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MAPPED, QUARTERED

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

Faculty of the Humanities

University of Cape Town

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

Signature: Signed by candidate Date: 05-11-04

Abstract

Mapped, Quartered is a collection of poetry, which explores themes of home, movement and memory through the lens of the personal and socio-historical. Many of the poems were written to reflect upon the question, “how will you craft your relationship with abundance?” This is an odd question, because abundance is simply a wealth of something. However, it seemed an important question, since many people live their lives in search of abundance. Abundance may describe money and power, the earth, or the emotional abundance inherent to our relationships to time, people and places. Through persona and narrative voice, the first poems drafted for the thesis, including *Halabja 1988*, *Ponce de Leon*, *Lady at Uptown Market*, *Wedlock*, *Strange Light*, and others, examine the nuances of our varied relationships to economic and political abundance as, variably, ‘perpetrator,’ ‘victim,’ and ‘bystander,’ innocent or otherwise. Poems drafted during the second year of thesis work, such as *Map of My Heart*, *L'Enfant Soldat*, *The Mother*, *The Bedroom*, *Circle* and others, sought to examine the question more introspectively in order to investigate the inexorable relationship between self and memory and the simultaneous singularity and universality of experience. As such, the title poem is not *Abundance*, but rather *Map of My Heart*, as the onus of the work was less to define all things abundant than to map the contours of our abundant hearts.

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I. Lost Latitudes

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Dog Walking

Night crashes into evening
like a wave into rock. The air
an immeasurable depth.
The dog has surpassed the woman
in dog years, has become grandparent.
She follows it through the woods

which, like unfinished dreams,
lap at her porch, want in.
The dog fancies itself conquistador.
A black-mutt Columbus driving its body
through branches that part
like water at the bow.

It rounds paths until it catches
scent of a wilder route, hoof prints,
the tent of a vagabond.
She does not care which way they turn,
how deeply they travel into the heart.
Concrete hugs the wooded edge

like a ribcage, where a deer
curves in question mark,
still as any finished animal,
its tongue extended
from its mouth in permanent thirst.
A coyote blazes the highway

to return its mouth to its babies.
The dog marks circles in the ground.
Time follows, becomes the trampled tongue
of mud under their feet.
Five deer flash through brush.
The flames of their tails burning into darkness.

The dog hungers
to dance after these natives
into the shadows and wants release

of its human follower.
Bystanders, she and the moon,
want nothing of kill or be killed.

Only to make use or waste
of bone, meat, skin.
She lets loose the hound, wonders:
When night undoes the horizon,
our bodies, like vessels, breaking into sky,
what drives us to shore?

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Ponce de Leon

The native woman smiles a broken smile.
Her teeth are islands in an archipelago
trailing behind the tip of his sword
like drops of blood and chipped bone in the sea.
Shiny stepping stones cracking beneath the weight
of his weary horse, España.

His boat sails across the ocean like an arrow,
enters the hearts of Hispanola, Puerto Rico,
Pascua de Flores, leaves behind a sea and sky conspiring
an illusion of infinite blue. Blue feathers re-birthing the bird,
a phoenix in the woman's headdress.
Blue pulse beating his temples like a drum.

The fountain of youth's secret blows
from her pipe in smoke patterning clouds against her face.
Disappears into everything else
like the dream he remembers only until he speaks,
tries to name it and it crumbles, bone ground into the sand.

He mistakes sadness in the woman's eyes
for the reflection of his face.
His eyes, trained on the earth and searching
for the magic stream – eternity in one sip –
fail to see the horizon wink, an arrow from the blood-red
ancestor earth, a trail of orange seeds like islands from his pockets.

Abundance

At once: the gorged stomach, the first lick of the spoon, the smells
from underneath the kitchen door. The rosebush garden

and the solitary rosemary slowly gradating from little pot to big pot.
A doorstep and the *Times* on the welcome mat.

News-printed fraction of one day's plenty. Cover page: a man pinned
to rock, mountain-side, slowly detaches his hand, the blood

falling where he might have fallen. Separate from him, it is not him;
he who would feed on himself to carry on in vague resemblance of himself.

Under his skin, cells bob about in blood like fleets of ships bearing treasure
to the vital organs. Finding, instead, the world breaks off at the wrist, has cliffs, edges.

This lifetime a feast, whose host promises nothing but the smell
of blood from the haunch. The gated garden. La buena vista:

landscapes dotted with brown backs and reeking of tobacco plant, banana tree,
the earth changing its mud from yellow-orange, deep rusty red, to brown again.

We at the table, abundant in belly and chins, hold tight to our forks.

White

Name its properties

The color of suddenly.
White. Without color.
Thick as milk, empty as air.
Reflective.
Luster without light.
All of a sudden.
A stroke of lightening.
A bunny tail.

Which things are white?

Paper. Walls.
Surfaces for seeing easily against.
Behind landscapes and cityscapes
rest blank panoramas of promise.

What does it do?

Rubs off on my fingers
like chalk or paint, powder
from a marshmallow.
Wears me like a fingerprint.

How white are you?

Not the white
of ivory tusk,
flesh-tone drawn
from a box of Crayons,
an earthbound feather
from a bald eagle's cap,
a bride smiling inside
the borders of a photograph.

How white are you?

I wear the utilitarian white
of a canvas bag
woven tightly
as the moon's dust
into dust.
The moon
without its perpetual spotlight
of sun, clinging
to its ghostly carcass
on blue sky days.
Skin, uneven as cloud.
A gray whistle
at its center.

The kitchen tile
dirtied again
with paw prints.
The hallway walls,
scene of the evening parade
towards my childhood bedroom
when night knocked about the house
in black bedclothes.
The pink Jesus
on the wall, angel wings
to wish upon (what else
could be the color of hope?)
The priest's collar,
brighter than any confession:
forgive me father
for I do not know
from which source comes
my meat, or land, or name,
or jewelry,
or underwear on the laundry line.

What does white do?

It awaits its fate
between whit and whittle.

And meanwhile?

Underground, armies of teeth
smile up at our feet, quiet
as the dead must keep.
Should their voices push up
like plants
through the soil,
they would set aflame
centuries of powdered wig justice,
picket fences,
the smoke rising as it once rose
across the Mason Dixon line.

Name its properties.

It has wished itself
but has never been
the empty space of an afternoon
the translucent hieroglyph
of smoke signals exhaled
into imagining, the innocent
white of a lie.

Neither empty, nor translucent,
nor innocent, it is useful
as a secret code. Flimsy
as an absence of fact,
as fear, as forever,
as cloud huddling
to cover the sky.

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Lady at the Uptown Market

appreciates the devilish bananas.
No fruit-fly halos, cough of pig's head,
uncivilized grind of bodies through narrow isles,

feet and arms passing piecemeal through the crowd
like sifted flour, cinnamon, clove.

In Bangkok markets she has visited, drizzle spits on open toes,
drip of animal, ash, unknowable mud.

Open-air fairs in Saigon, sun sweats over women
picking apart greens over baskets, lashes
lowered to their task. The dark eyes of their nipples

peer out beneath fabric at the passing *lay-dee*.
Bargain prattle indecipherable to her foreign ear,

so she is certain the chop of syllables hide slight of hand
for the cut of meat, her dollar value.

Here, salmon filets patiently wait their turn in butcher paper.
The litchis are polished, the chocolates wear name tags:
orange, lavender, raspberry cream. The cold cuts shiver.

Here, a stand sells fine wares for kitchen collectors like herself
to decorate unused space above the stove:

Indian baskets, Thai stone grinders and Japanese bowls
sit idly on shelves, shiny Chinese teapots fake smiles,

napkins, hand-painted by women fled from North
to South Korea, fold neatly into the counter's lap.
Quiet in their thoughts. They have not had a rest in some years.

Small Deaths

Sticky fly-paper catches two.
They dry by window-light
in the kitchen, shrivel.

I hate their over-exercised wings.
Translucent as that airy something inside
begging them to fly.

All day invisible fly-shapes
buzz about my head, around
the ant I let live circling a plate.

Intruder mapping cracks in the wall,
broken spikes of a silver fork. It will find
the jam, swim inside it like sleep.

The buzzing crescendos as I eat
afternoon omelet outside. A whole garden
of vegetables. Six nowhere boys

scale the neighbor's balcony, raid
the kitchen for green apples in a bag.
Another neighbor, Robin Hood's nemesis,

aims and shoots his gun,
shouts obscenities. Shirtless, gleams
like a freshly painted picket fence.

By night, the fly-ghosts double, triple,
as I walk outside apartment walls
barbed like a prison's. The guard

sleeps locked in his tower
with the keys. The buzzing drowns
my heartbeat begging the sky:

protect me, protect me.

The Bush

Crouching somewhere between boy and man,
a strawberry pulp of blood rings his newly circumcised penis
like night against his body painted white.
A blanket drapes his bowed head like a veil.
Neck thin as blade. The sky's inaccurate shade of blue
throbs between incision and scar.

Elders tell stories in voices that mimic their elders telling stories.
Of legend and warriors. Honor and pride. Invention.
And women. Their beauty and madness.
Marriage and the abundant underworld breathing blood
beneath layers of skirts and flesh.
Of sons. Family name and loyalty. Of the tribe.

Back home, his family tidies its rooms, roasts goats in the ground,
clears space for those gathered to welcome their son
back from the bush, newly carved. Skin smooth as whittled wood.
What ritual for his blood? The slaughter.
A toughening of skin over fire. Knives loosening flesh
that separates easily, now, from the bone.

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Postcards from Cape Town

I. The Safari

Moons, and not a single lion.
Though the Mountain tucks its head
into grassy forearms as the sun
licks rocks wet as newborn cubs.
In the brush a snake coils around a frog,
its belly shining like eggshell.

II. View from the Mountain

Below, the city unfolds
on the steel wings of a crane
that bows to the shore.
Its beak taps on the towers,
leading into Langa
like French doors onto a verandah.

III. The Company Gardens

Two a.m. on a Saturday.
Two boys wait with knives
to collect *the bag, lady*,
and she runs, striped with streetlight
towards her front door,
as barbed as the air.

IV. The Township Tour

Xhosa boys becoming men
peek through a thatch of branches
just off the highway median.
The driver calls the sight
a real treat
when they shake sticks
at our cameras
winking through the windows.

Ten Days

For ten days, I haven't missed you.
I've ambled, through red sands
and hills yearning with grasses,
towards the shore, where seaweed cowers
beneath the raging foam and a rusted ship,
shipwrecked. And for nine nights,
the fire's smoke has dreamt cloud-shapes
inside my lungs, none of them you.
Asleep, my body murmurs its contentment,
in harmony with frogs reporting
to swamp from a cavernous boot.
There is so much beauty here.
The sun, winking an eye between
two pale cheeks of rock, is the flash of gold
between your teeth. Your breast,
flattening under my tongue,
is a wind-licked dune, distant.

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Eleven

I.

Day wakes in a stroke of red
on the horizon. Vertical wound
through Muriel's canvass
and the alarm, the sound
of the red to come
rounding police car lights.

For now, the alarm's ring
is the diminutive echo of industry.
A school bell across the street
signals the start to learning
with a pledge of allegiance
the tentative omission of God
by the boy in the back row.

She hasn't painted in moons,
swollen or burst into concave crescent
since her pregnancy
spilled into her sheets
trailed behind her to the bathroom,
washed from her in toilet water
mop, laundromat.
She blames the premonitory red stroke,
can do nothing more
to salvage the canvass.

Darren woke and shaved
and locked the front door
behind him hours before.
The imprint of his body has walked
from his side of the bed and stands
by the window to watch
the sky crack and rage
in the absence of a structure
to support it. Muriel
spends moments in her cereal,
in the soil of a dry fern,
in the grotto of her bellybutton,

before she confronts
the television's insistence
upon the sky falling.

II.

Sal calls his cab Gabriella.
Fingers the Brazilian flag
hanging from her mirror
like a pendant pointing
a trail through breasts
of the real Gabriella in Itacare,
1975. She sambas
down Queens Boulevard
and gets lucky with a suit
riding to Wall Street.
Rare to find a pick-up
in these parts. The man
sweats at the temples,
twists his wedding ring
into his breast pocket.

World Trade.

Sal remembers traffic
on the bridge, the song
that played against the plexiglass
as he dropped the man,
the man dropping change
into his palm,
the palm of the morning
pierced by a chill wind
like a nail,
the Towers, two arms extended
without hands, abruptly
set ablaze
by an airplane.

III.

Jean passes him,
as she passes him each morning.

His nose, a matchbox.
set alight on his cheeks.
Lean friar. Bald circle
inside a ring of gray hair.
He dances to an imagined guitar,
shakes a finger like a maraca.

Jean lives her life in rows
of corn fields and cubicles.
Her dreams are lined
with the legs of evenly spaced
Rockettes. She dreams
a velveteen skirt
for Christmas
to kick off the New Year.
She'd promised herself
an audition by now.

But this job is only temporary,
she reminds herself.
Just to keep her
on her feet.
She watches the friar shake
and grin, a crowd gathering
to clap and giggle.

She wishes she could dance
without the kick line
or choreography.
Her heart rumbas
towards the friar.
For a moment she imagines
twisting out of her blazer
and into the circle's center:
Ginger to his Astair
and walks on,
checking her watch.

IV.

The blast comes and *what?*
rises with smoke. A heat

against her feet
like a finger
against a frying pan.
The *why?* without time
because there is no time. *How?*
A lock of fingers around hers
a man's palm
she chooses to be her father's.

In the air she is five
her legs hinged
around a swing-set.
She makes promises
to the blots of sunlight
ringing her eyes.
The swing and she
bow before the sun,
her promises bending
towards untruth
the unlikely
the never.

She remembers five seeds,
a promise in their planting.
Straight from the core
and into the ground.
She remembers the spot,
overgrown with everything
but roots as sturdy
and brown as her father's hands
steadied above the hole.
She remembers a mosaic
of sweat above her lip
the sun wetting her head from the roots
the stem of her parted hair
and the tips of her ears
burning red.

The fruit that would fall
still falling, soundlessly.
The dog sniffing the ground
where it opens
and softens the soil.

She always thought
the craving would stop.
Imagined something cultivated in her
until fully grown.
The tree that has only to weather the seasons
remains intact
long after it has shed
as many leaves as she has skin.

And still she craves,
she promises,
she promises to do.
She can't.
She can't do.
Crave.
Craving.

Something to do
with the ashen swing,
the tired rope.
Something to do with that hole in the ground,
the seeds she imagines
intact and stubborn
contained as a secret
the truth
that would shout up green
under the sun.

Her promises
fragmented as rays
refracted
through unlikely prisms
become rainbows
over her eyes.

V.

Lieutenant West of the U.S.S.
Arizona stands attention
before the flag hanging on his porch,

limp as his body inside
the Naval uniform.
He stands
as deflated as he once
was full inside his clothing,
inside the moment of impact
at Pearl Harbor, his body
leaning into the moment
suspended between death
and more life
the horror of the now.

He stands
and recalls the dead
angry in their sleep,
their cheeks and foreheads
flush with the moments before.
Stands, because his knees
won't manage the run
uphill or the hasty
hitting of dirt. Stands
to face no army approaching
no enemy flag
beyond the barracks,
no barracks.

He stands because the Towers,
like the kamikaze planes,
plunged into the still waters
of America like a pebble
lobbed into a pond, its ripples
ringing a target he stands
to defend.

He stands because
he has always stood up
for freedom and bravery
and God and good men.
Because he sent his sons
to Nam and got one man
and one flag back
Because airplanes cracked
impenetrable towers

like a baseball
through the attic's window
and the light reflected
off shards of glass
has dust squinting
off old trunks and newspapers.

He stands
because America is on its knees
because he has been on his knees
for America
and lived to stand again
to stand again, as he does now
before the flag
that has marked his life
and his son's death
to stand before the flag
and salute.

VI.

This gray blankets us
like snow. We
have become trees
our faces and limbs
covered in ash.
We look around
at the world
only now
bewildered
as though
we'd fallen asleep
and awakened
into winter.

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Strange Light

Neon blue through the kitchen window
crawls over chopped potatoes, tomatoes.

Street-level, cars march steadily through stoplights
as ants parade over the silver basin.

Not to be frightened back into their holes,
that secret underworld of ant-agencies always

plotting, plotting.

Last week, they surrounded a black mass – fly
or baby spider – in a corner above the bathtub.

Me, a shiny rock submerged. Naked in white camouflage.

The television casts the night camera's ghost-green
like a net. A reporter dropped from the overturned hand of night.

Live from Baghdad.

The knife in my hand takes to onions, minces garlic.
I nick my hand grating ginger, fingernails red with masala,

a powdered trail of turmeric leads up my sleeve to tricks
all looted or burned. The screen explodes into a brighter light

through the static neon blue, (a strip club? a gas station?).
A battered statue wears boots empty of silver sheath

or dagger. The oil is impatient in the pan.
Cars turn, two by two, their motors growling North.

Windows

The mountain offers its curved rock
like a hand we curl inside to watch
the city rush the sea dotted
with boats driving the sky.

From here, the city's buildings breathe
through their darkened windows
like mouths to other galaxies. Inside,
a kitchen needs cleaning, a telephone rings,

and one body writes its longing
onto another. From here, the world
is a sleeping giant and our hearts torches
burning like match-sticks at its feet.

Still, some Sundays, your pot boils over
into the empty cups of a few men and women
living down your block. You greet them
on the street and remember their birthdays.

I write poems, exhale my longing on the page
and hope it can sail words like boats
from the harbor to some other life
and shift it, subtly – what we both wish to do.

Like ocean plates shift and deliver
land to the sea so gently, entire cities
may one day submerge
without ever feeling their descent.

Tucked into the mountain's palm, you touch me,
quiet my urgency to make some difference
to someone, though it echoes through my body
like a siren wailing against the bones of buildings below.

I want to stay here forever, small and unnoticed
against a canvass of rock. But somewhere else
on the mountain, a rock tumbles, startles a bird towards
the sea that swallows, swallows, swallows the shore.

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II. Equatorial

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Halabja, 1988

Our village ducks beneath warring mountains,
old as the great aunts' feud. Together again in the kitchen
after all these years. The fight's first seed planted,
forgotten – the light-eyed boy, the red-blue shoelaces.
The mountain's peaks and descents testify to a graver argument.
This land, my land. This tongue, my mother's tongue.

I soap pans and pots. The other women work in silence,
tell whole histories with the twist of a spoon,
covered in flour. Hands whisper over grain, shelled nuts.
A cracked egg is the sun bleeding heat. A bubble
rises with a secret, explodes into the water.

Outside the kitchen window, the family tree.
Leaves thin-veined as the newborn riding her mother's breast.
Its roots like the grandfathers' necks
undulating with pipe smoke on the shaded porch.
A wish, dropped through the trunk wide and timeless as the day
ripples the wood into rings like a stone through water.

One hundred and twenty family members gathered
to celebrate a marriage, an exchange of promises
thin and hopeful as a sapling. In the sky,
a rumble of planes, distant as Vesuvius, testing the winds.
The bride raises a finger into the air, feels her blood beating like rain.

What comes next should not be beautiful,
but it is beautiful, the still frame: planes drop pink bombs
like petals in water, cherry candies in a bowl
silk buds trimming a young girl's scarf.

Then they open. Scent of fertilizer, yearning rose.

The bride puts her finger beneath her nose, the great aunts
touch fingertips inside the flour, mothers bend like branches
over their babies, clutching them like the promise of an afterlife.
Pompeii's black lava oozing from their noses and mouths.

Me, I plunge my head through the dishwater. A wish
explodes on the surface. I swim what seems a century,
and when I rise one hundred and twenty are gone.
The circle around the bride and groom broken by rows
of buried bodies, soil topped and sending up hope in a flower bed.
What is left: me, the tree, the stolid mountains.

+

* In 1988, the Kurdish-occupied city, Halabja, in Northern Iraq was chemically bombed, resulting in the deaths of over 5000 people, 75% of whom were women and children. Though the Iraqi government has been held largely responsible for the bombings, speculation persists around Iran's involvement. In part, this controversy stems from the fact that the attack occurred while Iraq was receiving military and economic support from the United States.

Egg

Half a dozen eggs.
Six hard-shell embryos.
The stuff of chicks
refrigerated into stasis.
Stunted growth.
A matter of potential
black, shining eyes, shock
of yellow fuzz and an orange
decrescendo for a beak,
flattened into an omelet
with two or three more
of its unformed brothers.
It's no use to lament the loss
of these babes.
who might have grown long enough
legs for grilling
into a sandwich, rubbed
with curry spice and oil.

It has been said
that the human brain
suffers more connections
between nerves
than stars shine
in the sky's fresco
of constellations.

Is it any wonder that
in an egg, I see a sun and cloud?
In the night sky,
the hen's illusive golden eggs?

L'Enfant Soldat

for K

He paints in halves.
Women's faces and pears
split down the middle.
One half always awash
in red like the underside of skin.
Les femmes sont des inconnues
indistinguishable in a crowd
as a single fruit,
lined up with the others.

He paints and stops painting.
Tries to make sense of the fissures
the fault lines, the combating cheeks
and eyes, cutting through a forest,
wet like a woman's sex,
that has been taken prisoner
by nightfall, by a trampling of boots.

From time to time, his brush
strokes a line through his deforested mind.
He crosses it and does not know the way back.
To the hospital I bring pineapple,
the only gift I can afford.
He tells me pineapples hang like suns
in the Congo's forests
and house snakes, yellow as sin,
burrowing in their flesh.

I've read the articles.
A boy soldier,
whose gun outweighs him,
uses it like a cock and fires
real bullets into a girl.

We don't speak of his boyhood.
I only sit with him,
side-by-side in front of Ward 2,
to get some air in the afternoons.

And when he reaches for my hand,
presses his thumb into my wrist
as though boring a tunnel
into the mine of my flesh,
I notice the sun
slicing us like lemons.

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The Mother

My fingers have rubbed raw
as the Midwestern morning
I greet in my uniform.
Graveyard shift
over cans of peas and corn.
In one can
among the hundreds
of thousands
money to pay the sitter
soaks in pea water,
turns greener still.

On the drive home
the apple tree
I have only seen in the dark
stretches its branches
as wide as the road
as if to say
this is how much I love you.
I could surrender
let loose the wheel
and close my eyes.

But there are the children.

At home, an earache tunnels
through my youngest child's sleep.
I lift her into my lap
limp as a flightless bird
and we rock
inside time's womb.
Daughter, I whisper,
rock towards the island
of yourself,
a heart-shape.
Use my hand on your belly
as a compass.

My own heart points
towards Utah
where a mother
has buried her child
under the hand of a lover.
A mother who,
in the courtroom,
receives life
inside a sterile cell
a failure
at metaphysical motherhood.
At night, she will rest
against the toilet bowl
and dream of the murder of her child
by the smother of another's hands
and pillows, while she slept
soundly
under blankets.

The air outside has begun to pale.
I must sleep
or time will punch a hole
through my body
like the factory's clock:
In. Out.
My daughter's chest rises
with a wave. In, out.
Around her body, my arms
make a gate
though her limbs weave
in and out of mine like ivy.

My heart drops
from its stem
into her sleep and bobs there
a red apple, halved.

Wedlock

for Amina Lawal Kurami

Shadowed in veil,
the lines of her face,
like the parameters
of her existence,
are imagined as any border.

The sky above her, a naked blue,
an overturned hand.
She, a dropped thing,
bound to the gravity
of her feet, hands, face
against shoe sole,
dirt road, cement cell.

Beneath her dress,
breasts swell with milk
she feeds her son
through nipples hard
as the wooden bucket of a well,
dip and pour. His mouth
an O she recalls patterned
on the lips of the father
of her fatherless child.

Buried standing to her neck,
her executioners will lift stones,
a hardness rising between
their thighs and palms,
crack at her head like a globe,
until it splits apart into continents.

The milk feeding
back into sandy soil, will run
in streams like first roots
of seedling, thin and white.

Her mind's exposed contents –

a full moon, the tenor kiss
of metal key in metal lock,
wind whispering Allah's *there*,
there, a frightened ostrich
in parallel predicament, head
buried in sand – will expand
broadly as the sea, across which
women groan into their hands, pillows,
the fleshy shoulder of a man.

Whisper peace, like peace
is a piece between legs
where no man's landed
before God.

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Conflict Resolution

If you look at it this way
on paper
flat as a scorched field
smooth as a scar
hidden beneath a scrub
of wool and cotton
lined like a row of gunmen
belly-flat and aiming
pointedly as accusations
in the black ink
of a self-made tattoo;
if you stare through loopholes
like the barrel of a gun
into a woman's vagina
like the wind through eyes of skulls
and arrive at a newly appointed president
whose wave is reflected
in a pool of flags below;
if you hush the television screen
where just inside
Rwandan children beg to cross
the border to Zaire
and join their mothers,
Palestinian women birth children
while standing at the Israeli border,
a Tibetan monk prostrates his life
to the blade of a Chinese soldier
who stands
inside your living room;
if you hush them,
if you stay quiet,
you have sealed yourself behind a wall,
you have failed to learn
what you will come to learn:
the memory of mortar is long.

Impulse

To pull a bag of oranges by its tongue from the gaping mouth of a delivery truck.
To throw myself in front of something speeding, arms eagled, as if taking a bullet for someone else.
To obey the itch of a knife against a wrist, or the tickle of its point beneath a jaw.
To shout a mountain's shout in public, to hear it echo against bodies like emptiness against rock.
To plunder the last jewel from your mouth, and carry it under my tongue.
Oh, the carnage! Time tumbles and spills forward like loosened fruit.

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Waking Thought

I love her body. Her breasts are dreams
I still hold in my mouth. We wake
and do not wake out of a sleep like water,
as I cling to her buoy body in the half-light
of morning. The flowering avocado tree outside the window
opens its lips to the sun.

Every morning is an afterlife. By night,
the sun submerged, the two of us swallowed
into night black as the mouth of Jonah's whale.
The stars, our only hope for another rising,
sparkle between briny, shadowed teeth.

What death is dreaming? In my dream:
someone lay face-down in a vacant office.
I hammer and kick at his back, and when it is done,
I am presented with a long list of charges. No arrests.

She once told me her heaven would be the dream we dream
when we are awake – the faithful allowed passage
along slick whale tongue to a permanent sun.
Grandmothers, great-grandfathers, the died-too-young
will welcome her on a receiving line fit for a queen.

You will be there, too.

But I don't believe. *It doesn't matter. It's my dream.*

I reach to feel her hip, thigh, knee. The dream leaves residue
at the back of my tongue, so when we kiss, it is with mouths closed.

And I wonder which waking world is this? If I might someday wake
into another world away from my woman, sturdy as the present.
Someone, face-down, whose name I cannot name,
kisses the ground with his mouth closed,
carries a dream in his mouth he will not let me see.

III. Map of My Heart



Map of My Heart

1832

Which shoes for the journey? First one foot,
then the other aboard the ship's deck
unlocking its wooden kiss, bow from dock.
The Continent's features disappear behind a mask of rain
as twilight touches its head to its knees
and sleeps in the belly of the boat.
Which people were these, whose people I became,
whose soles undid at the seams like basted borders
of homeland, new land?

The compass points due west from war or famine,
towards a promise, a wife.
Stowed-away in dream and seed, I inherit
Ireland's square hips, Holland's *knoopneus*,
eyes plucked from French vines.
I dream of sailing from this land of people,
strewn about like vegetables in an uprooted garden,
back into a waking day on a phantom farm
to meet the ghosts of what stayed behind:
a debt to pay, a secret hung to dry in the courtyard.
Instead, find footprints wandering
from front gate to ocean front
and slip them on like shoes.

I swim in the borrowed blood of ancestors,
lining my palms. Generations of women
nod through my hair, as my face shuffles
through a vintage box of photographs:
this one muffed her hands in fur, this one
undressed in the dark. The wind paints my nose
antique peach. I look for lost faces
in the tug and pull of my palms against my cheeks,
find their absence more articulate than speech.

Heiress to a blur of syllables and a heart
sighing into my fingertips and toes,
I step forward and leave a path,
straight as a spine from here to there,
knowing there is no travel without return.

1915

A box of photographs. No labels, dates.
American names evaporated in ink
like those tossed overboard in bottles.
Only faces whose names
take shape on our tongues are framed.
Great-grandmother Clara's portrait hangs
imbued with pneumatic chill.
A lullaby whispers beneath the glass.
Three deaths: a mother and her tongue,
a child's memory with no vocabulary for its evocation.
What sweat her husband caught from the fevered bed!
Scattered four daughters like chicken feed across four farms.

In a final photograph, my three year-old Grandma
and her sisters fashion sweetly on their father's lap
in modest dresses and wide smiling bows.
The women they'll become swim deep inside their closed mouths.
Their husbands and children curl
within the clenched fists at their sides.
Their hearts ache to blow open their buttons,
but keep still, as the camera demands.

1951

Memory opens like a cupboard.
I brush fingertips over its contents,
mark objects with prints of the present tense.
My memory is draped with dimension, color.
I know which baseboard to lift,
find a box, its contents familiar only to me.
Another's memory has no doors,
presses flat as the wall along the stairwell,
hung with photographs. Suspended moments,
at once more fixed and more fluid than my own,
like screens stunned into static, apt to blink back,
without warning, into a program in progress.

My father stands at his father's side in black and white,
still as the blonde in the grocer's window.
The clock reads quarter-to-nine.
Perhaps Grandad is on his way to sell shoes,

his patent leather winking?
My grandma takes the photograph.
She will unfasten my father's hand
from his father's hand in fifteen minutes,
when work begins as it has always begun.

He is small enough to be lifted up by his armpits.
Too small to traverse imagining
to a day when he will carry his father
from the neighborhood bar to bed.
On this day, my father's future spins
like the plastic pistol pulled from his holster.
He does not know he will husband and father,
grow heavy in the heat of Texas summers.
Perhaps he recalls this picture in living color:
the day a ruddy stroke on the canvass
of his father's cheek. Their shadows,
black against the pavement,
waiting patiently and mute for the next move.

1964

One woman pulls a gun, just to show him
who handles the wheel, as my father thumbs
his way to Mexico from Minnesota
in back-seats and truck beds. Another Jack Kerouac
opening state borders like gift ribbons.
Unbound to a place or another body,
his own body wide as the road running
through him and out the rearview mirror.

The road lay dashed in probabilities,
the horizon becomes hypothesis.
He dreams of a house where,
beneath a baseboard,
he will find the girl he handles on the beach
with hay-bale hands, the slap of their bodies in surf
like the splash of milk into a pail,
and Ricky-Missing-Teeth and Georgie-Body-Odor
figurines on bar stools, shredded as the laughter
blowing over their bottle tops.
Details, dropped off the postcards sent home,
become hidden aces in my father's hand.
In the wash of sameness that follows,
his secrets travel him safely as a thumb.

1986

Billy Joel soundtracks our battle for leg-space.
Dad's ash peppers our pillows
and someone's feet or farts
keep the windows yawning straight into the Nebraska night.
Over miles of flatland, air tickles our cheeks like wheat.
Cactus spikes our sleep, the radio crackle-pops
in chorus with Mom's snore. Detail masks the memory:
the faithful meeting of rubber and concrete
(the sound like a whale's tail scraping
the planks between my great great's head
and the whole of the sea).

I learn escape, waking, middle morning,
in an unfamiliar town
like a promise, without proof, come to bear.
There, reflected in the landscapes, my body-to-be:
one of concrete entries and exits.
Roads sprawling and traversed as veins.
Sharp bones in billboard skin.
Time waving, going, gone.

No Names, No Dates

Drawn with breath at birth. A murmur.
A wish howled into want
from the rib-caged heart.
A guttural yes or no to the cold,
the fluorescence, the faces.
Wails turn into words and pass
like heirlooms between tongues,
couriers of need without direct translation.

Can a want for movement be born in blood?
Blood set sail over an ocean and stilled over soil
returns in salt and sex and birth?
A newborn, sensing the room awash
in reflections, begins to swim?

Cartographer. Adrift.
My heart draws loneliness to scale,

beats through veins that carve my body
into hemispheric proportions.
I crack the hulls of innumerable ships
and invite the depths to rise.

I regret packing the duvet.
Its buds embroider a memory.
I unfold the old cloth to flag new territory.
Always some reason to stay
and the unspeakable need to go.
Each movement a prayer for a circle.
There is no home anymore,
only walls where insects castanet in the cracks.
Arrival begets departure. Today it rains.
Today the sky clears. Tomorrow, more of the same.

Inalienable now, brought to shore
in a wash of before. Time breaks on rock
and recaptures itself in blood.
Blood traveled so far as to forget the heart's contours,
the birth beat.

To that source I release words,
carrier pigeons of the heart
that return spent and roost in a dream,
see-sawing like a feather through sleep.
A dream of my father and an always of mothers
knitting, peeling, clutching a valise,
of generations severed from the birth place
as from a boundless chain of paper dolls,
of places we have traveled
but will not, again.

My blood rumbles like an engine
slows then speeds from the nearest thing,
now far.

IV. The Heart's Migrations

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The Bedroom

The walls have grown elephantine in their gray.
We shrink in our bed beneath lamps lit
with the half-born dreams of our lives.
In their translucence, a heart coughs
an anemone of veins against the glass.

Our whole day we spent at the sea
in valiant conquest of the cold, the waves' punches.
We shook sand from our towels, brushed
minutiae from behind our knees. Still,
our breasts itch as we posture ourselves for sleep.

Noses and mouths pressed together,
I cull your breath with mine in continuum.
The walls stand, stilled,
in guardianship of the room,

as if over a watering hole, and bear moonlight
on their backs. Only outside does the world run,
zebra-striped with fear. Here, our bodies' warmth
leaves us mud-baked and tired, sleep
raids and retreats like the tide.

You are thinking of leaving. This place,
not me. Though my heart beats
like rain returned to cloud returned to rain.
For now, we lie like worms entwined
in the earth beneath an upturned rock,

kiss like birds nipping at a dropped apple.
There will be time to decide what becomes
of this room: oasis, mirage. Night closes in
like breath. There are those who will come
to scavenge. For now, we feast.

Rewound

Driving through this town,
I can picture us there

just off the highway
at the restaurant we discovered

and returned to every night.
The way that woman stared

when I put my lips
on your lips.

I remember the elephants. Our safari.
The trucks and tourists.

The lion's breath, raspy as the crumple of hooves
through the grasses. The buffalo,

migrated to the outskirts of the park
since the arrival of lions.

Back at the hostel, I loved holding you
inside sheets I hadn't washed or stretched

across the bed, and showering instead of fighting
over space in the bath.

A part of me wants to exit the highway,
veer north towards the bay, where we marched

down dunes, sinking us to our knees, and swam.
I can see you swimming there,

taking the waves with your back, your hair
smashed into tentacles. A part of me

wants to eat the same dishes. To report back
on the prices, whether the sauces

taste as good as before. But I'm keeping to the part of town
that neither of us thought pretty.

The developments we passed
and crinkled our noses at the last time.

I'll eat in a chain restaurant.
See to business, strictly business.

But I'm swimming with you. I'm holding you inside the sheets.
I remember everything. I'm driving back the other way.

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Summer Night with My Father

Stretched side-by-side on lawn chairs, we run
our fingers through blades of grass black
as seaweed. The porch light casts us yellow.

I say the nearest sky is the deepest part
of the ocean, where we rest like merman
and mermaid, dreaming up coastlines.

And you say the sky is the underside
of the black mutt on the porch, scratching
at stars of blood left by the fleas.

We sit silently until you say
softly as a cicada
you used to dream of becoming an astronaut.

I try to imagine you weightless in a space-suit,
powdered food pinched in your silver glove, but won't.
Want to say that you have always been my earth.

I stay quiet. Your eyes strain heavenward.
It is the first time you tell me a secret and we stare
at the night sky, like it is the other's face.

Circle

*let the circle be unbroken
by and by, Lord, by and by*

Aunt Marty dances over soil and shrubs
as we cup and release her.
The spaces between my fingers become a sieve.
A coat of ash grays my hands.

We bend like shadows over the garden
where our dead live, reeds against the wild blackberry bushes.
The dusk, like each dusk, a leaf dropped
from the perennial plant of seasons.

Thanksgiving on the farm.

The family will return to the house
lit with candles and candy wrappers
where two cats too fat to mount the counter top
wail to waken the turkey's carcass.

Where a fiddle and banjo rest in concert
before our fingers will find
and spend their strings.
But for now, the living tend to the dead

whose bone and flesh yield grasses
high as the youngest cousin's knees.
Ericka's tree bears fruit, ripe as a cheek.
Mousie Grandma and Randy

flower with the dead we never knew:
the AIDS abandoned Aunt Jenny brought home in ashes
from hospice beds, one after the other
their bodies celebrated in soil and root.

We work into twilight,
the hush of our fingers over weeds
becomes a whisper. Memories trail us
like mud on our hemlines.

In chorus with silence, the pony admonishes the dog.
The frogs bordering the nearby pond
call to one another in the only song they know
and we sing our spirits come home.

*if you will greet me
I will join you
in the sky, Lord, in the sky*.*

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* Based on lyrics to a hymn, "Will the Circle be Unbroken," written by Ada R. Habershon in 1905.