

Conversation Pieces
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Sleeping Under the Tree of Life

Poetry and Short Fiction by
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and Jacqueline and Jada
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Turns the World Round Midnight

The Tongue We Dream In

Our first language was wet
mournful questions rang
like falling stars
in red clay throats

No milk teeth to help
form words, our eyes
made syllables, cries strung out
on ropes of tears, thoughts
dangled on twisted threads
of hope

Our first language was touch
balled fists of unlined fingers
grasping for fire, tendrils of light
blazed in eyes, molten with liquid fear
skin pricked and pierced with
stories to be told, lives to unfold
through the dark tunnel of years

Our first language was song
a bell hangs in our hearts
rings with every bloody drumbeat
songs to reduce souls to ashes
and songs to sing them anew

Our first language
was wet touch singing
ourselves across the darkness
into life, in our dreams we sing
in the first tongue, the language
before birth

What the Map Knows

Worlds so vast
loneliness
without end
with roads named
after dying stars
for men who brought hunger
from other distant lands
bought bones
from other distant bodies
and fear
of the dark oak forests
that held each other up
knowing fire dreamed
of swallowing them
and the tongue of the wind
was the scattered nations
wrapped around their shoulders.

Then, even the manmade river
was not silent.
He cried himself back to warmth
but they called him ice,
cursed him when his grief
walked their new found land,
grief covering the silent houses
like a starry wagon's wheel.

They called them kindling, savage blood
as if words would make it something
they can hold
in open hands

plot a way to follow
across the widening sky.

This is the map of worlds, forgotten.
This is the new world without end.
Where forests have been
cut away from their trees.
Flesh split, the bones exposed.
These are the lines blood
could not pass.

What the map knows but cannot tell
is that a grain of dust dwells
at the center of every flake of snow
that ice is a river grieving
that blood lives inside
a circle of its own beginning.

What we know is this:
the first language is forgotten
but not dead
the first name is not the first
or even the last.

There are names each thing
gives itself, contains its own
dream for life
and beneath us
the order already moves
maps, roads, rivers, stars, blood
the lines are ever shifting

a forest burning
a river grieving
land dreaming
and blood waking up.

Original Sin

The sweetest thought must be
a pomegranate seed
or a plump fig, inside gold and pink
outside, purple and green
vines twisting and humming
with a dream, the sparkle
of tiny sharp teeth

Sleeping Under the Tree of Life

The dark drank Persephone
but I vowed it won't drink me
I mixed my flesh with the fruit of angels
spread the burnt sienna, blue, and red
with my iron knife, spread the colors
until each stroke was a delicate carving
short-limbed and thick-waisted
low to the ground, I reached for hope
ripened in my blood like those first fruits
seed and semen, the green twisting limbs
could not protect you from our Father's voice.
Now I paint you as you paint me
unbroken images we deliver to the tree's
brilliant roots. I've drunk the juice that spilled
from your chin, you've swallowed hell
and we will survive the fall when it calls us back.

Ruins

We are never far from ruin
like the great ants on the carcass
of an emerald-winged cicada
like a monarch butterfly
buried in the gravel and the dirt
like the green side of a hummingbird
rising into view, you lie back
and consider a future that hangs
low like the sun collapsing in sky
carrion musk exists side by side
the scented hollow breasts
and wanders in the deserts
of the world, where from each
grain of sand and lump of coal
is a diamond and a bone

Repast

A last rock-skip hurled across the river's cheek
sunlight carved into our skin, where sweat clings
and skeeta bites claw and scratch, branch and bark
turquoise dragonflies crisscross creeks and dry-hump air
the branches above our head slice the sun
into bright gold bars that fall across
our faces like new scriptures in skin
and shimmer like flat green snakes and lizards
across the screen door and the porch floor
where our tired feet grip the black ribs
of wood and silence rolls across
our lips like oil across the wide green water
spirits will rise and fret
the mourners done already wept
the baked chicken is cold
we in our solemn stance
forgot the last dance step
is this it—is this what they meant
when they said grieve

Unmarked

Green leaves leap
through faded fences
crooked as snaggleteeth
the sky holds everything
but says nothing

She sees us climb, one leg
raised over the next
up and beyond the unwelcoming
signs, warning ignored
like the caretaker's advice
confusion in her face, a
sun shining in brown eyes

why would anyone want to visit here

A question our feet answer
digging in the dirt, the soil
and weeds spinning
from our heels as we
walk over the lumpy ground
and sit on sour earth

Beneath this abandoned lot
the state forgot, is kin
waiting in this lake of earth
waiting like a dream remembered
waiting like a stone turned

Burial Ground

The rising moonlight
climbs over the glass bottle trees
to rest row upon row
branch upon branch
above the cold flat earth.

And with night the watchers
circle the dead with a ring
and a shout that ignites the path
around a distant sun, here the spirits.

Rise and moan, call out
to loved ones long since gone
and wrestle while the fireflies
dance, above the broken
pottery, a favorite cup chipped
a tarnished spoon bent.

Navel names forgotten, they
wait for the wind to whistle
hymns, songs to soothe the
journey begun but not yet
over, no. It is not yet the end.

Here the spirits dance
their own holy step
wait to ride the wind over
the river, and that sound
over your shoulder is them
winging their way back
cross the sea.

The Silent Ones

There are souls who can take
a twisted limb, a diviner's stick
and point fingertips to water
trail or ditch, they can find the first
drops in the earth's throat
and quench your thirst before
it begins.

Some women can lend
the moon light from their
own shining foreheads
turn tides with the sway
of their hips, fishwife and
midwife to the ages, they
deliver loaves of bread and
seeds to feed the lonely before
night ends.

Then others can build shelter
from rock, draw comfort
from a stone. No patch of
earth can refuse to release
its fruit into her waiting hand.

You will know her in silence
You will know her in stillness
You will know when a star crosses
her full mouth. You're asking
questions, but she has nothing to say
because the answers are in the work
and the story is all in her eyes.

Mama River

Washes her hair
dark as the mirror sky
between her round palms
she rubs it with indigo
and black silt, twisting
the thick strands
as if starting a slow fire

Hair like braided
molasses, like split-fish
ends, stuck and formed
waterlily poppies
coiled and poisonous
as dark-mouthed snakes
roots deep as black holed
flowers in her red clay garden
tangled knots along her
watery banks, the ends
hard cattails, pussy willows
and bent Sunday morning
palms, her crown puffy as
rain-soaked mushrooms
black dandelions, sweet
as honeysuckle nectar
her kitchen like cypress
tree roots

I sleep on the other bank
one hand trailing in the waters

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fingers bent, the other hand
combing Mama River's
windblown hair, her head
resting in my lap
the other half of the world