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Intersections

A Collection of Poetry

A dissertation in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the award of the degree
of the MA in Creative Writing in Poetry

Faculty of Humanities
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HLLSIM006

FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

The poems *Exchange*, *Wake* and *The Ritual of Care* have been accepted for publication in the South African poetry journal *Carapace*, though they are not yet published.

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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.

Signed _____ Date 25/09/2007

Intersections

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This is how we began

16.

You began to build walls
when you were sixteen.
They were brick-by-brick thick
with your everyday effort
you sleeping on site
in the presence of men
double your age, older,
your hands still school soft -
you said your hands bled
when you caught the bricks.

17.

I've seen photos of you
seventeen, astride your
motorcycle, casting scraps of shadows
against the red brick wall
outside your house in Edmonton
before you left, before you felt
other winds behind your back
as you sailed the length of this land
to its caped tip to conceive me.

16.

You cried on my shoulder
when I was sixteen
my sweat mapped shirt
so wet with your weeping
at the final loss of her.
You'd returned once more,
flown the curled back of Africa
to see what had become of me
after the last abandonment.

17.

I was seventeen the first time I mixed cement.
It was in a rusted wheelbarrow.
You and I prepared to knock down walls,
then to build, lay bricks, form doors.
I still feel the drill humming in my hands,
dishcloth tied over my mouth.
Dust clung to the sweat on my shirt,
even now inhabits my lungs,
closes my chest, prevents open breath.

Danny the Champion of the World

A boy should not
be held up by his feet
like a dead pheasant.

This one is clasped at his ankles
picked by a man
from the metal wreck
of a bombed truck.

With his feet suspended
his t-shirt falls inside-out
to expose a pale tummy
and clean navel.

His face is covered in ash
and from his upside-down
head his hair hangs
long and lank.

I don't know the boy
I knew Danny:
childhood story of trophies,
pheasants shot, gathered
and slung over shoulders
by their feet.

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Flying on the foreshore

My first flights took off
from the incomplete flyovers
by Buitenkant Street.

In his clapped-out car my dad
would drive us toward
the broken roads
then before the turn
tell my sister and me
to close our eyes
drive faster and faster:
we were flying
over Cape Town.

Then brake to tell us we'd landed:
we could open our eyes.
It was a crash landing
onto the road, back to traffic.
We'd bounce up and down
on the sprung seats, tic-tac
leather clinging to our skin.

Now, new buildings have grown
from the gravel and concrete
and steel chasses
shells of towers
still to be built
metal monsters made in
the place I learnt to fly.

Hotels with fountains
lit from the inside shine
through my lidded eyes
to blind me when I try
to spread my arms
lift from the ground
drive off the end of the road
and fly over Cape Town.

Shower time

I would like to say, with your hair beneath
the flow of water from the wheel-like
shower head, that you are a golden goddess
of summer, your hair doused by cool waters
yet shimmering with latent radiance.

But you look like a newborn hamster,
nose pointed in the air to snuffle
your eyes squeeze tight, they filter light
then unsqueeze to see and you reach for me.

For my hands holding the towel
to dry your eyelids and face, you've lost
another contact lens in the water. Between
the shower and me is a blind hamster girl.

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The ritual of care

was the sagging skin
of my grandmother's elbow
dipped carefully
into hot bath water.

She'd dip then stir
dip then stir
as she patiently awaited
the perfect temperature.

Gently she would sing
'til the folded-in skin
of her elbow said:
this is right, bathe him now.

She'd lift my brother
at the folds of baby-skin
beneath the armpit
and slowly settle him down

into the water: his *vetkoek* feet
his lumpy legs, his plump tummy
until he sat in the bathwater
solid on his bum.

She soaped him with method.
To end she would pour the
water over his head.
He'd chortle. She'd laugh.

Exchange

Over the back-seat
front-seat separation
a father hands his son
the lid of an ice-cream tub.

The boy, held back by the
black seatbelt, strains to claim
the lid from his dad's hands.

Finally, he nabs it
grasps the booty
before slowly licking
the circumference of the lid.

The circle of chocolate
diminishes in the face of
his concentrated ministrations.

Afterward, with a once-white T-shirt
face and fingers dirty brown
left with a half-moon of
melted chocolate ice-cream

He grins. His father
in front frowns, then laughs,
and laughs, and laughs.

Sea Point sea front

There's a beach on the
Sea Point sea front
that cuts an isosceles triangle
a bight of rock and sand
out of the ocean.

Eroded walls
pocked pumice stones
protect the steps
to the rocks below
and the gritted sand.

As a child I'd
descend the stairs
feel the rough bits
of shattered shell
discarded glass

rubbed opaque
by sand grains
beneath my feet
as I tumbled my way
to the tidal pool.

I'd stand in soft shallows
in the glitter of ground perlemoen
scared of the seaweed stained deeps
where my father plunged.

He'd arise from seaweed beds
as a monster of the dark under-spaces
his black hair shaggy and wet
leap out chase me screaming
as I scrambled over the boulders
to the steps and up beyond the walls.

Bait

Every summer holiday
we gathered as a family
to fish in the Keurboom River mouth.

Always the first need, bait.
We stomped prawns,
our feet delved
into their homes
coercing them out of mud
squelched between our toes,
nudging them from weedy mulch
into our muddied buckets.

When learning to cast the long rod
to which I tied my prawn,
I didn't dare say my feet were cold.
I was a big boy.

And I didn't like stomping prawns.
You thought I loved
playing in the mud
and later the feeling
of cracked salt on my shins.
I didn't. As a good boy,
I did it anyway.

But I never had the knack.
I preferred to see
how they got away,
swimming under seaweed
slithering beneath my feet
to leave me shivering.

Wake

She comes in
at the back entrance
and she is thinner.

Her boys Xolisa (Peace)
and Thando (Beloved)
are dead.

As so many are
the unwitting victims

unwitting of their victims
as so many are.

A wind-bent reed
bowed over their graves.
She was that thin.

In the smoke of the fires
that cooked the funeral meat
her fragile form faltered.

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On the apron

There's a carcass of a cow
caught in the wires
of a sliced up fence
on the apron of grass
beside the highway.

Oh, but it's not dead. No it is.
The cow's calf is crying
from rattling lungs, he's
scabby, braying, knocking
his nose into his mother's
breast, she lies cut up
by a bed of blades,
protective razor wire.

They worry about all kinds
of dangers here: someone
sleeping on their farms, foreigners
from beyond the border crazed by hunger
descending on this lot of land
held by reservists gripping
rifles in hairy hands.

They look like meerkats on the backs
of their bakkies hopping up and down
at the slightest sight of *uitlander kaffirs*,
asking for passes as if apartheid's been
reinstated on this stretch of road by Beitbridge.

But right now, I'm looking at the cow,
her calf nudging her gently, knowing
there's no more milk in her nipples
except for the red oozing from her chest
where the calf licks, licks, then lies down.

It just so happened the other day

that I was down on my knees
with my hands, palms to the sky
kneeling on bricks in surrender

(crumbling bricks with green moss
that cushioned my knees)

a man was holding a hand-gun
to the temple of my head, the barrel
touching the forceps dent
I've had there since birth

the tip of the gun touching my skin
jiggled back and forth (rather
like a jack-in-the-box at the end of
its spring) and I thought:

"What would it be like to be shot
in the temple, here on the bricks
in front of my wife?

If it happens, I hope they
don't rape her, that they just
take the car and go."

Or it was something along those lines.

My life didn't flash
before my eyes
but the bricks looked
particularly beautiful

as if they were put there
so that I could contemplate
the last brick ever
while I prepared to die.

Evidently, they didn't shoot me.

They couldn't start the car,
they called me a fucking foreign *vlonkie*
and that made me slightly angry,
but it didn't stop me
from referring to them as gentlemen

to the policemen
on the forms I wrote for my statement,
to the detective-inspector
wearing a black gun holster,
to the ADT guards
in tight fitting khaki.

I had to sign a document
which said that they
(the police service)
had provided satisfactory service.

Though it would have been
more satisfactory
if their service had included
none of this happening in the first place.

Some weeks later I was at a party
talking of it and someone said to me:

“The police can’t contain these fucking
kaffirs anymore, I really don’t understand
why we let them get into power.”

I hadn’t said what they looked like
whether they were black or not.

The beanies they wore
make me never want to buy
thickly knitted red wool beanies.

In the dark, I had a better view
of the one gentleman’s shoes
than I had of his face.

I remember his hand:
holding the gun.
It trembled. It didn’t want to threaten.
It didn’t like the idea of killing.

Hands have better ideas than heads.
Had I realised he wouldn’t kill me
neither would his friend?

I really don’t understand
why the other gentleman
had to use the word kaffir.

I left the party early.
There'd been meat on a braai.
People drank beer.
They crushed their tins with hands
that trembled for a moment or two
before aiming, shooting the cans into
the dustbin next to the pool.
One or two tins missed,
or hit the rim and bounced off,
or landed inside with a dull, metallic bang.

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i-pod - crash on the corner of Main and Rouwkoop

i.

Dah da da da da Dah! A body turned sideways

or looking backwards I couldn't tell

A mottled brown-grey dog
zeb-sponge kind of dog
pulls its tyre-chewed hind legs
along the road behind it.

Its legs look like a tattered bride's train
stained scarlet and brown.
They've left a snail trail of blood on the road.

I think of coca-cola tin red
I think of drinking it.

It would have to be icy cold
after a run.

That's what the guy on the road
could have been doing
when the car hit him.

Sucks to be him
for facing the wrong way.

Little Lego-man.
You could almost
pop out his legs
pop in new ones.

His shoes wouldn't fit.

A dog and his runner.

Dah da da da da dah!

ii.

One car looks like a discarded apple core
pushed into the gutter
thick-thin-thick
smashed from the side.

The old lady driver
from the home down the road

hit it hard.

She got out undamaged.
But she looks like her hips
could have broken in surprise,
snappity snap grief-wracked hips.

When marimba rhythms start to play

She knows she's going to die soon
she's just killed someone,
a young man running.
Helped to kill him anyway.
Some others too:
that girl in the gutter.

Maybe she doesn't like seeing dogs in pain,
did she own a pavement special?

Or maybe her dried peach face looks like that normally,
all the juice squeezed out, eye shadow running.

iii.

Dah da da da da dah!

In the lights from the crowded cars,
in the blue-red-blue-red flashes from
ambulances, police cars, traffic cops
it's a club scene

When marimba rhythms start to play

People bent over, swaying, standing
the wetness on their faces
could be sweat instead of tears

dance with me, make me sway

In the right corner! the nursing home crowd:
bowlers' day out

like the lazy ocean loves the shore

granny jive time

dance with me, sway me more

i-pods shouldn't be allowed to
play music at times like this.

Dah da da da da dah!

Open windows

My face is a salty
litter of tears and sweat.
I am pressed, I am pushed by heat,

by frustration, by everyday
annoyance at beggars, joke-sellers,
big-issuers, to close my windows.

I've sanctioned closed windows.
To be private, have silence,
to ignore the fact:

that the man outside holding
pamphlets has broken skin
open a sore on his palm.

He can't offer jokes to a
closed window, nor
can it shake his hand.

He moves away. And behind me,
an open-windowed car
is bombarded with singing,

stomping, clapping, open hands.
Fingers wreath out. Hands shake.
Change is exchanged for jokes.

Travelogue

i.

A woman sleeps on the train
head tilted toward the window
her mouth hangs open
begins to mouth words
from her dreams.

It seems as though
she's pleading with
the window
for release.

Her blouse opens
just slightly to reveal
a scar above
the left breast.

The blouse opens and closes
in the movement
of the carriage.

I see the clatter
of the train
in her teeth.

ii.

Two workers sit together.
One's brow is wide
his hair grey and slicked back
thin wind-blown trees
clinging to a mountainside.

The younger man
wears a simple gold band
and a red strapped watch
he regularly checks.

Two creases of skin
begin above his nostrils
end around his mouth
show what time is doing to him,
gravitational pull
of every night bent
over a desk.

The elder has black holes
in the tops of his teeth
visible when he opens his mouth
as a finger investigates bits of
breakfast nested there.
His hand scratches his forehead.

The younger's voice is focused
through a wine-thickened nose.
His upper lip pumps out as he
chews his gum.

They argue in deep-throated voices
over a lost receipt.

iii.

After finishing colouring-in
his Spiderman picture
in reds and blues that stride
awkwardly over outlines
the little boy puts his head
down on his book
to fall asleep.

His mother rearranges him
slips behind his neck
a tiny turquoise travel pillow
Winnie-the-Pooh
as his headrest.

The boy's lips are the red
of Christopher Robin's knees.
His eyes flutter back and forth
sparrows nestling beneath
his eyelids, below eyelashes
long and black that mirror
his smooth-skinned mother.

His feet in their Velcro-closed
sneakers will take some years
to reach the ground.

On our approach
his mother tries again and again
to awaken him. Kiss on the cheek,
whispers of "Wake up"
"David, David... Wake up."

South Coast driving

It's night driving.
The kind where
the road doesn't exist
beyond a few white hyphens
in the middle of the road.

Where patched yellow grass
marks the receding hairline
of a bald, dark landscape
beyond reach.

The moon, caught in the clouds
isn't so much a circle
as light flowing from a cut
in the sky, then congealing
like a scab on the night's knee.

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Ascent, Monday, 6:15am

My window is
dew-streaked glass
on lightening land

through its pane
the blocks of mined ground
form a jigsaw.

Surfaces of Joburg
in burnt ochre
of deeper earths

and cleaved ground.
Outlived hostels
disused mines,

abandoned buildings
in the city's
old CBD.

Mounds of discarded earth
form man-made mountains
on the highveld.

Engine shudders rock
the picture, break up
the pieces. Joburg recedes.

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Stanhope

I took a moment to stop
at the top of Stanhope bridge
Table Mountain set
against a sky tinged

pansy shell cream and Greek blue.
Clouds foamed vanilla
on the sky's waves.
For a moment I was drowning.

Against the blue everything
diminished: the mountain,
the rusted scaffolding scarring the glass
of the second hand dealer,
the road, the tight traffic.

Until the cars,
the exhale-inhale of motors
the drawn-faced drivers
held me momentarily,
resuscitated me.

I drew in broken breath.
My Golf's engine clucked at me.
A thick-fingered man scratched
at my window, his fingernail cracked

like a hatched egg
to offer wire-beaded
Christmas trees that
don't die in summer heat.

Blinded by a burst
of sudden sunlight
bright through
my windscreen's dust
I ignored him
and drove on.

Hard winter rain

I know it's rained hard
when there's copper silt
at the bottom of Klipper Road.

When I walk by the canal
there are more leaves, bark,
branches in the water than waste

but there'll be at least one
bottle of Bell's or Jack Daniel's
that meanders through the muck

to Rondebosch Station, also unkempt
in the way rain dents old paint
that longs for lost whiteness.

If I've time, I'll stop, pick up
the bottle, gather silt in my hands
filter it into the bottle

stopper it with sodden leaves.
So when winter seems all but lost
to me in summer dust

I can look on water-tossed bottles
filled with stolen silt
and recall hard winter rain.

Winter city night

1.
our good night car rides
headlights hunting the dark road
reflect on cat's eyes
would I could hold you closer
than damp shallow streetlamp light

2.
fogged headlamps lurk
on mid-lines of the highway
bent by the camber
to shoot reflected white light
at passing cars in the mist

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Shucked

You stood barefoot
wrapped in a celadon dress.
The contact of cold
floor tiles made you shiver.

Undressing you,
I undressed a mielie,
I peeled off tight-woven fibres
to reveal dimpled pale skin.

Your dress fell to the floor
in the final shucking
the shrug of your shoulders
released the last clinging strands.

I bit into the flesh of you
as into pale corn
your goosebumps
the kernels of its body.

Afterward, I wrapped you
up once more, restored your
sweetcorn covering, enfolded you
in sheets.

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Coastline

The Cape bears the scars
of cling-wrap beaches
tight against its shores
curled into coves
that interrupt the language of rock
the speech of sea anemones.

Stalks of brown kelp
all slimy broken yolk
kneaded by children's feet
colour the sand off-white.

Discarded heads of rope
and the pecked empty skulls
of once screeching gulls
make a mausoleum of the coastline
sand castle headstones
sand-written epitaphs.

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Holiday time highway

Driving the N1 is a baptism by fumes:

Total immersion in the smoky viscera
of internal combustion
my nostrils turn the snot black
and gritty like left-over ash.

It is midday on a Friday in December
the traffic is thick as turning yoghurt
my fingers grip the steering wheel so tightly
the bruised leather of its contours
stick to the skin, adhere to my
finger wrinkles like viscid malt.

Rub your thumb against your index finger
when your palms are slightly sweaty.
You should get the kind of squeaky
frogs-croaking-at-night

Hot that inhabits my car
(small, white, no aircon
the tyres going bald)

Yes, you've got it
- that kind of hot.

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Haiku for Amy

1.
detumescence: just
reward for this witness who
refused your caress
2.
this late night harvest
of kisses from your wet lips
- tastes of dried apples
3.
hair your outspread wings
you perch above me moonlit
possessive falcon
4.
sharp-winged kestrel flight
the heat holds us up, we plunge
to the grip of earth
5.
rain prattles with roof:
late night lovers' pillowtalk
a winter rhythm

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Bomb scare

Something was wrong
when people began to run
past me after the siren
in the station.

My brother, just three, scrunched
his little fist in my grip
tighter than ever, feeling
the sound in his limbs.

A woman stopped beside us
You must get outside,
it's a bomb scare. I thought
of cartoon bombs

round and black with white
smiling faces and chalked
cheeks, their long ropey fuses
slowly burning.

Were they scared of my
hand-in-hand brother and me?
Get. Out. Side! she said.
But the bombs weren't scared.

I picked up my brother, who wouldn't
couldn't run, he was heavier
then lighter than ever before
his fists still clenched.

A man shaped like a crowbar
tall, thin, head tilted down
at ninety degrees to speak to us
wheezed You OK little boys?

The steps up were high, my
foot kept catching on the lip
and my brother on my hip made
me a three-legged dog.

From behind me, my mother ran
up to us heaving chest
her hair messed and wet
and dropped to her knees.

Like a broken vase
scattered across the gravel.
I'd have to lift her
pick-up-stick carefully.

She stared at us with
fearful eyes and lets go
was in her hands.
She hefted James, held me close.

Later, a dog tied to a lamppost that I
scratched behind the ears.
A park bench. We talked about scared
bombs. Mum hugged us till we got cold.

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The corner of the road

For SH

The corner of the road
was where his house stood
when he was fourteen years old
and his father was the
do-it-yourself man
on the corner
of the road
at the top of
the hill

he learnt to drive on that hill
bought a licence from
his neighbour, the traffic
officer, the year before
he got his first car

a Peugeot 403
painted and re-painted
it wouldn't start unless parked
at the top of a hill
to run down

the car seats rolled all the way
so he could lie in his seat and
hold Tracy's hand as they
shared *papsak* in the back-road
fields of Stellenbosch
where he studied

and when he was done with it
the car sat at the top of the
road in the corner
where the house was

before his father moved
to Uitenhage and greyed
and the tattoos on his skin
their ripple on arms and back
had slowed, their colours faded

before, when his father stood straighter
when he wasn't angry or daft
and unable to mourn his dead wife
who everyone had loved more than
the man who drank
was tattooed stank.

Now his father dead,
staring at the block of flats
where his home once stood
at the corner of the road
he points and says
"I lived there once"

turns and looks down
to the river mouth
that's moved back and forth
the length of the beach
to where it was when he was fourteen

where the lagoon gathers
a reflection of the moon
and the sparkles in the sea
could be fish or stars

looking up he picks out the stars
he loves in the night sky
"Charlie's Pot is the real name
of Orion's Belt" his
father told him once

"and the stars above it
are the steam, the smells of
all Charlie's memories as
he cooks in his pot"

Written by Nursery Ravine

As I walk,
the path writes itself
and writes me onto it
my footsteps scuffing
scraggs of rocks
catching on roots
that have grown through
just-written words of the walk.

I'm typed by a stubbled keyboard
the bark of old trees
their rough textures inscribing
my gait as I stride
stumble, catch myself
walk on into the day.

When I rest, cold rocks
and their moss
form the leather back
of an office chair
as if I could lean back
then forward and write the land
that wrote me.

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