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Volume 67 *Fall/Winter* 2007–08

Article 15

October 2014

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Recommended Citation

Furmanski, Lisa (2014) "Notes from the Corners of Noon," *Ontario Review*: Vol. 67, Article 15.

Available at: <http://repository.usfca.edu/ontarioreview/vol67/iss1/15>

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Notes from the Corners of Noon

LISA FURMANSKI

Bananas heaped on the floor, peels scattered
in and out of shadows, *whoosh*, a toy plane

clipped from a plastic bottle, car folded from oil
cans, nothing wasted. Jimmy whispers, *my father*

is dead, and picks candy from my hand. Water
is sold along the road, Margaret names what grows

in a runny alleyway, what defies the immutable
muck. In a corner of noon, darkness

defies the expected cycle and surrounds
an unexpected death. Untended. Uncounted.

*

A friend tells me I have no tears,
though words are many.

I brush against thin limbs, push them over
to sit at the mat's edge and note

*a corner, opaque though it is noon
sores like crimson petals between her thighs
a fever scorched and dry as mid-day sand, her palate chalked with mold*

Rice-clumps on the floor, gnats lift and land, giddy
in the quiet. My blue

paper mask sweat-soaked, breath tense due to heat
and to hours. The moment, then, to remind

her brother how hard
she had been loved.

*

A whistle. A reply. Two African grays
mimic cellos from our back window:
one loneliness sourcing another.

Sweet bananas ripen at the fence, soft trunks
of smoldering orange and black, the razor wire
glinting like tinsel.

Someone washes floors,
someone guards the gate,
someone cuts back branches: I write

an account of this, how the fence follows
wherever I (or even you) might choose to go.

*

Josephine lies on a dirt floor, head in the lap
of a friend tightening her braids. A moan released
like a sigh. A blue scum settling on each eye.

There is a decision, unspoken, not to go
to the hospital. Her father watches from the door.
Her mother stirs a pot. Hours that seemed few

are now too many, and we hope
she dies soon, her friend's blouse clenched in a fist.
I notice that it is not nearly dark

enough, that day intrudes, bright and ascending.

*

Wind accelerates, advancing the season from parched
to soaked, every surface rinsed clean: fronds

like brimming ladles, cracked taxi windows,
sewers choked with branches and leaves.

Our garden suddenly a gem. Yellow corollas.
Sunbirds and hadadas. Bromeliads hold

fleshy scalloped cups, like clam-shells, rain-full,
over my head. I stand back

and watch, helpless.
Ebiseera—moments, seasons—one word

for all grooves of time, even those that deviate
and defy. At night, a sound like shaken spray paint

turns out to be a voice, a tiny bird that hammers
at what remains
of the moon.

Guards retrace the perimeter,
floodlights assembling the shadows of noon,
midnight lit like day.

*

*rock scooped from a hillside
men break it to stones
women crush it to gravel*

Each woman to a scorch of broken rock.
Wood mallets. Sun-glare.

A stone shattered, its pieces cast aside, a baby
restless on her mother's back.

Rain hesitant.
Then hard.

Water taps the ground, the women
tapping stones, a slurry at their feet.

A few coins. Fistfuls of dry porridge. The daily exchange.
There are no riches to be

scraped gouged cracked culled
from this vein, this vast shell.

Only blisters and thirst.

*

Margaret's feet burn and tingle as if perched on needles.
Allen weeps at her test result, we tell her to pray. Suddenly

numb, suddenly blind, Annette stares into nowhere.
Zaudia ignores her husband coughing blood into his hand.

What should I show you? What meaning could be ascribed?

Sylvia's arms scratched and scabbed, there is nothing
to eat. Livingston's eyes pale as milk, as ice.

The house has two walls, no rooms, no doors.
Annette dies. Margaret dies. The husband dies.

Organs like smooth, firm stones in her belly,
Fatuma giggles as I feel her armpit for glands.

*

Can I, should I, write *the darkness*
of houses at noon, an interior seen only
after invitation and plea?

A baby whimpers. Damali sorts weeviled beans, a young man bursts
into the swelter with a joke.

Susan died last week, until dawn keening
for herself. Bright blood, her rectum's trickling.

Each glimpse
translated, then uttered or unsaid. I choose, and this
is my vantage. Advantage.

*

In a grove of green bananas,
 he starves, too weak to pick or dig. On the radio,
 we are at war, I listen to bombs falling,
 and bread.

Gloria runs, panting, to meet the car. Almost tears,
 pus drips from her ear, a smile spreading as she flips
 pages in a picture book.

Rain. Rivulets of red
 mud run over tarmac, a tide of paper, plastic bags, and leaves.
 The metallic sky collapsing

over green hills, Margaret, in an army
 jacket, sips tea, sharing the mug with her nieces.

Under a pounding tin roof, two men
 in a bed, one wheezing blood, his groin lined with perfect,
 round stones:

in the doorway, eclipsing noon, neighbors hear the news.

*

Someone irons
 while I read the news, she creases,
 smooths.

One evening, we jog through town: arcs of ash cast
 over gravel and mud, a board crossing a sewage ditch.
 In an abandoned car, chickens peck

at jagged windows. Children touch
 my pale hands and scream
 that they are real.

Dusk deepens, not into a rich dark, but a blank
 like the white sky at noon. Shrieks guide us,

our vision plummets, the ground drifting
away, though my feet still slap down.

Pardon this voice,
we were afraid: the heckle
of sparking fires, the palisading shadows.

*

Morning comes and the poison melts away.
A routine to survive each day.

Over pages, the same trace
of my dusty finger—a signature—red
as the liminal flush over the city, its staring children,
even shadows tinted and aglow.

A new day
and the dying die still, the city un-surrendered
to an invisible siege.

Why do I have this expectation?
That people will suddenly disappear from streets
even as they toss coins to a boy selling news.

A paraplegic pulls himself upright in bed
with a rope hung from holes
in the roof, the dailies yellowing in piles, their height
just one estimate of time.

*

A man sprawled on the hospital stairs
shakes and froths, urine pooling on the tiles.

A woman with a sheet tented
over her: *acid, her husband tossed it in her face.*

Robert sleeps in a trench coat.
He wants money for drinking water. They want to operate.

A plate of beans sways with flies, a woman's feet
crawl with ants, a steady trail along the sheets and
under her waistcloth. Robert says, *so*,

there is nothing to do, and turns to face the wall.
The man on the stairs stops breathing. Sister rolls

a green screen around him; between the wheels,
he is twisted, soaked with piss.

*

Ida sits on a stool under a mango tree—the neighbors
strain to hear—a small girl climbing

on to her lap, pulling at her coat. Ida's eye covered
by a sickle-shaped scar, thick as skin.

Anger, neglect, silence: even at noon, it is night
on her left, the eye shuttered tight,

an endless sleep to wonder
about her girl's fever.

*

Acclimation: driving, I daydream
and notice nothing. I read
in the garden while flames
consume rubbish beyond the fence.

In Kireka, Kinawataka, Nakawa,
men drink away an unfinished

rebellion, stumbling toward me without
speaking, eyes streaked and dry.

We crowd an unlit room,
patients in a noisy line: I shout
about years, diarrhea, and x-rays.

My back aches from leaning against
a crooked wall, my dress soaked through.
I step out into the sun and can not see.
Not quite tears, water runs from my eyes. When did I grow
tired? *Step out. Step away.*

Words too many, the stories
not mine to tell, though I want them.

*

A boy lies by the side of the road, a woman
testing his stillness with her foot.

A boy lies drunk in front of the market,
shoe-less, spit crusting around his mouth.

A body wrapped in sheets, laid out in a pickup, bouncing stiffly
over the rutted road. Jeffrey's hair like powder,

scalp gray and peeling, his wife shuffling
between rooms, peeling cassava and setting pills

aside. Ida dies. Her body draped
with a floral sheet, her photo placed over her face:

a woman I never knew, in green silk and grinning.

*

A deep odor over the pineapples, a boy tugs
my basket to carry it for me. A fresh vanilla bean,
brown and soft like a slug. Poppy seeds in a white sack,

rice with or without stones. I practice numbers, weights,
weather, greet awkwardly. There are no words

in Luganda for the prostate, the gallbladder.
Pregnancy is a stomach. HIV the blood.
Talking curls: do we say

what we mean? Can we mean what we want to say? *Ojja kufa,*
you will die,
 that sum of knowing, the only truth.

Speech turns to ego, karma. To repertoire. *Ojja*
kufa. Death an end to tedium, to loneliness.

*

Rita looks at the house, door and windows shut, *someone*
has died. Fatuma's bed and furniture stacked outside
 in the mud. In her empty room, the muttering

of old women: God knows, God's will.

We had forgotten to help,
we came too late,
little given, little tried.

We are unguided. Under a sky
 that does not stir, that can not be
 deciphered, its light oppressive and aware. Livingston dies.

The car breaks down, and homebound, I listen
 to news of air-strikes and caves, of liberation.
 The world's complaints.

*

Who hovers in corners and shadows, observing,
 with hands open
 then closed? At our volition, our fatigue,
 we wander elsewhere. At the call of a voice or an hour.

Who watches from afar, woken and curious
 for the moment,
 flipping through magazines, weeping
 at photos in the check-out line?

Who leaves home and murmurs *foreign*
with the tone of *beauty* or *sublime*?

*

I keep lists of the dead, write something for each.
Once, tears were few, and now—as hoped, expected—too many.

Shadows unravel and repair. Days when heat rises
from all angles and long evenings crackle with revival.

And flies where the butcher has finished.
And contentment within misery.
And the uncertainty staying creates.

Faces shift like overlapping clouds, a night sky that arrives
at all hours, punctuated (so strangely, improbably)
with what lies beyond: irrepressible light. Its brilliance.