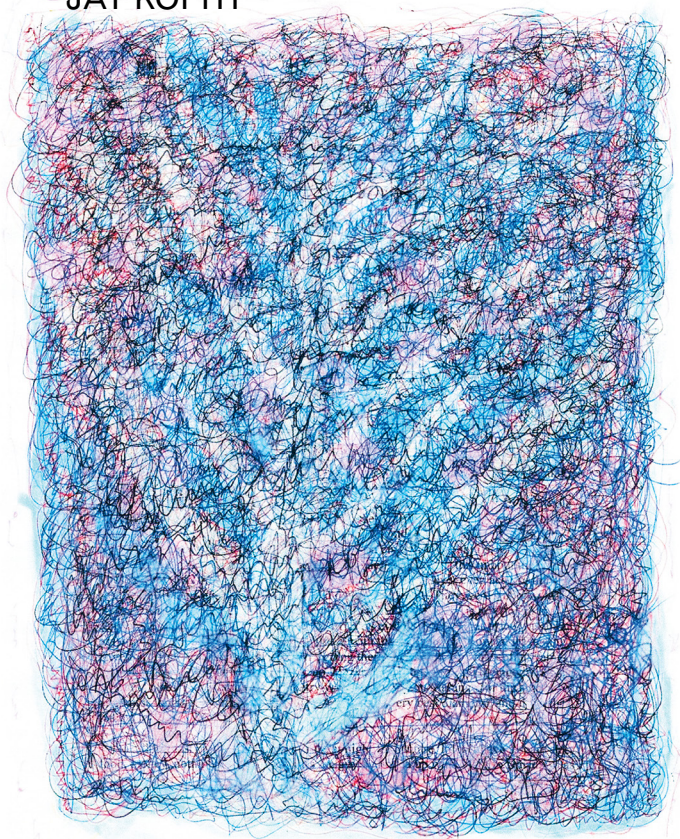


JAY KOPHY



Walking on Water

A Chapbook by
JAY KOPHY

Walking on Water

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Map

what is the difference between
a body & a country

when the reflection of a man traces the map of

a country—drinking itself into barrenness
every time he looks into a mirror. formed
from water instead of glass

mother says

the soil drinks blood & spits
a child through a woman's thighs. is how
we are blessed with children

& I believe her. & also believe that the soil
was our first language. even before our tongues
learned to dance to the sound of words

& perhaps this is why we trust the earth more than
we do water—a vast part of ourselves we pour
back into ourselves. or. air—which reminds
us that even emptiness carries life

to hold our dead ones. without throwing
them back to us out of tiredness

to catch us from falling through our shadows
 into unending graves

to mold homes out of. just so we can call a place

a country

Pharmakeia

in my country. here's how you cure hunger

first. stretch out your arms and collect your name
 with your clenched fist. then pour it into a pot
 that is being heated by the anger of the sun

wait for 15 minutes
 and add a little bit of the water sitting
 in your empty hands. and stir

you may feel a little sting in your eyes
 when the steam rises and meets them

when that happens. you may use your mother tongue
 to express your anger or frustration or whatever is
 unclean enough to be dressed in English

but English is what is unclean is what I can say to the sky

shhh. don't talk while you cook
 like you don't. while your father speaks. even
 when he's speaking in his sleep

now. crush cubes of laughter and sprinkle that
 over it. it may start to smell like a miracle

*but don't be deceived. over here a miracle isn't
a miracle until it's done in the name of the government*

shhh. now add salt. and stir till you can hear your grandma's
voice telling you to pray for a soft rain that cannot flood your home

wait for 5 minutes
then pour and hold it in your mouth till it tastes
similar to blood and finally. swallow

Autopsy

Consider this

that a boy has to pour his name
back into his wounded mouth

before he can remember who he is
without having to wear the skin of his fathers

who convert blood into ghosts like
the dead & the dead

I'm told always walk backward
because they only live in the past

I come from a long line of men
who say *I love you* from stitched mouths

bending bodies into the shape of things
that spell out soft in sign language

which is to say

I know no other way to celebrate the things

that bring me joy than to eat their memories
to turn laughter into a hunger

what is another metaphor for doubt other than faith

after a few minutes of being reminded
what it means to be loved

I ask my lover *what can kill us*
she says *everything we trust*

A Short Sermon

I cannot say something in my mother tongue
without un-filling my hands with the need
to pick up a weapon to rebel

how easy it is for us to destroy the things
that have nothing to do with our grief

lately I've taken to quieting my native voice
by translating the words into less dense ones

to stop me from turning the warmth of home
into a fire that is hungry enough to consume whatever
it attracts to its light without leaving a name for remembrance

and translating I've come to learn is not only
the rebirthing of words but also of self

for example

I became a stranger to the burden
of starvation when I read in English about how
my village leans on faith for food instead of plants

is there a way we can unbottle our anger without
becoming the very things we want to flood with our wrath

when the compensation to the victims of a man-made

disaster was not forthcoming

we planted our knees into the earth
and spoke softly in our own clasped hands
to ask for manna to fall into our wounded mouths

Hagiography

Bring me
to where
my blood runs

— Wanda Coleman

a half-baked body lying quietly on the ground
becomes evidence of the punishment of resistance
& we watch this still body. intently. as though it will
react to us making a memory of it

we don't mind the stench. we are used to death now
for what has history taught us
if not the many ways to rename blood
to replace loss with sacrifice

the price for this death is understanding
look at what you have made us into
even God. for a moment. questioned the purpose of blood
streaming out of a body when His son died
but maybe this is because He isn't from here
He isn't used to the stench of what He loves rotting in his hands
to say their name and taste absence instead of home

this home is a religion of hunger & dissolution

every day we wake up is a disobedience of the daily ritual

hallelujah!

another messiah has been found lying quietly on the belly
of the earth. limbs arranged like he's resting on a cross

with a placard in his hands saying:

*in my father's house are many mansions
and I am going to prepare a place for you*

and his body said blood instead of amen

Rigor Mortis

and they will ask me—
tongues dripping with forgetfulness

why I would choose to bury my lungs
in dust. crossing the desert. with a handful
of water

why I would be willing to drown
just to wash my country's scent
off my name

why I would pay to make another
border shaped body my home

when they should be asking my country

A Man's Wife Says Goodbye

at the door of a house that is tired of standing
 a woman is holding her husband's hand
 like it is the only pure part on a body covered
 with sin. reluctant to let go. because she had heard
 stories that anyone entering another country
 by sea was going to war and that those who survived
 carried new faces and names as heavy as
 the feet of an orphan child. who's trying to find
 his mother by following the sound of her voice

but imagine. that a wife doesn't have to watch
 her husband leave his family so he can be able
 to stop hunger from making a home out of their empty stomachs
 or a man doesn't have to hide his family
 under his tongue. and spit them into the arms
 of another country. where a dark sky isn't smoke
 from burning flesh

I too have always struggled to say *goodbye*
 just like the woman unwilling to let her husband go
 whenever I try. the word stretches and fills out
 every space in my mouth till it becomes too full to speak audibly

and I believe. that is what is happening to this woman.
 who understands that goodbye is all that stands between her
 and her husband's name changing to migrant

A Man's Wife Writes Him a Letter

using the same ink a body is dipped in
 when its movements spell out that it
 misses its lover

there are moments when words break
 in your hands when you try to write them
 onto a surface that is heavier than its weight
 so this letter—that reads like the sun
 slowly unzipping the night. was not written

it was whispered to leaves. with hope
 that the wind would carry it from branch
 to branch till it got to a tree

that was close enough to him to relay
 the message—which was covered in softness

the kind of softness that
 can hold the laughter of his children
 without reminding him of his loneliness
 the way the sky holds the moon when
 there are no stars to keep it company

the kind of softness that can make
 a woman write her husband a letter

with salt she fetched from her palms
 after crying into them all-day
 so the taste of home will remain
 on his tongue whenever he reads it

Salt

look at a resting sea & tell me if there's
 anything more soulful than the way. it drinks
 the sun to welcome the night & speaks about
 the beauty of the moon like it is in love

I remember the first time I went to a beach
 & walked along the shore. with sand holding
 onto my feet. like it was afraid to let another
 member of its family go. & the waves were
 clapping at the arrival of whoever was thirsty
 for a view of what looked like the face of God

until a boy. chest full of hard water. found lying at
 the edge of the water. breathless. reminded us
 that God grew on the same tree. where a man
 & a fruit. can hang from one branch

& maybe this is why I see men try to cross the Mediterranean
 with hands covered in sand to remind them
 that they are strangers at a place
 where weightlessness—the shedding of anything
 that feeds the earth the history of your feet

is what can stop you from sinking
 & gravity pours you back into the hands
 of whatever is ready to catch you

because what is the sea. if not an open
 mouth that swallows bodies & returns
 them back to us as salt

News

whenever I walk through the streets of my city
 I'm reminded that we do not need water to drown

that a mother who has to smear prayer
 on the tip of her tongue. before she can
 get enough to feed her child—is drowning

that a man whose hands are so empty
 they echo whenever he speaks—is drowning

sometimes. when I think about the act of submerging
 into openness. I only see the likeness
 between the hovering blue and the dancing blue

then I watch birds. break out from the sky and remember
 that the only difference between the sky and the sea

is that the sea is never satisfied—it is a hollow
 stage. filled with water yet it still drinks rain

sometimes. when I think about the act of submerging
 into openness. I only imagine an actor on stage playing
 the role of a man filling his lungs with softness

then I watch the sun pour from one blue into another
 and I know that. at home. a woman watching the news

of how a boat carrying 200
migrants. capsized while trying to cross the Mediterranean

is also drowning too. wondering if her husband's
skin is eating salt. the same way. a parched river
eats till it grows into a desert

A Poem Where God is a Parable

The absence of faith is the beginning of death.
What I call flesh is prayer bound to my bones.

All my prayers begin as songs from my bones
and end with blood instead of amen.

How I wish I began every request with amen,
like when I ask God to let doubt pass from me.

Amen. Oh God. let this sea of doubt pass from me,
for I've tried walking on water & almost drowned.

In Noah's ark, a lost name is replaced with drowned.
In Ghana, anyone who drowns is without a name.

What is the value of a life without a name
to those who believe in what they can only see?

To those who believe in what they can only see,
the absence of faith is the beginning of death.

On Dissolving

a man is learning to wear
a language. that has been dipped
in the accent of his new home

to hide the history of his body

and in this language
he is called *migrant*

because he died at sea
and became born again

hallelujah!

Self Portrait at the Door of a New House

I am standing on a land I cannot call home
I am a stranger which means silence is my first language
which means my name is just another sound floating
in a room swollen with noise but I imagine
that back home they swallow the warmest part of the morning sun
before they spit out my name through their teeth
which have been sitting in their mouths like doors
that usually open to hunger or dejection or anything
that lacks the strength to hold the vibrations of laughter without
crumbling
I imagine that back home a man is thinking of how he can separate
himself from the womb he was born from because he wants to stand
on the land
he was told is synonymous with something a prey believes
is that which stands between it and the jaw
of a predator dripping with its blood but what is hope
if not a lie coated with sweetness to stop us
from offering ourselves to the predator without a fight
for survival for history for remembrance and I don't have to be
reminded
of what I lost to get here when I cannot say water
without whispering blood underneath my breath
with hands shaking like I'm greeting the dead bodies
that were used to build the bridge I walked on to get here

A Migrant Writes a Letter to His Wife

My love

I have eaten more sand than the curious mouth of a four-year-old child
who sees the earth as the tender meat of a lifeless thing to be devoured

and I must confess that tiredness has become a word this body
no longer understands until it is falling under the weight of its strength

I must confess that I smell so much like the ocean
which is to say that my chest is still full of saltwater

I can taste the lie building in my throat whenever I say *I am fine*
but I am fine—and you should know that I say I am fine

not because it is something I feel. even though
I feel like a homeless cloud floating underneath a shadow

but what I mean say is I still remember that my body is an altar
that my faith in seeing the happiness in our family breathe

was what I needed to bravely walk on water. I say I am fine
for the satisfaction of remembrance in a body that wants to forget

I remember. when I had to leave and you were holding my hand
the way a cage holds its prisoner. strongly reluctant to let go

and I was urging you to let me go so I wouldn't be late for my first bus
and now I am here sitting in this lonely room wishing you never did

When They Come for Me

everyday. I pray to the God of deportation not to visit me
not to clothe me with a name I've been trying to forget

but to become like a deaf god who'll always answer me
with a silence so pure even the stillness of dead things will sound too
loud

and this is how we—those who walk on water
become ghosts even before we die

we drown and become everything's children except our countries'

but maybe the blood a soil drinks is what makes a country
a country and not just the drawing of its borders

because even as I've become a man with no country
there are days when I cannot stop myself from howling into a silent
night

when I see a cloud shaped like the map of the only place I could call
home
the only place. where I didn't have to offer language

to any God to stop me from wondering
if one day someone will come for me

A Poem Where Home is a Parable

and when they come for me tell my people
that hunger which is another form of death

drove me away from my home. that my country
spat me out when I was learning

how to carry its name without breaking my fingers
that water is no longer water in my mouth

& sand is no longer sand to my feet & my name is no longer my name
because I traded them to the God of migration
so I could take the shape of my new home like water does

my father says the only way to laugh without waking
the grief underneath your face

is not to imprison a moment as evidence of your happiness
but what does that make us

if not unholy things asking our bodies to rust
so I ask that when they come for me

you don't forget to laugh & cry & make any other noise
that will sing my song into a quiet evening
so it can be buried in a black sky the same way the stars are

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Biographies

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About Ghanaian Writing On Migration and Diaspora



Library Of Africa and
The African Diaspora

Ghanaian Writing on Migration and Diaspora is a series of three chapbooks that were produced through a partnership with The Library of Africa and The African Diaspora (LOATAD) in Accra, Ghana, and Reading the Migration Library (RML) in Vancouver, Canada. The project asked creative writers to consider the meaning of migration, diaspora, and belonging.

The chapbooks in the Ghanaian Writing on Migration and Diaspora series are,
On Loss: Two Poems from Ghana by A.B. Godfreed & SAAN
We are Moulting Birds by Gabriel Awuah Mainoo
Walking on Water by Jay Kophy

LOATAD is a decolonised library, archive, and museum dedicated to the work of African and Diaspora writers from the late 19th-century to the present day. With an expansive collection of books and ephemera from writers representing 41 of Africa's 54 countries, and Black authors from the Americas, the Caribbean, and Europe, LOATAD makes explicit the historical and contiguous links between the global Black experience.

RML produces small chapbooks and artist books that speak to the larger theme of migration as experienced by humans as well as non-humans. All RML chapbooks are freely available as digital copies, or through exchange.

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