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DARK CONTINENT

by

Jonathan Owen May

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Major: Creative Writing

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Abstract

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Dark Continent. Major Professor: John Bensko, Ph.D.

Dark Continent is a collection of poetry centering on a concurrent chronology of the poet and a fictional character named Mandrake, who is an expression of the poet's psychic territory. This work explores the nature of growing up in Zimbabwe, the duality of the self, the self in relation to danger, and how the self can be lost within the larger continent of the psyche. The work employs both formal and free verse structures, which serves to heighten the duality of the perception of the speaker in relation to the idea of tradition.

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Lana

I wish I knew why, but I dreamed about you
last night. You were bald, like the last time
I saw you, and young. About nine. I didn't
know what cancer was. We sat, counting
chongololos in the post-rain. They wobbled
on their hundred legs, black-hunched and inching.
It must have been March. Everything dripped
in the gentle aftermath. You were my sister's friend,
so I don't know why I was even there. You asked
if we still rationed water. I told you the school
built a small, stone-grey fountain in your memory—

“Mugabe to Seize White-Owned Farms”

During break in school, all of us
from grade four cluttered
around the monkey-gland
tree—its gnarled limbs
stretched out flowerless,
our playground arms.
Masugu
brought a knife
and cut deep
into the heart, before
it branched. Sap, brown
and sticky, covered our hands
as if it might never be washed away.

On Thirst

Poised above their heads, the hue of sky itself,
liters of water sashay in the buckets the girls
carry.

They walk for hours, the little girls, on sandals
made from old tires, black on pink underbellied
feet.

They must not stumble, for they've walked ten
kilometers already, ten more to reach the huts.

Love

does not carry them, their mothers do not carry
them. The girls, their noses stinging with dust,
sneeze

and for a moment, terror reflects like clouds
in the water of their eyes. They stop, steadying
backs

straight so as not to fail, not to turn back, mud
drying around their toes. At last—they reach
home,

mothers stay rooted at their weaving, babies
crawl inside the huts along the polished cow-dung
floor.

Boiling the water, the girls take turns sipping,
it is so hot, but they are thirsty. Twenty kilometers
thirsty

for this. They must boil the water. They see their sister,
clutched stomach, black flies crawling all around her.

Buzz

and buzz, weaving patterns around her, waiting
for their children to hatch beneath her skin.

Abundance

Our German shepherd Natalia
had given birth that day,
loosing puppies into the world
wherever she saw fit.
Seven in all, we thought.
Clouds gathered over us,
like the mess of corn meal boiling on the stove.

The rain asked nothing of us there,
only to be received and used.
We were always rationing water.
Our basins were set out, catching
the joy of excess, the joy of water.
All over Bulawayo mouths were held open
as people danced and ululated
for the wedding of earth and sky.

After this rain subsided,
people withdrew quickly,
taking their pregnant buckets inside.
We gathered the puppies
under a blanket in our gated veranda.

Nothing was asked of us, but still,
everyone knew the price of rain.

It was always just one or two,
at first. Then the swarm
of flying ants unfolded itself
from nowhere to eat everything
piecemeal and leave behind
small constructions of terror,
mangled maize, yawning and
empty sacks of corn meal.

After it all, I stepped outside
into the cold afterlife of the rain.
I saw something out of place
beneath our trailer near the garage.
I walked over, stretched my hands
out and picked up the remains
of the eighth puppy, the one we'd missed.
Its ravages barely filled my hands.

On Reserve

I can't hear anything but
the strange, warbling unison
of night noises, animals
stumbling off into hunger
or sleep.

The sleeping-bag eats hotly
into me, so I climb on top.

My skin tempts
the mosquitoes
through the green mesh.

I scour the ravine
near Lake Kariba,
thinking of altars,
hearing blood spilled
into the night.

I don't dare leave the netting.

Church

In the fading land
of my childhood,
I run my fingers
along the cave of bones
once an elephant.
I hadn't known
of waste, white,
sterile and tuskless.
Then again, I never saw
the quick hands, chainsaws—
eyes full of money.
The lumbering patriarch
reduced to this—
my playground,
memory of wonder,
the rows of teeth.
I laugh as I run
within the ribcage,
shadows patterned
like leadlight
in sanctuary windows,
touching bones
bones
with my hands.

Cartography

My sister and I ran through
the forest, new to us—
we were caught
in the naming of things—
Bridge of Many Thunders
over the small creek,
Bench Which Time Forgot—

I have no new names
for things.
Love wears its own old disguise
 of flesh—
which has no purpose,
aside from trying on good,
aside from trying to name—
but to cease
at last—
after reeling from loss to loss,
after running through
a lifetime of forests,
touching every possible leaf,
every
 brown sparrow
and attempting to bless it

with acknowledgement.

The Varieties of Religious Experience

This was no cathedral, but tile
and open showers with grime.
I was a child, shrugging off my swim-trunks
when he touched me in a way
I had never known.
I was eye-high to his thigh
but he lifted my chin like I was his
and he was about to wipe away
some childhood matter.
Can you call it rape
if you blush in its first telling?
Afterwards, with my wobbly legs and my bag,
I left the locker room and walked
towards my father, his hand out to receive me.
We walked outside as the sun hit hard
upon the frothing jacarandas.
I looked down at myself, feeling still
that hand upon my chin.
That endless feeling.

Mandrake the Magician

Mandrake's father slaps his Mother across the face while he holds her white blouse smeared thick with black lipstick, her white glove wet with the smell of someone else's perfume. Broken whiskey glass litters the living room floor, lit up like church. He turns to hit Mandrake, who's afraid to move, sneakerless, only seven. His retching Mother encircled in haloing copper light. Mandrake raises his arms in fear, his hands gesturing strangely.

His father's frozen face looms like a parade float, arm caught in a pitcher's rearing-back. Mandrake lowers his arms, stops crying. The glove hovers like the moon above a twinkling sea. He pushes his father over. His hands curl over and over, uncontrollably.

The glove drops.

Mandrake's father is filled in the back with glass. When his father screams and screams, Mandrake wonders if it's like the time Mother's face was bleeding, but she said it was just his imagination.

On Uncertainty

I want to tell you about the time the horses were burning and how I couldn't hear anything but my father shouting *Gijima* into the heat and the gross clopping of hooves in all directions as the herd scattered over the road. A barn was burning somewhere and they had loosed the horses too late or no one but the fire had loosed them. *Gijima, run.* How the horses ran into the city, away from the river, their manes on fire as they careened beneath the jacarandas with their violent purple blossoms that caught all sunlight. My father got out of the car and ran towards the other men as they tried to corral the horses whose huge eyes were pure white with terror, their flaring nostrils sucking up the embers of their own flesh. You could smell the bodies burning. How I jumped out of the car and ran to find my father in the crowd, thick as smoke all around me—voices in Ndebele and Shona, the crying children who watched the horses rise up and whinny in piercing ululation. How nobody cared a thing about anything but the horses. I heard my mother scream my name, her American cant heard high above the wailing, the old women clucking their black ashen cheeks at the destruction. Reeling from the smoke, I fell onto the main boulevard through Beitbridge, the dusty gravel littered with quartz pebbles the pale colors of candy. Everything was so hot, my whole head red and balloony from the rush and smoke and screaming. How I grabbed a piece of quartz the color of mint, each stone looking more liquid than the next. I grabbed one and put it in my mouth to suck on as I stood up from the road, now terribly afraid, wanting to find my mother as she yelled *Jonathan Jonathan Jonathan* as the light began to die.

“Mugabe Rejects Charges That Detainees Are Tortured”

The government thought we were terrorists
because we looked at a house. White people
would never live in such a house, they thought.

My parents were held for hours, questions,
questions, questions.

While my brother and sister and I cried
in the car, answerless,

soldiers practiced shooting sacks
of corn meal. They looked in at us
from outside of the car, gleaming black
skin pearly in sweat. The weight, they said
through foggy windows,
the weight was accurate to judge.
They must have thought us too young.
They let us go, no explanation given.

That night, my parents read us the Passover story
and I waited in bed for some dark stranger

to brush my hair back and say, Yes
I will take you into the dark
made of mothers' wailings,
I will show you what it means
to shed blood.

The Dog

I find my parents dead
on the living room floor,
spines cracked like their Bibles
to the story of God's children
passing through the divided sea.
I'm crying. My sister appears.
I show her the wet bodies
and ask about the dog—
what about our parents' dog?
I find Ferguson in the backyard,
his small white body coloring
all of the flora around him in white
as he passes. A dead peacock lies
on each side of him, its plumage
turning white as he looks down
on each side and up at me,
licking his thin black lips.

Mandrake Makes a Lullaby

Mandrake hasn't slept for nights now.
His hands move feverishly in the dark.
Red carnations float above him like dreams.
He's so happy, just Mandrake and Mother.
He conjures up the fictions of men—
tall, smiling, they would never hit him.
He makes black ones appear,
like in the movies. When he asks why
they always seem so sad, they smile,
sing him a song, and disappear.
In their eyes, he sees infinite patience.
He wants so badly to conjure up himself,
to ask how and why, but he can't.
He holds his breath, counts to ten,
clenches and unclenches his fists
a thousand thousand times.
He creates violins, the bows unbidden
by hands. Mandrake's fingers dart,
the music just above his head and,
in the next room, his dreaming mother's.
Inside her self, wingless, she flies
over mountains, over the whole thrumming world.

To my sister Jennifer

I was walking across the snow-covered parking lot
to the pizza place, and I was thinking of you—
up there in Vancouver, also surrounded by snow.

A tree held the parking lot together, broke up
the field of white, held me fast in my watching,
though I knew it wouldn't move or start talking.

The branches were an X-ray, incandescent white, darkness
seeping through them, the whole tree given over to the prognosis
of winter. We used to look at baobabs that way, though

our childhood never saw snow, did see plenty of backlit
pictures—our bodies paraded through by light, our hands
happily holding each other on our way to school.

We'd fantasize about the magic in everything, even now,
the tree rising from the parking lot to disturb me
in the way of memory. The birds pointed at by old ladies,

the birds falling from the sky. Blood on our faces, smudged
with our housekeeper's fingers—*Shhhhh, your parents must not know.*
When they did find the amulets she'd bought for us

(with stolen money), when they found the bus ticket
to the witch doctor's part of town, it was supposed to be all over.
We were children of God, we did not sprinkle chicken blood.

So she was sent away. Her gift to us lingers still—the trees
hold out their wooden fingers dipped in blood.
Close your eyes, umfana wetu, the core of fantasy.

///

I want to strip away the unimportant things—the chameleons,
the national anthem playing before afternoon cartoons, *xoxo*: the word
for frog. What am I left with? What besides these things—

the amulets, the blood, the *muti*—to guard us?
You found the girl's skinned body with mom. You told me

[No stanza break]

the dogs were licking her ear. Everything was always real.

It wasn't until my body was raped by the two older boys
over the course of a night, that I knew something was wrong.
I couldn't tell you for weeks. God didn't stop them. The amulets made

of blood, our blood, were useless. What was life if nothing was safe?
Beauty? Can I call it beauty? The year we moved to Memphis, it snowed,
and we looked out the window and thought it was beautiful.

We ran outside, arms, legs bared, our laughing faces. The poplar trees
dropped snow on us in awkward plops. We played until our skin burned
with cold. Now, we're a thousand miles apart. I know you might call

later this week, and I hope you do, so I can tell you about the tree
and how it looked like trees look in my dreams, and I'll wait
for you to reach into our past, pull out another small horror-wonder,

another time when our hands were holding one another.

Mandrake Seeks Out a Witch

Sweating beneath the green swath of jungle,
Mandrake follows his guide Lothar to the witch.
Lothar, who did not shake with fear at Mandrake
and his apparitions. Lothar, who grabbed him
through the twisting smoke, and said, *I can help you
discover who you are.* Mandrake wants to kiss
the man's black calves, muscled like stumps
rooted a hundred years in the earth. Lothar brushes
the plants away, breaking thorny limbs. Mandrake wants
to speak into his hand and pull from it the moth
orchid, phalaenopsis, and brush its orange tongue
against Lothar's ear. They round into the village,
and the people still upon their entrance. Mandrake
wishes he could cloud himself in translucence.
His hands are frozen in fear by the hut's dark entrance,
which beckons from the back of the encirclement.
Crossing that black threshold, Mandrake knows
his hands are powerless here. A magic older
than all of the things unnamed within him. A woman
squats on the floor before a white circle, rounded
bones within it. *Lothar helps no man,* she thinks
into his head. She throws the bones, which land
in a triangle. *Your hands are filled with longing,
like Lothar's. You must touch into each other,
indistinguishable from one another.* She gives them
each a bone-knife and they cut their palms
and hold one another's hands and are silent.

The Car Ride Home

Bulawayo, Zimbabwe 1992

Birds echoed into the empty outside.
Their strange language never stopped.

We hadn't asked why my brother, sister,
and I were sent home from school early,

our teachers' knowing looks, the principal's
waning mouth as he saw us off.

The living room was dark when we came in.
The blinds closed, small slants of light

played in intervals along the wood-grain floor.
My father knelt, his hands folded

against his forehead, his eyes just opening
from a plea to God I couldn't fathom.

The call had come a few hours before—
my grandmother's body lying thousands of miles away,

paling against a hospital bed in Memphis.
My grandfather said to his son, *She's gone.*

We knew it when my father stood
slowly, his knees weak from prayer.

His arms opening to us,
we knew that pain had no distance.

Lobster

for my grandmother

She flew to see us in Zimbabwe,
my First Memory: Beautiful
Manicured Hands—Jonelle
with those little pills in her purse,
malaria medication—
I'd say I heard them shake
but I'm not sure. Then she left,
Hair Blowing on the tarmac:
Last Memory. Jonelle—getting sicker
by the day, the doctors
holding her hand, my grandfather
holding back her blonde hair
as she vomits into the basin,
nobody knowing
these little pills were worse
than what they prevented.
We had flown into Memphis
the night before the funeral.
I stayed home the next day,
knowing nothing
besides lobster for lunch.
Lobster—what a thing!
I opened the fridge, peering
over their cold, slowed forms,
brown as blood turning
through tubes. Hours later,
the adult processional into
the kitchen—I was picked up
so many times, the kitchen light
so close to my head,
the scuttle of lobsters
beneath the talk of Jonelle.
Boiling water, the room hot
with relatives—I wanted to know,
I wanted to know what was going
to happen to the lobsters.
Dangled over the water, one dropped
with a plunk by my uncle.
The screaming. Adults talking

[No stanza break]

about Jonelle, the flowers.
Sick yellow of rhododendrons.
The kitchen filled with
the screaming of lobsters.

Childhood Noir

Jacaranda asks me what's wrong
and I look at the sun from my big rock
beside the elephant ear's soft green bodies.
I'm forgetting too much, I say.

It knows I shot the bird even though I didn't know
what would happen, even though my sister shot one too
and cried and the Daisy BB gun smiled and smiled
and and and

but the other trees adorned with chameleons
whisper their lies in susurrant cant.
All the pink petals look fast in my direction
then away again.

I don't know what the trees plan on doing
but their limbs stretch out casually, trying
to slip their arms around my shoulders.
Even the bright Poinsettia tree

unhinges its red mouths which bleed white
all over my hands, and while Daisy and the bird sleep,
Poinsettia cuddles around me like mother
and bids me, *Drink, drink of my candy leaves.*

After Lothar Dies

“and I leapt
into the cold water,
the seals coiled
their fat bodies
around me.
I thought
how warm their blood
must be, wanted
to feel it in my hands.
you watched
from the shore—
your hand of warmth
around my body
as I bobbed
among the ice walls.
I wanted you
to be in the water too,
our heat-packed bodies.
but you watched—
always turned towards me—
as if the great eye
of Mandrake
took favor to this
African’s ice fever.
so many erratics,
so little time to swim
in arctic sunlight with
the man you love.
how else
could you explain
when I asked you
why you stayed
on the shore and
the seals, Mandrake!
and you looked at them
and back at me and
said, everything
is yearning.”
Mandrake conjures up
the loop each night.
Lothar before him,
everything but real,
everything.

Everyday Pornography

You call the thing inside of you a monster
as you gyrate thigh-level with your open mouth.
The stranger spunks into your face.
You think of Spiderman and inside
you can't help but feel like the villain.
You call the thing inside of you a monster
but you don't even know what those look like
anymore, lost to childhood dark. Your face
drenched in white crude, your eyes two mirrors
showing nothing. Then he hitches up his pants
and nods to leave. Then you're alone again.
You do this to yourself to call something else
a monster. The monster is always the stranger.
The monster is always what you call the thing inside you.
Not *you*, but *the thing inside you*. See the difference?
You're still afraid to find there's nothing there.
Your face the painted shield, war-white, against
an inner darkness.

My father calls it *the God-shaped hole*.

My friends who don't believe call it nothing,
change the subject. It's the same sometimes—
naming, not naming.

Your face splits open,
like a cocoon, revealing an opening, a voice.
Its thereness speaks from the hole's bottom,
and for a long while, you're afraid of the voice.
Then you're afraid of the silence.

Bellodonna

You bob along the chlorine blue, your *apple derriere*
(your words) an ignored pool-float in the back-and-forth.

You stop trying to drown, turn turtle-up and grin
at where I was standing. There's film in your eyes,

so you don't notice all of the things now gone—
our cummed-up bedspread (I refused to wash out

of love, you out of disregard), years of Halloween
pictures, you and I—Faust and Mephistopheles.

It was when you started this suicide spree, instead
of telling me you didn't care anymore. Instead

of a doorway conversation where I leave hot-faced
and you grab a beer from the fridge. Now it's poison

in the spice rack, clearly labeled, I know you'd want
me to carry on in grief, *penelopizing without end*.

Now it's nooses in every room; when you leave,
they sway with the fan. You carry on,

each attempt holding both of our breaths hostage.

November

You imagine he does this every night,
knocks on a car window, asks for *a ride*.
When you acquiesce, he smiles and lights
the half-fag dangled from his lips. No pride
matters now or ever has. Ratty shorts
barely cover his knees. He asks if he
can *suck on your nipple*, his thumb cohort
to pleasure, tracing orbs you only see
pink in your mind's eye, his rising breath hot.
You grow hard with fear, and on the wheel play
your hands like young deer in the dark. You ought
to pull into the gas station and say
I'm just going to get a bag of chips
I'm just going to get a bag of chips

There Are Always Pieces Missing

Another man walks out, leaving my lips
puffy and my heart half-caged. *Did you
smell the rain* I wanted to ask him *sifting through
your dreams?* It smelled like absence,
like the smell of a smell long gone.

At night, my grandmother, gone,
passed through the veil, speaks the one
thing I ever hear her say, *Your body is absence.*
I reply, *Here are my hands, my eyes, lips.*
She stands from her chair and passes through
me, and I wake up screaming *You*

you you even though I mean myself. *You*
is the form grandmotherlessness takes—gone
with common sense, eyes burning—through
the mind's turnstiles. *You* looks for the one
not armed with anything but lip
service. In the end you are what your absence

desires, and by being filled, absence
acquiesces for a moment. Then the *you*
enters back in, crying for the wet lips
of another stranger gathered from the gone.
You are the enemy of the body, one
foot in the abyss, one tapping through

the dirt above your grandmother, through
her bones, finding nothing but absence.
You were foolish enough to believe anyone
could soothe your heart-scald. Silly chit—*you*
thought Freud was air and God too, and gone
with everything that has meaning. My temple of lips

burns its own offerings. Idols' stone lips
forever closed to comfort, to the sorting through
of feelings, of my grandmother's hands going
through my hair while she rocks. Absence
reigns and my dreams do not defer me

[No stanza break]

from feeling there is no one but *you*, no one.

My grandmother's lips open and close absently
all through the night she says *you you you*.
Then she's gone, and *you* is the only one.

The Water Within Me

Standing on the rocky shore,
I look out over the waters. I want
to find my sister there, floating above
the dark water, but find nothing.
In every direction, the tern-filled sky opens
through the clouds, its burden of light
shared by my searching. I listen intently
for any voice other than my own to call me
over the white-flecked water—anything
other than the small hum of my own heart.
I turn away, ready to awaken, when
from the depths I hear the leviathan
low my name—all the water within me
rings with its ancient rumble. My sister
appears beside me, holding a flaming book
in her left hand, a knife of bone in her right.
She bids me, *Fill your pockets with stones.*

System of Love
for Thom Gunn

You cannot see where the men separate,
thighs uninterrupted by cracks of light.
Shoved against a wall, one's wet tongue
licks once the chipping paint and finds
it has no name besides submission.
After all, you too have touched yourself
in darkness, unable to see your hands
doing lover's work, the work of orifices.

Lothar Watches Mandrake at Breakfast

cold, crisp flesh cut off
in wet chunks by those
proud American teeth,

never a red so slick
as apple skin lapped
into the blankness
of his open mouth,

each bite tinged with
sin hot as thighs
by my noticing

Rodeo Drive

Cody and I were having this conversation
with the Dolce & Gabbana fellow
who knew so much about the weather
in Memphis, lightly grabbing his crotch
as he guided us to the ties and pants,
gushing invites for drinks by the pool, nude.

Red shirt in hand, he slides his fingers over the nude
mannequin, gazing into the gauzy sockets, conversation
plays over in his head. The lights off, he pants
as he talks to dummy Harold, his silent fellow.
When, Harold, when will I find him? Crotch
bulging, tan, Harold looks outside at the weather.

Cody and I are backed into the corner, talk of weather
ringing hot in ours ears as we're brushed against nude
female mannequins, tiny breasts, no waist, crotches
that slope into nothing. At this point, conversation
falls second to the fingers of this D&G fellow
as he shucks with pleasantries. My pants

hit the tiles in the deluxe dressing room. He pants
as Cody and I look at each other, talk of weather
erased as I feel him choking himself, poor crying fellow,
on each of us in turn. Through a curtain crack, I see nude
Harold, his burning blank gaze. Two women in conversation
over the pros and cons of an avocado diet, their crotches

lined with organza. A smell wet-hot rises from crotch
level as I gather my pants back on, D&G's nude
still, pumping his frantic dick. The conversation,
at this point, is so far from the sun-drenched weather
that I begin to laugh, Cody and D&G still at it and nude
in the tasteful red dressing-room lights. Are all my fellow

queers so quick to slide tongues and all manner of fellow
objects into strangers? I thought of the two crotches
of the avocado-organzas—would they let some nude
hunk slip into them as long as he has nice teeth and pants,
as long as he's able to think of ways to make conversation

[No stanza break]

about diets and fucking, anything but the weather?

Some nights, faceless fellows plow into my dreams, panting as they unload their hot crotches. They don't care about whether my nude body cries; they're not here for conversation.

Mandrake Dreams of Lothar

I sit down at the bar and create the glass bartender
who lights up with the apothecaried fire of green glass
(which enters the mirror behind him and never leaves).
I am a million small Mandrakes, green-hued and wanting.
I came in for a drink but really I'm just looking
for the truth of two people from any stranger's lips,
the terrarium stubble of his night-hungry face—
the bartender, the seven o'clock stranger, it doesn't matter.
I can't see the stranger's face, so I try to buy him a drink.
His black hands clench and unclench around the sweating glass.
I open my mouth to order but the room fills with voices
and the bartender's glass mouth disappears.
Harvest moon peeks in through the window and roars
to keep it down in there and I try to say, It wasn't me,
but it's just the moon again, no angry neighbor face.
I yell back, *It's not a joke—what's going on in here—
and I want some answers.* The stubbled guy next to me
—he can't be Lothar—puts his hand on mine and says,
I don't remember how I got here. I want to see his face to be sure,
so I tell him, *Take a different route next time,* and he takes
his hand away and I disappear into the mirror again.

In the Kitchen

I wake up feeling the tightness behind my eyes
which means I had the dream where you were on fire.
I couldn't do anything to stop it (tied hands, bodies,

all the bodies filled with salt)

I couldn't even cut myself open and stuff you inside
where my warm mucous cave could choke out
the flames of your paperhands, laced with ink

(the delicious taste of ink) and the green dress you wore
with your hairy legs poking from beneath, turning trans-
-lucent at the calves. *Mr. Cactus Legs, take me dancing*

tonight

And all morning—as I make rye toast and try to fold the egg
white over the yolk (the pocket of heat, the surprise, the gush
of sunshine)—

I catch myself dancing in the kitchen,
just a two-step here and a two-step there,
my mouth aswill with grape juice,
and you—your vanished knees.

This is my blood, don't cry now, just drink it.

*Just turn there in the green dress, and let me spit juice
all over you until you are nothing but ash.*

Later, as I sweep up the broken plates, mop up
the egg yolk, I don't know what to do with what's left
of you, the translucence.

Dafna

This is a fable about my mother.
In it, the room fills with wind. I am lifted,
my clothes move about me in waves.
The rapture happens, no not the kind
where the bones of saints rise and fight
their way up through the skies. The one
where my mother went to Israel. How she
went there not because a man
killed himself without her love,
but because she was called, because
she looked out over the Red Sea
and, with her brown arms and legs,
swam across, fighting for air, fighting
against the other call to drown.

Dark Continent

Your little heart goes thumpity-thump which resounds,
ever more clicking, clicking, like a gun report. I imagine
you're in a cave, with spiders dripping mossily, mimicking
stalactites.

But really I say you, because I don't remember
it all so clearly anymore. I was the one terrified the lone flashlight
would go out, giving me one new story to relate: darkness.
I try to place my mother there with me, her hand, the clammy
space between our hands like the smallest gasping mouth.

I want desperately someone to hold me night after night,
enveloped both in a lazy cave. The love that is necessary changes,
like the body, bound to the earth. But what happens when the earth
changes,

when it slips away from you like a dream of loving
ruined into waking? I lost the dark continent almost thirteen years ago.
I have always wanted to go back, still the same as I am now,
an impossibility. All my life is made by this one longing
to never have left.

Even the little things are hazy. Instead,
my body creates clearly thoughts of someone riding me futilely,
broken into a passion which sees only itself—the heart broken
into its many conceits. I would give away every touch, every nerve
ignited into knowing, to have back that other world, the one
where I stride boldly through the cave, the darkness asking

What is caution?

The Beautiful Room is Empty
for Edmund White

Where is the body that continues to live
after reading through the prayers
of childhood?

Where is the body that empties itself
every morning, hoping to remain
empty?

Where is the body that passes by
the doorway to the beautiful room,
wringing
its terrible hands, consumed
with entering?

Where is the body that ever forgets?

New Orleans, New Year's Eve 2009

His moustache white like the snow he left behind,
Mandrake walks down Bourbon Street, crushed
on all sides by drunken beauty. Men rush shirtless
through the streets. Dance music echoes off
the bricks through the gilt railing, like the warbling wails
of seals beneath a world of ice. Mandrake thinks
of Lothar, swimming among the seals. Lothar—
gone these twenty years. How he'd enjoy
the thumping youth, their lips rouged with hurricanes,
nostrils palely dusted in white. Mandrake sits
at a stool in Oz, grabs a beer between the dancing legs
of some stud wearing only the smallest briefs.
The youth smiles and kisses Mandrake
on the cheek, calling him Daddy as he dances
off down the bar, fisting dollars, his bumptious ass
hypnotic. Silence. The countdown begins.
At "one," Mandrake gestures, almost off-hand,
and stops the dancing bodies mid-grind. A silver
shaker is limbo'd above the bartender's head.
Mandrake leaves a tip and shuffles outside.
Night sky stays fireworked into an electric dawn—
Mandrake wants to explode again and again,
but all he has inside him is the same one, frozen,
the same feeling of being surrounded by photographs.
All around him, kissing couples. He closes his eyes
and sees Lothar, black body pressed in by seals,
the ice walls crushing in around him. He turns and finds
a boy of twenty-something, crayola-tanned, hair
stiffed into black whipped-cream. His ass
peeks out from his jeans. Everything planned,
apportioned, more pornography than real-life.
Mandrake sees his jowling face, his frost eyebrows
in the boy's coked-out irises. He kisses the boy's lips
and walks away—he's always walking away—snaps his fingers,
the sudden rush of the world the very noise of loneliness.

Faith

God and I wrestle beneath the space-darkness.
We are naked, and He is perfect, muscled.
My skin mottles with sweat.

I don't even remember before our bodies,
intertwined roots digging into the same
dank turf, looking for water water.

My right thigh sinks into itself,
muscle holding its bloodied breath.
I cannot think of winning.

On Judgment

The mark he made upon my neck is still
blue as deep as night when owls hoot.
I did not ask him for a thing, but touch.
He took my hand and pressed it around himself.
I would not stop, I knew I must go on.
Love—he said—is dreamt from film and rouge.
He said, I do not want to know your name.

Oh silly chit—I thought myself, and how
did I, a preacher's son, to this and that
become, with sweat and rage and flaming thighs?
I dreamt up a normal such as this.
I could see God, his head nimbic and gold,
the light of it a stain like blood on sheets.
I said, What do you want? He said, To ask.

This prodigal, my flesh, this sense of waste,
this man did spend his lust into my self.
The blanket, blue against the window light.
His clothes thrown on in hurry. He moves like
a rat laid bare in sun from sewer days.

And this is the pleasure I have learned.

God of the Hanged

He is inside of me so fully I have to look behind
to make sure he's not some god, after all this time
of wishing for one.

God never grants wishes, it even
says so somewhere. Nightly on His prayer-altar I laid
the love for men I carried inside each day, bearing
the blood boiled up in shame on my cheeks as well.
Nightly, the wish to wake up the same as everyone.

You see, I am a lamb ridden by wolves and love it.
God calls all perversion pride, smears you into oblivion
because of it.

I don't think he's that kind of god.
His hair is blonde and ragged, and his beard
leaves runes of red along my neck. My twin ravens,
Guilt and Desire, form on my shoulders, their black eyes
bearing into him, bearing bearing into him. Pagan thing,
rammed up in me to the hilt.

He wants just this—my body.
I want to make him the same as me, the same
anxious body like a boil longing to be lanced.

Sickness
is but a thing named, like desire. Like his name, the one
he must have, because I can't call him lover, I can't call
him friend, I can't call him blonde dildo without end.

When he asks why I'm laughing, I say, *It's nothing.*

“I just have to stop”

It's terrible to hold the phone between your ear and neck,
listening to the nurse explain how there's a limit
to medication given out for your
type of pain. So you tell her about him
coming in late and drunk, the procedure.
He knows you are broken,
he knows your sutured body will relent
in its weakness. You bleed out as much love
as you can before trying to stopper it, to stop him,
even though it hurts so much. You think to yourself
there, cradling the phone, the nurse's voice antiseptic
across the wire. You'd prefer to die in silence
than hear her pity. She really can't give you
anything else until Dr. Monroe sees you, and
you should talk to someone about this.
You thought you were.

Luminaries

Lord, you stormed my heart
after all these years—I thought—
after all of the messengers sent
garbed in light—my sister, the old ladies
who made me strawberry cake at church.
The storming engineered by the imagination,
spinning full-fire in my mind's dark.
I wanted any light to fill me—frail candles
of the body's affections. The men nothing more
than candles lining the streets in paper bags.
You see Lord, I thought my heart was so small
anything could fill it, so I listened,
ate cake, and talked in the language of failure.
I put up mirrors in the dark. My heart filled
with the firefly lights of strangers. I called the lights love.
Like all other words, I knew only a lie
to say in place of a truth. I asked the mirrors
to do their work of love, reflecting without
question what to call myself.
I am the sum total of light, I am filled with love,
when really I was filled with mirrors.
You Lord, you waited outside my heart's dark,
always, I thought, in the guise of others, each
meant to fill me, each meant to give a word
that finally meant. I had no idea how small,
how quiet you were until I was alone
again, left after yet another man's hands
groped me, extinguishing in their completion.
I wanted you to line my heart with luminaries.
I wanted your hands to rush me into frenzy.
I wanted you to be my sister and tell me it's okay.
I wanted to eat you like cake and be filled.
I didn't know that I must be a dark, unending chamber
for you to enter, invited. I didn't know
you'd sit there in the dark with me, stroking
my hair, saying, This is the love I want for you.