

DIAMONDS ON A FLAGPOLE:  
A COLLECTION OF JOURNEYS

By

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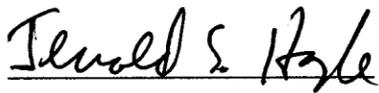
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A Thesis Submitted to the Honors College  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Bachelors degree  
With Honors in  
English

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

M A Y 2 0 1 2

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Degree title (eg BA, BS, BSE, BSB, BFA): <b>BA</b>	
Honors area (eg Molecular and Cellular Biology, English, Studio Art): <b>ENGLISH</b>	
Date thesis submitted to Honors College: <b>MAY 2nd, 2012</b>	
Title of Honors thesis:  <b>DIAMONDS ON A FLAGPOLE: A COLLECTION OF JOURNEYS</b>	
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Last updated: Nov 15, 2009

## ABSTRACT

Diamonds on a Flagpole is an original collection of poetry exploring the theme of journeys. In its most basic definition, a journey is a change, whether in a physical location, moment of understanding, or emotional state. Physical, intellectual and emotional journeys are represented through images, places, and language. A distinctive narrative style grounds the reader within time and space to create vivid scenes. These poems are inspired by traveling, childhood memories, relationships, and everyday occurrences. Each journey encountered in this collection is a unique moment on a larger scale: a diamond on a flagpole.

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In today's age, the word 'journey' has lost much of its meaning. As it is entirely possible to cross halfway around the world in less than twenty-four hours, we take travel for granted. Road trips, family vacations, even studying abroad, are all privileges that many students fail to appreciate. I was one of those students. In the summer of 2011, I studied for five weeks in Orvieto, Italy through the Arizona in Italy program. It was not until I opened my apartment window for the first time and saw the sun setting in across foreign hills that I realized what I had set out to do. Traveling to Italy was only part of my journey that summer. My experiences and personal growth inspired me to use journeys as my theme for my thesis.

When I first sat down with John Melillo to discuss my thesis, I wasn't even sure what I meant by the word 'journey.' At the time, all I knew was that it meant some sort of change. John sent me to a dictionary so that I could get a greater understanding of what I was embarking upon. I discovered that it came from the Old French word 'jornee'; it transitioned into the French word 'journee', which meant day or a day's travel. Before the age of airplanes and automobiles, a journey would have been limited to however far you could travel during daylight hours. For me, this definition meant that time is a key concept to journeys. Physical journeys take place in time and space: they have an origin, a destination, and a motivation. Emotional journeys can be defined as a significant change in emotional state that can be pinpointed to a certain moment in time. Intellectual journeys are changes in a state of understanding, ones that deal with the acquisition of knowledge. These three types of journeys are not limited to positive experiences; negative experiences are also changes.

In order to delve deeper into the world of journeys, I read several varied works of both fiction and poetry. Homer's The Odyssey is perhaps one of the most famous journeys in literature. Odysseus' unwavering determination to finally return home confirmed my theory that motivation and destination are necessary in a physical journey. Jack Kerouac's On The Road also highlighted those two ideas. These two works are from vastly different time periods but contain many of the same themes about home and traveling. I also read Gulliver's Travels, Heart of Darkness, and Samuel Johnson's The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia. These three novels give similar commentaries on the nature of journeys, especially the emotional and intellectual implications.

I also read Eleni Sikélianòs' book of poetry, The California Poem. She attempts to capture the entire state of California within a poem, accompanied by photos, diagrams, and other media. The entire poem is a physical movement throughout the state but with heavy emotional overtones. I attempted to replicate this particular style within my own work. I also read Sandra Alcosser's Except by Nature, a collection of smaller journeys. To add to the variety of works I read a travel narrative piece by Tony Perrottet. Pagan Holiday reflected the personal nature of journeys that I knew would be the focus of my thesis. The unexpected opportunities of travel, knowledge, and emotions create unique experiences.

The final poem in my collection was the first written. It was actually written during my study abroad experience in Italy. I had woken up from a vivid dream and hastily scribbled down the lines. The images and emotions within this poem are meant to be a culmination of all my

experiences, both in reality and in writing this thesis. The idea of diamonds on a flagpole came from a class I had taken with the immensely talented Richard Siken. He explained to us that within our poems, there were little moments substantially more interesting than the poem as a whole. He referred to them as ‘diamonds on a flagpole.’ His class, and my Italian dream, shaped the focus of my thesis to small unique moments. I feel that my collection represents the most important journeys in my life, from walking down the street to losing a loved one. These are the diamonds on my own flagpole.

Diamonds from Far Away:  
Physical Journeys

## Canto CXXI

'I came into a place devoid of light'

-Ezra Pound, Canto XIV

*Io venni in luogo d'ogni luce muto:*

the broken spine of Ezra Pounds' letters rests on green metal  
the precise shade of the Venetian lagoon.

The spray of the waves on my fingertips  
felt just as cool as the bookshelf;

his letters are lost in a sea of collected poems,  
just as his grave is lost among speckled red and gray marble.

*Io venni in luogo d'ogni luce muto:*

I've stood on the edge of Isola di San Michele,  
with only the sound of waves and impatient sea gulls.

Trees taller than church spires and faded cloth roses  
are only ghosts of living things.

Even I cease to live among the multitudes  
of salted graves, washed up  
against a bridge of sighs.

*Io venni in luogo d'ogni luce muto:*

the brick walls and clean white arches  
are serenity and isolation. The church  
was once a prison and under a lofty cypress  
a small marble headstone stands out.

Roman letters for an American poet,  
hidden in a dark corner to be forgotten.

*Io venni in luogo d'ogni luce muto:*

tilting buildings shadow cobblestone streets  
and emerald water—the refuge of lost generations.

Golden winged lions and chalky angels watch over  
star studded canals as we sip cheap wine  
and water laps our ankles.

The white grave covered in ivy is our testament:  
here, we can find the light.

## *Bella Notte*

It's 3 am, the street is empty,  
and Caitlyn doesn't know where I am.  
Amber street lamps glint off shattered bottles  
of wine, and cigarette smoke still  
lingers. June rain glistens on the cobblestones  
and makes it hard for me to walk.

*Hands curve against my waist,  
rough lips press to my throat,  
and I can't escape from the doorway.*

Every footstep echoes through the alley,  
louder than the roar of soldiers and students  
escaping from the bar earlier.  
Bright white light streams from shutter  
cracks, and I don't have my key.  
I ring the buzzer and it breaks  
the stillness and excuses of night.

*I'm dizzy and my heart is pounding.  
I wish I hadn't left the bar  
but no one can hear me over the thunder.*

Upstairs, my hair is tangled, white sweater  
stained from centuries of dirt stored  
in terra cotta bricks. She says nothing  
but stands to give me a hug.  
In her arms, I can cry.

*The tears won't come even after I've left  
the hidden side street. The light of the cathedral  
in the distance is safety.*

Tonight does not, cannot, exist. It washed away  
with summer rain and a glass  
of sweet white wine.

## In California

### 1. *The New York Times Guide to Essential Knowledge*

Dusty from thousands of feet rushing past, its pages  
list rules for ice hockey and Nobel winners and  
the Seven Wonders of the World both modern and ancient.  
But it does not tell of the wonder that is you walking down  
Santa Monica pier, clutching your walker as if pure determination  
and a strong grip will keep you from ceasing to exist  
like the terns that once roamed here.

### 2. *The Beach Closes at Promptly 10:00 p.m.*

The roar of the wind is drowned by the roar of the waves  
and tiny sparks melt the soles of our shoes. We lose the safety  
of pine logs burning hundreds of miles from home, so the next  
night we huddle around plastic bowls of half-opened mussels  
and gritty shrimp, but the boiling broth cannot keep you warm.  
This time, I'm the one to wrap you in a faded blanket  
and carry your chair across the sand.

### 3. *This is the End of Historic Route 66*

A cooler that does not zip closed.  
The opalescent inside of abalone.  
Peanut butter, maple syrup, and frozen waffles.  
Metal canes to keep you upright.  
Pink beach towels damp from rain.  
Art as yellow plastic tubes.  
Gulls squawking in the surf.

## Catalina Crossing

the eerie calm of pre dawn seas  
is broken by the wailing of your voice  
the tears dripping off your nose  
your fingernails clenched into my arm.

the waves are crashing over the hull  
as the window bends to touch the water.  
wind and lightening dance on top  
of the sea.

the sun is rising through thick fog  
but does not burn it away.  
we are floating in brightness  
and dolphins leap to greet us in the harbor.

my stomach is churning and flipping  
the factory blue seats keep rocking me  
get me off of here get me off get me out.  
we're never going to make it to land.

## Walking Down 3<sup>rd</sup> Street

There is a crack on a sidewalk I cannot see  
that fills with dead pine needles and  
yesterday's white star petals.  
It is a concrete edge that rises and falls  
like the San Andreas fault and it is not  
my fault. It is the sunburn in early January  
and the wind that blows over palm trees in mid March.  
And somehow, it's the conifers that have stood  
watch for fifty years, as cracks sprout across  
footpaths and flower beds. It's the sprawling  
prickly pear cactus that threatens my ankles  
and solemn sparrows who dart into palo verdes.  
It is the way this place was not planned, but evolved.  
And it is the bittersweet scent of orange blossoms  
that pulls me down the street every morning.

**A Diamond Mind:  
Intellectual Journeys**

## Cinghiale

There is a word that almost means javelina  
but instead of prickly pear,  
it is crushed oak leaves and  
smoky salt. Fog and terracotta  
instead of tequila skies and adobe.  
It means thin strips of carmine meat on  
crusty focaccia and jagged tusks  
mounted to the side of a crumbling building.  
It is leather bound books with yellow curled pages  
instead of desert varnished rocks;  
olive trees and marble cathedrals,  
not ocotillo fences and sandstone floors.  
Desire, hunger, pride of an entire region:  
it means wild boar.

## Egypt

The short graying statue stands apart  
from curly haired men trapped in white marble.

A god, a dream—it is not until we learn  
of Hadrian that the statue becomes Bes,  
protector of mothers and children.

The lion on his back offers no protection  
for himself.

Hadrian and his lover came to Egypt  
to be nourished and educated at her breast.

They stole her treasures back to Rome without  
regard for her own children, so Egypt  
claimed the lover for her own:

the Nile quietly enveloped him, slipping silently  
beneath her waters.

Now that short khaki stone, that statue  
Hadrian hid in his villa, lies decaying  
a few grains every day in the humid Italian air.

## On Doomsday

I ate Fruit Loops.  
I poured them into a bright red bowl  
and drowned them in milk the color  
of fire extinguisher foam.  
As news cameras stayed glued to the dusty skyline,  
I tried to find cartoons and my aunt sobbed  
quietly on her knees.

The morning that we crossed the border,  
five agents stopped our truck and looked  
for bombs under the hood. They asked  
if the two people in the front were my real  
parents, if I knew where I was going.  
In the early autumn dawn, I told them  
we were going home.

My father left a few days later  
to choke on buildings made as fine as flour,  
to collect business cards without owners.  
Every phone call was another plane crashing  
and all I could do was wait.  
When he returned dirty and quiet, I knew  
my father was a protector, a rescuer, a hero.

## *Arcus*

A rainbow is yellow orange red green blue purple  
because when we drove through one the light turned  
gold. Granite transformed into coins  
and the legends of leprechauns made sense.

A rainbow is a new adventure because I can go  
anywhere if it's in a book. Yellow brick roads  
and emerald cities spring from worn pages.  
*Somewhere, dreams do come true.*

A rainbow is a promise of new life from  
either God or Mother Nature, because the rain that floods  
our dirt roads is the same rain that swept everything  
away except Noah's boat.

A rainbow is simply a refraction of white light  
disintegrating into my physics experiments  
and the equality of marriage. The innocence  
fades with the angle of the sun.

A rainbow is drug induced wonder, a YouTube video,  
a hit song. It is the trail of a PopTart cat  
and the excrement of unicorns. The rainbow across  
the sky is just a rainbow.

## The Acadians

The rusted anchor is pitted  
with miniscule holes from sand  
and salted rain. The holes mark  
both the metal and the collective history  
of a forgotten coast.

Rocky shores yield nothing but dulse;  
storms wash away houses generations old.  
There is only an anchor left to tether them  
to this shore.

Diamonds with a Flaw:  
Emotional Journeys

## On White Rock Beach

The day my grandmother died  
her eyes looked like beach glass,  
hazy blue as if sand had scratched  
her lens instead of a broken bottle.  
We used to search for hours on  
among gray pebbles and decaying seaweed,  
cupping emerald and sepia and ivory  
in our clenched hands.  
Sometimes, a few blue  
pieces, ones that looked like bits  
of sky. When I found that glass  
in her eyes, I collected it, stuck  
it in a canning jar with the rest.

## Teacup

No one will say when they last remember  
hand washing the bone china—the pale periwinkle  
flowers are too delicate for the dishwasher.

It may be shattered, laying in pieces amongst  
batteries and last week's trout.

I've had the antique pink teacup  
since I was five, since we moved  
away from everyone I had ever known:  
four girls covered in silk flowers and satin ribbons.  
There's only the saucer left, not nearly enough  
to drown myself in pearl jasmine tea.

## La Brea

On a beach with sand that feels like kindergarten,  
my brother picks up a tiny black ball.  
We think it is a sea urchin, a piece of wood,  
something a dog left behind, and then it breaks  
and oozes between his thumb and forefinger.  
The sticky black stains his hand.

Later, we play with tar at La Brea  
which bubbles with gases I think are toxic  
and in it, I can see the sky, the willow tree  
behind me. The smell of sulfur and orange blossoms  
makes me dizzy and I lose my balance in the grass.  
Tar coats my feet. I couldn't see it  
and now I am stuck, I cannot move.  
Four inches was enough to trap a mastodon  
so what chance do I have of escaping  
this contamination? I shouldn't have stepped off the path;  
we shouldn't have played with that ball  
on the beach. I sit in the bathroom  
and scrape the tar off with only my fingernails,  
each movement leaving the soles  
of my feet pink and raw.

## Merlot

The cigarette burn in dusty blue fabric  
is now obscured by stains from red wine,  
from a glass marked with peach lipstick,  
from a time when her husband stood in Pennsylvania  
and gave the Gettysburg Address  
in the rain and to no one but his family.  
It has only been a score of years  
but the peach lipstick was thrown away  
and doesn't mark the wine carefully  
hidden in the garage.  
The red wine though, it brands every holiday card  
with shaky handwriting;  
it marks the anemic body and a wedding ring  
now too big.

## This Happened Only Once

- I. Fingers like broken copper needles  
on compasses not pointing north  
spin me in circles so that I am  
dizzy from laughter. The stars  
look so much closer from frozen  
concrete steps.
  
- II. Hands like splintered wood chafe  
my skin, leaving a burn I can feel  
in my cheeks. Rain soaks  
through our shoes and street  
lamps disappear, suffocating us  
in early morning.
  
- III. Arms like mossy tree branches  
wrap around my bare skin,  
tangled in blankets and discarded  
jeans. Through contented lashes  
we can see dust floating  
in lazy sunlight.
  
- IV. Shoulders like smoothed stones  
rest against my side, hollows  
and rounded skin undulating  
with heavy breaths.  
In dim moonlight, everything  
is porcelain.

## Diamonds on a Flagpole

‘All poems are about love, he told me  
as he perched on a ladder, gluing diamonds to the flagpole.  
Why are you gluing diamonds?  
Because of Tibetan chocolate.  
Or maybe it was Tibetan logic.’

All I remember about Tibet is that  
we demand its freedom, the same way we protest  
to free Vietnam and Iraq and compounds in Texas.  
All I remember about chocolate is that the good kind  
is from Belgium, which is famous for waffles  
and I think maybe poppies: the same red-orange poppies  
that cover Umbrian hills in Italy,  
but not the purple poppies that cover opium hills  
in Afghanistan. I think that may have  
been another place in another dream, with other people  
who were in love. They were in love with the earth that they wore  
down with the bare cracked soles of their feet. They were in love  
with the dirty yellow mouths that sang songs about birth  
and death and yams and rain.  
I’m in love with the rain: the rain that falls for nine days in June,  
and molds the clothes hanging outside to dry.  
The peaches in the kitchen are moldy, even though they’re new.  
Luckily, the marble they are on can’t mold  
because if it did the Romans wouldn’t be immortal.  
These diamonds are immortal  
because there is no Tibetan logic, no logic at all.