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The Untidy Yard

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THE UNTIDY YARD

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Jennifer A. Falcon

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Dedication

To the people that maintain, repair and inhabit Los Angeles.

THE UNTIDY YARD

by

JENNIFER ANDREA FALCON, B.A.

THESIS

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Poetry and Place: Examining the Los Angeles Cityscape

During the summer of 2013 while researching and writing this manuscript I drove by an old theater in downtown Los Angeles. I parked across the street, took pictures, and watched as a film crew set up for a night shoot. Later that day I told my mother about what I had seen, and she asked me about the theater. I told her how surprised I was that it was used as a filming location because from the outside it looked run down and unkempt. I told her it was on Broadway, and she immediately named it and began to describe how it looked when she was a child. Her description of the Million Dollar Theater greatly differed from what I saw, but my mother hadn't seen the theater in years. She began to tell me about the Spanish theater groups she saw perform at the theater and the Spanish language films that played there. She went into great detail about the buses she rode with my grandmother to get to the theater and how they went as often as possible to see whatever Spanish-language films were playing for the Mexican-American community in the area. These were stories I had never heard, and my usually quiet mother was eager to relay them to me. She admitted to forgetting about going there as a child, and that she hadn't thought about the theater in a long time.

The stories she told me were a clear example of how much personal history exists within the city of Los Angeles. There are stories to be told and experiences from memory and the present that need to be explored. The popular images and media-constructed ideas of Los Angeles focus on the city's wealthy and/or famous citizens or the lower income inhabitants and the violence they are believed to encounter. Those two groups do exist within the city, but they are not the only citizens inhabiting it. Los Angeles' past influenced not only its present, but also the lives of the people that live within the city and county limits. The Million Dollar Theater is not part of the established image of Los Angeles. It is a forgotten and decaying building with a banner advertising it as a filming location. It does not serve as an immediately recognizable background, but it was once a focal point for the Mexican-American community living in the area.

As a Mexican-American girl that was born and raised in Los Angeles I always found it a bit strange that there were so many ideas and images in films, television shows, books and advertisements that depicted a Los Angeles I never recognized. Films like *Less Than Zero*, based on the book of the same title, and television shows like *Beverly Hills, 90210* presented the youth of Los Angeles as wealthy, white and irresponsible. Life in West L.A. consisted of money and beautiful people with access to every pleasure the city had to offer. Films that didn't take place in that part of Los Angeles depicted a very different picture. *Boyz N' the Hood*, *Mi Vida Loca*, and *Blood in Blood Out* portray minorities in Los Angeles as always dealing with or engaging in gang violence. There are incredibly wealthy people living in Los Angeles, and gang violence does exist, but those are not the only experiences of the citizens of Los Angeles. The Los Angeles that existed in the media was never one I encountered in my daily life. There were no shootings on my street. I spent the majority of my childhood safely playing in my front yard, walking to the corner store to buy candy and never directly encountering gang violence. The purpose of this manuscript is to explore, write about and ultimately represent the Los Angeles that exists outside of the popular, media constructed image of the city. *The Untidy Yard* focuses on what is excluded from that constructed image and what exists outside the confines of the constructed images of Los Angeles.

It's important to recognize and understand that from its inception the city of Los Angeles built its reputation on an idea. The idea was based on an image, and that image was of a Los Angeles that was beautiful and close to the Pacific coast. The image was the main selling point to attract people to move west to a city with no industry and a shortage of water. According to *City of Quartz* by Mike Davis the division between the western and eastern part of Los Angeles developed as the result of the real estate market's focus on West L.A. The city became the creature of real-estate capitalism, and the image of beautiful people, homes, and beaches was reused and altered over time to continue to draw people to the area and sell new homes. Ultimately, it is that image of Los Angeles that continues to be sold to the

public. The effects of these constructed images have resulted in the real, but less desirable landscape and the people and lives who were already there – the lives of the construction and service workers that built the city-to be excluded. This manuscript sets out to include them by focusing on the domestic lived experiences of those who live and work on the edge of the accepted images and on the way in which the built landscape of highways and buildings shape those experiences. Particularly, the manuscript focuses on the life of one Mexican-American girl.

The manuscript moves between this speaker's house and the city because it is important to start in the house and then move out into the city. Based on Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, the reason for doing this stems from the notion that our "house is our corner of the world" (4) and as such, it becomes our "very first attachment in the universe" (4) because it is our introduction into the world. A house is a building and a home is a place. Both are places we live in, but through experiences and memories they represent different things in our minds. Memories shape the idea of home, as does music, the landscape, landmarks and various other aspects that make up a culture, because they are outside influences that find their way into the home. In an effort to understand the lived experience of the speaker the manuscript moves beyond that domestic setting, therefore to explore the structures and outside cultures that pressure the domestic space. This is the reason for the inclusion of poems about different sections of the city. The events in these areas influence the true culture of the city, and as such the manuscript must include them because these experiences along with the domestic make for a verifiable account of life and culture within Los Angeles.

Again, the culture of Los Angeles was and is carefully constructed in the media. This is established and well documented. The culture constructed through the images sold to an audience made up of Angelenos and outsiders, however, contrasts with many of the actual cultural experiences of those living in Los Angeles. In an effort to counter the dominant, media images of the city, therefore, this manuscript questions and attempts to move beyond what Raymond Williams' *Marxism and Literature*

describes as “dominant culture.” Williams defines the dominant culture as that which relies on its history to define itself. Culture defined by a limited account of historical facts would not be inclusive because it is the dominant culture that will decide what should and should not be included. Everything left out of the dominant culture “cannot be expressed or subsequently verified,” because it will not allow for the inclusion of experiences, values and meanings of those outside the bourgeoisie to be verified or captured in the culture it presents.

Similarly, the subject of the poems in this collection is that which is ordinarily excluded from the media’s dominant cultural portrayal of Los Angeles. The sole purpose of this focus is to attempt to verify the experience of those excluded by the media’s portrayal of the city and those who live there. The dominant culture’s image of Los Angeles doesn’t include the majority of what each poem addresses, or if it does it presents it as one-dimensional. A question posed and explored within the manuscript, therefore, is what exists outside or beyond the dominant culture. What the manuscript can change, or at the very least enter into the conversation, is the idea that a Los Angeles exists outside of the stereotypical images of the city. In fact, I think it fair to state that the culture of Los Angeles exists in spite of the depictions put forth in the mainstream media by the dominant culture.

The dominant culture may control the images that define the culture, but Williams wrote that “structures of feeling” exist beneath the surface of the dominant culture. The structures of feeling are based in the present. In an attempt to counter the dominant culture, writing must address the present. In addressing the present an attempt is made to understand “elements and their connections in a generation or period” (133). There always exists beneath the dominant culture’s depictions the lives and networks of those marginalized by the dominant culture. My poems seek to verify those lives, by looking particularly at one life and her connections to the city and to others in her life.

Writing about the city and its structure allows for the manuscript to look at what a building, bridge or freeway has become in the present. The poems shed light on what may have existed before, or the

different forms and what they may have meant or continue to mean to the people that interact with them. The buildings downtown and other structures throughout the city serve a greater function than originally addressed during planning and construction. The construction of a building is not about piecing something together, but understanding what that building may mean to those who interact with it everyday. In the current landscape of downtown several buildings have kept their façade, but the inside and surrounding areas have changed. *The Eyes of the Skin* by Pallasmaa urges architects to look beyond the planning of a building and stresses that ultimately the “meaning of any building is beyond architecture; it directs our consciousness back to the world and towards our own sense of self and being” (Pallasmaa, 11). Pallasmaa’s book suggests in other words that to understand a building is to understand how the structure can reflect the experience of those inhabiting it. Conversely bridges, buildings, freeways, parks, streets, and private homes not only make up the landscape of the city, but shape the lives of all those that live within them and the world they comprise.

While a focus on historical, environmental, and social contexts might appear unusual within poetry, there is a tradition of poets writing about place in this way. This is done at times to help understand the lived experience of the individual through lyric poetry. Charles Olson, Susan Briante, and Brenda Coultas each approach writing about place in different ways and employ different techniques in doing so. These poets present their readers with strong images that represent the specific place they write about while also detailing the lived experiences of people that inhabit these places. Charles Olson’s *Maximus Poems*, written about the small fishing town of Gloucester, Massachusetts during the 1950s and 60s, gives a glimpse into the way of life for the residents of Gloucester, Massachusetts. Susan Briante’s *Utopia Minus*, focused on her life in present-day Dallas, Texas presents objects in the city as they are, while simultaneously exploring what they were in an effort to capture the decay of the built environment in simple, but gritty detail. Brenda Coultas’ *A Handmade Museum* focuses on the changing cityscape of

the Bowery neighborhood of Manhattan in the early 2000s, and similarly documents objects or images that then come to represent the place. The works of these poets use the lived experiences, history, and current occurrences of the places they write about to convey to the readers a broader understanding of both the individual life and the place inhabited by these individuals.

Olson's work offers an earlier example of this understanding of place. Olson presents the details of Gloucester in pieces, or fragments throughout the poems, and is subtle in the way he paints the landscape for the reader. The lines "Between Newton and Tantuck Square the tracks/go up hill, the cars/sway as they go around the bend" (Olson, 105) serve as an example of a fragment of a larger picture presented to the reader as part of a picture that exemplifies the lived experiences of the citizens of Gloucester. My work similarly moved through the cityscape of the sections of Los Angeles I wrote about, but unlike Olson I did not create a specific persona for speaker to do so and in several poems the speaker is not clearly identified in an attempt to remain objective.

For example, "1st St. Cemetary" and "Union Station March 2013" aim to create distance to obtain objectivity, but also to try and stay in the present in an attempt to capture the experiences of people living in that place before history or the dominant culture cuts them out of the narrative of the location. Olson's work examined the different layers that shaped Gloucester and made it what it is at the time he wrote about it. His readers saw Gloucester through the eyes of Maximus as he relayed to them information about the city. I attempted to do something similar in the way that I used certain images, such as a person sleeping on a bridge in the early afternoon in "1st St. Cemetary" to depict this person's life in that area and let it speak for the larger issues of homelessness and poverty in that section of Los Angeles. This approach to writing about place also resembles Susan Briante's work in *Utopia Minus*.

Utopia Minus is a book that investigates what is lost, thrown away or abandoned throughout the U.S. landscape. Many of the poems examine the subject in the contexts of history and environment, and they all tend to examine objects as the speaker finds them. In "3000 Block Kings Ln – Demolished

Apartment Complex” the apartment complex is described in great detail, but the focus is only on the images of what it is left of the apartment complex. For example, the poem begins “central set of 8 steps to the courtyard/small rock garden/kidney shaped pool, 8 feet deep,” (Briante 43). The focus is solely on the building. Through the description the idea of what an abandoned apartment complex means to an area and what it may or may not suggest about the lives of people living around that building is hinted at. There are no grand gestures or lines about how devastated this area must be, because the building has come to represent whatever problems or issues exist in that area that led to the abandonment of an entire building. These aren’t poems that only serve to describe these areas of ruins. The speaker explores and lives in these areas. There exists a connection between the speaker and these areas. The connection may not be as a result of being a citizen of that specific place, but in studying them Briante found a way to connect them to her own life, or to the lives of her readers. The connection exists in the details. Briante so excellently captures the specific details of a place that the reader feels as if he/she has been there too. These specific details help establish that connection between the reader and a place he/she may have never visited.

The sections “The Bowery Project” and “An American Movie” in Brenda Coultas’ book *A Handmade Museum* takes the reader through the Bowery neighborhood in lower Manhattan in the early 2000s and slowly introduces us not only to the physical aspects of this place, but also the daily practices of people living there. The poems contain short, quick descriptions and introduce the readers to some of the people mulling about in the area. She describes them, captures them as they go about their business, whatever it may be, but she’s not harping on the harshness of their or of her life. In one stanza of a poem she writes “A Bowery Bum asked ‘Can I talk to you for a minute?’ He burped loudly in my/ear. Later he asked me to look up at the sun where he had written his name,/then to hug him” (Coultas, 16) and in the few lines that make up that stanza, there exists a sense of humanity that may not often be associated with this Bowery Bum. He’s not romanticized. The details of her account are relayed to the reader, but as the

book continues and the readers are given more images of things she sees and finds a bigger picture of what life might be like for the people living in the area at the time is created. Rather than just focus on the interior state of or judgment by the speaker, these poems capture the lived experiences of the people in this place.

The section “An American Movie” is similar. Each poem is an image making up a specific scene. It has the effect of watching a film in the way it pans and scans a scene, zooming in and focusing on important details and images while continually moving through the area. She tracks the movement she makes as she moves through and captures what she sees, “The eye moves to Avenue A and 14th, mural of Princess Di and Mother/Theresa side by side” (Coultas, 55). Certain poems in my manuscript similarly attempt to do this, though not in the same way Coultas scans an area. Rather the hope is that when moving through the manuscript and encountering a poem that focuses only on an object and the image of the object the reader will feel as though they’ve moved through the city in the way that Coultas moves her audience.

It is my goal that poems specific to my own experiences mimic Coultas’ poems in that way. Many of the poems in my manuscript take place in the house that I grew up in, which is still lived in by my parents. This fact allows for several things to happen. I can explore and investigate the ways in which the house has changed physically through the years and the people that played a role in those changes. The house itself can then come to represent and embody some of the dysfunction of the city around it. It becomes altered, things disappear or are replaced, and the people living in the house move around and in response to those changes throughout their daily life without possibly giving much thought to what was lost in the process of change. It was important to write about the different layers that make up the house and the city. It would not be possible to write about the present without acknowledging that something and someone came before and helped to shape what it is now.

The Untidy Yard is split into three sections. Each section addresses and navigates a different issue regarding life in Los Angeles. The entire manuscript aims to represent and present to the readers the lived experiences of one Angeleno and this is done by describing the dysfunction of the cityscape and the experiences of living within that dysfunction. These experiences differ from the constructed images of Los Angeles. The first section begins in the domestic space of the house, and moves out into the neighborhood and surrounding city. The second section takes a closer look at how people navigate that dysfunction, and the final section uses the reactions of people experiencing this dysfunction to describe how they react and ultimately work through it. As a result the second and third sections move back and forth from the city to the domestic space because the poems in these sections are arranged by theme and not only by location.

If the dominant images of Los Angeles are of Hollywood or the Valley, or the beach, or the Westside generally, with its wealth, streets lined with palm trees, manicured lawns, and tourist attractions *The Untidy Yard* begins with the poem “On the Corner of Orah and Hay Ave.” which situates the reader in an area obviously outside of the dominant constructed image of Los Angeles, in the Mexican-American neighborhood of Montebello. The speaker can see the city’s well-known landmarks in the distance, but can’t quite comprehend them because they exist outside of the space the speaker understands. What is depicted as Los Angeles, in other words, does not include the space the speaker occupies. This poem is concerned with conveying to the reader that real lives exist beyond the media-constructed images of the city and that those images are not necessarily known or experienced by the majority of the people that live within the city and county lines.

Beginning in the house allows for the poem to represent and embody the changes that took place over time within the city. Over time the house, like the theater I mention at the beginning of this preface, is altered, things disappear or are replaced, and the people living in the house move around these changes throughout their daily life without possibly giving much thought to what was lost in the process

of change. The interactions between people and the reactions of people experiencing the restructuring of the city or the after-effects of the restructuring serve as a dominant subject throughout the manuscript. There are poems, such as “A Play Date with Marvin and Mary” and “Left Handed Skyhook,” that embrace the lighter childhood memories within the house but many that focus more on the difficulties presented by the larger dysfunction that is the cityscape. These are juxtaposed to give a true a sense of the experience of living in that place during these times.

The idea of work also appears in the first section and throughout the manuscript. Initially work is what goes on in and around the house, in poems such as “Preparing Dinner” and “Summer 1995,” but work is addressed throughout *The Untidy Yard*, as seen in poems in the second and third sections, such as “Mixing Cement” and “At Al & Beas.” The work that is done to the house in these poems accomplishes two very important goals. The first is to show that work must be done on the house. It is not a home with a manicured lawn. It does not stay perfect, nor was it ever in full working order. Likewise, there is dysfunction in the family. Therefore work must be done to maintain and improve the house and the lives of those that inhabit it. This speaks to the fact that this neighborhood consists of the working class. Work is done to improve the house, not only to maintain it. This is very different from the images of a Los Angeles consisting of beautiful mansions in perfect condition.

Home improvement also allows for the creation within the manuscript of a role of the worker. In *The Untidy Yard* this worker is my uncle Andy. He appears in the manuscript much like he did in my childhood. He repairs my parents’ house, alters the landscape of it, adds to the layers of it, and generally improves the lives of the house’s inhabitants, particularly the life of the speaker. Through his work he becomes part of the house, much like the Angelenos that work in and around Los Angeles become part of the structures they encounter. The appearance of a worker exists throughout the manuscript. Work in general is important to this collection of poems because of the type of labor written about. The labor described or hinted at is physical in nature, and while it requires a specific set of skills that are not particularly easy to acquire, this type of labor is generally not seen as glamorous or desirable. I wanted to specifically capture some of the pleasantness of this work, not because the physicality or difficulty is somehow rewarding, but in the experience of learning these tasks or witnessing how people take these

skills and attempt to earn a living based on them.

This idea can be seen for instance in the poem “Summer 1995.” It is more than a recalled memory of the bets my uncle waged with me to get me to help him unload supplies. It sets forth the idea that work is never finished in that my uncle never stopped working. “Dry cement covered knuckles mark the door” of the family home because he has left one job to come, ostensibly, to another. Work occurs constantly. It does not begin and end in once place. This changes the way in which we think about this place. It is not only a landscape to think about in regard to how people live within that space. Thinking about a place must also include those responsible for creating it outside of city planners and other leadership roles.

The second section continues to address the issue of what exists outside the media-constructed images of the city. “The City of Angels at an Airport Gift Shop” directly navigates the experience of understanding that the image of Los Angeles that is put forth in the media is drastically different than the everyday experiences of living in the city. However, it is different than “On the Corner of Orah and Hay Ave.” because the speaker encounters the constructed image in the form of a postcard. The fact that the speaker is aware of what has been left out of the picture does nothing to stop her from purchasing it. It still represents home, despite the knowledge that it’s a false representation. The second section as a result is arranged to depict what was cut out from that postcard and from every image used to represent Los Angeles. Well-known places such as the Hollywood Walk of Fame and newer landmarks such as the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels are explored from different points of view not usually associated with these tourist landmarks.

In “Hollywood Blvd Summer 2012” we do not see the glamorous Hollywood of our fantasies, but the dirt and grime of the area. It’s a place where tourists gather and excitedly walk down taking pictures, but the only difference between this sidewalk and any other in Hollywood are the stars embedded in the concrete. Close to the shopping centers and restaurants this area is mostly clean, and so that is what is most often associated with this landmark. However, the Hollywood Walk of Fame is fifteen blocks long along Hollywood Boulevard and three blocks along Vine Street. It’s much longer than people anticipate and since it stretches so long down Hollywood Boulevard the landscape changes the farther away you

are from its center. This poem attempts to depict what occurs at the end of the walk of fame, where “I crush cigarettes into the pavement/with my heels, scattering them/around five point stars with gold/” because the poem is mostly concerned with the alternative experiences of this landmark.

Similar themes are addressed in “Our Lady of the Angels Cathedral March 2013.” This is a newer structure in Downtown Los Angeles. Its position above the 101 Freeway is unique because of the walkway with glass windows that allow for visitors to look out onto the freeway. The speaker in the poem looks out and scans the area visible through these windows. The speaker is able to see the decay over time of the freeway that cuts through the city. In this poem the freeway represents the city’s past with the faded murals from the 1984 Olympics and the obvious sections of the freeway that are in need of repaving, and the cathedral is the new structure stacked above it. The layers that exist all throughout the city exist within this poem. The present is built right on top of the past.

This theme is continued in the third section, but these poems move beyond presenting the reader with these ideas. These poems do that, but they also capture the way in which people navigate these issues. In “Mariachi Plaza March 2013” we see mariachi groups trying to attract the attention of potential customers. The poem about Mariachi Plaza is not only about Mariachi groups trying to lure in a customer or book a job. The poem attempts to put on display for the reader more than the struggle to find work, but the dramatic flair in which they play music, and the amount of time it would take a person to learn how to do that. It also draws attention to the fact that the mariachis are ultimately ignored when the potential customers are not in need or want of that specific service. It addresses the culture and roots of the Mexican and Mexican-American people that have long made up a large percentage of the population of Los Angeles and L.A. County. The plaza itself is located above a metro station. The carving of the city continues, though now city planners have moved below ground in some areas. Something very old, this traditional music is played above a somewhat new subway system. The people in the area react to these changes by continuing to do what they’ve always done. They play music and hustle for work.

This type of work and other work, such as construction, help to mold the city. These groups of musicians become part of the current culture while simultaneously commenting on the cultural history of

the inhabitants. In thinking about what a building means to those that encounter it, it became clear that I could not ignore the people that worked to build them. They became part of the many layers of history and action that led to the eventual construction or change in appearance to the building. They are also often forgotten as the finished product garners more attention than the work in process it once was. A building in ruins, condemned or abandoned would receive more attention than those responsible for working to initially build it. “My Uncle Built the Getty” explores this very issue. The Getty is a popular museum in West L.A. The outside entryway and plaza are arguably as beautiful as the art objects inside, but visitors tend to bypass the plaza for the artwork inside and in the process they ignore the workers who spent years of their lives building the museum and what they created.

This poem was chosen to end the manuscript because like the poem that began the collection it locates the reader in a specific place. It goes beyond experience of encountering something on the other side of the city, however; rather, it concerns itself with the fact that the work that went into building this incredibly popular museum should not be ignored. In the view of the dominant culture, the lives of those responsible for its construction are insignificant to the finished product. The personal experience of the people that built it isn't part of the narrative, and so my uncle who was part of the construction crew that built it is erased from it. Visitors “point at the sculptures with eyes/looking down but not low enough to admire the tile below their feet,” and so they don't think about how that tile got there or the workers who put it down. In seeing workers like my Uncle Andy building the entry plaza to the Getty Museum or repairing something in my house, we see how everyday people refuse to be crushed by the dysfunction of the place and society around them, but instead use skill, initiative and sometimes brute force to navigate a world that marginalizes them. The third section of the manuscript offers an alternative to bleaker poems in the collection, suggesting the possibility not simply of survival, but of finding happiness in an otherwise difficult and dysfunctional world

These ideas about what once was, what has been erased, what remains, and what is now in its place are addressed throughout the poems. There are layers all throughout the city landscape and the domestic space that account for the creation and alteration of those spaces, and within each layer exists a person, or group of people responsible for those changes. These people and the people that interact with their

work before, during and after its completion make up a lot of the lived experiences of the city. These are the experiences that are cut from the dominant constructed images that supposedly detail what life is like inside the city of Los Angeles. The poems in *The Untidy Yard* attempt to reconstruct those dominant images not by ignoring them, but by including them so that different interactions and points of view can be expressed in association with them. The simple truth is that these images are such a large part of the city's identity that divorcing from them would be impossible. This does not, however, mean that an altering or remodeling of these images to include different types of lived experiences would be impossible to achieve. Before a more inclusive depiction of Los Angeles can exist, its history of excluding specific people and their experiences must be addressed so that moving forward, any new construction will include them.

The Untidy Yard

I.

On the Corner of Orah and Hay Ave.

If you squint your eyes, clamp your lashes down and blur
your vision, then you might see the cluster of buildings —

those skyscrapers standing tall in the haze of smog reigning
supreme. The kings and queens of the concrete jungle dominate

the skyline on a clear day. After the rain cleans the skies, close
your eyes and ignore the sirens. Replace them with the bold letters

of the Hollywood sign. Its white paint clashes against the dead brush
of the hillside. Nine miles away from home you wouldn't hear the gun

fire from your street corner. These landmarks you know only because
your television displays them during a Lakers game. The city shines

for millions. You might forget the nighttime drills of double checking
the locks on the windows, the dead bolts clicking over and over again,

or waking up to a censor light illuminating your room. Holding your
breath, you listen to the leaves scatter across the patio. They'll break

under a foot, but if they scrape against the cement you're safe. It was
only a cat dashing through. The light will go out in a few minutes.

Two Blocks Away

Scales and jazz riffs fill my neighborhood
and I imagine the way his fingers press
down. Flattened tips firm over the valves

quickly alternating. A smooth transition
in notes blare out of the horn and the midday
sunlight must reflect so bright that his eyes

shut in concentration. He listens to the sound
bounce and swirl across Ashiya Park. Full
and warm notes reach my ear through

an open window. Friday afternoon
solos orchestrate the wind, dead
leaves march along the concrete in my backyard.

Street Games

My slip-on shoes can't dangle
from the wires above the street.
The worn out canvas checkerboard
patterns and waffle rubber bottoms
can't be strung together

to hang over earthquake-raised
sidewalks ripped apart by city
tree roots neighborhood kids
scrape their fingers against.
We dig out rocks in the cracks

to skip and roll down the street
for target practice. We'll pull
our arms back, aiming to knock
down sun torn shoes of older
siblings and Orah Ave. heroes.

Summer 1995

Dry cement covered knuckles mark the door. His knock splinters the wood below the peephole. He says gloved hands slow his work. I follow his thumb to a wheelbarrow demanding my attention in the driveway, ready to put

my eleven-year-old arms to use. I elbow my way through boxes and slide a mini billiards table to the earthquake crack in the middle of the garage, a shark in training waiting for lessons. The wager of the day is to wheel bags of cement

from the driveway to the back yard. The stick glides through his fingers. He lines up a steady shot and sinks the eight ball. Mustache rising and teeth visible for the first time that afternoon, his smile makes losing worth it. He leans

against the wall below the stereo, flipping the switch to the oldies station, nodding toward the wheelbarrow before covering the back of my neck with his palm he calls out a new challenge to the best two out of three.

Preparing Dinner

Between pulling the roast out of the Crock-Pot
and warming up tortillas my mother tells me

about the East L.A. walkouts in '68. Her knife
lingers over the meat and details. Cutting the fat

from the side of our dinner she says she can see
the face of the teacher pulling her out of the crowd.

Together from a classroom they watched police beat
her friends on the sidewalk below. Her palm slams

down on the burner that won't ignite without a strike.
The blue and yellow light flickers, and my mother

comes back to the end of 1968 as she rushes through
her brother's death in Vietnam. I set the table. She snuck

out of the house to watch a live feed of Woodstock
at the ABC studio. She pauses to sing a line from

a John Sebastian song before moving on to the summer
of '70, protesting the war in Laguna Park, and sets

our dinner at the center of the table before running
away into escaping L.A.P.D. batons meeting her bones.

She says my uncle with his Stanford ID and Ivy League
clothes saved my mom and uncle when the police stopped

their car a block from home. Her voice quivers
when she calls my sisters and father to the table for dinner.

Saturdays with Sgt. Falcon

Say my dad had a son, then the rocks and dirt
in the backyard would've been put to better use,
and playing Army with that Falcon might have
held his interest longer than my scattered
battlefield of weapons built of rubber bands

and twigs. He laughed at the bow and arrows
I made for our imaginary fight. I nudged them
all alongside me with my forearm. Staying
low to the ground, I perfected the Army crawl
he taught me by propelling myself forward

with a push off the ground from my knees,
a dig in the dirt with my elbows, keeping
my head down and eyes up for the tennis
ball grenades. He rolled them towards
the Army helmet drooped over the side

of my head. He tested my reflexes from the lawn
chair. My six-year-old hands chucked them
as quickly as I could at the wall of ivy
behind him. Water sputtered out of the hose
in his hand onto the patch of dead grass to his left.

Boyle Heights March 2013

My mother talks about the old neighborhood
as we drive down Concord St. She points out

what has changed and what is the same. Nothing
looks different to me. The cracks in the bricks

still splinter the heads of the children on murals
alongside the 5 freeway. Our Lady of Guadalupe

appears on the side of every store to keep taggers
from bombing the buildings. She blinks,

but tears don't fall when we pass her childhood
home. The chain link fence sags and my grandfather's

garden is a doghouse filled with tools to cut grass
that the new owners replaced with cement. Corn

doesn't grow in the backyard and we can't
see what's left of my grandfather's toolshed.

Driving Lessons

Dark sunglasses rest on the bridge
of my nose, keeping the sunlight

breaching through pockets of smog
from my eyes. I pinch the curve

of the steering wheel, my short nails
dig for control. At red lights

my windows remain down. I lean
back and pose, listening to music

in other cars flowing into my car
at red lights. Their phone conversations

echo through car speakers. I hook
my fingers around 10 and 2 when

the sunglasses come off. Streetlights
flicker and windows slide up.

A Silent Riot

The sky over our house was silent
the night of the Rodney King verdict
but on TV people rush to the man
on the ground beside a red truck.

Concrete flies and the papers call it
the night Beirut came to downtown
LA. Fifteen miles away men and women
burned and crushed their justice.

I kneeled and muttered memorized
prayers at the television, at an unconscious
man, and I hoped it would stop before
Saved by the Bell started.

Friday Night Film Fest

After watching Grease as a kid I thought
the L.A. River was a drag strip. In my mind
cars and motorcycles broke through chain
link fences to race along the trickle of water

during the dry season. I saw the work of taggers
on the embankments. Late at night they crouch
low to ground and clutch spray cans in their hands
to cover each other's names in early morning

darkness to avoid arrest. Graffiti changed daily from
Frogtown street names to avenue numbers. I kept
a diary of the greens and whites that crossed out reds
and blacks that don't stay clean long enough to fade.

Identity by Lines of Demarcation

An Angeleno is not born
in West Hollywood or West L.A.
among the neon lights and dim
by Vegas standards Billboards

on Sunset and Hollywood Blvd
flinging a steady light down onto
people scattered around sidewalks
waiting to get through the doors.

Chatter of conquests over liquor
and employers mix together with
their reflections on large glass
windows. Café views and storefronts

match the sprawling view from mansions
in the hills above. The freeways
cut through lines of demarcation
like chain links. Angelenos are born

in the county limits where
broken benches at the bus
stops take them to the suburbs
East of the city. Their neighbors

with slightly more money hold
onto their love for the Dodgers
and Lakers to make up for living
just outside the city limits.

Wilshire Blvd. March 2013

They dig their heels in for the night along
Miracle Mile among stacks of newspapers

and bottles ripping through trash bags piled
inside shopping carts nestled against storefronts

on Wilshire Blvd. Aluminum cans rattle
inside the cardboard boxes when BMW's pass

through Museum Row. "War/Photography:
Images of Armed Conflict and Its Aftermath"

banners tied to street lights advertising the new
exhibit hang over men and women burrowing

into the doorways of stores closed hours before
sunset, their feet slip through the metal racks.

After Work

Behind Albert's we stand guard
over the truck bed filled with newspaper
bundles we'll unload and recycle

in the morning. Table cloth headlines
from last week's unsold L.A. Times
spark conversation about the rise

in Malibu beach homes for sale,
the tally of homicide victims in L.A.
County. Montebello police slow

to peek at our unwrapped
carne asada burritos stuffed
with French fries and chile verde.

Family Night at Dodger Stadium

The best seats are field level,
adjacent to the dugouts. Dining
tables along the 1st and 3rd baselines
hold our dinner of Dodger dogs
and peanuts passed down the row.
Somewhere behind our seats I hear
oil popping in a pan in a kitchen
torn down between 1959 and 1962.
Brothers and sisters played stickball
in the dirt. We grab our knees
as balls fly out over centerfield.

Pico Park July 2013

Between Durfee Rd. and the 605 freeway on Beverly Blvd. green text scrolls across the Pico Park sign standing among the trees in the parking lot facing stopped traffic, “English pronunciation made easy for senior citizens,” and other announcements timed to match the traffic light a block away.

II.

The City of Angels at an Airport Gift Shop

She's not there in the fronds of the palm trees planted
in a straight line. I can't find her fanned out over
the street in a pocket of shade offering temporary relief
for the homeless man dragging his cart down the sidewalk
cropped from the view of the post card in my hand
to include even hedges and the Pacific on his right,
but not the discarded chip bags cluttering the gutters
around him. Stomped out cigarette butts clump together
in front of the bus stops lining Santa Monica Blvd.
Aluminum cans chase cars outside the frayed edges
of the mishandled paper product on a shelf. Trinkets
brandish a Los Angeles I've never seen. Scattered
across the display of shot glasses and posters, and I'll
buy a few things, secure pieces of someone else's
crafted memory in my carry on. Then slant the tattered
post card up against my kitchen window with shot glasses
holding it in place on the windowsill display among
ornaments in a neat row teetering on the edge.

Taco Truck on 1st and Breed

The cars weave between mechanics
lowering gates and locking for the day

in the center of the gravel parking lot.
Rocks bounce away from sputtering

washing machines and strike cars
outside appliance and auto repair shops.

Men twist tools in motors, anxious
to leave before dim streetlights hide

the taco truck patrons navigating through
the cars and toolboxes on 1st and Breed.

Friday night carne asada sizzles. The rising
smoke signals early arrivals to reverse

their cars up against the gates. We cover
our car trunks with tacos, beans, rice

and beer bottles as parking lot dining begins.
Nearby L.A.P.D. officers start the new shift.

Hollywood Blvd. Summer 2012

I crush cigarettes into the pavement
with my heels, scattering them
around five point stars with gold
accents and smeared wads of gum.

Security guards hover over loiterers
attracted to tourists paying tribute
with flowers arranged around letters
commemorating forgotten careers.

The stars in Los Angeles
fade into the sidewalk
amongst worn black stone
around pale red cutouts.

Lorena Street 2013

Pale blue
painted plywood
18 cans of Bud Light
Including Tax And CRV
Cost 14.69!
The Guadalajara Market
now proudly accepts
VISA and Mastercard.

At the Bus Stop

Cars slow and drivers
use idle time to take
a look head to toe
at the clothes of people

waiting for the 40 going
downtown at 6:10. Splinters
stab at skin through polyester
uniforms. Advertisements

rub off marking their clothes.
At the green light car tires roll
forward, kicking up dust
as debris floats into their hair.

Our Lady of the Angels Cathedral March 2013

I press my forehead against the wall
embracing the three inch thick glass built
to keep noise down. It cools my skin
as my breath fogs the view of the cars

and the weaving pattern they make
moving in and out of traffic on the 101
freeway below. My nose flattens,
smashing into glass above downtown

traffic during my lunch hour. I strain
to hear the bass rattling trunks
and modified exhaust disrupting
the beat. I imagine drivers singing

along as they pound horns to clear
a path for themselves. I close my eyes
to ride shotgun with them but open
them to the ghost I've made

on the window at the wrist of an angel
etched into the glass. Her wings blur
the cracked concrete walls along this
section of the freeway. Indentations

left behind by the trucks travelling
through the space between her fingers.
She does her best to distract
from faded murals along the edge

of the 101, the satellites in space
amid Greek gods, and kids jumping
rope in a line while toddlers chase
after them with a basketball in their hands.

Andaz Hotel January 2012

The Wilshire district skyscrapers
shrink against the mountains
in the window facing downtown

but dominate the clubs along Sunset
towering over the blinking marquees.
Lyrics from Los Angeles bands pasted

in the corner of the glass window, Jim
Morrison invites us to set the night
on fire from couches situated to give

guests the best view to stare out at
Hollywood while sipping on
drinks from the mini bar.

1st Street Cemetery

He sleeps face down
on the sidewalk wrapped
in blankets under the shade
of the First Street Bridge.

Flowers wilt, their petals
break away from a circle
of unlit candles with pictures
of Our Lady of Guadalupe

and the Sacred Heart of Jesus
glued to glass. He twists his
ankles in the tattered blankets
rolling a candle into the gutter.

Dinner Conversation

The light from the setting sun breaks through
the kitchen window. My mother scrapes
a serving spoon across the bottom of the pot.

She speaks to the soup. Her words hit chicken
and vegetables. Malignant tumor, like a handful
of grapes growing in the breast that nursed

me eighteen years after she left the university
for me. Stirring a serving spoon to cool dinner,
promises to attend my college graduation.

Mixing Cement

Fresh lines break through the splashes
of white over the red ridges and take
over the memories of watching my uncle
firmly set each brick in place. I stood

over his orange wheelbarrow mixing
concrete with ten-year-old arms too
scrawny for the task. His voice rose
over the squeals from the park opposite

the wall of leaves. His tells me to dig
deep, then stir, and scoop my work into
a cup to test consistency have faded over
time into the echo of his teasing words

that bounced against the green louder
than playground noise. After I flipped
the cup over, and watched the sand, water,
gravel and cement collapse into a watery mess.

Saturday Morning Repair Shop Traffic

The muffled bass and trumpets rattle
in blown out speakers from inside
the garage of Chuy's Auto Electric.

Red, white and blue paint chips
fall from the faded wood sign above
scattering across the sidewalk

and sticking to oil stains in the street.
Wood splintered from the sign wedge
into the tire tread of cars and trucks backed

Up at the Cesar Chavez exit off the 710
freeway in East L.A. They creep before
making the illegal left into the shop.

At Al & Bea's

He pushes neatly folded bills into their hands
after they slide his food through the opening

in the metal bars and smiles into the paper plate
rubbing against his button up shirt. He carries it

to the picnic table in the back, and sits to face
1st street. He points to the stores where he shopped

as a kid, the liquor store with cheap ice cream,
and the corner market with the pot pie special,

10 pies for a dollar, one for each of his siblings.
He wipes grease from his lip with a napkin before

tucking it under the plate on the dusty table. My father
tips the cooks more than the price of his burrito and tostada.

White Fences

Below the 3rd and 4th St. bridges
that lead commuters to and from
downtown, white paint, high
and tight on concrete legs

fence off the gang territory
from drivers searching for shortcuts
through the neighborhood below
the bridge to avoid the traffic.

Cruising

On Sundays they rolled steadily like a high tide
creeping in the night. Low and slow down Whittier
Blvd. past bridal dress and muffler repair shops
in freshly waxed front lawn washed low riders.

Classic cars painted Lakers purple and gold, Dodgers
blue or silver and black mimicking the mystique
of their beloved Raiders. Before I could sit shotgun
with my arm dangling against the side of the car door

with my sleeves rolled up careful not to scratch the paint,
traffic cones will stop us from merging into turning lanes.
The cars can't make left hand turns to turn around
and coast down the other side of the street.

Curtains

I know the Santa Ana winds sucked the curtains
with blue trim in and spit them out towards the ceiling.

I remember that they drifted up and pushed into
the screen as I sat in the bathtub splashing water,

but that blue thread that stuck to the screen was gone
when I returned home on break from school and saw

the bathroom my parents remodeled
for the first time. I leaned against granite counters

next to my dad as my mom described the changes. Standing
in the bathroom as an adult I can still hear my sister's feet

pounding on the hardwood floors and the splashing water
hitting the old green tile my sister had to mop up after

she lunged into the bathwater to separate my father from me
and she held me until she finished mumbling Hail Mary's.

Then my dad pretended not to hear our cries after he held
my head under water for making a mess in the bathroom.

He ignored not to hear us when he used the towel behind him
to dry his hands, like he is now, as my mother talks about picking

the right the colors to accent the shower they have now that
they took out the old bathtub I almost drowned in at four years old.

A Dinner Ritual

The record spins. The pops and hisses
play with The Spinners and Stylistics
through speakers in the corner draped
by thinning curtains. My father whistles
and taps his fingertips against the top

of the empty aluminum Pepsi can adjacent
to the plate across from me. I hum
at the dining room table. He stares
stopping me with a glance towards
my uncle's dusty, torn and empty chair.

He sat beside us for years singing songs
in our ears. The fading song anchors us
to our seats. The winter air breezes through
the cracked window he promised to fix
for us before the weather started to cool.

On the Day Andy Died

My sister's feet hang
over the rungs
of my bunk bed ladder.

Her toes flex in the air,
fanning out as my clothes
slap against the suitcase lining

as I pack. The noise interrupts
the rolling of her heels
over the metal on beat with Prince's

"Purple Rain." We're listening
on repeat. For the first time
in an hour we don't talk

about the plucking of guitar strings,
and how they quiver through the stereo
filling my room with more than our cries.

Her shoulders rise, and then jerk during
the solo. Her body shakes and she
knocks the blinds into the window

when the cymbals crash.
I don't hum along
as the song starts again.

III.

Home Repairs

The front door sticks to the frame
when it rains. White paint etches
into stained wood on mornings
when the fog rolls in.

During the colder months
as the rain rolls in
we lower our shoulders
against the door and push.

Mariachi Plaza March 2013

Sects of mariachis serenade cars
at the red light on First and Boyle.

The metal on their charro suits
sway and jiggle as they circle—

the street corner battling
the Gold Line grumbling below

for an audience. Jumbled notes hang
in the trumpet-blown air. Sweaty

hands swipe at strings. Their fingertips jab
at valves bartering for an afternoon of work.

Liquor Store Murals

Gray paint covers jagged white streaks on the liquor store wall painted over the names of local taggers. Black scrawls of letters visible under the streetlight spotlight weave in and around themselves, and curving back to scribble off the edge of their concrete canvas.

Union Station March 2013

The Counter Terrorism Unit
wrestles their disagreement
with the homeless man shouting

about the white men holding him
down. His spit hits their boots
and I hear him shout

God's white and so is the goddess
with gold hair before their fingers
wrap around his neck.

Across the room rough-skinned fingers
tighten around the front page of the Times
shielding a businessman from the scuffle.

A Play Date with Marvin and Mary

I never knew what a needle could do
until I dropped one onto the only Marvin
Gaye and Mary Wells record in existence.

When she quivered that she almost lost
her mind I pressed my ear to the speaker cloth,
wanting inside the voice tickling my ear.

The notes of the vibraharp clustered like record
grooves on my skin, flittering through the speakers
as Mary swayed away her loneliness. I nestle closer

and squeeze the album cover as I trace her face
with my fingertip, circling around half a smile
and eyeliner angled up toward the skies they sang about.

Left Handed Skyhook

The frayed bottoms of my uncle Andy's
Levis rub against his tan work boots.
Steel-toes skid across the driveway
under the hoop nailed to the roof.

Flakes of skin fall with the ball
from his calloused fingertips.
He pivots and twists away,
and the ball rainbows over me.

Courtside after a Lakers Game December 2012

The purple and gold confetti floats
down. The paper booming out
of the cannons twists, scratching at
exposed skin and tangling knots in hair.

Randy Newman's "I Love L.A."
hammers in the air while the wood
court trembles under the stomping
feet of kids rushing from the aisles.

When the broom-wielding clean up crews
reach the court Jack and other
Hollywood regulars turn their backs,
sneaking through a crack in velvet curtains.

Dent in the Wall

The tape along the edge
of the Sublime poster
won't stick to the wall.
Paint peels around the broken

plaster fluttering in the air
and landing at my bare feet.
I push at the paper tearing
the corner and flatten it over

the chunk of missing texture
coat. A thumb full of something
would fill it, but my parents never
fixed the mark the dresser

left behind when my dad threw it
into the wall, wedging it above
me as I scurried into the closet
safe from the falling drawers.

Sliding

I hurl myself over
the edge rolling
down the hill. Fingers
graze smiles etched
into the grass with
bass drum heart beats,

and open mouths sucking
in air to belt out a note
of joy. We make smog
filled skies a perfect
dream over the summer's
dead grass. The brown

dirt surrounding the new
swings and slick hot slides
burn our bare feet.
We run away when
older kids with bikes
and bats enter the city park.

Family Outing

Chick Hearn declares
the game was in the refrigerator
when the sofa cushion under
my dad creaks when he jumps

up to open the back door
and listen to the sounds
of the night. Car horns squeal
long after he closes the door

behind him. He wraps fingers
around his truck keys. We obey
his barked orders to climb into
the cab, buckling up quickly

when he peels out of the driveway
towards the direction he believes
the gunshots came from. Outside
the apartments on Garfield Ave.

people mill about on the sidewalk
fingers pointing in different directions
as the police arrive to question
them about tonight's drive-by.

Kurtis Blow Old School Show

I have to set the boombox in the corner to listen
to a children's story. Slick Rick narrates

the dangers of hanging with the wrong crowd.
The kids up the block huddle around the stop sign

to wait for open-windowed cars rolled to harass drivers
rapping lines from my favorite songs. If I don't extend

the antenna at the right angle, point it toward the lamp
our neighbor gave me in the opposite corner beside

the open window, then I won't be able to hear the old
school rap show on Sundays from 6 to 9.

Leaving LAX

Steer the car away
from the airport and

take me to East L.A..
Speed on the freeways,

but please don't miss
our exit. Stop at Albert's

Burritos on Beverly
and Garfield. Luis will

wave from the drive-thru
window. Scan the radio

until we hear 2Pac. Turn
him up. Lower the windows

and help me count the palm
trees in East Los leaning left

towards the Pacific. In movies
they line the streets but I see

only five here. The low
riders outnumber the trees.

A Conversation with a Transplant

I hear about the hours your back curves
against the leather of your car seat, idling
engines in traffic, smog making afternoon jogs
hazardous, but nothing of the exhaust filtering
its way through your BMW parked outside
the new condo in the new DTLA.
Its sidewalk newly coated with palm trees
low to the ground. Sodded grass distracts
from the Alliso Village housing projects lowering
property value before they met a wrecking ball
to build your Los Angeles. On this street I don't
always remember the details of Dodger Stadium's past.
Women hauled from their homes in Chavez
Ravine. Eminent domain invoked to build a center
for 72 suburbs encroaching on the stadium. 50
years later my car door slams behind me, and my
dad's childhood home, the two rooms for 10
kids he pointed out every time we drove passed
crumbles under the construction of your home.

The Last Game of the Season

Days before they discover the cancer
we climb the stairs at Dodger Stadium
and drink beer to toast

to another mediocre season. Bats crack
for hours, runs come in and we laugh
with strangers. Between innings

we pose with tall boys of overpriced
Mexican beer – proof we never did
escape the neighborhood.

In My Dad's Cluttered Garage

The wires snake red and black
across the shelf Uncle Andy
nailed into the wall

in the summer of '95, when he
spoiled songs by reciting lyrics
before they were sung. He found love

on a two way street, but lost it
on a lonely highway, before
her voice strained to send sadness.

Billy Paul crooned he had a thing
going on with Mrs. Jones long after
Andy struggled to hit the high note.

He leaned against that countertop
and closed his eyes while Otis sang,
steel toe boots on beat, red

laces bounced against tattered denim.
On Sundays he washed our cars
on the lawn and we sang together,

but the Four Tops don't sing that same
old song anymore and the speakers
stay close to the wall, peeking out

from beneath the sheet covering them,
I sort through the toolboxes he left behind
wiping away dust clinging to the grease.

My Uncle Built the Getty

People around me stop to take pictures. They pull cellphones
out of jean pockets and remove digital cameras from cases
to capture the moment before they enter the city's best museum.

They pose and fidget between photos, turning their heads to look
at the building behind them and move around me to take the stairs
two at a time. A few pause at statues and sculptures on display

to the right of the stairs. They point at the sculptures with eyes
looking down but not low enough to admire the tile below their feet.
I think it's marble my sneaker taps against, but I can't remember

because I was about ten when you started working on the Getty project.
You broke your drive home at the end of the day with a visit
to play basketball with me in the driveway, and reveling in your victory

you'd turn the radio dial to the oldies station and nod your head in time
with The Chi-Lites, I can hear you whistling and humming along to this
station over the years it took you to lay the tile in the entrance of the Getty.

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Vita

Jennifer Andrea Falcon was born in 1984 in Montebello, California to Joe and Magdalena Falcon. She was raised in Montebello, California and attended the local Catholic schools before graduating from St. Paul High School in 2002. After graduation, Jennifer moved to Columbus, Ohio where she earned her Bachelor of Arts in English from The Ohio State University in 2008. Jennifer taught English 1311: Expos. English Composition, and English 1312: Research at UTEP.

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