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Writing Sample

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Includes "Tuareg Indigo," "Since Circumcision," "Other woman: the what-now blues," "Writing," "Mutineer minuet," "After Adam," "Ovaria," "Slaughter," "Domboshava" and "After the loss of a daughter and her two cousins."

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T J DEMA

Tuareg Indigo

I am she who wears colour on skin
Adorning flesh with desert shades of indigo
My stories tell themselves below eyes
Above buttered cheeks
I have no need for a metal sky
A casket carved of bone, mortared in blood
I am a million constellations moulded of mud
The colour of a waking sky
Purple blue memories, sand storm covered secrets
Between my lover the desert
And I

Since Circumcision

It had been years since it had been done
Since a crowd had gathered waving goodbye
with smiles on their faces
Not quite cold, as one morning
When one flag came down
and another rose glistening
Azure and multi racial racing up the pole
Not since then had there been such joy

In their thousands they waded into the unknown
They went to a place where for the barber
The trouser must come off
And between rock and shrub
Each boy must sever the leather bag he is
Of games and childhood name calling
To become a strapping, foreshortened adaptation
Of his former self

Puberty is for the body
The mind hungers after ceremony
And my people know how to
Seduce it into wrapping itself in tattered cloth
To walk barefoot back into this world
We know no other way that works
But to teach pain to the weapon
Before applying green relief to that appendage
Hoping that knowing compassion
Will soothe all of tomorrow's inflamed and painful bits
Back to this moment
When the huntsman stood still before a falling blade

Other woman: the what-now blues

I lie deathly still in moist embrace
Mind heavy with sleep
Yet I know before he leaves
There are words I must speak
Breath even and deep
His scent filling me
With remembered need, I plunge
And gently announce
My womb is heavy with borrowed seed

Writing

The feeling exhumes itself first
You cannot call it
It must ask for you by name
And when the first wave hits
Your chest stale with old air
Unbuckle yourself, float
Do not hold on or back
Do not attempt to sand your beaches with sack
You are hessian
A hungry hour glass for the dune wind
The real work begins and ends with release

Mutineer minuet

I have been spotted
Spreading one leg towards the light
Dainty foot booted

Tyres burning rubber flesh to ash in the night
They come for me
While I am naked as desert sand

Wet behind ear / I am rain
Between thighs / I am forest growing everything anew
I am sand slipping away the fullness of youth
I have grown gills in the name of a storm coming

After Adam

Men are such contrary things
They clutch at their gods
As though they would climb
Down to them
Slip between templed fingers
And land at mortal feet

Yet we and they
Walk a different path
And since you are the one not winged
Adam's son
Stand naked beneath the brooding sky
Be the simple thing you are meant to be

Ovaria

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When midnight comes
I find I have been away too long
Blowing my insides upside down
An umbrella in the wind
Too busy believing
In dreams
In the magic to be found
In rat-infested pumpkin patches
And men with time
And one too many glass slippers in their hands

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Women learn
That sometimes there is blood
But not death
They learn to conceal the womb with breast
To choose that which can be lost
The hopeful recipe or the constant cake in cupboard
They learn to clutch the knife
Blade to borrowed rib
To empty the cup and be content
With utterly nothing

Slaughter

There is a bellow the cow makes at the moment of slaughter
A kind killer knows how to suddenly stab and slash
The bleating goat's throat to silence
To still the beat of a heart that surely must know
What is coming? If only once it is too late

He could slaughter and skin a goat
Taller than I could stand then
I would watch, corn-rowed hair
Squeezing conspicuously against an open wall
As he would flatten wild sage with a stomp and double thud

The reeds would lie obedient
Their sweet stench seeping unnoticed into the air
I remember the first time I saw life
Congealed at the heel of a boot, dribbling off a jack-knife
Wet on the Pointer's short-wire fur and tongue

I am no longer that easily removed
Though the sound my green city tongue made then
Undid all his efforts at kindness
Dragging the ritual performed unwilling
Back from the sage-smoked other side
To bear witness before my youthful verdict

Domboshava

Imagine you come from this
And then you wake
Up in a shack
On a sugar plantation

You are hungry
For the freedom of open air
Yet unable to name the thing
Not there anymore

Dennis says, of a different prison
It is not all terror
And deprivation
Between their redemption and your salvation

You will walk to a drum song, its skin fraught with wickedness
But this rock above you now folds and folds and
Folds holding the ancient, the future and the you
Standing here now on the edge of it all

¹ Domboshava which translates to red hill in Shona is a site in Zimbabwe with 6000 year old cave paintings

² Dennis Brutus was a Zimbabwean-born, South African poet who was imprisoned on Robben Island

After the loss of a daughter and her two cousins

There is no method
Only madness
For the man standing still
Long enough for the dove to alight
Comforted by his quietness
Pity the man clinging to loss
Walking daily with the memory
Of past possibility
Communing within this unholy trinity
The man for whom death is past
Too easily finds a place to which he longs to return
