

# **Travelwise**

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*By Ashley A. Bode*

Thesis Director  
Richard Chess

Thesis Advisor  
Richard Chess

# Travelwise

Poems by

Ashley Bode

36 Wanoa Ave.  
Asheville, NC 28803  
(828)713-3117  
aabode@bulldog.unca.edu

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## Tour Guide

Welcome! Glad you're here  
in the heart of America—a blueberry muffin,  
our stronghold, the nourishing essence of America,  
waits for you, secretly waving a sweet hello.  
She winks her blueberry eyes, invites you in for a quick bite,  
surely worth your while.  
Next to her, a maple leaf,  
reminds you in soft voice and sunset smile  
how lucky we are to have such good friends.

A squirrel will stop to greet you momentarily.  
Sweet, flicking tail, nut cracking hands, a sign  
of natural survival.  
note his sneaky eyes watch you intently as you drop a cracker—  
that's not accident.  
He's as foreign to you as the nearby smoke of the Appalachians,  
and his eyes dart just as wildly.

I'll take you somewhere else, to see more of what awaits you.  
An empty beer bottle, torn midnight blue paper label,  
brown neck and hollowed belly, perfect for music.  
Pick it up, play a note, music is all around you here,  
floating through skies and hiding in our trash,  
covered by unused paper bags and half eaten greasy fried chicken.

There are weeds here, just northwest of where we stand,  
Growing like you've never seen—  
six feet tall, thick stalked  
like sun burnt corn husks  
that sprout up green deliberately  
spreading arms and legs across  
the soil meant for the more beautiful.  
A swarm of malicious mosquitoes, gray like the sky,  
Wait thirsty, wings flash frantically hovering  
Over your skin as if it were the  
Last body left. Invisible eyes  
eye your every move  
And plot your pox induced demise.

Stay close- I'll show you where to pick the four leaf clover,  
Hidden beside comrades one short of salvation. Walk  
slowly, look at your feet and you'll find it, sticking out like  
a red rose in a spring pastel bouquet. Pick it with your  
fingers, hold it to the sun, Delicate, simple, a sign of  
magic. Welcome.

Anthony

The buildings of Times Square spit  
colored light on his face.  
Lights flash and surround the square  
with ceaseless movement  
The heart of the city beats a fast,  
uneven tempo. Unpredictable.  
A flawless scarf rests  
on his neck as if a decorative curtain.  
His eyes always tightened  
and face rigid,  
his nose turned up  
from the street.  
And for the first time,  
casually he notes  
the span of buildings  
that stretch from the ground  
to scratch the clouds  
that lie loose over the island.  
His nose drops, hides deep  
beneath the folds of the navy  
scarf and he feels  
as big as the crumpled  
yellow paper that tumbles  
by his feet and into the path  
of cross traffic.

Mr. Greenjeans

It took nearly ten minutes to recognize him—  
An old neighbor.  
eight hundred miles away from home.  
He stood loose, bendable, almost spineless.  
He wore a sandpaper chin, wrinkled jeans and  
a Rollingstones T-shirt faded,  
untucked.

We called him Mr. Greenjeans. I only  
ever saw him wear a precisely pressed  
polo shirt tucked crisply into jeans stiff  
with a crease from waist to ankle.

I only knew him stern-faced, with a gravel voice,  
adamant that the property line began with the oak tree  
and stretched to the azalea bush, reminding me the  
petals must not wilt across his lawn.

A tunnel of snow ended in a skyscraper built  
from his plow marking the place where our  
sidewalks met during winter. His tulips grew  
strong and pure each spring to torment my  
flowerbed dotted by weeds and patchy  
grass.

His wife, a sweet Betty Crocker, watched my  
birds when I left for vacation, and lent recipes  
in the fall, She left him after thirty years.

Here he was, before me.  
Thick aged eyebrows weighted with disinterest  
looking happier than I'd ever seen.



## Wedding

Alone, she had reminded people of a cinema billboard  
Her cheeks a lurid pink, eyes green as cilantro, hair golden yellow  
And fresh with the fragrance of jasmine and lavender.

Together they looked like corpses—  
Skin grayed from the heavy burden of displeasure  
Of each others company,  
Their fingers dry, cracked and joined together  
By tarnished gold bands.

He was no more than a hand-cranked machine— A  
crook with an automatic smile. And a begging tin.  
She had lost her balance and was romanced By  
his art. Watercolors of the French countryside and  
romantic portraits of her best features, she poured  
her pockets and energy into his false ambitions.

Now together they hung limply

The first days  
Only the knives and forks spoke,  
peril lingered over supper always  
waiting for dessert.

A new suitcase was purchased and  
three months after all accounts joined,  
she was discovered in a coal fireplace,  
charred and muddled in pieces  
of a forgotten jigsaw puzzle,  
a partial payment for her blunder.

## Virgie Mae Sullen Dances

Virgie Mae  
Sullen, will not budge.  
She's stubborn like  
Clydesdales in the barn  
below the boards of the  
loft floor where she sulks.  
The floor is wise and  
comfortable

In its position,  
and in no hurry  
to move like  
apple trees  
planted by the  
wind centuries  
before the dirt  
road curved  
around their  
bases.

Her linen skirt lies flat and  
useless as she stands still  
wasting the only shoes  
her mother wore. Cold  
musty leather saddles  
her lazy feet.

Adults twirl fast as the  
fiddle whittles song out of  
harvest air. Men dip and  
dive drinking Budweiser  
and swinging wives in  
squares

Around her.  
until he scoops  
his daughter by

the waist, to  
allemande whee  
with the August  
heat across the loft.  
And Virgie Mae

Sullen, like her  
Mother, feels Her  
shoes Leave the  
ground.

## Rush-hour Conversation

I wait until the sun falls just below where your eyes can see  
to light up like stars in a calmed winter sky.  
My neon signs force themselves upon your windshield.  
Streetlights line my middle like buttons on a shirt.  
Green, yellow, red are everywhere hiding  
among the brassy pink and orange, but still  
they draw you in and guide you along.

You flee into me to make your way towards home and  
I become the last challenge in your day. I am the  
place you find yourself merging into, lose your  
patience and hate your life. I barricade you from your  
happiness, but you keep coming back to me.

## Cross country move

Three hours till daylight, four hours till warmth,  
the sign read "don't blink or you'll miss the time of your life."  
He drove the pickup forward through the nighttime dust,  
aching for the land ahead  
He felt despondent.  
The weather watched him with narrowed eyes,  
partly angry. The mountains had done the same,  
blocked his every turn, commanded he stay put.

No longer knowing if time existed,  
shadows of blue and granite fell  
like the thin fingers of an ancient woman  
who refused to clasp her hands in prayer.  
He began to check his reflection  
in the rearview mirror as the desert  
filled him with its breath.

He finally smiled at the sky understanding^,  
much more than understanding^ for at this hour his soul  
was like a caged yellow wing with azalea blossoms  
and a vivid cloudless sky at its window  
beckoning him with warm young air,  
promising more with each mile driven.

### Parking Deck Dance

Twin girls flutter like sugarplums  
In puddles of a parking deck  
After a show at Radio City.

Taps and twirls stumble helplessly  
Out of virgin feet, mimicking idols,  
Smudging paten-leather toes.

Ringleted heads bow with ambition,  
Until being scooped from the night  
And dreams of Rockette stardom.

Jazz music flies to the leather backseat of Daddy's Cadillac  
Where new dreams are born of saxophones and poetry,  
Leaving tulle tutus and pink taffeta behind.

## Los Cabos

Lorenzillos Live Lobster House claims the harbor as it's own.  
 Drawn like purposeless  
 paperclips on an office file cabinet,  
 tourists come here attracted  
 to flour tortillas, napkins folded into swans and flowers,  
 and the English of the white trimmed staff.

Baked from the sun, sprawled out in our vacation,  
 we dine on the patio in the summer Mexican air  
 Angel Louis brings shrimp cerviche  
 Fresh from the dock a  
 and silver tequila without asking.  
 His clothes are crisp, white,  
 Against the blue of the ocean  
 like the painted buildings of the Greek islands.  
 His teeth stretch tall and perfect  
 to make his posture complete.

A bus full of teenagers drives madly  
 across cobblestone streets, careless smiles  
 shout *¡Viva los Cabos!* Blaring horns  
 and music through the speakers.  
 Angel apologizes in happy English,  
 each letter carefully placed  
 like the series of forks on my deep red napkin.

My mouth savors the richness of *tres leches* cake while  
 the most striking blood orange balloon falls slow into the  
 waves as the helium wears out and the facade of  
 beauty collapses.

*Chiquile! Chiquile! Quieres gum?*  
 Small hands wave at us, children with faces  
 And feet covered in aged red dust from the street  
 and sand from the harbor,  
 sell gum from their pockets for our leftover pesos.  
 Early they've learned why my fair skinned  
 fingers jingle in my pocket  
 and why it is I stand before them.

I come home with skin soft  
from the spa and deep brown from a Mexican sun.  
Edna and Marite in the apartment  
next door, bring books to my porch,  
and smirk at the pair of tequila shot glasses  
with sombreros and neon cacti plainly painted  
that sit on my countertop.  
My face burns hot like desert sand.

*Ay! Guera they say, Come teach us Ingles and we'll teach you to Salsa*



## The Things You'd Say

*Carl doesn't need more pajamas, get him chocolate for his birthday.*  
only to find grandpa's gift again two years later packed in our belongings, by you, insisting we enjoy and he never knew the difference.

We'd visit that house on Pearle Street,  
cobwebbed since the 70s and stocked with any  
knick-knack imaginable, and you'd swear the  
bottle of Ne-Hi soda in the basement cooler  
dated 1982 was still safe to drink

*My memory is ninety years full to get it all right*  
was your excuse when you sent Christmas  
presents in May with a letter of angry words,  
demanding to know why we had left you out of  
this years celebration.

Even sixty years later, your neighbor  
Violet, widowed and confined  
to a night gown and slippers, who sat on her porch  
just feet from yours, was a hussy.

We each were your favorite grandchild  
at different times  
even though you couldn't tell us apart  
or remember our names.  
We all were John or Jackie,  
names that never belonged in the family.

We'd take you to the nicest restaurant  
we could find for your birthday,  
they even offered soup d'jour,  
and ginger sorbet to cleanse the palette,  
but you asked for Bush's baked beans, jalapeno slaw  
and fried chicken with the feathers still on.

We let you ramble on about Nixon  
running again in the 1996 election  
with your TV loud enough for even Violet to hear.  
We envied your follies, but seeded our prayers with your name.

## Passengers

1.

Slick-suited man  
ready for the job.  
Cross-country chores  
interfere with a fear  
of flying.

White knuckled, knees like a  
shivering child and, I imagine,  
a stomach like a trench of fear-  
waiting for the enemy to strike.

2.

Her cheeks squeak when she breathes.  
Lipstick collects in the corner of her lips.

Dressed in her Sunday best, circa 1989,  
she says she hasn't flown since Clinton was in office.

Her cats, she has six, are staying next door  
while she visits her sister.

Her husband died seventeen years ago last week and  
her children and grandchildren have since moved to  
Alaska. And I can't imagine why.

She smells like stale crackers and clutches a pleather handbag  
filled with butterscotch candies.

She will suck on them as if they were the very last candies in the world.

Her hands are folded. She ignores the pages of my book open wide,  
and continues to chatter when my eyes close.

I pretend to snore, and she still rattles  
about the way her geraniums grow.

For a moment, I envy what it must be like  
to listen to the absent voice of geraniums

at dinner and breakfast and lunch  
at bedtime and morning coffee and all the time that fills the day.

Then I ask her, what she has named her cats.

A mouse-eared devil mousketeer  
flicks snot rockets across the altar  
of the airport chapel.  
Head bowed and sinful,  
I pray for his finger to catch fire  
from the prayer candles  
so he can sacrifice himself to God  
while his mother finds him a Kleenex.

Please be sure to secure your seat buckle tight  
for safety. The seat cushion can be used as a floatation device.  
Do not be alarmed if oxygen masks drop overhead  
or isle emergency lights illuminate red  
guiding you to an exit. We're glad you chose to fly  
with us. Please jump feet first into the friendly sky.

## Seattle

1.

The underground looks like an old photograph  
a hidden city in sepia  
below the traffic of midafternoon.  
Forgotten streets and sidewalks,  
tunnel just one story beneath.  
Discarded garbage, Depression glass,  
toilets, and furniture piles in  
storefronts abandoned from human error.

The city above bustles with electric buses  
architecture lines the streets like misshapen  
chess pieces, stretched tall and ready to play.  
History buried by cement and asphalt built on  
sand and sawdust, sinks more each year.  
People have forgotten.

2.

Cars float across Lake Washington,  
Pockets of oil contaminating the  
clear, blue window to the greater below.

3.

Alaskan Salmon soars overhead—  
jittery sightseers crowd to see  
fish fly in the market.  
fresh peppers and soap made of honey and sandalwood  
beckon your nose past the rawness  
of salty gills and sun-baked shells.  
A bargain offers a specialty kite,  
rainbow arched for only 15.99. Crowds  
carry you up stairs and down malls,  
A labyrinth of individual sellers of organic chocolate,  
collectable comic books with pristine pages,  
antique postcards and scarves  
knit by a woman who looks like somebody's Aunt Frieda.  
There at the end, you make it back outside  
into the crisp northwest air of entrepreneurship.

4.

Giants above the city and  
Our homes and roads,  
These tall trees  
Untouched by cement and steel  
Look down noses upon it.  
They watch and remember  
Every yellow-jacket and misplaced stone

Limbs gray like autumn rain  
Bodies wide as the wings of a condor,  
And an unheard voice,  
deeper than the song of a whale.

5.

Mount Rainer guards the city  
in the distance.  
The gatekeeper falls asleep  
while the city awakes,  
the silt and lumber  
foundation cracks  
and the mountain takes slow breaths.

## Underwater poem

Through the teeth  
Of a ferris wheel and bubbled  
Music of the arcade,  
a carnival laughs above me.  
Docked by the water,  
a Venus Fly Trap captures its prey  
With the appeal of bright colored  
petals and the sweet fulfilling  
nectar of a good afternoon,

and I've finally found quiet When I  
settle with the sea dust in this tropical  
space. Life swims by  
careful not to disturb my peace,  
careful not to reel me in. The queen  
angelfish circles. Natural vibrant blue  
and green colors ripple down the  
body, outline the shape of her  
against the sandy bed and coral —  
unique in her place, surpassing the  
color of life on shore.

She glides with yellow eyes, past my  
face, close enough To feel her gills  
beat. Her breaths are silent and  
careful not to startle me careful not to  
unravel my escape.

Each breath I feel  
is just enough to survive.

Vancouver at night

A marble eyed woman  
Hides behind  
An accent that falters  
With validity  
and a violin weathered  
pale, plays  
frivolous tunes of  
an Irish gypsy.  
A vagabond, waiting.  
A tourist trap.

Courteously, she promises  
good fortune  
to those generous  
enough to add to the open hat  
of a humbled performer.  
A soft arpeggio of coins falls  
into the sidewalk.  
Scratches from the  
strings of her violin  
cover the ring her voice  
that sings light and heavenly,  
the ring of a bell.

Harmonica blues  
Flutter from the lips  
Of a passing pedestrian.  
He slouches in his shoes  
Strolls carelessly,  
His eyes wander over the waterway  
And his arms curl towards the music  
That sings out  
and into the waterside air.  
The two songs marry  
As each note dances  
Overhead before letting go  
of the comfortable air.  
The blues saunters downtown  
As quickly as it came.

## Looking for a nightclub in NYC

The city sneaks  
In around us,  
while we walk  
lost and  
looking for LOVE a  
nightclub on the thirty  
first of October. Yellow  
cabs have disappeared.  
Horns have become  
distant and muted as we  
creep onto unmapped  
streets and alleys tucked  
behind diners and 24  
hour food marts, empty  
buildings with fire  
escapes that creek with  
the cold and dangle  
overhead dark, and  
ominous like menacing  
spider webs. A rotten  
perfume flushes up skirts  
from the grated squares  
in the sidewalk, where  
heels click farther from  
where we want to be and  
each night shadow tracks  
us by our feet

Trash bag heaven  
collects leaves,  
empty  
Macdonald's wrappings,  
a lost knit cap and  
other orphaned  
clothes—  
a naked tree  
on the fire escape



blushes in its pot  
and the lively wait  
in line smokey  
eyed and scuffling.

We find it  
too late or early  
to feel the speakers  
draw us into each other.  
Instead we shiver  
as we dance, close,  
scared and alert  
on the street  
next to barred  
windows of a  
convenience store  
where bottles of  
tonic and gin  
reside next to  
the loud red pages  
of overlooked  
gossip magazines,  
a collection of  
plastic handled  
pocket knives,  
and keychained  
pepper spray  
illuminated by  
a sign in neon  
that reads  
I Love New York.

## Amie's Song

I was supposed to trust you.

Knowledge beyond textbooks You  
promised to know these bears As if they  
were family.

*All you have to do is hold the camera steady.*  
My teeth chattered  
in my sleep and invisible  
hairs stood up on my neck  
while you entered their space,  
slept in their den and mocked the difference  
between nature and humanity.

*I have work to do*  
and you toted me along  
like a backpack or another  
diary video camera  
no longer your lover  
and hidden, like a family secret.

*A great grizzly future.*  
And you didn't mind the danger.  
but my eyes were bloodshot and frozen open,  
my lip quivered and fingers trembled  
while we watched them snatch  
wild salmon from the rocks of the river.

Thirteen years experience taught you to  
treat them like children? Sing in rhyme  
and baby talk them away from making  
us dinner?

*A family history, volumes long.* but I  
beat her with a frying pan as she,  
your so-called cousin, ate you alive  
at my feet— looked at me, panting  
for more.

The Waltz of 1944

Goldilocks parts her lips—  
cracked balloons kiss the clouds.  
A bloody breeze carries  
the sound of the hideous  
into the castle where  
her sleeping feet flee dreams  
of white knights and black veils.

Ashen faces above, watch  
while she breathes in mossy air,  
leaked from a battlefield  
now covered green with guilt.  
The hidden memory of  
ancient tales—waltzen  
through ballrooms before the Reich  
put beauty to sleep in still soft graves.

## Tornado Season

I sleep in the afternoon  
beneath the mulberry  
while the sky turns yellow, burnt like mustard seeds.  
The wind whisks the branches of the tree into a fury.  
I smell the storm,  
a forest breathing pine down my back.  
The clouds form thick stripes of color,  
layer the sky above my waking eyes.

Like an opossum when startled.  
I hide curled and frozen in the hall closet,  
I've smothered myself  
with Mothers fine fur coat and Fathers wool scarf  
A matchless glove mountain and a tunnel of ski caps  
cover my skinny goosebumped legs  
I find myself each time  
in the depths of this closet, cuddled against  
my sister, smelling the prairie in her hair, hearing her whispers,

After the tornado passes, Timid as field mice,  
we climb out of the closet and house,  
into the yard to look at the clouds  
smooth and asleep in the sky,  
always waiting for the siren to call us in again.

## Family ties

Lake Michigan has waited patiently  
for me to come home, smiling a wide  
blue smile, unhurt by my lengthy  
absence. The wind whirls into song,  
relieved that I've arrived.

The waterside aquarium  
is my favorite art museum.  
Each small exhibit of sea urchins  
and pond life is a square painting  
mounted to the wall for me to view.  
Hundreds of deep-sea electric jellyfish  
bring beauty of the unseen  
in neon pink and white  
light into a darkened gallery  
of curious observers  
who stand close enough to see  
Their hearts beat.  
Detailed dioramas  
come to life in green tempera painted  
plants and iguanas.  
The Kimodo King  
hides beside the royal palm tree  
watercolors in his scales  
shimmer beneath the heat lamp.  
He stays still- a perfect portrait.

Dad brought me here  
while they built the Oceanarium.  
We sat next to the lake, stared at the sailboats  
bobbing in the marina like ducks in a bathtub.  
In the summer, the grass filled  
with grandmother dandelions waiting to be  
sent over the water or into the breeze  
to follow unknowing bicyclists  
as they traveled from north shore to south.

And we'd lay on our backs, shape clouds  
with our minds, feel the lake breathe mist  
on our faces and he'd promise to take  
me to see the belugas

when their tank was full.

Three belugas line up beneath a blue Manet seascape, to stare back at me, alone. I've thought of them, since they settled in sixteen years ago, and wondered if their waves were painted just right, if Dad had been to see them, and how home has been without me.

Bellies arched to the top of the water, they float on their backs, rock in their bed, their eyes soak me up with curiosity. White angel faces, happy to meet a long lost relative. The echo of a family unwavering, fills the tank.