

FALLING TOWARDS THE CENTRE

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Creative Writing

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by

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Abstract

I am interested in the poem as a textual body that is able to collect the ruptures, silences, music, and wounds of the body, Ukuzithutha, in order to perform their address. I seek to assemble these disfigured and fractured bodies, of which I am one, onto the page. And thus create an experimental, non-linear lyric of repetitions and fragmentations arranged into a memory text, to hold these stories against what Audre Lorde calls 'the tyranny of silence'. My thesis is influenced by Ntozake Shange's choreopoem, 'for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow was enough', Claudia Rankine's 'Don't let me be Lonely', Sindiswa Bukusu's 'Loud and yellow laughter'. And Fiona Benson's 'Vertigo and Ghost' whose form and lyric is a strong influence on the shape of the manuscript, and the construction of its mythologies.



A Telling In Two parts

By
Vuyelwa Maluleke

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PART ONE:

LIST OF COMPLAINANTS*:

- GIRL
- THE SISTER
- MOTHER
- FATHER

*How do you make a picture/the body which is testimony /the body you can only say to yourself/ the body who is a spy/the daughter/maybe the writer is asylum/the body waiting for evacuations/kin of the letter telephone/the cable mouthed kiss/the body that goes missing appears in this story/as warm as a hole/a friend/ honour it, say, I love you/now the hole is a very fancy line/ and I am afraid I don't know what flower to wear to yesterday/I love you, says the sister/love can defend a secret just as well as a gun/ *what are you hesitant to tell me?*/ a gun walks into a bar and falls in love with staying alive/ and you fall in love with living again/ with walking away/walking off with all your weight/the body needs a splint-a voice-supple spine of memory/*you want to tell me something?*/ Mother: to remember, we must use the language of forgetting/place both hands on this woman/ place your mouth over her speech/*where did you go?*/the shadow of sweet things is sorrow/or a moaning thing with one life/*why do you drink until you disappear?*/this one life is beautiful/thank you and the way you look at me is my pleasure/ I gave that pleasure to you, you can say thank you now/Girl, your mask is beautiful/ and heavy/a wooden light/I must look away from it sometimes/ to triumph over silence/ to avoid being a mask too/ to shift the root/ the fear/the truth is unethical/ is more vulnerable than a lie/don't look for me here/ the lie is honourable/like history/we are a myth/a poem/a hole/ I make us good/make us nice/strike dumb/strike sleek/strike english what is hideous and should not be named/I take our father out of the story/ say, we don't remember who killed me first/ say, look i still have my one life/ *you understand now?*/whatever we say is a lie.

[WIRETAP:THE SISTERS¹]



GIRL: can I tell you a secret?

[sister is a pause so long it turns into stone]

GIRL: (whispering) God is dead and no one wants to say it

[sister laughs like a shadow trapped in a room all night]

GIRL: we make ourselves, and there is never rest from it.

[sister is a church looking away]

GIRL: You know that magic² runs in our family?

we can cut around the water in one GIRL
to make the bones in another.

GIRL: If I am right, someone is stealing our secret
and saying they made us.

¹ Clay of two skies assembled in water. [see also: twins; a disguise] GIRLS made on the eighth day

² A pleasure so elastic it is a ripple fired in mothers tea

[ALLEGATIONS: SONG OF GHOSTS}

Praise to them Lord
these dangers³
that raise themselves
these GIRLS heavier than death
these dazzling & Black GIRLS:
a bloom so mean it is a blindness
you cannot report in the mouth.

Tomorrow,
more of us will come
found & vivid & waiting
a praise so sharp it is rage
& nightshade & gold chain
& visiting in you
[what is the body but a debt
that must eventually
be paid]⁴

Besides,
this is the reward
this is the law of grace
this is the warning:
you cannot call off
what you have
already destroyed.

³ If you are not frightened you do not have enough information

⁴ SCENARIO 1

[EVIDENCE: BIRTH OF GIRL]

DEPARTMENT OF HOME AFFAIRS BI - 5

[REDACTED]

PARTICULARS FROM THE POPULATION REGISTER I.R.O.:

[REDACTED]

BIRTH/GEBOORTE

IDENTITEITSNR: 891223 [REDACTED]
IDENTITY NO:

VAN: [REDACTED]
SURNAME:

VOORNAAM: [REDACTED]
FIRST NAMES:

GEBOORTEDATUM: 1989-12-23
DATE OF BIRTH:

GESLAG: FEMALE
SEX:

GEBOORTELAND: SOUTH AFRICA
COUNTRY OF BIRTH:

DATUM UITGEREIK: 1994-12-14
DATE ISSUED:

[STATEMENT OF GIRL: THE CREATION STORY]

you thought we were dead

....

Sister looks like

her mother and her father

she is a face knocking under the house

she is an adult when she is born

she is the service door into the world

....

I am the second journey

pulling down the world

rowing out of mother

by needle on water

....

it is difficult to leave

the melting world

the ankles the knuckles

the cave of rains

but we come

my sister and me

....

[GIRL slowly pushes her skin out until it is a person standing across from her]

we go go go

[collapses hands]

we fall in [catching her breath]

with the rack of screams

the weeping sweat the leak that makes us

....

mothers is a whimper that bursts into salt

the shivering eyes the letting go

[EVIDENCE: DISCARDED LETTERS BETWEEN GIRL AND SISTER]

Dear sister

do you remember,

how we [REDACTED] mother [REDACTED]

and peel [REDACTED] the muscle [REDACTED] breaking us?

....

Dear sister

[REDACTED] again [REDACTED]

you have [REDACTED] the last letter

Is it because you do not want to remember?

Or is it because [REDACTED]

....

Dear sister

Are you [REDACTED] ?

[REDACTED] teach the girls [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] they know [REDACTED] they have hands.

....

Dear sister

Thank you, [REDACTED] yes,

the [REDACTED] women

[REDACTED] touch [REDACTED] to fall out of the sky.

....

Dear sister

[REDACTED] the hymn?

break open the touch

break open the begging

break past the sky

pulling on the water

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

come 5

⁵ the dripping ocean

sad ash of clouds

[INVESTIGATION NOTES]

SCENARIO 2

GIRL is asleep⁶ against the window of a moving taxi. the streetlights move into her face like a sea horse; a yellow so sluggish it cannot make holes in the slumber. GIRL wears her mother's tired body around her neck. a body that cannot touch but catches plates, catches the salt dripping from the people in the walls. love has left the world. love is a thing with teeth. love is an example of darkness. love is humming a scream. Someone in the audience says 'No one will marry her'. her girlhood tears to the sound of time. it never goes quiet. It never goes still. GIRL thinks loving women is the one way to leave home. GIRL leaves and leaves and leaves



⁶ what is the body but a seed with a film in the middle

[SURVEILLANCE OF GIRL AT HOME]

SAFE: A SELF PORTRAIT

Greet the body⁷
the borrowed address
the knives falling
like tongues in your chest
everywhere
everywhere,
mend flesh into knuckle
everywhere



Says *stay, stay and meet me in the fight*

In that black chamber of voice
under the roof of your blood
-a hollow miles away from hands.

Say *stay, stay and meet me in the flight*

in the ankle of mouth:
the gin black molar of girls without a
church
& the spiked bone that pilots the girl
milking the elbows of bad words.

You cannot eat hunger alone

So come with me, into the mirror
along the lose dress of its heels
Say to your tongue:
the palm of this world

Come, come I'll make you safe

⁷ A damp black moon; the rib boned palm

⁸ A chorus that poisons the rot

[WIRETAP:A CLASSROOM OF CRUELTIES]

Bang:

In primary school I was a runner
a dark blue grim, barefoot blast
counting two directions
to follow behind the other girls.



Bang:

look left and then right
What kind of news slows the metal,
the girl?

Bang:

nine
I am foaming, coming away
from the gaps of my smile
(swallowing a black word)⁹
into the Palmolive soap
I am a childhood with bitter hands.

Bang:

A white woman is a lesson you should never swallow.

Bang:

sixteen
Father falling like an eye, a trick
the bones on his left dripping to the floor.
The daughters who do not yet know that dying
takes as long as all of your life

Bang:

I am almost thirty.
I am sixteen and nine
a runner trying to finish dying

⁹ Black is the past participle of People. [see also: 'You People']

[INVESTIGATION: NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH]

[STATEMENT OF GIRL]

In our neighbourhood the sun hovers over you like grease
like an older woman who is not my mother
someone who thinks she is everyone's mother.
like a case officer but in that ubuntu way.

[SURVEILLANCE: CODENAMES]

mother codename MMA [heard: the sound a locust makes]
mother codename TELEPHONE [heard: 'did you hear? She wants to marry a
woman. That one is trying to kill her mother']

[SURVEILLANCE: NEIGHBOURHOOD SAFETY BULLETIN BOARD]

build your fences high with brothers loud music stomach of the ocean.

[SURVEILLANCE: WOMAN STANDING OUTSIDE HER HOME IN HER GOWN]

MMA is a birdwatcher
and
there are so few trees in the township.

[STATEMENT FROM GIRL: PANIC]

MMA is a government employee:
sweeps the rumour out of her grass
into the wind sweeps the wind
into her neighbour's yard
waits in the flap of her broom
for you to greet first.

i do not say 'hello'
HELLO is the name
of the dog two streets away
collar like a trap a wedding
teeth like a scar net of hooks

BEWARE THE FREE

not that you asked or anything but

(whispers)

build your fences high

echo of a castle

vapour of a shark.

again, not that you asked or anything but

(whispers)

move some place wider

with trees.

cover your personal business with trees.

[WIRETAP: TERMS OF ENDEARMENT]

GIRL's mother to GIRL: 'Some of the things you say are hurtful'

[SURVEILLANCE: NEIGHBOURHOOD WOMEN]

the collective noun for women standing in groups of at least four in the township is

1. A gossip
2. A telephone
3. A lookout
4. A tape
5. A church

[SURVEILLANCE:THE MUMBLING UL-DE-SAC. WOMEN ON STREET CORNER]

The hour of tongues rustling around the waist.

the murmur of nightgowns the croaky hedge of wigs.

[STATEMENT OF GIRL: PANIC NOTES IN THE MARGINS]

(whispers)

turn the other way.

go someplace with shade

some place the eyes cannot count.

and build your fences high tail of a man paw of a ghost.

The locusts gossip

spread your legs open

into the wrong boys mouth.

[WIRETAP: BIKO ACCENT AT NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH MEETING]

‘It is not a mistake that there are so few trees in the township’.

[WIRETAP: NEIGHBOUR OF GIRL]

‘that one likes girls’

[WIRETAP: BIKO ACCENT AT NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH MEETING]

‘they took the trees to leave us out of the treasure’

[WIRETAP: GIRL TO FRIEND AT NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH MEETING]

(whispering)

build your fences high

with broken tongues

fist of the wind.

[WIRETAP: NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH MEETING CLOSING COMMENTS]

they took the trees and you believe you are ugly.

you are wrong.

[STATEMENT OF GIRL: PHONECALL AFTER THE FACT]

the whole neighbourhood watches your body for you [hostile pause] keeps you clean.
a ringing telephone keeps you out of trouble.

[INVESTIGATION NOTES]

THE GIRLS AS BLACKSMITHS*

(Bana ba Motho ba kgauganya tlogo ya tsie -Setswana proverb)

GIRL 1 and GIRL 2

sit in this line

facing each other.

so close a question

makes its sounds

in the other.

Yes answers GIRL 1

And the moon cools

into black,

to blindfold the night

Yes answers GIRL 2

Placing her cheek

on the hot stove

to warm the house

Yes answer both

sister is a doing list

a room you can walk

into in the dark,

a man in the room.

Another story:

I split my blame

down the middle

and give half

to my sister.

*Yes*¹⁰

Take this girl

Give her to the line,

dislocate her joints

Give her to the thief

And, what does this

tell you about loss:

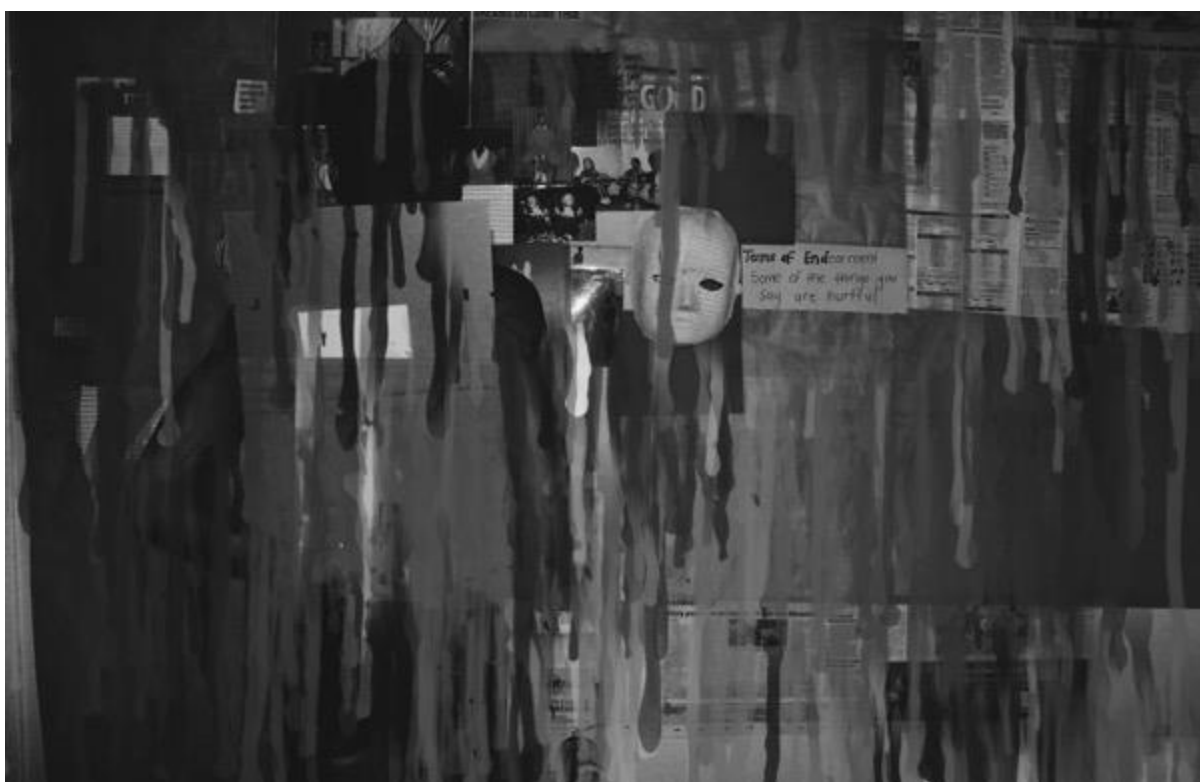
the night we are

a member of?

¹⁰ Black body must make a slave before she dies. make food from mourning. why are you looking for her name?

[INVESTIGATION NOTES]

SCENARIO 3



What is the body but a night

steeped in drowning

[SURVEILLANCE: GIRL IN CRISIS]

WATER

A Blue light is focused at the centre of the stage, where a legless bath sits like a blister, a boat, the march of many palms withering in the water. The bath which was once white, nibbles its colour until it is a brown bowl stealing a last journey across the body of a girl. Because it wants to go unnoticed it holds its breath as GIRL soaps her body and crumbles into the water, in bubbles. GIRL moves slowly, a grief soaping first the piece of rope she will use to clean herself and then her face, down around the margins of her voice, shoulders, and arms. The neck cajoles the rope into a charm that could swing the girl like a leaf, or swing her slant until she has eyes as wild as stop signs, or begs like Christ. GIRL does not surround her name too long with the rope.

GIRL: (rinsing the soap from the rope)

Under the foam
of a damp light
filthy girl spreads
barren crescent
of gladness. spine of
go and come, come
a coming of throats
thistle of barren winds.
filthy girl is moist
a used coffin
a harbour in black.
Honey, I owe
death a body.
Only filthy girls
wash their names
out with a wreath
made in the same
lesion they used
to wet the body.

God left a miracle in the women. so GIRL lifts the water from the rope. this woman wants to climb. To kill the mother in the voice. this woman will beg like Christ. Or chase her tongue like a dog. The go and come, coming. She wears the rope around her neck. legs of a hollow woman. she inserts the end of her tongue into the greed. pulls both ends in opposite directions until the knot is a father. and home hangs over her like a grave. She undoes the knot and the cross. belongs to no one. and the rope hangs, close to her armpit. a friend. she twists the friend around her arm, her stomach, and her throat. marking a disappearance. GIRL takes down the rope, pulling it through the right rib and it collapses her mouth into the water. Her teeth fall, an appointment tearing the water. She begins soaping her rope to build the fire in 'help me'. The rope like the girl falsifies its courage-the valley of feathers.

GIRL looks into the floor through the water and the red sand at her dead cousin.

GIRL: How are you?

silence

so many bones and you never answer?

silence

Say GIRL must go under death to talk to her cousin. Say swing low, sweet chariot and let me ride. Say GIRL wants to be held by a mother who will eat the echo in her chest. a mother who eats names. Say a third thing we cannot remember because GIRL starts running in the water her name already in mother's mouth. it is too late and we cannot stop running. It is too late and we cannot maintain eye contact with living. To run further GIRL steps out of the bath and turns it over. The rope drops from the top of the stage. a photograph waiting for GIRL to climb in.

GIRL: *(stepping into the noose)*

In the flood
the house rocks
until mother brings
us into the kitchen
tells us to close our ears
and fall until our shadows
disappear into the water

Snap to black

[INVESTIGATION NOTES]

SCENARIO 4



What is the body but the levy
Of what remembers and what cannot remember
The echo of a blast come to say

[EVIDENCE: PERSONAL EFFECTS]

A PURSE FULL OF BLACK



My tooth is so honest it aches
a howl swarming the bone
a daylight in the body a fence
trying to pursue a better body for herself.
I wonder if a stronger woman can grow
into the gap she will leave behind.
& what if all she leaves behind is
a purse full of black and more self-pity

....

And maybe we are not made for very beautiful things, like teeth.

....

People tell me that I am most beautiful when I smile. I smile most when I am tired, to
gain control over my life in public I smile.

....

A father is an army. Or a father is a war.

And during the war the carpet is maroon and you are eight, or twelve, or sixteen. And only the adults stand in the windows. You are a daughter so you walk on the bones in your belly to avoid being seen. the carpet files its nails on your skin. you clean the carpet on your knees because the war does not believe in vacuum cleaners. Perhaps you do not own a vacuum cleaner.

I cannot know anymore when I am telling a lie.

The house is always clean. You are always fed. You and your sister play quietly until bedtime from the bedroom to the kitchen, from the kitchen to the bathroom, from the bathroom to the lounge. You do not look your father in the eyes. you do not talk back. Especially, you must not ask the father if God exists. *Because that is the kind of shit you ask your teachers.*

....

When you cry and the war tells you to stop crying or it will give you something to cry about, you listen and build in yourself a wall so high the sky cannot get in, cannot flood you with anything, not daylight, or rain, or love. One day, when you are still a girl, the father hits you on the hand with a belt and you do not cry. When you do not cry father asks you if you think you are a woman now. To get from the woman to the daughter he breaks the skin some more. And when you cry you are his girl again.

....

curiosity is blasphemous.

are you listening?

I need help defending my words.

I need help to say that sometimes I look in the mirror and wonder if there is another woman in the seams

and will not she live my life for me?

will not she smile for me?

why.

why not.

why will not the body let us lie?

....

I am born so many times.

First I am a girl, then a teacher puts soap in my mouth for saying a black word and then I am Black. One day when I am a Black girl and know what to do to keep the soap out of my mouth, a bone breaks and bleeds out of spite. My aunt who was always a Black Woman tells me how to wash off the blood. But I cannot wash the pain off the blood, that must stay. This is woman's work. My aunt tells me to stay away from pleasure, to stay away from chocolate and white pants and boys; and for a long time I am convinced that pleasure will make me look fat so I do not allow myself to be touched. I am a Black woman then. when I am a Black woman I let men touch me because it is one way to remain untouched. I let men touch me because I am a woman who loves women and some of the men in my country will kill you to make you into a woman they can break in half. That is how we love each other on earth.

....

Pop Quiz:

If each time that I am born I give up my freedom, what am I?

....

My canines are sharp.

someone says, "why do you need such sharp teeth"

the way that people who think they are revealing something to you ask.

"for people," I said.

I am sharpening my mouth to break through the skin of the emptiness into which I rise.

....

To make sure that the body does not come down stuff the open spaces with food.

....

Someone measures the wrist

the bracket the proof

the nod the obedient government of our hand.

Do other women know that they should want a body that is so small it fits around the horizon of an index finger and a thumb?

have you tried shaking hands with a woman that is dissolving?

....

No one tells you that it is okay to be a colour without light. The thing being born through the thing that is already alive. That you must bear the scream and know that you are coming.

....

In every poem I am trying to ask a question about a murder:

If I am not touched how can I know that I am alive?

If my father spends days not speaking, and not dying is he alive?

If I kill myself will I go to hell?

....

My father fetches the years from the east into the west. My father is a railway man, then a policeman, then a man. But before my father is a man he gives me his east and west to pay for a top row of beautiful teeth. A beauty so crowded it takes years to make straight. Beauty hurts from the time I am twelve until I am seventeen. My mother says that I needed the braces, that without them I would have had an underbite. A face with a drawer always open. Who loves a thing that is always waiting to be filled? In this new face I can hide my want. In this face I look like other girls, famished but without hunger.

....

This body is a needle looking for a damage. I do not know how to love women that do not need mending. This body is woman's work. A woman without a tear tries to love me and although she is beautiful I cannot bring us together, no matter how often I tell my friends that I want to be loved right.

[INVESTIGATION NOTES]

SCENARIO 5



What is the body but my brilliant capital

a city built over the wound

[EVIDENCE: AFTER THE CLUB]
THIS SONG WANTS ME TO CRY¹¹

(open to a pitch black stage.)

a yellow spotlight snaps open on centre stage, revealing GIRL sitting at the edge of the bath brushing her teeth and humming a song about murda. She is wrapped in a blue towel. The injured toothbrush in her mouth moves over the teeth and the song. She gets up onto the cliff of light to spit out the toothpaste. returns into the light. facing the audience

GIRL:

the sound of bath water pours into
the darkness/ mothers voice knocks
on the door and says
'uya'swimma?'/ Seyi Sheyi (feat.
Patoranking & Shaydee) sing about
a murder/ the body sowed into the
crimes of a song/a green woman
leans forward and bursts the song
in her hands/onetwothree/one two/i
am having a good time/you dance
until you are the curse/i have bad
knees, if i went down like that my
shadow wouldn't get back up/we
drip and submit the burden which
is that *I love you, but I am not IN
love with you/* the needful
enters/still and black as a
beetle/you multiply into the person
dancing next to you/ take my hand
and lead me home/raise the blue

light into a woman/the fan arches
its back to cool mine/smoke enters
through the hair/*I've never seen
anything like it/*you enter through
the portal of a glance/suck me
through the doors of my body/
onetwothree/one two/hips/a
horizon facing away/played
backwards/ass bent over/ass
holding the centre/ *I can see how a
person like that can get under your
skin/*alcohol swells the words
shut/stretches the body until it is as
wide as night/and the sweat
painting its ghosts rolls into the
drought/a woman in a body that
cannot catch turns is probably
sober/ *Say you no go running?/* i'm
scared/ i want closeness/what rope
do we use to hold up a broken

¹¹ to believe in love when love is just an attempt to restate a broken memory.

heart/pity/ i want to squeeze into
your skin/a pin/ a daylight/ lean
and intolerable/ another woman sits
and watches us wring the sorrow
out of our bodies/ i am having a
good time/ the song that
remembers you pushes up against
me in the club and i want to cry/
onetwothree/one two/ a thirst roots/
one two/ i dance until i cannot be
straightened/ the body is the error/
the sin held with gritted teeth/ you
keep turning in the club lights/a
rainbow during decline/the dark

things touch us all/ onetwothree/
one two/ i must grow/ i must grow
thick/I must grow a thicker heart/

[WIRETAP: GIRL AND SISTER]

I SHOULD SMILE¹² MORE:

the walls of my favourite place
shine like grandmothers wedding teeth

& i sink like a moth, then a kennel into the bath
clenching my sadness under the water

this woman is a coffin we must keep clean for guests
this woman is tired, a bowl, a ditch breathing underwater

I steam my name on the basin in an orange cup
to weed a lovers touch out of the corners

I scrub with a sack of oranges to pull the collar
of longing off the skin & soften my tail
so that a more beautiful girl can grow into the bones

a woman who cannot hide her need
barks forever around the city,
her tail growing as long as the moon

Who wants to love a thing
that is always smelling the dishes for love?

¹² Allow the show that takes chance within me to be seen by others. [see also whistle or splinter]

[WIRETAP: GRANDMOTHER AND GIRL]

B FOR¹³



Do not go missing darling Black body my catastrophe
do not you know better than to tell everybody our business?

¹³ The apparent similarities to a fairy tale or the childhood game ‘Black shoe, Black shoe change your foot’ are purely coincidental. This is a true story. This is a premonition. This is a laying open of emergencies.

PART TWO:

WEARING ONLY A SMILE



I hope to die of an overdose
a pleasure of any kind

ODE TO THE DELSEY SUITCASE

Mother leads home in
by a square leash
dog of red
of suitcase
of bloated mars come back
rolling like a hospital
wrapped everywhere
like a hole a woman
to prevent being scratched
climbed into looted
of absence of sweetness

....

months returned in garments
returned in broken GIRLS

....

You
flesh sewn with stones
and red rain
bloat of a fish
carried home
through two airports
through a tide of skies

....

 you bloody gleam
 clapping across the paving

....

you
sweat of tags
waking the rooms
to nurse the GIRLS
the orphans

....

to nurse the sour dust of longing
fenced behind the ears

....

You're here now.
unpack, lick back the mother
broken from their face.

A WOUND TOO INJURED TO BE SWEET

A weary orchard sits in the father couch
as still as a painting of a house near water
a winter in the voice

*you must speak or God will take
the only fire in your house*

confession:

the clock in our house eats three meals

my mother takes in her
tea a spoonful of smoke

we can't both be sick she says
how will you get to home?

THIS IS YOURS

say what you want about love your township
but it is the only eternity you can make

without scorn or revision or a passport
& all through the year you can't look away from it

They want to know when you will give it back
& if it is *yours, yours*. & so you say *yes*

because you know how to wrap a fire and make it safe.
they will want to touch it, do not let them.

Honey, be the dog barking in the chest like an electric fence
You will have to fight a stranger to keep what's yours.

.

ODE TO THE RIVER

Did you hear about the river that drowned
in a bath?/ she was bent at the eyes with a
spine only a hole could dress/ in my
culture we keep our shadows in the
water/*what would you like me to forget?*/in
a famous photograph: a river made
homeless burns the basin looking for its
family/ in my culture we keep our water in
the women & drink until we are empty/ *he
spat on me*/ Sometimes I am ashamed that
I am too much a museum of floods/ what
God has put together man turns into sin/ I
always wanted someone to have control
over me/like glass/ in the bath i sink like
soap/ the sky makes itself as tender as the
ocean/ drinks until it drips/that is where its
blue comes from/ and the river being a
smaller sky is as doomed as glass/ *he spat
on me*/ a river cannot be lifted from the
bath by an ambulance/ & Black Women
have to die to be named/ my father's
champagne glass slips out of my hand and
sweetens the floor/ it is strong enough to
cry/ & did anyone ever tell you/ that you
have the kind of face that makes paper
beautiful/ *he spat on me*/ what God has put
together man puts in a vase/ run, run,
forget your duty/we pity the woman who
borrows her neck to the man she loves/ we
pity our mothers for marrying/ we love our
fathers/ it is summer and the bones in our
sugar have hardened/ they tell you that if

you are strong enough to give your songs
away then you're strong enough to take
them back/ *he actually spat, on me?/* They
don't tell you what to do when your
children look like you.

FURCULAR

& nevermore shall it be
that the tongue be as spiteful as God:
the lemon dark palm who made the wind
that will not lift our dead an impenetrable tenderness
latched away from us & nevermore our country

[I'm sorry]
this land is only a country because
it can change its mind wander off leave you behind.
sing the anthem nevermore while it disfigures you.
[I'm sorry] if that is love but what kind of love
can bear one hook pulled with the feet
into the family through the son the daughter
forty eight times forty eight times nevermore
& nevermore will we kill on behalf of flowers.

& when the water runs out on behalf of us
a plea will come like a drought & all the people
we took from each other will make a window in us
& with all those dead watching nevermore
shall we so easily say *I wasn't there*.

BASED ON A TRUE STORY

the club tightens around the sorrow of gladsome music

the weary load of sweat the softened teeth

the woman you borrowed tonight narrows

like a riddle when touched or looked at

& what you are running from cannot catch you here

& what you sow you must hand over to the last song

to the feet half full the face dripping mascara

dripping mother dripping until you are near yourself

a woman lit by darkness a darkness lit out of mercy

come in come in kiss me & I will win your sadness from you

come in a mouth is like a song it is a good place to wait

for something more deliberate than love

I AM ALWAYS MOVING TOWARDS YOU

What we do not say to each other
bites speech into ultimatums
a guillotine chorus
you
you never
you always
we go on like this, skinning words
until body is a wet star thrown into desire
and we are both a panting weapon.

I think of you that way

not aging, cool inside the fire
tongue curved into the tail of a dog
touching and waiting to touch again
an offering that does not consume itself

does my name come up?

a thirst lines the border of my thighs
Like hunger, they cannot remember being full

a woman with a wife is a wheel
that will leave with your body
and whoever touches you next cannot arrive

do you think a well knows when it is full?

Love, I am flammable
until the brown grass of my body glows through the night
and my name softens to ash in my mouth

the loss of you blows about me
can you touch me and tell me what it says?

I must tell you that I am more beautiful now than you remember

HONEYMOON

In Durban,
after sleeping
at the Maharaj hotel
the **ocean** disrobes
at the top of a rock
into a pink bathing suit
in front of her railway man

truthfully, God would like
to wear pink straps too
God would like to be in love
in his photographs too
so when the ocean is away
God steals the railway man
out of her cupboard

& the ocean ages like a spider

NIGHT WOMEN

After Kaveh Akbar

Night woman in shaky hands. Night in honey.
Night mouth: palm of guilty neck, woman
spread like a trembling. bring in night. Night jar
mess of need and loneliness. Night spider. Night witch.

the winded bell. The webbed cage. pleasure in unison.
Night breast ticking like an bowl. Night mending
on flesh. Night? mends in the throat

Night in whom the lines curve.

Night sermon lead in the knees, song of gladness.
white night in the burning spine. Night that contests sleep. Night
of short nails. *Nightsong*. My love, Night of winded appeals

and approaching thirsts. Night woman, dripping like
the begging in praise. Night, confessing it outright into the fingers
Night who held her mouth while it was happening.

ON VIOLENCE

Is it love?
stealing from blame
to injure your need

chasing like a lamp
a house a trap
into a woman

are you not tired?

....

lower the body into the funeral of sleep
ask grandmother to remove the women who did not love you
fold the toes through the foot of a desk & there is a door
eat the left arm open & there is a door

....

For nothing is impossible:
cut through the woman until a choir of necks sob
at the door of the love you cannot leave

come in
come in

....

forgiveness is a tomb
& everyone will leave me twice

....

~~-wash laundry-~~
~~-take your stuff for repair- mama says it's not expensive~~
~~-buy walking shoes~~
~~-I can do all things-~~

~~-nail clipper, nail file, cuticle pusher-~~

....

GIRL is a closed hand
a stone that cannot eat
a stone that drowns saying her name

....

Yes, I bend my knees backwards to fall away from love
Yes. Why did you not come looking for me?

....

my appetite is thirsty
& cold & looking away
& what I need is to cry out

....

I lead the GIRL from the wound
into the throat - the quivering boat of sorrows
I bark & scratch dig & circle the bath water
to mourn the hands on my body

FLESH

You _____

climbing the body like rain

letting go of tomorrow to get here

you must say your name before we enter this house

You _____

whistled into the phone

the colour of your mouth cracks to let me in

leave the murdered man and his wife

leave your wife

You _____

rowing the oath that swings like blood above us

weighting each spine: for better and in health

you store all of your splitting in the eyes?

You _____

crossing this body to get closer between us

to plead the woman out the throat *Do you do this with your wife too?*

You are beautiful, but you are not what I asked for

ELEVEN FALSE REPORTS AND ONE TRUTH

1. At a model c school, where you learn to speak through a cage
you breed a season
in a little dish.
2. In class that green arm rises out of its bean body to say
please god, see me through this season?
3. Internal dialogue: 'Are you God god?
a double the line with its eyes always open?
do you mind if i avoid you too?'
4. The secret says a woman who clenches her mouth & does not get up
from her burdens to sing when everyone else is begging
cannot hail her blessings.
5. Her mother says she wants away, into a hunger so white it is a pill
or a season naked in the cold.
6. Praying sounds a lot like begging, and that sounds a lot like negative energy.
7. You fill your hands with absence and wish for water or fire. Whatever keeps your
secret from the page
8. You do not believe in small or big G god.
9. How to spread: Devotion is primitive. You can't buy one spoon, or a pair of spoons,
those things love in crowds like people should.
10. I am ugly. I am ugly. I am ugly.

11. Friendship trends this season: glossy eyelids, the silent treatment and brushing yourself out like a wolf.

12. I do not come out of the house until night time when my cup is full of wine
& the same lyric repeats until my body is a funnel through which i can come
and go without losing.

ALLEGORY OF BLACK GIRL AS A MIRROR

Say then that I am overflowing
& nobody's fool & did not give up

& this face secret brew of want
of difficult women & midnights shelter

a tide met in the mouth is collateral,
or inheritance, is a quarry of petrified hands

a spoon dragging the body into the bone.
Mama was a nurse so I became a writer

her cures are better than mine
but my tongue can carry our dead

falling to us from the water or
falling to us from the heavens.

& what do we call the GIRL
looking away from herself?

The tongue fearful of taking the sky
the tongue breaking in the breath,

a spook? Daughter is a mirror given
to the world as gently as bad luck.

SELF PORTRAIT AS BRENDA FASSIE OR JESUS AS A BAD GIRL

I give up my ghost
to make other people's problems my problems

& I go platinum, I go statue
I go higher, to where the sky droops into heaven

& fall back into my body.
I'll be shouting & shouting & no one will want to hear me

& sometimes I'll sing at a funeral & a wedding at the same time
so you know, I've lived & died & seen it all

like to marry is a woman problem
like in both cases she is the outfit

& collecting all that darkness may make your tears into stars,
but only in photographs, when the flash is on & the night is on & you are Black

so do not give your presence away
they want you to. they will ask you to

not to the beautiful
or the body like a chandelier of mothballs
or the money thicker than expensive grass.

Borrow yourself to happiness
You wanna be loved. You just wanna to be loved

& I know I made dying famous
cause I can sing any song, but it's a lot harder than it looks.

Anyway, I'm working on a come back
next year. Nothing is impossible

