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## Compass Rose

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COMPASS ROSE

By

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Bachelor of Arts in English Language and Literature  
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2008

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Master of Fine Arts—Creative Writing

Department of English  
College of Liberal Arts  
The Graduate College

University of Nevada Las Vegas  
May 2015



We recommend the thesis prepared under our supervision by

**Rosemary Powers**

entitled

**Compass Rose**

is approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**Master of Fine Arts - Creative Writing**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the orientational power of language through a collection of poetry grounded in themes of place, landscape, and desire. Language organizes the raw material of existence into the humanizing possibilities of experience and connection. It interrogates, examines, exalts, orders and reorders continually. Much like a physical landscape, it is constantly shifting under various pressures, which operate at variable speeds. By working and reworking themes and images, these poems explore the twin processes of erosion and deposition.

The materials found in these poems are largely drawn from my own memory, perception, loss, and desire. I mean to use language to both represent experience, and dismantle and reconstitute it, which will necessarily occur in the process of representation. There is a tension, as in life, between past and present as one slips inexorably into the other and is then remade in memory.

The thesis is organized around the cardinal directions to indicate that the poems constitute both a world and a map to that world. They are grounded in the physical features and natural processes of the earth, the changing of the seasons, and the weather, all of which are indifferent to our perceptions and yet form some of the foundational metaphors of human experience.

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East

## Springing

from soggy earth  
stippled dark bark  
swellings too full and  
not yet solid with color

I am always forgetting  
life is long already and  
the legends explain little

cut down branch and twigs, shears rusted stiff into  
friction—a nub of heat  
my homely lust

## Connecticut

these square houses  
in sparse woods  
ivy in snow

I understand  
everything now  
how  
decisions are made

peaked roofs speak  
to hare tracks  
in sparse woods

woodsmoke  
old ways of turning  
matter to heat

and ash and light  
and vapor and air



## The year of airplanes

I.

the year of airplanes  
love's simulacrum stretched  
loomlike across

call it continent  
this land unmaking

sun spiraling toward me  
    moon higher where  
    you are

airy cycle of  
fleshwarm passage pressed  
thigh to thigh  
    for    hours

    four   hours

II.

it's wanting that pulls  
a gravity anew into  
us

oh us that we that  
wills itself while  
spinning globe indifferent  
warp and weft

irresistible centrifuge of  
long longing

bodies attract one  
another then  
nothing then  
dawn

## Marriage

only this        do not be  
                      afraid as the world  
clicks softly into place  
settles            like silt

stillness is not death  
it is all  
right to sit a while while  
things go on becoming  
what they are

there in the greening  
the creek behind us  
yes     there was  
          a series of silent clicks  
the moment    locking into  
reality all full        of birds  
and branches that we can  
never say we  
were not there  
it was so

reality all full of birds and  
branches        tiny  
                      flying insects  
the gnats day bright  
undeniable

## **I have left**

I have left  
he is left  
behind is left  
I alone

this is an  
    empty box

rough air  
until past  
    Memphis  
    (pyramid  
    river delta  
    dog star)

someone  
must  
come

we have  
by miracle  
still all our  
fingers      our toes

he will come home  
come calling  
his  
throat unstrung

strange song  
long winter  
white teeth in a  
white cup

## Early days

there is snow already  
my parents' tomatoes gone  
here clouds move  
west to east

settle low in valleys  
spaced wide filled deep

he prays for it my  
father for snow

in other times my hair  
wet with sweat  
the sun is high  
blue pools the roads  
shimmer with heat you'd think  
it water

crickets do not mind  
all night singing  
scatter when I walk the dog  
cockroaches on warm sidewalk

when burned  
pinecones crack open  
then wait for rain

in November it will be spring again  
and flowers and black bees

it is in waiting without  
knowledge with  
hope            a little  
we are little  
we wait wide open

a spring becomes a pool  
mountains walled around

elsewhere bright houses  
stacked skyward

my parents are sleeping

clouded sky all orange  
wind and light  
all night

it goes  
too far

bare trees reach up  
as when green  
or petal white or  
tight budded waiting

## **Divorce**

I.  
this is it  
it is coming  
to a point

*en pointe* the  
dancers their bones  
grinding float away

this is how  
things end

II.  
think of small spiders  
ballooning on silk  
into open air  
think of them

**North**

## How close

it does not have to be  
difficult it is what  
image we are  
made in                          need  
                                tender desperation rending  
  rendering

three gulls  
or vultures wide wings black  
white sharp distinct stretched long suspended slow  
  they  
also are looking

inside the bodies of animals  
this  
this is how close  
  and quiet

what it takes to be  
wordless elliptically still  
thermal updraft                          breath  
we slowly spinning  
searching hunger for  
something shared  
  familiar flesh  
  unreadable entrails  
  illegible dust

this is not ending this  
holy throbbing  
nameless between



## Cleft

winding we

nude soft simian  
ungirded

afternoon careful coming  
the dog asleep  
wrapped in yellow

palm tree flapping like Mylar  
like wings  
like rain

what isn't here what  
would we want  
what world

afternoon coming gentle  
sidewalk gravel wet  
setting sun

## River

a body that winds  
around and through the way

bodies wind around  
and through the city

the black hairs stick  
to my skin my body

pressed against and  
through the glass the window

uncurtained the twenty-third  
floor the air not space

but air not empty but full  
of air of bodies pressed

against and around on the train  
running under the street the earth

on stilts through the  
air around the city and through

bodies pressed against bodies  
pressed against glass

windows uncurtained metal poles  
warm with bodies pressed

against themselves over the  
river through the empty

street not empty but full  
of emptiness 4 a.m.

cold without bodies  
moving through against

the wind the air pressing  
against my body pushing

back against over the river

I've crossed twice today

already and will again three  
times again before it's done

## **To be bound**

I missed spring I was  
far far far the haze carried  
where I stood

copy machine is miracle  
is eye is wire is light is  
air is eardrum

arms full of numbers  
names

sky clouded out  
to out the lake the boats  
tiny floating people

## **As simple**

as simple as that  
to hover between  
equinox and solstice  
in dimming light

it is now far and long  
ago

body becomes  
somehow home

those dark months when you  
when we  
how can I say

we kept the windows  
dark and tight

snow rose off the lake  
salt ate through our shoes  
corroded cars  
my heart my heart my heart

## Lilacs, Chicago

I am told I will  
feel the lake  
will gain lake sense  
we gain lilacs  
each may when may  
and limestone collide

enormous

in the distance ships  
suspended between  
lake and sky static  
boys fishing haul it up

gray and gray  
lilacs coming  
every may

**South**

## **Chellah**

the storks have wings  
tipped in black and long clacking beaks they're  
voiceless  
they eat eels  
in the pool of  
the necropolis  
the breadbasket of empire  
a dozen graves a banana tree walls covered with words  
field of broken marble  
the old workshops under grass



## **Nation**

the hillsides written  
with sheep  
goats  
flesh and  
milk and hillsides  
a  
tally of themselves

the air cracks  
into words  
built of words walled  
and gated language built  
carved in profile  
of words of god  
is king of the nation the  
nation inscribed

## **Fasting**

the air from off the sea the  
ibises white the storks with  
great clacking bills they are called for  
the noise they make

the coast is laced with wind

the air is bright as any  
    ridden by fat bees

the balcony faces the sea through  
palm dust and minarets that  
call five times a day

the city is always calling  
storks without voices still  
are calling

## Complexity of flesh

that was where he was where  
we were and now return

we are always returning  
alone with gulls beaks smudged

red and crying for  
fish their bullet bodies

weightless

it is eid say the flags the fasting  
is over buckets of sardines  
rise from the boats

the port is full of watchers  
it has never been brighter  
in the desert it is raining

of course there were others who still  
bind me into time of course

his skin

the gulls are screaming  
no gulls in the desert  
where is it raining  
the wind is high and I  
studded with sand my skin  
burns

a wall of open doors  
storks glide overhead  
men want me to know

the palace is not this way  
on rue berrima at sundown

or at ten a.m. monkeys and cobras  
take their places

tomorrow I visit the tombs  
or watch the sun move hot  
across the sky

gardens of oranges  
olives  
a wreath of figs  
I know  
now what  
a fig tree looks like

the hillsides belong to god  
he is king of the nation  
this is written in rocks  
the earth piled up and made  
to speak is calling  
calling back to  
prayer a forest of minarets

everything is falling

**West**

## Range

*the night is cool and I'm a fool each star a pool  
of water*

so high above the sea  
thin air  
                    thick blood

snow in july  
suspended on the long grass  
sagebrush

winter without snow  
the golf course crackling  
the geese don't go

that summer night herons  
nest in tall cottonwoods  
long necked beaks clacking diving into

                    the water is low

*oh bury me not  
on the lone prairie*

Sam says Charlie died  
it's about time  
            I'll walk I'll walk it's fine it's  
autumn

laughing at stars while  
blood pools under my skin  
flat on my back  
the skateboard nearby still rolling

Aaron dead too but  
it's been years  
me in Chicago

                    I loved him  
                    I still say

*goodbye old paint I'm leaving Cheyenne*

gone south and east and west  
toward mountains visible blue  
from the viaduct over the railroad yard

coupling like thunder  
low slow signals at night  
cars you can't count

dig up the earth and pile it high

stretch out on flat land on  
high plains where  
you can see a creek five miles off  
by the trees

gates swing down  
wait half an hour in your car  
play the radio  
it'll pass

*it's your misfortune and none of my own*

his grandpa in fluorescent basement kitchen  
with vodka and cigarettes  
we were all men there together

beneath the juniper on the ground  
dirt in my hair  
still with its berries bluegray

always birds and sometimes foxes  
those deer by the mall  
black eyed so still

raccoons in storm drains  
bat the cat brought in  
papery and fierce

mourning dove that  
died behind the piano  
too heavy to move alone

glass rattling  
windowsills dark with grit

*where the coyotes howl and the wind blows free*

where distance is measured in hours  
the roads uncurving

in a borrowed truck  
to Laramie by night over the pass  
Lincoln standing sentinel

we were so young  
    left the gas cap behind at  
    Little America 2 a.m.

we should have been afraid

instead drove forty miles drank coffee drove home  
flashing our lights at the trucks  
certain we would live

*oh bang the drum slowly*

oh indian paintbrush buffalo  
grass scrub oak oh thistle  
oh sagebrush swelling my eyes

oh

advice so simple—  
chew sap like gum  
pour molasses in snow  
somehow close enough  
to real life

lichen on the sherman  
granite technicolor  
symbiosis orange gray green  
a place  
that is rock  
    air

road

sky sky sky a little  
earth  
    dust in my mouth

buffalo jump somewhere near devil's



tower they taught us  
to tell  
rock from bone with our mouths  
bone sticks to your tongue  
rock falls away

*give me a home*

half built houses  
the prairie lawnless just  
long grass cigarettes tossed  
still burning

the pleiades cassiopeia ursa minor orion

the roots go down twenty feet

Sam says Charlie's dead  
Charlie  
he said once

crow creek dry creek peanut pond sloan's lake stock tank  
sometimes a loon  
the herons

*keep a-movin' dan don't you listen to him dan  
he's a devil*

*he's a devil*

*he's a devil*

he's a devil

billboards at the border  
a plywood bison  
a herd of them real

*oh give me a home*

*leaving Cheyenne going to*

meadowlark black v at the throat

*get six jolly cowboys to carry my coffin  
get six dancehall maidens to bear up my pall*

that's all

it was a shallow sea  
fish in sandstone sheets  
field of shells

it was a grassfire  
    red red at sunset  
    out near Wheatland

brown with drought  
the water is low

hazy with cottonwood

sagebrush scent on my hands  
smoke in my hair

sometimes the prairie  
is an ocean  
it is sometimes a wall of fire

before the roads  
endless

prairie dogs build  
    their towns  
    bark warnings  
    dig down

a hawk swoops over the highway  
hits the side of a truck  
is pulled under the wheels

keep moving

men in fringed chaps  
wrestle steers to the ground  
twist their muscled necks  
in embrace

your misfortune

we smoked with the windows up  
    burned the upholstery

too cold to care

snow on the road  
like ghosts

too bright too high too close  
to the sun      dust  
and then nothing  
then the sky

the missile silos underground  
pronghorns on the tarmac  
long arc of contrails  
fuzz into air

the hills stop rolling  
spread out  
low and quiet beneath  
the sky a  
dome  
aching blue

## **Interlude**

thunderhead rise  
up pink above  
mountain striped black  
gray sky  
going purple over  
atomic city

## Bird

's stomach full  
of stones of  
weight just below  
pumping ventricles  
aortic chasm collapsing  
again and  
over again

spindle legs  
eye cannot make sense  
cannot be  
even bones hollow  
void within the thing

they are born sharp  
birth themselves  
dig into open air

and bright how bright  
how open high up  
how feather light  
to be

## **Blood moon**

next door the blood  
goes its rounds  
flicker at the throat

blood moon hangs

it goes its rounds  
the fan goes  
moths drift up weightless  
at the door

blood moon hangs outside  
low and fading

doors open  
faithless  
lunar push pull  
soft flicker at the throat

## **Nevada**

the olives love the air  
love the sidewalk  
love the pigeons their fat greasy necks  
love the sunny air

pine tree makes love to itself  
profusion of pollen  
bees and grackles  
a kestrel sits high

## Lion

I was young and  
the birds so large. Now  
pollen dusts my car, blows  
away in rivulets  
when I go. I want  
to go going is hard  
I have been alone  
what else can I

this is  
trust and yet we make  
do the grass grows around my  
waist we are hunting  
grasshoppers to trap in  
jars with holes punched in the lids with  
hot nails. Power lions  
my brother called them power lines  
but they might

dangerous

power lions. It is quiet. I am lonely.



## Sorrowful Mysteries

### I. The Agony in the Garden

here among flowers I say  
you know  
what I have  
done and will do

you your flesh the  
twining strands muscle fibers

morning glory swelling fast

o god o god

### II. The Scourging at the Pillar

remark the cutting  
blood has meaning  
we are asked so  
to take into ourselves

he loves us he loved us he loved us so

### III. The Crowning with Thorns

were you there when they  
crucified my lord  
were you  
there when you

sometimes it causes me to tremble

the brow its blood  
my god my god

### IV The Carrying of the Cross

now the cellular structure of wood  
cell wall jagged  
which tree?

## V. The Crucifixion

and death is death is circle  
we come  
we come around  
and death is death  
is life is coming round is us  
and nothing more or less for  
leaves on forest floor come  
soil  
come fecund  
I saw it all this is all a  
soul could ask  
I ask no more

## **We are seen**

he walks beside the water  
the water is still  
the water is bright sapphire  
the water is froth and cobalt

everything is here

the sand is crushed shells  
the sand is stone  
that will become stone  
the sand is solid with water

in the water swim eels  
schools of anchovy  
flash silver with fear

to drop slow  
to no longer need

his hands are empty  
the sky does not blink  
we are seen  
the water is still

## Cosmology

remember the ibises  
on the banks of  
drainage canals

remember the sweat  
pooling in the small  
of your back

the ant hills  
the geckos so small  
we saw their hearts  
beating backlit at sunset

on the windows of the  
house that was broken  
into twice where  
we made love

you have been in my dreams  
these last nights

there have been sounds  
that are not your voice

remember the bird that  
sang at dawn  
the air that clung filmy that  
covered us everywhere

## **Rosemary Powers**

### **Curriculum vitae**

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#### **EDUCATION**

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University of Nevada Las Vegas  
Compass Rose, poetry

B.A., English Language and Literature, 2008  
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#### **AWARDS**

2015 Poets & Writers Maureen Egen Writers Exchange winner in poetry

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ENG101 E Composition I Extended I  
ENG 101 F Composition I Extended II  
ENG 102 Composition II