



Western Michigan University  
ScholarWorks at WMU

---

Dissertations

Graduate College

---

8-2004

## Dear Beyond

Kirsten Hemmy  
*Western Michigan University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/dissertations>



Part of the Poetry Commons

---

### Recommended Citation

Hemmy, Kirsten, "Dear Beyond" (2004). *Dissertations*. 1232.  
<https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/dissertations/1232>

This Dissertation-Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate College at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact [wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu](mailto:wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu).



DEAR BEYOND

by

Kirsten Hemmy

A Dissertation  
Submitted to the  
Faculty of The Graduate College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the  
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
Department of English

Western Michigan University  
Kalamazoo, Michigan  
August 2004

DEAR BEYOND

Kirsten Hemmy, Ph.D.

Western Michigan University, 2004

My project, *Dear Beyond*, a collection of poetry, examines the connection between landscape—both internal and external, or private and public—and environment. My poetry reflects my own unique background and my struggles with emplacement, or the placing of oneself in any particular landscape. It aims to challenge dominant paradigms of voice, expression, and even inquiry; it questions traditional, systematic forms of inquiry such as the Cartesian idea of an essential separation between object and subject. Culture and landscape, I have discovered, manifest themselves everywhere, in variegated forms: in spaciousness or intimacy, in internal and external contexts, in tactile experiences, in focused or dissipated attention. This is where my poems come from, as well as where they aim for.

UMI Number: 3135099

### INFORMATION TO USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleed-through, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

**UMI<sup>®</sup>**

---

UMI Microform 3135099

Copyright 2004 by ProQuest Information and Learning Company.

All rights reserved. This microform edition is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code.

ProQuest Information and Learning Company  
300 North Zeeb Road  
P.O. Box 1346  
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346

Copyright by  
Kirsten Hemmy  
2004

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks to the editors and supporters of the magazines in which several of these poems first appeared: "Impertinent Quest," *Spoon River Poetry Review*; "Depth," "Revision," *Smartish Pace*; "Birthday Flowers," *Green Mountains Review*; "The Atrocity of Water," *Alaska Quarterly Review*; "Afterwards in Manoa," *Sonora Review*; "Breakfast with Kahana," *The Chaffin Journal*; "For Israel Kamakawiwo'ole," *Red Wheelbarrow*; "Kilauea Iki: Devastation Trail," "Thirst," *Blueline*.

I wish to thank the many people who've offered their help, support, friendship and guidance throughout my graduate studies. Nancy Eimers, Bill Olsen, Nic Witschi, Kim Blaeser, and Gwen Etter-Lewis comprised an incredibly helpful, intelligent, and supportive committee, and I am indebted to you all for your expertise, guidance, and brilliance. Nancy, Bill, and Kim, I thank you for your poetry, as well as your willingness to look at mine. I admire your hearts, your minds, and your writings, and I look forward to reading your poetry for many years to come. Nic, thank you for your commitment to graduate studies and teaching. You've committed your time and intelligence to so many of us here, and we're all better

### Acknowledgments—continued

people for this. I hope to be as dedicated a teacher and scholar as you and thank you for the lesson in work ethic and humanity. Thank you, Gwen, for your unyielding support, for encouraging me to further develop my postcolonial and African scholarly interests, for mentoring me and offering me academic and life opportunities I might not otherwise have been able to acquire.

I'm grateful for the input and guidance of other professors I've had the honor of working with at Western Michigan University: Herb Scott, whose attention to the line is no less than magical, who is tireless in his devotion to contemporary poetry and thus, the emerging poet; Bob Hicok, who in his eccentric astuteness made me think and rethink the relationship between self and environment, between the human and nonhuman; Yvette Hyter and W.F. Santiago-Valles, without whose support and late night Nescafe talks in Dakar would the Senegal poems not exist. And professors John Koethe, Susan Firer, Gregory Jay and the late William Harrold at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, whose patience and diligence during my formative-formative years of graduate study provided me motivation and encouragement from the very beginning. Heartfelt thanks to the scholars and friends in Senegal who've helped me to re-evaluate the world and my place in

### Acknowledgments--continued

it: Gorgui Dieng, Lamine Kane, Ibrahima Thioub, Abdou Ngom, and the English Department at *Universite de Cheikh Ante Diop* in Dakar.

Thank you, too, to friends far and near, for your support: to Karen Carcia, Billy Reynolds, Amy DeJarlais, and Marcel Brouwers for reading my work and for honest feedback; to Adela Najarro, Jamie D'Agostino, Beth Martinnelli, Lupe Solis and the Word Warriors for faithfully maintaining the ongoing conversations we have about poetry and all that such conversations can include; to Debra and Garret Kim, Wendy Miki, William, Jennifer and Ava Makanui, Nancy, Steve and Julia Nygaard-Baldwin, Arthur Camara and all of my Hawaiian 'ohana and Senegalese *mbokk* for an unfailing faith in poetry and its pursuit. Thanks most of all to Kevin, the Dockertys, and to my parents, sisters Davida and Erica, and brother Killian, for everything.

Kirsten Hemmy



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	ii
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION .....	1
II. POEMS .....	30
The Atrocity of Water .....	30
Kilauea Iki: Devastation Trail .....	31
Room .....	32
Sugar .....	33
My Grandfather Tells Me a Story About His Life .....	34
Bird of Paradise .....	35
Birthday Flowers .....	37
A Correspondence .....	38
Revision .....	39
Parlance .....	40
Theft .....	41
Prelude .....	43
Lament .....	44
The Milky Face of Christ is Everywhere .....	45
Late September Fugue .....	47
Portrait de femme, St. Louis, Senegal .....	49
Sold For a Song .....	51
Reaching the Holy City of Touba .....	53

## Table of Contents—continued

Grand Dakar, Tuesday July 1, 5 pm .....	54
Sahara .....	55
Monologue for a Vulture .....	56
<i>Ile de Goree</i> , On Visiting the Slave House ....	57
Fragmentation .....	59
On Fleeing the Tdijani Mosque at Prayer Time, or Apologetica .....	61
Rainy Season .....	62
Love Poem .....	63
Still Life, the First Year .....	64
Thirst .....	66
Table Manners .....	67
The age of every tree measurable .....	69
Afterwards in Manoa .....	70
Depth .....	71
Kona Beach Shack .....	72
Meditation & Swimming .....	73
After Talking With My Brother About Sur- prise Attacks Which Begin in the Water .....	74
Planting Roots: .....	75
Breakfast with Kahana, Kona Pier .....	76
Earlier in the morning the sky .....	77
Dear Beyond .....	78

Table of Contents--continued

BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	79
--------------------	----

## I. INTRODUCTION

In these forests, in their embroidered dresses  
or black bones  
someone knows how they begin and end.

Hatif Janabi, "Savage Continents"

Who knows when it will end—when nameless face  
and nameless face are one whole thing?

Bessie Head, "Earth and Everything"

and along the rough wall quince petals were holding up  
the light that was theirs as it was passing through them  
among the many things of which we would not have spoken

W.S. Merwin, "Letters"

It seems important, in the introducing and contextualizing of these poems, to admit that the line, "among the many things of which we would not have spoken" has been sloshing through my head for more than a year now. I've carried it around with me, thinking about it in the quiet hours of a day—walking around the densely wooded nature preserve behind my house, in working around the house, in the minutes after preparing for class, before the teaching of it begins, in the final moments before sleep, and most often, as I sit in the coffee shop where I write most of my poetry, in those quiet, pensive moments before writing, where I frequently gaze out the window, attempting to clear my mind. The line of course, is not my own, but W.S. Merwin's, from his poem "Letters" and the last few lines of the poem, which read:

and along the rough wall quince petals were  
holding up  
the light that was theirs as it was passing  
through them  
among the many things of which we would not  
have spoken

These lines resonate with me: yes, there are so many things—important things, beautiful things, momentary things, painful things—of which we never speak. It's our human frailty, perhaps, our imperfectness, which prevents us from articulating so much of what it is we are, what

it is we witness, which catches us in this perpetual state of existing and not-existing, of sharing experiences, things, with other thinking, feeling, articulate humans, but of remaining at the same time isolated within ourselves, unable in essential moments to speak of that which we've shared—feelings, observations, time, experience, living.

And yet there are those of us who try to speak of such things, those who spend entire lifetimes understanding that language ultimately fails, that we humans fail in our attempts to communicate experience, things, through language, but there are those of us who try anyway. We keep journals, we write poems, we tell stories. It is the writing of poems which seems to me to try, more than any other mode of expression or communication, to have as its goal the capturing of the transient, the particular, the exacting and fleeting and impressible and precise, the "thing."

This is an often-visited topic; poets, I think, and maybe all writers who try to convey a particular moment, have to be aware of the impossibility of it: that if we are to be in a moment, part of an experience, we cannot be thinking of how we will write this down, how we will speak of it later in the lines of our poetry; conversely, after the moment passes, it is unfeasible to believe that

we can exactly record, relive, or recreate the experience. Moreover, there is the issue of language and its failings: we must understand, or at least grapple with, the notion that the particular experience is often something unrepeatable, improbable, uncreatable, with words.

"Among the many things of which we would not have spoken" intimates the many things of which we cannot speak, the impression that we humans are sometimes unable to effectively communicate with one another, even on the basest, simplest level. It seems a kind of counter to Wittgenstein's argument against private languages: in *Philosophical Investigations* he argues that language is by its very nature and operation communal, that sensations and language are essentially shareable. In the poem "Letters" there is indeed a private language, and an indication that there has been a long time of not sharing this private knowledge between two people. "Letters" is addressed to a male friend, and in these lines the speaker is considering what it means to a friendship that so much has been impossible to say in the relationship. So much has been shared between the two, which makes the failure of expression all the more painful: the friend felt empty at turning forty, and couldn't help associating such an emptiness with the calming of the

wind in the bay at Aulis as the Greeks moved on toward Troy, the moment where Iphigeneia is sacrificed to quell the gods and quicken the war fleet (in Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*). The speaker sees this pain, recognizing that the emptiness has something to do with the failing of language, the friend's inability to turn his feelings into something ironically more tangible, like words, that the friend misunderstands nature, misunderstands his and its place in the world, that he sees nature as something over which he *does* have control: "you wrote from England / alluding to pastoral scenery as though it / belonged to you." But the speaker himself can do nothing more, stopped up against his own silence, and instead, observes them observing something together—the light passing through quince petals, the petals absorbing it, letting it pass through. This is one of the many things of which they will/would not have spoken.

Yet Merwin does speak in this poem. It's a tactic to admire in a poetics: the effort to speak about something that cannot be communicated. The transcendental failure of language, is, for many of my favorite poets and writers, a recurring issue in their work. It's partly that the incomprehensible is incomprehensible, partly also our own human weakness, our self-imposed (if we can know that it is that) isolation, our willingness to



withhold things which we would rather share. And I suppose that this facet of the human condition, whether we inflict this upon ourselves or whether it is a part of what makes us innately human, is a reason I've been so obsessed with thinking about all the "things of which we would not have spoken." After all, I'm guilty of it, all the time. Daily. In relationships, in meeting people on the street, in long distance correspondences, both professional and personal, with people whom I admire, whom I understand, whom I do not. The list could go on and on—in some way or another, I frequently fail to communicate to people in the most meaningful, human way, to "speak" about things which I would like, or ought, to speak about. And of course I am not alone in this behavior, this withholding. It's very human of us, maybe one of the most fragile, human things we do. We notice beauty, that the sun sets and rises every day, that the moon is low and sometimes has just reappeared in the silver sky, that a new snowfall can seem lush as spring, that spring green can happen quickly as snowfall—all of these things happen, we notice them, fleeting as light through a leaf, and don't speak of these wondrous things. And think of the more banal ways in which these things happen every day: we don't tell each other the details of our lives for fear they're just details, we never mention

the daydreams we have, the longings, our happinesses and sadnesses, our inability to connect with our past, to escape from our futures. I'll admit that I'm fascinated by this.

I don't think that my decision to write poetry hinged on this fascination, though I do explore this idea in some of my poems, especially several of my more recent poems. I have, for example, many newer poems that came as a result of my experiences in Senegal. While I was there, I kept three copious journals: one for daily entries, wherein I made notes of each day—things I did, saw, my reactions and feelings to these new experiences. The second journal was comprised of lessons, teachings, readings, and notes on these, and the third, an attempt to record all that had been said to me (in talking with other scholars, people I met at market, etc., I would attempt—again experiencing that failure to recall with accuracy when one is engaged with the moment—to record exactly what had been said). One of the requirements of the Fulbright-Hayes funding our group received was that we make plans to share our "findings" (a concept I continue to struggle with) in some public way. Conferences, publishing, etc. I decided before the trip that I would write a poem a day, and try to have them published, either as a collection, or along with the rest

of the group's work. I abandoned this, journal four, early on during the six weeks. I couldn't write poems while I was there. I discovered that I couldn't speak of anything.

I'd encountered this problem before, this inability to write poetry; it's happened whenever I've moved to a new place. (I am greatly affected by the landscape—the actual land, as well as the humanscape.) The experience of being someplace new has often impressed upon me a kind of speechlessness. I've traveled and lived many places in my life. I've been lucky for this. And I think one of the things that this has created within me is a feeling that, wherever I live, it is not exactly my home. I feel permanently displaced—wherever I go—though I never have in mind (or heart) exactly where it is I might feel at home. This feeling—one could call it alienation, though I tend not to feel it in a negative way—is something that's been expressed by many poets. It might manifest itself as a foregone conclusion: that of course one is an outsider in a world which he or she attempts to observe and record. An outsider might struggle with language, with the search to understand from the inside. There might be the vague hope of entering into a world whose differences the poet will recognize and respect. In much of Merwin's

poetry there is this unmistakable drift, as in these lines from "Witness:"

I want to tell what the forests  
were like  
I will have to speak  
in a forgotten language

This can be the holdup as well as the power of the displaced voice, the outsider, one hopes: that there are similarities one might evoke between differing realms, that connections exist to be made, that acknowledgement and recording of differences might lead to understandings of what those differences mean.

When I began organizing this manuscript, it was early on this past academic year. At the time, I was just beginning to write some poems from my experiences in Senegal. Initially, the manuscript was split into two: what I thought were my more optimistic poems and those that were somehow rooted in the past. I began the collection (and this hasn't changed) with the poems that I thought attempted to make connections with the past, poems I saw as being obsessed with or haunted by a history. And at the time, I could see the interactions of the two sections: it is fascinating to me the way in which the past inhabits the present, and this seemed like a relationship which could be replicated within a

manuscript, the beginning poems being those from the past, those which speak to the present.

But the Senegal poems were happening on a daily basis: I would send myself to the coffee shop where I write, give myself the goal of writing one poem before I could leave. Quite often, I would leave with three or four new poems. During that first semester, I filled up two notebooks with poems about Senegal. I have written about ten or so Senegal poems which haven't made the cut for this manuscript. This seems to be one of the challenges of the first book and is becoming my own challenge: that for the novice writer the poem is in a constant state of flux, of growth, and that as this growth happens, the manuscript probably changes at a quick rate. I see my first book, potentially, as fulfilling my original goal for the Fulbright requirement: after another summer of writing and reading, I may well have an entire manuscript of Senegal poems. I certainly haven't run out of ideas, or lines which nag at me in the midnight hours, yet. What to do with some of the other poems that appear here—those ones, in particular, which seem to me less elegiac and more stuck in the past—I'm not quite sure.

What became apparent in working the newer poems in—and quite frankly, this was a horrifying realization for

me—is that so many of my earlier poems are about a relationship gone bad. I don't know that anyone will ask me this question, but one wonders how many times a writer needs to write about the same subject. It's been said that we write about the same topic over and over, again and again. Perhaps this is true: but I like to believe that I am capable of seeing the world in a bigger way than some of these poems seem to me. They do in fact feel like the same poem, like the working out of something deeply personal and troubling. These are the poems which have been published, which have, frankly, been taken quickly in the submission process. I have to believe that it's not just that editors believe that my life crises and difficulties will be interesting to their readers. Instead, I think that these poems, when read individually and not side by side, aim to suggest something important, essential even, about human relationships. I think I've said this better in a poem: that one wonders what we won't do to each other, whether there is anything like the pain inflicted upon humans by other humans. It's the truth that many of my poems are confessional, that what's in them comes from what's in me, from my own experiences. But pain, and pain made possible by human wickedness and indifference, is something, sadly, that we can all relate to.

The confessional poets have always interested me as a "group" or "movement" as well as individually. I'm particularly drawn to the female poets, to what women contributed to this sect of poetry as well as what this movement and time did for women and poetry. These poets broke new ground, shattered taboos, considered the problematic position of women in society, in the institution (of marriage, of the academy, etc.), in the world. It's not just that the poet in these poems reveals intimate details of his or her life, nor that what's also revealed is the fragile and fragmented self. What's so moving, I think, is the total honesty which begets a real, perceptible guilt. And what makes this an appealing sort of poetry is that it's something we readers can relate to, or even aspire to—perhaps we can't exactly relate to the brilliant and suicidal admissions of Sylvia Plath, but we can admire her honesty, her vulnerability which appears as a commitment to candor as well as to pain. The honesty, the acceptance of a human guilt, a human weakness and culpability, is admirable and evident in the confessional poets—Robert Lowell, Theodore Roethke, John Berryman, Plath and here, in this passage from Anne Sexton's "Live:"

Just last week, eight Dalmations,  
 ¾ of a lb., lined up like cord wood  
 each  
 like a

birch tree.  
I promise to love more if they come,  
because in spite of cruelty  
and the studded railroad cars for the ovens,  
I am not what I expected. Not an Eichmann.  
The poison just didn't take.  
So I won't hang around in my hospital shift,  
repeating The Black Mass and all of it.  
I say Live, Live because of the sun,  
the dream, the excitable gift.

When I read the beautiful, hauntingly painful lines of Sexton, Plath, and other confessional poets, I'm grateful, I recognize the debt I owe these writers for having made acceptable the flamboyant subject matter of the personal, of the "I." And I have a momentarily lapse, feel less aghast that I've written so many of the same kind of poems. When they appear together like this, as they do here in this collection, they do feel like they're about the same situation and the speaker seems the same, in the same state of mind—and eventually, I will remove some of these poems. Because it's the notion of human weakness, really, which is most important in these poems, and I want the poems to be directed to the turmoil that results from human weakness interacting with human vulnerability, rather than seeming directed at a particular, painful, personal situation. Henri Cole says that his ambition in writing poetry is "to write what is human, not escapist." One would suspect that with this as a goal, the poet might have to visit certain painful



moments of his or her own life. And if the poet is attentive, as Cole is, to tone, to experience (to, presumably, not writing the same experience again and again), to matters of innocence, of vulnerability, of grief and of love, then the poem does convey a personal experience which is rooted in the universal, in the conscience, as in this section from Cole's longer poem "Chiffon Morning:"

### III

How many nights did I throw my arms around  
 our black dog's neck and listen to Mother,  
 on her knees, retching supper? The love hound  
 licked my face again and again like fur.  
 Far off, the weirdly ethereal bells  
 of an ice cream truck, hypnotic in contrast,  
 calmed me like tapers burning steadily.  
 Near dawn, when she was pregnant with her last-  
 born, there were complications. The long path  
 to the ambulance was splashed with what came  
 from inside her, a floating purplish wax  
 our neighbor, a cheerful woman, mopped up.  
 When Mother came home thin again, the sun  
 crowned  
 whom she cradled. Father was out of town.

I admire this poem for all the pain it conveys, and how beautifully and complexly: the son, the speaker, is still in this moment, in a way, remembering his mother and her attempts to be in that world. The father is abusive and in this section, absent. The mother, inflicting pain on her own body, inflicts pain on her unborn child and her son. And as a reader, I suppose it's the pain that I can relate to: if not from a similar

experience, then from the possibility that pain is a universal, human truth, and that we are all capable of recognizing pain and the emotions which attach themselves to it.

When I was in Senegal, one of the most difficult and simultaneously enjoyable things I did each day was to go running. There were several reasons it was difficult, one being the city itself—the difficult path I needed to take to reach the ocean side, where there was a running path that went for miles, soccer fields and workout stations. I was living in Grand Dakar, the name of a suburb, sort of—amazingly, Dakar also had a kind of gentrification, and the city proper had moved closer toward the ocean during French occupation. As a result of this colonial movement, the improbable exists in Grand Dakar: paved, cement sidewalks line roads made of dirt and sand. Gorgeous street roundabouts, very French but unpaved, whose gutters have crumbled; medians which contain not flowers or landscaping, but refuse and sand. All along the way, I was overcome with a sense of refuse and abandon—there were projects never finished and more and more, indicating that the colonizers had been there to reap rewards, then left with the booty. It was difficult to see every day (I wondered if I'd stayed, if I'd have grown accustomed to the landscape eventually seeing it as

unsurprising), but it also made foot travel—and running specifically—very challenging. Sidewalks are torn up. Cars share the road with buses, with horses, with mopeds. Though I'm certain this is not the case—there is an eighty percent unemployment rate in Senegal—there were times when it seemed that everyone owned and drove a car. The roads are wide and unpaved, and though there are traffic lights and stop signs on the busier roads, crossing the road was something I never got used to. One day, I saw a teenaged girl cross the road and get struck by a car. Her body flew about 50 feet, and I watched her body convulse and die. I'd seen her smile and laugh as she ran across the street, trusting, I suppose, that someone could stop in time, that the cars would slow down for her. She had no idea. It was treacherous, always dangerous with the traffic.

In addition to the travails of a city in postcolonial crisis, running was made challenging by my gender. As a woman, I felt compelled to wear pants—when I dressed to go out during the day, it was apparent from the fashion of Senegalese women my age that I should wear clothes which covered my legs to my ankles, my shoulders and arms. Attire also needed to be loose-fitting. Which meant that when running—in the Sahel, in the summer—that I needed to wear the most modest of clothing. I stood out

as a *toubab*—the Wolof word for white person, which literally means doctor—and as a Western woman. People stopped to stare at me, people turned around to look at me as I passed them. I was the only woman who ran. I never saw another woman exercising outside, in the afternoons, while I was there. The positive aspect of running happened because of this standing out—I met someone new each time I ran. People made a point of speaking with me, which helped me improve both my Wolof and French. I met a minister in the government one day, a soccer player the next. While I was being noticed for my differences, what happened, ultimately, was that I was able to meet a wide demographic of people (though all men), and in addition, saw and experienced Dakar in a way that I couldn't have in other day to day travels. Nevertheless, I always felt my gender as well as my ethnicity, somewhere just outside a place of comfort, of feeling like I really fit into it all.

Poets for whom this outside-ness is an issue have had a major influence on my writing: Yusef Komunyakaa is one and Ai another. In Komunyakaa's "Facing It," the speaker suggests his duality, his being at the Vietnam War Memorial and at the same time, not there at all. We also get a clear sense of racial otherness on the part of the speaker: he is a black veteran, was a black soldier,

and is a black man standing at the wall, all of which add up to something much different from any other (non-black, white) person's experience. The speaker is so dislocated from the memorial that he sees his image slipping inside the wall, catches himself looking for his own name etched there:

My black face fades,  
hiding inside the black granite.  
I said I wouldn't,  
dammit: No tears.  
I'm stone. I'm flesh.  
My clouded reflection eyes me  
like a bird of prey, the profile of night  
slanted against morning. I turn  
this way--the stone lets me go.  
I turn that way--I'm inside  
the Vietnam Veterans Memorial  
again, depending on the light  
to make a difference.  
I go down the 58,022 names,  
half-expecting to find  
my own in letters like smoke.

He's there, we're there at the wall with him, but we're all also subject to displacement, to a better understanding of otherness, transported back to the war itself, lost in conflict, as the speaker sees names of those he knew: "I touch the name Andrew Johnson; / I see the booby trap's white flash." Through the speaker's own sense of displacement, we can imagine that not-fitting-in, and imagine the larger social issues and their consequences: those of a black soldier; then those of a

black veteran from a war which was neither won nor honored; the horrors and realities of war ("The sky. A plane in the sky"); of fighting; the anguish and bravery of facing a wall of names, of soldiers who died on the same soil where you survived; what must be lost, what might forever remain something internal, broken, confused. The final lines of the poem leave us with the sense of turmoil, of enduring conflict and separation:

A white vet's image floats  
 closer to me, then his pale eyes  
 look through mine. I'm a window.  
 He's lost his right arm  
 inside the stone. In the black mirror  
 a woman's trying to erase names:  
 No, she's brushing a boy's hair.

In this poem, and others of Komunyakaa's, we get a real sense of alienation, or displacement, which feels personal, which appears to or might convey the author's own recurring sense of alienation in any given situation. For Komunyakaa, we can do better than speculate, as he's spoken in interviews and written (in *Blue Notes*, a collection of essays) about his own struggles with racial alienation, though he also has pointed out that he sees himself as a part of the human story, as perhaps contributing to "a kind of hopeful celebration, a celebration of those small moments and how they all lead to the larger moments of human history."

It is an optimistic stance, to celebrate the small moments and to consider how they lead to the larger moments. It is this way of thinking which allows us a real engagement with the world, which allows us to be meditative, to focus on those small moments as important, which allows us to really face the world. When I got home from Senegal, all I could think about was going back. For some reason, I felt there as though I did belong, or at least as though I wanted to stay there and see whether it could feel like home. It felt like it had potential for that, though of course I knew that it would never feel like where I was from, a source, a birthplace. But it was something, that really strong feeling. So for weeks it was all I thought about, getting back. I tried to write poems. I tried every day. Every day, I sat at the coffee shop or in my office, staring out the window, reading other people's poems. Of course, I had other commitments here. I prepared for my fall class, began reading for my Orals. I put those three journals away in my office closet. One day, a couple of months after I'd returned, I was preparing to teach a class on culture and tourism, and looked in the closet where all of my African literature and other research artifacts were, hoping to find the matching masks I'd found (one at the Black Arts Festival in Kalamazoo, one at a market in Dakar-useful

contextual tools for discussing difficult terms like "culture" and "art"), and I stumbled upon the journals. In my typical procrastination, I read from the first journal, the one which contained all of my daily observations. And in those few hours before class, I wrote three poems. After this I was able to celebrate the many small moments of my time in Senegal. I realized that for months, I'd been thinking big, too big—in abstractions, really, such as "I have to get back to Senegal;" "West Africa changed my life;" "My life goals are different now." Yes, all of these statements might have been, might remain true, but thinking along these lines toward a poetic end was equivalent to writing the grand abstraction, the big question. My journal keeping—my insistence on observing the world around me in its small pieces—in the end, really influenced my poetic process.

The poetry of Ai conveys a displacement as well as this commitment to the everyday. She is an unapologetically politically-minded poet who uses common experience to both suggest the existence of otherness, or dislocation, as well as to make poignant political statements. Dislocation or otherness, in some of my favorite Ai poems, is illustrated in the persona. The persona is the other, the dislocated, or he or she is the



enactor or contributor to such an identity crisis. In these dramatic monologues, Ai often places the persona within a significant historical or social context, one which suggests the continuation and prevalence of certain social problems like racism, sexism and classism, as well as the problems which ensue from these: rioting, imprisonment, profiling, rape, theft. In a passage from the poem "Hoover, Edgar J." the speaker contributes to this sense of dislocation, of otherness; the particular situation/moment contributes to the larger ideas or -isms; and the overtly, candidly political is apparent as he speaks about the civil rights movement:

I can stop it if I choose.  
 I can release the tapes, the photographs  
 and end the so-called peaceful revolution,  
 but my solution is to sabotage discreetly,  
 to let someone else take the blame,  
 the Klan, or even another smoke,  
 who's younger and not broken in by privilege.  
 Someone like that Malcolm X,  
 that showstopping nigger,  
 who respects no boundaries  
 and hates the white man,  
 because he understands him.  
 He doesn't want to vote,  
 he doesn't want to tote that bail  
 in the name of integration.  
 He wants to sail back into blackness  
 and I say let him.  
 There is no such thing as freedom  
 and there will never be,  
 even for the white man.

*Greed*, the title of this collection, refers to the greed that is perhaps a human commonality, a truth that we all possess and understand. Part of what's so

admirable about these poems is that they are dramatic monologues of real people—Hoover, Marion Barry, Jack Ruby, Lee Harvey Oswald, Desiree Washington. And that the greed—and the emotions which run amok through the greed—is not only palpable, it is understandable. Ai must be able to understand the greed in order to convincingly create these personas, just as I, the reader, am able to understand it and the characters' struggles with it. *This* weakness must be a part of me, must dwell somewhere within me. There is greed for so many things—money, power, sex, love, space, understanding, knowledge.

Gorgui Dieng, a professor and writer I worked with in Senegal, likes to say that greed is something innately human, but that it emerges through power. And, he believes, power always corrupts. Gorgui is a professor of English and African Literature at Cheikh Ante Diop University in Dakar; his novel, *A Leap out of the Dark*, is the first Senegalese novel written in English. In it, Moodu, the protagonist, struggles with contemporary African and global issues: the tentative relationships between Africa and its diaspora, between Africa and the west; the battle for true democracy and equality of a people whose history has been both rich and raped. When I met Gorgui and read his book, I was having my first experiences in Senegal—that tumultuous, incredible time

that led to that frenzied journal-keeping—but I was fairly sure that I knew some things. I thought that I understood a part of the way the world worked, or how it worked in certain places, with certain elements that created a specific formula. I wouldn't have said there was such a thing as Truth, necessarily, or some common denominator of humanity or the universe, but I would have agreed that there were certain questions worth asking, questions and answers with retinue. I would have supposed that I at least knew some of the questions. My work with Gorgui, my studies with him and two other scholars, Lamine Kane and Ibrahima Thioub, challenged this notion.

I had a narrowed perspective and believed I had a worldly perspective. So much of what I thought I knew, I had learned. And, as it had been with my own cultural knowledge, it was learned rather than experienced, anecdotal or literary theory instead of familiar or familial. I'd never had to consider what globalization might mean when you aren't part of the global power, what neocolonial means to people who know from experience the definitions of terms like colonial and postcolonial. In my studies with these scholars, I learned about the World Bank and the IMF, concepts like structural adjustment—a way to “help” indebted countries pay off loans to these institutions—and how, improbably, garbage from the United

States and elsewhere wends its way to Africa (countries "donate" used goods—cars, clothing, plastic bags, you-name-it etc. to countries which, ostensibly, are deemed to need such things). These men introduced me to other experts—Dr. Fatou Sow, an activist who is working to improve women's roles in education, health and human rights; Dr. Ndiasse Diop, who studies economics and its urban and rural realities, and many others—whose teachings caused me to reconsider everything, to try and understand the social and political nature of received knowledge as it is revealed through literature, through the/any text.

I brought three collections of poetry with me to Senegal: Ralph Angel's *Twice Removed*, Lynda Hull's *The Only World*, and W.S. Merwin's *The Pupil*. Reading these poems each day affected my daily outlook—the way I responded to culture and to circumstance—just as much as my daily experiences affected the way I read the poetry. When I read this passage from Hull's "Suite for Emily" (from section 7, "A Style of Prayer"), I knew that the speaker was not referring to Dakar, to structural adjustment and the injustices imposed on Africa by the West, but here were these lines, speaking to the sidewalks' disrepair, the eighty percent unemployed on

the streets, the hungry animals and starving people, and  
my own complicity:

There is a prayer that goes Lord I am powerless  
over these carnivorous streets, the fabulous  
breakage, the world's ceaseless *perpetuum*  
mobile,

like some renaissance design, lovely & useless  
to harness the forces of weather, the  
planet's  
dizzy spin, this plague. A prayer that  
asks

where in the hour's dark moil is mercy?  
Ain't no ladders tumbling down from heaven  
for what heaven we had we made. An  
embassy

of ashes & dust. Where was safety? Home?  
Is this love, staff, orb & firmament?  
Parallel worlds, worlds within worlds-  
chutes

& trapdoors in the mind. Sisters & brothers,  
the same thing's going down all over town,  
town  
after town. There is a prayer that goes  
Lord,

we are responsible. Harrow us through the  
waves,  
the runnels & lace that pound, comb, reduce  
us so  
we may be vessels for these stories.

It was as if she was there with me. This was exactly  
as it was. I experienced this, too. Hull's images, her  
lines here are what Komunyakaa calls "a tableau of a  
witness's interior-exterior journey;" within these lines  
we recognize that measured experience is what moves us  
toward an understanding, a recognition, a witnessing of

the witness. It is this role of the poet and the poem as witness—as “vessels for these stories”—which became increasingly important and evident to me during this time in Senegal. Because I began to see it everywhere, in every word, every place, even in the silences. I could see the poem as witness in these lines from Angel’s “Even Because:”

Because even love  
returns. The city’s all brightness

and shadow, deckle-edged, bluer than air—  
there’s no help

anywhere—you no longer know how to listen.  
And love says, love—midnight to midnight,  
already ablaze.

Poetry of witness, Carolyn Forché points out, occupies a complicated space, a place which emerges from that which cannot be defined as exclusively public or private, or that which would not otherwise be spoken about. This type of poem might also be political, and in some of my own poems—many of them in the “Senegal” section—I make a conscious attempt to make political statements, to be more prodding and perhaps less introspective. But what I think that Forché means by

poetry of witness is what Hull and Angel do too, what Merwin does: the poems are not just personal, nor are they, strictly speaking, political. These are poems which are as much about poetry as they are about problems in the world, in the worlds where the poems exist. Each poem, furthermore, is the creative product of a writer with a politics. In the positioning of the poem of witness, the poet creates a space which gives credit to both the personal and the political, which acknowledges that the personal might be a powerful space of resistance. It's important, then, to see the way in which the personal interacts with the political, how, as Forche points out, "larger structures of the economy and the state circumscribe, if not determine, the fragile realm of individuality."

This, I suppose, is a way of suggesting that the poem of witness might be able to reckon with the beyond. In this manuscript, and in my life, I struggle with what's beyond, with getting at that and writing about that: what's beyond my scope of vision, of knowledge, of experience and understanding; what's beyond this country of ours, the rhetoric which rings in our ears, the machinations that make our military hum, our laws enforced, our president speak; what's beyond the place(s) from which we-be it we the dominators, the dominated, we

the collective or we the individual—stand and observe the world. Knowledge can be mundane, utilitarian. I want to know what's beyond that. Literature represents commentary on every kind of pain and goodness inflicted or exacted. I want to know all about these things, yes, but I also want to understand what happens "beyond" these incidents— I want to be able to see the private imagination interacting with the public world, I want to get at the inconceivable spaciousness and smallness of the world. I want to speak of "the many things of which we would not have spoken."



## II. POEMS

### **The Atrocity of Water**

Water has a beautiful smell in certain places. Or it is the full, wet air, which smells of water. As I write this we are traveling by cab to my cousins' house in Pearl City on the island

of O'ahu. We drive over a bridge that was bombed. We drive past the military base where the water is so clear—a violent violet that exposes the dialectics of war. (The sunken

USS Arizona, today a tourist site which people line up for hours to see.) The bridge we travel spans a great historical distance: today, the hellish orange halos of fire

are swallowed by water; they've even stopped bombing practice off the island of Kaho'olawe. The lesson is that you can own everything. The lesson is

that we can stand for anything, even water. Our cab driver is impressed that my cousin teaches at Keio University ("it is the Harvard of Japan"), and, using his broken

pidgin tries to engage us in a conversation about Heidegger's "Question Concerning Technology." But I am thinking about water—all the oceans that bring us together, that separate with

a nihilism that eats the oxygen from the water, from the skies, leaving blue the color of guns, of corpse. Water can be deep and voiceless. We can need it. We are almost over the bridge now.

**Kilauea Iki: Devastation Trail**

On cloudy nights after surf-drenched days  
the soft scorch of *pahoehoe*,  
lava drifting, on fire, to the sea-  
slow black moans of resignation  
as Yamaguchi's Kalapana Store, schools &  
homes give way to the supple blanket.  
So much will endure:  
the store's decrepit neon sign, a stillness,  
the heaviness of someone's memories.

Years later, nothing will bay at the moon  
from this earth except the darkness.  
A woman will hear emptiness like whispers  
as she wanders the hardened mountainside,  
considering the barren luridness,  
the lies of fire, smoldering.

## Room

Moans come from the other room. I hear bed springs, rustle of blankets. I do deserve this: I always wanted to live

somewhere small, where people overpopulated the space and it was a necessary and arduous effort to cohabitate.

I always admired the way so many people managed to live in cities together; most without ever resorting to violence.

I imagined that tight spaces called for unity, community. I couldn't wait to live in a big, crowded city like New York. It would be

communal, cooperative. I was blameless then, clean as a freshly-ploughed field. I didn't understand so much of the world, how things last for only so long, that what people often do is simply tolerate. How do the smallest

of containers work? How do we look at the spaces our bodies occupy, and how is it that we ever can conceive

of ownership? I am beginning to understand that the harsh betrayals of the world are all the same

as the harsh betrayals of the body. Think of the anarchy of transit and then of kinesiology, or westward expansion.

The ways that we drift from one thing to another. The anarchy of movement is also the unraveling of love.

Our destinations are quick flashes—quick as the El—the logistics of which many of us cannot possibly

comprehend. I am straining to hear more of the distance which is seeping through the walls.

## Sugar

The fields my sister & I breezed through  
never calmed, & it took years  
to understand how the world worked.  
The ocean was improbable,  
but we understood it with the deepest,  
easiest blue. We could look at  
A black swell, out toward the horizon,  
the edge of what we knew,  
& tell when it would break into whitewash,  
surging over the reef, carrying turtles,  
lava sand, surfers. But with the old sugar  
fields, our science was always simplistic.  
We played in those fields as children,  
hide & seek, foot races through the red  
dirt, neglected stalks of sugar, high as  
the tallest wave we'd ever seen, that still  
tasted sweet after several seasons of abandon.  
Years of cutting & burning, years of men without  
wives, without families, come to Hawai'i  
with promises of a better life, & what added up  
finally to poverty, filial piety, to backaches,  
skin rough & dark as rock,  
the red that never gets out from your clothes.  
But we couldn't stop  
associating open fields with freedom.  
Long red roads, dirt leading to nowhere,  
corrugated sheet iron shacks  
made graceful by an afternoon rain.  
We couldn't conceive of the sugar cane, thick  
like the fingers of a thousand workers,  
bent so far, so close to the earth.

**My Grandfather Tells Me a Story About His Life**

Ruby dyed her hair red until the last few years  
when she couldn't remember to do it, he says,

tentative & soft, as not to startle my own  
memories of my grandmother. But at the end,

he continues, perhaps the mind only remembers  
itself as it wants, anyway: she at her most exquisite

red-headed self. The mind releases the body  
from its humanness, this marvelous weight,

at some point—beauty is, time flies as it never  
moves, the larger landscape is the roadmap

of the soul. At night, he says, I sleep with it all—  
we drive along the countryside, red earth, red

dirt, opal skies, broken hills, passing by all  
the things we've loved in this world.

### Bird of Paradise

It was why we were together, to begin:  
You exposed the world two categories at a time,  
A mathematical equation that broke people  
Down into something I could manage, something

I could understand. Those who are beholden  
& those who are not. Those who overfill  
The ice cube tray & those who skimp. These were  
Binaries which could explain the world, dispose

Of anything larger or murkier than black & white.  
When I brought you home to meet my family,  
You realized that there is a third world, ours, a gaping  
hole  
Which wavers & battles to remain where it is, tentative,

Content with inconsistency, with the inexplicable.  
That we accept as truth whatever others bestow.  
Even hatred, even pain. Even what we might  
Inflict upon ourselves. You brought

My mother a Bird of Paradise, a flower so  
faultless, but tangible, ephemeral as well.  
In our back lot thousands more  
Grew. We didn't try to keep this from you,

Perhaps, in retrospect, a mistake. You & your will  
Made many demands that trip. You had bought  
A photographer's guide to the island, determined  
To immortalize the place, to see it through the lens

Which demands a well-made scene. We didn't meet  
My friends or cousins; we circled the island instead,  
Stopping, after the volcano, at a green sand beach,  
An impossibility made real by olivine & lava rock,

Cold objects created by fire. The inside of the earth  
Seeping out, rubbing against itself, a heated  
& eroding creation. It was a rough road, sharp,  
Treacherous with lava shards. We walked

For several miles along pasture lands ridden with  
A rope of black, lava path leading to the sea. When  
Suddenly the road gave way to cliff, which exposed  
Green sand—not black, nor white—I was startled

To the point of belief. This was a new world,  
escaped from the world of ideas & of logic.

So exhausting, it was more than the physical  
In a physical world. I stared as long as I could,  
mesmerized-

The green cutting into the land, connecting with the sea,  
Like the emotions of the metaphysical, gleaming,  
& you, behind your camera, shuttering black & white,  
Hoping to capture the moment.

### Birthday Flowers

She knew she'd killed them, and after only two months.  
She did it  
on purpose, not in the beginning, but finally,  
eventually. They were red  
and gold, a gift from someone who loved her, and she had  
been

doing so well for them. It was a sunny day, after so much  
fall  
drear-warm, and she decided they could use the sunshine,  
the deck, the outside. Placed them benignly between the  
slats

of sun, watched their yellow faces open, turn to face  
the light. Later, in the cold bleak of mid-afternoon she  
turned on  
the heat, made tea, and watched them through the window.

The green leaves on the stems shivered and shrank, the  
flowers hung  
their yellowed heads. She watched the water in the  
holding dish, tried  
to determine if its stillness meant ice. She listened to  
the birds, far-off

calls of geese. She listened to Mozart. She puttered  
inside. Too cold  
for a run. The clouds swallowed the sun; the night  
ingested the day.  
And she looked out into the dank, liked how she could  
apprehend

their outline, absurd and sacrosanct, the way that they  
were still  
there. Their red and gold resilience, their resolve, was  
something  
unconstrained-she thought this later, as she swept

her house clean. It was improbable, something like  
begetting,  
like what the sun gives the world after cold autumn  
night, after black  
hours away, and the only way to see is to compare  
darknesses.



**A Correspondence**

Rain has fallen through the city.  
Rain is falling through our roof.

I imagine I am glad for it, so I sweep  
the dust as though each gray shard

is a moon sliver, a diamond slice. Our house  
has prospered once again—our roof shudders

beneath the weight of its own importance,  
and the familiar walls, strong and thin

like aged skin, hide me from the city  
streets, the sidewalk which at night flickers

with imprisoned stars. You are trying to write  
a poem; your words, flimsy in my cold

hands, like a pewter fish slipping. I think you  
one of the city's last standouts: so much has

already given up on the world, which appears  
to have been silenced by the rain. Our house heaves

beneath a quiet, and I am thinking delicately  
as the rain falls, and falls, collapsing in onto itself.

**Revision**

Before they can demolish each other, little bits from her  
heart & deeper  
still, she walks away backwards. She's skipped all that  
uncertain time—  
he alienating her friends, the audacious & exhilarating  
motorcycle  
rides, sex, jealousy, screaming, acrid wine & cloudless  
martinis. She  
ends things right at the beginning, the first night after  
class, the cold  
& dark & the slow drawl of cigarette smoke creeping from  
mouths:  
this time she declines the invitation for dinner &  
drinks, sensing  
his turmoil, realizing she can't change someone, that  
wounded  
is just wounded & not necessarily lovely. Knowing  
intuitively this is  
the kind of man who is capable of believing that a man  
wants nothing  
more than to destroy what's beautiful. & so she says "No  
thank you,"  
cool & firm, shakes his hand, walks away. She walks by  
herself  
into the night, amongst red & cream bricked buildings.  
She can see  
her breath. She can hear two women, friends, walking near  
her in the dark,  
chattering & carrying on. Autumnal sky, a pewter moon, &  
the occasional  
light from buildings, from cars, spotlights into the  
night. Her heart is  
a floodlight. She sings the only song she knows by  
heart, an almost whisper.

**Parlance**

The janitor for the college preparatory school,  
High on the mountain, overlooking green

Pastures, rolling out to the ocean,  
Tending to the soccer field one evening,

In that impossible moment between day and dusk,  
Smells the dairy farm in Makawao, a few miles

Uphill and upwind, and is reminded of how  
His father, a farmer in Kula, up Haleakala

Even further toward the frigid summit,  
Kept him out of school to learn a man's work,

To earn his keep around the house.  
The fields of his youth were kept green by

Chill mountain mist and the indolence of cows,  
Who ate and defecated all in the same place.

What did he think children were for, anyway?  
As a boy, a teen escaped through the military,

Fighting enemies who looked just like him in Vietnam,  
He found himself pondering this very question.

Now his boy was a student here, at this school  
Where no one else's father was a janitor,

Nobody come from a farm, a father who, until  
Near-adulthood, could not read. This son

Was a superstar, a soccer player who used  
These fields to do magic. He was a scholar of history,

And an artist, clearly cut out for greater things than  
War, cleaning up cow shit, the slaughter

And the death that had made his father a man.  
What is a man for, anyway, is what he thinks

These days, sometimes, in the dark and quiet moments  
Of his job. His son, somehow, is grateful. And he

understands that his child somehow could be, as  
he feels the soft green grass cushion his heavy steps.

## Theft

After we break things off I try to sell it all:  
the engagement ring, the bracelet & gold  
necklace, my Hawaiian middle name  
etched in black on both. I go to the gym  
with the writer, my new lover, first, worry about  
leaving too much of value in his studio efficiency.

Swimming for an hour, stationary bike,  
all pale consolations for me, punishment for  
leaving you & orchid oceans, ocean skies, me  
Pacific Islander now graduate student living  
in the Midwest. After it all & with sweaty  
body & cleared head, on my way through

the locker room I notice a computer disk  
in the shower, my notebooks in the toilet,  
poetry everywhere, pens too & my empty  
wallet splayed out next to a sink. Hawai'i  
driver license gone, credit cards & of course  
my jewelry. Pieces of you, pieces of me

which I deserve. I do deserve this—it's what  
the new boyfriend says & I say nothing,  
& this is how we talk. This is what it turns  
into, what perhaps, it could only ever have  
been: opinions of his as truth, feeble  
if successful attempts to both poetic

justice & fault with the world. It will be  
years before I realize that what I fell  
for was this writerliness, the hardness  
that makes one look at the world  
& see, maybe feel all its pain. In colors,  
in the weight of things. This, he might

never know, was my real punishment,  
what I deserved for leaving you  
the way I did, for striking out  
on my own. I learned to watch  
out for myself, to learn myself. Later  
he will have written this into a story,

tell of her (my) leaving him (you) at the altar,  
of the coldness in taking a man's masculinity  
like that, of the woman he knew who  
was willing to hock her past just to be  
rid of it, to get over the emotional  
with a purging of the physical,

her tarnishing of the elemental with greed.  
& there's nothing more I can say to him,  
as this story—my story—is something  
I will read in a college lit. journal only  
years too late. The story doesn't have  
the proper tension, anyway: nothing

about how difficult it was to leave,  
to turn heart against home, surfboards  
I missed in the foyer, the bedroom,  
everywhere; the makeshift bed  
we'd built from brick & plywood planks.  
The way we'd memorized each vein,

the color of skin on wrist on skin.  
The silhouette of body (you) against  
the night in our tatami-mat room, which is  
to say, we were close together, even in sleep.  
The way your torso rose & fell,  
a harp softly playing into darkness.

## Prelude

### 1. For the Ocean

You begin. Beyond the sloping sand, its glass shards smoothed brown & green, beyond the coastal shelf's *limu*, spindle urchins & cucumbers, where beds of *opihi* mussels climb & clack, firesponges, whelk, where old turtles open mouths to graze, white-throated & wrinkled, where manta rays drift low & big as cars, goat fish, moon fish, needle nose, you take me, violet blood, unknowing, life breath, nothing, you take me beyond song.

### 2. For the YMCA Pool

Another prelude begins in this small town miles away from anywhere. Beyond the sunset, cold breath smoothed into arc of winter orange, beyond dogs in blue windows, bark-crooning at huddled passersby, where sand & salt have melted ice from asphalt slick as night, where the locker room floor collects damp scarves, salty boots, where child-stenciled dolphins smile to cover cracked old walls, blue light, chlorine closet, bodies beating through water, child tongues lapping at wet air, you take me, warm blood of frigid bodies, of children & all the wintered hearts, you take me beyond it all.

**Lament**

-- after James Wright

The wind is so cool here in the mountains;  
It is an almost blue, the color of lungs  
Before the sun rises. A cow calls  
To the early morning stars; a rooster is restless  
Somewhere down the road. Wind strokes  
Wind chimes, a frivolous game, the push and pull  
Required to make music. Riposte: the smooth  
Whisper of morning birds, together in the dark  
Hibiscus trees, just outside the window.  
Silver swords swoon in the waning moonlight.  
Soon, the sun will warm the world. The night always  
Fails, and some mornings, this is the only sadness there  
is.

### The Milky Face of Christ is Everywhere

It should come as no surprise, then, to learn that the priest is white. Even though the songs & chants use Wolof, even though this is Cap Vert, even though this is Sub-Saharan Africa & everyone but the neocolonial hangers on are African,

the blackest black I've ever seen. This is important only because it is so beautiful but also to point out that there's no mistaking such blackness: a white priest cannot really be any more than a mirage, the worst kind of hallucination or trick

of the mind, one which claims to be speaking for the people. The town is actually called Keur Moussa, which translates to House of Moses, where this priest & others like him—yes, who look like him, God willing—have built a primary

school for children to learn *foi*, faith in French. The rest of the town, the rest of the country, go to Mosque on Fridays. On Sundays they do work, they rest, they hear the bells chime from the monastery for each hour & before each service. The people

of this town are Diola, & Diola people speak Diola first, though many these days are learning Wolof, which is becoming an indigenous *lingua franca*. Keur Moussa the monastery is gray & an embroidered swatch against the desert, the Baobab,

the lives that people live here. People at Keur Moussa are Francophiles, & French is what's spoken. The milky face of Christ is everywhere. Later & inside you will see that the black angels fly lower than the white ones, & a soft old French priest will ask

all the visitors & church-goers, faithless & faithful alike, to sit down & watch a video on a television in an air-conditioned room. The illusion gets trickier: it's as though you're in Europe now—there are no air-conditioners in Senegal! A white voice tells you



that the nuns specialize in making *bisap*, or juice of hibiscus. They use the traditional Senegalese process because they want to maintain tradition. & an old, wizened priest teaches Africans to make the Kora & then to play it, this 21-stringed instrument that

only African *griots* & musicians have learned in the past. To be a musician or a music maker is a birthright for the Senegalese, or was before the monks & priests began sharing their knowledge. The monastery Keur Moussa was built in 1962 to help

the poor of the area, which is everybody if you mean spiritually poor & without Jesus in their souls. Thousands of years ago this may even have been an animist place, land of much trickery, the worst kind, trickery of the heart & self. The Diola

churchgoers, though, have *foi* in their hearts. At the service the monks are all Senegalese. They get to sit closest to the front; they are also the choir. They sing to God; they face the direction of the priest. There is fire & brimstone

in the words of God as the priest speaks them to the congregation, & there is a palpable *peur*, or fear. There's no reason to have fear. Have *foi*, because God is no illusion. He is real, says the priest, as real as you & I, as tangible as our skin.

### Late September Fugue

Now is the season of rain,  
& each day that I don't

hear from you I grow somehow  
more certain that you have fallen

ill with malaria. It's not  
only that I am an Australian-

American with a life of all  
that is discomfiting & most preposterous:

not only SUVs & organic free range  
meat & genetically modified corn & coffee

shops with climate control, but gyms  
& Ka-Bars & weapons of mass destruction

sold in our Wal-Marts, the NRA &  
ecstasy, oxycontin & talk shows to cure

our epidemics of obesity & elevators  
& golf carts. At dinner in July

someone American remarked his  
surprise that Africans died

from malaria in throngs  
every year during this season,

the disease he learned about before  
traveling, which seemed a risk

& reason for his traveler's insurance,  
a back-up plan to airlift him from

your country if need be. You & I  
ate together & sometimes this man joined us,

his theories of AIDS & poverty  
& daft prototypical commentary

about everything from darkness  
to the black wonder of your skin.

On this occasion you were  
eating french fries & sculling

down Coke & said that you  
hadn't been sick for ten years

now but anticipate dying from  
the illness. The man asked you

more questions about survival,  
for which I was again

embarrassed & about which  
you were again gracious.

Finally, I think, he went away  
& we were left to ourselves, alone

& together, as seems our friendship  
is determined to be,

a silent vowel, an almost O.  
I do not contest your belief

that says birth & death are pre-  
determined. The Sahara cleaves

to your landscape, your  
countryside shadowless &

so I imagine you are grateful for  
the rain. This ritual of season is

how both of us & our ancestors  
kept count of the years. The rain

is deafening-silent & loud.  
Your absence is neither

yet. Here it is autumn.  
On my street the leaves

are turning to underskin & are  
falling, chartless, to the ground.

# **Portrait de femme, St. Louis, Senegal**

*Les cieux sont clairs et l'océan est clairifiant égal.*

The skies are clear & the ocean is even clearer.

It doesn't matter how she says it, just that

when she says clear she means familiar.

Iridescent, prism of color. The city is split

in 2 by a body of water, the Atlantic seeping

in like a blue peninsula. She is at the Hotel

*Louisiane* in the trendy French quarter,

the right side of the water & a place

the guidebook says offers "a stunning

location." A man is fishing in front of her, just

beyond the patio & with a net. Across the chasm

& in the water, children are bathing & men

are washing their horses & then themselves,

side by side. Women pore over clothing,

scrubbing with tired rocks, handfuls of sand.

Fires are burning on the beach; people burn

their garbage but still it ends up in the water

& everywhere. There are more drifts of plastic

bags than her mind can make room for & the streets

are littered with poverty, every local looking

for food & *cadeau*, change, tokens of consumerism.

She can only question her space—she is surrounded

at this moment by no one but other tourists,

mainly French & some Canadian, yellow & white

stucco & she sits at a glass table, literally,

oceanfront;

yesterday on the *car rapide* she could not breathe,

20 of them squeezed in where 10 should fit,

but finally it didn't really matter because she reached

her destination which was this peninsula, crossing

the bridge *Pont Faidherbe*, designed by Gustav Eiffel

& meant to cross the Danube instead of the Senegal

River. It was moved here in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century

as the city began its separations & its reparations

through jazz, the blues, things which moved

across oceans, be it miles or meters. & no matter,

really, this small failure or success of Eiffel's—

it was here where they could speak French

& watch boats surf waves & if they wanted

to, not stare too long across, concentrate

instead on what the guidebook called "the bluster  
& fire, explosion of color," meaning something  
lovely, the sunsets over these waters, an explosion  
of colors which does not exploit--this  
a nagging thought, not unshakeable.

# Sold For a Song

*-in memory of Ken Saro-Wiwa,  
Nigerian Ogoni Minority and Human Rights Activist and  
poet,  
executed on November 10, 1995.*

They burned your body with acid after  
it was hanged, destroying all evidence of life. Your son  
felt guilty for not having  
done something, that he didn't feel more than sadness  
after his father's death.

What can I do?

I read about the city as  
though  
you owned it. As though the world was yours, if only for  
an instant.  
People took to the streets, dancing. They loved  
excitement. They hated  
to question. Things just happen: you said it yourself. In  
your country,  
things have a way of disappearing quickly.

They were all walking,  
walking very very slow. Crying small, small, small. None  
were dancing,  
not your Sozaboy, not even in dream. They wanted to  
speak of tanks and putrid human  
flesh.

I want to sing for you.

Silence is a lone, lean dog,  
scrounging for food  
out in the dreary rain. We'll speak no more  
of minor mercies. Who knows  
what lies by the roadside, abandoned. You did not pray  
for war, your bones lost  
in lonely trenches, in a plain of agony. The anthill, the  
forest sing for you. I look  
for a voice. I dream about the city, your country, your  
dream. There is no song  
in the story to break the silence of the night.

We fear things when we call  
them  
by other names. You have told me, told many, not to be  
afraid-but  
there are so many terrors of the night. When the moon is  
sullen, it will not rise.  
What happens when all the nights are dark?

I am starting to believe  
that everything works together, even if it hasn't always  
been that way-I open a book,

and your subtle voice gazes out from the forest. It is  
not your book,  
but it is, at least it is today. We touch death, that  
life may be revealed  
as black, white, and more. We grow, and we are always  
sorry.

You reveal us  
in mistakes and ashes and halos of fire. Words have never  
been enough,  
yet they are everything, too much for so many.

Time has turned upside  
down,  
and your city, the world, is something I know the exact  
weight of.  
Heaviness—my conscience, my eyelids.

What can I do?

You are only a  
breeze.

### Reaching the Holy City of Touba

Everywhere along the way people are  
starving. This is the stuff of men & gods-  
patterns unfolding into equations of gold,

the walls fat with ornate geometry,  
Italian marble, French crystal.  
People have saved their whole lives

to give. The Imam greeting the hungry  
devout appears on a mechanical  
wood carven staircase. Appears

from nowhere, a mystery. It has been  
said this is the last stop  
on the road to Paradise, here,

this almost mirage of ceramic, plush  
& fountains, where men & women  
side by side on their knees bend to

touch forehead to pillow. There  
are streetlights in this city, maybe  
the only ones in Senegal, a fresh water

spring which never dries up even in  
times of drought, & Amidou Bamba,  
the prophet in shroud & mausoleum.

Everyone hopes to die here, or at least  
to come here after death. In Islam  
there is a saying: love for your people

what you would love for yourself.  
Meaning, the walk back from here  
will be long. The talibe or followers

will pray 3 more times today-  
all the proof is written  
on the walls in gold.



Grand Dakar, Tuesday July 1, 5 pm

I go for a run. I am the only woman  
I will ever see wearing pants & a t-shirt. I am  
the only woman anyone else sees, either.  
This time a boy about 5 follows me even

before I can start my jog. I mistake him  
for a disciple of the Islamic leader, *marabout*,  
who lives on the corner & forces his boys,  
*talibe*, to beg for food & money, to dress in rags

every day except Friday, day of Mosque  
& holiness. It is only my second week,  
flimsy & pathetic excuse as it is. It's true.  
This boy is starving for real, begging

not as a way to god but as a way to live  
just a little bit longer. It's true, it's only  
my second week—I know a little Wolof,  
tell him next time, *babeneen*, but of course

at 5 he's wiser than I & knows there may  
not be a next time if I don't give him something  
right now. All I have is a bracelet, which is  
pathetic & turquoise. & beautiful. He can't

even eat it. We are walking, I assume, toward  
his house. He begins to cry, holds onto  
my index finger with all of his like the child  
that he is. & is not—we are lost, he is

far from home. I talk to men in broken  
French, finally meet one who understands  
my pathetic attempts enough to help me  
take the boy home & also explain to the child

that *babeneen*, tomorrow it will be  
better. A blatant lie to help one foot follow  
the other, to resilience or resignation, both  
heartbreakingly beautiful & pathetic.

**Sahara**

Women need water & wells,  
spend all day wandering barren

landscapes looking for either.  
Buckets on heads & carried

on high, hoping. The Peace  
Corps built a top notch well

in Ndiayene but it's empty.  
for lack of rain. This is global

warming. This the women learn  
at a day's cost-thirst & dirt,

hunger & thirst. It's actually  
called the Sahel, this place

where the desert is migrating  
in, uninvited. It's called

desertification, a mouthful  
but painful to swallow, dry,

this creeping across, this  
cleaving to, this changing of

everything, this relentless  
& rootless, enduring drift.

**Monologue for a Vulture**

-- *Lac Rose, Senegal*

Water made pink by salt, some aberration  
of science so stunning it takes the breath  
away. Deepest, flesh-like pink. We circle  
about the children & women as they work—  
they carry buckets of it on their heads; they have  
filled the boats to near sinking & they wade  
through the pink, pulling hundreds of pounds  
of salt in rowboats, wooden fishing boats.  
Above, we flap wings methodically,  
waiting. We can practically hear time  
hurtling past, whirring its smooth motor.  
Now a tour bus has stopped to admire  
a lake made pink, the water & the way  
people live & die—all the hard work.  
There are things that can't be named, even  
as fat white tourists leap from a fat white bus.  
Chafing against the heat & all the salt.  
There is nothing to drink & nowhere to hide—  
they eat their lunches watching the sun sear  
rose-colored water. They consider  
the world, buy salt in vials & eat their art.  
See how they swim through the world,  
groping for all, trawling for hearts, pink  
like a lake, that they can buy or eat.  
The production of the world by a pale-veined  
hand, by grabbing. Listen for the sound  
of skin cracking, hair dripping with salt, tethered  
lives blowing, floating on water too salty  
to drink. The hills made of salt  
are relentless—neither chromosomes  
nor dust, we see the great piles ladled  
into mounds as big as a woman's strong  
back, the wrapped children she carries even  
as she works. Neurons sizzle in the sun—  
tourists return to the bus, by now pink  
as the water. Salt thickens the air, money  
spent, but there is something else  
to the exchange, almost imperceptible:  
not one of them thinking to look for us,  
bothering to wonder how it is that  
we've chosen to loom here, why it is  
that we wait, what it is that we will eat.

## **Ile de Goree, On Visiting the Slave House**

### **I.**

The ferry is a blast of diesel fumes. A few years back, a boat like this sank & thousands drowned off the coast of Senegal, bodies scorched by white heat, bloated

by death mere miles from sand & safety. It was our September 11<sup>th</sup>, Janaba says. I am squeezed, face twisted & limbs cleaving; we are all touching each other.

So many bodies in the boat: the rules for crossing the Atlantic were made by someone who looked like me. There are no rules. I hold my breath.

### **II.**

The island itself is beautiful. Colonial, pastels & sand. Having been the only *toubab*, white foreigner, on the boat, at the dock I am mobbed

by people who want me to help, be of use this time, come to shops, see henna fabrics, buy earthen jewels. Between us stand so many

silences of the world. When I say I am here to see the house what I mean is no thank you, I would love to but can't, what won't we do to each other?

### **III.**

The house is pink & faded. We go downstairs first. Janaba tells me she didn't learn enough about slavery as a child. We are the same age. There are chambers

downstairs, no windows at all in some rooms, tiniest slats in concrete in others, like I've seen in forts. These are not for guns or rifles but the simplest self-

defense of breathing, of looking at the ocean's churn. I walk to the door of no return, named so for what it really was. For years the waters grew shark-infested

after recognition crept in, a cloud: getting on that ship meant something less comprehensible than death or even living. People, their bodies, jumped in throngs.

I stand in the women's dungeon for a long time.

In the men's room are wall scars, monuments  
to shoulder blades rubbing for lack of space  
& the fact that nothing can compare to hurt

inflicted on people by other people. Darkness  
downstairs resonates against the walls, wet  
& cold: throat & heart of stone. The souls

are everywhere & fathomless. I am stunned  
by the acidic light upstairs. It is daylight,  
astonishing, stinging. The staircase is

grand, a ballroom, regal, arched & sloping.  
Lonely & exquisite. I count each stair-  
15 steps is all the separation. Upstairs,

I cannot look at the jewelry, the wine & art,  
labyrinth of wealth & infinite distances. I  
keep my head down, notice the warped wood

of the floorboards, how they don't always  
line up, good & evil, shadow cleaving to light.  
On my knees, I see bodies walking in the dungeon.

IV.

Afterwards Janaba & I meet outside. Not  
talking, we stare at the ocean, said to have  
a riptide known to pull people out to sea

in the blink of an eye. Beauty frightens  
with possibility, its desire & want. We stand  
close together & our skin touches, my arm

brushing hers, a softness. There is no wind  
& the sun is scorching, yet we feel it, a shudder-  
the indifference of water, the stopless renewal.

**Fragmentation**

I befriend a boy in Senegal who can  
recite the Qu'ran three times—all  
the way through—by the time he is  
eight. He is a gift to the world, truly,  
goes to private school even though  
his parents can't pay the fees. I meet  
his teachers, see their eyes, lonely &  
proud. For all children in training,  
the first lessons are prayers. These  
are the foundation & have to be  
perfectly memorized if there is  
any hope at all. It is through prayer  
that the Imam, leader which this  
boy will someday be, sends strength  
& power to the masses. The words  
have been written down over & over  
again: the boy takes me to the library  
of a prophet who spent his life  
transcribing the Qu'ran. There  
is nothing in the library but a thousand  
books in his handwriting & the words  
of the sacred. There must be a hunger  
in such rhythms for them to have  
survived it all: holy wars, famine,  
disbelievers. I try to speak to the boy  
in Arabic, which he doesn't understand.  
I recite the only poems I know in French,  
some Rimbaud, Baudelaire, & Mallarme.  
These men are landmarks of failure,  
of modernity: one's livelihood  
ends in aphasia, the others abandon  
their work, overcome by the notion

of the world's fragmentation. This is  
something I'm not sure I can translate,

not sure this boy would understand. We  
stand in silence, feeling the graves of those

around us, all the nameless lives less  
somehow than ours. I wonder what will

become of this boy, all the places he  
will travel in dream & through prayer.

He smiles, touches his hand to mine.  
I can only speak to you in broken

things, I say, but don't tell him how  
something of me longs to be shut.

The world is a beautiful place, he  
says, almost a Paradise. The Qu'ran

says the world suffers, whispers  
the boy, but I'll never know how.

**On Fleeing the Tdijani Mosque at Prayer Time, or  
Apologetica**

Because I cannot change my name. Because the mosque  
sleeps at night too & especially in between prayer  
time & has been designed to look like an umbrella,

hovering, drifting over the brotherhood. Because  
I belong to the brotherhood to eliminate you.  
Because symbolically I am the forty-third president,

I am America. In the right situation, I too find  
there is something within which can hate;  
which unflinchingly & with a thin-lipped grimace

doesn't question meaning & existence, not at all.  
I can press the red button & start the war, end  
the world. Because I do because I can. Because

the tower is high & there are so many stairs  
up to the microphone. Because the call is beautiful  
but incomprehensible. Because I cannot

coat my skin in darkness, my tongue in yours. Because  
you will not let me inside, because I walk toward  
the desert alone, under the crooning blanket of your  
prayers.



### Rainy Season

Grand Dakar: the road in front  
of the house, Rue X, is flooded again

& for a third time this week I wade  
through water which is knee or thigh

deep & sharp with glass & stones, thick  
& mute with human & other sewage. I cut

a sandal on rubble & step hip high into  
a pothole. I think for a moment to find

a cab in this river of people, cars & animals  
scurrying. But the rain has its way with me, too,

& anyway it is faster to walk. Everything  
has slowed down: for once I am unafraid

of cars & cross the street that leads  
to market, careful only of waste floating past.

People are happy for the idea of rain, blizzard  
of relief for the crops, & catch water in bowls

for drinking, cooking & bathing. White  
laundry hangs slack on a line between

watery buildings, souls are wet with hope  
& possibility: there is something about

feeling the world drop by drop, seeing it  
accumulate in all its true grit & glisten.

**Love Poem**

The dark is cold but clear  
& I can see my breath, blue  
& so alive it freezes, an almost  
tangible. Here is possibility,  
here are winter skies. I am  
at the crest of the only  
hill in town & when I look  
out I can see oceans,  
mountains, desert & the whole  
goddamned world. I wonder  
what it would be like if  
darkness wasn't really  
dark at all, if the world  
could see me back, standing  
here, amazed, could read  
my thoughts, feel what I'm  
thinking: that love is malleable  
& what we came here for.

## Still Life, the First Year

-- for Maggie & Marcel

If this were a TV show instead of early Saturday morning  
at the house  
on Maple Street there'd be a disembodied voice, not deep,  
throaty, male,

but the voice of a sweet and innocent but intelligent  
sounding  
child, speaking over the scene to tie it all together,  
tell enough

of the background to explain why we can't control the  
impulses  
that led us to this moment of inaction, why no one should

mistake this seeming inaction for laziness, for rest: the  
voice  
would suggest that there is much more, thorniness and  
ache,

indicating the moment's pivialness: the tall boyish-  
looking man  
five years her junior was raised on a farm in the Midwest

as a Seventh-Day Adventist. The woman was raised by  
dingoes,  
a first-child flower child in a family that collected  
death

and tragedy, and she wore hardships just beneath  
the seemingly serene, oceanic surface. They are dressed  
in black

formalwear for a wedding this evening, just returned from  
it,  
actually, wedding of friends at a lake on a windy night.

The vows were poetry and so was every toast  
in their name. Everyone touched the rings which the bride

and groom will keep on a finger forever. The bride, says  
the child's voice, has no more than six months to live.  
Sometimes

beginnings and endings get confused, or beginnings have  
begun

to happen before the endings have had time to feel  
like anything but. The music is Billie Holiday, *Night and Day*, pure  
silk and beauty. Tragedy isn't soulful, of course, nor  
precise.

The guests, she and he, are me and my husband of too few  
months,  
already thinking of endings. Of course the endings are  
our own—

they always are. If someone were coaxing me on camera  
here  
they'd ask me to say something brooding and meaningful  
now, try

with feelings to change the color of the room. I can only  
say I am  
scared, I am stupid in moments like this which is why

I don't speak at all. All I do is observe, and in TV or  
real life,  
it's just not good enough, it's not anything. The room  
is sparse

with emotion; it is autumn outside our window, morning  
but still  
before dawn, and leaves blow sloppily, impulsively on the  
street.

**Thirst**

It is what I am drawn  
to: danger lurks under  
the brilliant blue. Sharks,  
manta, monstrosities, truth.  
Growing up, I drew it often  
with crayons and watercolors.  
Turquoise, cerulean, violet.  
There was no black infinity  
then, and colorful fish played games  
near the aquamarine surface, usually  
smiling. I thought it a peaceful place.

Serenity sloshes into white caps as I  
swim through dawn-tinted swells.

I have been to the middle of the ocean,  
my brown legs dangling toward savage  
purple, then black. There is enough  
room there, enough of everything.  
As blue waves carry me,

I wait to disappear.

### Table Manners

In Hawai'i we eat outside  
as often as we can. Someone

brings poi. Another the rice.  
We cook chicken or pork,

barbeque, teriyaki style. We  
bring our families, call 'ohana

to every meal. You can always  
make peace with the ocean, pray

to your 'aumakua before you eat.  
In Senegal this summer

I sat on the floor around a bowl  
eating with my hands. Me, the

earth, *mbokk*, my Senegalese  
family and the food all parts

of the same whole. Hand  
touching food touching mouth.

I ate with my entire hand, licking  
bits of rice from my palms:

respect to the cook and to  
the food. At the laundromat

in Kalamazoo they sell submarine  
sandwiches. Once in the women's

restroom I found chewed pieces of  
lettuce in the toilet. The girl who'd

purged was still in the bathroom  
and didn't wash her hands.

I call my mother  
and ask her the recipe for lomi

salmon and haupia, which remind  
me of growing up and home. When

I can't find the ingredients  
at the all-night grocery-everything

store, for a moment the world has ended,  
has grown larger and I am far

from wherever it might be that I belong.  
The night sky is empty and improbable.

It is late and I still haven't  
eaten. I don't know what else to do:

I drive through the drive thru,  
eat my food in the car on the way home.

**The age of every tree measurable**

only when it's killed down, counting  
rings of its insides, measurement less

a thing than a direction. Like an autopsy,  
chartless & dark the charting. Skin

bark seared away--in the old days  
Hawaiian men carved the bodies

into ocean going canoes, leaves  
for food. Parts of the body severed

from itself: cut in gullet & gut.  
I once tutored a boy & his brother

in a house made almost entirely  
of koa. Their father collected things--

art & culture, people, pasts & stories--  
on his business travels. Gave me koa

bowls & utensils, marionettes  
& masks from around the world.

Wanted to enrich the collection:  
asked me to tell my family's

stories, asked me to move in. Often  
on my way home, walking down

the mountain, I'd stop to rest under  
a tree that must've been over a hundred

feet tall. Of all that I miss in this world,  
the largess of such a tree, its shade,

its everything. What thing it is that gives  
way to beauty in all this plainness,

this usefulness so real it's splendid.  
What is there to help us forget

what drives us: our love for luster,  
for the splay & slice of adornment.



## Afterwards in Manoa

--in memory of J.K.

The first evening after your death, it is important for me to know that it is not a prank—I am swimming at the university pool, the one where we'd exhausted our youth—

a man, practically all skin, looks at me & says "I'm sorry"  
to the gray slab of cement at his feet; our coach, one time object  
of sexual possibility pulls me into his office, shuts

the heavy blue door, & I think that it's a surprise, a party for me, some ridiculous celebration under the guise of death. Where have I been

that I haven't heard the news? He is trying to protect me; his hand is a soft white against my thigh. This moment has everything to do with your life.

I am sitting on the plaid couch with my eyes closed. She wasn't in pain, he says, & it wasn't her fault. I cannot  
open my eyes—this is not the way we imagined our intimate

instants with this man. I suspect it was different for you & he—

I can see that he is holding himself together for this miserable moment under fluorescent light. He is brittle & essential

& I think, *be careful*. I ask him to come outside with me. There are others there— absurd, men & women waiting, watching in their swimsuits. The place is lit up

like a ballpark, but when we walk to the north end of the complex, we can see the blue mountains pushed up against the sky. We lean against the artificial

blue of the fence, bask in the chemical light of the pool. We are silent, & our skin touches in a way that makes me wonder if the whole world

isn't comprised of this very second. There is an empty shiver: my eyes are open. There is no surprise—the world is blue; the moment of death, instant.

**Depth**

Banana creepers scribble into the landscape—  
Green & wiry, stretching across telephone lines to  
smother  
Lush 'ohia trees, their flowers, red brush-like lehua.  
The girl is ushering the spinner dolphins through the  
warm water  
Along the coast, & as they make their way back to deep  
Seas, she touches one, a soft black, just long enough for  
it to pull  
Her down, a perfect blue become frightening, drenching,  
Stinging her eyes, she & hundreds of animals, both quick  
& frivolous,  
Pulling her further, into the waters that drop to a mile  
In places, places near to where she is. She feels  
As though she is floating, pushing deep into the sky.

But the night is crawling too—  
It is an ocean, darkened with stars that glitter in spite  
of it all,  
& it is creeping toward day, away  
From this dream that is drowning her, into which she has  
sunk,  
& here, as she tries to remember what breathing, what  
freedom  
Had felt like, she can only feel this ride down, this  
pull

Into the unknown. There are so many sensations which  
Memory records as the same. The night is like this,  
sometimes.

**Kona Beach Shack**

Startled again this morning by the sound of waves  
crashing  
sucking and shattering against the black rock  
several walls between us  
I lie in bed staring up at the dark  
black & reassuring as the ocean  
which falls in on itself again & again.  
I wonder if it can know that  
it measures my importance—there is no need for anything  
but noise, but the steady & slow reassurance  
of repetition, of this vague recollection, this familiar  
light beginning to bleed across the room.

## Meditation & Swimming

--for Peter

At the Kona pool, well past mid morning,  
the heat hovers in the sky, everywhere,  
& it illuminates the crystal blue, the cement  
oven that surrounds the water. I'm ritualistic,  
or compulsive, even on vacation: I'm here  
every day between 11 & 1, swimming to escape

the prattle of my mind, matters of the mundane  
& the metaphysical. This day is the same--  
I try to focus on nothing, absorb my body into it.  
But then I recognize the wander of a college  
friend, his gait steady through the lane, arms still  
strong & brown. I'm not surprised that when

we talk it is as though no time has passed  
between us. All those years apart, learning  
lessons the hard way, vaporize beneath the sun  
into nothing. & so it is again: man- & woman-  
children, bodies close & wanting  
to make sense of the world, find safety

in the universe. Somewhere in between we've  
tried our best. When he tells me he's engaged  
I surprise myself by saying the first thought  
on my mind, which is that the world sometimes  
startles with wonderful things. I am happy,  
an emotion I used to confuse with love.

We part after an hour of one another, resolved to stay  
close this time. I leave the pool momentarily chilled,  
my skin softened with water & pasted with chlorine.  
The sun warms; something quiet urges me  
on. I return to the monotony of everyday, am grateful  
for the discovery that what we do, we sometimes are.

**After Talking With My Brother About Surprise Attacks  
Which Begin in the Water**

In the dream there is always a chance  
that this water will envelop us all.

I am one of you, nameless, faceless. We  
are at sea, drifting, waiting, our bodies

clinging to nothing save what is real.  
We cannot drink the water. Our gear

weighs sixty pounds. We are weak  
& try not to think about dying of thirst.

Occasionally one of us thinks about  
dying another way, nobly-ambushed

in the dark, shot or by explosives. You  
are our special forces commander &

these are not your thoughts. In the wet  
dark of night & war, I remember the story

of a family in Alaska whose car broke down  
on the ice outside Kodiak. How they stayed

in the car until all the warmth had turned  
cold & started walking toward home

for as long as it took, likely knowing  
they would never see another car, would

never make it the dozens of miles to help.  
When hypothermia set in, their freezing

brains told them they were hot, an ecstatic  
final moment before death & they disrobed,

scatty with cold, garment by garment.  
The bodies were found after the car was

found, by following the footsteps on the ice  
& finally, the trail of hats, sweaters & underclothes.

**Planting Roots:**

We imagine a progress.

Teeth & skin, my fetish.  
Our heads fall together,  
yours an imperfect triangle;  
my arms are long gray wings  
& I pull you, small-armed,  
inside of me. My breasts are uneven.  
We are not art, & my sparrow hair,  
a gesture, falls away from you.  
We are shaped like flowers.  
It is always the waiting  
that makes you believe, so it's  
what we consume. We hope  
in flashes, longing carefully,  
reaching like willows in the spring.

### Breakfast With Kahana, Kona Pier

We find smooth spots along the jagged wall & sit,  
dangling sandy feet, watching waves slap blackness,  
captivated. The irony of places like this  
is not plumeria-spackled smoke stacks, ocean  
so blue it stings your eyes with salty color, ships  
floating like whispers, harbored like harmless daydreams.

It's not even what you imagine is underneath—smooth  
silver fins, the violet of deep, valleys of sand & coral  
gardens.

The impossibility of all that we could never see, no  
matter  
how we might try.

But the rock wall, made by other versions of us:  
careful lava shards puzzled together in a deliberately  
tentative pattern, slicked with ocean whitewash. How  
its design & purpose is to keep us from falling  
in, or throwing ourselves, for the beauty of it, for  
adventure,  
for love. A wall is a difficult thing to imagine, before  
it ever exists.

We choose or grow tired: walls make us question our  
relation  
to whatever they keep us from. We otherwise mightn't  
notice  
the separation. It's because we come from a long line,  
because we are one & the same as those who've piled these  
rocks  
together so meticulously. We realize our own tendencies,  
feel  
one another's weaknesses; & this, ostensibly, is what  
contains us.

**Earlier in the morning the sky**

was still dark & splattered with moon  
light, the roads were white  
with snow, the yards & fields

even fuller as we crunched along,  
alone to an early morning swim.  
It is one of our first married couple

rituals & we talk proudly of how  
we've managed to stick with it  
even in the cold & bleak of winter,

how we're alone on the roads, alone  
at the pool. It's too early for the rest  
of the world, you say, & I think

moon & stars & we can see our breath  
in this darkness, a part of the flickering blue  
light which yesterday only beckoned to me.



**Dear Beyond**

*Happy the eyes that can close.*

-- Alan Paton, Cry the Beloved Country

Tell me if this is true: I want to know  
what survives us, what's bequeathed

from mother to daughter, what's passed  
across oceans & migrations & border

crossings of the soul & every imaginable  
landscape. Some nights I dream of cities

rising brick by brick, cream colored &  
pink, flesh-like & built on enslaved sweat,

fishermen cleaning silver kettles of pewter  
fish, their eyes slab gray & forced open

by death, atrociously seeing & seeing & -  
men bent close to the earth, arms like scythes,

mountains grizzled with pine trees, ash  
trees swiped down for love of money, starved

boys, girls turned to ash, men & women made  
into soap, people loved & hated beyond

reason, an ocean of memories--all mine  
even in their hideous imaginableness--

which slosh against my skull. I wake to  
shadows I have been or will become:

flutter of leaf to ground, birds returning,  
too early, to naked trees. Movement

in the corner of everywhere. What is there  
unrepeatable, what cannot be handed down?

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Angel, Ralph. "Even Because." *Twice Removed*. Louisville: Sarabande Books, 2001.
- Cole, Henri. "Chiffon Morning." *The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Poetry*. New York: Random House, 2003.
- Forche, Carolyn, "Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness," *American Poetry Review* 22:2 (March-April 1993), 17.
- Fox, Alan. Interview with Yusef Komunyakaa. *Rattle*. November 1998.
- Hull, Lynda. Suite for Emily. *The Only World*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1995.
- Komunyakaa, Yusef. "Facing It." *Dien Cai Dau*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1998.
- Merwin, W.S. "Letters." *The Vixen*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002.
- . "Witness." *The Rain in the Trees*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988.
- Sexton, Anne. "Live." *The Complete Poems*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1981.