

# Questions for the Sea

A collection of poems by Stephen Symons

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This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part,  
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## Abstract

This collection of 47 poems, *Questions for the Sea*, explores questions pertaining to the frailty of human existence within the natural and built environment. Many of the poems involve some form of human exposure, and subsequent response, to the effects of the natural elements.

The presence of the ocean, whether obvious or nuanced, is offered to the reader as a constant; and serves as a point of entry or departure, and even inquiry, for the poems. The collection is divided into nine sections which encompass themes including landscape, natural topographies, specific localities within South Africa, inter-personal relationships, and aspects of human conflict, both historical and contemporary.

Of special interest to the poet, are the visual properties of the poem's form on paper, as well as its association with poetic style and narrative function.

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## Contents

### I

- Tinnitus, 7
- Rain song, 8
- Glass, 9
- Against forgetting, 10
- Words, 11
- Weight, 12
- Heat, 13

### II

- Beta Beach, Bakoven, 15
- Camps Bay, 16
- Boyes Drive, 17
- Muizenberg, 18
- Tietiesbaai, 19

### III

- Questions for the Sea, 21

### IV

- Birth of a daughter, 27
- Lucidity, 28
- Mother, 29
- Darkroom, 30
- Second hand bookstore, 31

### V

- Morning sketch, 33
- Perfect day, 34
- After the storm, 35
- Commute, 36
- Days, 38
- Driving home, 39

### VI

- The prospect of a dreamless sleep, 41
- Death of a gecko, 42
- Compound eye, 43
- South Easter, 44
- Nothing but movement, 45
- The Gale /5th December 2013, 46

*continued overleaf*

## VII

- Dead bird, 48
- Death of a husband by drowning, 49
- Not dark yet, 51
- Death of a surfer, 52
- The day after, 53

## VIII

- On reading a war poem before sunrise, 55
- Letter home, 56
- Spioenkop, 58
- Sniper, 59

## IX

- Table Mountain, 61
  - Wheat field, 62
  - Holiday houses, 63
  - Autumn, 64
  - Mist, 65
  - Imagining snow, 66
  - Dust, 67
  - This is a country, 68
-

*I*

## Tinnitus

Before sleep  
with most parts of the day  
folded away  
the present steps inside him

What he hears  
is the singing of a needle  
that rises and pierces  
the sound of clouds  
brushing against darkness

He closes his eyes  
and leaves the night shapes  
of stools and mirrors  
for the black felt beneath his eyelids

And feels  
the thickening ink of sleep  
rob him of his feet  
as the first breaths of a dream  
lift off the sea.

## Rain song

You step over the notes  
as they settle on the beach  
they find your hips  
and the flowers of your dress

Your hand is all I have  
and the details of your fingers  
all I want  
within mine  
the folds of flesh  
the scars  
tanlines  
grazes  
the inaudible whispers of pain on your skin

This intimacy of fingers  
is perhaps all we'll ever have  
as the tide gathers up our footprints  
and the rain sweeps its song  
towards us.

## Glass

Sometimes he would let himself  
wear the fragrance of her  
on some insignificance of his body  
like the back of his hand  
or the fold of his elbow

He would lift those parts of himself  
to his nose

## Smile

And let her memory  
slip across the back of his mind  
like a blue window allows clouds  
to skate over its surface.

## Against forgetting

I think he was always  
against shedding her  
like a time worn skin  
worrying his love  
would eventually spill  
into forgetting  
and letters would float  
from the words they had shared  
until all that remained  
were the muffle of strange voices  
in distant rooms —  
and a return to  
separateness  
from the warm calm  
of an embrace.

## Words

Late summer —  
with evening sucking away  
a blood orange horizon

sea-mist planes the tide-line  
as you lean into me  
to cheat the cold

those hours  
between death and waking  
when a gale is done twisting  
the roots of the house  
and birds vanish from the earth

I lie awake  
and feel the warm  
pulse of your breath  
on my shoulder —  
but more than these fractions

we have catalogued  
into a closeness  
called love  
are the words we pass  
to each other  
long past midnight —  
into a mingling of darkness and speech

that pauses the earth.

## Weight

It's that time  
when night  
has spent most of its darkness  
constellations falter  
birds are shaking sleep  
from their feathers

I lie closer  
and slip my foot  
under the weight of your thigh  
to steal those last fragments of peace  
from you

Unaware of my theft  
you turn towards me  
unveiling a second self  
that speaks a language  
spun from intimacy  
with vowels of flesh  
and consonants of touch

I smile  
into the warm pressing  
of your body  
and watch the sky  
being slowly stripped of night.

## Heat

Awaking to find the coolness  
of your skin above the sheets

Outside the pines are fossils  
pretrified by the same heat  
that sunk a gale at first light

A mountain and  
the triplet calls of a shrike  
fills the window

It was later  
once the morning breeze  
began its slow heaving  
at the curtains  
that I smoothed the imprint  
of your sleep  
from the bedding

And realised that the day  
had turned to no more than a  
fly thudding against glass.

*II*

## Beta Beach, Bakoven

There was a moment  
marked by the exhaling  
of a last flare of sunlight

where everything wore  
a fine edge of gold and copper

detail gelled  
to a black ballet  
of cormorants  
dogs and flirting couples

bonded to black granite  
boulders and the closeness  
of your sunned skin.

## Camps Bay

Within the city  
a fist of heat is already  
beating the beginnings of day  
out of light and concrete

Summiting the *Nek*  
there's that buckled horse-shoe  
of coast below  
still cooled by the  
mauve absence of sun

Driving past roofs  
and curtained windows  
weeping the breath of sleep and kettles

Switch-backing down towards  
the sea's voice

So close you can hear  
the drawing up of its secret lists  
as each syllable  
brightens to liquid brilliance

Then the school bell rings  
and the children rush the gate.

## Boyes Drive

I rub away the splashes of salt  
that have tightened the skin  
on your shoulders

Your smile  
looks out towards the bay  
where a trimmed fingernail of moon  
teeters on the fog

At last  
a sea breeze releases the heat  
from the throats of the sandstone boulders  
behind us

Below  
spades have stopped skidding over the gravel  
And that fucking lawnmower is done  
with the grass.

Muizenberg

1

I miss  
your cool gun metal skin  
dimpled and pecked  
at by a North wind —  
a shark tooth patina  
multiplied over  
lines of surf stepped  
into sea haze

watching walkers and dogs licked at  
by sea-mist  
their hunched forms carrying that grey light  
across wet sand  
towards anthracite  
breakfast and asthmatic kettles

and the surfers  
side-stepping the ribbons of kelp  
wet copper at low tide  
and the citrus viscera of red bait  
sucked back  
into foam and grit

2

always —  
the complaints of brakes against rail  
and that exhausted clack into the station  
of a film strip of train windows  
reflecting  
the bay snapping past  
coves terracotta roofs  
reefs and doric columns  
waves into

slow afternoons of dulled turquoise  
heavy and  
constantly drawing life into shadow.

## Tietiesbaai

This bay  
searing  
    in its calcium whiteness —  
        the midday heat of talcum  
            shell and bone  
                beneath  
                    bare feet  
like a wind-sucked  
    boneyard  
        of fallen angels.

### *III*

## Questions for the Sea

**16h30**

The beach is stunned  
by a day's worth of heat —  
a blue and squinted view  
jammed with umbrellas  
towels and glazed bodies  
framed by the peals of children  
broken by the collapse  
of shorebreak.

Out in the bay  
Kelp Gulls bank skywards  
with gale-frayed feathers;  
they elbow higher  
tuck their wings away  
then dive into a school of mullet  
caught in a rip.

I am standing in the shallows  
calf deep  
wetsuited  
watching the gulls gorge themselves  
as the last minutes of heat  
liquefy to a vein of sweat  
between neoprene and skin.

Soon towels will be cracking in the wind  
and families will slog back  
to their suffocated cars  
leaving vacant plots  
of flesh-smoothed sand.

Beyond the surf  
is an inflatable dolphin skipping  
past the gulls

like a question mark  
made of plastic,  
blown out to sea —

chasing after an unanswerable question?

*continued overleaf*

---

**18h20**

Where do you go at dusk?  
Do you just pour over the horizon  
into the abyss  
where you are turned to cloud  
then followed  
into death by the sun?

---

**19h00**

We always wish for more from the waves  
we wish that they wanted us  
or left prophecies for us on the sand  
or revelations in their spray

but all they want  
is to turn our footprints  
into white islets of foam

Why is it that the waves seduce us?

---

**20h35**

Tonight, constellations float  
in your oiled stillness  
and you are beautiful

Who dreams  
under this moonless sky?

Who do the waves mourn?

---

*continued overleaf*

---

**21h45**

Somewhere a fisherman is praying  
his way through a storm  
trying to skipper his vessel  
to safety

Yet what part of your body  
has turned to pewter  
in this hook of bay  
as the moon pulls at you  
and the city lights ride  
your tides?

---

**23h10**

Do you feel the ceaseless rubbing  
of the bones and boats  
that lie wrecked  
beneath your skin

Held by a blue tonnage  
beyond maps  
and human claim?

---

**00h25**

There are so many times  
you could have taken me,  
filled my lungs with your blood —

Are you waiting  
waiting patiently for the right moment  
to sink me like a stone?

---

*continued overleaf*

---

**05h45**

What of those days  
before this city  
millions of mornings ago  
when the tails of the first whales  
would have skimmed these roofs

And the shadows of great cartilaginous fish  
patrolled these streets  
made of barking dogs  
and swimming pools?

---

**07h30**

Why have we mapped  
your body into seas  
bays and oceans —

Given you legs and arms  
where there are only  
blue and green  
voyagings of current?

---

**08h50**

Are the shells  
that we hold to our ears  
still part of you?

Is what we hear  
the rushing of your salted blood  
and not ours?

---

*continued overleaf*

---

**10h05**

Where do you plot your violence  
summon gales and  
seduce chop into swell?

Who ushers your breath under doors  
through gaps and vents  
so radios seize up

And windows with perfect views  
are smudged away  
and eventually salted shut?

---

**Midday**

Looking out  
towards a nebula of heat  
stretched across the horizon  
I wonder how these slopes  
can carry the weight  
of so many houses

And whether these words  
are more prayer than question —

unanswerable as death?

---

# *IV*

Birth of a daughter

My daughter  
you were more than beautiful  
with your dimples  
threads of hair  
and fingernails of silk

Still sightless  
and exhausted by birth  
you latched to your mother's breast  
found the heartbeat behind  
her smile  
and swam back to heaven  
with a new taste in your mouth

As all parents do  
or perhaps not do  
I thought of you a lifetime from now  
    made infant again  
    and then I wept.

## Lucidity

Towards the end  
her voice could not carry the weight of sentences  
she would slip beneath a meniscus of sound  
and drift for hours  
in the sunned silence of a bedside glass

Propped up to a sea view  
she would wish the bedding away  
watching smithereens of cloud  
reflected by a wind-scuffed bay

And then she would speak  
her words would make sense again  
and soar like the gulls —  
feathers skimming the spray  
skirting the wet surfaces of lucidity.

## Mother

A lone lush tree —  
you gave shade  
and always love  
until autumn came  
    indifferent  
    and beyond healing

How it plucked your leaves one by one  
elbowing out the other seasons

A continual shedding  
until winter —  
when your speech faltered  
to the cracking of bark  
and branches fractured  
at the slightest breath

Finally —  
the last of the birds took flight in a fantail of white.

“It’s better this way”, they said  
over sandwiches and tea  
as I watched the last of the leaves  
swept away by  
a fresh Spring breeze.

## Darkroom

Bored by three days of rain  
he stole into the half-light  
of her darkroom  
into its red alchemy  
of images

He paused —  
a woman and a boy lay  
curved into each other  
in sleep

Mother and son perhaps?  
She dreaming  
of the stone wall  
all parents build  
around their children

He imagined their sleeping shapes  
on the gleaming wall  
brushed by  
shadows of black leaves  
attached to the even  
blacker limbs of trees

Beyond the room was wind —  
coalescing far-off shoreline fluorescence  
to a brilliance  
that poured from the photo  
and filled the darkroom  
with a light  
unlike anything he had seen.

## Second hand bookstore

*'You'll find the poetry three rows up and at the end of the Classics section, can't miss it, past History, before Cookery'*? He follows an aisle of shelves. Most are moulting chipboard flakes. The quality of their carpentry annoys him. Filaments of paint run over flecked linoleum tiles. They dribble down the aisle of the bestseller section — the quick reads snatched at duty-free or borrowed from a summer guesthouse; holiday sand still snug between a racy plot. Here, bookmarks are gravestones. He fingers out a laminated verse — a water-colour reminder of God's eternal love — complete with a dove winging its way towards a cumulus cathedral. Other books offer Happy Birthdays in cursive, ballpoint flowers, hearts and 'I love you's' behind covers bandaged in Sellotape. *'Darling Thomas, Our best wishes on your 10th birthday, love from Mommy & Daddy, 1971'*. Handling the books leaves a roughness on his fingertips, not quite dust, more like a fine colourless sleet — the tidal residue of half-memories and forgetting. There are whole shelves letting go of childhood — spineless bedtime stories, illustrated books of knowledge and soccer annuals. A shamble of comics — sun-brittled, buckled and sticky thumbed — lie in a shopping basket. Sunday afternoons of slow clocks and tea in lighted rooms surface and then dip back into memory. There are the books of the sick, the dying too, trawled from the reading trolleys of convalescent homes, and lamp tables of curtained sea view flats. Black and blue hard-backs that have shed their gold leafed identities. Emerald encyclopaedias infused with mothballs and salted air dream of mahogany shelves in sun-trapped hall-ways. He wonders — how whole worlds can be buckled into suitcases or taped into wine cartons. There is no Poetry section, except a coverless *Paradise Lost*. It smells of burnt toast and carries the signature of a cup. The finger marks of its last reader have gathered on the bruised edges of its cover. He holds the book for some time and looks outside towards the wet street and its glistening current. He shivers and wonders why he feels as frail as a bird's leg — and then sneezes.

*V*

## Morning sketch

From here  
dawn smudges horizon  
into skyline  
into the fire-brittled leaves and  
bones of fynbos

For a moment  
the sun is snagged  
ambushed  
by a barbed wired fence  
until it slips free  
diffused to an orange button

Dew beads  
brim with light  
multiplying the morning  
into countless worlds  
within worlds

each

a perfect clarity

## Perfect day

Days like this  
that might prove  
atheists wrong  
unsettling their unswerving  
orbits of disbelief  
with a single note  
made of mountain  
sky and sea

So pure  
bees stumble  
on the velvet  
rims of petals  
and birds  
will chorus  
forgotten songs  
long after dark.

## After the storm

The clouds have slowed —  
emptied of rain  
ruptured by light  
and bleeding a dawn  
still concussed  
by the storm's machinery

all cradled within a pink calm  
where leaves cling to  
everything but trees

even the sighs of routine —  
the hymns of kettles  
grumbling dust bins  
and dopplered wash of streets  
are sheened in silvered wetness

he watches  
and feels  
that transaction  
of cold exchanged for warmth  
    how sunlight floods  
    rooms and turns  
violence into routine.

## Commute

The city watches

there is only  
the low thrum  
of incessant motion and routine

the way wind  
and light anneal  
the morning

while above  
the sun coasts aimlessly;  
becalmed by a clay fog

as white and red  
beads of traffic  
stop-start their way

to hours congealing to screens  
coffee machines  
and phones

until the day rises to midday  
then ebbs and beaches itself  
on the afternoon hours

cold whittles away warmth  
catalysing buildings  
into shadow

and everywhere  
cell phones are waking  
shivering — trembling —

slim pocket bibles  
ringing out their  
end of day annunciations

slowly the city re-discovers  
its night time vacancies  
beginning with

*continued overleaf*

a mob of gulls  
pecking away at  
the last bones of light  
tossed into the streets.

## Days

Like a pocket of  
smithereened glass

misted reflections  
arranged  
sifted  
smoothed at the edges

that always kaleidoscope  
to something surpassing  
what they were

with the slightest twist of  
memory.

## Driving home

Hours into the drive  
lack of sleep  
slows the hands  
of the clock

I am pulled along the undulations  
the camber and rhythms of asphalt  
past shaved farm lands  
and the Spotted Eagle Owl  
I swerved to avoid

Where each blind minute  
is stitched together  
and made visible  
with white and yellow paint  
punctuated by cat's eyes  
that gaze back

Unblinking  
Rousing memory —

As each pole ticks by  
the shapes and spaces  
of a forgotten love

Sharpen into focus  
lit by the twin beams  
of headlights  
pointing home.

# *VI*

The prospect of a dreamless sleep

Leaves  
    tire of their trees  
Clouds  
    sprint over  
        a loam sky

The mountain is lost  
    tipped  
        into  
    a bay  
    of pewter  
        by a gale

Asleep —  
    blood  
    rivers  
    beneath  
    sunburnt  
    skin

Windows panes cast away their views  
    misted  
    threaded with breathing  
    and the first beads of rain

But  
    sleep still turns like a great engine  
    a conjurer of dreams  
    not death  
        dust  
        or wind-pitted bone.

## Death of a gecko

The night has turned to concrete  
and the city is a curtain  
still as the breathing of birds

a cat pads over moonlight  
in search of prey  
through the thinning heat  
past pine needles  
that float  
on freshly cut lawns

your hips are sketched  
in tenuous veins of streetlight  
that play like jazz over the sheets  
rhythms of shadow that rise dip and  
slip into imagination

sleep now cleaved  
by the click of an electric fence  
I head into the cold  
barefoot  
with broom in hand  
to brush the gecko from the fence  
and stop that metronome of death.

## Compound eye

Stumbling  
with a dry mouth

from a slipknot of sheets  
sweat  
and her dreaming back  
into a freshly painted kitchen

where he admires his handiwork  
and pours  
a glass of ice water

he watches a fly

rubbing its legs together  
eyeing  
the gale beyond the glass

the freedom of

the moon swaying through the clouds

the way some trees have slipped their roots

even the broken necks of the daffodils  
he planted last year seem so alive  
in the battered moonlight  
then he remembers a TV programme

that a fly's eye has a thousand lenses  
and they have the fastest visual responses  
in the animal kingdom

he places the glass in the sink  
and wonders

does the fly desire its freedom  
a thousand times over ?

— before he swots it into oblivion  
with the Late Final.

## South Easter

In this wind  
the city is lost at sea  
mad as a hatter it loosens  
the bolts of the bay  
and quilts the mountain  
in a charge of cumulus.

In this wind  
all comes from the sea  
curtains of salt seek  
out the cleanest windows  
pennants of flotsam form beachheads  
in watercoloured coves.

In this wind  
the sea is welded to  
a crazed palette of white noise  
roads swim beneath drifts of sand like whales  
and leaves are summoned  
to pile up in suburban corners.

In this wind  
nature unbuckles rage  
mugging the dreams of babies  
with rattling gutters and rapping fruit  
as sleep corrodes like a nail.

## Nothing but movement

The wind knows nothing  
but movement  
even in death it whispers  
to the leaves

The Gale /5th December 2013

Today  
the sun has given up  
manufacturing summer

A gale clenches the sky  
and plucks the feathers from  
the breasts of birds

Every tree is a silver green shoal  
pulled towards the sea

Trawled from its green memory  
of hope and light.

# *VII*

## Dead bird

The bird  
is turned inside out

a splay of bones  
frail as the veins  
of sunburnt leaves

followed by  
a confusion  
of feathers  
light as sea foam

that marks the violence  
still snagged by  
freshly mown grass.

## Death of a husband by drowning

She stands at the water's edge  
feeling the wet sand  
inchng over her anklebones  
as her feet sink into its icy granularity  
till something catches in her throat  
like a small bird

She shivers  
as the breeze  
nips at the sea-wet skin of her calves  
or is it the thought of his hands  
white-knuckled and veined  
weighted by bags of shopping or  
a sleeping child?

Lemon and cerise roses  
climb from the soaked hem of her skirt  
over the thin-skinned edge of her shins  
curving up to softer territories  
to those shadowed parts of flesh

She stands  
in the cast-iron light  
hours before the sun  
burns away the smell of salted air  
with the morning sheening  
on the chilled rocks

And alone  
(except for the distant blot of a dog-walker)  
watches daylight ignite;  
looks to the gape of the bay  
hoping to drown love

*continued overleaf*

or the memory of love.

Later

in those slowed hours  
between breakfast and lunch  
as cupboards are emptied  
and books are boxed  
the smell of him  
seeks out her fingers  
and she returns to the beach  
across the stinging sand  
to wash him away  
again and again.

## Not dark yet

Daylight has tipped over  
dusk is spilt over sea foam  
as the tide trawls the shoreline  
tumbling shells  
and cracked bulbs of kelp

No one notices the Kelp Gull  
with a shattered wing

Dogs too drunk on freedom  
ignore the bird  
as a fan of flightless feathers  
draw a perfect arc  
across the wet sand.

## Death of a surfer

Death came in a whorl  
of cobalt and white

It sliced through colour and cold  
a scarred slab of cartilage  
like a slash of barbed wire  
and muscled grey sandpaper  
against  
sea-softened skin  
neoprened and tan lined

It took him for no reason  
other than  
he too was at home

Now shut tight  
the beach is scoured —  
there's just the loitering arcs of gulls  
forsaken against  
the fractured bay

Every atom is stilled  
darkened  
and  
fathomless as the language  
of the sea.

## The day after

The day after you die will be no different

traffic  
will stutter into town  
the bees  
will go about their business amongst  
suburban pollen  
the sun  
might catch the back of someone's neck

tongues will flirt with teaspoons

drivers  
will curse  
wheelbarrows  
will ache under another load of bricks  
blisters  
will burst

trees will throb in the heat

asphalt  
will singe bare feet  
a wave  
will break the silence  
doves  
will chortle from the shade

but in that second called habit  
you know she will call for a towel

from the shower  
and listen to the sound of your name  
slide from the tiles  
into the water at her feet.

# *VIII*

## On reading a war poem before sunrise

A good time  
to read or write;  
when the house sleeps  
and everything  
is made of stone and thinned breath

A poem could begin here  
in the dream-lit waiting  
of branches and birds

Stillness hangs from the cold walls  
and frames the drone of a lone car —  
or is it the breathing of the sea?

No  
it's the rush of the poem's blood  
and its words fastened to  
the quiet like beach sand  
in minute increments of roughness  
crystalline and salt-sticky

You  
brush the words away  
trace the rules of light seeping between the blinds  
let the first accolades of bird song in  
and wonder  
how many storms  
would scour a beach of sand  
and expose its granite bones —  
and wounds.

## Letter home

### 1

The shadows of the steel window frames  
are drawn back  
then released by a sea-breeze  
to reveal the sun-cracked gauze  
that lets the flies  
and mozzies in

Pretorius sits in a slash of light  
brushing the *opvok* out of his boots  
whistling  
— more spit than sound —  
as his hand blurs over the laces  
scuffing his palm  
to the colour of his overalls

We're all here  
some in shorts that have slipped their drawstrings  
others in vests with the life hung out of them  
cleaning rifles  
or licking lies into envelopes

Out there  
beyond the base  
churches are pealing for believers  
drunken notes tumble into the bungalow  
swirling motes of home-sickness  
and drawing memory into sunlight

So a happiness  
that masquerades as dust  
is held briefly by  
the doorway

*continued overleaf*

*Ja, julle vokking naaiers  
gaan nou lekker afkak'*  
is how it would begin

But before that  
a shuffling line  
that dribbled *fucks* and *voks*  
would form in the after-lunch heat  
so we could drop a sandbag  
into each others pack  
and slowly the weight  
would grow  
bones gather flesh  
sinew  
and gnaw at our backs.

Pretorius always stuffed a wet towel  
under his webbing  
to ease the rasp  
and clots of Vaseline too  
that would stain his browns —  
a bitch to wash out

A week later they found him in the heads  
door ajar  
still sitting on the throne  
skull flopped forward  
revealing a cracked bowl of bone  
and a chrysanthemum of brain  
that had dripped pools of blood to explore  
the flecked tiles and the butt of his R1

And it lay there  
in the snuggerly  
between his toes  
  
the blackened brass casing  
of his final letter home.

## Spioenkop

Climbing the koppie  
on a birdless dawn  
with summer dragging behind us

Hiking through the work of spiders  
spilling dew beads and  
skinning the same wet earth  
where soldier's hobnails  
crunched and slid  
to reach a summit  
spread with death —

Squinting away  
from the sun razed veld  
I look back down the climb  
to where the last breaths of night  
still shade the slope in slate and umber

And in that moment  
morning hews the incline  
to a hedge of stone  
light splintered and  
still twisted deep into the flesh  
of this country's history.

## Sniper

Up there  
his days rifled  
to a burst window  
with its glass teeth  
still fixed to a shattered frame

And from his height  
he would marvel  
how man had managed  
to dismantle the sun  
with war

At night he aimed his scope at a coal sky  
stretched over a ribcage of trusses  
and he watched the stars  
tremor  
as their light arrived  
like luminous rain  
on the barrel of his rifle

He died  
floors up in that  
shell-shocked room  
that leaked stars  
and memory —

A space that freezes  
the echoes of pigeon's feet.

# *IX*

## Table Mountain

This evening the mountain  
is an amphitheatre conjured  
from rock and mutable light

Clouds pour  
over its ragged back  
as colour slides from every surface  
leaving a topography  
chiselled by the elements  
by the incessant wrenching of gales  
pulling at its skin  
and a white gush of water  
after winter rain

Dusk falters  
giving the crags time  
to loosen their last tongues of sunlight  
till all detail bleeds into shadow  
and liquefies  
under the soaked weight of cloud

Further down  
a blackening wind  
unbuckles the belts of roads  
houses butted against its incline slip away  
till suburbia is undressed  
its belly laid bare to the elements

Light inverts  
and thickens into night  
only the suffused apertures  
of yellow windows remain  
punctuating a darkness that wills hands

to draw curtains decorated  
with nightingales and foreign flowers  
across the emptied view.

## Wheat field

We broke our journey alongside  
a wheat field that had been  
harvested to a blond stubble

I stood plucking  
the slack barbed-wire fence  
and let the view blur  
while you took to the field  
with the light skirting your body —  
sharpening a shoulder blade but  
softening the milky beginnings of a thigh

You stood there transfixed by  
the arrhythmia of a wind pump's blades  
watching it pump dust  
into a cracked dam  
covered with tufts  
of sun-split grass  
and edged by a sliver of wheat  
the harvester couldn't reach

Your camera aimed  
at a Blue Crane —  
its lens flared  
    the bird startled  
stepped into the air —  
a dream  
taking flight  
in the first moments  
of wakefulness.

## Holiday houses

These houses are tethered  
to driveways

sheened — still — freshly hosed  
large windows reflect

*sprinklers flick over*  
leaves  
chrome  
concrete

now lit in parts by  
the beginnings of streetlight  
afternoons have slipped high walls  
hosepipes are coiled

*tables wait*  
for lives to be laid out  
between cutlery  
over linen white as death

*and salmon walls*  
boast with watercolours  
frames  
and glassed smiles

*outside*  
a breeze stiffens  
twisting the last of autumn  
from the branches

so it clogs the gutters  
of these houses.

## Autumn

The cold whets  
its teeth on  
the blue of the sky  
and velvet undersides  
of leaves  
gnawing colour from petals  
trees  
and eyes

What's shed...  
desiccated veins  
and fragile spines  
that crack underfoot  
brittle as spun sugar

Till nothing flows  
or fills the fissures

And everything is sapped

Even us.

## Mist

The mist inhales light

softens sight  
suspends detail  
exhalles

and moistens the air in a  
a suspension of grey molecules

so  
sound is damped  
and summarised

to three things:

breath  
the ocean  
and remote birdsong

## Imagining snow

Imagining snow —  
its weightlessness and texture  
from behind a misted car window  
rubbing my breath from the glass  
to reveal the mountain  
whitewashed and grazed with cold

I have always watched its work at a distance  
the way the presence of snow  
awakens the memory of a broken bone  
sharpens the edges of leaves  
and hardens the bark of trees  
against axes and nails

The way it exists  
so delicately between states  
like water dreaming

Yet I have never wrapped reality around the word — s n o w  
and cupped it in my hand like a butterfly  
before it awakens and turns to liquid.

## Dust

Here in the squinted light  
hammered into heat  
the leaves applaud  
scrubbing the silence  
stirring the dam  
from treacle stillness

Pigments fused to sandstone crags  
shift with the sun  
washing the corrugations  
of jeep tracks with  
crushed pink and orange  
mixed from a palette  
of valley and scree

And dust reigns  
a floured film of skin  
breathed over rock  
water  
fynbos  
till it becomes time —  
iron red ancient  
coating flesh  
with the dynasties of stars  
beneath a sky  
that has been split wide open.

## This is a country

This is a country full of question marks  
but there are no sentences  
fastened to the question marks

This country is a deep ravine  
cut into a mountain by  
the slow steady flow of water

A country where the plants and birds  
have forgotten their names  
and the trees grow into an impenetrable dusk.

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