

One Leg at a Time

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by

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Abstract

This collection of poems explores the boundaries between certainty and uncertainty, between the desire for meaning and the destabilisation of meaning.

The content encompasses everyday life, love and loss, and the ambiguities are reflected in the forms used, so that, for instance, the linear continuity of narrative and the musicality of the lyric may be juxtaposed with the fragmented and imagistic leaps of the associative poem.

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Family

The four of us, traveling

Together in the family car,
each one was somehow bound
to look out her window,
passing discretely
those fragments of landscape.

Funny how, when the world is vast
or empty, how much more
slowly and clearly it all passes by.
And when it's full, of trees for instance,
how well it makes a fence
that ripples like water
across the surface of everything
so that you don't know where to look.

We were never allowed to listen
to music on headphones in the car;
my father considered it rude; I do too.
So there we were, in our silence being
just the four of us, traveling.
I can't remember where.

Letters

We placed our letters, carefully folded in hope
on the windowsill each night
to find the way across gardens and dreams
and to reach the fairies.

They always wrote back in tiny curled letters
and sometimes with invisible ink.
Our father would lightly burn the paper
to make the words appear.

One morning all the couches were turned upside down,
the pillows flung across the room.
The fairies wrote to apologise.
Those naughty dwarves were out of control.

To make up for the mess they left us lollipop candies
in pink and green icing. I bought one the other day
at the local grocery store. It was old and dry
and crumbled between my fingers.

Alida

every day she takes six pills
some are small and white and round
others are green or brown or oval

she fills the compartments starting with M
for Monday
one of each per day until the box is filled
but her hands are unsteady
the box overturns
the pills spill across the carpet

my sister and I pick them up
and watch
as she feels a tiny pill
with her pink-gloved fingers
rolls it back and forth
feeling searching
but the light is too faint

grandma, you should be wearing your glasses

*I don't need them
I can feel which ones are which*

The detective

through my tears I watch him
in his suit and straight back
asking my mother questions

he looks just like one of those detectives in the movies
not the cool mel-gibson-lethal-weapon type
more that clean-cut I'm-in-charge I'm-in-control type

why is he here his timing seems all wrong
whose guilt is he trying to settle inside this stuffy room
too crowded with its three plastic chairs

The boat

I always loved Florida for its skies. The open blue
quickly turning
into a summer storm.

We used to chase the lightning all the way to the coast.
And it does remind me of when I was in the boat.

Always
back to the boat.

Always the grey sun and heavy dust and sinking into water.
And while the memories keep coming and going
the horizon breaks
until it's the landscape that's moving
and the boat is still.

We do what we can

people say we look alike
 and we do
we think over the thing as it is

where the river swells
 flooding the ribcage
small pieces of cloth like corners of bunting
get caught in the eddies

 only the surface of things is easy
 the brown leather couch
 the dying grass
 the hammock we fight about
 and take inside
 when it rains

and the thing burns
muddled noises amplify
and we do what we can
 to make do

The World of Tomorrow

She just finds herself
knife in hand.

Why are you telling me this?

She's sorry.
It slipped.

Ag, Sis.

Remember our first trip to Disney World?
We sat wide-eyed in the rotating ride of 'The World of Tomorrow'
while a purple creature showed us a future
where families connect through a screen.

And here we are
holding up our laptops
to walk each other through our homes.

What more can we do?

Snow falling

the artist said to keep the eye on the person not the canvas
 then he held up a small fist
and with a black-stained thumb
started smudging the air

it snowed yesterday
it never does that here
I phoned to tell you but you weren't there
I stood outside
 the snow melting in my hair

not enough that I could cry
not enough to feel warm inside

one must capture the likeness he said
that essence of the person
 then he stopped explaining
said he could only show what he meant
then he traced the cheek the jaw
 the slightly protruding chin

 I could still see the grey sky
 I wanted to be outside
 I wanted to be
 not standing there looking through
 the likeness of the dark shadow drawn under the eyes
I wanted

with the wind in my face

 the snow falling

America

The first time

The first time I heard the word 'disconcerting'
there was a fat lady on the wall
fondling herself in 3-D.

I remember 'oblivion' too.
I was in love. He was black.
The way she twirled those curls.

Maybe I should've taken up botany.
Or haberdashery.
I could've stitched the world in pastels.

I tried ballet but my points
couldn't keep the blood in.
Red was never my favourite colour anyway.

Let's park it, you say, as if we're just out for a joyride
and the dryness in our throats
is nothing more than thirst.

My god the world is flat.
We find the desert and all we want to do
is cruise and booze. Admire the view.

Until we lose the car and the straight line spirals
out of the rendezvous. Where the hell
did all this sand come from?

Continental drift. Inter-species erotica.
I know I told you ticks don't jump
but check your crevices anyway.

Sometimes I think of you

you didn't kiss me on our first date
even though I wanted you to
in the dim light coming through the door
your unassuming smile and the way you didn't lean
straight talking with your hands
about fucking Bush and Cheney and the war
you were so tall
I didn't mind the way the dishes piled up
and where we were
sitting in the window smoking talking shit
with Pat going off about Tiananmen Square
when it was still new I loved your smell
you took me home to meet your mother
and played Big L on repeat
that was before Benji found God
but even then he was beautiful
sitting at her dresser his large brown eyes
soft and round as he divided our lines
I stopped swimming in the ocean then
and somewhere we moved in together
somewhere I kissed someone else
and somewhere there was Henry just Henry
stinging our brains
and your mother phoned
she sold the house on her way to California
all the furniture strung out and empty
calling strangers at midnight begging for truth

American dream

we'd walk down the one side
and back on the other
three blocks that could sometimes
take the whole day

and the halfway house
that grey and dilapidated three-storey
just stood there
while we passed its empty mailboxes

on the other side
the Hare Krishnas offered curry rice
on Tuesdays on the lawn
and played their whiny music

sometimes I wouldn't even change my clothes
for days I wouldn't care
except for the politics
that burned through all our talk

we'd sit in the doorway
watching a hurricane tear down the lights
and leaving us
without power for days

and what was his name again
that guy who sold crack from his wheelchair
who got stuck on the rocks
leading to our backdoor

still we'd walk down the one side
and know we'd never end up there
staring out windows
waiting for letters that would never come

The truth

The sun spreads naked across the porch.
She knows what she wants. She knows
you're going to give it to her.
She's one of those with the pink pouty lips.
So you shift your chair into the corner for shade.
But the truth is, you want it too,
just on your own terms. You can get her drunk
one cocktail at a time.
Or slip her something to make her
more comfortable. So you wait it out.
Wait for her to slump against the wall,
words slurring as she turns
from white morning light to yellow to red.
In the dark you make your move.
And it's okay. She wanted it. Asked for it.
Teased you into your corner all day.
What do words mean anyway.
What to believe when her mouth says no
yet her lips scream wet.

Somewhere south of Cairo

Somewhere south of Cairo
she takes a dark-haired lover.
She keeps him
in her room during breakfast.
She eats slowly.

She smokes Pieter Stuyvesant
at the foot of the temple
and in the mouth of the tomb.
She drinks whiskey on the rocks.
Hides letters in her suitcase.

Somewhere between the sand
and prayers, her pink dress disappears.
She is luminous with sea-passion.
She stops counting stairs.

At midnight she wanders the streets of Luxor.
A hundred pairs of red eyes
protect the children of the dust.
She slinks in and out of doorways.
A wedding crowds the air with laughter.

Somewhere south of Cairo
she flies towards the glass.
She begs for the masks of the gods.
Carries their voices on a shaky tray.
Steam drags behind her.

It was quiet for a while

Heathrow airport
the last leg home
the last ten hours of lank and piss and lounge
left lonely in Brussels in a hotel room
last bottle of wine
last thin man under his blanket pulling his thing
stumbling eventually down spinning earth
towards sleep and home

it was quiet for a while
next to that canal outside of Amsterdam
lying on the cool grass
listening to stories about Oman

kept forgetting what to look for
found the bathroom floor and where she left the letters
too many carpets climbing up the walls
she was just too fucking beautiful
blonde and Philadelphian
too cool with her postcards smokes and shades

what happens when you soak the spoon too long
you find something feet maps trains funny something's funny
until you get stuck in France
with him and his carpet bag and leather skin and his ticket coming too

what the guidebooks never tell you -
how to break promises to strangers in lonely dark tunnels
how to eat mussels in Italian
how to tan fresh tits
how to choke on cock at high altitude
how to appreciate royal gardens inside their yellow walls
and all the pissed-up pissed-on streets
how to take pineapple off a stranger's knife the juices dripping down her
fingers licking up talk of dreams puzzles the long walk home
the mountains ribbed and swelling behind the glass

Do you also think of me

the last i heard from you
you wrote on my facebook wall
CEE CEE GOT SHOT IN THE FACE.
and what about the boy?
him and the other one they found
at the bottom of the pool?
could it have been love
if i don't even remember
the size of your syringe?

no time for infinite jest.
so you found me in the bathroom
and then we watched the bats come out
behind the tanning salon.
we thought we were so cosmopolitan.
but i didn't fucking run away.
you just got lost in the mirage of my real.
do you also think of me
when you smell metal burning?

Not for everything

you can blame the drugs
but not for everything
everything didn't make sense
like now
repeat after me
i love you
you don't have to mean it
just for me
me and you we were
really something
but something doesn't add up
here you can use my spoon
but not for everything

Notes & sketches

On the plane to Joburg

The woman next to me asks if I'm a writer;
she sees me putting little words in my notebook,
says she's been writing her whole life.
Every day she records
what she and her husband do.
Eventually when one of them 'goes',
the other will be able to read back
and remember how they used to be.
And whenever her friends complain
about how the weather's changed -
that winter's never been so cold or summer so hot -
she goes back through her notebooks from earlier years,
then tells her friends, 'No,
it's exactly the same'.

Hunting

The annual family hunting trip
is for men only.

My cousin and I have to beg to go,
offering our domestic services
to our uncles and cousins.

The sun is already at our backs
as my cousin begins breakfast.
I only do what I must -
handing her spices, milk
as she scrambles the eggs,
filling and refilling the toaster,
setting the table, remembering
forks go on the left.

All morning I imagine
spending hours alone and on foot,
listening, waiting for a rustle
far in the underbrush,
a crunch of leaves,
the crack of a twig.
The weight of the rifle
slips in my sweaty palm.

I imagine the eye must tune in
to the veld, settling in
to the shades of orange and brown;
all reflexes sharp
enough to deflect
the glare of sun. There,
behind the sweet thorn,
a shift in the shadows.

At the breakfast table
an uncle explains how to tell
the female buck from the male.
Later he hands me his plate;
asks me to butter his toast.
And I wonder if I could do it -
to find the neck
and take the shot.

The house

the house hears
 like an elephant
feels vibrations
 through the ground
man coming
 from the stoep

his tracks
 in sand
through the living room
 his life
measured in the sway
 of the floorboards

the house takes the man
 like a shadow
leaning into the corridor
 into the heart
where the wind blows
 sand and salt
through the cracks in the walls

Climbing the Sentinel

the day unravels
 white clouds
 rolling up
Drakensberg basalt
the northern face
 Ntabamnyama The Black One
the One that reaches into the heavens
 to swallow the stars

for a day the One that indulges us
ascending its corners and hidden caves
 flailing at flowers on the other side
 praying for something
 more solid than roots

Wilderness

the warm August morning
holds me in her breath

I see no one but birds and snakes
here and there a skull bone

I try to stop worrying
about rhythm to simply walk

feel the solitude of the steenbok
his tiny body kicking sand over dung

what story is this where I pass
outside the lines of faded maps

far beneath the ribbon of stars
I dissolve into water shade food light

without you
no longer has meaning

in my pockets
I carry only stones

Likkewaan

Again I take the single track -
a lopsided loop that rises and dips
over the back of the city.
Again I stumble on the steep
with winter waiting in the bend.

Once, I came upon a likkewaan.
The afternoon sun slanted across his scaled black tail.
We sized each other up, eye to dragon-eye
while the leaves between us
fell into the shade.

Still life with paper

behind three stacks of paper
dark green leaves stretch out
over the sides of the orange pot

some of the papers are also
twisted sideways reaching out
their corners almost touching the others

beyond the window
birds and cars swim endlessly
in the noise of city dawn squealing brakes

i pull the blinds up for extra light
the paper stacks throw shadows
over the plant

Pencil sketch

I imagine your house
in lines
and semi-arches for doorways
two bedrooms
no stairs
except maybe
to the front door
I imagine a fireplace
there
across from the kitchen
the hallway
opening
leading to the counter
some windows here
and there
some furniture
just the big stuff
a couch
a bed
a desk
and shelves and shelves
of books
I imagine you
standing in the kitchen
or maybe sitting at the desk
where a single lamp colours
everything yellow

Cycle

the days of the week pile up in the kitchen
days of dark and light and colour
coalescing into still wet or dry

I don't want it so loaded (either hot or cold)
I don't want fuzzy (which takes all day)

what I want is economy (all desire is)
scrounging through pockets
for a ten rand note

Lessons

I sat in a wooden rocker on the porch.
I was on my third spritzer and it wasn't even lunchtime.
What did he mean when he said that? I listened to the waves.
Every once in a while I heard a seagull, or a car driving past behind the house.
Would the salt in the air affect a wooden rocking chair?
I don't know a thing about how wood ages. I don't recognise
the tune coming through the window. And just like that, it's gone.

It was a dreary Saturday morning and I was on my fourth spritzer.
What did he mean? When was lunch? My stomach was growling
and the waves, well, they were still there.
We'd just moved in; I always wanted a house with a deck by the sea
so that I could write my magnum opus. Oh never mind.

I was sitting in the wooden rocker on the porch.
I'd just finished my fifth spritzer when the kids ran out the house
screaming at one another about who touched who first
and who stepped onto whose side of the bedroom first
and who was going to tell on who first and
should I teach my children not to tell on one another?
Would that be a good lesson? Must everything be a lesson?

Lesson one: how to properly mix wine and soda water.
Lesson two: how to stay on your side of the line.
Three: how to let your mind go and find inspiration
even in a cold room, too cold for breathing and where
you should maybe not lean against the walls.
Lesson four: how to walk in high heels through the veld.
Lesson five: when to realise it's time to stop all this and take up the ukulele.
Six: how to spell ukulele.
Seven: how to read your audience - which would be useful for everything
from relationships to spelling bees.
Lesson eight: how to know when you're overdoing it. I think I'm overdoing it.
Nine: to bring less paper next time
then you'll be forced to stop naturally.

I sat in a wooden rocker on the porch.
I was on my eighth spritzer and it wasn't even lunchtime.

Home

In between it all

I've only ever taken trains away from home.
There's hope in the places where I don't belong -
in small gardens that hug warm houses,
in streets that curve and curl like smoke.

We think we move of our own volition
yet the landscape pulls me like fingers
through an endless field of yellow grass.

Among the floating villages of Ha Long Bay,
a woman rows her shop from house to house.
And once a year the dogs leap off their decks
and swim ashore to mate.

I've only ever loved you once
but in between those limestone cliffs and now
that might be all I've ever done.

Enough

The house was full of noise
last night while you were gone.
The world flowed like water
in and out of the sliding glass door.
In bed I was the only one.
In this city of malls
there are simply too many
empty spaces to park one's heart.
What is enough.
Coming home at 3 a.m.
A kiss on the eye. A hand
stretched across the sheets
slipping comfortably
under a breast.

Marriage

this bed is too big
the sheet can't even reach the corners
where everything is pulled tightly together
and where you sit putting on your socks
while the sun stretches across your back
and I on the other side
still wrapped in the dark
dream of the time
we had a single mattress on the floor
and we didn't bother with the corners

Measure

I rub the soil before I pour
 can't seem to get it right
it's always either
too little or too much
 and though I've read all the books
about seasons and spaces
and how to pretend
 still everything dies
according to its own
misunderstood reasons
 leaf-lips parched and strained
 or drowning secretly
 rotting in the roots
all the elephant ears
the succulents
 and even him
one day thriving
nourished in me
 the next day choking
on too little
 or too much

Space-time

It's Tuesday morning 8 a.m.
I draw a spaceship on the blackboard in Louw Hall,
it's just an oval but I don't mind
I draw a ball inside it
and diagonal lines to show it bouncing
up and down and forward in space
as the ship flies at the speed of light
I count the seconds out loud - one two -
and measure the distance with chalk
to explain how time dilates
and space contracts.
My chalk crumbles as I press too hard,
a hand goes up to ask how it can be
that we don't ever notice.
Well we're always moving, you see,
and we're simply too small
but how elegantly true it is
that we may never know for sure.
I make more scratches on the board,
call it a collapsing wave and watch uncertainty sink in,
and I'm still revelling in it an hour later
as I order a latte from Coffee Buzz
and I'm making my way through the crowded space
when you call
I head straight to the doctor's and you're there
looking at tiny black dots on a screen
talking about cancer.

Of course the key is never in the door

it comes at night
as a man wearing nothing
but blue pants and latex gloves

I'm in my childhood house in Newcastle
where I always ran to bed
because I was afraid of the dark

I count his steps coming down the hall
barbed wire rolls out behind him
I hear the whimpering of dogs

he grips the handle
watches
with his blue eye through the hole

when he comes inside
it's in an empty house with many rooms
pools covered in thick red rubber

I hold my breath and half wake up
yet something stirs
in the feel of plastic sheets beneath my feet

I wait for the fingers
let myself bend
and slide into the dark

Throwing lavender

pure white

day upon us

long as her lace
trailing into the chapel

how *vrolik*
(or is it *vroulik*)
what we mean her to be

her body
stiff beneath
the hidden boning of her dress
her steps quick and light
between the hard benches

and the sun burns
slowly through the ancient story
love is three mix sand throw salt
protect us from our contradictions

he and I

throwing lavender

into her hair

Marriage - a variation

our fire is dying
you head to the woods for more kindling
while I watch the orange flames
 simmer into smoke
sip my wine
 thinking
it's no use trying to blow

Not springtime yet

this morning on the porch
I hold in icy hands
the still objects of my world
 the coffee cup
 the phone
 the pen

the wind catches the backs of my calves
and deep inside
 my heart
 hibernates

while beneath the soil things are growing
 spring is coming
and the bees
have stopped
dying on the lawn

On our way to the fever tree

the river splits
into a thousand threads
unravelling
 slipping over soft earth
 and hard

the way you talk while you look away
 I cannot hear
the air too thick with thorns
and growing with each breath

turn back to me
please please
turn back

and you do
 smiling
as if we're safe inside a secret
swinging in the summer heat
our feet high and kicking above the ground

Verassing

Before the sun comes up
I pray it won't. For days now
this is my wish.

Old shadows guard the ground
where the entirety of loneliness
hides beneath a bush.

When I receive the mail
I mistake the word *verassing*
with *verrassing*.

My language of birth
so far from my thought
still breaks me at my core.

The hiss of water
dripping
into fire.

The river

I enter the river
with awkward feet.
The water is cold and deep
and wraps around everything.

I am in it.
There is no other way to be.
If I believe hard enough
I can breathe.
I can reach your mouth.
I can flow out to sea.

The sky is open water.
The heart is thick black water.
I am leaking.
The edges of earth are leaking.
The river is leaking
into me.

Slowly

the silver hair begins to fall
 i know i should say slowly
i know slowly
i know what those fingers want
slipping over my abdomen
my belly the sky on its whitest day
i slip out of myself
 one leg at a time

the silver hair begins to fall
and slowly
 the sky
 those fingers

Waking

at the bottom of it all
are the sheets
caught around my legs
a vague sense of the room
the rain outside
breathing in the dark

Glossary

likkewaan: monitor lizard, iguana (Likkewaan, p. 28)

verassing: cremation (Verassing, p. 45)

verrassing: surprise (Verassing, p. 45)

vrolik: cheerful (Throwing lavender, p. 40)

vroulik: female, feminine (Throwing lavender, p. 40)