Dear Beyond

Kirsten Hemmy

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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
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Western Michigan University
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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.
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Acknowledgments—continued

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Kirsten Hemmy
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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, unrecreatable, 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 inabilities 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
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 toubaab—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,
hide 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. Ndiassing 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, 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 Forche 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 Forche 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 Forché 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 hold
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.
Les cieux sont clairs et l'océan est clarifiant 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 19th 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

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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.
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.
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 11th, 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
depth & 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

drops & 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 pivotalness: 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.

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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?


