

The Book of Dirt

by

Nicole Santalucia



The New York Quarterly Foundation, Inc.
Beacon, New York

NYQ Books™ is an imprint of The New York Quarterly Foundation, Inc.

The New York Quarterly Foundation, Inc.
P. O. Box 470
Beacon, NY 12508

www.nyq.org

Copyright © 2020 by Nicole Santalucia

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the author except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. This is a work of literature.

First Edition

Set in New Baskerville

Layout and Overall Design by Raymond P. Hammond

Cover Design by Nicole Santalucia

Cover Art by Deanna Dorangrichia

Author Photograph by Deanna Dorangrichia

Library of Congress Control Number: 2019947956

ISBN: 978-1-63045-065-6

Contents

You Have Now Begun Reading <i>The Book of Dirt</i>	11
Notes from the Commonwealth	13
Keystone Ode with Jane Doe in It	14
Keystone Ode with Moving Violation in It	16
<i>from</i> The Book of Dirt	17
Keystone Ode with Lesbian Car in It	18
Red State	19
Notes from the Commonwealth	20
Keystone Ode with Overgrown Garden and Invasive Species in It	21
Keystone Ode with Homophobia and Ground Beef in It	22
Bitchtown, Pennsylvania	23
Notes from the Commonwealth	24
Red State	25
<i>from</i> The Book of Dirt	26
<i>from</i> The Book of Dirt	27
<i>from</i> The Book of Dirt	28
Keystone Ode with Assault Rifle and Grocery List in It	29
Notes from the Commonwealth	30
Keystone Ode with Hot Sauce and Motor Oil in It	31
Bitchtown, Pennsylvania	32
Keystone Ode with Marianne Moore in It	33
<i>from</i> The Book of Dirt	34
Keystone Ode with <i>The House of Mirth</i> in It	35
Notes from the Commonwealth	36
Red State	37
Keystone Ode with Founding Father in It	39

<i>from</i> The Book of Dirt	40
Notes from the Commonwealth	41
Notes from the Commonwealth	42
<i>from</i> The Book of Dirt	43
Keystone Ode with Local Journalism and the Associated Press in It	44
Notes from the Commonwealth	45
Red State	46
Notes from the Commonwealth	47
Keystone Ode with Visiting Hours in It	48
<i>from</i> The Book of Dirt	49
<i>from</i> The Book of Dirt	50
Red State	51
Keystone Ode without Jaywalking in It	52
Notes from the Commonwealth	53
<i>from</i> The Book of Dirt	54
<i>from</i> The Book of Dirt	55
Keystone Ode to My Wife after Reading Anne Bradstreet at a One-Hundred-and-Three-Year-Old Farmhouse	56
Notes from the Commonwealth	57
Keystone Ode with Litter and Exhaust in It	58
<i>from</i> The Book of Dirt	59
Red State	60
<i>from</i> The Book of Dirt	61
Notes from the Commonwealth	62
<i>from</i> The Book of Dirt	63

<i>from The Book of Dirt</i>	64
Keystone Ode with Prison Dinner in It	66
Notes from the Commonwealth	67
Keystone Ode with Despair and an Unmentioned Avocado in It	68
<i>from The Book of Dirt</i>	69
Keystone Ode with Environmental Contaminants	70
Red State	72
Keystone Ode with #MeToo in It	73
Notes from the Commonwealth	74
Keystone Ode with Queer Skin	75
Keystone Ode with Businessmen in It	76
Notes from the Commonwealth	77
On First Having Read <i>The Book of Dirt</i>	78

from The Book of Dirt

If I'm a wife and my wife is a wife
who vacuums the house and cleans the dishes
which wife dusts and which one does laundry

who cleans the dirt off of the dirt
which one of us sucks dirt and which one spits out dirt
which one of us doesn't fit into the word *wife*

if *wife* is carved into the dirt whose left breast
falls off and whose right eye is dug out
if the wind is prayer if dirt is 50% lesbian

and 50% void if it never rains how do mosquitoes
suck the gay out if we live below ground
in our dirt house do we get squatters' rights

can we sue the land if the land is our witness if
we inhale the earth if our bodies are silent
tell us what we own if the law of the dirt

is dirt if wives travel west of the dirt
what customary law influences property rights
if individual grains of sediment never move

if the force of gravity pulls us deeper into the dirt
if there's no gust of wind or water or ice
our marriage will never sculpt itself into a mountain

if the valley of dead-women-in-the-dirt has been
our destination this whole time all we had to do
was walk barefoot in our backyard

Bitchtown, Pennsylvania

Some bitch like me sets the fire, cranks
the heat, burns the toast, swallows the flare.

The flowerpots and front lawns blaze
one little fire at a time. Flames sprout
from the gardens on Hanover Street.
Yellow fires and red fires and motherfuckers
drive trucks that are on fire. The chicken hut,
gas station, post office, and the neighbors: all on fire.

When the train passes through this neighborhood of flames
a gust of wind knocks over the bitch who lit the first match.
Her fire burns on fear. Pretty soon the black sky
swirls in flames and the clouds shrivel up,
dry out, and drop like dog shit

to the sides of the streets and highways
where heroin addicts are left for dead, where farmers
grow lettuce and trade sheep for shoelaces and guns,
where starving cows are auctioned
and eaten alive, and the people

confuse women for beef and love for needles.

Notes from the Commonwealth

Dead Woman's Hollow Road: Cumberland County, Pennsylvania

You watch the news to find out that lesbians don't wash away
after drinking dirt, that the dirt didn't absorb all the rain last week,
that there's everything to name and no voice to repair the rainbow,
that the history of queer was murdered in the Michaux State Forest.
I heard about the woman who ran from the echo of hate—one shot at a time.
I mean, I went to the grocery store, bought mushrooms covered in dirt,
rinsed their white heads, poured olive oil on them, the news in the background.
There's a storm coming, a flood warning, maybe a murderer on the loose. I cooked
and swallowed dirt. Eleven miles away a tree named Rebecca sank into the land.

I am on the other side of the rainbow in the dirt
that doesn't make the news: lesbians sprout like wild strawberries;
their root systems tangle with murder. In Pennsylvania, crushed bones
cut into the land, and daughters collapse before they are auctioned off
every Sunday morning. This ritual is for sale in the church parking lot
where blessings smell like gunfire, and fingers break the sound barrier
as they dig for life.

The dirt under the dead woman's fingernails: sacred.
The yeast in her throat: scooped out, melted down,
and served as communion.

Keystone Ode with Local Journalism and the Associated Press in It

After reading *The Patriot Newspaper* on July 14, 2015

The news headlines are stuffed in exhaust pipes
and King Street is about to explode in Shippensburg.
Tailpipes are clogged with the “Military’s Transgender Ban”
and the “Number of Uninsured” has hit
the bottom of the Susquehanna.

I am driving on the river bottom
looking for lead musket balls with teeth marks,
something to bite down on while my muffler
burns out and my catalytic converter suffocates.
There are soldiers brushing their hair with bones
down here. My windows are rolled up
while saw blades, British copper half pennies,
and clay marbles float to the surface.

The obituary page is on the shoreline
in a pile of flint and pink arrowheads.
Margaret Mosier Balaban is survived
by thirteen children. She loved to savor
nut roll, raspberry torte, and chocolate
layer cake—her degree in chemistry
was burnt in the oven back in December 1945.

She would have been 91 this year,
but now Mrs. Balaban
is a sheet of paper on the riverbank
where heroin addicts topple over.
This trash pit will never get dug up
and archived because all the historians
are starving to death in toothpick forts.

Keystone Ode with #MeToo in It

So #MeToo cuts her ponytail off, walks into a bar and takes a seat next to #MeToo and the bartender serves #MeToo whiskey from an eyedropper she pulls straight out of her purse, but it turns out #MeToo was already in every purse because #MeToo comes as a picture inside every wallet. #MeToo carries tweezers everywhere she goes, plucks chin hairs before her picture is taken. #MeToo slides into a bra strap, tucks into a sock, falls out of a pocket, folds into a shirtsleeve, gets lost in a discount rack. #MeToo shuts up. Drinks. #MeToo never loses the memory.

#MeToo, like when my high school soccer coach hijacked my shin pads and cleats he drained the water cooler sucked the orange slice out of my mouth the warehouse out of my mind the metal cage out of my lungs the ferris wheel seat that flips inside my gut yes he resigned I was a goalie I wanted to tell his wife wanted to cut his tongue out rip his face off my torso hardened into tree bark when my shirt came off her torso hardened into tree bark when her shirt came off she wanted his wife to yell but it was sunday then tuesday and 16 is hard pavement her head is my head against the curb my hair wrapped around her throat I was 16 I swear I never kissed back

So #MeToo wants to tell his wife, wants his daughter's name not to be Nicole. #MeToo was kicked off the soccer team. He ran for mayor as a democrat, just like #MeToo. So you lost the sour taste of being a teenager, #MeToo? Me too. Now she stands in front of a classroom twenty years later with hair down to her knees and when a student says #MeToo, she imagines her soccer cleats dangling from his rearview mirror as he gags on a wad of her hair.