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SIMPLE ORGANISMS

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This work has not been previously submitted in whole
or in part for the award of any degree. It is my own
work. Each significant contribution to and quotation in
this dissertation from the work or works of other
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Signature

Date

SIMPLE ORGANISMS

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Karoo letter

After the winter of coughing blood, the mud
of my tuberculin, my body's rack laid bare
on cots and tables, I have watched the air
come parched and sunlit off the scrub Karoo.

I said I'd live – I know I promised you;
but I'm no better, and I fear our child
will have no living father. Strange, this proud,
new century of science: it gave to me
instead of fixtures, rather than a cure,
this desert's petrified and beautiful motifs
of recapitulation. To be sure,
despite our thumbs, our eyes, our industry,
I am, and you, the slow phylogeny
of simple organisms, of our brains
a billion years before the *cogito*.
I've watched the boil and nurture of the sand,
how you and I can trace, from where the land
surfaced death-sprung from the fossil sea,
the moulds of our evolving ancestry.
The world's unfolding at your swelling womb
its smallest part, the pulse of our design.

I knew I'd not return to see you there
when I found, revealed by wind, the rocky bones
of ammonites below the hill. The air
came parched and sunlit off the scrub Karoo,
uncovered them, and drifted swiftly through.

My father's churchyard

Confetti petals fog the trampled grass. The crowd
has left my father's church and hillside yard
for somewhere they're allowed

to celebrate. I stand below the hill to see
the way the chapel steals into the sky
above the cemetery,

my father's garden tool-shed, rising from a wide
parterre of souls. The rocks have spilled about
and over. But beside

the headstones, wreaths are flowering up: as over there
(a wedding-goer's impromptu homage) lies
a freesia boutonniere,

plucked neatly from the jacket of a passer-by;
a ginger lily placed across a name;
geraniums gone awry

and rooted to a mound of settled earth. And still
I see him here, explaining how those dead
are part of us. The hill,

its churchyard, flowers – all this was his botany,
as here he nurtures back to mind this son
and father's bonhomie

with wild confetti. Were he standing here, he'd say:
'This garden is in bloom. There was a storm
of petals here today.'

Finding crabs

On days like this we set out finding crabs
in the stream between the waterberry trees,
bending low to peer into the banks,
to stab our reeds into the slope,
to feel the tug – and he's there
hanging monstrosly, stupid,
and as we lift him off the branch,
two fingers under the hard shell,
his legs uncurl and curl, his straining eyes
gaze like periscopes, stretching out
sizing us up, sizing him up,
two fingers under the belly, easy
until once I felt the fleshy underside
of a crab giving birth, an open crab
freeing her offspring in the water,
releasing her young, sowing crabs
into the gaping caves where she saw
the spikes stuck deep in the dark mud,
and us running home, downstream,
screaming at her soft unguarded belly.

Second entry, captain of the wrecked
Cabalva, July 1818

As I had thought, the men have come
to me. I've said 'we're lost' to some.
Or stopping short they've seen the caves,
the bulging shore, the dogged waves

and turned away. I cannot know
their fury. Seven men will go
beyond the headland, we will burn
the ship, and find our food in turn.

The ship lies splintered near the crew.
The air is cold, the land is new.
It's dawn. And high as I can see
the seabirds circle silently.

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Their labrador

I visited the couple afterwards.
They found it hard to say that he was gone,
their labrador, who saw the way for them
along the pathways to their lampless home.

They had it built in stone beneath a slope
of pine and fynbos, on the leeward side
where smells and moisture settled. Every day
they'd walk, the dog beside them sniffing up

the track and brush, and, seeing more than them,
narrating everything. He could announce
a bird nearby, or the boiling up of cloud
above the house in time to hurry back.

Of all they said about their seeing dog
they said the least about his final night,
for as he died the lovers feared, for once,
their briefly separate bodies out of sight.

Your gravity

At some stage, somehow, everyone's made love
to the moon. The moonlit glance, the harvest,
the sonatas on her rilles and mares, all
their pocket daydreams. I have even seen
a flagpole thud silently into her soil
to germinate with America.
But when I am here and the flat face of the moon
squashes up against the window,
its rifts and valleys are older and more broken
than deserts. When I am here
and lie against the mending of your body,
against the pulse and rising of your heart,
I'd rather feel the heavy flesh of love
and know the earthy life of every part.

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My first England

'Why you want to go to this cold thief place?'
Wide Sargasso Sea, Jean Rhys

1

Below the floating aeroplane
blackbirds sprouted from the red roofs
and the hillsides puffed with white sheep:

it was my first England
and my brain was greedy as a plough.

All my reading life I knew I'd come.
This, this is my fistful, I said,
clutching my ticket to Leicester Square,
of all my childhood's English things,
the crows, the snow, the filthy Thames.

And all that day, I'll swear, my head,
my shaking head was England's.
Show me rain, the colonies, such food,
or foxes in a hunt, and, even this,
I could not think a thing amiss.

It was my first England
and my brain was greedy as a plough.

2

Why you want to go to this cold thief place?
Jean asks again, this time in the icy screech
of Bond Street's Underground.
For years she has been like a stone in my brain,
and I can't answer her.

Except, this time
inside that metal shriek I hear a sound
that brings it back. Living my child mind
I have forgotten the prophecy of the storybook.
I have forgotten that I ever remembered
the sound of a field crumbling in the plough,
and the cry of a stone in its blades.

For his funeral

To my grandfather, Jimmy Wayne

For more than twenty years it's been the same:
a contract whole, a vague, familiar claim
to lore of you. I'd choose to leave it so,
an artefact, a box of one thing. So.
But now, and for your funeral, duty-bound,
my tributes fail. My speeches run aground.
I've only seen what's changed entirely.
And so I offer us. I offer me.
Know this - your requiem - that even when
you pushed your chances till their tendons creaked,
you squeezed life to its end, until it leaked
with gold, this family, and what I know
of change at last today: that you must go.

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Frog

When I've got time, I take the river road
and sit to stare beneath the runnels there
expecting frogs. The water slims them down
and turns their urges graceful: in one swoop
their reflexes divulge the riverbed's
elaborate calculus. When I was small
I fished for tadpoles here and took them home
raining in their buckets and their jars.
But as I watched them mottle, saw their legs,
my nerve collapsed, and every spring I'd run
and gurgle every glass out in the stream
before the creatures lost the grace and poise
of the marine. For when a full-grown frog
lands, arriving squat and bottle green
upon a rock, its glistening, swelling throat
expands and falls, expands and falls; its eyes
are dimmed and dull, its legs lethargic, bulged
and grievous. Nothing mine could ever be
so honest to its defects, so resolved
to not plunge down at once, not try resist
the slender tadpole's metamorphosis.

To my husband, after many years

Again, I've found my face in this kettle,
my hands in these pots, mixing in
the oats and sugar's dirty frost, and trying
to grasp their adolescence. Years ago

we thought if all those birds could keep their young
alive along the branches of an oak,
we could raise children. There, among the leaves,
we started this, these offspring. Now

they've raised themselves. They'll drift in dressing gowns
to breakfast soon, naive and ignorant,
determined not to learn from us. And so
they are learning nothing but wistfulness,

like us, when we were young and saw those birds,
signifying us, flying over the yellowing oak.
Our children, too, will take their learning there,
in the knots among a flock of starlings.

The church at Hoedspruit

The latch is simple on the wooden door
at Hoedspruit's little church. When you're inside
you leave behind the airforce town's great heat.

No more than fifty people at a time
can fill the pews. An upright piano stands
and waits for Sunday at the lectern's end.

Last time it played was at the funeral
of three young pilots. Gathered in this church
we sang and shivered and remembered them.

They locked their room, and in the soggy heat
of Hoedspruit, making compacts or mistakes,
inhaled three cans of antiperspirant.

I pack my briefcase, hymnal, bible, notes,
and think of christenings. The townsfolk say
they don't believe I could have saved those boys.

I rub the callous on my digging hand
and stand outside where I helped hang the door.
Already I am sweating. In the smell

of perspiration, I remember when
we mixed cement all day, those boys and I,
to build ourselves this cool, forgiving place.

Abraham remembers Isaac and the ram

Genesis 22

I held this blade for hours above his neck;
he trembled at its curve, and had I struck
a moment sooner— Strange, that in my grief
I looked away to see the captured ram,
the tangling branches growing through its horns.
And that I brought this swoop of steel so close –
this clumsy tool – a loyal warrior
lumbering into history with a knife.

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Downstream after bad weather

It wasn't so much a flood
as a new river gouging its course
between our houses, making bedroom floors
the fresh sediment of its riverbed.

We gave it our furniture,
our books and our ingredients,
down to the coriander reddening
in the brown rapids at the kitchen door.

Then on the hot iron roof we gathered
to cast down our last aspersions,
and to guard against nothing at all
but gushing thoughts of things alluvial.

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Guarding Casualty

Even when I work the latest shift,
cigarettes for warmth, I always see
the same uneasy family gathering
across the parking lot at Casualty,
between the waiting room and ambulance.

And as I hear their mumbling, as I see
their eyes flashing like wet glass,
everything seems dangerous and strange
to that same, unbalanced family, stumbling out
in the ritual of the keys and the car doors.

I tell myself again: they are not safe
where I have been keeping my watch.

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The artist's road trip

As pale as frost, I shift from foot to foot
until the blood regains my ankles, calves,
my thighs, and fist to fist I recognise
the rub and slouch of denim in the rain.

I'm standing here like Turner in a storm,
deliberately, to realise art is all
the fabrication of experience.
The burst of water in my hair and ears

is not aesthetic; neither is the way
I'm gently sinking in a surge of mud.
And what will count, when I am somewhere else,
is how I lie about this trip so far,

and whether, like the rest, I tell it all
in metaphors: this was the path along
the natural traces of my history,
the long, resolved migration of a swift.

Salvage

I waved as you glanced back along the deck,
your hair the wind, your stance the sea's own.
You were all I knew of oceans, standing there
remembering that each torch-lit wreck had shown

how salvage was your spirit's salvage,
a dual sense: the ships recalled such loss
that joy at moments of discovery
compelled some resurrecting double-cross.

You waved, and you were gone. This salvage here
your spirit's salvage, too. Except I drew
no bouyant, double-edged ambivalence
at that black depth, with some parts new

and old parts resurrected. In this boat,
while some are working out chronologies
and explanations, my mind, undeterred,
rehearses drowning off the sunburnt quays.

You are the lump inside my throat, as cruel
as the ship emerging on the ocean floor
when we descended, pushing through our lights
towards your wetsuit's lost and sunken store.

The foresters

We knew the forest wasn't natural,
that all the paths were work of foresters.
But when we got a chance we took our bikes
and rode its fields of pine, through gates and streams,
through ditches, over rock, past tussling ferns
where roots and saplings tangled in the moss.

Then once, in rain, we turned too late and found
the keepers' homes, a woodpile-scrappers' town
whitewashed to the hillside. Foresters
had gathered in garages, grey from smoke,
to barbecue, their fires in half a drum,
their coals alive to spite the growing storm.

The wood was prickling in the undergrowth,
a forest twisted in conspiracy
with metal and the smoke of lumberjacks.
And still their work lay beautiful for miles -
I'd seen it, how they managed to transcend
themselves, their beers in hand, their smart-ass fires.

Every Seed's Lab

I worry, in the goggled keep
Of embryology, that science should lay
Mistaken eggs, that its first sheep
Are merely knots in strings of DNA,

For I suspect that on this fragile film
Of warm, wet rubber, still
The slightest, yellowing, nucleic form
Depends on God, or magic, to be born.

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Ecstasy or torment

A small noise in a minor key,
a beetle is simplicity -
I saw one at my feet as I passed by,
a drop of amber or of tiger's eye
writhing in such ecstasy
or torment, in such a careless frenzy,
that jealously I had to ask
if it saw me, too, but could not grasp
the wonder in my eye
at the fury of its spinning,
or whether, at its own unwavering pitch,
it knew a thing beyond the ecstasy
or torment of its utter simpleness.

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Hornbill

Tockus flavirostris

We knew you at our campsites, acknowledging the tents
with your great yellow-billed head swinging like a bat,
your beak a grand banana at your eyes, a waxed moon
thick between those scowling, red-rimmed beads.

There wasn't any mouthpiece in the world
more fitting to your call, a cry from the dirt you shuffled in,
a loud stutter in your anguish. And then silence,
as your ugliness settled over you like a dark shroud.

But when unperched you were the wind's trapeze, the stroke
of a brush on its canvas. Nothing that flew compared
to your dip and ride, to the feather-tipped lunette
in your flight's dome. When we saw it first we knew

it was bird-strike. And we bellied-up at the proof
that grace – the slow parabola you'd carve
from the very air – could find its way from place
to place, alighting there, cast in the bone of your wing.

Serpent

We have the most arresting garden, decked
with foxglove, lavender, snapdragon, trees
and creepers, kept and ordered just to please.
But, now and then, we hear the panicked wails
of those pedestrians not warned or made
to stay alert, those who exclaim, afraid
when a serpent moves to break its camouflage
and emphasize by patterns in its scales
the tangled undergrowth, and to reflect,
as a shimmer in the hot metallic day,
the sun's glare and their squirming disarray.
I think, sometimes, they scare too easily:
a garden must have snakes; it is their charge
to show us things can change that suddenly.

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The astronomers' proposal

This moonless night, let's step outside
and close the door; the cabin's light

will quickly hide the Gegenschein.
The hills are crumpling in the sky,

where sunset's ended, hid from sight,
the nebulae are circling. There,

the vanished sun's still warm against
the dust of space, like us. Give me

your hand, and marry me for this
conceit: like zodiacal lights,

like Earth's first marriage ceremony,
we're dust and sunlight when they meet.

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The War Museum

For my grandfather, once Lieutenant Arthur Attwell

The choice was always Zoo or War Museum.
But I think you always knew
I wanted the Museum,
its park of cannons,
the miniature and tunnelling escapees
burrowing out.
Its halls dangled with Messerschmitts,
and the huge torpedo hung dissected there.

Before the naval mine, its bloated shell
black and spiny as an urchin,
I tried to imagine you, composed
behind your Royal Navy sweeper's guns,
calmly blasting out that floating steel.

And then, my favourite, the German mini-sub
like a black cigar with a man inside.
I read its blurb each time, unlatched the top
and sniffed at its excitement, at its sour metal smell,
the marvel of its human fishness.

Today it's naval exhibition day;
the base is turned out in its finery.
We stand and watch the sea come falling in.
You mention it again, and I think,
'I loved that mini-sub,' and say so.
'I didn't,' you say, stiffening
for a moment at the recollection,
black in the swirling water.
You smile, and look away towards the boats,
deceiving me as gently as before,
calm as ever in the maddening sea.

Letter to Japan

For K. S. P., Hiroshima

At dawn, the huge mnemonic of the sun
reminded me, quite suddenly, of sunrise
all around us and our broken car
at Akkersdraai, and how at Jonkershoek
we scrummed its pistons back to life again
like a stuck apple cart. A barrow of desire
on a slope. And not long afterwards, undressed
among the playing cards, we tried our luck
to the hidden counterpoint of Pachelbel
until I knew the clef and stave of you.

It's all the sticky fruit of memory,
like apricots in jars, a bright preserve.

Japan, in sunset there, tossed up this need –
this fireball game of catch, this morning's clear
and opened jam-pot memorabilia –
to write this letter as the sun rose:

Dear,

at dawn, the huge mnemonic of the sun
reminded me of us, our day begun
in the great white bed at Akkersdraai,
a still life breathing in our peach-like skin.

Three impressions from a window at the docks

1. *Setting out*

As the harbour lights
flickered off to the sounds
of daylight, two sailors
moored a failing skiff

to the second quay. No one
knew them, nor why
they sailed by night like
dockyard ghosts. Leaving

on foot, they turned inland
just as the last trawler
cast off, dry nets heaped
among the fishermen.

2. *The harvest*

Seals flashed like lithium
in the tide, as the evening
swells slapped against
the jetties. Everyone was

waiting. Slowly the horizon
began to prickle with masts
and mizzenmasts, until
we could just make out

(anticipation rippled on
the wharf) decks of kingklip,
here and there a yellowtail
skipping on the boards.

3. *In darkness*

Every boat had docked
for the night. Doors closed
and curtains joined
like eyelids. Swollen clouds

were powdering the sky
below a full moon. And
I could have sworn I saw
(as for a second, a mismatch

of time and circumstance
displaced the century)
in dreadnought coats
two men put out to sea.

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The Robber's Grave

Pilgrim's Rest

Crouched low, I try to read the robber's name.
But flush against the rock, the engraver's work
has vanished in the wind and grit. Or else
there never was a name. To know such scorn
he must have been a terrifying thief:
where all the other graves lie east to west,
his own lies perpendicular to these
and faces south. Laid out beneath the scrub
his bones will always, only feed the hill
where lichen scales the speckled sides of rocks,
and here and there pyrites breaks the sand.
And while the graveyard waits he will not see
the coming of the Lord, the swelling east.

I watch the town beside the riverbed
and trace his final course, his careful steps
where many years ago, alone one night,
the robber slipped invisibly beyond
his powers of cunning and surprise. There,
between the old hotel and general store
they shot him dead.

By morning you could hear
the diggers chip methodically away
at the hardened churchyard soil. Throughout the day
the townsfolk climbed the hill as I have done,
along the curling, foot-worn path and on
into the yard, where now the drystone edge
lies scattered loosely, where the new-dug graves
have spread unhindered past the failing walls.
And I'm as drawn as they were by his death.
I turn away, complicit with the day
that no one knew him, when they stood around
and stone by stone secured him in the ground.

Eohippus

The stables swallow me into their smell,
the thickened air of horses, tack, and hay.
It's always dark where they are kept, so huge
and sudden. Some are thoroughbred, some dray,
each one ideal, Platonic: none to say
'that is a perfect horse, and that one not'.
Remember also *eohippus*: small,
three-toed horse of early *equidae*,
whose teeth were different and who only knew
prehistoric things. 'Ideal' too.
My horses do not know, I do not think,
their origins; but in their eyes sometimes
appearing in a morning paddock's gloom,
I see them search the air for traces still
of that new, archetypal animal.
Soon the mist will clear and leave them
startled by their own proportions.
They whinny anxiously: I find it there,
and hear beneath their shaken breath
the faint sound of *eohippus*, the dawn horse.

The estuary

It's no longer a surprise: between the lights
upstream and here, are bodies in the water,
ghosts of ghosts. And where I am
the beach is sending boats out for the haul.

The villagers as well no longer try
to seek or to explain it, for they know
or do not want to know. For many nights
we talked of nothing else. We quickly learned

they come at night, have drifted for a day,
and so past settlements and border posts,
swim lifeless through the forests, breathing
nothing but the stream around their heads.

As if we have exhausted all the ways
to speak of bodies in lagoons, we notice now
the shimmer of a bird among the reeds,
the hidden sun alight behind the clouds.

At dusk we wade into the bay. The boats
are out and waiting. Almost out of sight
a body makes its way, negotiates
the rocks and driftwood. No one points it out.

Around us blackfish jump, or silently
a woman fetches water from the pier.
These vigils hold us to the river. See
how perfectly the dark shearwater dives.

Notes

Abraham remembers Isaac and the ram

The Christian Bible's Genesis 22 tells a story in the life of Abraham, whose devotion to God was so strong that, being tested, he agreed to sacrifice his only son Isaac to Him. At the last minute an angel stopped Abraham from killing his son, and a ram appeared in the bushes nearby to replace Isaac on the altar. For his loyalty Abraham was promised infinite descendants, among whom is Jesus, and metaphorically all Christians.

Every Seed's Lab

In January 1998 Chicago scientist Dr Richard Seed proclaimed: 'Cloning and the reprogramming of DNA is the first serious step in becoming one with God.' He claimed he was on the brink of cloning a human being. I found no explicit comment on his marvellous surname. (For TIME's archived article on Seed, see www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,10168,00.html.)

Karoo letter

Millions of years ago, the now semi-desert Karoo was a sea, and its watery past has left it filled with fossils. Around the turn of the century, some Western physicians believed that the dry air of the Karoo could help those with tuberculosis recover.

Second entry, captain of the wrecked *Cabalva*, July 1818

On 7 July 1818, during its fourth voyage, this one to China from Portsmouth, the 1200-tonne English East India Company ship *Cabalva* ran aground on a small island in the Cargados Carajos Reef, some 200 miles north-east of Mauritius. Commanded by James Dalrymple, the ship was carrying iron, lead, muslin, paper, watches, perfume and Spanish silver pesos, not very useful cargo for a shipwrecked crew. The crew had no idea where they were, or whether there was any chance of their being found. After some months the *Magicienne* turned up to rescue the beleaguered crew, who had not been getting on very well, left to their own devices.

The astronomers' proposal

The Gegenschein, or zodiacal lights, is a rare astronomical event. You are unlikely to ever see the Gegenschein twice in a lifetime. It is an oval glow that appears in the sky on moonless nights, just after sunset, as the last rays of the vanished sun reflect off the dust in space above you.