TWISTED IN THE TRUNKS OF TREES

by

KRISTIN AARDSMA

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in the Department of English in the Graduate School of The University of Alabama

TUSCALOOSA, ALABAMA

2010
ABSTRACT

A collection of poems.
DEDICATION

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

I am grateful to my thesis advisor, Joel Brouwer, without whose diligence this manuscript would not have come to fruition. I would also like to extend thanks to my committee members: Robin Behn, Amy Holmes-Tagchungdarpa, and Albert Pionke. Additional gratitude goes to Peter Streckfus, M. Ann Hull, and Brian Morrison.
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 lockets

    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 

ground 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 serpentes 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 lightening 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 solider 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 fist ing
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.