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Hyphen

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of
Master of Creative Writing: Poetry

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

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 people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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Abstract: Descriptive.

Hyphen is a selection of twenty-eight poems (lyrical, narrative and persona poems) and two prose vignettes. The pieces explore ideas of memory, identity, emptiness, loss, love and joy. They are rooted in an itinerant experience of this world and question the concepts of belonging, home, usefulness, art, god and beauty. Most of the work has been inspired by places, moods and events in Mauritius, Saudi Arabia, England, Europe and South Africa.

An individual's relationship to landscape, society and self, along with their personal interactions (with humans, animals and gods) form the basis for these poetic explorations of what it means to be *in between*. In between spaces. In between stages. Phases. Moods. Ideas. Weather patterns. People. In between here and there. Now and then. Home and away. *Between the devil and the deep blue sea*.

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*They sat them down upon the yellow sand,
Between the sun and moon upon the shore;
And sweet it was to dream of Fatherland,
Of child, and wife, and slave; but evermore
Most weary seemed the sea, weary the oar,
Weary the wandering fields of barren foam.
Then some one said, "We will return no more;"
And all at once they sang, "Our island home
Is far beyond the wave; we will no longer roam."*

- 'The Lotos-Eaters': Alfred Lord Tennyson

Our garden was large and beautiful as that garden in the Bible — the tree of life grew there. But it had gone wild. The paths were overgrown and a smell of dead flowers mixed with the fresh living smell. Underneath the tree ferns, tall as forest tree ferns, the light was green. Orchids flourished out of reach or for some reason not to be touched. One was snaky looking, another like an octopus with long thin brown tentacles bare of leaves hanging from a twisted root. Twice a year the octopus orchid flowered — then not an inch of tentacle showed. It was a bell-shaped mass of white, mauve, deep purples, wonderful to see. The scent was very sweet and strong. I never went near it.

- Wide Sargasso Sea: Jean Rhys

Siren Song

I keep going back

to an island
moist with death, coraled
with the bones of lives unfinished.

The moon is big there

and moves the waters with a strong magnetism.
And the phosphor at night peeks through the sea —

the eyes and lights of a drowned city
spill onto beach sands
beloved by tourist brochures.

Do all islands contain our souls' whispers
in the leaves of their coastal trees —
perpetually moving to the beat
of the wind, tolling, to and fro,
like a restless head on a sleepless pillow?

Or is it just this land
of lotus eaters
that wraps its lagoon
around my feet, asks me to eat
in wonder and never wake up?

It's the softness of the air
that entangles me like seaweed,
languid and familiar before
becoming despondency. Trapped,

by tropical humidity
my eyes can no longer see the deep, opening beyond the reef
and my ears keep hearing
the crash of waves on the barriers.

This grave is beautiful.
My ancestors live here and call me.

Abyss

Deepest seabed unveils its secrets

A team of Japanese and British marine biologists found that delicate, soft-walled creatures dominate the microbial life forms that inhabit the sediment at the bottom of a deepwater trench in the Pacific Ocean. The trench, called Challenger Deep, lies 643 km off the Marianas Island in the South Pacific. The trench is 11.2 km below the sea surface at its deepest point and would comfortably submerge Mount Everest in a 1.6 km-deep layer of water. – Steve Connor: Weekend Argus 5th February, 2005

There is an abyss
from my childhood.

I remember
'*Trou Dangereux*'
where we would
challenge each other
to jump.

Close to the shore,
only twenty or more steps
past a ridge of volcanic rock,
there it lay,

swimming in tales of dead people and animals
and a monster sucking you into a bottomless pit.
The sea was murky there — a sick grey-green colour.
We stood on black rock, salt-encrusted, sun-hot sacrifices,
hearts beating like captured birds' wings,
and with shaking legs
we jumped.

No one ever reached the bottom. No one died.

But I remember
pissing warmth into the cool current
curling between my toes —
imagining fingers pulling —
swimming as fast as I could,
back to the edge —

and when scrambling up the precipice's wall
the worst was feeling slick seaweed cloy my limbs,
and the rocks' broken barnacles clawed my skin
in a vicious attempt to make me cry
in front of my friends.

Once back on dry land,
the pulse of the ocean continued to drum in my ears
like a huge shell swallowing me alive,
but I laughed and smiled along with the others
knowing I had faced something deep down there,
an inexplicable dangerous hole
that would keep gaping at me
on and on, like the tides
and the cycles of the moon,
always there
below every path I walk, waiting.

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* *Trou Dangereux*: Dangerous Hole

Bedtime Stories

My mother lives across the sea from me.

Sometimes we phone one another.

In our last conversation,
she told me a horrid tale,
not unlike the Bible stories
she used to read me in bed.

Like the one about the Passover,
and fresh lamb's blood on doors,
when Moses and God's angels
kill all the Egyptian's baby boys.

I always felt sorry for the Egyptians.
Because they had such a fabulous dress sense.
And because the Egyptians loved cats.
Worshipped them. Just like my mother does.

Her artist studio lies in a forest
inhabited by cats,
black-pawed and wild.
She feeds and talks to them.
Sometimes, they fleetingly let her touch their tough fur.

The story goes like this:
A neighbouring boy found two cats
being eaten alive by maggots.
With big eyes he took my mother
to the sugar cane fields where they lay stinking.

My mother gathered them in newspaper.
Took them home and washed them.
Squeezed the bugs and blood out of their backsides.
Tried to feed them. Wrapped them in an old blanket.
And left them for a while.

When my mother returned,
the one she later called Sistar,
though feeble, had eaten.
She survived. The other lay lifeless.

My mother and the boy made a bonfire
to burn and send the cat on its way.

Gasoline was poured on leaves and garden debris
to make sure the flames would purify the stench.

My mother placed the weighted body on its funeral pyre.
She lit and threw a match.
Said a prayer.
Small. Silent.
I can see her standing there.
Quiet. Sad.

As the flames rose higher and higher,
finally reaching flesh,
the cat began to scream out its last breath.
It was too late. My mother and the boy
could not pull the burning cat out.
Instead they had to listen to it dying, at last.

My mother could not sleep after that.
And as she told me her nightmare story,
I wished I lived across the road from her.

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Long-Distance Call

Now I phone that place once called home,
and someone else answers.

Every time, I am surprised to hear
someone who sounds a little like me,
but not quite, as though I'm talking to the me
who once lived there, but only in my imagination.

I can hear the leaves of the citronella bushes
we planted all along the white-washed walls,
and if I close my eyes, I can smell
that white paint mingle with their crisp essence.

She gives me news of
the ever-suffering rose bushes,
the palms and their coconuts,
the frangipani and its neighbouring *flamboyant* tree,

the *cocluche* who never wants to stop growing,
the wished-for tamarind still not sown
the bread-fruit tree who's borne its first fruit
and the forever abundant papayas.

Those seeds I planted, they've yielded enough *brede mouroume*
to feed the whole of La Gaulette village.
The hibiscus, bougainvillea, limes and mangoes are doing fine.
The herbs continue their ongoing battle with the crabs...

as my mother tells me how many leaves she's had to sweep off the roof,
I feel at home in her voice.

* *flamboyant*: a tree with fire-red foliage, similar to a jacaranda.

* *cocluche*: also known as a *badamier*; a tree with green leaves and seasonal pink-white blossoms, often grown by the sea. My parents have one such tree with roots that extend to the sea and so you can hear the ocean in its bark.

* *brede mouroume*: foliage from the *mouroume* tree that is served blanched or braised. This tree also yields pods that are known as 'the poor man's drumsticks'.

My Grandmother's Art

'Quand je vois la Vie en Rose'- Edith Piaf

My Grandmother would paint my face
in imaginary colours with her fingertips
gently caress beauty and belonging into me.
As we lay on an afternoon bed resting from the tropical heat
she explained each brush stroke of her imagination:
*And now I am painting in your lips ...the colour is exquisite ...the
curve of your brow magnificent —
You are like a wild rare orchid.*
Her words were filled with flourish, exaggerated by love.
She made my face feel like it belonged beautifully in the world.

I continue to paint my face now her hands are gone —
only mine are not always gentle, hued in love —
sometimes nails scratch cheeks red as blood is bit from lips,
other times, I retrace the portrait of my grandmother's flower —
and I tint my scarred eyes in rose water — disguise the etchings with
bold strokes of hope and remembrance across the canvas that is my skin.

Lionfish

Open your mouth. A fish pours out.
A whole fish. A complete dead lionfish.

*The lionfish is a venomous coral fish
with spiky fins resembling a lion's mane.*

Sharp as the tropical coral habitat it was taken from.
Stripped bare of its bright and warm sea-flesh stench,
now a silent skeleton on exhibit in a foreign museum.
Lit up from inside, translucent specimen,
a zebra-stripe pattern ghosts
the carcass's previous fire.

Encased and cold,
I carefully extricate each splintered bone
from my gums, tongue and palette
to try and speak. It is painful.

Outside, a sea of voices explains:

*The lionfish is a venomous coral fish
with spiky fins resembling a lion's mane.
It is a rare and dangerous delicacy to some,
caught by local fishermen in caziers.
Cazier is the Mauritian-Creole term for a fishing basket-trap,
traditionally made of cane, placed in between corals to catch fish.*

a cazier full of fish eyes spills open —

waves staring into my dead eyes, your mirror.

Theophany

Once upon a time, she spoke to god

and he told the little girl about war.

For a fleeting moment she understood why,

and stopped having nightmares

about billiard balls that turn into bombs
and people decked in white
riding across desert sands,
come to slay all her playground friends

and the wolf who ate her brother
and the men who knock on the door, asking to roast her father.

She always heard his voice

when sat beneath a tree, or in grass,
and once when hunting for four-leafed clovers —
believing that finding just one
would undo the trouble she was in
for making prank calls from her parents' telephone.

Her god told her to go home and relax.

Then she grew up —
and a preacher man with yellow eyes
and two big black dogs that barked forever
told her the voice was not god's —
she was the devil's child.

And her god stopped talking.

She took funny coloured pills that made the walls move.
Her eyes saw a parrot burst forth from a man's stomach
and a dragon creep from the edges of a woman's skirt
as it billowed in the conditioned air of a nightclub toilet.
Her skin spread and bloomed purple, crawling with insects from the inside.

But she never heard his voice.

She went to a pink-walled church
and found the Virgin Mary,

captured in glass, stained blue,
crescent moon and chains around her feet.

There, the young woman spoke to the ancient lady
and was told, from deep in her belly:
'You do not belong here.
Go away.'

She travelled in search of her god
to many lands and places of worship.

Called out for him,

but only heard her voice echo back, hollow.

Deaf, she was lost.

And one day,
when she had long forgotten

the sound of his voice,

lying in the grass of a recently re-planted wood
beside a stream, not far from an empty barn

as the dew set in leaves,
he came to her,

silent.

Laughing inside, kissing,
melting into the ground below

they did not need to speak.

He was green and strong like a tree.
And he had horns just like her.

Persephone's Swim

Having bathed in waters rusted by mud
and combed my hair with wind-whispered reeds
I tasted the soft autumn sky, crunched clouds
and spat out the seeds of an apple
I had been sold along the side of a road.

Not red, but yellow and bruised sick.

I don't know why I accepted the old man's offer.
But I did. Perhaps it was pity. An act of charity.

There are so many poor country people offering produce
to city cars streaming by, on their way to promised lands,
advertised arcadias, an artillery of fritillary
to wipe the fripperies of life away.
I decided to stop.

Smell the flowers. Break the speed of my Ford Cortina
and commune with the local peasant folk.

And so I ate the crumpled fruit,

and woke up in the dark
after having been rowed across a black river,
rocking me to dream.

But the night was short.
I had heard tales of endlessness. They are false.

The morning soon licked me,
washed pink and purple and orange into my eyes, skin and voice,

until all my days were spent swimming figure eights
and singing nonsense rhymes
I dove for and found at the bottom —
beneath bamboo stalks, willow leaves and sludge.

And then I fell asleep again,
curled in contentment along the banks of a river called Lethe,
tickled by the gentle under-arm hair of my wise old lover.

He held me and was everywhere, above and below and inside.

But the city, she missed me. And called me.

My mother howled into the soil and foundations,
wintered the buildings' walls grey,
scratched paint off their surfaces,
her nails pierced and poked holes in streets
where people fell and were never found again —

and she beat her inhabitants with the wind
of her sharp tangled hair.

And so I returned.

I returned
river-brown, not even slightly red
not like when the sea tans and salts your skin.
I returned
kissed by the promise of another time,
and strong with memories
allowing me to hold her and be welcomed back.

I returned
remembering the river,
knowing his love.

I returned to the city with a river bursting, birthing in me.

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Deus Absconditus

The statue is dead.

Though golden leaves rush in to join the filigree,
copper entwines ebony and prayers are lit,

the Black Madonna and Child are dead.

So many hopes, so many dreams, so many wishes melt
and twist to the ground. The church is ablaze with hot sighs

stuck to the floor in silence.
Knees bend and creak,

the wind whistles a pop tune
cracking through arched doors

calling from the sea and to the mountain
never having left, always waiting

outside. Like a gardener. Not allowed in the house,

She rests and eats with the trees and the birds

and the green leaves,

like a truant, not going to school but knowing —
and enjoying her picnic.

Our Father

When you plunge your arms into the heavens unseen,
red-robed and lean, veins straining
to reach your god with this wafer —
all the women gathered want to fall on their knees
and pleasure you.

We clamber to receive Christ's body from your beautiful hands,
naked and trembling, fingers touching
our lips, we kneel —
all us women tilt our heads back and offer
our belief to you.

We confess our sins to your body, hidden in darkness,
attention hovering between your imagined form
and the very real smell of you —
all us women who thirst for your blood, your gaze, forgiveness,
but mostly for the sacred in you.

We ask you to marry us,
to another man, another body, another life
and you oblige our wish, bless our union —
all us women get married, have babies, baptise our children
for the love of god in you.

We invite you to dinner at our family tables,
drink in your tales of redemption and duty
as you sip our wine, nibble our food, taste our hunger —
all us women watch you eat — and later
dream of being eaten by you.

Hierophant

There is her face imprinted on the cotton.

She will not let me sleep
for what I have done.
She will not let me dream
for what I have not done.

The sheets rise and fall
in the shape of her breathing.
Though it scares me,
I do not want it to stop.

My thoughts hang dirty rags in the air,
newspapers blown into trees and fences
by an interminable wind.

She screams echoes
into the hollows of me,
inking tomorrow's headlines.

*Shhhh. Sleep now. Stop moving.
There's a good girl. Lie still and
let me worship you.*

Gather her,
like a robe. Pull into knees. Tightly.

Squeeze.

Blood streams embroidery on pillow cases,
creates pools of delicate loss beneath my bed.

I like the smell she leaves behind.
It flows thicker than frankincense and myrrh,
and fills empty spaces with a fragrant wetness —

a sleeve dipped in wine to suck on,
a pungent comfort blanket
to swim and sleep
and sink in.

*All I have is this holy shroud
as evidence of my love for you.*

The Bibliophile

I like black books.

But not the fingerprint smudges often left behind,
that speak of greed like lamb grease,
herb-speckled, around a mouth
that's been to a barbecue.

Black books should come wrapped in special paper,

the kind you find in art shops — transpicuous and handmade
flown in from exotic far-away and far-behind-in-technology places,
the ones with pieces of pulp still stuck between the sheaths,
the un-flossed and non-glossy organic variety.

And a stained sample copy of the book could be available for perusal.

All books should be treated with such respect.
Not just black books.

Protected. Pilfer-proof.
From the insatiable hunger out there,

grubby hands and open mouths,
pilgrims sticky, stuck and drooling for meaning,
plunder books for words to quote, and appease the growing empty.
But the voracious never stop eating to digest.

And black books would get special attention.

A pink or a red ribbon perhaps?
Wound and tied extra tight
from prying prayers, hands that tremble, mouths aquiver.
Fantasies of famine's end would not spill onto the covers,

those thumb and spit marks,
like oil in a puddle on a rained-upon road,
diaphanous as a mirage in a desert dream
but ugly, still.

Black books could then be bought unsoiled, clean, pure
for purchasers to gobble up, undisturbed by the unpalatable.

I like black books.
They are particularly delicious

when their pages are untouched,
with virgin spines unsnapped.

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The Reader

One day, perhaps a Monday; or one of those days when people generally get up to work a lot. Anyway, one day, quite late in her life and quite frankly rather late for a Monday morning, she woke up knowing what she wanted to be.

Diana said to herself, throwing off her duvet, 'I want to be a reader'.

She had been hunting for a job for quite some time now, up and down various streets, escalators and elevators, in shopping malls, office blocks and the usual hang-outs of the working crowd. Therefore, this sudden insight was quite a revelation, especially as her genes and grooming had formed her to be an action woman, not an intellectual.

It must have been the city traffic seeping in, past her burglar bars, windows and block-out curtains — all those delivery trucks delivering, commuter cars commuting and honking, people shouting at other people. The noise levels woke her up and once awake she realised that she did not want to contribute to the pandemonium outside. Diana wanted to be silent. And what better way to engage in quietness than by reading?

Of course, like all epiphanies, this crystal clear call to read, had been brewing in Diana's unconscious for some time now. In fact, her vocation had echoed down the canals of her stubborn ears all her life. Despite her father's attempt to turn her into a fisherwoman at the very least, as being a huntress that fainted at the sight of blood just didn't work, Diana had turned vegan by the tender age of ten. And then of course, there had been her infatuation with the school librarian, Bettina.

In between all her climbing, abseiling, swimming, running and numerous sport activities, she had sometimes attempted to throw words about on a page. Diana even managed to publish some of her Betty love poems in Sappho's literary journal. But that's only because her sister's the patron of that establishment.

Besides, Diana now realised that she did not want to contribute words to the cacophony of ad-speak, psycho-babble out there. The world was becoming a billboard with all those words unworthy of books being written, looking for a home to cling to.

No, Diana wanted to save the words that deserved saving. Those ones no one had anytime to read anymore. Everybody was too busy being busy. Often, too busy writing to be able to read. The world needed a reader. Diana would hunt down those words and read them.

And so, with much aplomb, Diana the failed huntress opened up shop as a professional reader. Not the kind hired by publishers to wade through wads of slush. No, she did not have the patience for that. Diana carefully selected what she considered to be readable material, hired her illegal immigrant neighbour Jesus to build a portable but plush chaise longue and went about purveying her services to establishments and private individuals she felt to be in dire need of a reader. Book fairs, birthday parties, museums, writer's

groups, schools, universities and their creative writing departments, public gardens, supermarkets, even corporate functions wanting to turn their event into a sophisticated soiree.

Diana told potential clients that, “The dying art of reading adds a certain *je ne sais quoi* to even the most mundane happenings.” She also offered a full scientific lab service, complete with brain wave monitors and machines that measured the cone and rod movements in her eyes, for her niche market of skeptics and scientists. So they could make sure that she was not just laying there looking embroiled in a book, acting the role of a reader. No, that she was actively engaged in the art of reading and doing a rather splendid job of it too.

Unfortunately, the world was not interested in her brand. Diana soon went bankrupt and into liquidation, donated all her books to wannabe writers, and enjoyed an enforced early retirement on the island of Mauritius. Apart from a minor squabble with a pesky beach voyeur named Actaeon, whom she sorted out promptly by using voodoo to turn him into a baboon, Diana lived a happy ever after life. She spent the rest of her days saving all the other monkeys from hunters hired by international research laboratories, bombing non-eco-friendly golf estates, recycling her old business cards into postcards; and copiously reading of course.

The Electrician

I understood I could change things. That day, I walked along the main street of Cape Town, changing light bulbs from red to green just by looking at them. This simple trick caused much trouble and mayhem. I wondered how much damage I could do by expanding my new powers to a broader field.

This thought scared me, so I went to a doctor who sent me to a shrink. Neither believed me and now I've gone and closed down Koeberg Power Station with my mind.

Nuclear leak they're calling it, but the birds know better. They see me walking the streets at early light when the first cars roar in the belly of the beast. Mostly at dawn pre-feeding time when all is quiet, hushed in sleep. Then, the early morning travellers sound loud as they begin their hunt. And I am compelled to change light bulbs and sometimes even switch them off all across town. It is my mission to stop the rush of human traffic. It is a dangerous job. But still, I enjoy the challenge of a good black-out. And I feed the birds to keep them quiet.

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Still Life

A family. A table. A lover.

Mother. Father.
Brother. Sister.
And the lover.

Sit and eat. Silent.
During a tropical storm
on an island.

The family watch him, the mother's lover, eating across the table,
the table the father designed
to resemble the trees of his native land — Teutonic and solid.

No one says anything, but everyone hears noises
from the lover's grease-kissed lips.
And outside a cyclone ravages the island.

Trees fall. There is much noise and killing.

'More salt?' asks someone to anyone.
There is no reply.

The children watch the adults.
The adults watch each other.

It is much noisier inside than out.

'Pass me the salt please,' says someone to no one.
Everyone rushes to pass the salt.

That's when the guava in the fruit bowl implodes,
as fruit often does in tropical storms.

The flesh drips onto the table
and sticks on the lover's fingers.
He sucks them dry.

A family. A table. A lover.

Mother. Father.
Brother. Sister.
And the lover.

Tonight, they will all sleep in beds
of fallen leaves and broken trees
like bird nests' eggs cracked in the cyclone,
coagulating in silence.

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Cliché

Sunset, it is sunset.

A man and a woman —
a highway.

A drive from country mud to city lights.
Bad tune on a bad radio station.

They listen, laughing —
and everything is perfect, perfect like the sunset.

That's when he says —

he says, 'Look, there's a whale swimming through the sky.'

And sure enough, a small dark cloud plunges into the sunset.

And she says,
'I love you.'

Drops the lines she's been writing,

throws the pages

of purple blankets, lollipop sun and anthropomorphic clouds
onto the car floor

and tells the man 'I love you'.

Another cliché, she thinks —
but how else to describe this feeling?

Over dinner, they'll briefly discuss the sky and its many shapes and colours.

It was so beautiful.

I know. I don't think I've ever seen anything like it.

Do you remember that night we drove through the Karoo?

Yes, it was full moon.

And the moon hung between the horns of a billboard bull.

That was weird.

We pulled over to watch nature commune with a commercial.

Yeah.

I love you.

I love you too.
Are you working tomorrow?
Yep, got a full schedule. What's your plans?
I've got some writing to do.

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Gardening

"Let my beloved come into his garden, and eat his pleasant fruits." – Solomon's Bride

It is September-windy, bright.
My husband hovers large in his small city garden,
plants tomato seeds, digs the earth
to place the rose bush I have given him.

I am inside, reading creation myths
and fairytales about red round fruit.
Submerged beneath sheets and blankets,
warm and heavy, I look out, beyond the dark

bedroom window; through
glass and burglar bars

eyes rise out into the bright,
green garden of my beloved.

He waves and
talks to me,

but I can't hear him.
The window is shut.

And then I know. I taste the future fruit of death.
I know that after — after life there will be death.

No sound, a garden I cannot access.

I am not Isis, Inanna or Ishtar.
I will not be able to enter and gather
the severed limbs of my beloved.

I will not reap his bones and breathe them back into flesh.
I will not weep over his body and water it back to life.

He will wave
and talk.

I will see,
but I will not hear his smiling voice.

Slowly

Slowly,
she decided
what to wear.

Pulled gold stockings from her
memories of seduction scenes
in books she had devoured
for knowledge of the others —
the men she wanted to dress for.

Wished to bite at them in vermilion velvet trousers
and snap their lips between the lace cuffs of her *pourpoint* jacket,
as they drank in the fierce pulse at her slim wrist.

Her pearl necklace was meant to poison the most robust heart
with a yearning for surrendered limbs tangled in *broderie anglaise*.

She wore soft clothes to gently kill them
like a sensuous tree in an orchard,
chopped at by a sleepwalking woodsman,
mad dreams unfurling a need to splinter.

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Drunk

Drunk, I feel like
an old wooden saloon door
creaking as a I sway from side to side
in the plot of a bad Western,
vacillating between Jack Daniels euphoria,
toilet humour and beer tears.

If I could go back in time,
I'd hang on the wall
of a 1970's student commune —
the photograph of an outer-space nebula.
Hazy and indistinct
perhaps, but certainly luminous
and synonymous with stars.

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Water

Thales said the world is made of water,
just water.

And looking at the sky
I notice how it falls

onto the ground,

the ground that shimmers with water inside
and flows into the earth below.

Everything is water.

Hypnotic, the world falls
like a dance

scattering limbs like raindrops around me.

And I swim back to the top
of a lighthouse

I once stood in as a child,
looking out through a huge cut-crystal eye,

mirrors smashed into spinning disco-balls, the world dances

across a fallen horizon
the waves fall down,

their crash cracked in the refracted glass,
I am seeing the world through a kaleidoscope.

It is a rainbow,

falling.

Night Rain

It rained last night.

In the middle of the night, it poured down.

Waking at first, and then lulling to deep
sleep broken only by the smell of sun,

morning sucking up last night's rain.
Things to do draining the rain's dreams,

I feel myself falling
into the morning

like last night's rain.

University of Cape Town

City Rain

The sky is a womb
threading the sinews and tissues of a child.

Her baby beats and throbs
and holds —

onto flesh, piercing wet
fabricating dark mountains out of damp bones.

It looms and breathes
and grows —

up fast, crying silent
turning over folds of clouds in winter's sleep.

Until born, fat dimpling legs quiver akimbo
straddling the city with the noise of life.

They scream and kick
and flower —

the streets, awakening sunlight —
mother and child bleeding into the ground.

University of Cape Town

Lethe-ward

As she poured autumn leaves onto my body,
I knew my memories were also falling.

I tried to capture the cold sky, wet ground and three smiling faces
above me and stuff it all somewhere deep in my coat pockets —
the one I had bought at a festival, second-hand fake-fur
with holes in the lining, and pockets.

I wanted to tell my friends to shut up.
To stop talking —

so I could concentrate more on remembering them.
I wanted to touch them somehow.
With my words. With my fingers. With my lips.

Instead I lay there silent, hands in my pockets,
allowing myself to be buried in a child's game —

by a little girl, who, satisfied with her burial,
ceremoniously placed a final leaf upon my mouth.
Kissed my forehead, patted my hair, and
flung the remaining leaves from her hands into the air.

The Travelling Tree

The travelling tree
does not contain water
inside, like those tropical palms do.
Nor does it have roots that grow into the earth,
unlike oak trees aging past wind and weather,
living long lives in abundant forests.

It has severed limbs that bleed
like evil trees in fairytales.

The nomadic bloom
grey-green like mist, not chartreuse,
resembles a house-plant tumbleweed —

a spiky, rootless ‘for sale’ specimen
conveniently living on air alone.

The itinerant’s stumps cannot branch
out to previous places and faces. And in the winter,
it has already lost all foliage to past spaces,
cannot feed the soil. Uncontained,

it keeps moving —
to find a home it can attach itself to,

rolling down desert hills and drinking sand.

Familiar

Last night, I was woken up by familiarity.
At about two a.m., the wind picked at my house's front-door lock
and peered through the shutters, making her shudder in corners
I had heard before.

I have moved many times and never returned.
This is the first time I have come back to an old home.
And so, there is delight at being woken up
in the middle of the night, by a known intruder.

I get up to sit on my new couch in my old home
and watch the night, and then the day go by.

The light falls into place at certain times.
It is like hearing a favourite song over and over again.

The house plays her essence to me, the audience.
I am an honoured guest here in my new old home.

I sit looking and listening into her, contained,
and wonder what flowers I will plant in my home's garden.

Bulbs, I think. Because they multiply with the years.
They will warn me of the wind before it creeps in.

I am learning the language my home speaks at different times
and the stories she plays through various lights of day and night.

This is my season of return. And like a well-read book
kept by the bed for those lonely hours, it is familiar.

The Mansion: An Anti-Poem

The mansion is white.

It has no clutter, but under-floor heating
and a wraparound view of the city.

To enter the mansion you need to either live there
or know someone who knows someone who does
live there. You have to ring the belle bell —
an art-deco-repro door handle with TV com
and wait to be buzzed in —
walk through the plaster-of-Paris lions
flanking the entrance. And then you are given access

to a sushi-laden minimalist very long wooden table.
You will be seated under a bourgeois chandelier,
entertained with noise masquerading as conversation.
You will sit, toes caressing the slick warm tiles
mind blinded as you inhale
and watch many people come and go —
but never remember their names.

You will recognize these faces around town, in shops and bars —
but never speak to each other again.
You have all come for the wide white open space
this mansion provides. The thought of having to close the emptiness
with plenty of meaningful communication alarms.
So you'll argue over which CD to play loudly
and silence each other's talk with.

After exhaling,
you will take a tour of the mansion,
leave the kitchen, its built-in aquarium and ice-making frigidaire,
pass the bare lounge's ubiquitous plasma screen,
walk and grope along large, serpentine walls —
look for a photo, used razor, scattered dirty washing,
opened library book, some sort of personal touch, anywhere.

On the walls? On mantelpieces? In the master bathroom? By the jacuzzi?
Maybe in the toilet bin? And you find nothing —

but a rolled-up note with which to powder your nose,
so that you too can accessorise

the mansion and its abundance of emptiness.

Into the Middle of the Desert

I remember rainless months and dusty eyelashes,
eyes filled red with sand. A European child in Saudi,
wanting to be a cat — I ate cat food.
It did not help me metamorphose.

One dry and hot time
(can't remember when, though I can remember
one rain induced mud dance and two or three flooded
days cycling through rivered streets,
my Karate suit tucked into Paddington Bear Wellingtons,
believing I looked like a pirate),

the camp directors announced a clamp-down
on wild cats, roaming streets and tipping
over dustbins. The words “fox traps” and “poison”
were written alongside a warning
to keep all domestic pets and unsupervised children
inside, for a few days.

I tried to save them. Locked all my feline friends
into the broom cupboard of the clubhouse pool area.
Moved them, scratching and furious,
from our local meeting and feeding place,
the half-built circular wall I liked to call my amphitheatre.
The traps did not work, but the cats were loaded
into a white pick-up truck, driven out
into the middle of the desert.

Empty Heat

There was one solitary green tree in the vicinity,
protected by a white picket-fence,
close to the grey cement building my family and I lived in,
surrounded by desert.

And always, the empty heat rising.

There was our mother, armed with paint and brushes —
she brought a huge strawberry, orange hippy flowers,
fluffy white clouds in bright blue skies, Mickey Mouse
and multi-coloured balloons into our monotone, foreign home.

She marched us through vast dunes
in search of buried fossils,
but we found flowers, fed by a leaking sewage pipe,
spun across the horizon like a magic prayer carpet.

She pulled us through a hot *souk*
as the crowds pushed us towards a public beheading
and I screamed and screamed
as a man behind us shoved my skirt up to feel

the empty heat rising in me.

There was a sandstorm wrapped around me,
like a big hairy hand, probing,
red burning my eyes and throat
and all I could hear was a call to prayer.

Our mother took us to the ocean
to show us fish and shells
but we saw birds, tarred in oil
burst from the shores of Iraq, sliding across the gulf in flames.

I felt myself sink as the heat kept rising.

There was heat rising, spilling emptiness into me.

Still rising. Never fallen.
I've never left that empty heat. And it's never left me.
Always foreign. Something foreign.
In me.

In Between

Raised in an Arabian land of heat, fire and temper,
sometimes the calm of England clamps down
like damp in a bathroom with no window
and a loud, inefficient extractor fan.

The setting is ordinary.
I sit on a bench in a small town square,
looking at a cobblestone floor,
pretending to hear whispered romantic
secret stories in the rain — soft.

The stones sigh an outlandish tale of unrequited love.

I see a young couple squishing themselves together
in front of a music-shop window. The guy rubs
his hands along her bum, loving it.
There is such comfort in roundness.

The shop's display of old music sheets
and DVD screens remains static.

The ground reverberates with the struggles and throes of age.

An old woman pulls her shopping trolley up small steps
with the effort of a Greek hero slaying demons.

And I am lost somewhere
in between
the couple and the woman.
Neither young nor old.

But I have been and I will be.

Moth

I come from a small island.
Its shores are like the sleeves of a jacket
two sizes too small,

tugging at my armpits.
Uncomfortable and yet, I do not want to
give or throw it away.

And the bigger places don't fit either.

I play dress-up with the world,
hanging out in other people's cupboards,
trying on other people's clothes.

I swim between
now and then, here and there
still never knowing what to wear.

A dress of phosphor, salt and moons
drags me to the bottom of the sea,
anchors me like Jonah in the whale.

But in the belly of the beast,
all walls are what are called aphotic —
that which is opaque. But porous.

I look forward to growing older and smaller.
Squeezing the corset of blood-ties tighter and tighter,
eating time to shrink and fit my home;

leaving these empty dark closets
of big faraway spaces;
returning to my chrysalis.

Soon, there, I
will no longer need to wear
anything —

anything
at
all.