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Review article

Plaasfeminism in Ronelda S. Kamfer's *Kompoun* (2021)

Hanneke Stuit

Plaasfeminism in Ronelda S. Kamfer's *Kompoun* (2021)

This review article explores how Ronelda S. Kamfer's novel *Kompoun* (2021) deconstructs and diversifies the white patriarchal space of the *plaas* (farm) by reinscribing it with a highly situated 'plaasfeminism' emerging from the female characters in the novel. This critical reinscription through the lives of the McKinney women from the Overberg is necessary, but certainly not triumphant. For Nadia, the protagonist, the idyll of the *plaas* consists of her admiration of and longing for her maternal forebears and thus provides a source of strength and personhood, but the *plaas* is also quite literally the scene of a crime from which her family fails to protect her. *Kompoun* complicates mainstream notions of feminist resistance by charting the internal contradictions of female subjectivity and highlighting the vulnerable position of the McKinney children, who grow up in a community where both adult men and women pose a threat of emotional and physical abandonment and abuse. Yet, in times of need, Nadia manages to mobilise her personal image of the *plaas*'s beauty as motherly and the women who live there as tough as coping strategies that suspend her imprisonment in the harmful dynamics around her. **Keywords:** *plaas*, feminism, rural idyll, Ronelda S. Kamfer, loss, Afrikaans literature.

The boss bitch of Groenplaas

"*Niemand kan fokkol maak met 'n nine-year-old wat haar ouma gevat en getame het nie. Nie die ander way around nie*" (*Kompoun* 53) (Nobody can do fuck all with a nine year old who took her grandma and tamed her. Not the other way around).[1] This is how Xavie, one of the narrators of Ronelda S. Kamfer's novel *Kompoun* (2021), describes his niece, Nadia. Nadia, the main narrator of the novel, is one of a score of cousins in her generation who are moved around between Groenplaas (an apple farm in the Overberg where her grandmother's people are from), Santekraam (a fictional coastal community mostly associated with her grandfather's family) and the Cape Flats, where many of her parent's generation end up living in council housing.[2] Nadia, who is born out of wedlock, is taken to Groenplaas to live with her maternal grandmother, Sylvia McKinney, until her mother is "sorted" (58). Most of this moving around is done by Sylvia McKinney herself, "*die stammoeder van lieg*" (14) (the ancestress of lying), "*die boss bitch van Groenplaas*" (205) (the boss bitch of Groenplaas). Nadia describes her as an "*areamanager, sy het net ingekom om stock te vat of 'n nuwe kind te introduce*" (16) (she would just come in to take stock or to introduce a new child). Even well into old age Sylvia McKinney is a woman to be reckoned with; at her daughter Diana's funeral, she sits "*soos die leader van 'n plaas-Yakuza met 'n blink tapestry oor die knieë, krom vingers in die skoot*" (171) (like the leader of a *plaas* Yakuza with a bright tapestry over her knees, crooked fingers in her lap).[3]

In what follows, I will trace Nadia's discomfort with this matriarchal heritage and explore how that ambivalence ties in with the role of Groenplaas in the narrative. Nadia constantly seeks to distance herself from the matriarchal dynamic, despite the fact that she is also drawn to it as a source of belonging, mental resilience and feminist awakening. By focusing on the fact that the old woman's "empire" is a distinctly rural one, this review article seeks to explore *Kompoun*'s reinscriptions of the *plaas* as a feminist space, focusing on how Nadia's hard-won sense of belonging and subjectivity are tied to the loss of these matriarchal figures, and of the place in which they lived.[4]

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In scenes like the funeral mentioned above, Kamfer shows her exceptional skill. The above portrait of Sylvia McKinney confidently straddles the line between caricature and affection, showing Nadia's love and respect for her grandmother, the outright fear Sylvia instils in her family members and Nadia's awareness of her grandmother's disarming vulnerability as she ages. Layered brushstrokes like these structure *Kompoun* as a narrative, which loops around a number of incredibly painful moments in the family's history. There is a plot, certainly, in the sense that the novel recounts the story of how children bury their parents (13), but it does not move through this grief chronologically. And why should it? As this novel powerfully shows, grief does not work in straight lines. Instead, the family funerals surface throughout as benchmarks for the dynamic between the cousins, stitching together the two perspectives of Nadia and Xavie to unpack the ramifications of one of the family's biggest traumas: the story of Antie Diana.

When Diana is harassed by a man named Mal Hannes at the age of 10 or 11, Sylvia punishes her daughter with the sjambok when the child tells her what has happened. After this incident, Diana starts going to Groenplaas's neighbouring compound, eventually falling pregnant with twins. The alleged father is Edward, a young coloured man with a black mother from the compound and who is chased off the *plaas* by Diana's father.[5] Once the twins are born, Sylvia decides to take them away and sell them to another family. The neighbouring women at Groenplaas's, however, do not accept this, and get the children back. Diana is sent to Santekraam by her father, only returning to Groenplaas after several years. Despite the fact that none of the family members remain on the *plaas* after Sylvia dies, the stories circulating there about this course of events never really die down:

> *As hulle van my familie praat, loop daar 'n storie rond van 'n broer wat sy suster pregnant gemaak het met 'n tweeling en gelieg het dat dit is 'n jong van die kompoun se kinders.* (245)
>
> When they speak of my family, a story goes around about a brother who got his sister pregnant with twins and lied that they were the children of a boy from the compound.

Another story that takes on flesh and walks around to contradict the family's shame, is rendered by the third narrative strand in which an unnamed omniscient narrator renders the attempts of Christina (Diana's sister and Nadia's mother) to seek out Edward and convince him to stay with Diana and take care of the children against her mother's wishes. In this compound of lies, Nadia struggles to come to terms with what the *plaas* means to her personally, as the novel both critiques the spatial organisation of the *plaas* and offers its more idyllic aspects as a coping strategy for Nadia.

Critical geographies of the *plaas*

As Desiree Lewis and Gabeba Baderoon point out in their introduction to *Surfacing: On Being Black and Feminist in South Africa*, it is sometimes assumed that writing "from socially marginalised standpoints can generate only knowledge that speaks to the experiences of these groups" (2). The opposite is true, however, as Lewis and Baderoon are quick to point out. Black feminist initiatives in particular are profoundly invested in actively envisioning "*new* non-post-Enlightenment and post-colonial understanding[s] of being human" that are "therefore relevant to all" (2 and 3, emphasis in original). In order to formulate such new visions, feminist writers often employ personal, even autobiographical, forms of storytelling, in which "[c]oncision, wit, [and] poetic force [...] can carry enormous weight" (2). A compelling combination of these elements is copiously supplied in *Kompoun*: throughout, Kamfer relentlessly chisels images on the reader's retina with a violent yet nuanced complexity that cuts to the core of things.

One of those instances is Nadia's description of the governing body that existed on the apple farm during the time of Diana's trespasses:

> *Die beheerliggaam is 'n phony governing body wat in place is om die plaasmense, mostly die plaasmans, te laat voel asof hulle 'n sê het in hoe hulle vrouens se lewens control word*" (*Kompoun* 79)
>
> The governing body is a phony governing body in place to make the plaaspeople, mostly the plaasmen, feel like they have a say in how their women's lives are being controlled.

In one sentence, Kamfer sketches the entirety of a colonial system designed to ensure ownership of land and profit from this land by producing conditions of slavery that kept people of colour, specifically women, under

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strict (re)productive control (Gqola 44). Despite a lack of influence, Christina riles against one of the men from the governing body for demanding of her father that he removes Diana from the *plaas* and for beating Edward up so badly that he ends up in hospital.

From the way Nadia recounts the story, it is clear that she is proud of her mother and admires the women of Groenplaas, but early in the novel it is also made clear that she is in doubt as to whether she can live up to this impressive genealogy:

> *Die vrouens in my familie is fireproof, hulle is gemaak van nat hout, maar ek is 'n droë takkie kindling en al pak jy my onder die nat stompe, vlam sal ek vat*" (*Kompoun* 12)
>
> The women in my family are fireproof, they are made of wet wood, but I am a dry twig of kindling and even if you pack me under the wet stumps, catch fire I shall.

What exactly is Nadia's position here? Does the opposition between wet wood and dry kindling imply that she is not like the other women in her family? That she is more fragile, or perhaps fierier? Are they described as wet stumps because they are worn down and dulled by the problems in their lives? Does the image of Nadia as kindling imply that she will carve out a different path for herself? Or does it suggest, at this early stage in the novel, that no matter how many wet stumps her family tries to pack around the various stories of Diana's ordeal, Nadia will unearth it and set it alight anyway?

Before I turn in more detail to the McKinney's love-hate matriarchy, it is important to emphasise that it hails from the *plaas*. It matters in the first instance because the *plaas* matters to Kamfer. As Bibi Burger makes clear in her article on ocean metaphoricity in the work of Kamfer and Putuma, Kamfer's imagery does not call up a history that is painted in broad strokes, but instead is committed to specific and situated histories (28). In her Jan Rabie and Marjorie Wallace lecture, "Soos 'n koeipaal op die plaas", Kamfer explains that she will probably always write back to the *plaas*, because accurate representation of her heritage is one way to counter the many stories, traditions and contributions of the coloured community that have been lost:

> *Ons geskiedenis is afgekap, fragmented. Hele gemeenskappe is geskuif na die sykant in hul eie verhaal, hele lewens reduced na footnotes.* (Kamfer, "Koeipaal")
>
> Our history has been cut off, fragmented. Entire communities have been shifted aside in their own story, entire lives reduced to footnotes.

Another reason is that if the larger point of Black and postcolonial feminism is, as Lewis and Baderoon rightly suggest, to envision new ways of being human that move away from the structural violence of Enlightenment divisions and objectifications, then the *plaas*, as the (symbolic) pinnacle of a colonial plantation logic that threatens biodiversity and makes equitable relations between people close to impossible (Stuit 2, 9), is an important place to start.

I use 'place' on purpose here, in order to emphasise that idylls about farms and agriculture in general play a crucial role in propping up modernity/coloniality to this day and that the consequences of that symbolic displacement are profoundly material for many, also to this day. As Kamfer makes clear about her preoccupations in *grond/Santekraam*:

> *In 'n klimaat van land claims en vrae oor wie die regmatige eienaars van die land is, was dit vir my belangrik om uit die stemme in my familiegeskiedenis die oorvertel vas te probeer vang. My grootouers het nog nooit hulle eie huis besit nie, hulle het gewerk op die plaas, en toe hulle nie meer kon werk nie, moes hulle trek.* […] *grond/Santekraam was vir almal soos [my oupa] die ou mense wat vandag in hokkies in Wesbank en Delft moet bly omdat hulle in hulle jeug die grond vir ander goed gemaak het.* (Kamfer, "Koeipaal")
>
> In a climate of land claims and questions about who are the rightful owners of the land, it was important to me to try to capture the retelling [oorvertel] from the voices in my family history. My grandparents have never owned their own house, they have worked on the plaas, and when they could not work anymore, they had to leave. […] *grond/Santekraam* was for everyone like [my grandpa,] the old people who live in shacks in Wesbank and Delft because they have improved the soil for someone else when they were young.

Could the feminist work done in *Kompoun* then be seen as a hyperlocalised plaasfeminism that reinscribes the *plaas*—a space traditionally coded as white and heteropatriarchal—with the lives of the McKinney women from

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the Overberg? On the *plaas* in *Kompoun*, the white farmer features only in the background to create an atmosphere of patriarchal belittlement, for instance when he lets his wife, "Lady Groenplaas," communicate to Diana that her boyfriend Koos Roos (who has been peeking at the teenage boys swimming at the dam) needs to see a doctor, while the boys themselves are not scolded for harassing the girls on the *plaas* (*Kompoun* 30–2). This is much more than a clever reversal of J. M. Coetzee's famous point about the South African pastoral's "occlusion of black labour from the scene: the black man becomes a shadowy presence flitting across the stage now and then to hold a horse or hold a meal" (5).

In narrating this newly centred history, *Kompoun* could be said to provide a "critical Black feminist geography", a term coined by Katherine McKittrick and described by Barbara Boswell as the "subversive place-making practices of black subjects who inhabit the margins of discursive and geographical space" (6). One of the moments with such a geographical orientation is the scene where Edward returns to Groenplaas after a twenty-year absence to attend Diana's funeral:

> *Hy ry met die grondpad langs die appelbome verby, tot waar die pad 'n vurk maak. Die een pad ry kompoun toe, die ander pad draai af na waar die bruin mense gebly het. Vandag is dit bruin en swart mense wat saam aan dié kant bly. Dit is net aan die oorkant van die dam waar daar nog altyd net 'n wit familie bly. Die kompoun is verlate.* (*Kompoun* 167)
>
> He drives along the dirt road past the apple trees up to where the road forks. One road leads to the compound, the other turns off to where the coloured people used to stay. Today, coloured and black people live together on that side. It is only on the other side of the dam that it's still just a white family. The compound is deserted.

Crucially, this topography is offered in the third narrative strand, with its omniscient but nameless narrator. The focalisation is adrift here, especially from the moment the focus shifts from Edward to the spatial division of Groenplaas. As if to say that the *plaas* is the *plaas*; one can describe it, but no specific voice can own it. Where there was once a spatial division of three, now only two remain. The compound has been taken out of the equation, but the essentialist racial division between this side and the other side of the dam remains. In this sense, the passage could be read, not just as an indication of time having passed on the *plaas*, but as a metaphor for the lack of change in South Africa as a whole, where the most conspicuous segregationist reliance on black and coloured labour has been somewhat alleviated, but its legacies—as symbolised in the remaining spatial divide on the *plaas* and in the unchanged infrastructure of the road that continues to be used to get to these spaces—remain.

If there is plaasfeminism in *Kompoun*, it is thus clearly not an easy or triumphant one, in which reinscriptions of history lead to landslide changes. Instead, it meticulously accounts for the racialised and gendered histories of displacement and exploitation that press upon the matriarchal networks that it explores, as in Nadia's description of the *plaas*'s governing body. In line with Marni Bonthuys's discussion of the general characteristics of postcolonial feminism in contemporary Afrikaans literature, Kamfer's plaasfeminism is thus particularly astute in dealing with the intersectional challenges of race, class and gender (254), but also adds the crucial perspective that the organisation of space has ways of persisting that can keep the effects of white patriarchy in place.

Plaasfeminism as coping strategy

So, what actually takes place on Groenplaas amongst the women? What kind of "subversive placemaking activities" (Boswell 6) emerge there? And what does the *plaas* mean to Nadia? With regard to Nadia's self-esteem, the space of the *plaas* in fact plays a crucial role. It serves as a badge of honour when Xavie insists that Nadia is particularly tough and can survive anything because she is from the *plaas* (*Kompoun* 157). When Nadia is sexually harassed by a man working in a store close to her father's house after she has returned to the Cape Flats, she uses it in an attempt to put a brave face on:

> *Ek stap stadig huis toe, want is warm. "Eendag gaan ek uit die plek uit kom, al die mense vergeet, al my klere wat ek in die plek gedra het gaan ek uitbrand. Fok die Cape Flats, ek is vannie plaas," sê ek vir myself terwyl ek na my pa se huis toe stap.* (78)
>
> I walk home slowly because it's warm. "One day I will get out of this place, forget all the people, I will burn all the clothes I have worn in this place. Fuck the Cape Flats, I'm from the *plaas*," I say to myself as I walk to my dad's house.

As Nadia walks back to her father's house, the reader knows she cannot rely on him in this intense time of need because he regularly beats her. Nadia is literally stepping from one scene of abuse into another. In this situation of entrapment, the *plaas* fulfils two sheltering functions at once, allowing her to distance herself from the situation

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emotionally. Tying in with her admiration for the toughness of the plaaswomen from her childhood, Nadia tells herself that she, too, is tough enough to cope with sexual and physical abuse by men. The *plaas* serves as proof that she can be violent and hard in order to protect herself. At the same time, one could say that Groenplaas functions as an escape hatch for Nadia, a place that she can contrast with her lack of agency in the Cape Flats—a lack that she can only undo by imagining the destruction of the traces the Flats will leave on her—and one to which she could, if need be, always return. In this way, her *image* of the *plaas* allows Nadia to create leeway for herself in a spatial continuum—between the store and her father's house, between the Cape Flats and the *plaas*—that is highly restrictive and unsafe.

That the *plaas* is also unsafe becomes clear shortly after one of the most moving scenes in the book in which Nadia reflects on her grandmother's passing:

> *Ek voel asof ek uit 'n vliegtuig gestoot word.* […] *Die ding wat breek binne my is nie sadness nie. Dit is my freedom. Die een stukkie van myself wat ek nooit opgegee het nie. Jy kan net free wees in opposition van imprisonment. My ouma, my ma, my pa, my oupa, my nefies, my niggies is al wat my freedom gegee het. Maar meestal my ouma, want Mamma was die begin van alles.* (176)
>
> I feel like I am pushed out of a plane. […] The thing that breaks inside me is not sadness. It is my freedom. The one piece of myself that I have never given up. You can only be free in opposition to imprisonment. My grandma, my mum, my dad, my grandpa, my nephews, my nieces are the only ones who have given me freedom. But most of all my grandma, because Mamma was the start of everything.

By teaching her how to place herself in opposition to others, the women in her family have, despite their emotional neglect and outright meanness, also taught Nadia to be resilient and free. Now that her grandmother has passed away, Nadia ends up in a vacuum, suspended in mid-air without bearings to take from the people around her. The McKinney "empire" with her grandmother at the helm has itself become a kind of compound—a fenced off or walled in residential area that is designed to keep some people in, and other people out. Within its confines, Nadia knows what to do. Outside it, she is lost.

But the novel, crucially, does not end here. On the contrary, after this moment, the pitch of Nadia's and Xavie's entwined perspectives intensifies to provide insight into some of the most traumatic moments in Nadia's life. Crucially, Nadia reveals that as a child she was shocked and repulsed when Diana, while looking after Nadia and her own daughter Zodwa, took them to a dirty forestry farm one day to perform sex work and made the children wait in the room next door where they could overhear everything (185). When her grandmother accuses Nadia of having gone along for sexual reasons, even though she is just a little girl, the accusation hurts her in ways that she cannot fathom. It is Xavie who then reveals several chapters later that Nadia's physical abuse by her father started when she came back from the *plaas* with selective mutism and that her family did not believe she could not rather than would not speak. Only after this revelation, which plumbs the depth of Nadia's psychological suffering, does Nadia admit that Diana's relations with men were the real reason why she wanted to leave Groenplaas and return to her mother in the Cape (188).

In a dream at the end of the novel, on the night her grandmother passes away, Nadia's sense of loss, isolation and discomfort find their most ominous expression. In the dream, Nadia returns to Groenplaas:

> *Groenplaas was groen en nat, die heel mooiste plek in die Overberg. Is asof ek dit vir die eerste keer sien, niemand was nog ooit so bly om my te sien soos die Overberg nie en ek het gevoel asof ek 'n ma het. Kan 'n plek so mooi wees in die cruelest season, kan 'n mens in 'n plek bly waar dit so groen en nat is terwyl jy so dors en droog van binne is? Die Overberg hou haar liefde net vir haarself; óf dit, óf sy is 'n man, 'n man wie se hande net goed is vir die appelbome, want appelbome het nie sagte centres nie.* (244)
>
> Groenplaas was green and wet, the most beautiful place in the Overberg. It's like I see it for the first time, no one was ever as happy to see me as the Overberg and I felt like I had a mum. Can a place be so beautiful in the cruellest season, can a person live in a place so green and wet while you are so thirsty and dry on the inside? The Overberg keeps her love all to herself; either this, or she is a man, a man whose hands are only good for the apple trees, because apple trees do not have soft centres.

The scene starts as an idyllic reverie of homecoming, in which Groenplaas is personified as the motherly figure of the Overberg. But this soon turns into a stark contrast between the lushness of the place and how Nadia feels inside. A sense of being stuck between abundance and dearth, between past and future, between "memory and desire" is strengthened by the resonance with the opening of T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* in the phrase "cruellest

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season".[6] The idyllic joy, like many moments in the novel, escalates, compounds, goes from bad to worse. The switch in the gender pronoun used to refer to the Overberg in the final lines is particularly telling, lifting another tip of the veil of Nadia's past, where a childhood spent in what should have been a sheltered female space becomes dominated by the rough hands of an apple picker.

Loops of loss

This novel makes many contributions, too many, in fact, to enumerate in so short an article. Above all, there is Kamfer's poetic prowess. The imagery is concise and beautiful, funny and heartrending at the same time. There is also the situated plaasfeminism, which does an incredible amount of work in deconstructing and diversifying the white patriarchal space of the *plaas*, and thus in addressing Enlightenment legacies of division and objectification. As I have emphasised above, this critical reinscription is in many ways a necessity, but not optimistic. The feminism of the McKinney women is born partly from their sheer malicious nature, it seems, but certainly also harks back to them having to deal with being thrice oppressed, in terms of race, class and gender. For Nadia, personally, the idyll of the *plaas* consists of her admiration of and longing for her maternal forebears and thus provides a source of strength and personhood, but at the same time the *plaas* is also quite literally the scene of a crime from which her grandmother and Anties failed to protect her. In a broader historical and symbolic sense, this reinscribed image of the *plaas* is a helpful one in order to reconsider the type of abuse, dispossession and neglect made possible by the patriarchal persistence of South Africa's colonial agricultural past and its ongoing influence on the present.

What is perhaps most impressive, is Kamfer's ability to trace the workings of loss and capture its larger-than-life forces in literary form. In making the tensions between the oppression and cruelty of the McKinney women clear, *Kompoun* complicates mainstream notions of feminist resistance, charting the internal contradictions of female subjectivity against the vulnerable position of the McKinney children, who grow up in a community where adults, both men and women, pose a threat of emotional and physical abandonment and abuse. In response, Nadia mobilises her personal view of the *plaas*'s beauty as motherly and the women who live there as tough to create a coping strategy that suspends her imprisonment in the harmful dynamics around her. Nonetheless, these damages have been so profound that she barely manages to access large parts of her past. As the structure of the novel makes clear, what she does reach only becomes possible to face after she has lost the most important of her parental figures and, with her, the living connection to the *plaas*.

The feminist subject position that arises from this situation is a confounding impasse. To uncover one's links to the past, going in straight lines is impossible. Not just because, as Kamfer herself has noted, those histories are largely struck from the record, but also because, as *Kompoun* crystalises, facing one's own trauma is like staring into the sun. The only way for Nadia to get there is by looping around that deafening loss. Yet, the beauty with which this work of looping is rendered, also provides some comfort that could have broader implications. Nadia's counterintuitive observations that a funeral can be the start of something, that all who have died are never buried, and that our own stories end the day we are born (244) will no doubt resonate with others whose communities' histories have been largely erased, with others who are faced with the question of how to move forward if a connection to the past of one's people can only register internally once it is acknowledged as lost. One consolation could lie in the knowledge that we retell the story of our forebears in one way or another, whether we choose to or not.

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Notes

1. This translation is by Bibi Burger; the rest are by me.
2. By utilising the name "Santekraam" in the novel, Kamfer connects the McKinney family history to the consequences of South Africa's apartheid politics of displacement that were the topic of her poetry collection *grond/Santekraam* (2011).
3. The novel's persistent references to Japanese popular culture, like the anime of Studio Ghibli and popular video games, help to shed light on the narrative's situatedness precisely through its connection to a wider, globalised imagery.
4. "Plaas", the Afrikaans word for 'farm', is used throughout to evoke the ideological implications that the term has in different Afrikaans-speaking cultures.

5. I use the terms 'coloured' and 'black' in lower case to denote the ways in which these categories have had and continue to have structural consequences, despite the constructed nature of these categories under apartheid. They matter in *Kompoun* because the McKinney family uses Edward's black heritage to ostracise him. I am also using the term 'coloured' to denote the extent to which this novel is situated in the specificity of the cultures and languages of Afrikaans-speaking communities in the Cape. I am aware that the novel makes use of various Afrikaans geolects, particularly those from the Cape Flats and from the Overberg region, but I am in no position nor qualified to comment on these nuanced differences in any depth. Later in the review article, I will use the term 'Black' with an upper-case B to denote global trends of Black (feminist) resistance based on Black consciousness movements from the 1970s in South Africa and beyond.
6. "April is the cruellest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing / Memory and desire, stirring / Dull roots with spring rain." (Eliot 78)

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