

TWISTED IN THE TRUNKS OF TREES

by

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A THESIS

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## ABSTRACT

A collection of poems.

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Mary Jo and Al Aardsma.

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## CONTENTS

[My thumbs have cracks so deep].....	2
[As rocks settle along the ridge of a mountain].....	3
[The blown-up magazine fractures the walls of a city].....	4
[Under a veil of darkness she closes her horror-eyes to stop] .....	5
[The television, in its hush and flicker] .....	6
[Tulle is torn and scattered on the road] .....	7
[A magnolia tree gleans seeds from her soil] .....	8
[The white mountains] .....	9
[Off the county road, where lanes taper] .....	10
[Someone's father] .....	11
[Their knees knock bone's shudder while their hands] .....	12
[A map rolls at the edges like the sea] .....	13
[Before I put on the oven] .....	14
[Wood from deep] .....	16
[With his muddy boot pressing the merchant's back] .....	17
[After the murder] .....	18
[They say our bodies were flung high and filled] .....	19
[The river] .....	20
[A border of blood] .....	21
[Mouths spread] .....	22

[The flames of the forest] .....	23
[The swing's leather belt holds the small globes] .....	24
[The merchant in his silence] .....	26
[On the road that cuts] .....	27
[Cartridges rip the soldiers' jungled mouths] .....	28
[She wraps a bandage around her husband's face] .....	29
[The burn on the merchant's back boils, swells] .....	30
[Night pulses through my body] .....	31
[Sleeves ruffle and flip against palm leaves] .....	32
[They were underground, themselves the buriers, burins] .....	33
[The ground soaks with dark hair and a vehicle for flame] .....	34
[My cousin, in his nineteenth year] .....	35
[A woman] .....	36
[The merchant's head] .....	37
[An arc of red drips as it dries] .....	38
[The hem of her skirt soaks] .....	39
[They blow hair from each other's eyes] .....	40
[The merchant must] .....	41
[Lovers braid their hair together, yellow woven] .....	42
[Two young boys sit] .....	43
[Because we cannot blame the river] .....	44
[A king, in one bulbous hand, holds a miniature cow, unpainted] .....	45
[My hands bloom] .....	46

[The soldier, his hands marked with calluses, fingers] .....	47
[My occipital lobe descends to images of torn] .....	48
[Women heave themselves onto hands of flames] .....	49
[My cat curls into a fist on the floor] .....	50
[This foreign nation, these] .....	51



Even the blossoming tree lies the moment its bloom is seen without the shadow of terror; even the innocent 'How lovely!' becomes an excuse for an existence outrageously unlovely, and there is no longer beauty or consolation except in the gaze falling on horror, withstanding it, and in unalleviated consciousness of negativity holding fast to the possibility of what is better.

—Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*

////

My thumbs have cracks so deep  
they cut any fabric, and I touch all of this  
anyway. A surface never smeared. We build  
our bridges on top of bridges, and they sway  
like the wind's deep breath  
through the acacia trees. We  
built our bridges, and they sway.

A man sits with this face  
buried in his hands,  
his face  
the poppy of an exploded  
bomb. You watch  
with your crumbling eyes  
the way I imagine  
a history  
not my own  
carry me through colors  
only realized because of an ink  
discovered by others.

////

As rocks settle along the ridge of a mountain,  
an echo shoots through the wind,  
and people turn in their sleep  
    as if a god hushed  
in their ears. A cobra breaks through

dense water when the rains come.  
Flicks its tongue against the air. Slides back  
    when the ground shakes  
    weak stones into swelling cracks.

////

The blown-up magazine fractures walls of a city  
that does not matter for its darkness.

A well chokes with bodies,  
clothes torn from backs. Doily-women with broken bones. Faces  
worn like crowns.

The walls and ceiling darken with lace  
patterns painted in blood. Unfinished boxes and the little  
round hats of children, hair still inside, litter the red floor of the dead  
room. A yellow braid,

a hundred thousand pieces,  
reddens for mourning locket

for the breast of man. With rifles  
between their eyes, their heads bloomed into opened poppies.  
A pall is thrown over tulle-women, over nausea. The well  
falls in on itself.

////

Under a veil of darkness she closes her horror-eyes to stop  
her pupils from mirroring the broken skull of the child.  
Her yellow hair stained red.

He kisses her shadow-cast face  
with hashed lips, marking her. It is dark,  
and the soldiers swarm against the stronghold. Over the black map  
these rumors circle:

his shot of her head, the huge doll of her body,  
no longer dying. His head, in the dark,  
by his own hand.

////

The television, in its hush and flicker,  
illuminates Mother as she sleeps,  
mouth wide,  
on the couch. So wide, she could swallow  
the house along with  
    all of its things.

She does not wake when she ruffles  
the blanket, adjusting her sore hips. She does not  
wake when the hush of the television  
projects children  
with glazed eyes holding Bibles with their tapered  
fingers, their thin skin tightening  
    around their bones. She wakes  
to a man's voice. *God?* She turns her heavy  
body on the couch, pushes hair  
    from her eyes  
to watch a man bounce a child  
    on his knee.

////

Tulle is torn and scattered on the road.  
The girl can't scream. She's already fallen.

Her dress stains the floor  
as soldiers hew her  
behind doors. Her blood seeps out her underarms—  
her yellow hair shines.

////

A magnolia tree gleans seeds from her soil,  
drags her limbs. Dark bark shaded by half-moon leaves,  
black and waxy. She birthed herself  
through red clay, screamed as she breathed light.  
Soaked clay, thick with blood. The magnolia  
polishes her leaves in the sunlight and  
    if you dared  
would let you lean against her lilted trunk. Your head  
against her dense wood. She pulses  
with beetles when her buds begin to tear  
into open white fists. You fall asleep in her shade.  
A beetle's tickle on your neck, its tiny buzz as it pollinates  
your ear. The creak of the tree's ancient limbs  
under a body's weight. Joints explode into carpels.  
The blossoming tree lies  
when she whispers her scent through the breeze.



////

The white mountains  
of the soldier's knuckles bend  
around the switchback  
    of his blade. He sharpens it

while clutching a merchant's locks—hair  
    never cut. He sharpens  
his knife with a cigarette balanced  
between his dry lips

and the smoke  
burns the merchant's eyes. The slow scrape  
    against that rock  
    tortures the tiny bones

that shudder within the merchant's ears.

////

Off the county road, where lanes taper  
like the waist of a too-thin girl,  
a house tilts in the direction

the wind went. Smudged windows  
let light into the living room  
where a typewriter once seized  
and now lies still, where papers  
mark the floor, and a torn couch

stinks. Someone still  
trims the lawn—the grassy lines  
list against the house's lean.

////

Someone's father  
cannon-blasts a man,  
laughs, *To trust*  
*a darkness*. His black eyes.  
His bone-skin turns  
translucent with each step  
into his dark. The beast of his heart  
pushes black blood through his body,  
the fever of his brain  
a black halo. His muscles chorus  
as he pulls a trigger, throws a bomb,  
burns a city.  
Soldiers wrap their mouths  
around the fire,  
and the flames  
are simple as a pall.

////

Their knees knock bone's shudder while their hands  
fist their dresses into peonies. A man cradles his lip  
in one hand, his other hand props open his jaw. The whole  
of his face agape.

His dark eyes  
bury their steps from the darkness. Through blood-let bodies of widows  
their feet absorb shell metal, tree tack, bellowing.  
Smearing their faces into mud, their bodies  
crumble in on themselves.

The light of eyes shrivels as a well blooms with water.  
Their shrapnel bones rest in a palm's shade,  
marrowless.

////

A map rolls at the edges like the sea  
turning in on land.

The general's hands  
are not moors. His desk pockmarked with paraphernalia  
of foreignness: coins with the king's face scratched  
from them clean, an emerald ring fit  
for a child (its bottom split like the women),  
a shallow cup of *bhang*, the sinking head  
of a burglar listing toward the map's edge.

Hairs litter the blood-stuck neck.

A mouth rots into a sun setting. Teeth fall  
from the sky. Under two hessonite eyes  
a mountainous beard, wrangled deep by grey  
hairs jutting out like dead limbs.

The tongue is a whale's dead body  
losing its beached weight  
with every ash of the general's cigar.

////

Before I put on the oven  
mittens, I wipe water  
from my pale hands and notice  
again the scars,  
    one like a dried pond  
    one like the curve  
        of a switchback. Marks  
flattened years ago, but still  
                                          sensitive to touch.  
Mittens on, I open the heavy oven door  
    and baste  
        the turkey  
one last time  
before I serve it.  
To you. Sip your wine. Are you comfortable  
in your chair? Does the weight  
of day drip  
    through your bones?

I plug the knife in to the outlet near the table.  
It writhes  
accidentally against the tablecloth  
before you  
turn it off. It seizes against a plate before you  
    switch it to silence. Outside,

snow falls, hits the roof of the house. We don't  
hear that. Wind throws snow against trees,  
but we only hear the whistle of push. We imagine  
    whistling bombs  
                                  but not long enough to imagine  
    the sounds afterward. I pull  
the turkey out of the oven

and place its heavy body  
on the antique cutting board. It was  
my mother's. Flip the record  
                                          while I carve.

The knife's vibration  
    aches  
the bones healed wrong  
in my hand. The knife

pulls skin, tears it free from flesh. Skin flakes  
like bark from a burning aspen—  
    embers pull  
    from a trunk and rise  
    as they fail  
    into the air.

With precision, with dedication  
I slice breasts, prod  
at the open wound,

and we wish  
writhing maggots wrestle over  
each other to escape  
the cut of the knife. They spill  
onto our plates. You press them  
into your potatoes,  
watch them drown there. I cut the legs

from the body  
of the bird and tear them  
finally from their sinew—  
    the twist of my wrist,  
    the final yank  
    sounds like the pop  
    of a toy gun.

////

Wood from deep  
in the sore of jungle.  
His heart the placeholder for his scripture.  
The drag of trees

was his path for his heathens,  
their souls without vehicles,  
to his structure  
filled with reverberating  
tusks of light.

His church desorbed hedonists,  
their idols—  
the many arms of a gilt statue  
glitter the dirt floor

and shine cross-like  
against their pupils.



////

With his muddy boot pressing the merchant's back,  
with one fistful of blade and one fistful  
of the merchant's hair  
    he tests the sharpness,  
dragging it cleanly

through the merchant's braid. His cigarette nearly  
burns his teeth as he waves his prize

    above his head.  
Laughing, the cigarette lands  
on the merchant's back—another mark  
on his map.

////

After the murder,  
after the burial  
the boy's face still  
a bloomed peony.

Its petals sag,  
flaccid stamens spill  
pollen like a clumsy man  
spills gunpowder.

His mother, now  
dead, wants us  
to write about it,  
but red clay makes

grave-digging difficult.  
Who else is  
sorry? To look at him  
is to look at the rot

of a region. A blind spot  
blurring a map.  
His head is a hill  
covered in kudzu.  
An axe cracks its crest.

////

They say our bodies were flung high and filled. They say we were shredded,  
our hair torn to stuff dolls, to start fires. Their kindling words—  
they say our hoops were raised  
above our heads.

The lights of the fires were the stars in the sky. Packed without fear,  
*Only Women Are Safe*  
*On This Road*. They say we were limbless,  
our bodies easels  
for their stretched canvases. Our spines, the scrawl of foreign letters,  
broken by their brushstrokes.

They say honor—a fishbone braid tied with the ribbon of man—  
but the maps of blood in our hair were not our own. We wash  
the red out of the river, then sip water  
from our hands.

////

The river  
serpentine the island,  
is blanketed  
by lotus plants that hum  
above the water. Shaking off mud,  
the sun rises  
in each bloom, calling out  
the pink sky. A mugger crocodile

lazes in the shoal  
awaiting thirsty prey  
who come to gaze at  
the river  
full of floating suns.

////

A border of blood  
soaks into her skirt's hem  
as soldiers hew her  
behind doors. Bodies of blood  
seep out her armpits,  
her yellow hair shines  
against their swords.

////

Mouths spread  
open into darkness;  
words seep  
out ears. On the darker roads,  
pieces of men lie  
surrounded by wailing, a dark soldier  
with a gash-mouth. They hold  
their bodies in their hands  
and slip on their own blood. They  
hold their blood in their hands  
and slip on their own bodies.  
A soldier shoots a soldier  
from a cannon—his body retracting  
like the knife from a wound.

////

The flames of the forest  
consume the tongue of land between rivers.  
Every bough sags,  
    sways—  
the weight  
    creaks  
along with the pig skin  
    ropes—ligature  
marks like confluent rivers.  
The bodies pendulum,  
    their indigo chins and hands  
    darker for blood's dye.

////

The swing's leather belt holds the small globes  
of the girl's little bottom  
in its grasp,  
and she pumps her legs  
forward  
and bends them  
back, her skirt exposing  
the black hole  
between her legs. Her hair  
hashes across her face  
with each pivot of the swing. She kicks

her shoes onto the chipped wood, letting  
her feet swim  
naked in the air, letting her laughter flirt  
with the budding leaves on the trees. She presses  
her chest out, elbows back

and at the highest point, jumps from the swing  
and lands, squatted, on her feet. The empty swing

wrestles between its chains, flips over itself  
as it attempts alignment. The girl, still a knot  
on the wood chips,

screams.

The moats of Mother's ears vibrate with its pitch  
until they itch enough to move her  
from her cross-word.

The girl, wrapped around herself,  
drools her cry onto her skirt, her skirt soaking  
from sobs

from the blood that spouts from her pink leather  
foot. Maps of blood on her legs, bubbling  
between her toes. She screams

and spreads blood across her face  
when she tries to wipe away tears. Sticky  
in her hair. The razor stands in the valley  
of her foot,

separating  
ball from heel: the difference



of callus.

    Stands so deep  
only the smooth curve of the handle shines.

////

The merchant in his silence,  
in his dog-stance,  
in the mud of his lot,

shakes. In the sun his sweat beads at his brow and  
shakes clean from his face,  
shakes onto his hands,  
    hands that clutch mud—he clutches mud  
so hard that one  
by one his nails tear  
from their beds—a slow rip he doesn't notice. It must  
  
sound like the knife's meeting with his braid,  
or the gentle shooing of a child.

////

On the road that cuts  
the blanket of kudzu  
my car's wheels shush  
over recent rain. A constant  
soft hum. Thick air  
settles on the hill's shoulders  
like a child nuzzles the crook  
of her mother's neck.  
Into black night  
headlights mimic the soft exhale  
of starlight until

the junction marks the land  
cross-like. Streetlamps  
shudder in the soft rain. New suns rise  
in each oasis sign. Flick themselves  
against the sky. Forgetting  
excises existence. The signs pull  
night from the sky, bleed themselves out,  
become new constellations that guide us.  
At a streetlight my car stalls  
and the engine refuses  
to turn over.

////

Cartridges rip the soldiers' jungled mouths—the wrinkles in their teeth  
the captured roads. A bomb detonates the jungle  
when the fat slithers from tongue to tube to intestine.  
Swallowed pieces of animals burn holes  
in the stomachs of soldiers, holes where their religions seep into the blood  
puddling the ground. Walk through the wetness, follow steps  
into the jungle's mouth where they cast

themselves out. A child's chin rests on his knees in the doorframe—  
his only shelter from this rain.

He hungers  
for the ghost of a father he carries with him like a disintegrated charm.

////

She wraps a bandage around her husband's face—  
his lip a bomb's shell in his hand. A broken poppy,  
the dark cracks in its petals. He closes

his hand around it  
and they listen to the blood flood the floor.  
She presses a wet cloth to his temple  
where his hair is slick with red,  
sticks in his ears.  
She wrings the maps of blood out in the tub—the muted violence  
hitting the water. She holds a rag in her hands—  
her husband's face half gone.

////

The burn on the merchant's back boils, swells. It sizzles  
louder than his vague breathing. The soldier grabs  
    what's left  
of the merchant's hair, lifting him to sit,

his hands mark his knees  
with islands of his blood, with his  
    mud. His heavy head a pendulum  
that crosses his chest—  
the only note of time.

////

Night pulses through my body—the bruise  
on the sky spreads, pushing its cold shore  
closer.

Outside, my breath  
shows itself to be an apparition. Cold  
glows through me

as I inspect the trash pile  
near the sick oak. It grows each day  
more proud. I slash  
a plastic bag, letting its contents  
vomit. Gems

sparkle on my hands in the streetlamp's  
whispered light. The woman  
who sleeps in my alley  
rustles awake, adjusts her sore hips,  
pulls her caked sleeping bag  
closer to her cracked mouth.

Inside, I play *Satyagraha* while neighbors fuck above me. The bed  
keeps bad time—too quick  
for the opera. The woman yelps  
like a toy dog.

I know it's her because she says, "Oh my god. Fuck me.

Fuck me. Yes.

Oh my god. Fuck me," which is all  
I've ever heard her say.

Elsewhere, crowds of men gather  
like fallen pollen. They stand and wait,  
swaying with the wind, for a queen to spill

clumsy words. Cheers wash  
ashore as the queen stands  
torch-like,  
her dress engulfed  
in flames, her mouth a fist  
of screams.

////

Sleeves ruffle and flip against palm leaves. Stained  
like dripping. The breeze falls close to the ground,  
pushes dirt from footprints and into holes  
of the threadbare. Here, a foreign dye  
shakes off the longer it wraps  
itself around the ground. Bugs pulse at hems,  
a collar torn and infested, wretched. A lightning  
red, the sky blooming beyond  
what is called dark.



////

They were underground, themselves the buriers, burins  
born from their fists. They hid their minds in the soil  
and masturbated to other gaits, their erections  
long as mangrove roots, their semen the salt  
scattered on the leaves. On another shore, a wrong  
shore, another struggle:

they swam in shallow water, debased a death-place with burins  
born from their fists. They knew the shade of their trees  
by the shade of others—roots dark and dominant.

////

The ground soaks with dark hair and a vehicle for flame—  
his beard singes into a broken map.  
A fire large enough for only one body  
    ties back her arms like dead wings. Two  
        burn at different heats: his body tucked in cloth, her dark  
  
        body blisters the darker sky. Colors fade into black  
flame, the clay of him becomes air, her shame. Thuggishly cast,  
she burns into him without alms. Her body, mouthless, crackles.

////

*A superman is, on account of certain superior qualities inherent in him,  
exempted from the ordinary laws which govern men.*

*He is not liable for anything he may do.*

—Nathan Leopold in a letter to Richard Loeb

My cousin, in his nineteenth year  
with his fifteen languages,  
let boredom swell like buboes  
on his joints—  
his sores festered  
in his death-drive until he chose to press  
a seedling between his teeth—  
the mangled Bobby Franks  
doused in acid  
smeared against a culvert,  
mangled  
like my cousin's spectacles  
wrapped around the reeds. My cousin

lives in death, while the Franks boy

died a martyr for boredom,  
is now a symbol for forgetfulness

marked in the valleys  
of our spines for water to drown  
in the wet season.

,

////

A woman  
hums as she washes  
fabrics in the creek. It is a sound

even more beautiful than rain running  
over my roof. She hums  
    a song I cannot know, but I know

the apple in her neck bounces  
    with each new note  
    and that the sun snakes through the leaves  
    to warm her face.

////

The merchant's head  
    swells with blood  
as it swings between his shoulders. His breast  
shakes each breath  
from his body  
    until the soldier grabs a fistful of hair  
    still intact  
which pulls the merchant's nose  
    to the sky. Wet shoots from his nostrils,  
drags from his mouth, from his eyes. Each breath spits  
more of the merchant's body from him  
    until the soldier scrapes his knife  
    slowly  
    across the apple of the merchant's cheek, and his breath  
stutters in its progress.

////

An arc of red drips as it dries. Paths to puddle  
at the floorboards. Wet woodwork swells,  
fibers soft as hairs  
from a poppy's closed fist. Holes larger than  
your heart  
constellate the interior wall. Holes eclipsed,  
still fuming  
with night air.

////

The hem of her skirt soaks  
the blood as she hews soldiers behind  
doors. Bodies of blood seep out their armpits,

her hair shines against their swords.  
Her braid whips around her body as a soldier should  
come to attention, the weapon

still  
in her hand.

////

*Meanwhile strangers were shooting craps  
with what was left of  
our language,  
our lot.  
—Paul Celan*

They blow hair from each other's eyes  
like bombs blow  
shade

from trees. Their skin  
sucked with mud. They wash  
their ruined lot  
from their navels with rags. Fingering the soot  
on their backs, they write their names  
in case they are found

tangled  
together  
in the rotting mouth of  
their jungle.



////

The merchant must  
turn death  
over in his mind. It will  
take days to find his body—  
his family will think  
he's left them. And  
the unfinished  
shed. His boy  
cannot build without him—they will sit  
and stare at his body,  
missing hair stuck  
to wounds soldiers ripped  
from his skin.  
In the heat of this day, his body  
will begin to rot  
back into the earth, run  
in the rivers, return  
dust to desert. The men  
will wear his hair  
like a crown,  
surround his hair  
in metal. And here, under  
the sticking wound

of that tobacco,  
here, under the coarse boot  
bruising his back, here  
with his hands fisting  
stale roots of young trees, here  
among the strands of his hair  
cut free from his head  
his body will fail.

////

Lovers braid their hair together, yellow woven  
with black. Backs touching, they watch the city  
fall apart. *My father calls me*

*fallen.* The silence of their bodies  
grows as soldiers spit cartridges  
into mass graves. *Our cultures outcaste us.*

Their grace is how quietly  
they run away.

////

Two young boys sit  
with their knees in the mud,  
palming their thighs.  
Their faces dirt-dark. Until rain  
fills the letters like rivers, they draw  
the alphabet in the ground.  
Taking shelter in a coconut grove,  
they rehearse numbers one through ten  
before the littler asks of empire,  
his voice still  
the crackling  
whistle of fire.  
Their ears are big,  
as big as the soldiers'. *The others  
are the crest of a tsunami  
but the wave will not drown us  
because our empire  
is high land.* The grease  
from the cartridges  
their men mouthed  
will scab the boys' mouths,  
and soon  
they will learn  
the word *revolution*.

////

Because we cannot blame the river,  
we look to the orange light that swells  
on the water's surface. The river threads  
and so bridges were built. Watch people

walk across. In their lulled stampede  
do they imagine others thrown like wishes  
into the river's bowels? Bodies become the snaked  
roots of trees that drink the river dry  
until they are found knotted  
and damming  
the culvert.

////

A king, in one bulbous hand, holds a miniature cow, unpainted,  
his wrinkles rough as the roads of a city.

The creak of his knees as he bends to cross one  
over the other is audible only to him, though it echoes  
in his empty hall. His other hand  
cradles a paintbrush, a clot of paint at its tip. Maps of color  
devour the animal,

the land covered by foreign mouths.

The seams of paint dry  
as crooked as soldiers' mangled bones.

////

My hands bloom  
to show you  
the merchant's lip—  
I carry the disintegrated charm.  
I can't hear the pop  
of his lips as they part  
to sound. His breath  
does not stink  
in my face. My language hums,

carries me through the rooms  
of my brain: Why do I weep  
for his sense? Why  
do I turn his lip over in my palm—  
it does not erase my auras  
or alleviate my seizing skull.  
It does nothing  
in my hands  
but rot.

////

The soldier, his hands marked with calluses, fingers  
the merchant's gums, protected  
by his upper lip. It quivers under the soldier's  
clutch, writhes against the coarse grip. Salt now  
in his already dry mouth. An ache of a body  
seizing with anticipation. The merchant's lip

blooms in the soldier's hand  
as it swells with blood. As if the soldier  
pinches a bud between his fingers. As if  
he plucked it for a lover. With precision,

with dedication the soldier draws a line  
with his knife  
above the merchant's lip  
until it falls gently into his hand like a soured petal.  
And the merchant now has two languages:  
breath and scream.

////

My occipital lobe descends to images of torn  
skin, compounded bones that rake the earth. Marks  
hashed on my back for each day I cannot locate myself.  
Ravines between lobes  
where I find my mouth  
calling out to reorient  
myself  
somewhere  
on the islands of this brain.

I cannot cover a continent with this,  
cannot project my mind's flat map  
of blood or its sharp seize of pain  
onto other topography. Location

is an illness spreading  
through my tissue in an attempt to  
locate itself on the borders  
of my brain.



////

Women heave themselves onto hands of flames. Hysterical—  
how much time must pass for emotion to escape as gas? What turns  
them to ash: the melting body of a man, the burden of whispers through dark hair  
that mark their spines like whips. They burn, their hair the kindling  
that engulfs their live skulls like hoods. Their blooming skin is echoed by other

artillery. They have walked on the shards of glasshouses—it is their feet  
that bleed; others followed their footsteps to the funeral pyre, though the palls  
were already thrown. What covers them: the sea's salt, soldiers sawing  
through a crowd of men to put them out, flat palms quickening their ash—  
the wind carries away whatever lacerating whispers escape their lungs.

////

My cat curls into a fist on the floor  
next to a tower of books. A moat  
of papers. She lazes,  
flits her tail  
against spines. The cold exposes  
itself in my stiff fingers. My white  
knuckles like mountaintops.

The cold stales in my room  
while rain threatens to drown us  
once the river swells  
into a new scar. The roads

do not number themselves and do not know  
they are numbered. When the heat  
carries us in its mouth, the roads  
do not know  
that their exhales note the time.

////

This foreign nation, these. I cannot palm  
in translucent hands.  
Twisted in the trunks of trees

are the monster's many faces.  
Terror is a four-lettered word burdening  
this foreign nation, these. I cannot palm

the monster, who sat under acacia's sweet scent,  
or other common names feared—  
twisted in the trunks of trees:

Mister. I have this voice that only works  
to locate its own pain on a map of  
this foreign nation, these. I cannot palm

those trees, can only hold terror under my tongue  
and press it against my teeth until the word  
twists into the trunks of trees

where my voice carves a landscape  
soaked in other blood.  
This foreign nation, these. I cannot palm  
twists in the trunks of trees.