

A Fold in the Map

ISOBEL DIXON was born in Umtata and grew up in the Karoo region of South Africa. Her debut collection *Weather Eye* (Carapace, 2001) won the Sanlam and the Olive Schreiner Prizes. Her work has appeared in two pamphlets, *Unfold* (2002) and *Ask For It By Name* (2007), produced by a group of London-based poets. She has also been published in the *New Writing* anthologies, *The Paris Review*, *The Guardian*, and *London Magazine*, among others, and been translated into Dutch and Turkish. She lives in Cambridge.

Also by Isobel Dixon

Weather Eye (2001)

A Fold in the Map

ISOBEL DIXON



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*For my mother
&
in memory of my father,
who loved a good map.*

Contents

PLENTY

Plenty	3
Weather Eye	5
Crossing	7
Christmas Beetles	8
Amanzi	10
A View of Empire from a Train	11
The Skinning	12
Shaken from Her Sleep	13
Foreshadow	15
Certus Incertus	17
Gemini	19
Positano	21
(I Want) Something to Show for It	23
The Root of It	25
Kudu Watch	26
Strike Softly Away from the Body	28
Back in the Benighted Kingdom	30
She Comes Swimming	31
The Growing Gift	34

MEET MY FATHER

Meet My Father	39
Father	40
Long Distance	41
Tear	42
In the Wind	43
Listening to the Birds	44
My Father's Pain	45

Lamb	46
Struggle	48
Singsong	49
Today's Lesson	50
Withdrawal	51
Watch	52
Survivor	53
Drip	54
Cheyne-Stokes	55
And	56
Afternoon	57
One of the First Times After	58
The Paths of the Heavenly Bodies are Ordained	60
Old Child	61
After Grief	62
The Buried Butterfly	63
Again, or Dreams of My Father, Always Silent Now	64
Night Skirmishes	67
'And the Hyacinth's in Bloom — A Lovely Blue'	68

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Plenty

Plenty

When I was young and there were five of us,
all running riot to my mother's quiet despair,
our old enamel tub, age-stained and pocked
upon its griffin claws, was never full.

Such plenty was too dear in our expanse of drought
where dams leaked dry and windmills stalled.
Like Mommy's smile. Her lips stretched back
and anchored down, in anger at some fault—

of mine, I thought—not knowing then
it was a clasp to keep us all from chaos.
She saw it always, snapping locks and straps,
the spilling: sums and worries, shopping lists

for aspirin, porridge, petrol, bread.
Even the toilet paper counted,
and each month was weeks too long.
Her mouth a lid clamped hard on this.

We thought her mean. Skipped chores,
swiped biscuits—best of all
when she was out of earshot
stole another precious inch

up to our chests, such lovely sin,
lolling luxuriant in secret warmth
disgorged from fat brass taps,
our old compliant co-conspirators.

Now bubbles lap my chin. I am a sybarite.
The shower's a hot cascade
and water's plentiful, to excess, almost, here.
I leave the heating on.

And miss my scattered sisters,
all those bathroom squabbles and, at last,
my mother's smile, loosed from the bonds
of lean, dry times and our long childhood.

Weather Eye

In summer when the Christmas beetles
filled each day with thin brass shrilling,
heat would wake you, lapping at the sheet,
and drive you up and out into the glare
to find the mulberry's deep shade
or watch ants marching underneath the guava tree.

And in the house Mommy would start
the daily ritual, whipping curtains closed,
then shutters latched against the sun
and when you crept in, thirsty, from the garden,
the house would be a cool, dark cave,

an enclave barricaded against light
and carpeted with shadow, still
except the kitchen where the door was open
to nasturtiums flaming at the steps
while on the stove the pressure cooker chugged
in tandem with the steamy day.

And in the evenings when the sun had settled
and crickets started silvering the night,
just home from school, smelling of chalk and sweat,
Daddy would do his part of it, the checking,
on the front verandah, of the scientific facts.

Then if the temperature had dropped enough
the stays were loosened and the house undressed
for night. Even the front door wide now
for the slightest breeze, a welcoming
of all the season's scents, the jasmine,
someone else's supper, and a neighbour's voice—

out walking labradors, the only time of day
for it, this time of year. How well the world
was ordered then. These chill machines
don't do it half as true, the loving regulation
of the burning days. Somehow my judgment isn't quite
as sure when faced with weather-signs. Let me come home
to where you watch the skies and keep things right.

For Ann and Harwood

Crossing

Old men with beards remind me of my father:
surplice white, a beard of blessing,
Father Christmas face.

I just can't help but smile at them,
old rabbi daddies, walking in the street.

My dad will tip his hat at everyone
he meets—old-fashioned courtesy—
now leaning slightly on his stick.

Does he greet dark-haired daughters too,
with just a touch of extra love?

Come to this city then and see me weave
among the crowds that beat
these concrete pavements every day.

(You'll never have the time to greet them all,
these urgent hurriers.)

But tap-tap slowly to the kerb, hold up your staff
against the iron roar, and when the wood leaps
in your hand, strike at the tar.

There'll be a stillness as the faultline fissures
deeper than the Underground.

The engines stop, the hush reminding us
of history and grace.
The clear 'good morning' from your smiling face
settling among us like a dove.

Christmas Beetles

Outside, the afternoon is ringing,
ringing, massed cicadas singing out
their silly news. The hot
brown garden's loud
with all their gossipmongering.

The insect grapevine—
shrill bush telephone—
incessant beetle headlines
shrieked into the heat.

Like our old radiogram,
its fizzing, whistling, wheezing,
as we ease the big ribbed knob
and line the red bar up,
with news from Moscow, Greece,
Lourenço Marques.

These noisy chaps are closer,
sounding off from somewhere near.
The jacaranda, or the orange trees,
we can't be sure.
They are everywhere,
and nowhere, sly cicadas,
no-one can decipher them.

Or was it just the sound
of sticky tarmac, shimmering?
Who knows? Perhaps the noontday shouting
never was that clamorous.
Our tricky memory contrives
and always turns the volume up

and in the end I guess
that they were merely stuck
at fundamentals, needle jumping
at the prod of sex, or simply whooping
—*summer! summer! summer!*—
every minute of their short, hot, beetle lives.

Amanzi

Outside the panes of jewelled glass
the rain pours down. How strange
to think my childhood years were marked
by prayers for rain. Here there's no need.
So very little need at all, it seems.
No question of it, all the grass is greener
here. The lawns of Cambridge, emerald,
manicured, this town's inhabitants secure
in cosy, educated affluence and peace.

Days later, home, I see new boxy houses
and a sign: *Joe Slovo Township*. And a shop,
the *Bright Life Store*, with its own homemade
logo praising *Coke*. In Table Mountain's
richer shade, the phrasing *Armed Response*
is echoed, wall to whitewashed wall.
Down at the lights, I stop at red and shake my head
at all the kids who weave between the cars,
come tapping on the glass. But one
holds out his windmill made from wire and tin,
its spinning blades reminding me of long hot roads,
and dusty plains. Of being young and prayers for rain.
It costs ten rand, a pound. I wind the window down.