ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: EMBRACE: POEMS
Jennifer A. Williamson, Master of Fine Arts, 2004

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The themes in this collection of poems center on location, memory, and identity. Many of the poems are travel poems that reside in a specific geographic and temporal locations but which, in the course of the poems, expand outward to capture the emotional landscape projected by the speaker. The poems also focus on familial and romantic relationships, while exploring the attempt to navigate an identity that is defined, or reinforced, by connectivity. A large number of poems investigate the relationship of memory to identity, not only examining memories for their story content, but also probing the change in relationships when an individual loses his or her capability to remember—how that loss of memory affects those around him or her as well as perceptions of self, identity, and the way in which we connect.
EMBRACE: POEMS

By

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Dedication

For my family, by birth and by choice.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my family, who not only encouraged me to pursue this degree, but who also provided a great deal of the material for the thesis! You’re my primary inspiration, and I love you all.

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Embrace

Asleep, she sighs
and turns
tucks herself
against that place
from where woman
is said
to have come

that place
where there is still
a childhood scar
from when
he fell
a half-buried root
turning into his side

his body
shell-pink and delicate
he lay still
feeling breathless
feeling
blood seep through
his shirt
to thicken
and dry
like a brushstroke
marking
the place
where his mother had
pressed her hand
to stop
the rush of blood
where the skin
would someday
pucker
into a ridge
and feel warm
to the touch
and sleeping
she curves

instinctive

against that side

in warmth

and its excess
Abu Simbel

In the crook of the mountain’s arm
there is a temple built for a queen,
decorated with androgynous forms
in postures of loving – a youth,
gracefully thin, extends one arm
dance-like, downward, to give
an open lotus to another who is
kneeling, hair falling forward
to cover what might be breasts,
hand forward to accept.

The bright February sun is not warm.
I am here to see the Ramses temples
dug into new hills by architects and
engineers, stone un-built and reburied
on the Nile’s new edge. Angular figures
stiffly postured in prayer and combat,
lean across stone panels, ignore
slender incisions beneath each foot.
Aging quietly, they have outlasted gods.
Touching the wall, I can’t find seams.
Instead, there is just enough room
to place one finger in the groove and trace
the outline of a lotus blossoming. Dust
on my fingers, cold and flecked with ancient
greens and reds, smells of dried ferns.
I can trace the forward-pointing feet
of a goddess still posed in movement.
She knows. It is a stone older than love
we break the heart against.
Lanzarote

It wasn’t a relationship, but it wasn’t fucking
since we never got that far. It was just skin,
the smell of talcum and sea salt.

This island of three hundred volcanoes
had melted and remolded, licked
its crust in hot cat-flows, enclosed

by unrelenting water slapping greenly
against advances. The heat
was sharp, too white – it cut

against the eyes, chased us under umbrellas.
In too much shade, the wind traced my back’s
curve, fingering skin into thousands of

tiny bumps. Piloerections, you called them.
Black lava-flecks in my arms, your thighs,
the conch-whirls of our ears, everywhere
it shouldn’t be, everywhere it could.

Days break in pale succession, roll
over in waking surprise.

An open window where
I hear the waves, but can’t see them;
sliced morning oranges in a cobalt bowl.
Winter Solstice, England

It gets dark here at three thirty in the afternoon.
Each morning I wake to evening sky;
the morning dusk lasts for only a handful
of hours, until night draws in again, impatient.

Walking along the two lane road to my house,
a dog barks and is quiet. Yellow lights cut square
windows, reminding me that the day is less than
half gone: there are hours of night ahead.

It’s the kind of sky that gradually ripens, until
it seems it was always this way. There’s no dog,
there’s no road, there are only the yellow squares
and the smell of snow. This should feel lonely.

It’s not possible to judge the distance to the house,
where I’ve forgotten to leave on a light.
Calling Home From Egypt

It’s four p.m. here—no idea
what it is there, somewhere west. The station screams
with activity, busy-robed bodies
pull carts of children and string-tied boxes,
wilting in the heat. The south-bound
tourist train has minutes to arrive.

One hand covers my open ear,
the other cups my chin and the perforated
black mouthpiece, filters out whistles
and roars. No connecting click, just a woman’s
voice breaking through static, answering
somewhere on the other end.

You won’t believe it here.
They have these dried lotus blossoms,
crumpled like old cotton bolls. Floated
in water, they unfold. The whole room
smelled up with hyacinth. I had to
open a window.
In Summer

The women of my family gather in groups,
lawn chairs circled in the square shade
of the house. Dewy and pink—*women don’t sweat,*
they glow—they fan themselves with paper plates
and eye the children who chase one another
with handfuls of blueberries.

My sister-in-law joins them. Her palm, hesitant,
smoothes the flat husk of her stomach. I watch
her lift an empty yellow plate and fan with
the other hand, until all the women are waving
like butterflies—not fast enough to create lift,
but wavering in the still, humid air.

It has always been this way—the moving illusion
of flight. For just an instant, the circles sway
in unison, like petals. They laugh.
My grandmother touches a nearby knee,
and the fluttering slows, one paper wing
alternating with its neighbor.
Looking at my mother—so there you are—

I try to remember knowing her before

her body was not our body,

try to imagine back to still, warm waters—

here I am. I don’t sit.

The drift swelters, provides no relief.
Love Poem

Our late afternoon game—
my grandfather and I
snapping beans or shelling
peas, soft chimes
in the bowl at our feet.
After awhile,
he’d ping a long one
at the metal garden bucket
and ask, *How’s love?*
It helped, having something
to do with my hands. *Ending.*
Fingers split the pod,
small trio ringing the bowl.
A nod, *just takes time*
to get right. He looked
towards the kitchen
window, where Nan’s
shadow worried back and
forth, moving silverware
from counter to table
and back again.
Piling shells in our laps
on faded dishtowels,
we finished and tossed
them at the bucket. Closer
to dinner time, we gathered
up the shells the bucket missed,
waited for the sun to settle
behind the house.
Tell me again, how you
were crazy to go alone, an officer
with six-hundred dollars, only
a handful of words.

Tell me that you were
alone in Peking, alone in the rickshaw.
The market smelled of fried taro
and pears, you couldn’t eat
the delicate fried-grasshopper,
but gave it to a laughing child,
who showed her teeth.
Stopping on a street
that smelled of garlic,
outside a narrow doorway,
hens scratched at cabbages.
The mother of the house, *mu qin*,

Pacific Tour, 1946
led you inside, a circular table,
low to the ground,
scraped your knees,
as you tried to fold beside it.

She brought green tea, no sugar,
in bone-white porcelain
while her sons poured *jen ju*,
pearls, from squat bushel baskets,
covering the table
in a shell-colored heap.
Drawing your fingers
across the pile, you
brought a handful to
your mouth, felt them
with your lips, the
pinks and whites, oblong
and round, smooth,
misshapen, that took
hours to sort, until you
were satisfied with sixty,

hid them for weeks
in your dress-whites.
Three strands: your wife,
sister, and mother.

Now, your wife keeps
hers in a jade box.
I, your daughter, have
the other two, combined

them into a double-strand
and keep them safe
in a box with
my birth certificate.

To please you, I wear them
on your birthday, watch
your eyes brighten as you tell,
again, their story.
To My Virginity

You were more sophisticated, could catch the eye, and flirt.
You made me feel clumsy, childish.
You didn’t approve of my friends or when I wore lipstick. When I told you I let David Rickman touch my almost-breasts on the church hayride, you weren’t shocked, just smirked and admitted he touched you too.
You weren’t a worry, came home at curfew, told my parents I was on the porch, saying goodnight.
You never embarrassed me, had too much to drink and stumbled home on a Sunday morning, or told how my high school boyfriend bit my lip, made it bleed on my first real kiss.
You just got quiet, and I’d wonder what you were thinking about.
We got older, and sometimes
at parties I thought I’d see you duck out
for a quick smoke. But when I’d look again
you were leaning against a wall,
like you never left.

We stopped confiding in each other.
You were too critical; I was too sensitive.
You kept borrowing my favorite sweater
and looked better in it. It would sit in my closet,
make everything smell like cigarettes
and jasmine. We didn’t talk much
on the car rides home from college,
at Thanksgivings and Christmases.
You eventually gave up on holidays,
said you didn’t believe in them.
After You Left

You weren’t as skinny
as I remembered

though I didn’t touch you
to be sure
didn’t see all of you
at first just

your shoulders
in a London crowd

your lanky gait
in the Prague train station

it was your face
in a bus heading north

I couldn’t be sure
until you were standing
in front of me
face luminous

I said nothing
You said *Speak*

finger sketching
the line of my collarbone

*Speak*— thumbs running
along eyebrows
to cheekbones down
to jaw *Speak*

until my face was captured
in your hands

but I still said
nothing and you
bent my head back

face moving
down to cover
my still-closed mouth
Gail Helen

All your life you felt your sister
must have been prettier. Born perfect, she died
three days later, struggling to open her lungs.

Moist, closed flowers. You never forgave
your father for saying you were born
with a squashed nose. You think of her,
calla lily, curled in the cold Ohio ground
above your grandfather’s broad chest.

Years pass before you give her name
to your daughter for safekeeping. She inherited
a weakness, would sometimes choke on air.

Watching her struggle, you think of your mother.
Your hand rubs the soft infant chest.

Petals open like gills, draw in the flush red air.
Falling Into Bed in Cairo

The curtains were some sort of brocade—
heavier on one side of the open window.

I closed my eyes against the orange city streetlights
and the outside smell of oranges.

I slept somehow, too tired for dreams,
and woke in darkness to a voice. No, woke
to several voices overlapping, sustaining one long vowel.

Then I heard the echo of more voices,
muezzins, calling from concrete tower-tops, in elegant,
thicketed mosques. Night-herons, still, then lithe over water.

The furthest was lilting, as though carried
over water, from the banks of an orange city.
The voices chanted and broke, a lone male
carrying the word to its end.

I couldn’t tell if the light behind the window was dawn.
Age Twenty-Three, Observing My Grandmother’s Hands

*Look at them,* she says, stretching them out over pretend piano keys.

Knuckles swollen, tendons pulling the fingers, she reaches for my hand,
pats it, *Your hands are cold,* chuffs it between hers.

Gnarled and reddish, they look like hands that have worked in hot water and harsh
soap, that once suffered chilblains and no gloves. They seem at odds with this woman,
who gardens and once played “Just as I Am” on the Victorian rosewood

after supper. They are still soft, as smooth as my face, when she presses my hand,
folds my fingers with hers. *Look at them.* For years she was the back-rub giver,
rubbed so hard that our muscles rang, and to finish, she slapped each back

once for emphasis, leaving us breathless and stung. Now, she smooths one hand
with the other, rubs the gold wedding ring over her finger—she can’t get it off.
She holds the left hand out, shows how her fingers overlap,

follows the line of each finger in a gentle, straightening motion. They fall back
together, graceful as tree roots. *Look at them,* she says. *These are my hands.*
And she touches the tip of my middle finger, a young woman’s finger
that curves at the end, bending towards the pinky. When did they begin to curve
under the tip of the ring finger? She grips my hand more tightly.

Look at them. Look closer.
Journey By Train

1. York to Edinburgh

We passed Durham and Newcastle,
jogged through cityscapes and back
over the moors into oilseed fields cut down
to stalks, fallow and lean in October.
The countryside moved south,
away from me, facing the back of the train.
It was easier to look out this way, with more time
to watch what I’m leaving: harvested fields,
swift, bare rows of earth, then rock.
The North Sea crept in, menacing
the coastline, brooding like water after a storm.
Train-cars flew along rails,
smoothing past a stone cottage,
sudden at the water’s edge. Stones
dangled from the thatch; a rusted
green bicycle leaned against the cottage wall.
On a hillock, there was a man, black cap
in one hand, harms fully extended, waving
open-palmed at the train. They flickered
as they moved, wavering as though in a silent, Chaplin film. It was as if he knew someone on the train, someone watching for him, heading north. His arms were still moving when the train turned inland, and I lost sight.
2. Dublin to Galway

Everything looked like it had just rained:
low stone walls, black cows grazed
along smooth green furrows, spring hay bent
heavily in one direction. The saturated air
beaded on the windows of the train. Gray clouds,
gray sky, seemed to ebb, receding westward
like an ocean wave. The air smelled of salt
and copper or peat. We passed the tall pencil points
of monastery towers, lurching upward
from ruined churches, the leaning, broken teeth
of graveyards, sheep cropping the grass below.
A one room cottage—maybe a hay barn—
swept past. It was cracked and falling,
roofless, in verdant, wet fields.
All that was left was a single eastern wall, reaching up
to a sharp point where there should have been
thatch or slate. A single, centered window cut
even squares of sky.
3. *Marseilles to Nice*

The French Riviera trains were double-decker.

Cars reached upward, window-glass curving
over second floor seats, like an atrium.

From the upper deck, the rock-coast fell
more abruptly: a hint of slope, a rock edge, then nothing
but the postcard view. Emerging from the rock,
the train bent into the half moon arc
of a cove, terraced gardens stepping down
in clipped, green layers, then sheer to turquoise water.

I could only assume there was a sandy beach
at bottom. Small, anchored boats bobbed like moons,
rising with waves, but not drifting
any closer to shore. A new tunnel ahead,
cars burrowed into rock, towards the next cove,
the next crescent of sand. White moon beaches,
empty, cold. The train, ahead, pitched into sunlight,
into another black tunnel.
4. Vienna to Innsbruck

The train, nearing the station, slowed.

We left mountain rock for neatly allotted 
vegetable gardens and tool sheds 
at each garden edge. No one was gardening, 
or hanging laundry: no shirts or dresses 
waved in the train-generated breeze. 
The rectangled gardens were just beginning: 
thin, green rows in dark, wet earth. 
The mud, almost black. One had a flower border: 
tulips, red with yellow piping, dipped 
their heads above a low wire fence. 
They were planted recently, too cold for bulbs. 
Then the gardens stopped; 
industrial stucco and glass expanded 
higher over the view. Brown tiles 
covered roofs and corners, lining edges 
in a medieval brown. Narrow stone 
alleyways flashed between buildings. 
If you looked up at the right moment, 
cobbled alleys gave way
to earth-brown roofs, then snow-topped mountains
that erupted on the far end of town,
peering back.
5. *Siena to Florence*

In Tuscany, wine country, it was too late in the year for anything but brown vines, drying in neat, partitioned rows.

Slender dirt paths combed through them, leaving enough space for one man to walk between the rows. Partially hidden by hills, five square towers overlooked the valley. Stark, medieval stone, roan-colored: russet among white limestone.

An iron cross, made of single bars, topped the tallest, and somewhere inside there must have been a bell.

I could hear its rusted alto ring and fade, ring and fade. Then still.

Not a place of worship, not a fortress; harsh stone angles cutting at neatly divided ground.
6.  *Patras to Athens*

For the first few hours the train pushed past
blue-glass gulf water, then veered inland,
into lemon groves. Waxy leaves swayed upward,
lemons bobbing among the green.
They looked how I imagined they would,
like overgrown bushes, overrun with yellow
fruit that blossomed, breast-like, in clusters
nestled in the leaves. Air smelled of citrus—
lemons ripening, lemons swelling with water,
lemons rotting on the ground beneath
a lemon canopy. Dense with foliage,
it was impossible to see beyond the first tree
in the beginning of a lemon forest.
The train stopped in a clearing, and after a few minutes,
strained forward again. It halted several times,
in openings where scrub grass led out
from the tracks to a sudden uprising
of lemon trees. We were surrounded, contained,
each clearing identical to the one before.
Leaning out of the open, broken window
I could see only trees and the inert train
disappearing into them. Then, slowly, faces,
a handful people, emerged and boarded.
One mother held a small boy who
was sucking on a piece of lemon
as if it were sweet.
7.  *Cairo to Aswan*

When I fell asleep, the Nile was on the left.

I couldn’t see it from my window,

but sometime during the night, the river

crossed over to follow us on the right.

By dawn the Nile had narrowed, brought its edges
closer together. The water cleared

and no longer stank of river mud and gasoline.

On the banks, tall crops of cattails gave way
to measures of clover and sugarcane.

Small wooden shelters shaded skinny donkeys

munching on hay scattered at their feet.

Copses that gave way to cabbage fields,
crops gave way to brush, everything giving way to sand.

Just yards from the water, everything green ended.

Then the short distance to the train track,
then mottled white dunes. We passed through
valleys filled with vegetables and citrus trees,
farms with irrigation, rows of sycamore and mulberry
edging fields. But inevitably the Nile would narrow,
the green would narrow, and crops huddled
at its edge. The sky in the river deepened its blue, the moon traveled and faded at its edge.
Lowcountry, Daniel Island, South Carolina

Under the white arch of Highway 17,

high tide has lifted the sea oats, filled

the narrow channels with water. Wind

touches the eel grass, and it parts in curves,

showing silver instead of darkened mud.

A red-tailed hawk watches from her nest

on a high piling—what used to be a telephone pole,

now a nest—a traffic cone she must have dragged up

years ago juts out from the tangle of pine branches.

Over car exhaust, the mud smells of sweetgrass

and salt. Everything waits. This is how I remember

childhood: traffic over the long cement bridge,

tall green grasses part and wave,

rinse themselves, pause again.
Tattoo

For a week I wouldn’t let you touch it.
The skin, newly inked, raw, oozed with excess pigment and antibiotic cream. It healed into raised black ridges circling in on one another, a maze you would follow with one finger, tracing from center outward and back to center, the thin scabs tangled like wrought iron, or a wax seal.
Eventually, you left. In the shower now, looking back into the mirror, I can see it. It surprises me to find no ridge. It’s smooth, pigment blooming just under the skin—not a flower but a circle, and circles within.
Souvenir Shopping, Monastiraki Square, Athens

In one of a thousand identical shops,
crowded in the winding streets of the Plaka,
vendors sing out to the passing crowd

of the higher quality of their statues,
of the lower pricing of their linens, wink gleefully
at this young American and her brother as we pass.

One of them pretends to believe we are newlyweds,
laughs at the sudden red in my brother’s face,
invites us in, promises a good deal in marble

to fix his mistake. The shelves are narrow
and we move sideways, surrounded by miniature
mythological armies, unmoving, symmetrical.

The small figures gaze impassively, patrician,
a hundred copies of Artemis on the ledge. I can buy her, if I wish:
Artemis bathing, looking over one shoulder;
Artemis in black marble, the height of my hand; Artemis
in alabaster, obscenely baring one breast;
gray-marbled Artemis holds a small bow

against the folds of her dress. Turning, I see
my brother peering at Zeus and Hermes, moving them
around the shelf, facing off in rows, like chess figures.

Apollo tipped over, stares defeated at Zeus, until
I pity him and turn away. On a new shelf, there are
white figures with round faces, heavy bodies.

Labels say they’re from the Cyclades, these smooth-faced
statues, with no discernable eyes, no features but the general shape
of graceful bodies. I see, among vacant male busts

representing knowledge or justice and fertility statues
with entwined couples, a woman, kneeling, bending her head
to look down at the line where her arms become her lap.
Her face is smooth, a featureless oval of white marble,
with an elegant ridge—hair, if you can imagine it—
flowing away from her face, down her back.

She is the Thinking Woman, ancient,
and her shoulders look sorrowful, if stone can feel sorrow.
I don’t know if she is patient or strong. My fingers trace the line
of her cheeks, blank fall of her hair. I fall in love
with her. At a cry, I turn back, see my brother
holding out his hands. He has Pegasus,
alabaster, reared back, wings extended in feathered arcs.
Pegasus in the moment before launching upward,
coiled and shivering with momentum.

Tiny horse-nostrils flare out with imagined, inward breath.
I follow the muscled legs, to my brother’s careful, shaking hands,
to the raised foreleg, cradled, and broken.
Narcissus Lost

I used to think I was damaged:

I had a father who didn’t love me enough,
a mother, too much. It meant I was destined
not to know balance, to withhold everything.

Wisteria vines bloom for a single week in spring,
clusters of lilac-blue flowers hanging like grapes.
Unchecked, they will suffocate a tree, bring it down
in a handful of years. As a child, I played

in the vines, tucked against a pine tree,
ten feet off the ground. I liked the purple, the too-sweet
smell, liked feeling alone and beautiful.

Each spring, before I grew afraid of falling,
my mother would find me there,
told me to come down when I was ready.
Narcissus Found

The poem you would have me write

would be elegant and ornate, and about you.

Or by not being about you, it would be about your absence.

You’d want to be hidden: the azaleas by my door

would dip heavily in the same gesture your shoulders made.

Your scent—sandalwood or maybe cedar—

would linger in every room of the house. It would be

your face looking back at me when I glance in the mirror. And the eyes.

Leaving you there, behind the silvered glass,

your eyes follow me. My mouth opens

your mouth, my face turns your face away. Your hand rises

to your mouth, each time I touch my lips,

feel the soft, forgiving skin. You smile at me.

See, I raise my hand now, and you reach for me.
Interstate 77 South, After Passing Charlotte

Another flat mile, pine trees crowding from the road
to a navy sky—my mother had been driving
for six hours, taking us home.
There was no moon and nothing on the radio.

Summertime, and above us, lightning
passed lazily from one cloud to another.
Each time I remember this, she looks younger.
I look younger. She was wearing my favorite ring,
the pale blue star sapphire she lost once, and that I found
for her, not in the house or the car, but in the tomato bed.
You can only see the star in direct sunlight, so
the ring was muted, like a pearl on her finger.
Witch’s Seat, Loughcrew Cairns, Ireland

Collectively, the hills are known as “Sliabh na Caillighe,” or the “Mountain of the Witch.”

A rectangular stone set into the hillside, as high as my chest—it must have weighed in the thousands of pounds—with a seat worn into the top. Not carved or cut, but chafed until the center smoothed downward, almost shone. Sitting there, my feet dangled over the edge, I could see green squares of barley farms, neatly divided over each hill. I wondered how many women must have sat here, not those Druid-like women with night-colored cloaks and unwashed hair, not beautiful and young, but townswomen,
bent and weathered, who didn’t need to speak
as they climbed, came for centuries and eventually
left this worn, Mesolithic stone, its face carved
with shallow concentric circles, cups, and stars.

No mystery and ritual, no conspiracy, just those
who hiked up a hill, found this massive stone
inviting, the feminine inner curve.
I see her clearly, a young woman—or perhaps
a woman who’s been married for longer
than she hasn’t—barn coat tugged firmly
around her, wind brisk on the hill. The first shock
of cold stone, then its warmth as she settles,
looks back over her land, her house.
What does she see? A gust of wind loosens
her dark hair, and she catches the strands, tucks them
behind an ear. She can see for miles.
In Search of Lost Time

She forgets the little things now, checks
the newspaper every few seconds to reassure herself
of the date, walks to the mailbox and back to the house,
letters on the kitchen table.

Everything reminds her of home: oak trees
leading up a dirt path to the house, smell of honey-suckle
and something wet from the earth—moss, maybe,
or just summer’s humidity.

She seems smaller each visit, perched obediently
on the sun-porch sofa, pats my shoulder as I lean down
to kiss her. She always asks if I’m happy;
I always say yes.

Her last of eight sisters died in February, and since then
she has talked about the farm. Growing up in the country
meant that there was always company, cousins
from the city. She and her sisters
took them riding. They’d circle out from the barn
to the edge of the Rappahannock, then through fields with even rows
of cucumbers. They’d had to stop several times to help
cousins who slipped or fell, couldn’t manage even a pony.

Each time she reaches this part of the story
her voice changes, comes from a different part of her chest.
I see her, boyish, on the chestnut Cerberus: impatient,
bursting forward, abandoning them all for the river.
Tornado Warning

You didn’t need the radio
to tell you that—the sky was enough.
Outside the rain stopped,
nothing moved in green-tinted light.
The air felt like one slow inhale,
holding, not breathing out yet.
It was difficult to wait.
You never anticipated that
sometimes the worst happens.

You knew when your parents
stopped loving each other,
and when your grandfather
began getting lost inside himself.
His body had become tentative.
Your grandmother broke
the leaded crystal vase, the one
her brother, now dead, had given them
for their wedding. She dropped it,
rinsing it in the granite sink for
the hyacinth she clipped
from the garden. She never said
if she had cried, or just swept
the larger pieces into a box.
She had to keep him from seeing.
You knew you had no right
to grieve until you had something
broken to grieve over.