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## From The Desert Like a Walking Cactus

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FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS

Emma Stewart

May 2020

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Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts in Writing  
Sarah Lawrence College

FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS

# **From the Desert Like a Walking Cactus**

FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS

**for my family  
found and born**

FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS

*“Me voy a buscar una luz pa iluminar  
Todos estos momentos  
Dejando todo lo que tenga que dejar  
Y seguir creciendo”*

— *Bomba Estereo*

## FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS

### A Map of the Desert

Now What?

Imperial Valley (2003 - 2009)

Goat Zuihitsu



Memoir

You Press the Body into Experience and Thousands of Hands Press with You

\*Tiger Teaches Shapes

Poem for page 37 of "My Favorite Thing Is Monsters"

Goat Zuihitsu



Satan lived in the room he was born in

You Press the Body into Experience and Thousands of Hands Press With You

\*Hunting Season

Death and Voyeurism

P. 37

Goat Zuihitsu



John Travolta's House

You Press the Body into Experience and Thousands of Hands Press with You

\*Poaching

P. 37

Goat Zuihitsu



I forgot about ICE until I remembered my mother

You Press the Body into Experience and Thousands of Hands Press With You

\*Rehabilitation

P. 37

Now What?

Goat Zuihitsu

FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS



Memoir

Raising Arms

P. 37

You Press the Body into Experience and Thousands of Hands Press With You

\*Modernization and Loss of Habitat

Goat Zuihitsu



I'm Going to Tell You Something that Helps

Pata Poem

P. 37

Goat Zuihitsu



Mama

You Press the Body into Experience and a Thousand Hands Press with You

\*Rehabilitation

P. 37

Goat Zuihitsu



Self Portrait as Regrettable Tattoo

You Press the Body into Experience and Thousands of Hands Press With You

\*In The Wild

P. 37

Goat Zuihitsu



Cut Down the Trees to Make a Map of the Land

You Press the Body into Experience and Thousands of Hands Press With You

\*\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$

P.37

Goat Zuihitsu

FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS



What I Learned about Preparing Catfish from Watching YouTube Videos all Summer

P. 37

Goat Zuihitsu



Dear god, Dear god, Tinkle Hoy

You Press the Body into Experience and Thousands of Hands Press With You

\*Forced Symbiosis

Dear Egg,

Goat Zuihitsu



You Press the Body into Experience a Thousand Hands Press With You

\*How Many Bengal Tigers are Left in the Wild?

Goat Zuihitsu



Memoir

Now What?



## FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS

### Now What?

-Ekphrasis on Children Walking Across A Bridge of Chairs in a Flood

I  
When I dream the life I have is made up of too many doorways  
the ideal hallway contains no family,  
no water/  
The reflections are blindspotted and the corners are clean and  
dry  
When I dream the house is untouched by the flood but everyone  
outside  
is having a good time and I want to swim with them  
When I used to dream dark water was a nightmare  
but now there's always a light to swim towards  
and a boat nearby I refuse  
because swimming means I don't have to listen to  
anyone  
not listening to me/  
Water becomes the only way to cut a path  
without other people getting in the way  
and the dark water always ends up hiding nothing  
that will grab my leg or pull me under  
with greedy mouthfuls/

## FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS

### Imperial Valley (2003 - 2009)

When we talk about Calexico  
my father always wants to go back  
    he had everything     the biggest house in town  
                            and, working from home     all the time in the desert

when we talk about Calexico  
    I think about all the scars on my arms  
the burn mark george gave me     that's his grave now  
                                            I hear he's working at Wal-Mart

but loss, as far as loss goes  
    is a little paper boat  
                                    zooming down the gutter of my memory  
I can't follow it anymore  
    I let it go to let it go  
                            to chase it would be

to have been  
    left on the side of the road  
    following the canal home — for how long?  
the road sign, the one between El Centro and Calexico  
said 75 miles or am I crazy?  
    74 miles it took 45 minutes by car one way  
                            am I crazy?  
I remember the cracks in the road at night  
76 miles  
    and all the ghost stories that filled the time  
ghosts, not people, resentment in the soil  
    from the slaughter — houses, farming, settling  
in anthropology class I learned that the Imperial Valley  
produced 76% of all US produce     is that right?  
    or am I crazy

after the police left us alone  
    george said I was stupid     holding the joint up like that  
I never called my mother or Mike to come get me  
    I was afraid of the hour between call     and rescue  
    El Centro was closer to Brawley but  
still an hour away     85 miles?  
    an hour even if I'm crazy

## FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS

The night I came back from Brawley for the last time  
my friends cheered — it was the warmest thing  
it was more open than arms, they cleared the big leather chair for me  
they hadn't seen me sit in anything but a lap  
for 9 months 9 months always seemed so significant  
I came back weak on my legs and they filled me with smoke,  
It was all we had and we learned not to need anything else  
And I did until one day I breathed out and watched my smoke drift away  
dissipating  
In a desert unprotected by its landscape, by the people  
That took it

When we talk about Calexico

I remember

sometimes the winds get up to 180 miles per hour  
sometimes the air turns into a mouth stripping  
the paint off cars faster than a car can travel  
from El Centro to Brawley  
every grain of sand  
a ghost taking  
until like smoke I had to disappear

## FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS

my mom tried to teach our goats to  
pee in one certain spot by giving  
them treats when they'd pee in that  
spot

except that

they think that now whenever they  
pee they get a treat

so whenever they see my mom

they pee



I'm making myself an effigy of hair and skin

this one won't get taken for granted          this one won't be recognized as anything  
worth taking

I do every shot in front of a statue of the baphomet

Satanic Tenet III: One's body is inviolable

subject to one's own will alone

I suck the last  
kiss of T out of the syringe  
Hail Satan

## FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS

### **Memoir #1**

My mother describes my birth as; it was raining that day. Passed through the forced lips of the c-section complicated into my mother's belly. How bitter, that second between "raining" and "you were so skinny! I could've had you myself". And another hand takes my from my mother.

FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS

**You Press the Body into Experience and Thousands of Hands Press With You**

\*Tiger Teaches Shapes

I press my stomach ///////////////  
into a long line the way I think a paint brush ///strokes a tiger ////onto paper,  
through the trees/////through leaves and grass I can't name -- just like a tiger--  
and slip /////on tip on tip on tip///  
and my parents are greeting guests with/////////  
    "Emma's a tiger today" as if I stopped once my mother hid the costume  
        it will be years before I think about how  
            this makes my ass look

FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS

Poem for page 37 of “My Favorite Thing Is Monsters”

it's 2017 and my mother keeps texting me about my brother  
like he's an old dog going on his last car ride

I'm in the middle of class and he's in the middle of another waiting room  
his organs are in the middle of an ocean  
that his liver won't process anymore

Reyes, I read your book and suddenly remembered what Scotty used to look like  
his eyes look at the same sad spot  
when he's not making a joke out of everything

can you tell me what happens next?

FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS



not everything inside me has a language  
that can speak self into a thing  
I understand

I'm sending the cops after me,  
needle point tweezers,  
a sewing needle,  
a tack from my desk

who are you i pick at zits scabs pores  
again and again who are you who are you  
the fatty layers stay quiet

Satanic Tenet I: One should strive to act with compassion and empathy  
toward all creatures in accordance with reason



## FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS

Satan lived in the room he was born in, in piles of his own history, archaeology impossible. We found a dead mouse under a recliner once perfectly mummified in the desert heat

I didn't even know there was a recliner next to the bed which was a mattress so over-used the center was an open mouth of springs and brown foam crumbs he'd thrown a sleeping bag over

I lay on the edge  
I tried to leave once and he just laughed and went to sleep.

Does this spark joy? No, this is obviously abuse. I can throw it out. It's very easy to throw things out now. If I can't see the floor I panic. If I sit on a bed for too long I panic. If people recognize me on my route to the gym it is time to move.

The Rule Is: if you can't open the door, don't enter  
a neighbor once laughed as he told me he had to warn people off following me home

I tried folding my shirts the way Marie Kondo shows you to in the manga -- I like the manga I can put it down, that's my favorite thing about books -- but the way Addison showed me is better for me

you roll them up into little pills, fold them in on themselves if you do it right they don't wrinkle

you can chuck them in a bag and gtfo but you need to have less of everything that sparked joy the woman at Buffalo Exchange loved it when I brought in a sack full of shirt pills

i was stupid struck by how perfect her mannequin makeup was, all washed out neon colors like decay looking amazing, looking like bladerunner cold immaculate

makeup takes space and time i haven't kept

and the short haircut too, the one everyone in Rosemary's Baby hated? she had that so good maybe one day I'll buy floral pants and actually wear them, maybe I'll buy them and give them away maybe I'll wear them first

The Rule Is: sunlight, floral pants, make the bed before you leave

I miss my hair stylist, she knew how to get rid of things even when my hair was as short as it's ever been when she was done there'd be a happy kitten sized pile on my lap and she'd pause in the middle of fluffing and tugging (sparks joy) and styling and snip more

I made that rule when I was little, when I saw my friend's room where their dad kept all the spare computer parts he'd been hoarding since the 80s of course Satan's room was the spitting image of it

The Rule Is: you have to leave

FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS

**\*Hunting Season**

up the one zag of the staircase I slide// my shoulder small ////against the  
silent dividing wall////between stairs and hallway //ears under fur pulsing  
with held breath////waiting to hear my brother //on the other side waiting to hear me  
to start the hunt ////////////////

////////////////////////////////////He moved out months ago  
I'm waiting for the inevitable jump, the start my whole ten years of life has been  
jabbed with -- suddenly, suddenly ///and again//  
Every quiet moment manic until I either escaped/////screaming into my room or  
//my brother catches  
my fuzzy stomach with his arms///and like a sack heaves me over the balcony  
laughing

How did my parents catch my tiger tail //but miss my brother's arms  
/////full of me over the stair balcony dipping rising up dipping  
a shaking orange blur  
it will be years before I realize I'm afraid of stairs of going down  
stairs of people behind me//////////

## FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS

### Death and Voyeurism

I'm watching my mother feed herself  
like strands of dead hair down a drain  
down to my brother who spits blood  
and sounds like he's full of helium  
his tissue is so stuffed with liquid  
yellowing as if hay-stuffed/

They say he's getting better/

There is a sticky note on my mother's door  
in her handwriting: SHUT UP ARMIDA  
She laughs, "sometimes I need a reminder"

He isn't getting better/

He keeps us in his blind spot  
wheezes out a joke  
"mom looks like a muppet now"  
and when he laughs alone he doesn't close his eyes anymore  
they just roll around his sockets  
looking for a way out/

FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS

P. 37

Does your brother get to live, Reyes?

I hope so

I may have thrown away the Batman drawing Scotty made  
on the only letter he wrote me from the Salvation Army program

I don't know what else to do

My family holds on to so much and how much of it is history?

I wrote him one postcard from Spain

I bought so many postcards

one for each week then one for each family member

Toreador postcards for mom food for dad

speared and thriving bulls for my sister

I sent the one thinking

even as I sent it

how could this possibly reach him

there are so many ways I can't reach him

## FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS



Where does a body start. I decided the borders of this fleshy hold were unmanageable and grotesque the same way any pubescent monster does, with the voices of everyone else clogging up their throat, their pores now so cavernous as to let in the choking hoards of shame. Tiny pants. The day a Hot Topic sales girl said “our sizing only goes up to 14, after that you have to shop at Torrid” you’re on thin fucking ice, there’s no passport that’ll cover that ass in this land. So a body then couldn’t be a country so much as a boulder in a landscaping project that everyone with enough money to speak has agreed is ugly and inconvenient to look at. Blades of grass, those are beautiful, unsee-ably gorgeous. Step on that neck. Please, touch me. If you can wrap your arm from one end of my waist to the other side and touch your own soft belly, it means i will be easier to love. The size of carry on luggage, free to move with any arm that would take me, and pretty too, to have in public. So quickly move me through a scene, define me by how easy I am to end.

Satanic Tenet V: Beliefs should conform to one's best scientific understanding of the world. One should take care never to distort scientific facts to fit one's beliefs.

## FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS

**WE WALKED TO JOHN TRAVOLTA'S HOUSE** from our dealer's house. They both lived just off Imperial highway in the middle of nothing. Or, nothing until the mall came along. Now you can see John Travolta's house from the mall. Kiebler had a herd of little mop-looking terriers that would make a mess of noise around our ankles. Mike, Kiebler and I went to John's around 2am talking about what we'd steal from there. It was dark, no street lamps, just a half moon, and the dark got solid nearer John Travolta's until it pressed out the talk and we heard the dogs. They sounded like rottweilers. We started laughing, we could hear them barking all the way back to Kiebler's. After that, we'd drive past his place a lot, especially after the mall was built. We'd say "Hi John Travolta, hi John Travolta's big mean dogs".

I hope they're OK.

## FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS

### **\*Poaching**

Snares are your best bet.

And in the forest -- that's where they found me, a home I was belly up sunning and snoozing --  
snares are easy                      the ground is thick with discard / tigers love hidey holes / places  
full of them / and only them // we had to squeeze our way into his room / there were decades of  
discard / I woke up    and the snare closed                      one time he held up    a pair of toddler  
pants    that had petrified/ on his floor/ as if they'd been ironed / or like a cat/ all legs  
sticking out//

A snare will hold a tiger until the poacher can kill it.

Rarely will she chew through a leg / I do not know how to call for help





FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS



Emma

again  
they tell me in the middle of the night  
of whatever night it was  
they agreed on my name

Emma  
the trajectory of a life Emma is a sound that can be made  
in most languages

According to exorcists names are sources of power  
to exert control over over a spirit force its name out

Emma plays matchmaker with her friends Emma shaves her head when she goes to college  
Emma the great ruler of Hell who judges right and wrong Emma Stewart died Thurs., June 17,  
1965 Emma hard of hearing in the right ear due to trauma Emma whole or complete,  
universal  
Emma stays in one place and the world shifts to exist behind it Emma said  
“fuck” standing near a eucalyptus tree unable to see herself  
just the grass dying in front of her

## FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS

### I forgot about ICE until I remembered my mother

So removed from my language I sifted the news about hieleras through filters  
it's like something out of Zelda, why call them high-lear-as?

Then i hear my mother years ago talking  
about how I ate hielo, tanto hielo como su mama que tenia anemia, o creo que si pero no se

(Forgive my accent it is flat with English, dull like a dead buffalo plain)/

Hielo, swells up in the throat like a fist of roots and puffs back out again  
but hieleras slip past the last sigh, back down the throat,  
grow deep, suck wind down into small bodies and creep under skin  
lost skin, whose body this is  
whose body is illegal  
whose body is shaking against absence, the cold air full of other  
cold bodies, close but deep in themselves, no one to help stymie the creeping freeze,  
whose body has been tucked away in the hielera,  
a ball of a girl curled tight as a stone fruit/

What do I know about being cold in the desert? I know the frozen sand,  
the wind screaming at midnight around a house,  
but not the untouched body being let to freeze to death in a controlled room,  
I know the canals, the flat horizon dancing with mercury pools,  
I recognize the designated water stops along the cracked highway  
but I never tasted them/

I know once when i was learning to drive  
I alternately crept and flew up and down empty roads at sunset,  
low desert with fluffy dead bushes like coral that occasionally  
snapped their necks in the wind  
and tumbled along exactly the kind of scene you're imagining,  
the corrugated tin of the Mexico border some miles off in front of me/

I stopped for a man in high boots and that dark green uniform I recognize viscerally,  
like a mirror made of hands that press into your face,  
it makes you feel the color of your skin/

Like a slow weed he ambled, ignoring my green Mazda  
as he crossed in front of the obedient metal body,  
inches from his thigh, from his breakable skin  
to the tree on the other side of the road and kicked,

## FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS

one solid thump at the trunk so it gave up ripe fruit  
body of a man, dark as plum against the fading light/

This is just to say I drove away  
again and again  
until I couldn't recognize the scene anymore

than the people who look at my parents  
and asked when my dad remarried  
can see my mother/

Or how I could never see what was going on past the bars,  
painted mint green, on the other side of the border,  
except in clips, and only what my mother wanted me to see/

The way her father in Mexicali lived in a partially burned  
down house because of some rivalry with our cousins on the other side of the lot/  
When he passed away from an abscess in his leg a family of children  
and grandchildren came to pay their respects  
to an absent patriarch who had sacrificed a life with them

to watch over the children of his late wife/

What fantastically deep roots are these that I was pruned away from,

they are the only tangle of images I can see  
when I watch people's mouths yawn wide with  
I've been to Mexico too,  
the beaches are so beautiful,  
and everyone there was so happy, so in the moment/

That can be as true as it wants to be,  
but I never learned that language,  
never went so far beyond the border  
to where the fruit grows the colors my mother  
painted our kitchen walls,  
sun baked gold and red  
like the dry blood of plums

## FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS

### **\*Rehabilitation**

The door of dad's apartment was a mouth    anything outside could take me    / into itself /  
and I wouldn't come back / this time// this time the I am wearing dress is wrong // and I deserve  
it //I would like an information card // "Cannot rehabilitate, do not release into the wild" //I  
shake / for months / press my ear to the door//listen for breathing/////



## FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS

**Now What?**

**II**

Now we have errands to run

no matter how wet the furniture we still need to eat

Now the sun comes out so we can see what drowning does

to different objects

Now doggie paddle

The world is still a shape, but A to B is a path that demands

new movements

Now the roof is the floor

Now our neighbor is a boat captain who helps deliver Red Cross meals

Now school is how to bait a fish hook

Now the morning finds another missing pet on a far away chimney

The world catches a glimpse of us

and sends what they think we need then turns back to other

things

Now we are short on toilets

# FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS



I'm always thinking about two things: goats and death.

The day my atoms finally lose their grip like a family

accepting the distance

How does a goat do it everyday the same motion of the jaw

bring two things together and watch what they create

here is a wrong fact; sheep were domesticated from goats

goats are of the family capra and sheep are ovis I don't know what any of this means

but the shapeshifting desire in me thinks if a person can be a sheep and a sheep  
can be a goat then the transmutation between myself and cloven hooved life of

general disregard for anything that beckons or comes up to my pen empty handed is a

leap I ready for I'm wrong I'm interested in dying in how a family is

chosen and a body is shifted split apart

come back together

## FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS

### **Memoir #2**

Another hand takes me from my mother, sitting in the counselor's office at the Calexico Mental Health Center. "How old were you when your father remarried?" They, the two of them are outside the glass and I am suddenly some strange bastard. Did I come out of my father's thigh? Who else gave me these eyes? This unending desire to pull things out of my body in order to somehow become whole, or to clean myself like a house made for anyone other than me. I'm 14 and I don't understand what people don't see, so I lie "like...6?"



## FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS

### Raising Arms

The body contorts under its own weight  
    slowly, over time /  
We were in the hotel room on our own beds,  
my mother and I  
when she dislocated her shoulder  
trying to pour a glass of water from a plastic jug /

It was a silent shrugging up, distorted  
gesture / of the joint lifting unhinged from  
its cuff / and the immediate gasp, whimper  
response / her expressionless face  
nothing else happened quickly /  
she is still holding the jug / finishes  
pouring the water / and slowly twists bone  
and joint back together / like mortar and  
pestle /

Of course I hear it  
I know I didn't, but I have  
heard my own shoulder pop  
    like a bubble gum effigy  
rolling, angry crunch, a boulder  
dislodging a tree trunk  
and both fall useless out of the ground of tendons  
/  
I know it will happen again to both of us /

Neither of us can pinwheel our arms anymore /  
Soon waving will leave /

But even with years of mobility  
    lost to lifting the wrong, typical thing  
        we keep lifting our arms to do the  
same routines  
        and it works sometimes  
        sometimes we don't retract back  
into the body  
        or lose our grip  
                    but stretch our arms out

FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS

P. 37

more days than not I am watching him make a life out of the  
magic of love  
hurts to see him hurting Reyes you know it too the way it  
or the way he sometimes just hurts you  
but how much laughter there is in between

## FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS

### **\*Modernization and the Loss of Natural Habitat**

“Don’t fucking joke like that” // laughter is socially recognized to ease tension  
most cats will purr for similar reasons/ from happiness < to pain

He slowed the car down// the motor barely rolled and the  
only way back would have been following a canal I tried laughing instead//

Every car is a hungry body/ or an accident the door closes not unlike a snare//

Flat body of desert/ you can kill a tiger/ bright and orange//  
purring on the side of the road

# FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS



feet

I like to think  
a goat  
is happiest on a mountain here is a mountain  
When I was ten or eleven my best friend spoke to a boy in our class  
and I got so mad that I threw a rock at him  
hit him square in the forehead I don't have good aim but my arm knew  
what my heart needed later Makisha would say it was funny but I'm not her  
best friend her best friend goes to a different school and I can't throw a rock at her  
Makisha's mom didn't approve of me because I only spoke two languages  
and didn't do any extracurricular activities and I liked strange things  
like her daughter  
who threw my dad's straw hat in the swimming pool once  
just to see how he'd react to think I could become the space between two loves  
with the throw of a hat  
a goat is happiest on a mountain or, looking down  
the precipice makes me dizzy  
looking at a straw hat in a blue pool means I need to choose who is right and wrong  
which means who stays and who I let go  
a rock a hat a mountain and no hooves to get me down  
if I had a best friend's body what would I look like to her?

## FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS

I'm going to tell you something that helps; don't use the word "just", don't diminish what has happened. It has happened, and just can also shrink time, it didn't just happen, it happened a decade or more ago, it must have been 11 years. You're not old, it wasn't just once, it happened. Once. It exists in the world, the one that you have, and it happened. Again. It didn't just so happen, it didn't happen any way you can remember just so. But it did happen. It happens. And when it happens again it isn't going to be just a mistake, or the last time, there is no last time, there is no mistake, it isn't just. You aren't leaving it in such loose soil. It will keep coming up again, picked up by the wind no matter where you go. Kick it with an absent boot tip and it will tumble out in front of you, it didn't just happen, it happened. It is happening.

FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS

Pata Poem

The textile section of Joanne's Fabrics in Yuma  
is everything I know about possibility  
all these animals embroidered into scenes rabbits on wicker furniture, patas tucked  
neatly against the truth of their anatomy having tea time with victorian ruffs  
around their scruffs, which are extra folds of skin to protect their fancy necks  
from the dog jaw  
sometimes you kick yourself  
through another day  
sometimes you get someone else through theirs

i get through another day and at the doorway mom says "clean your patas"  
until one day I refer to my patas and with surprise she says "no, people have pies!  
animales tienen patas"

tengo patas, mama, gimme mis patas,  
para ser animal, para nunca ser hija sin patas

I want those soft, quiet, pada-paws translated  
like carpet all over my quiet life, full of fur and nothing words,  
the words I use when I don't have any way to describe how I'm full of these strange velvet  
surges for minutes pressing into my throat like hours spent trapped  
in a party of rules I can't make sense of the bend of a spine susceptible to  
breaking when sat upright in a chair a neck pressed in on all sides  
screaming in itself a word that I cannot find to say /I/ when /I/ is not the  
protective scruff or the collar hiding it  
/I/ am in my throat when I'm told to use my words  
I am using my words I am not using yours  
PATA PATA PATA PATA  
all over the page, pata pata pata  
all over the couch, the chairs,  
the table,  
the idea of being human one way or another

FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS

P. 37

a picture is a body    reaching out            of a  
language it has no words for            my brother's  
sketches        are always unfinished        a head  
                  sifting from one brilliant corner  
of a canvas    to a blank        a white space  
                  that has consumed more than his work

## FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS



eyes  
■ goats sheep and octopuses have rectangular  
shaped pupils to help widen their peripheral vision so they  
can see any potential predators day and night ■

Predators can overcome the line of sight of prey  
with camouflage most animals have a certain amount of rods and cones less than human  
eyes oranges, greens and browns can look the same fur colors can shift scatter the  
pelt wildly like dry grass in the wind they can breathe and move just like everything  
else that doesn't know it's hiding them often they are acquaintances a friend of a  
friend that we saw on the street and said come in how have you been we haven't  
seen you in ages

You can look at someone all you want see everything they show you and still need to live  
with them somewhere just outside of your understanding somewhere just outside of  
your reason to run

If I could have seen him coming  
I still wouldn't have known to  
run



FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS

Mama

Tina dogged me with her burnt pink cheeks and muddy green stare

“Why does your mom call you mom?”

mama is not a 10 year old with tight braids in a double-wide trailer lot

mama is --

I remember thinking about Tina’s cycling wound, the long colorless line across her ankle

“they had to re-attach my foot”

I couldn’t re-attach my understanding to mama

I stood there dumb as a severed foot

I am not here to tell you I had my language taken away

But sometimes -- even when mama takes her brittle nails from my un-appled neck up

to my chin, feeling

the weedy patch of scruff-- I miss the sound of “mama” calling me

from my friend’s yard

it’s time to go home, mama

I wish I were home, mama

Mostly now I’m too thick and too thin and injuring myself mudslide of a body with a happy

Syphus heart pushing me up

chasing me down

the careen of lost days

not sleeping so well

waking up

saying good morning

meaning it

Where did I go that took me so far away?

I only stepped out the door over and over

until the door changed and I--

want the warmth of knowing how close the beach is

the yellowing of my brain on august days

Rebekah and her texting me “let me send you a poem, mama”

every flower

how do I keep finding these friends, gifting me poems?

The oak trees, I spoke to Rebekah’s crush, we both agreed the vineyards

in Sonoma county break our hearts

he said the oak trees they tore out took so long to grow, I remember

the oak tree in my grandparent’s yard grew right next to an apple tree, then died

with the apple tree bursting out of it

like a bouquet

and I am so tired and cagey

I’d let something burst fruit out of me

FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS

right about now///

maybe that's just how it'll happen -- like a corpse from the Wicker Man --

but what kind of tree do you plant on an Emma grave?  
and who would know if I was an Emma or Rowan or Oak anyway?

most of the oaks are gone now and so is Tina

the double-wide trailer and maybe her bicycle too  
foot-eating and mean as a question in English  
love

about my mother's

in Spanish still here both languages

we share, grafted together, in front of the lost faces of other's  
even confused they seem happy for us now

I am a tree with a house full of people full of questions  
who put an apple tree and an oak tree so close together?  
did they really live with one another for decades?

is an oak-apple tree

an oak tree?

or an apple tree?

FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS

**\*Rehabilitation**

////////////////////////////////////

“The tiger

He destroyed his cage

Yes

YES

The tiger is out” - Nael, Age 6

/////it/////was/////so/////cold/////and/////I/////was/////so/////

/////hungry/////

FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS

P. 37

in the years of dreaming      Scotty would say he would work for Disney  
and his art was like a passport      immaculate paper    gift    gift    he has  
even still  
he worked for Disney he made magic  
of the magic of Disney”      they told him “the janitors are part  
out of garbage      which really made sense      who else could make magic  
his whole life

## FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS



belly

A goat has hair a goat has two horns a goat has hooves and is considered a hardy animal a goat has no sense of space or ownership a goat will piss if pissing will get it what it wants a goat will piss because that is what it wants a goat will eat goats grow hair not fur a goat has a beard goats have eyes people don't like goats chew most of the days goats may or may not be staring, goat pupils are bidirectional goats look disinterested I grow more hair and enjoying chewing most of the time my will is a goat's will is

eat hay alfalfa food pellets grass brush chaffhaye park maps tin cans fresh grass bacillus subtilis stored in a 50 pound bag goats will eat grains, whole pelleted rolled or texturized cookies bread shirts lanyards shoelaces pieces of fence post what is in your hand eat what you threw in the trash do you know what it is to go hungry my muscles spasmed for days I kept fainting goats will eat I will eat

## FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS

### Self Portrait as Regrettable Tattoo

like a child I'm drawn  
to a body wrapped in the alcohol based solution of a promise  
I'm going to change through this grip through this steady pain  
again

again  
it starts something *new*  
the blood and ink stay hot for 48 hours every time it's this time  
i'm going to lose a piece of myself, I know it I know it until  
the third night passes and there's nothing  
but bright black newness, and me  
cupping water and bathing it, proud and gentle  
again///

that I welcome the needles  
in my skin  
again  
must mean I welcome also the fear  
of chasing off infection -- the air a trojan horse

new is never the simple boolean of success or failure  
often it is standing on the fact that no matter what i thought i could do  
i reach a limit, like my father 6'3" going to get a ladder  
to put the last brick on top of a cardboard brick tower  
while i watched thinking  
*the tallest thing I trust will not be tall enough for everything --*  
what if there's no ladder  
what if my open skin is too open what if  
the soap isn't enough -- everything stands  
at the open gate what if  
but i know the care it takes  
to patiently wait for heat to cool  
for the last brick the finished piece  
and i am here to care day by day wash, watch, and trust  
the ritual tells me  
*we'll go back home, mija*  
*I'll be here to take you home again*  
again  
again///

## FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS

### **\*In the Wild**

Usually tigers don't socialize in the wild//but when I recognize one of my own//I can fall in love  
our stripes perfect for our bodies///A big paw//to a big paw///just two paws// catch  
me sunbathing//before we have to go///and I leave with some idea///of what shape I  
move///through//





FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS



“I really like this” george grabs my leg / where the hair curls away/ from his hand like the  
heat scares them/ like the heat of another body exists more than mine  
define mine if I don’t know where I am / if I don’t know where to put myself  
a leg a skin a hand /  
I / like / this who and where did I go and why did it feel exactly like warm dirt  
burying me when he closed the door

## FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS

### Cut Down the Trees to Make a Map of the Land

I've grown with this man for 31 years and he stops finally and says  
"Why don't you ever give me a normal hug?"

The day is bright the day is a slab of suburban white concrete  
outside of a shiny new library with a few cars in the afternoon parking lot.

The trees are small and sappy, their trunks  
exactly as brown as their leaves are green and spring off the blue sky  
the sky is just blue, there are no blue cars in the parking lot,  
therefore the sky is Super Blue,  
no clouds, nothing for clouds to do here  
there are so many 90 degree angles I feel like I'm wearing my glasses.  
I might be wearing my glasses.

There's heat, but not the kind dad and I weathered in the desert,  
which was a heat more like an oven yelling at us to leave,  
get the fuck out,  
it tried like Hell to let us know we didn't belong.  
That's not this heat, this heat is probably a t-shirt with a stupid design.

So I've never hugged my dad straight-on,  
"I always worried --" I think I'm looking  
at the parking lot while he confesses, "--maybe your mom  
told you I was creepy or something,  
I dunno, I just want a hug from my daughter,"  
How do you feel something so much bigger than you  
for 31 years  
and never see it falling?

## FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS

\*\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$

Tiger pelts can sell for [\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$] // each one is unique stripes like thumb prints//  
the bengal tiger has a spot// white// on the back of each ear// to imitate eyes  
a second face/ as good as the first// if you get too close/// before you find out which one it's  
using///then --/// both faces, but mostly poachers value// the pelt// the body beneath  
the neck// not the tiger's head// or how he chooses who to show you///no matter a  
she/they/he/////a skin goes for more than a self mostly "they"/ my parents  
apologize again / but it's my voice//

FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS

P. 37

I am never my brother's sister  
I've heard my sister is my mother and my mother might be my grandmother  
people never say anything when I stand next to Scotty  
but when we drink in Long Beach  
I can throw back a doubleshot like a rope he catches "That's my sister!  
that's my sister!"  
the bartender still looks confused

## FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS



I'm looking for They when I said I wanted puppies and they made it into a joke girls  
want babies Emmas are girls Emmas want babies when they closed the door they  
made it their job people do this for each other Emmas are people who do things  
I don't feel like going over all of them but I can name brands  
Satan for the time I wasn't allowed to go home and all the times I believed I deserved "it"  
(amalgam of pain and dehumanization -- do we need to go over "it"? no.)  
Cars for the wrong turns for the near deaths for the choices I don't have moving  
forward and fast cutting a landscape for the sake of getting to the point  
Hims for the cops that one time the cops decided to pull me and my friend over just to look at  
our costumes him for the way a cop gets to say spin around and not think about  
someone not spinning around an authority of dog mouths the smell lingers

## FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS

### What I learned about preparing catfish from watching YouTube videos all summer

// cleaver up under her gills/settle the thick blade behind her skull/hammer down into the spine with a small mallet/the large catfish has nostrils that look like eyes/eyes that look like bullet wounds unhealed/ all its life/you do not have/ to be careful getting/ down to her organs/you will not get through/ her heavy doors without/every intention of breaking/through/and intention will only get you/ halfway/this is a weakness you can remember/ from youth/when you thought physical strength/ was intention/when you were wrong/she is a woman/pull off her head/both hands tucked into the slit/ around her neck/tug back/and/forth until her head slips like a dress/off the truck bed/onto the concrete/already and still/trying to swim away/in her own wet/trailing her bitter yellow egg sack/pet the organs away from her blubber with the tip of your cleaver/her head cavity is now the word/gaping/before you knew the word gaping/ fins/stretched to chest open backfly/on either yellow side/a catfish is very sunny in death/ leave the head/ for the body/cleave off the first fin/which makes a sound/like two teacups fighting/ you will get nowhere with her body/ and still crack away/even with her skull gone/ the golden ring you wear is nothing/ compared to hers/ hammer through her spine for another steak/ her eggsack/running/the length of her body/peeks out after every/cut through another hole/her main artery blubbers/like a bursting red tongue/still/it leaks slowly/still you take/ another sunny piece of her/throw her/steak by steak/on the bed/of your truck//

FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS

**P. 37**

When I talk to mom she says I know he's been testing it with  
the patience of someone looking in a mirror      not  
recognizing themselves

FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS



x-rays can't pick up wood    they define things by comparative density    disregard  
the things you can see through like "I'm happy"    that's easy    happiness is  
happiness to an x-ray  
but my mouth was made of felt    and I could hear myself saying it    over  
everything they did    until I couldn't speak over    pieces I was turning into    wood  
is light and porous    and it welcomes a lot of little things into the body it pierces

they're splinters    probably just splinter probably just a mild infection    it's  
just wood    everyone gets splinters    they    won't    kill    you



## FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS

**Dear god, Dear god, Tinkle Hoy**

when I said “what god?” I meant I wanted to know  
about Her god  
dog paddling in milk

is Guilt the only god I’ve ever followed  
as it lead me further  
like a child  
down the empty library isles

god is singing in my head again  
the world turns upside down  
as he leaves the roof of the Lighthouse  
if only there were no other people in the world...

my god said “Who is this?”  
he wants to know if I am happy here  
if I have eaten any Apples yet

I spoke  
I serve Poetry to serve you  
these fine collapses are not lies  
the way you’d been treated —I knew  
I couldn’t lie to you

I am speaking as if already flattened,  
listen  
to the exquisite music,  
and say goodbye

when I call him back now he comes  
dressed in the silver of memory  
his lips roll over the words:  
“take care of yourself”

*[Sources: Inio Asano, Lucia Perillo, Harryette Mullen, Bernard Perron, Cynthia Cruz, Chen Chen, CAConrad, Constantine Cavafy, Mary Ruefle]*

# FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS

## **\*Forced Symbiosis**

The cars have joked about eating us for so long and they finally did/ here  
they are/ roaring down the street/ taking all the time in the world with  
them/ the process of deforestation vast and swift/ cuts me off at the legs/  
forces me to move to places where tigers are bright and visible/ they took  
everything/ they are taking everything/ what they don't want they look at/  
like it's not just a life trying to live/ the eyes on the back of my head can  
see more than they think/ dad says buy an inconspicuous car/ lay low/  
whatever you are/ fly it under the radar/ only be as free as you need to be/  
live to hide/ tigers are stalker predators/ the moment you're seen  
////////////////////////////////////

## FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS

Dear Egg,

You, with your head  
on the window in the backseat of another  
long car ride with your bloody  
    churning    uterus  
dragging the day down  
into cramped misery --  
Egg,  
your head tried to escape with    “if i was a boy”  
focusing on that beautiful image of the tall,  
    thin, muscle-blessed  
sad eyed figure    bound up in silk  
ropes -- Egg,  
the waist of your jeans  
biting into your fat  
real hips    “if i was a boy...”  
    a mental seamstress taking  
what you know of your body pulling it tight against  
minds-eye bones and singing blades  
up hems of neversilk flesh  
salvaging scraps to fit  
    a tight figure knocking hope empty  
    against a pelvic bowl

Egg, I found the needle/  
It doesn't stitch -- we are not stitch-able -- it floods  
the needle finds all    our fallow  
    belly gripping fear  
drowns it in a new feast  
of bitter syrup and body hair the days spent pretending to shave  
next to dad at the mirror    Egg,  
don't worry  
    about the dark, about the shapelessness  
we were just hungry  
in a different way, for a move  
and now, when we get lost  
    we listen to our own voice  
crack and pop  
    less  
    on a long road  
getting closer///

## FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS



Remember that time I didn't die on the side of the road I want him to drop me off there once some version of us I said I had a crush on someone at school oh -- my crush was black and that matters -- and george said "don't fucking joke like that" and slowed down we were on the way to his foster father's house which was off the side of whatever highway there is a tight curve in the road the kind with all the big orange and black stripe signs warning you he would've left me on the road right before the striped curve I met his father instead george said hold on while the dogs came running to the car an old man just behind them you have to shake his hand or the dogs will rip you to shreds

FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS

**\*How Many Bengal Tigers Are Left in the Wild?**

On the stairs I am ////doing all the right things/////moving up, walking down////////people are behind me//

I'm still wearing that funny skin of experience//my parents still excusing me////in my voice "they is fine if it's too confusing/////don't worry about it" ////before I've even stepped outside

the flat line of my belly between my thighs and my head //////just two feet on the stairs thinking

about how it would feel if the person behind me Shoved/////broke my face on a stair what does my ass look like//////// I'm a tiger today -- as if//when I shave

I stop being a tiger////but maybe it just stops being today////////one side of this equation has to shut off////eventually someone will kill me //////////eventually I'll grow out//////////of my parents' voice////excusing the oddity of my own body

I am a line of belly on the stairs //////and the back of a head //////waiting for another hunter

////////////////////////////////////

///To be a tiger (ser un tigre) ///I will continue to be a tiger (soy tigre)//////// always (siempre)///

## FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS



Belly drum we've gone over you      pet a hand over density of hair and hide  
belly goat you've got a world of stuff thick and safe in your solid body      curves  
out where it needs to not where it's told      belly goat belly goat belly belly goat  
can dog teeth rip through you      goat belly goat belly belly goat belly  
belly      if I grow you will I be safe      or will they use a knife next time

Simultaneously three things are true:

I'm leaving

I'll always be here

I'm not coming back

## FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS

### **Memoir #3**

So I lie and for the next 4 years I don't talk to anyone except a really nice family counselor who says "you remind me of my friend, she always has these amazing acrylic nails and paints them wild colors" and I say "I made friends with some vampires, and we go ghost hunting at 3am on weeknights". All of the homework packets I get from the double-wide trailer at school have the answer keys on the back. I wake up at 3pm, watch cartoons and eat at Denny's almost every day. When mom takes me to hand in my homework to my one teacher, she sits with the other mothers. Mostly no one says anything about what we look like, but occasionally someone leans over and whispers "so when is she going to start showing?" Mom thinks it's hilarious that I would get pregnant at 14 surrounded by other pregnant 14 year olds. One of my friends has a pool so we hang out there a lot. His parents are never home. I'm proud of myself; I'm 14 and I only hang out with people older than me. We smoke clove cigarettes and they get the resident goth of El Centro to come

## FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS

hang out. He's even older than them and knows a lot about ghosts and magic. He buys two big bottles of Jack Daniels from Food 4 Less, his and her's. They last the length of our 3 year relationship. Mine lasts longer, I think it's still in his freezer next to his son's dino chicken nuggets and the champagne from his marriage in '98 when he started losing his hair. At 19 I start dating a man everyone calls Satan. His room is an impossible archeology of his own life piled high and tight so we have to squeeze through the door and stand on two feet of discarded objects of all kinds. When we're not high he's mean. My mother helps me fill hefty bags with my stuff while Satan stands at the edge of the bed and cries. She holds my hand in the car.



## FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS

Now What?

III

The day I woke up to rain in Calexico the landscape turned  
unrendered, a perfect gray blanket over already isolated lives  
the block buildings a bad 3D design on the flat repetitive dirt  
we lost the blue sky for less than 12 hours and stopped existing  
I woke up to everyone in a dream, forgetting how to drive but knowing  
we had to stand outside/

And again, in the record heat of Salamanca, when the rain came  
rushing through the town, a classmate and I stopped talking  
with a mirrored expression we walked slowly into the street  
and absorbed as much as we could/

So maybe flooding leads to new bridges  
and finds some people  
who know how to make a normal day  
out of waist-high water/

And maybe the desert teaches us rituals in the litote of giftless dirt  
with nothing to drink sometimes for years/  
Maybe we're bodies like deserts, rain pulling us out from safety  
to find rivers and erode new canyons, learning to route  
water through us and out/

## FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS

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## FROM THE DESERT LIKE A WALKING CACTUS

Emma Stewart (he/they/she) is a trans masc nonbinary poet, born in Pasadena, California. They have lived in Sonoma County, Madrid, the Imperial Valley desert, Long Beach, Santa Cruz and New York. He has written multiple chapbooks for friends and fellow creators, collaborated on a live recorded music album by Autumn Altair that was played for a Twitch audience of one (1). In Long Beach she was part of a poetry group called Gut Punch Poets who performed twice together before she left for UCSC. These performances and relationships are still where Emma finds poetry does the most in their life. Loves pho and would rather drink soju with their friends on Blacks Beach than submit poetry places. If she ever gets awarded anything, he'll probably brag about it on Twitter tho.