

## ABSTRACT

Title of Document: MEMORY PALACE

Thomas Aaron Brown, Master of Fine Arts,  
2015

Directed By: Professor Michael Collier, Creative Writing

What happens when memories are altered or lost? When the journey we try to take back to where we once were proves fruitless, time and again? My thesis, *Memory Palace*, deals with this tenuous, liminal state between my childhood spent in rural Chad, Africa, and the adulthood in which I now find myself in urban America and elsewhere. I search for a place of belonging—knowing that the road back to the days I spent sipping tea just miles from Saharan dunes has long since disappeared. This project reflects not only metaphysical journeys but also formal and stylistic departures as I search for a means of expression that is as much a personal journey as it is linguistic. *Memory Palace* is ultimately an exploration of experiences abroad and beyond—an effort to find a path for myself that connects past with present, grief with consolation.

MEMORY PALACE

By

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Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts  
2015

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## Acknowledgements

My thanks to the following literary journals who have published versions of the poems below:

“After Two Years Traveling Abroad, Woman Found Hanging from a Tree” and  
“Batha River” in *Tupelo Quarterly*.

“Memory Palace” and “Beatific Vision” in *JMWW*.

“Nasara” in *Saint Katherine Review*.

“N’Djamena, Meaning ‘We Will Rest’” and “Twin” in *Burningword*.

“Outside Ngaoundere” in *Literary Bohemian*.

“This is Only” in *Dappled Things*.

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# I

In those early amorphous years when memory had only just begun, when life was full of Beginnings and no Ends, and Everything was Forever...

—Arundhati Roy

## Memory Palace

Let us implore that it be returned to us,  
That second space.  
—Milosz

In my father's house, there are rooms where I might wander,  
finding in each the rubble of childhood—a reading chair,  
maroon rug, cluttered toys—things on which I could  
place a memory, if only I could return—

return to search the worn spines of books with talking mice,  
to trace Arabic calligraphy with untrained eyes and speak  
the words of a language primer: *Ghitatti sakhira, ismaha Samira*.  
I could cover these covers with a thought I never wish to lose.

Each room would be a category—in one, the cabinet of drawers  
housing a friend who found a gun in his father's car, the car in which  
he drove the sheikh, and the father who found his son's blood on the seat.  
In my schoolroom, the desk over which the owls clawed in the rafters

where I project the time I hunted with a sling birds the size of my thumb,  
and found none. An unstrung bow to remind me of the afternoons  
when I couldn't mark the words, couldn't say, *How is your health?*  
*Will you be back tomorrow?* The time I was promised he would return,

but he never did and something was missing from my toys,  
a bright green gun. A bright green gun to remind me of the trucks  
burdened with soldiers speeding off to the eastern front, leaving  
a wake of dust only too eager to rise. And how could I forget

the dust that rests on every countertop and crevice, chair and shoe?  
The particles raised by the mortar and pestle beating to the smoke  
of cookfires, dust settling on my bed, in a closet, down a hall where  
I articulate all memories into one: a toy gun, unstrung bow,

desk with owl feathers, cabinet spilling blood, the spines of books  
I never had the time to read. If I lose the way back to this place,  
lose it at a wrong turn and into a wrong room, it will not be for lack  
of things to stand in place of other things, but for the will to look.

## Batha River

They say this land was once an ocean, but I have not found the shells  
to prove it. The dry riverbed slithers like the trail

of a prehistoric snake, its scales leaving the ruts and cracks along the bank,  
dried and caked, sandstoned by sun and drought.

As a child I came to it, the Batha. I saw a sea of dunes dimpling the surface,  
saw a train of pack animals exposed under the hot season sun,

hooves treading grains like water, fording the absent river at a snoring  
pace—the scratch and rasp of foliated bone on sand,

groan of wood-bundles tied against their blistered backs. Their journey  
was endless, as a boy's eyes would make it seem, seeing

their trajectory up a hill and through the twisted thorn trees to villages  
I would never go. But I would return some years later,

a few years older, when the clouds emptied like a jug, drops spread by harmattan  
wind, my friends and I traversing the bog and bird-trees,

standing under the mighty *haraza*, a tree so tall the clouds settled in its leaves,  
the branches marked the four winds. In its roots, we found

stones brought from the depths of the earth, shaped by a thousand years of ocean,  
warmed by the desert sun and our eager hands.

We had waited three months to hear the news: to hear of it coming, coming  
from the southern lake swelled by the rain, turning

and overturning the dunes and rocks and roots, the sand turned to mud  
turned to liquid, risen three feet then ten, the villagers

waiting with fish lines, rushing the word faster downstream than the water rose.  
My friends heard the news on market day, brought it through

my door, and so we came, stones in hand, coiling out our wrists in unison.  
We threw them: a skip, a second, a third, submerged.

## Twin

He had invited me over for coffee, and so we sat sipping clear glasses—the way he always made it syrup-sweet, sludge-thick so that it burns the throat.

We sat in his one-room mud house, on a flowered rug shuttled across oceans and deserts to reach us on the Saharan edge, windswept and forgotten.

I watched him heat coals in a brazier, place them in an iron and hover his hand over its surface, judge it ready to press fresh clothes.

I watched as he spread his shirt across the rug, brush it with heat until it lost its wrinkles, then fold it with a hand, his only good hand,

which had survived a botched birth, broken in his brother's wake and set by a *marabout* tying it too tight with unskilled hands—

the arm still twisted eighteen years later, a reminder of the mother who died giving him life and the brother, unblemished, whose prospects

are as clear as the skies emptied of harmattan rain when his own cloud over, doomed to watch others drive the herds out in the morning or mount

the market trucks as hired hands. I know he irons every Saturday. He sprinkles water on a pair of pants, picks up the iron, brings it down, presses and repeats.

## Motorcycle at Maghrib

And sometimes I find myself on the back of that motorcycle—the headlight illuminating every chipped brick and bounce of rut along the road from the clinic

(that used to be the edge of town) toward the city center, where the fluorescents form a dusty halo in the dark, an ethereal glow that guides me there, guides

me to it. You had called me before prayertime to see if we would go out, a guys' night on the town, and so you came, the knockoff Honda pattering underneath

the stars, the headlight a single bulb barely stronger than a flashlight. I said *don't drive too fast* as we left and you only laughed, talking me through the streets

that night, past the silent gates where I had entered so long ago. *That is Bichara's home, do you remember? Was the big mosque here when you left?*

At the restaurant, you were the host, the life of the party, finding us a table on the streetside, you ordered the top three things on the menu: an omelette,

steaming *nashif*, and bread barely stale at the end of the day. We gorged ourselves as we talked about life after five years' absence—*You gave me that shirt,*

*do you remember? The one with number 41 on it, the Nowitzki shirt. I never wear it. I leave it in the corner of my room so that it never fades or tears.*

The food nearly gone, you smacked your lips and hissed at the waiter boy until he brought us a round of mango smoothies. The cool grit and sweet sank

down our throats. We lingered in silence, watching the previously non-existent night life bustling down the main road: buyers of phone credit, Nigerian

cigarettes, and those new twenty-seater tourist busses that rumble six hundred miles to the east, the ceiling lights revealing bag-eyed passengers, clutching

their belongings close to chest, wary of petty thieves even in sleep. *Let's leave,* you said and so we got on the moto one last time, riding back to what used to be

the edge of town, and sometimes in crisp twilight, when the constellations emerge, I'm almost convinced the motorcycle still hums, still goes beyond the furthest light.

# Teacher

*for Oustaz Boukhari*

That evening we shared a bowl of assir, like honey  
the guava nectar so cold the metal clouded around

the chalk dust left by your fingertips. You had just  
finished a lecture, somewhere down the street, teaching

the youth how to speak, how to read, how to think  
before they leave to till their fathers' fields out of town.

But behind your door, my brother and I took in your mind,  
there in the diminishing afternoon, you so tired you could only

drink juice and crack jokes that danced around the intricacies  
of Arabic, the tin door rattling with every gust of dust

as the cows come into town—we heard them call out  
their arrival, the gentle rumble of their hooves on sand,

the close coming of each one down the street and into the houses  
of neighbors, to the same corner of yard where they spend

every night, where a bowl of hay waits by the tetherpole,  
for slow chewing through the hours.

## Sakina

Your brother was having another naming ceremony for another child,  
and after we had all heard the faki speak and the name

of the child whispered from man to man, we sipped tea together  
and you wondered what my habibti was like,

how she was far away, and whether she would become my wife—  
and she did, but you would no longer be alive to see, only

we sat sipping, and sometimes in my thoughts I wander back  
to the same mat, to the same morning, to the same

sound of you whispering in my ear your new niece's name, *Sakina*,  
meaning *peace*, meaning *serenity*, meaning *rest*,

and how could I have known, that before all of us, before your  
aging mother and drunk of a brother, you would find it first?

## Mirage

You'd never felt the pain in your chest  
until you felt it then,

the moment you stopped your bike,  
breathed short, collapsed.

They found you there, not yet a corpse

still breathing  
but already breathless.

My friends thought the hospital would clear you,  
but fifteen minutes  
and you were dead.

Your body faded into dust, faded beyond it  
till sifting ceased, dispersed to sky.

I've unearthed the truth behind your death:  
how you were driving your usual route to work,

weaving between mud wall and concrete,  
knowing  
every rut to avoid,  
every friend to greet

while passing by, while passing away.

## Maternal

when I see you again  
what will we say

to each other  
my Chadian grandmother

you brought me  
spiced and steaming coffee

you made me sit  
and drink your eyes proud

of who I was becoming  
a *rajil* you said so emphatically

the same eyes with which  
you gazed at your blood-son

your youngest given to you  
in husband's memory

conceived before they took your love  
and shot him at the outskirts

your Madri would grow  
to care for you in old age

to provide for his brothers  
who couldn't keep a job

for drink and sleeping around  
but he was taken too

dead from his motorcycle  
and what must you say

to the shriveled tree  
in your backyard

the one under which you sit  
pouring coffee for guests

serving them sweet biscuits and dates

## Sewing

In the whitewashed guardhouse, the sewing machine  
beats with rhythmic precision the calico *tope*, up

and down—needle sinking, table shuddering  
under the blows, the surface polished

by the sweat of human oils in hot season heat.  
Roughness long smoothed, the cloth slides

seamlessly—first, the side of the dress is joined  
by thread and then a black metal zipper couples

the back together, its cheapness visible  
in that it hardly completes its course,

and as the foot pedal rounds the gears above,  
the needle speeding from silence to a blur,

a collar of embroidered petals, the craft of an hour  
at the sewer's hands, finishes the final touch.

After the return, you try to tell them how it was

to see a friend after five long years, an absence stretching  
continents and oceans, tell them how it was to see him

walk into the café beaming, beaming just like the time  
he beat you at basketball or the time you stayed up late

with your brother and him watching grade B war films.  
He hasn't changed a bit and you set down your tea glass

and laugh yourself into a silence with him, seeing how  
perhaps his dimples have deepened and the flecks of gray

in his hair increased, why you call him *father of age*  
though he's in his twenties. You realize it's this silence

of time you've missed with him and with others, time  
sitting down and sharing everything except words,

speaking in smiles and spending in the currency  
of hours—you had no better place to be.

## Prayer

Make these bones breathe;  
make the reason known

before he's buried at sundown,  
before bones become particles

and skin becomes dust,  
before the dust itself rises,  
lifts on wind, and settles  
along my windowsill,  
in my lungs.

Grain-sifter, have you found  
a way to separate gold from grit?

## N'Djamena, Meaning "We Will Rest"

The day the looters broke into our house was the shot fired  
as my father yelled and the fear that came with the window

darkened by the men looking in and the scuffing of sandals on  
a packed-dirt yard, the grind of metal loosened, the voices

between walls, the bullet that never came, and the hack job that  
never was by a drunken soldier wielding a machete under-

oiled and over-used on thickets by roads and rows of bodies.  
I waited for an execution like at my friend's house two years

before when a rebel was found hiding and forced to kneel,  
a bullet to his brain. I waited against the wall seeking flatness,

transparency, hoping the shadows never recede. This was the end  
of going to bed with no thought of fear, the beginning of chilled

sweats, the beginning of sounds signaling the departure of a place  
once known—the sound of curtains riding wind, ceiling fans beating

air, the sound of opened bags and belongings strewn across the floor,  
of receding taillights and a street littered with empty shells.

# II

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,  
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.

—Elizabeth Bishop

## Acacia Road

From thirteen thousand feet, the twisting acacias—the thirsty thorn-trees reaching  
like a web of fingers up to the sky, into the earth—look like shrubs  
shriveled under the sun seeming so distant, and yet so present with its heat.  
The streams of cattle ridge like ocean waves across the plains,  
the sleek and sheen of their backs, ants' exoskeletons, labor for miles to the burst  
of brush beyond the endless *nagga*. Rising from earth, the mountains  
pepper the plain: the mounds of rocks, marbles of God, pile high above  
the *dom* trees whose black seeds clump like fistfuls of obsidian—  
when they fall they make the sound of a bullet rushing through a dust devil,  
rushing to the point of impact in the sand silencing  
the sound of lead. From thirteen thousand feet, I wonder if a shepherd  
roaming the road remembers the rebel trucks that breathed death  
into the dust, clouding the air with grain, cloaking the black barrels of kalashes  
aimed across a land I now study, five years later through the plexiglass,  
a land sucked dry, flying to the town at the world's edge, the place no soldier  
would go, the circles of huts and thatch swelling as the empty oxbows  
wind a road to follow—a road that breaks at the carcasses of colonial homes,  
empty at the edge of town, and the huts that become mud roofs  
sinking like worn mattresses, surrounded by ruts weaving between rows of homes  
and people streaming in polyester gold and deep azure sky—and somewhere,  
down there, a three-part gate along *chari kabir* stands as the entry to mine,  
but to find it, you must turn at the broken cement mixer, the one left lying  
abandoned by a truck traversing the desert, having traveled so far it makes light  
its load, casting off the disrepaired, losing its cargo piece by piece.

## The Funeral

They have told her Youssouf has left this life, left it on the road  
between Ngoura and Amjamena; he fell twice off the hood  
where he had been perched, refusing a seat in the cabin  
when the third lurch brought him to the earth,  
and under the right rear tire. Without the father of her children,  
what was she left to do except marry her daughter  
to the guard across the street, his impotence the wind of rumor,  
the reason that within years their marriage was over,  
and she let her son become a soldier—he sends money  
when he's sober. The day of the death, the yard filled  
with neighbors who beat their chests, who screamed so that Allah  
might tip the scales in Youssouf's favor. They silenced  
to count the ninety-nine names, made it somewhere around  
six thousand before the day was done and I could only hear  
the hush of death stealing like a cloud over the mud wall.  
I could not move or go to say the single word *kalawah*—  
the word that seems so outside of Arabic it must have been  
made up for a day like this when you meet your death  
between wheel and sand, and how could I do anything  
except pause at the dying of the sun and think of you,  
Youssouf, wrapped in seven meters of linen, lowered  
into a grave dug in collapsing sand, somewhere  
between Ngoura and Amjamena, where a stone the size of a fist  
marks your grave, and the shadows it casts marks the hours,  
like a dial that disappears at noon, or at night.

## I don't know anything about suffering

as in losing three children to a sickness you can't even name,  
as in losing your baby boy  
five days after birth

while you rode a market truck coming home to see him,  
as in saying that a dead child has  
*returned*

rather than *died*  
(as if that could make it all easier)

as in riding the back of a motorbike and hitting an acacia tree,  
the chain or the wheel snapping your femur,

as in waking every morning to the sound of your children dying  
(from whooping cough)

as in walking the fields at noon to glean a bowlful of grain—  
how painful when your husband

never returned from the war and the journey he made  
across the desert to find a job in Geneina,

to marry the second wife  
so much younger,

she didn't bear a stillborn three years in like you—  
as if you weren't trying, as if you didn't want to please him

as if every dead and dying thing was  
under your control

and you could make the clouds drop rain and breathe life  
into a brittle carcass by the roadside,

as if you could even begin to think with a mind that for once  
wasn't parched as in the road you walk to your field

every morning, several kilometers away,  
joining with the others

who bear the same blows, have the same cracks, who sweep  
the endless horizon with their eyes and reach

their jagged arms

to the single cloud that won't let go, won't seal up earth's scars,

though everyone asks it why.

## Train à Grande Vitesse

Somewhere, somehow it's shuttling past,  
the metals humming, the windows lulled to sleep  
by the rushing wind

rushing but only

so long as the train moves,  
to stop would mean silence, the kind one feels

when stepping down on the platform,  
and it's late—the hour hand standing straight.  
No one is there to meet you.

So you walk out the station, walk along the Seine,  
and every postcard image  
blazes against the never-setting night.

But you don't have eyes to see it, not that  
you'd want to anyway, and you can only think  
of the roll-out bed in a banlieue  
you need three connections to reach.

You remember then how much you prefer  
movement, the movement outside your window  
while you sit perfectly still, watching  
a man with a pencil moustache eat his lunch,  
turning to the next page of the *Monde*.

## Coming of Age

Along Boulevard du Montparnasse on a Thursday, a protest day,  
I walked not knowing my mistake until it was too late

and the swarms of university students, a year or so older than me,  
swept the street—sirens blared, police took up positions—

and down one alley and then another, I came to them not knowing  
what they protested against, only that they stood in my way

from an afternoon walk when I wanted to see something  
more than marching feet, upended trash cans.

I tried to cross the swelling boulevard, got caught in the sweep,  
an undertow that pulled me side to side and always down

towards the Eiffel Tower looming distant and aloof and the Seine  
whose current idles by no matter the day or season,

and looking out across the raised fists and linked arms,  
I spied a Metro entrance on my side of the road

and dropped down the stairs, found the crowd there, too,  
drumming on metal bars and scaling turnstiles, pushing

me back to the surface, and then I fled back to my quiet street,  
the street named after some mountain, the street

where a bakery stood at its end to hold the masses  
from my chip-painted door which drew apart

with a tug of my hand, and clicked together again,  
myself inside, down in the basement where the beams held

the centuries-old building together with a groan, and I tried  
to forget the chants, the fists, the linked arms blocking

my way. That was five years ago, but what about thirteen  
when I stood as a boy in Florence and watched a train

of Hare Krishnas come through, an undulating wave  
of shaved heads and faces glossed serene—

men and women beating the drum, men and women  
dancing and joining their voices in deep-hearted song,

and I could only watch and ask *Who are they?* as their music  
flooded the street and took minutes more to fade

as they passed down. I felt the tug to join them, to dance  
with abandon as the crowd looked on. Their gaze would be

disapproving—the kind of look I must have had when in a bookstore  
later, I scanned the shelves, cup of hot chocolate in hand,

and couldn't think of anything but shaved heads and saffron, sweeping robes.

## Nasara

The word the kids would shout gleefully at the white boy walking down  
their street; the same that would make my limbs listless, make me notice

my skin, how it resembled more the sands baked by the sun  
than the warm earth richness of theirs—I wanted to chameleon

my way through the streets without being singled out as *nasara*,  
as foreigner, as other. The word reminded me of what I was not.

The word I did not understand until years later, a man, I leafed  
through the pages of a magazine, and saw the same word, *nasara*,

*Nazarene*, the first of its Arabic letters, *nun*, embossed on the cover page.  
Reading how the letter was painted on the doors of Christians in Iraq,

how militants would come back later to gather the flock and line them up  
above a fresh-dug trench. The same word I read and had to put down

to stare at the blinds, the way they only let in a fraction of light  
even at midday, and I was chilled by the sense of a word

I was hearing as if for the first time, a meaning more for me  
than it ever should have meant—the children only wanting

to see me turn and smile, those around me only wanting me  
to come and rest, to let go my words and let them join with theirs,

to dwell in the shade of language in a place beyond the past, where I sit,  
with glossed pages lying bare and open, reading between their lines

a vision where another boy is taken out into the street, gun to his head,  
all because of that single word, *nasara*, meaning, *Christian*.

## Village, Tanzania

*for MNB*

Here at the edge of the world  
or, for others, the center  
of the heartland—where  
the soot of cookfire smoke  
lingers with mountain clouds,  
where the straggling sheep  
graze the clumping shoots  
and bike-tire shoes circle  
tracks across the path  
to the hearth-lit speakeasy  
at the village heart—here  
we walked, you and I,  
not touching each other's hands  
for that would make the villagers  
talk amongst themselves.  
Instead, we chose silence,  
communing in the dying light,  
walking along the path worn  
by cloven hooves and human  
feet, we who were bundled  
in warm-up jackets mid-July  
upon a hill in Safwaland.

## Departures

That Sunday we sat in church, my father holding the Psalms in his hand  
as he read before the congregation, his voice a mixture of fear and defiance—

*If the foundations tremble, what can the righteous do?* No other verse could  
he claim after taking his wife and sons across oceans, to follow a voice

that told him to heal the sick, listen to suffering, and watch as those we love  
pass beyond. He read underneath the tinting tin ceiling, the pulsating

fans providing little relief in the heat, and I heard the questions he asked  
with the Psalmist, the questions between the lines and the longing

for their answers. The questions again my father would ask a few days later  
when he heard the news that Rudy died on the road to AmTiman,

the Land Rover a mess of flesh and metal, the lorry that hit him tipped over,  
and the passengers wailing for the pools of blood sinking in the sand.

*What can the righteous do?* Not a day went by without wondering why  
we were here, what could we offer, how we could ever stem the flow

of wounds centuries old—the wounds in every face-line and skin-crevice  
and the wounds, that despite everything, a friend would dispel, as he opened

his door to us, his smile wider than the Chari river, a smile silencing  
the questions instead of asking God we should have asked ourselves.

## Outside Ngaoundéré

*after Dante*

While driving above the valley, along a rut  
of road, I saw the river dropping into an abyss—  
couldn't gaze below for the trees, the thickly woven  
curtain of brush and millet stalks, but knowing I must  
find a way, must find the place where the falling river  
meets the earth, I searched until the gateway revealed  
its mouth to me, the break in the growth through which  
the steam rose, and I heard the roar somewhere down  
its muddy path, the path I stumbled down for an hour,  
slipping on rock and root, sliding when I lost my  
footing, the sludge chuckling at my feeble attempts  
to resist—I hardly had the time to stand before  
I saw that I had emerged onto a steep bank,  
and there before me was the whirlpool, the cloud  
of mist that hissed a warning to those who approached,  
and its wall of falling water, coming down as if from sky.  
I felt my way along the pool's edge, where the foam,  
once churned, now came to collect on my soaked shoes.  
I risked submersion but for the promise of land—  
a peninsula breaking out from the cliff, into the roar  
of the water. Climbing, I crept up this risen island,  
this rock of two trees, broken baskets, abandoned shoe;  
this rock, metamorphic and lacquered, firmly fixed  
in swirls lapping its sides, reaching for my ankles.  
In the midst of the steam, the roar, the water  
that somehow rained yet remained the same,  
I stood and found myself in its center.

## The Calling

### I

In three days, they took down the temple brick by brick:  
the steel-toothed claws ripping apart tile and mortar,

old rusted pipes bursting like shredded paper  
while the demolition crew crawled around onsite,

hard hats mirroring the summer sun till the day  
when the dark-fisted cloud crept across the July sky—

the rain that followed washed clean the remains  
of the unused university building, the runoff

streaming down the cracked drains of the last wall.  
Wind threatened to collapse the exposed ribcage

of iron beam and ceiling timber, wind across  
the sidewalks and through the oaks lining

the expanse of grass, emptied of students on break,  
filled with the fog of a tempest so thick I couldn't see

out the barred windows of the library. I waited  
for the break in the storm like a cloud

across the sun, that seemed to speak *leave*  
*or you'll lose your chance.*

### II

Outside, the wind had left its rubble along the sidewalk:  
the broken branches, split acorns, wash of mud

along the path like a brushstroke. The fog settled down  
and in its break I saw flashes of a place I had left

that wasn't the library or the bus stop  
but dunes, thorn trees, carcasses of cows,

and the dry bed of a rahad yet to be filled, and I saw him,  
riding on his motorcycle, riding the dirt road he takes

to work every morning, Madri coming from the mist.  
We met in between the fog and trees, soaking

in the rain we shared in silence. I had forgotten  
the lines across his forehead, forgotten how long

I had tried to make sense of his death. He was dry  
and his voice was dry, as if it hadn't been used

these sixteen months in the soil.

### III

His words came over the rain patter, light yet labored:  
*When the last child has died of thirst, when the old woman*

*goes past the furthest house and disappears in the desert,  
when the last bull has withered to its ribs, breathed its final*

*breath, and the mourners still gather ten years later,  
still say my name and sip the same tea on the same rug*

*in the same yard, when the water never comes again  
to the dry riverbed, and it has been dammed upstream,*

*when all the herdsman have waited hours  
for its drops—who will write about this place?*

I said *I will* I said *I have to* and then I walked past.

# III

I say how can we be happy when we are mere  
wanderers without a home?

—Helon Habila

## Elsewhere

One day you searched for memory and found it riding sideways  
in the Metro,

catching the scent of a cigarette in Paris  
or perhaps Istanbul

(it's these things you can't be sure of anymore)

the air held the same desert grains collecting  
against the N'Djamena curb

where white road-lines fade, where rickety cabs coast  
to filling stations,

where the streetlights hang lifeless for years

waiting for repair.

You realized then that you must make places stand in  
for those that have been lost—

like the time you took the train into Chicago for no other reason  
than to roam the streets at rush hour—

the street drummers drumming the rhythm of the men and women  
returning to the station, and you saw the ghost

of a friend now gone in a break between them,  
before the crowd closed in again and again

you were left as you always have been, trying to make something  
out of something

trying

just like the day you searched for God in Salisbury Cathedral,  
climbed through the rafters

to the tip of the spire

climbed even out the bolted windows but didn't see him there,  
until you looked down

and found him in the faces of the people walking the grounds.

## Head Space

If you ask me how he found his way in, I couldn't tell.  
If you spent a while following, he'd lead you down a rabbit  
trail: across a bridge spanning the known and unknown,  
through the revolving doors turning till the end of ends.

You'd be lucky to emerge into the halls, the spacious halls,  
full of mirrors fragmenting your figure into oblivion—  
you would forget how you entered, where you were heading,  
and who you once were. Only, you'd see him standing

in the distance, fluttering like a desert mirage, beckoning  
or walking away. You'd follow him down one pathway  
and then the next, through doors wide enough for titans  
or cracks as thin as knives. You'd come to what you thought

was an opening, just to find it glass, and turn to see him disappear  
down another way. When I was there, I thought I'd found him  
time and time again. I thought that after taking a thousand steps,  
after calling out *Wait*—my voice on edge—I might turn a corner

and find him there, waiting with an air of knowledge  
as if he'd always been waiting to tell me I'm not really lost.

## Merciless Infinity

Somewhere along the road, you see the fire of a thousand fields

approaching closer and closer

until you are closed in on all sides, and when the wind comes,  
the sparks light the grass like fueled embers

and you struggle against its hellish vortex  
like treading tempest water

and after the wind, the earth shakes,  
its bones rattle—there is no way up or down

and after the quaking earth, you watch the flames

scar the earth,  
sear the sky

and you huddle just above the ground because it seems  
your only protection.

Then density of sound  
comes unseen  
and snuffs out the fire's flame.

A whisper and a rush takes hold your legs and arms—

you are made  
lifelessly limp.

## Istiklal Caddessi

In the midst of marquee light, the faces upturned and laughing at street performers,  
I search for you, brother, with no eyes to see the flashing bulbs

of sale signs or signs saying *two scoops for two lira*, I search to find you  
in the faces, not expecting yours to smile with the others, knowing

you search for something too, amidst the scents of spice and roasted nuts,  
the revolving kebab spits, the whirls and twips of toys sold on the street—

that's not why we decided to come, hours earlier, you said *let's go* and *we'll see*  
*Taksim late, after the protestors have gone* and we made it to the edge,

saw the square empty, smaller than we'd seen on screens, and going back,  
less than what we once were, we couldn't decide how to return,

whether we'd retrace our steps, or branch deeper into Beyoglu and come  
upon a café or bar, take back an espresso, and keep going—

either way we exchanged more than words along a side street, and we parted,  
just like we always do on trips like this, having reached a point

where we can't stand the sight of the other. It lasts only five minutes, and then  
we are back searching for each other, searching in the crowds and the lights,

walking over Galata bridge, back and forth, underneath the half moon and minaret  
serenade we look for each other, at the mouth of a metro or ferry's dock

or by the round swirl of traffic and towering screens—we look to say everything  
that isn't *sorry*, that isn't an apology, if only we could meet in between.

## Lake Kivu Dream

A mess of streets and shanties, crossroads of war where masses throng,  
faces sunken and hands begging at barred truck windows, the trucks  
speeding to camps birthed in blood, the fields followed by the flowing lava  
and the roads caked molten all the way from the slopes of Nyiragongo  
down to the shore where I stand, staring into the lake's depths—waiting for what  
I can't say. Only, a vapor rises somnolent, and beneath the layers of the lake,  
somewhere methane lies limnic, waits under volcano shadow belching cloud and ash  
over the paving roads and walls torn by shells and lava and hands piecing together  
brick by brick, war's rubble, peace's silence. To which my back is turned.  
Somewhere a man wakes up to see his children sleeping, somewhere  
he goes outside and sees his neighbors sleeping, somewhere he rides his bike up  
to crater ridge and sleeps underneath the jujube tree. Somewhere  
a troop of silverbacks circle a termite castle, poking and prodding with the bluntness  
of their fingers withdrawing to see bug whiteness and mandibular henna tattoos.  
Somewhere green leaves mask green shirts, hovering spider-like in cookfire smoke,  
watching children at play with metamorphic pebbles, bouncing away  
the hours in their hands, and somewhere, the lava has reached the shore, sinking  
beneath the surface and creeping along the floor to the million-parts of poison  
trapped under the gentle waves. I await the detonation and release, toxic  
and calming, that I will breathe myself into a sleep so numb  
I could take the first step into ankle-deep—without fear, but knowing  
that beneath the surface there are bodies.

## Malindi Beach

In low tide, you could walk the cove—  
it comes to shoulder height

and at high tide, you have to row  
your way to the outcrop of rock

where the Indian Ocean crabs  
try their best to stay dry,

moving from sand to boulder  
as the waves rise and up

into the million crags of home.  
I came here once, with my brother.

We beached our boat and floated  
in the nearby shallows, watching

the ephemeral fish. The hours went away  
with the waves, and returning to rock,

we found our boat gone with the tide  
and in the distance, rising and falling,

its blue plastic hull burst waves,  
the same my brother tried to swim—

the current pushing back his every stroke,  
but there was nothing to be done

except watch it get carried away,  
further and further, beyond our little

rock island, my brother's figure  
slowing in the current and turning back.

I waited to ask why he couldn't outswim  
the stream, why he'd even agreed

to leave the boat basking on the bar—  
and as he took in each breath,

his body heaving wave-like,  
the crabs appeared from the crags

of the hollowed stone, watching  
our figures huddled silent

along the shore, waiting  
for the tide to subside.

## Picture of a Family

*after Cavafy*

There's a photo he carries for long journeys  
like this one, for trips on loaded market lorries  
where the passengers take their seat, perching  
on top of cargo, or sitting on crude benches  
inside the buses coming from Sudan with names  
like "Best of Luck" or "Mr. Good Looking."

As the road rumbles from Chad through Cameroon  
to Nigeria, toward another year of medical school,  
he always reaches into his inside coat pocket  
and brings out the folded 4x6. Sees his brother,  
with the latest jeans from the capital and a maroon  
hoodie zipped half-way up, one leg placed forward  
and his head tilted back—an "attitude" he's learned  
from movies and music pipelined from America.

Sees his mother, bright pink polyester swirling  
around her figure, and remembers how she woke  
before dawn to make him *fangaso* for his trip.  
He sees the lines his brother and him have caused,  
drawn into her face after years of worry,  
fatherless years of selling market produce  
and begging relatives for support. He sees the slight  
twist of her mouth, the triumph of a mother  
shining through the sorrow of leave-taking,  
the promise for her child to have a better life.

## Hours after disembarking from your plane

you lean against the rail on a ferry crossing the Bosphorus, spanning  
the stretch of water

that divides a continent—you remember  
the two weeks just spent a few hundred miles south of the Sahara.

As if a minute hadn't passed, you picked up the threads of ages-old  
conversation

sipping tea with friends you hadn't seen for years.  
You walked the streets of youth, the same streets now illuminated  
by lights instead of lanterns, graded by steamrollers instead of hooves,  
but you longed

for the silence in the neem trees  
as the wind of hushed voices drifted between their leaves,

and everyone used to know each other before the war  
scattered us all,

before the university brought in  
a thousand new faces, and now you can't tell whether the man

you meet on the street is your neighbor or the girl on the walk home  
is the one

who sold you a bag of peanuts in the suq,  
so you try and recreate how it used to be—you go out when the sun

has baked the sands to embers, to the shores of the great river  
but it's only you,

and the shadows haven't grown long enough  
to stand in place of all your friends who've gone.

## After Two Years Traveling Abroad, Woman Found Hanging from a Tree

I can see your gaze out the window, the silences  
of a house that hasn't waked,

the straight-planed walls with interwoven leaves dancing  
wraithlike—

the pre-dawn moment when the earth lingers undecided,  
as if waiting for light

or nothing at all.

You felt it too, the fear of confinement that comes after knowing  
so many cities, so many streets;

of being

tied down: the feeling that drives you into the wilderness—

drives you to do something the others wouldn't dream.

These walls know their bounds. This land is measured, acred off.  
Even the floorboards have mouths.

Will we ever be content, you and I?

## Suspension of (Dis)belief

as in forgetting the way in which  
you were raised, as in forsaking  
every good word you've read  
in the Good Book—as if your  
actions now would be reactions—  
this is not abandonment

but something else entirely,  
more like the feeling a butterfly  
must have when breaking from  
its spit-wad nest, first freeing  
a technicolor wing and then  
another, first the twisting,  
the breaking before the flutter—

more like the prominence  
of an art display at a museum  
when you first walk in: *you have  
no option but to confront it.*

Something else pulls the weight,  
pulls and yearns and lets go  
like the ten-story-tall crane  
you see on your way to work:  
swiveling and lifting steel like  
a toothpick. It asks of you  
before you ask of it like when  
a hang-glider runs headlong  
to the cliff edge not knowing  
if the wind will carry him  
to the horizon's end  
or suspend its given gust.

Before suspension, there  
must be belief undeniably  
in the things that are, belief  
that another sits somewhere  
watching over, pulling strings.

## Ghazal

In dust season December, we rolled out our rugs at Ramadan,  
filled the beige thermos (don't drink!) over the inscribed mat, *Ramadan*.

Friends filtering in like slivers of window light, we broke out  
a new pack of Bicycle playing cards, saved just for that Ramadan.

In a humid November, the short bearded plumber stepped  
from the Sudanese bus, tools in hand—that fall we met Ramadan.

The hardest worker, sweat beads slid down his forearm,  
shirt soaked, he wouldn't have a drop of water: *It's Ramadan*.

The hottest August, dear friend Mahamat wouldn't stop  
playing basketball, so long as he could find a spot and spit (Ramadan).

At the end of day, an hour still left to Maghrib, he'd take up  
the ball in the curl of his fingers, find and hit the net, Ramadan.

Under the summer sun, July sky dimpled with cloud, the old men  
of Sultan Ahmet lit cigarettes and didn't give a flip about Ramadan.

They didn't seem to care, they didn't seem to remember the brown  
summer laughter and long-hour sweltering wait of Ramadan.

## Song of the Workers

Before the sun rises, I hear the shovels out in the corner of the yard, scraping.  
Clément, the leader of the bunch, sets the tune

of some sorrowful song of the south, first the hum and then the words  
the words that escape his lips—  
a song of the grandmother  
who made him  
boulle

who made him sit and sop the sauce with its grittiness  
in his fingers.

The song of the ferry crossing the Logone  
he remembers

the day as a young boy his father took him by the hand  
cigarette steeping in the mouth and together

they rode a 14-seater north.

When they reached the outskirts of the truckstop market  
young Clément watched city boys walk outside

the van windows, selling radios and batteries  
and chewing gum for the clink of a few coins

in their beggars' cups, and this was just the market's start.

When they reached his father's cousin's house  
(in Moursal)

his father took up the hammer, and from then on never left the square space of yard,  
always pounding and planing the long slender slabs of Cameroonian timber.

Within a day he could build a table: the legs arched on the side, the finishes ornate  
and then he'd sit back in his rope-strung chair

(the ropes unraveling)

and sip marrissay till his eyes shut, the sawdust settling in his beard,  
and Clément crawling up his father's knee to pluck from his chin

what he thought was gold.

Clément sang his song and the others began to weave their own into his,  
their own journeys to the desert edge town:

their plastic-woven  
    *Ghana Must Go* bags  
filled with the trusted hammer  
    they'd carried since the cradle...  
the smooth-oiled saw with lion teeth...  
    sandpaper squares used on twigs to clean teeth...  
whiskey packets for when the day was done...

and at the dark dusk closing, their song still continued strong.  
    I'd sit on the half-finished wall

and watch them slop the red bricks carted in from the river kilns  
    and hear them sing and hear them teach me new words

*amman mai* – fetch me water  
                            *karé* – I'm fine  
  *da boi* – the boy.

## This is Only

*after Mark 16*

It will happen like this—  
first, many will say *I am*  
when asked if they are me,

but this is not yet the end,  
and there will be rumors  
of wars and the earth

will quake down to its  
very bones, but this  
is not the end. This

will be the time when  
you are on your guard,  
when you who follow

will be rounded up, brought  
before the councils and courts  
and asked what it is you

believe. What you believe  
will be beaten out of you  
but it will never leave,

there will always be me,  
but this is not the end.  
This is only the time

when your brother  
will turn you over and  
your sister will rat you out—

when you will be hated  
and you will not have time  
to go back into your house

for your coat or your keys,  
it will be the time to flee.  
This is only the beginning

or perhaps a recurrence  
of when I saw him fall

like stars from heaven

but that is another story  
for another time, only  
don't believe them if

they say that I am there  
or I am around the corner  
because my time is not yet

and don't say I didn't warn you  
that the earth will sink into dark  
as if plunged into a sea

of space, the sun snuffed out,  
and the moon turned round  
so that only its backside

greet your unseeing eyes.  
But there will be clouds  
and angels and me—shining

like sheet lightning, riveting  
the earth to its core. I will find  
you in the corners to the ends

of rock and sky. Just take  
care not to fall asleep  
and miss me coming by

your hiding place. Stay  
awake and we will ride  
the four winds together.

## Vanita

Like firing embers, your eyes  
lit with recognition

as you saw me and my love  
standing by the bars of your bed

supplicating us with your hands  
we took them, dry like paper

but warm and pressing our fingers.  
The levees of your eyes

threatened to break, *I'm so happy  
for you.* And for a second time

you asked, *Did you marry?*  
We said yes.

Knowing that you have passed  
beyond, I can only reach

into a boy's mindframes  
remembering the afternoons:

the house on Ridgmar,  
outside the dogwoods dancing,

the swingset rusted and unused.  
You didn't want to leave

to join my grandmother  
in her house an hour away—

it might have been across an ocean.  
I remember the afternoon

you rested in your armchair  
one last time

and swept your eyes  
over the picture frame mosaic,

the faded upholstery,  
the cream wallpaper.

You thought of the years  
you raised a family here,

and the day your husband's heart  
gave out—and the night a light

approached your door,  
your eyes opening

before it receded,  
and you fell back asleep.

## Beatific Vision

*Paradiso, Canto XXXIII*

My speech will be short like the memory of a child  
who still drinks from his mother's breast: not that  
the living light was simple—it never really changed—

but as I gained the strength to look more and more,  
the single image, the sole object, began to take shape  
as I myself was shaped: clearness of light, profound

and beyond, merged into three circles, each with another  
color (or were they the same?). Two reflected one on  
another, rainbow on rainbow, the third fire-breathed

from their layers. *Speech fails to express, words a spark  
of what was! These lines can't even be called "little"  
in comparison!* Eternal Light, you live in yourself,

you know yourself, and—both known and knowing—  
you love and are pleased in you! The circling, thus made,  
was a shaft of light around you and yet your own reflection

all the same. The more I looked at it, seemingly, it was my own  
likeness in its light, in its color like a stroke of paint.  
I couldn't take my eyes away, like a mathematician trying

to make a square of a circle, a circle of a square, never finding  
the formula he needs (so he thinks until his head hurts,  
this was how I felt staring into this strangeness).

If only I could see how the image fitted the circle,  
how it fit there at all, embodied yet not, wanting  
a place as much as I—the wings of my mind could

not fly to that place, the place of understanding. But  
for a flash that made it clear: my power failed  
the highest thought, and my will, given energy

to turn again, became like a wheel revolved by love—  
that love, you know, that moves the sun and stars.

## Elegy

We were supposed  
to become old men,

you and I, our wives  
mingling as friends,

grinding millet  
to powder over

the conversation  
of stifling afternoons,

and our children  
giggling meanwhile,

shooting marbles  
and flipping cards—

the games we used to  
play not too long ago.

We were supposed  
to be two old men,

you and I, sharing  
in the silence

of empty tea glasses,  
laughing at God's humor

instead of just me  
wondering

why he'd want you  
when I still do.

## Evensong

Tonight, the stars have settled in the sanctuary,  
left suspended, like a thousand angels

they hear our prayers, they brighten with the ecstasy  
of praise, flash-flickering their brilliance—

sight is made difficult. I cast down  
my eyes, I refuse to show my face,

I have brought in

the shadows through the door, they trail and dance  
in the corner

*Christ, have mercy upon us.*

\*

Dearly beloved  
let the word move us to a place

where we might repent, where we might  
take upon ourselves a posture

of piety, praying

*Lord, have mercy*

*Christ, have mercy upon us*

for that which we have done  
and left undone.

\*

I have a sin of grief—  
snarling in the corner,

flaring-flesh,  
tying-tendrils

around the mind.  
I have a sin which

if God had done,  
he would not have done.

I always have more.

\*

*Christ have mercy on you and forgive...*

forgive the agony which I have brought?  
Soul-joints grind and groan with longing

to be pure

absolved of this lack,

this thorn which you have said to be power  
only through you, only through you

can I receive the power to approach

*Our Father...*

\*

The priest with the collar around his neck  
says we are free

but are we?

Twisting and turning like a flame  
how can I ever be still?

I long for it

even so, even so I entered this evensong  
while it was still light, but through the shaded glass

I can tell it's dark outside

*as it was in the beginning.*

\*

*World without end*

where does the soul's journey begin

and where will it be  
when time will cease?

Will the self expand, expand with fullness of you,  
will you infuse it  
with your essence?

Or will we shrink to a flame, existing  
yet not existing

threatened, extinguished if not for the oxygen  
that fills the air  
this marvelous filling

which you have done.

Did I know of it before I came through the door?  
Did you pull me here where the words

of a new song sink to cracks  
between the stones, seep across the walls

to the splintered rafters, congealing like caulk?

\*

*Let us depart*

kicking I have come, in peace I leave.

I have seen the feast, spread glittering underneath  
the candles, I have tasted it  
and found it filling—

a light to lighten, a sound to sound, a taste to taste.  
Let me illuminate, let me melodize, let me season

your earth, until you show me your face:

your face, a glimpse of which will set the wrongs  
to only a dull numbness,

will cease the shadows to only the lines of shadows.

*Take not thy spirit.*

Never stop renewing, renewing the heart that groans.

*Go forth into the world.* Rejoicing in a broken spirit.

## Endless

I slip beneath the surface in January, so cold  
the water steams from the pool into the air

like effervescent waves—

you could blow them with a breath and watch  
as they take shape and sail above till they become

indeterminate from cloud.

I wish that in their airborne steam I could have a seat,  
could breathe myself across borders and oceans,

breathe myself into a new skin

different than what I am now: a man, watching pool waves  
lick sandstone siding, remembering

the boy who sifted grains

with his steps to join Moussa by the great road  
where Toyota trucks rushed through town like zephyrs—

but now only a man, waiting

in suburbia for the myth of life to return and take him up  
in its cloud one last time.

## N'Djamena Morning

Mornings like this, the sun shining in patches through the trees—  
the trees with needle-thin leaves

and Moussa tuning the radio...

*(crackling)*

adjusting the antenna wire

stretching from the box to the metal window grate.

Outside a motorcycle rides by, a lizard brushes across the wall,  
and from on high, the wind makes the topmost mango leaves speak.

*Je chante à la radio... et on dit le premier gaou  
n'est pas gaou.*

Juliette is digging in the corner of the yard,  
sticking her snout out and breathing in the earth—

she smells the scent of a hedgehog that passed by in the night  
on its way to the road

where the faded Peugeot taxis

shudder over bumps.

*Je savais chanter un peu.*

On walks through the neighborhood  
where the tall whitewashed walls of the UN compound

stand in silence, it takes some time before you see a human being:  
a uniformed guard, who invites you to sit down

on his blue stringed chair.

From far off, the sound of a distorted voice comes closer—  
a camouflaged truck kicks up a cloud

and a soldier stands in its bed,

lifts the megaphone to his lips, reminds you of the curfew at ten.

*Et on dit...*

A chameleon slowly crawls its way across the road,  
it feels the rumble of an approaching car,

sees the treads with its sideways eye.

The chameleon sticks out its tongue, puffs out its chest,

the back tire

obliterates the tongue.

*Je savais chanter un peu.* I knew how to sing a little.

## Remembrance

*Here have some tea I poured him a glass and take from the biscuit tray  
and don't forget the peanuts.*

The shadows of the thorn tree twisted and sickled  
their way across the gravel beyond the porch—

the sky cloudless, the surrounding plain bare of life apart  
from the camel train at the horizon-line

loping off toward a faraway market day.

*Do you remember the time we stayed up late  
watching what*

*was the name, Sid al-Khatim—Lord of the Rings?*

*Yes.*

*Well I saw it on Canal+ the other day...*

Someone came into the yard from the side gate, took a cup of water  
from the moist cooling jar in the shade.

The metal plate covering the jar's mouth rattled shut.

*What is it that you do now?*

*I work with different projects. Now, I'm with a well-digging NGO.*

*Yesterday, we were all the way in Ambassatna  
looking for a good place to dig.*

*And the money?*

*It's all right, one day I'll save enough for a wife or maybe  
just enough to move to N'Djamena*

*and pay the bribe to get a government job, even if it's in the South.*

The wind blew from the southwest, gently enough to cool us.  
Strong enough to send the falcon-shadows streaking

across the oven-sun yard.

*Tell me he said do you remember the time we watched basketball games  
and there was that short fellow, Boykins was his name.*

*What happened to him?*

*I don't know.*

*Tell me, why did you come back? I expected to see your brother,  
I expected to see even your father.*

*But why you?*

On the other side of the walls, a motorcycle roared to life,  
then faded away along the road to town.

## Notes

The section epigraphs in this collection are taken from *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy (Random House 2008), “One Art” as printed in *Poems* by Elizabeth Bishop (FSG 2011), and *Oil on Water* by Helon Habila (Norton 2011).

The epigraph that begins “Memory Palace” comes from Czeslaw Milosz’s “Second Space” as printed in *Second Space* (Ecco 2005).

For my translation of the closing lines of Dante’s *Paradiso*, I am indebted to John D. Sinclair’s *Divine Comedy* translation (Oxford University Press 1961).

Several lines in “Evensong” come from *The Book of Common Prayer*.

The song lyrics in “N’Djamena Morning” are taken from Magic System’s wildly popular song “Premier Gaou.”