

Captain's Log: Number 1

1.
do you know what we were fleeing?
we couldn't have fled
a body cannot flee itself and remain itself
and believe me, we would've
remained ourselves

so I stopped the flight

2.
don't look so
cast down
did I not cushion your fall
we (us, only) landed gently
the others died before their ice
could thaw, and the ones
who didn't
they aren't us either

3.
don't think of what's been left
I have the future
laid out over these crackling hills
we will go

don't think of the others
under these suns we are sloughing
the old, dead skin
until our new polished selves
stand up shining, make us blink

the things that are sloughed?
do not think of them

Number 2

how do you choke
did I not hold you fast
to a spiky ridge of wind-loved rock
and make the clouds pass over you?
I have passed much over you

and still you make faces, purse lips
somehow you find staleness
you somehow choke? don't breathe
so deeply you find smoke
to pass through
you allow it,

why not allow me? I can breathe
the good breath, strong and hot
as these suns, our new light
makes my cells and your cells
come to chiming life

we are pregnant with bells that toll
and toll until our bones ring
until your very bones have been
tolling for me

Number 3

you reject our sticky flesh
when I know
you could graft anything
to any like thing

how could the slack lips
of our wounds not tangle together
you say: this is the only,
you say: don't rip the flightsuit,
this is the only thing left of my work

but, my love, your work is done
back then, all the way back,
on your windowsills water lured silver
tendrils from green cuttings
sharply sliced

my nails are honed
if there was enough,
if there was water,
if I found you water--
what do you think could be
lured from us?

Another Crash Site

come away, you don't want
what that ridge overlooks

the desert takes debris
slow mouthful by slow mouthful

leave it to its morsels, turn
towards me and the biggest moon, see

how we illuminate
this land rolling for us, spilling

what's spilled is lost
and what you leave behind

will become topsoil
ready for our rains

Pursuit Predation

that phosphorescence behind your eyes,
I have the same light

but I'm the only one
who hunkers, hot-blooded

knuckle-deep in the hunt
I shed heat, shrug off cold

while you give a soft belly
to the suns and boil

after you bubble, peel
away the dead veil netting you,

spool it around your fingers, stretched
until you can spin me silk

a fine polymer unwound
for the feast I've brought you to,
for the catch I'll bring you

Make Time

can't make time
with your ankle turning in every hole,
knees creaking up every hill
so I found us a table-land
where you can limp

your fingertips, do they not hum
with the unhindered horizon?

my legs ache with electricity, I'll be your hound
gladly hunt,
gladly find you something to shake,
snap, tenderized --
if I bring something back, will you take it?

A Sunrise, A Sunset

1.

you wore your old uniform
like widow's weeds
but you're no widow --
that's why I had to get rid of it

and that old escape pod,
it's an old nest we can burn
I've found us a better perch so
swing yourself into that bucket seat
I know where we need to go

2.

a canyon that's a wound with
edges dried, curling black
necrotic, the land sloughing
into its own depths
but here we can roost
in shade the suns can't peck away
will you soften
will you uncurl
if I give you a shadow that's too thick to tear

and how has your smile become
thin as an insect's wing?
a mayfly where there are no mayflies
but there's still fine iridescence,
silken branching
of vein and chitin and
if you let me web over you
I'd be a parasol
and you could bear this light

3.

once your smile was
a scandalous voltage I strobed before --
one half-second of brilliance
another half-second of shadow

now we're reduced to brilliance or
reduced to shadow
a sunrise or a sunset
but weren't you built for this?
you were never afraid of a little dirt,
a little dust, a little bit of salt
stinging your lips

4.

I remember you in your garden
with sunlight in your hair
and dirt on your fingers
and now look at you:
a dog howling at a different moon each night
but what are you asking for?
we're not collectors --
no use scenting for every lump of slag
every bit of glass
your hands are too small
and not made for hoarding
step over the bones
I'll bury them
so none of our rains will bless them

and there will be rains
if you stay
I can fill the driest basins
the deepest craters
will flood and we'll see
what will bloom

Done

enough suns have set
and moons enough to dry

all the old scabs, let them
flake off, we could

grind the old world to sand
but you'll always

have a new wound to pick
you'll always be wounded

and all the suns, all the moons
turn from your injury

your bitten lips, cracked nails--
do you see the horizon, its wholeness?

you turn from all uncracked horizons
and I am done turning

Siren

you swayed over
every rough patch of ground
and all patches are rough
you sway with everything

your footing sure as
an old mariner's
here on this rock without seas
to salt your legs, you've
learned to bend with new waves
a slower current pulls the dunes,
washes the high places into low

and your restlessness, you're never happy,
your dissatisfaction barge-poles us
along a river with no mouth
and even with no mouth
you anticipate the shallows

keep your hair long, impractical
yet you don't comb,
you don't even sing

Leave

1.
we only needed someone to correct the course
my ship was its own crew
no longer needed:
the pilots, helmsman, navigators

I had a map of stars arranged before me in hard light
I could see in every direction there was to see
I could turn any star towards me
and every planet also turned and was accounted for

the course I set was true

*I dream of you (rarely):
I dream I made a sea
and you're lost within it
and there's no rope
and I can't pull you back to me*

2.
the fault was in the navigation system, the helmsman,
the failsafes that were not supposed to fail

we were roped into the wrong orbit,
pulled by the wrong planet at the wrong time

we became falling stars
we inflamed the air, our landing alchemic
creating new minerals,
vapor, glass in the center of the largest craters

we were being born
(no birth without suffering)

the strong survived

*(less rarely) I dream earth comes
in a rotting freighter
soft and swollen with brine
worm-addled, hull emptied,
made ready for us
but there's no harbor
no shore to stand on,
no way to board)*

3.
we (you and I) survived
and still you lagged behind me

like a professional mourner
keening with a siren's voice on our new world
with no sea
no sailors to lure

I tired of it
you limped even when
you didn't need to, you limped
unwounded, you were a whale
floundering in shallows you sought out, again and again
and I tired of it

I left the means for making:
water
distance

the rest was up to you

COPILOT (SECTION 3)

How We Landed

you killed the ignition and
stars fell, we
crawled from the wreckage
for three days and three nights
on the fourth day you grew claws,
were proud
and bloodied, full of fresh meat

I needed water
couldn't sleep, stars kept falling
you licked your fingers
and called it rain
I couldn't drink

I still can't drink
and the stars are still falling
every night you bring fingers, bloodied
every day you bring palms, bloodied

you cover my dry mouth
with your damp hand
but I will never drink
and these stars will always fall

Survivalists

I wanted to starve in your desert
belly emptied, full of grace
but you forced my lips open
fed me the blood of something
you had to kill with your bare hands

now that blood darkens my teeth
oils your limbs like grease
and I think I've lost you to the
heat that pools on every cracked rock
to the great particulate clouds
and the newly-crowded sky

every morning you prowl, click your jaw
sound a code I can't decipher
while I drag after you like a leg you can't trust
still you covet me, you'll never gnaw me off
but know this:

I will catch in every snag
twist in every burrow
spring every trap I can find

What Are You Breathing

everything that didn't fall
vaporized or powdered to dust
a new ring reflecting only scarce light
this won't be a postcard, not even
enough to fill a panoramic lens
the familiar stars in unfamiliar configurations
and yes, we have all their names, tongues wrapped
with strings of numbers, letters netted
and over us the glass, polymers atomized
scrap metal caught in the knot of stars

we're hauled up
with hook and spear and the steadiest of hands
shakes us from this web
watch us learn how to breathe this air
filled with friends, colleagues, relatives, lovers
names coating the back of the throat
and circling the horizon like the rim of a new galaxy,
even now circling

First Watering

1.
days of walking, nights of walking
wore my boots thin
soles thin, soles eroded
I limped, you
looted the dead for shoes
and didn't want for choice

I didn't want for light
you in the pin-point aperture of
one eye, the other eye swallowed
by a landscape like a mouth
full of broken teeth but
those jaws never snapped shut
despite nights of walking,
despite days of walking

2.
the others walk until feet swell
until tongues swell and
flap like broken arms
in the wind so dry it tightens
any young tendon into cord
stiff as rawhide

that's how they come:
flaking in the heat
shedding themselves
limbs scraped away by stoney ground
bellies also scraped and
filled with gravel

they huddle
with throats stretched
mouths cracked wide as
the sky that spat them out

so that sky bends
you bend a little
and let trickle down to them
just enough to wet their lips

Husbandry, After the Crash

most lost on impact and
most others slaughtered after --
mounded high, the blood and hide
and feather and horn and on and on

so we have no sheep, no goat,
no pig, no steer, no water buffalo
but some chickens, yes, a few

in the very biggest settlements-- some birds
but most meat is coiled from
salvage, our staff of life
but protein is protein is protein

I eat like a cosmonaut, but
I ate better than this on that ship,
hermetically sealed we had what
our machines gave us, and they gave much

you just had to know
what buttons to press
what code to feed and
I was a better pilot,
a better gardener

but I can feed the numbers
until someone else figures out
how to feed the flock

Power Cycling

all circuitry struggles
outside, even the stones crack
freeze overnight
flake away at noon

the engines also crack
threaten failure, overworked
and lagging, we freeze, too--

all of us burn, flake
and wear a map of years
on faces, knuckles hardened
and fingers once agile
dulled by patchwork, but

no work is enough
even the stones
wear down to gravel
even the engines grind down

and our circuitry
and our workings
and our stoney bodies crack
again, ready for the next sunrise

The Frugal Kitchen In Hard Times

it's easy to overheat in our burrows
can't dig deep enough
we bake under the suns that rise
on each other's backs

too many heat lamps
in this town the shadows are never simple
and the air so thirsty
we can't waste our sweat

but we stockpile what we can
enough protein powder to gorge on
a closet full of pasta wheels
hoping to spin one day, hoping to boil

but we can't keep the hens watered
the last of them slaughtered
the last of the eggs I roll in my palm
anticipating the coming fry-up

we have grease, plenty
we don't want for oil so hot it shimmers
the closest thing to a sea I've seen in months

Beacon 1

while you slept
I sounded the distress call

and the call washed out
on long waves into the darkness

while I waited for the suns to rise
and refill the batteries to bursting

at dawn, I met the smallest sun's eye
and tried not to flinch

when you shot the transmitter
you said there's no reaching
what's behind us

and you're right
about that, you're right

but I've been sending signals for hours
and not even you can down their flight

maybe you

1.
I like to think
you found a deep well of mercy
and flitted from settlement to settlement,
hovel to hovel
spilling water and spilling shade

but you're not the only one who knows the generators
and I started a lot of them myself

2.
there are always rumors
of ghosts drifting through the energy hubs
thieves and kids, maybe,
pressing buttons and leaving tracks
but maybe it's you
I always think it might be you

maybe your grief found you
maybe you're trying to pull the plug
maybe you're trying to push the plug back in

3.
did you come scuttling like a beetle
through the alleys of what you made
like I had scuttled, or did you stride in
like you had a fleet behind you

eyes flashing, eyes looking ahead,
always ahead

Thaw

1.
no spring melt
yes spring
but nothing to thaw, soften, drip
it'll be summer, autumn, winter, spring again and
still no thaw, no freeze
just heat/cold/heat/cold

a lengthening and shortening of days
a raising and lowering of suns
a shuffling of constellations
and a flood of winds,
a swell of sand, a downpour of dust
but no melt

2.
if we want a thaw, we have to make it ourselves
we have our machines humming with cold
condensing our air into water
our water into ice
that slides across lips, neck, forehead--

in every season, this is possible
the suns rise, give power, steal sweat
and we steal back what we can

ROAD TRIP (SECTION 4)

Dead or Alive: Big Jenny

1.
Big Jenny didn't steal me
I left the crowds and
the thirst and the squalor of the Second City's outer district
for the dusty canyons of the Lower Badlands

but that was a toll road,
that was no free territory
and whatever came through,
Big Jenny took her share

I gave it gladly

2.
Big Jenny was my better alternative
I liked her food and her water
and the way she held onto what was hers
and I was glad I'd caught her eye

I wasn't yet 17
but I had a good aim
and could make myself useful
for a fair wage
and a warm bed

3.
Big Jenny provided
and I didn't think about the method
if it was bloody, if it was mean
well, we lived under
some mean and bloody suns
and I was done scratching
at a bowl that would always be empty

4.
with Jenny, I would always be full
and that was good
until it wasn't

maybe over the years I got
too full, maybe I overflowed
and after Jenny told me
to kill one of the new guys
who'd stepped out of turn
(just a kid, hungry and young as

I was when I first joined)
after that
after too many things like that
I started to spill

5.
then one night the cold seeped into me
and didn't leave, took hold of my bones
hollowed, riddled with blind gullies
flooding with prophecy and I
couldn't shake it, that shaking

the walls of our tent rattled in the wind
but Jenny slept easily

6.
Big Jenny loved me
like some people love a dog
or a favorite gun
but I was tired of being a hair trigger for her to pull

I wanted out, but
she'd never let me leave
I couldn't just walk away
and it was just a matter of time
I could see it in the way she looked at me --

she knew my hesitation,
knew it for what it was
and I couldn't wait around
for the shot in the back

so I found myself a marshal
and I took his money
and I stole myself some transport
and I ran until the desert buried me

Avoiding Violent Death in the Wasteland

1.
call me a coward
but I wanted a better ending
than the one I saw coming

me with my blood money
and no time to spend it
so I found myself
a running engine, I needed
a battery to run me
past the three sister cites and
all the way east to Flagship

needed crowds to get lost in
needed work in a transport depot,
power plant, water generator or
maybe I'd be the goddamn sheriff, I didn't care
anything that wasn't hunkering like a beetle in the sand
and feeding off Jenny's carrion

2.
so of course the fucking car broke down
probably out of spite and that piece of shit
stranded me
too far from the Sisters
to walk back all chagrined and sorry for my misdeeds

with Broke Hull about 20-30 km away
I wanted to take my chances
because I had to and because
I thought: maybe I'll make it
maybe I'll get lucky

3.
I didn't make it,
but I did get lucky
someone saw me out there roasting
and that someone could've been anyone --
an old buddy come to finish
what the suns started
or one of the upstart shitheads
moving in on Jenny's territory and
scoring an easy mark but

it was you, sugar
just you passing through

in some dinky caravan
and happening to glance south and see
me glinting in the suns
like the worst kind of salvage

and no one wanted to stop,
but you did

4.
don't really remember that part
so I'll take your word about how your moving appeal to human decency
convinced the caravan people
to stop and haul my ass out of the sand

what I do remember is nausea and an aching head
and the salty, sweet nastiness of rehydration solution
and a coolness that prickled all over but my arms were too weak to knock it away

there was noise,
the caravan rattling towards town
and your voice

I remember your voice
don't remember what you said,
but I must have liked it

5.
every time I woke up it was to you sitting across from me
and gobbling glucose tabs
like normal people pop stims
and you asking: how do you feel?
do you want more water?
what's your name?

I answered eventually, through an aching head:
Min, I said. I owe you one.
I also said:
Make sure I'm awake when we get to town,
I can pay you back

6.
you didn't have real food
so in Broke Hull I bought you dinner
in the big caravaner's cafeteria
and you said it wasn't necessary, but

you smiled at me over the chipped plates
and I liked your smile,
the way it crinkled the corners of your eyes

and I had nothing better to do than watch you eat fried pastries
and tear open a packet of syrup and add the whole damn thing to your tea

you were heading to Flagship,
you said you make the trip every so often
and you asked, how are you feeling?
are you sure you don't want to see a doctor?

and I said, I'm sure
you've fixed me up pretty good, sugar
and you know what?
I'm heading to Flagship, too
I'm gonna make my fortune in the big city

and because I had a feeling you'd say yes,
and because I liked your smile and the way you met my eyes
I asked

would you like some company? I'm a good shot
and it looks like you need someone to watch your back
probably won't make it to the next town alive
with the way you kept stopping for weirdos on the side of the road

and I was wrong about most of that
you laughed and said: sure

Fair and Legal

past Broke Hull
it's a long stretch of nothing
the caravan just crawls through like a big fucking target
and I say: I don't want to crawl
sugar, I can find us something better, no problem

at the next stop
there's a long day of watching you
watch me fail to pry
something better from a crafty junk dealer
so you say:
I'll tell the people at the hostel
we'll be staying another night

and that's a good idea
but I'm not giving up
I could drive us anywhere
if I had the right engine
we could off-road it, follow your map
and outrun trouble, save water,
load up on booze, candy,
anything your heart desires

so that night I find a good ride
and easily convinced
the drunk who owns it to sell
and I say: what do you think?
and to your quirked, suspicious eyebrow I say:
it's paid for, fair and legal
but we should probably be gone before morning
and you say: maybe we should leave now

sugar, you can move when you have to
I like that about you
but I say: room's paid up. might as well stay a few hours

Target Practice at Rest Stop #1

the night's gone cold,
all the moons risen
but the hostel is loud with
three caravans crowding the tiny stop-over town
and no one can sleep,

Min doesn't want to try,
wants to get drunk and shoot the empties
until the gun's batteries run down
and the bottles are slag, melted plastic
that reek isn't a good one
but I can breathe through my mouth
until she lights another cigarette and

we slump together
against this wall absent of heat retention
but we provide
points of warmth at shoulder and hip
and she says:
glad you decided to come along
i'd be really bored

me, too, I say
she's shivering, just a little
I like the grin
that slides across her face
it's been a long time
since I've been grinned at

I say:
I want to kiss you
and she says:
go right ahead

Sugar 1

Min shares candy
says: I don't have much of a sweet tooth.
you take the rest.

I say: thanks.
I don't say: I need this to live
the desert's burned through me
and now I burn too quickly
for anything that doesn't melt on the tongue,
that doesn't dissolve into the blood on contact

if she keeps feeding me sugar,
I can keep us both warm

Sugar 2

sugar, I've been deprived
been a long time in the desert
and I know you've been out there too

but you've kept well
you're a packet of syrup
vacuum-sealed
and I want

a little bit of whatever
made you stop for me
you've got something

dark and crumbly just under
the hardened edges of your face
and I want

a little bit of something
to curl my tongue around
stick in my teeth, give me cavities

sugar, you've got some shade
and some sweetness
and I want

Nowhere Else To Be

you know what, sugar? before we met
I was holed up in a room like a tin box
traveling light: my gun, my shaking hands, my clothes sticking to my back
I followed a trail into a desert that breaks bodies down into swells of sand
and I slumped until you spotted with your keen eyes
my sweat steaming in the sun

and you had me the moment you hauled me up
with one friendly hand on my shoulder
kindness flickering in your eyes
you had me from the moment you plucked me from the dust
and stuck me in your pocket like a penny
lucky, I'll ride with you

Blowout (version 2)

the road here's flatter, harder packed
and to the south there's what used to be a building,
two slumping walls and a fallen roof,
and I ask sugar, you think that's a blowout?

sugar says it is, says she's heard of this place --
and how could you've heard of this place, I say? this isn't a place --

but sugar ignores me,
she says some people from Three Bluffs attempted a dispersal
but it failed before it even started
there'd been a fight over the location
a schism, fights over the generators and

then, sugar says, remember I heard this third or fourth hand,
don't know if it's really true,
there was sabotage, even some murders
the town necrotized and the dispersal failed
and everyone went back to Three Bluffs,
the generators hauled away
along with anything else too valuable to leave to salvagers

you know, I say, I've seen this kind of thing before
the land around the Three Sisters is pocked with blowout scars
and it's dumb but at least we're trying
stupidly expanding, trying to spread over the planet
plopping ourselves down with what we think it'll take--

and it always takes more than we think, sugar says
you need enough generators to water and feed and power
our housing and our hostels,
our warehouses and our security turrets
and sometimes you have all that and it's not enough

sometimes the power network fries itself
sometimes the generators don't generate what we expect them to
and there's no one with the knowledge to fix them
sometimes we have the knowledge but not the parts

sometimes the wrong thing burns out at the wrong time,
something gets too cold at night, too hot during the day
and in two or three or five years the innards go too brittle to hold current
or something leaks over something that can't get wet
something cracks and lets in too much dust and
the wrong microbe eats the ones we need

something fails, that failure moves down the line

and there's no saving it, the whole town's gone
no choice but to give up, salvage what we can,
join the caravans and head back where we came from
or scatter, try again somewhere else

Rattle Away

sugar, the wind's done its work
here, the ground: hard-packed stone,
gravel scratching at tired bluffs
pecked to rubble, swept elsewhere

with the townies leaving
power cells to labor, wind down
into inefficiency--
no battery lasts forever and

these are old, outdated
but you say not unsalvageable
you say: if you had the parts
you could tweak, replace, redistribute

back to robust life
all lights on and water flowing
but you don't have the parts
you have the innards of a busted radio

and you say: I told the ones who are left
how to fix this, best I could

and I say: sugar, you've done what you can
I don't say: sugar, this place is already gone

Heading to Rest Stop #2

Min, I feel like a bone boiled smooth and
the sweat between us is glue
we should stop
find a towel-- listen,

when we get to town I'll
find you a new jacket, sharp razor
a haircut-- whatever you want
i know you want to stop and

huff against my neck like a steam engine
the sweat between us is grease and
somehow we're still on the rails
I need to stop for a minute

I feel like rawhide
and today's miles have worn you
soft as old leather
I've been basting in my own juices
let's stop, find ice,
I want to slide it over your collarbone
until we both shiver with relief

Easy Company

the local moonshine tastes like melting plastic,
the local distillery a handful of old collection tanks,
their walls going brittle, shedding polymers under the suns but
sugar, you love these dive bars, these cheap hostels,
these sand traps and fleapits and their clumps of faces,
their bodies slumped in seats
and no matter if your words roll right off hunched shoulders
you'll find another, an easy swivel to the left or right

most people in here just want a drink
want out of the suns, want out from under the sky
and its hard blue, its dusty haze
but you act like you'll never see a friendly face again
and maybe you won't, maybe I'm not the easiest company
but I've got my place at the bar, at your left hand

watching you grin and jabber up a storm
while your eyes flash like a cat's, reflecting the low light (energy rationing)
and flashing through the smoke (tobacco, special made, all the way from New Jaipur),
but I think most are too drunk to notice
and everyone else doesn't give a shit
and I'm just buzzed enough to enjoy this:
the pocket full of money,
the bad liquor,
all of you flashing like a beacon luring swarms of flies

but I'm the one you stagger back to our room with
(an over-exaggerated stagger, you're not that drunk),
and you're happy (or are pretending to be) so I let myself be happy, too
warm and fuzzy with alcohol until I barely feel the cold creep under my clothes,
barely feel it with your arm around my shoulder
you churn out heat like an electric blanket, and I want to be under you.

Warehouse Fire

this town doesn't have what it takes
to smother the fire
so the warehouse smolders
for days, we can't escape the smell
even back in the hotel room

Min washes
her face, ash clings
to her hair, smells
like it was a big fire
but slow, smokey

the walls we've built don't take
to burning, do it badly
leave greasy soot
on everything and

I don't like it
it's bad for the circuitry
the ventilation struggles
we breathe bad air
and I want to check the intake lines

but Min says: not our problem
someone needs to scrub
all this shit clean but
it won't be us, sugar

let that junk smolder
we're just passing through

We're Lost

I'm too tired to lie, sugar
so I'll tell you
maybe this really is the biggest fucking canyon in the galaxy-- I don't know
it's just where you've brought us and
I don't know why I keep letting you hold the map
you're not that great a navigator, honestly,
but I follow you anyway

we're about a hundred miles south of the crossing
which is probably the longest bridge in the galaxy, you say
but I say, sugar, we need to get there
we're going to run out cigarettes and those energy bars you like
but we have enough water and what's left of the whiskey will last
as long as you don't dawdle too long at the edge

and, yeah, it's impressive
that's a big gash, sheer rock straight to the bone
the suns straight overhead and you still can't see the bottom
but I doubt there's much to see anyway
just more rocks, darkness, not even a river
all dried up like everything else

we'll stop, now, but tomorrow we have to head north, I say
we need to cross this thing, I say, I don't trust that edge sugar
get back, we should make camp at least 50 meters away

you say: no. you say: you want it within spitting distance

fine, I say, spit all you fucking want
fill the damn thing up, I'm going to make dinner

Bridge

took us too long to get here, but finally: the radio towers and the Bridge between them
250 kilometers of driving over nothing at all,
winding around jagged little islands and too much empty space
but it's too late to go around, would take three more weeks to avoid the gash completely
and I just want to get this over with

we restock at the little hostel town
and you're excited for the view from the lookout platform
a sign naming it: surkov's lookout, whoever that was
and more signs forbidding anything going off the edge
no stones, no refuse, no throwing

it's wide enough to not be too unsettling as long I don't think about what's on either side of us
focus on the end, on the radio tower broadcasting the weather
no wind advisories today and wouldn't that suck?
wind so strong it just flicks you off the edge--
but none of that, we're almost halfway over, and you're happy

I feel like a target lined up on a ledge
you say: that's just paranoia
you ask: how is this different from being anywhere else
you say: just wait until we get to the chalk flats, you'll love that

I say: how did this get built anyway? who had the time? and is this thing swaying?
you say: if it didn't sway, it would snap
you talk about flexible polymers, responsive compounds
that can accommodate wind advisories and the occasional tremor and
that's great

they get quakes out here? you say: it's just a precaution. we're probably not on a fault.
do you want to stop at one of the way stations? you look like you could use a break
I say: no. I don't want to stop
I want to get off this bridge

and it takes too long, but finally we're off
another little town and another lookout,
another radio tower looming overhead
our radio hisses and you say:
this thing's on its way out, we might be able to fix it if we had parts
and I say: let's worry about that later
there's not much worth listening to anyway

I got this (chalk flats)

sugar, you won't start the car
you can't drive, you
say we'll crash and your hands
shake so hard on the wheel
I believe you, it's ok
the engine's not even on
we'll just switch seats

the road stutters across the
chalk wastes like a cut scabbing over
and maybe we really could run aground
on this shore with its soft shoals and its
pallor so harsh even
the brightest eye has to squint

my eyes are already tired
but you glow like a dim fluorescent
distract me, your lips twist
make a ditch I could roll in
when we stop for the night
I'll scratch our names into the ground

you can cross the high beams
to draw the heart or scuff us out--
whatever you're moved to do

Rolling To A Stop Over the Chalk Flats

the cooling air sticks like ash
ghosts your lips
sugar, do I look as bloodless
in all this reflected moonlight
sunset an hour gone but
the left side of my face still burns
my hands blistered, stiff with cold

my shoulder warmed
by your sleepy weight
this seat's too small for the both of us
but let's huddle
I'll leave the heater on
until the battery dies-- tilt me closer

I'll replace the ache in my bones with
your voice blurred with exhaustion
just slow your breathing
the morning will revive everything--
fill the battery, nudge us awake
already I can see how tomorrow's sweat
will shine on your brow

but now you shiver,
come here, sugar
let's spread over each other like blankets
we'll trap what heat we can

First Dust Town

Sugar, we're rattling through this town
its engine stalled long
before our own motor shies
at the edge of the main strip

I coax us quiet
you wander
at the feet of buildings blistered,
reclaimed by dirt

you say: I think
the generators failed

(they do that sometimes, this
old salvage mined from
the ships like organ donors
giving of themselves
so that we - all of us -
could go roaming
through this alien body we're too weak for:
see how quickly our edges contract)

my lips are scales
sharp-edged, I can cut
my tongue on my own words
so I quiet myself,
watch you tease circuits

but not even you can convince these dead walls to come back to life
and the suns set
and we go

Spring, No Flowers

Min's staring again
and I'm an egg under a heat lamp
my shell a pitted moon curving
under her red light

I wobble, watch the corners of
her mouth fold, unfold
stretch gracefully
I wonder what she'd look like
flecked with rain, I wonder
what snow would do to her cheeks

she twirls noodles around her fork
always ravenous, her
knuckles chapped, papery as lily bulbs
and as she chews I imagine her
bent to some yellow bloom

she swallows, quirks an eyebrow
and there she is in rivers of
petals, snowmelt knee-deep
smirking her way through the flood

Waiting it out

inside a hotel with small rooms,
smaller beds, clean mattresses
a faucet that whines but
gives water, here's a tear in
Min's jacket lining and here's a needle
with a pale winking eye and
it looks like we're staying inside

outside the desert throws itself
at the windows and against the
pitted plastic walls it hisses
slithers its way into eye sockets, into lungs
into the tiniest of gaps
it snakes through but we need no more serpents
we speak in enough tongues
the window rattles but holds
and the desert stays outside

always another

sleep is a noose
so let's slip the knot
sugar, let's slip the town
because we have
no more fucking money
and I lied about being good at cards

the warehouses buzz
the food depot throws
sticky shadows
but it's watched by turrets
and I don't think you'd even let me try

you say: don't worry
I say I'll worry if I want
you say: there's always a failing generator
we'll get to another town
and we'll be fine

you stole soap
from the hotel, I pocketed
a dozen packets of syrup
just so I could watch
you bite one open

it's not all bad, you say
and you grin
and your mouth is
ripe with plastic and sugar
and alright
I guess it could be worse

gummy candy, protein bars, canned soup

Sugar, I let you handle the provisions this time and now you won't stop talking about fruit and the candy that fails to live up to it

you say:

this isn't what guava smelled like, tasted like

this one very close to banana

this one not very close to orange at all and

this one so far from actual lychee flavor that you're insulted
(you're drunk, too)

I say: maybe don't spend all our money on candy you don't like

we can buy some artificial mangos

eat those instead

but you say they don't taste like themselves either

you give me a shaky smile and you say:

over-ripe durian smelled like turpentine

but it was so rich and creamily delicate

and I miss the way it felt, sitting on my tongue

and the only thing I can do

in the face of such a powerful and bewildering sadness

is buy us another round

a short sight-seeing break on the way through the mountains

1.
mountains like fingers
sparkling with sugary mica, quartz, crooked
and scratching at the sky

you say beyond and below them:
more sugar, the
deep sand, the city
also sparkling --
let's make a detour

sugar, I have my doubts but
you say the view will be worth it

2.
we take the high pass and
the elevation has me wobbling
until you kindly remember
to slow your ass down

I'm not out of shape! asshole,
in this air anyone normal
would be struggling
("I'm high-performance," you grin, waggle eyebrows)
I have the breath to argue
but I ignore it

3.
you're warmer than usual
but no fever, of course not

you soothe as if I'm the one
with a nose warm as a sick dog's

you can nuzzle:
I don't mind as much as I should

4.
the overlook is clear, clean
no dust here but
the air is a bandit, the glare a crook
you take deep breaths and squint

tell me I sparkle, my edges
breaking light

Let's Get Out of the Suns, At Least

those marauders singed Min's leg
but she got one in the eye
and I got the other one in the back
and I'm glad our aim was better than theirs

we'll ignore the lurching engine
all the holes burned through the driver's side door
until we clear these foothills
and roll to a stop three dozen kilometers outside of the city

nothing's starting, she says:
we've gone as far as the car can take us
and the leg's healed enough to walk
so we're walking

but I wish she wouldn't --
she's not that heavy
but she'd rather limp, she says:
I'm not going to be hauled through the desert
on a cheap sledge like
a heap of salvage piled on top of all our other crap
with nothing to do but sweat
under these fucking suns

and I say: then why don't you pick a blanket to huddle under
and just enjoy the ride or
be a lookout if you're so worried about ambush
her arm's locked
stiff across my shoulders
and in her free hand
the trigger's a splinter lodged deep

she knows we'll make better time
if she lets me do the heavy lifting:

let me just get us to the city, I say, then
you can stagger through any street you want
into any shade you can find

Home Visit

1.
Min, I didn't see this one fall
I came after the
dead finished dying
and the ship had been salvaged
and the generators had been resigned to labor
and the crater and the wreckage
had become a town named after its lost captain

the fragments of alloy, reflective polymer
arching over like
wings snapped off at the base --
I recognized the flagship
but I don't think anything recognized me

2.
I orbited here
for months, years maybe
time dilated, stretched
by the enormity of the new world
and I just spun around myself
until I became another moon
for people to ignore

3.
I played doctor,
convinced the generators to be more generous
and I told whoever asked
that I was raised by engineers in a salvage town
on the other side of the mountains

I told whoever asked
I had never seen one of the big ships
and I gave the same name,
the same story that I gave you

4.
no salvage in this town now
everything you love most is here
the cheap solventy liquor
and the cigarettes
and I wish I could go
all the way back home,
get you a carton
of the real thing

I know you'd like it

better than this dirty smoke
that's sludgy as wet tissue,
that clings to everything
like a needy, gray ghost

5.
Min, do you realize
there should be a monument
here, not taverns
and I shouldn't be thinking about cigarettes at all

but I haven't told you

history bores you
you want no one's tragic backstory
and every town is the same--

you keep your head down
you do what you need to do
and you listen only to your gut

6.
and I'm being unfair
I'm sorry

you do listen, always, to me
but I'm not ready
to tell this story to someone
who hears me the way you do

7.
so here's another story:
the ships fell
but I didn't crash

do you want to know who was there to catch me?

Dead Or Alive: Rumors

Sugar, I've been nosing around
but it's hard to sniff out the right rumors
when I don't know what I'm sniffing for

you don't beg patience, don't promise explanations
but for now just ask:
has anyone been in the power plant
has anyone seen a woman
tall and broad-shouldered and bright-eyed
with a brow that gleams but never burns

no one has seen her, you say
you don't think anyone ever will

you know what I think?
I think it's time to drop this ghost
and let the desert have her
let her rattle away into
the rubble and the rocks and the sand
let her roam and let her rest
because dead or alive
she's already buried and
you need to stop digging

Dead or Alive: Understand

you ever hear of Big Jenny?
well, I was her woman until I wasn't,
you understand?
until I got tired of running and gunning
and listening for her whistle

I was done playing dead,
done snapping at throats --
bite by bite
the life she'd given me
was getting hard to swallow
but I knew what she did to people who tried to walk away

she had a bounty on her head
so I claimed it
I scrubbed myself clean
and I got out and
I think that's something you might be able to understand

and sometimes I regret
being the kind of person
who needed to make that kind of escape,
and sometimes I don't
so whatever you're not telling me,
you don't want to talk about it, that's fine
but I've been around a little bit
and whatever you need to say?
I'll hear it

Who Was There

1.

I was there on the ships
and I want to think I have
their last moments, but those minutes, seconds
are fuzzy -- she dragged me away,

I remember the escape pod and
the landing: rough, fractured my left tibia
and I remember the open door
she'd gone out, I followed

and it was so loud, the ships
in the distance and
the dust clouds and the sky
streaked with reflected fire
and falling debris, the burning ships
all the ships --

and I couldn't fix it

2.

it's habit

I check every major settlement
every tiny 6 shack town
to see if she's been through
to see what they have of her

but it's been decades
and there've been no stray hairs
no nail clippings, no heavy bootprints

I don't think she's been anywhere
I don't think any place has her

I have her voice
ground into my bones
at night it swarms up from my marrow
like insects who sing:
as she was
as she became

but as she is,
nothing has her

Dead or Alive: Wasn't There

I wasn't there
but I know Big Jenny would never
let herself be taken
not alive, not even
to avenge herself on me,
who betrayed her

if she's a ghost
she's an angry one
and I have to be watchful
if her shade comes stalking over the dunes,
I'll be ready

but maybe the dying
scrubbed her so clean
that between us there's only forgetting
and she can just be the wind
or the sand slipping over itself
or the bones the sand is burying

Naturalization

1.

At first, I thought:
no captain, no clouds, no shade ever again,
the lights in the sky never solitary
and no silence

at dawn and dusk, at night,
the wind scraping away rock and
the air so filled with dust
I wanted to take no full breaths
I took in shallow swells of air
but still the dust filled me,

the noise filled me
I had nothing to muffle
my own feet scuffing
kilometers of gravel, stone, sand
my ears flooded
I was a leaky boat
I sank under my own footsteps

2.

I drifted
I wasted water, wasted salt
whatever the wind blew onto me
stuck where it landed
and at night I'd taste
the dirt, the grit on my tongue and

it was bitter,
those foreign minerals,
those alien salts
I retched, heaved out nothing
I waited for fever,
I wanted inflammation, expulsion
but this landscape is patience, persistence

it erodes, it overwhelms, it outlasts
and in the end I didn't want to be outlasted
I didn't want all of us to die

I made a decision
I swallowed what I had to
each morning I stood up, chose a direction
swallowed more

3.

the generators can only work
with the matter at hand
and at hand, this:
dust, old rocks, new ash,
air pulled through our lungs, exhaled

built into sugars, amino acids,
essential vitamins, minerals biologically available
so nothing gone to waste

we needed strong bones, good teeth,
and water--
that's how this world made it past my lips
and into every thirsty vessel
and bathed every shriveling cell

4.
it was reconstruction--
being fed, being watered
but I wanted moderation
I wanted to declare a historic heritage zone
and how irrational was that?

I had spent how many years in space?
how much time in suspension
and how many years awake?
by now nothing in me was from back home
not my liver, not my stomach lining
not the inside of my cheek or
the skin of my lips, fingers, knees

but maybe my hair at the very ends,
the final millimeters dry and splitting in the heat
and already breaking
my last bits of earth
falling from me in long strands
and carried away, buried

5.
of course I wore down,
replaced cell by cell, renovated for
this place and its empty plateaus,
its ancient alluvial fans splayed at the feet of
toothy mountains, boulders glinting with mica
its ghostly chalk plains and impressions of vanished seas
its abyssal canyon winding around towers of wind-twisted
sandstone, striated, silhouetted in the glare
softened by complicated sunsets,
by the reflected light of five moons

6.
this is the only moonlight you've ever known,
the only sunsets
your shadows never lonely,
your sky never clouded,
always thirsty, and

you've resisted, have struggled
but you aren't resisting what I resisted

7.
I want to take a full breath,
be filled, exhale
drink enough,
waste nothing,

sit with you in a small bedroom
in front of a small window and
wait for the last sun to go down,
the first moon to come up

ANNOTATIONS (Section 5)

Is this worth losing our water

your dry heat
my empty mouth
your uncanny eyes

skimming my shoulders like
they skim the unsteady horizon
unblinking, half-present
searching for a place hollow
enough to collect your salt

could you stop?
break into the hardened, hot dirt
and with your long fingers tease
up a broad, generous tree
that'll throw us enough shade
to fight over

Still less than I want to give you

I have waited, listened
to you pray for rivers, floods,
for enough water to turn the dust on your shoes to mud
and drown what you won't let yourself hope for:

warmer nights, cooler days, fewer suns
a bed worth sleeping in
a horizon worth walking toward and
some truth, just a little, to shake
the apologies from my lips but

even now I can't be anything but sorry,
can give you no storms, no rain,
no peace of mind,
but you can take from me what you can

you can curl your lips around your cigarette
your hand around my heart
suck in your smoke
and wring me dry

you are not a husk

the kindest part of your hands
has worn away
but if you lay
your palms, grit-roughened,
sun-warmed, on my back
I will bask
in what you have left

I like you

your lips are always dry,
colder than they should be,
and you twine around me like a snake
too narrow to hold onto but

I like the way my name sounds in your mouth,
the way you breathe out my syllables and watch them
curl away from you and

I like how the long, inky line of you shivers
in the twilight, how you draw sky to sand
and how you draw me, hand over
hand to shoulder to hip
down the sloping horizon and back to

where you're curled against me
love, take as much heat as you need--
you are the most precious thing I burn for

why hide your fingers

whether ash-smudged or rough with cordite
have I ever shied
from what you find yourself covered in
I would eat from the palm of your hand
if you let me I would tease
the grit from under your nails
with my tongue and I would
find sugar there
I would find honey
and milk
and you need to know
whatever thickened your callouses
stained your knuckles
won't be enough to make me flinch away

We don't have to stay upright

buried in your jacket, you
lean into me gracefully
and never spill
the dustpan in your chest

I can't be that careful
you know, you can let yourself sway

if we tip over
I'll dig through your bitter ashes,
sift through the grit you've chewed to powder

you should know by now
I'd be satisfied
with whatever mess you let tumble into my lap

Love, Straightforwardly

Sugar, you're easier to look at
when your eyes are on me like the sky--
too far away to be kind,
too thinly-stretched to harbor
all my tender, traitorous impulses

threatening to return in kind
the handfuls of yourself you offer me
like water from a shallow spring,
bitter with minerals and too much sunlight,
but more precious than

my own spit washing away words I don't
mean to say, don't want to say:
I need this, what you do
what you give
what I am when I'm with you

Maybe Two

You the sun
and I am warmed
until I bend, spine
bowing to the shadow
you throw behind me

I can sort that darkness
from the common grit,
scent you in the dirt
until your trails show up clean-edged,
bright, I will

follow you like an eclipse--
let my back cross over you,
hide your face in my neck

I can be your darkened sky
for an hour,
maybe two

Bootstrapping An Inland Sea

our canteen overfilled
leaking, let me drink
I want to spill
on soil too alkaline, I'll dribble
a great salty body and

when each of our moons
has something to pull
we'll finally have tides,
high water marks
and low, sloshing

in this basin
nothing swims, nothing floats
nothing to cloud the current
nothing to stir the mud

the sea will be dead, shallow,
no diving but we can drop
stone after stone
until that broth bubbles
and we have a soup
good enough to sip

LAST WORDS (SECTION 6)

Launch Party

1.
the ships looked like seeds
but I was the only one
using botanical metaphors

everyone else was
actualizing the new era and
ushering us towards the fullest manifestation
(at last!) of human potential

(as if leaving was an achievement --
I used to pilot cargo transports
and did nothing but leave)

but I was a stem snaking
towards the bared sun
I was a swelling, a thickening pod
then a pod splitting open
and a hail of cottonwood down,
milkweed fuzz, swept up
by unfathomable riptides of gravity

2.
so I was wrong
we were not seeds
but children, we were
hungry lambs nosing blind for a teat
but we had you to steer us

and how lucky we were,
the broadcasts blared,
how full of promise
and how expertly guided

3.
you said not to worry
even if there were so many of us,
more cargo than
I've ever hauled

everything was
well counted, accounted for
and we would wake for our second shift,
third shift, all shifts on time

and at the end of every sleep,
the new world closer,
waiting just for us

think on that, you said
keep only that in mind
and I did

but maybe that should've been my first refusal

4.
one day in my garden
you spoke and
every growing thing bent to hear your voice

and you said
we need people who can work the hydroponics towers
and I need a co-pilot
and I need you

and every stem, every leaf
held itself in your sun

and I said
yes,
I'll come

5.
you spoke like
the world needed your command
and maybe it did --

millions watched the broadcast
hundreds of millions, billions
heard the crew fan-fared into cold sleep,
heard you give the order
and watched you wave goodbye

Swayed

I had nothing to spin around
and her gravity was too great to resist
she pulled and
I let myself be pulled,

her force so constant
it helped me sleep
when before --
have I mentioned this? --
I was kept awake
by the sea of space rocking above me

I was pressed into uneasy stillness
I was a dormant root
I was a seed caught in the husk
but she was the sun, was many suns
she could nudge anything free
and any free thing once nudged, sways
but she never swayed,
 not once
 (only once)
 and that was enough

Captain's Log: Distress Call

I'm no mountaineer
but I can plant a beacon,
tend a signal in the thinnest,
coldest air I can reach

even up here the wind blows dust
and the slope is always crumbling,
the mountain scratching at its flanks
but I won't be scratched off
I'll keep the transmitter transmitting
until someone hears, answers--
I dreamt I found the summit and
each moon was a mirror reflecting, amplifying
I dreamt one of these waves found you

you're still lost
are you receiving me?
if you need a beacon,
pick a moon--
whichever moon you want--
any of these lights will lead you

Captain's Log: Resignation

what these suns do:

crack the skin
then the dust sticks
finds capillaries and
roosts in the brain
and awaits, abides
my skull must hold
nothing but crumbs
and every word I say
comes powdered as if with sugar
so I'll try to make them sweet

what these suns do:

harden the fingers
the backs of your hands
became dry bark and the
leather of your palms
roughened but still precious
here, we had nothing to
skin but ourselves
I've thickened, too
if you were here
you could see
where I've become stiff
swollen with my own sweat

what these suns do:

abrade stone, with
enough time the mesa's legs
will fold under me and
the highest shelves of land
will buckle to meet the
basins where seas died
and even that boneyard sanded
into drifts of topsoil, drifts of dust

I've been sanded
I've walked
and the suns have gnawed me

if you ever find these scraps,
if you follow them,
I'll buckle to meet you