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Shining Dark

M.S. MacGinty

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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.

Signature: _____ Date: 02-02-2010

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.