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Shining Dark

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MCGMAR013

A dissertation submitted in *fulfilment* of the requirements for the award of the  
degree of  
Master of English in Creative Writing

Faculty of the Humanities

University of Cape Town

2010

**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.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: 02-02-2010

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## Little Girl

Autumn arrived, and you were in the garden,  
the afternoon grass turned the hose's colour  
and you were chasing the dog through the last trickle  
of daylight, as he shot off after distant barks  
falling back to earth.

You came up to the house and ran to the door,  
the wind behind you like wings,  
swooping on you, reaching;  
like so many little girls before you in folklore,  
young gypsies in Lorca's ballads,  
Little Red Riding Hood.

Run, Run, Run!  
For I imagine the wind darkening  
to a thick spinning cloud, twisting  
and flashing and spilling out of itself  
into a storm of body and fur,  
eyeless, fangs and open jaw at its centre,  
pushing out from the uneven mass, accelerating,  
turning the corner in a ripping tear of form, claw and smoke.

What sharp, terrible imagination I have!  
You come in and close the door with a quick, final lock,  
banishing the unreal, sealing it all off  
in the calm indoor air  
so that once again  
outside  
is the dense blue sky  
of early autumn evening,  
the beautiful, still cold.

## **Childspeak**

'When someone loves you,  
the way they say your name is  
different.

You just know  
that your name is safe  
in their mouth.'

*Billy, aged 7*

Pity the artist, mind full of spiders,  
caught by ideas and twelve o'clock shadow  
who ran and walked for dry miles through metaphor  
in atomless, uncertain fields

while the child,  
already complete in his Holy dew,  
spoke instantly.

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## **Future Imperfect**

Looking backward and forward to places I know  
or have yet to know (the new ones  
as though some future projected  
self of mine  
speaks warmly back to me),

in my heart they all  
have a familiar ancience.

They have helped me grow, and grown  
into my body, like a new organ.  
Even the ones that are still to be found; blood already  
pumps towards them.

My blood moves vibrantly for these places, times,  
as fully formed to me as people,  
though thinking about them I feel  
as though an old man recounting;  
lost emotion yet to be born,

to be uncovered in the sand, sea,  
hills or mountains,  
or cities on the brink of dream

where I can look them face to face

and rekindle a feeling I'd felt all along,  
unexplained, from my own depths:  
that I'm both their father, and their son.

### **My family and I driving**

My family and I driving  
along the M3 at night –  
myself seven years old,  
wrapped up in the backseat,  
my father, mother, brother,  
grandfathers and grandmothers,  
nested warmly in the dark,  
below us, the quiet rumble of the engine.

Me, sleepy with car motion,  
watching the waves of shadows  
from the line of streetlights  
dipping and trailing  
over the backface  
of the driver's seat,  
like formless angels  
passing through the car.

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## Apparition

Dressed smart on this cold night,  
I make my way to my drop-off.  
Its raining; wet, soft rain,  
but through the blades of whiteblind streetlight  
it's somehow metallic, freshly-cut,  
as though it came from the pavement, not the sky.

An out-of-tune guitar, like a stray cat,  
owns the street.

And then I am led towards her,  
unsure if by imagination, in my mind  
or by my emotion, in my heart,  
or by a manifestation of her, spiritually, in front of me;

uncertain as to what is creating  
this still-crystallising bridge,  
connecting me to her;

her shape now immediately before me,  
though not in Time and Space,

like the presence of the dark,  
filling up the end of this street  
or a patch of jungle, varnished smooth by night,  
in which she waits, purring for her attack.

## Departures

Autumn's watch at the hearth came to an end,  
the low brown smoulderings  
on the deep lawn vanished,  
the heavy bark over the land  
ashed to winter-grey.

And with their coats and hats and scarves  
so many of my friends left  
for other places, countries,  
their passing felt in my body  
just as the seasons change the earth.

The cold invades the vacant spots  
that grow around me like a child's bubbles,  
their thin, stretching walls fattening  
as they're blown through the air.

Another layer is needed  
if I'm to step outside  
to look for a walk,  
as the leaves blow further away from thinning trees.

I am left behind  
in the thickening cold,  
a partition  
between person and person;

my only new companions  
the settling winter and this naked poetry.

### **Lost during translation**

There are times when I sit down to write  
and there is this ceremony  
between me and the poem,  
or me and the words  
on the piece of paper

as though Roman soldiers or legions  
stand attentively,  
lining a passageway in my mind  
right at the centre,  
and stretching out  
in front of my eyes.

The performance of the writing  
is being watched,  
and not a word  
or pen stroke can be out of place.

They may even cheer in  
their great halls made  
of fake marble

as they conquer meaning  
during a surprise attack  
and the words, their power and message  
break up,  
are divided among the thousands present  
into separate tokens  
(each piece different for each blank face),

their single unified power  
lost for the golden-hearted  
of the clear, majestic outside world.

## The Fear

The house over a dry summer Christmas  
its family on holiday

You remain there alone.

A tap left running, without sound

Little, empty winds  
sweep around the garden  
Sunburnt skin on your back begins to peel off

An uneasy dream you have, about a girl you know

The house getting whiter and whiter –

Your face locks,  
(or just falls away,  
leaks out)

eyes and eyebrows raised,  
they float off

(moving so slowly through the lounge  
they hang suspended  
by a wall, or a mirror)

then outside, up and away

taking forever to drift

smaller and smaller

into the blue sky.

The grandfather clock  
at the end of the hall  
is wide awake in stone,

and you are as absent in this house

as the missing family.

## Heavy with dream

I

A man with a long, steep face  
    (an escarpment right up  
                            against your eyes)

    in yellow and red jester clothes.

A dungeon.

Through his body  
    a great wooden stake  
    up from the floor behind him  
    at 45 degrees

No blood or splinters  
No mess

Him, his entire short scene  
changes with the sweeping of book pages;  
new ones blow past you,  
turning rapidly from the base  
of the medieval tome,

stopping, as the wind exits,  
on a page that is the face of a girl

    w h i t e

    rosed slightly at the cheeks

eyes closed in a royal sleep,  
her pressed lips, her mouth, flat  
no nose at the centre

skin steamed down  
    and burnt leathery  
    like a treasure map

    still very soft,  
            sweet to the touch.

II

I wake early before the dawn  
with the birds;

I listen,  
fighting consciousness,  
to hear what else  
they are saying.

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### **In a dream**

You sat at your mirror,  
your mother behind you, fixing your hair  
at your desk; in the distance,  
a tennis court shimmering.

You spoke to me:

you'd thought  
we were together again,  
you began telling me.

You were sad and crying,  
you had a box of tissues.  
You held some to your chest,  
after drying your eyes,

and they scraped and scratched away  
at your skin and right into  
your open, wet heart

and I saw the thing that I'd craved back,  
naked,  
for the first time:

impenetrable, oblivious.

## **Ancient Fertility**

### **I**

New moon  
above moist earth;  
the air is fresh with lack of light.

A serpentine boy,  
winner of a contest  
among other young men

is chosen by the queen,  
and summoned to her bed.

Soon skin slides along sheets  
(moonlit skin like the desert at night)  
and breaths escape onto pillows.

### **II**

Bright moon  
flamed blue at its edge,  
and the earth, hard and stony,  
is darker than the night sky.

The calm, serpentine boy  
is summoned for sacrifice.

Soon his skin is left behind  
on the ground, in a fleshy mess  
by the claws of wild women,  
descended from the mountains,  
their eyes burning with moonshine.

His blood is sprinkled over crops,  
the remains of his body eaten by  
the queen's nymphs, masked as maids.

Then, with rain prayed for,  
and harvest sown,

a new sun is on its way.

## Nocturne

### I

Shadows lie down over quicksilver land,  
held breathless, the only sound the dripping  
of some paws through loose earth, from a young beast,  
walking with casual stride, ears sharp against its outline.  
Broken from the dark, it moves to a clearing.

A lone moon, above, the pulse of its glow  
and breathing low enough to be still,  
turns everything under its beams  
to fresh glass.

Light pricks through bushes  
and trees (each one a lightning crack of jagged bone,  
their arms rows of tooth and fang),  
comes through like glowing ice,  
into the fully-lit space, open to the night,  
by whose waterside he drinks.

His legs steeply firm at the lapping edge  
as his head dips to the water,  
eyes fixed straight ahead  
in a midnight stare;  
his posture delicately ready  
to sweep into dance –

each lick he takes  
seems to leave the surface  
untouched.

### II

His claws that were clean in the light  
are now wet with crimson,  
a colour washed up at the shore,  
which he tastes, unsettled.  
He tastes again,

and a drumbeat from far off

like a fat bullet  
penetrates the air.

Alert, he drinks again,

the drumbeat beats harder,  
pounds out, faster and faster

He hurries back to the  
rest of the pack, on a ridge  
above a thousand flashing lights

the beat stronger and stronger, spinning (whirling as though losing a sonar axis;

thinner rings of sound from the outer rim of the drum  
and deeper bass slams)

the beat growing, thickening

as one by one,

they trail down

to the city.

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## **Late in the day**

Late in the day,

the afternoon is sleepy with milk.

Lying in the duvet,  
my head drawn by horse plough  
towards slumber,

a girl comes to mind, starts to moisten my thoughts.  
I can see clearly her dairysmooth skin.

My head falls quicker towards sleep, dipping,

my heart grows weightless over the bed  
and at its sides my brain dissolves in early dream.

Now she is beside me,  
folding her arms around me  
and resting in mine;  
breathing in and out,  
all the while her eyes closed,  
next to me though far away,  
in a peace untouched and already preserved in time.

I move to embrace her, deeper  
but cool drops  
fall from her body, one by one;  
her skin leaks and softens to crushed snow,  
loosens to a quickening stream,  
faster, faster  
She showers down into a pool:

Pouring into my head is dream;

I fall now, with her, into her:  
I am covered in sleep.

## **Listen, ancients**

Listen, ancients,  
hearing me or not,  
I too wish to sing to you  
in such a way that  
every man should be heard  
and here is my common voice.

For thousands of years  
you have glowed, exotic,  
kept so in the perfect tense  
but still you continue  
in the old book from the back of the library  
its secrets still fresh,  
with the smell of pages and of being left alone  
in milkwhite reflection;  
in the illustrations for children  
or tourist brochures,  
the pictures so full, overgrown,  
great battles in big colours,  
free of the scholar's intrusive detail.

Your dirty, brave faces,  
your bad teeth and rough hygiene  
(the only part of you I do not envy)

the baker yelling above the dust and clamour,  
the sandals on the feet of those at the market place,  
the sparkle of chatter at the amphitheatre,  
on nights as cool, starry and fresh

as they are now,  
as ever they have been.

Even today I can feel the same ground  
you once walked on,  
the same rocks, stones,  
buildings, cities.

I can walk in the places where you once were –  
I can sense your presence –  
part of you, your atoms, particles, energies  
may well  
be inside me.

(One day  
I too  
will pass them on.)

Till then you continue  
pushing forward our imaginations  
to new voyages.

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## Passing through

A small town

the empty dark like horsehide  
you by yourself

You try to rest  
beside the fire

head spinning with a kind stranger's drink

in this town

where sleep  
smothers the lights

and left behind

on a silent chandelier

are cobwebs

shaped as a vast ship

setting out

on a new journey

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## Visitation

The moon appears  
already full,  
dark clouds at its brow  
so as to be  
a growl of yellow gold  
in far-off mist, a mirage shimmer;

wet with ghosts,  
itself a music of the night,  
a language, a spell  
for creatures  
summoned into the air.

A girl,  
one of us,  
owing something in return  
for this beauty, to the night,  
slips into bed, eyes already closed,  
(her childhood bed, revisited  
after seven years.)  
and the moon steals a quick gleam across her legs  
as she slides them under the sheets.

She sees the row of pines  
at the edge of her garden  
drawn out as though a tide  
with a heavier black than the sky.

The trees abandon their shapes,  
lose their outline  
and out of them come figures, emerging,  
the substance of shadow  
dark as the trees themselves

rising  
broad-shouldered and breaking out  
from the definitions of pine foliage,  
treading on the horizon  
then onto the ground.

She sees the silhouette of their upper bodies

on the tree tops,  
sees them advance up the lawn  
towards her bedroom window.

Her dreams, fears  
she fought off as a young girl  
that were locked away in this place  
now hatch and claw their way toward her.

The incidents of half-certainty,  
the shivers by herself,  
the whispers at the back of her neck,  
whenever she thought she heard her name  
in the house or in the wind

now make a new kind of sense

in this moment  
that though dormant  
has been a long time coming.

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**Wet dream**

Morning rain outside,

you lying in your tent.

Droplets on a branch, flutterings in the wind.

Gentle dreams too,

fair faces between the trees:

Your breaths slowing,

warm in your own cum

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## Physic

Through the beerglow around the bar,  
I saw your face.  
I smiled at you, and you returned it;

The smile of a mistress, a worker of sex in thin pin-striped pants

(“vraiment, il y a beaucoup da femmes Congolees en Long Street”),

of a young woman,  
    vibrancy lighting your blood  
    and catching in mine,  
of a child, your countenance opening to a sky,  
of a mother, love creasing your eyes and lips.

The fragility of your form already  
quivering in my muscles;  
your dark skin layered with night's colour and rush,  
myself craving it and the night itself on my tongue  
as though a substance.

But I touch your hand,  
and not long after the warmth passes from the lights.

In this place,  
you are far from home.  
There are no tight stockings, no Moulin Rouge.  
You are no Roxanne, there is no Red Light either.

And when I am at home, you dim in my mind  
to inaccurate fantasy on itchy sheets

as I search the details of the smile  
in the flickering memory.

You have become  
a struggle of geometry  
in a clean house

and now, just words,  
on paper,  
like white powder, blown just out of reach.

## An aftermath

After finishing a creative work,  
after a poem has been made,

a sadness comes  
like after sex, from time to time.

A sadness not gut-wrenching,  
but more like a  
creeping  
pillow

that can't be shared

with the work  
with the poem  
or with her body –

as though at the end  
of those moments  
of unity,  
we can't but be separate.

Merely finding another one  
won't suffice.

Alone  
in the terrifying afternoon

two or three  
o'clock

and ticking

I chase these feelings.

## **Attachment**

I spin a web around you

and you are caught in my orb  
right in the middle  
wrapped tightly together

like a fetus  
constantly unborn  
into my world

protected  
by these threads  
I have spun in my thoughts  
over you

from any emotion  
or any need  
for me

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## **Purgatory**

The day you went to hospital  
and no one knew what was wrong,  
you lay there indefinitely,  
as doctors came and left.

I remember the light  
more than any feeling,  
more than anything else:  
eight in the morning,  
crisp,  
as though there were little rocks of hail  
on the lawn;  
spiky, burny to the touch.

All other detail,  
(what I had for breakfast, etc)  
in the alerted uncertainty  
fell under the blanket of that light.

That morning brightness  
was a prison  
a dream with no air  
where, shut in,  
your mouth, nose and throat  
harden and clot  
with the vacancy of breath

that could be broken only  
by the sound of your voice  
reclaiming the space  
and we waited as pale and weak  
as what that voice had become  
when we heard it  
locked away in a telephone.

## Will

Outside  
in the warm evening,  
open forest  
looks you face to face.

In front is a plane tree,  
its leaves lit by a windchime;  
dark, quiet and beautiful.

I wish to be in it,  
to penetrate the night

(where it's most thick between the trunks  
ripe to be grasped.)

I hear singing coming from over there in the dense black,  
pine smell on its outskirts;  
the voice of an old bluesman,  
a call.

I straighten, immediately;  
a dog alert.

I follow, begin moving;  
I reach out to it,  
but at the slightest touch, everything fixed in the scene is set loose.

I dance, more and more I writhe,  
my motion as free as fire in the air,  
heart alive flooded by something  
from the deep evening;

the colours swirl;  
my skin, alive, fresh-dewed,  
spreads over the leaves  
and round the tree tops  
of the plane tree and its light,

my touch becomes their touch,  
our senses blended.

I too am now part of the swirl

dancing, faster and faster

till the curves and motion  
of my body  
become a kind of thick, pure water

spilling into the surrounding –  
soaked in by the forest

at once a part  
and owner  
of this night.

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## Storm

An open, dry field  
settled in vast night.

On the horizon over the plain, thunder shakes loose,  
a lock shatters its bolts far off in the sky  
as though a thief were creeping in.

Who is that under the only tree?  
A woman,  
uncovered;  
her white skin seems to glow  
in the dark that itself  
though expansive  
has the quiet, soft quality  
of a bedroom at the stroke of midnight.

She is tied to the ground  
by her own hand;  
each foot, each wrist;  
legs wide and tense.  
Her body, her straight black hair  
blown around  
in the strengthening wind.

A fierce weight of sound  
crashes down from above, closer

as a shock of muscles  
pushes her upward

and little kicks of breath  
escape from her mouth.

Still the rumble, like slow heavy footsteps;  
closer.

## **The country and me**

I look out, and look to you:

A tin-sheet rattle as forked light  
spears to the ground  
over shanty towns;  
barefoot little ones run  
inside.

The laager breath in the fresh sun  
across the wheat fields after the storm,  
there is the deep beer-golden singing  
of miners in a gumboot dance  
in the new light.

II

These scenes of you  
were once as foreign to me  
as the taste of alcohol to a child,  
or pages of an old Afrikaans textbook.  
They were scenes I would squint into,  
their colours thin, grayed.

But now, I rediscover them  
and I see that the rains,  
warm and dark,  
that come and go  
wash away  
more and more  
of the static dust.

Now, I rediscover you,  
a calloused face hiding a smile.  
I wake as one would to find their parents  
watching over them.  
The love before there was love.

## Callings

In the faces of my dogs, ancient and selfless,  
I see the stories I grew up with:

The great American plains,  
smoke rising from the chimney of a homestead;

a man on a horse, as though born in the dusk;

migrations of Indians, caution in the forest.

In and around their faces  
there are totems  
to these memories,  
totems that come to me  
spread in the wide flames of their fox cheeks.

But American stories, why?  
I grew up in a green suburb  
in a golden-brown country,  
South Africa.  
Perhaps these icons from  
my American grandmother?

She has appeared to me  
in dreams,  
one more clearly than others,  
sitting at an old log table  
in front of a wooden house,  
by a brook,  
foliage all around and above her  
translucent with midmorning light.

My Xhosa friends tell me to listen  
to the ancestors;  
they are immanent in everything all the time,  
in every scene.

Ancestors inhabit your dreams,  
they call too,  
sometimes even in your conscious waking.

For now,  
I have heard a different calling:

lines of melody  
that appear to a poet,  
(performed, perfect, created from elsewhere)

spoken by my grandmother;  
behind her voice  
the sound of water.

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## Sentimental Song #9

When others look at you and I,  
love is what they see,  
love travels through us, in us,  
and outward,  
beaming,

and when, in thousands of years,  
people in far-off galaxies,  
on distant planets,  
look to earth with incredible telescopes  
that they've managed to build,  
the light they will receive  
will be our light,  
from our time –

just as the light that travels  
from us now  
will only arrive at  
those places in space  
in that thousands of years' time.

So, if they looked at earth then,  
they might well see  
you and I,  
together, embracing,

lying down, or sitting across a couch,  
or even standing in a hallway,  
holding each other,  
the one trying to hug tighter  
than the other,  
eyes so happy they half-forget  
to smile,  
our love surrounding us,  
for all to see,

as our light goes streaming through the universe,  
forever following its expansion.