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To the University Council:

The Thesis Committee for Jonathan Owen May certifies that this is the final approved version of the following electronic thesis: "Dark Continent."

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DARK CONTINENT

by

Jonathan Owen May

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Major: Creative Writing

The University of Memphis

May 2011

## Abstract

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

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

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Lana

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

“Mugabe to Seize White-Owned Farms”

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



## On Thirst

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

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

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

Love

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

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

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

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

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

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

Buzz

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

## Abundance

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

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

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

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

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

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

## On Reserve

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

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

My skin tempts  
the mosquitoes  
through the green mesh.

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

I don't dare leave the netting.

## Church

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

## Cartography

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

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

## The Varieties of Religious Experience

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

## Mandrake the Magician

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

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

The glove drops.

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

## On Uncertainty

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

“Mugabe Rejects Charges That Detainees Are Tortured”

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

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

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

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

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

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

## The Dog

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

## Mandrake Makes a Lullaby

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

To my sister Jennifer

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

///

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

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

[No stanza break]

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

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

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

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

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

another time when our hands were holding one another.

## Mandrake Seeks Out a Witch

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

The Car Ride Home

*Bulawayo, Zimbabwe 1992*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lobster

*for my grandmother*

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

[No stanza break]

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

## Childhood Noir

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

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

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

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

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

After Lothar Dies

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

## Everyday Pornography

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

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

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

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

Bellodonna

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

each attempt holding both of our breaths hostage.

November

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

## There Are Always Pieces Missing

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

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

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

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

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

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

[No stanza break]

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

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

## The Water Within Me

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

System of Love  
*for Thom Gunn*

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

## Lothar Watches Mandrake at Breakfast

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

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

each bite tinged with  
sin hot as thighs  
by my noticing

## Rodeo Drive

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

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

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

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

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

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

[No stanza break]

about diets and fucking, anything but the weather?

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

## Mandrake Dreams of Lothar

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

In the Kitchen

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

all the bodies filled with salt)

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

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

*tonight*

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

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

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

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

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

## Dafna

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

## Dark Continent

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

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

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

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

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

*What is caution?*

The Beautiful Room is Empty  
*for Edmund White*

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

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

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

Where is the body that ever forgets?

New Orleans, New Year's Eve 2009

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

## Faith

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

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

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

## On Judgment

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

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

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

And this is the pleasure I have learned.

## God of the Hanged

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I just have to stop”

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

## Luminaries

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