



poems

73

supplement to BOLT april 73

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Durban, 1973

POEMS

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Supplement to BOLT April 1973

THE FLIGHT OF THE WHITE

SOUTH AFRICANS

(In 1856, a young Xosa woman, named Nongquase, preached that the day was approaching when Europeans in their country would be driven into the sea.

(Encyclopaedia of Southern Africa)

I

Kinshasa, we feel, is not the place to reach
At noon and leave the plane to endure inspection
By a hostile ground-hostess, observing the bleach
On her face, her cap tacked with leopard skin,
Faked, and far too tired for the erection
A good bristle requires. We make no fuss,
However, knowing why she snarls at us;
But proffer our transit cards, and march in

To stand at the urinal complaining aloud
Of filth, flies and spit, amazed that this
Is it! an Africa the white man bowed
Before, growling outside the walls of the Gents:
We fumble uncomfortably, unable to piss
Till a soldier, bursting from a booth, clodhops
Past, still buckling up, and the talking stops.
Steady yellow stains white marble in silence.

II

Perhaps, Nongquase, you have your revenge. Tell me
Why, when surf rides like skirts up a thigh, we bare
Ourselves, blind behind black glass, bellies
Up, navels gaping at the sun? We lie
Near ice-cream boys, purveyors of canvas chairs:
While they and the fishermen who stand
Off-shore, shooting seine, busily cram
Their granaries : we gasp, straining to fly:

While in the upstairs lounge, our waiting wives
Caress expensive ivory souvenirs;
By rights, White Hunters' spoil; and home-made knives.
We flounder about, flying fish that fail,
Staring with the glazed eyes of seers
At our plane, hauled from the sky, lying like dead
Silver on the tarmac, feeling hooks bed
Deep in our mouths, sand heavy in our scales.

III

Our sojourn : what might dear Milne have made of it
Or Crompton, Farnol, even the later James,
Who promised homely endings, magi who lit
The lamp we wished to read by, gave us The Queen,
A Nanny we almost kissed, our English names?
We blink and are blinded by the Congo sun
Overhead, as flagrant as a raped nun.
Such light embarrasses too late. We've seen

So little in the little time spent coming
To choke on this beach of unbreathable air
Beyond the guns' safety, the good plumbing;
Prey of gulls and gaffs. We go to the wall
But Mowgli, Biggles and Alice are not there :
Nongquase, heaven unhoods its bloodshot eye
Above a displaced people; our demise
Is near, and we'll be gutted where we fall.

THE VISION OF LOUIS XIV, AT VERSAILLES, IN WHICH HE FORESEES HIS APPROACHING DEATH

Tonight, the sun sets unbidden.
Mazarin, being my mother's instrument,
truly fathered me, and could have said
why my mirrors fatten with German tourists.
Yet for tonight, at least,
in the courtyard the cobbles hurt
the feet of the peasants in their soft shoes,
beyond the gates. Guards!
A woman cries in the secret passage-ways:
there are shouts for blood, down there.
Here is a tall man in a strange hat
who claims France for himself:
Not Cyrano, and yet, that nose ?
The shoemaker shall build my heels even higher.
No soap! More perfume! Clean linen to sweeten the itch!
My pulse is full of foolish talk;
strange rumours disturb my chest.
O, guard the hidden doors!
My fountains crouch and flex on furry white spiders' legs.
In the morning my dressers will find me more stubborn than ever
and the sun will rise, unbidden.

**AUSTERE LADY ATTENDED BY
AN UMBRELLA BEARER,
SEEN IN A DREAM**

She stands in a teeming landscape attended
By a plump, sodden sir in morning dress.
The patience of many marriages reposes in

The angle of his wrist to the umbrella, flowering
From the grip of his fist, petals distracting
The rain from its stem; capacious protection

She accepts without notice or thanks. She outfaces
The wind tearing through the high fences of rain.
A half veil darkens her eyes; a little cameo brooch

Disciplines her breast beneath the dusty black
Of her travelling costume, catching
Her severity to her throat. All around it rains;

Coming down steadily on the umbrella, on her attendant,
Off the brim of his top hat, creeping into his pockets;
Not touching her except to muddy her tiny

Elastic-sided boots, a little, above the welts.
There are shapes in the jungles of rain, difficult
To identify. The light is breaking like mirrors.

A young man bent into the wind, hand to hat,
Wiping his eyes and smiling steps close
To the lady and doffs his hat. The rain has smoothed

The hair at his temples, shines on his celluloid
Collar, is pendant from its high points,
From his ears and trembles at his lips.

Embarrassed by its pressing attentions, he pleads with the lady.
She shows faint interest, anger, then indifference.
Only sunshine or sudden rape would counteract the rain's
superior suasion.

He has sat in hotel lounges staring at old roses
With the look he gives the lady and her umbrella bearer
Where she hangs like mistletoe upon its oak.

At his bow, water falls from ears and lips:
Replacing his hat he turns and walks back into the rain,
And is again the shape from which he became.

COMPLAINT OF THE POST--ECUMENICAL CATHOLIC

The Pope blessed my rosary;
I've worn the scapular of the Third Order of St. Francis;
made the First Fridays;
visited the shrines at Lourdes,
Fatima and Assisi;
and worshipped a Child of Mary.
Then I lapsed leaving Sister Sacristan
to her flowers and candelabra, crackling forests
she genuflects before, her old bones good tinder
that somehow never fire.
I keep to the parish, avoiding strange towns,
sitting on some hotel stoep sipping beer,
amazed at how loudly the girls
from Loreto Convent cheer behind me.
Here, the Chinese Fahfee man,
nibbling inscrutably at brown paper pay-packets,
numbers our dreams,
and in the Durban Club rich juices settle.
The van from Goldenberg's Polony Factory
waits on the Greeks in their corner cafes,
whose minds are mosquitoes behind dark netting,
obedient to distant mafias of insistent relations.
Chief among their clientele,
Du Toit, sweating beside his garden boy on his plot
in Hercules, breaking shale: no cruelty, just a fin
sometimes against the grey sea behind
his skull's strong walls.
Ringing the parish,
are strange towns where wrought-iron weathercocks
tower in the wind,
Benoni, Boksburg, Brakpan, Springs:
they circle like sullen moons.

SUNDAY MORNING AMONG BAYSWATER HOTELS

Nobody's sleeping partners,
The landladies of Bayswater
Have come to collect:
They draw up outside the cheap hotels
And struggle from the cockpits of Jags and Bentleys,
Thighs widening,
Armed with Pokes.

LINES ON A BOER WAR PIN-UP GIRL SEEN IN THE FALCON HOTEL, BUDE.

Demure you are over your left shoulder,
Above the great embankment of your back;
Buttocks and thighs heavy as sandbags;
Shapely ankles bolting you
Beside your pennyfarthing:
Fortress Britannia; Boadicea on a bike.

Flesh sweetly stripped and posed before
Steel frame, chain and exciting leather saddle:
How well you have withstood your rucksack days,
Their sieges and reliefs:
Your lovers fallen below.

Perhaps in his backyard *kia*,
Some old black veteran has his copy, too,
Which he touches with a dirty fingernail and laughs,
Showing his gums:
Who else remembers you?

UPON A LADY PATRON

I've seen through silk blouses breasts lift
And been reminded of boats on a Sunday river;
Something about the swing of them, forever
Bobbing at their moorings; their roped drift.

When the brown curl of the river divides all,
Rubbing itself privately against itself, the
Assault of the black boat-clerk in his stall,
Upon a lady patron, comes back to me;

They close and he is seen, being the centre
Of a crowd of waiting patrons, to enter
Her blouse, headlong. Beneath the silken ripple
His hands work deftly, letting slip a trim,
Pink breast : then his mouth is on its nipple:
And, for a moment, she bears up under him.

VIEWS OF A BLACK COUNTRY HOUSING ESTATE

Dead winter morning : raddled biddies
In heavy coats and green jockey caps ride the bus.
The brood they pampered into teenage
With sweets, crisps and cuffs have become
Daughters in muffs and shoes as heavy
As polio boots; and peevish sons.
In the brief evenings, I see them courting
Down Fallowfield, Stony Brook and Longcroft Roads,
Where pear and apple were.
Deceived by unseasonal sun,
Coupling a little earlier each year,
Their wombs fruit into winter
Producing these

Grandchildren, busy in the park,
Making an Adventure Playground.
Passing the scrupulous semis;
Ers—An—Mine, Mon Repos, Benidorm:
The bus is a grit in the street's gray eye,
Reddening it briefly.
I can just make out the doctor's patients
Settling back against the frosted glass
Across the road the children are working with hammers,
nails and saws
Fastening bits of wood into branches,
Roping nylon vines to swing from in a jungle
Safe enough to take their weight:
Building trees.

CAPE DRIVES

V

Constantia's development is such
Its' vineyards ruin untended, reduced to plots
Quarter acres glittering ersatz Cape Dutch
Where scorched leaves rust and each new weed's a garotte.
The keen househunter snouts and forages
Bringing to light dead tenancies, extinguished
Ambitions, squatters' buried cottages,
Drunken Coloureds with one burning wish.
These days the jails recruit the harvest hire
Who strip the vines; so it's a better deal,
At fifty cents a shift, to fight the fires
That munch down mountain sides intent on a meal
Hot for lip-smacking tender Cape Dutch thatches;
No mean return at least, on a box of matches.

KOBUS LE GRANGE MARAIS

He sways on his stool in the Station Bar and he calls for a short
white wine
And he knocks it back and sheds a tear and he damns the party
line,
And he talks to himself and blocks his ears when the tired old
locos shunt:
“Way back in ’48, we said, die koele uit die land
And kaffir op sy plek, we said, the poor white wants his share:
They put me in my place, all right,” said Kobus Le Grange Marais.

“I was all my life a railwayman, all my life a Boer,
And there’s none unkindier than a man’s own kind, I tell you
that for sure;
I fought in the O.B. till I was caught and I sweated my guts
in a camp
For the bombs I threw and the bridges I blew and here’s what
I get for thanks;
The turning wheels took off my legs and I’m not going anywhere
But downhill all the way from here,” said Kobus Le Grange Marais.

“My pension held up far worse than my legs, so I went to the
dominee:
A bed in the garage will do,” I said. “Man, where’s your pride?”
says he.
He wanted to pray but I turned to go when the police decided
to raid,
They took him away in the big gray van and came back for
the Kaffir maid.
I have an idea he did a lot more than park his Ford in there,
Or so the Women’s Federasie said,” said Kobus Le Grange Marais.

“O it was dop and dam and a willing girl when we were young
and green,
But Jewish money and the easy life are the ruin of the Boereseun,
He disappears into the ladies’ bars and is never seen again
Where women flash their thighs at you and drink beside the men,
And sits with moffies and piepiejollers and primps his nice
long hair:
You’d take him for an Englishman,” said Kobus Le Grange Marais.

“The meddling ghost of Reverend Philip O he haunts us once
more --
His face is pressed to the window-pane, his knock rattles the door;
From Slagtersnek to Sonderwater he smears the Boers' good name;
And God is still a rooinek God, kommandant of Koffiefontein:
If what I hear about Heaven is true it's a racially mixed affair:
In which case, ons gaan kak da' bo,” said Kobus Le Grange Marais.

“The times are as cruel as the big steel wheels that carried
my legs away;
Oudstryders like me are out on our necks and stink like
scum on a vlei,
And white man puts the white man down; the volk are led astray;
There'll be weeping in Weenen once again, no keeping the impis
at bay;
And tears will stream from the stony eyes of Oom Paul
in Pretoria Square:
He knows we'll all be poor whites soon,” said Kobus Le Grange
Marais.

He sways on his stool in the Station Bar and he calls for a short
white wine
And he knocks it back and sheds a tear and he damns the party
line,
And he talks to himself and blocks his ears when the tired old
locos shunt:
“Way back in '48, we said, die koelie uit die land
And kaffir op sy plek, we said, the poor white wants his share:
They put me in my place, all right,” said Kobus Le Grange Marais.

RUTH KEECH

(From an old record: "582 bales of cotton and linseed were salvaged and sold by auction on the spot with considerable profit")

NATAL COAST SETTLERS

From the first their object was to barter;
A little land for one with more to offer,
Knives for mealies, turkey-twill for hide,
Ivory each hunter's dream-reward.

They raised no question that they could not answer.
Climate? Species? A breaking down breakwater?
They solved with fortitude the vital question;
Each for himself brought out the best in them.

The cunning coast where savage foaming miles
Subsided into necklaces of shells,
Connived to slip them smiling immigrants
In regular remittance from its wrecks.

Those who left the corseting coastal bush,
The swooning palms to shun the sea's embrace,
With helmet, boot and rifle faced the hills
Of freedom, armed to save themselves.

Their frontiers were bound by what was timely
These pioneers who leave us feeling lonely
While men from whom our searching daylight comes
Confined themselves to Europe's gaslit rooms.

REFUGEES AND THOSE WHO REMAIN

There are those who have reached
The plane of departure.
The engine has soared to their will.
They have watched the unpoliced sky
Escorting their dream
While their legs felt foreign
Their duty done.

There are those who are beached
On the flux of adventure.
Activities banned, they distil
Self-respect from each small remark of the day.
Regard their esteem
With reserve, for where does betrayal begin
With the self still unknown?

HOME FROM HOME

Boldly we climb the verandah steps to pay
The debt we owe the imposters sitting there.
They lift their heads like worn sheets in the wind.
Which side they'll show is never very clear.

"Last week we thought she'd gone. Now today she's done
The flowers detoured from the funeral parlour."
So they stun us with their goings-on
And scare us with each freakish demeanour.
Our memories match the meanings that we make.
What hinges hoist the remnants of their reason?

"I'll run away. Mother so often said, 'Darling,
Your room will always be here.' Why should I stay?"
She stoops to knot the stocking round her shanks.
Sad isn't it? the kind of things they say.

"Hullo m'dear." Just these two words Room Five
Preserves from decades on her midland farm.
She hails each step that must by-pass her door --
"Hullo, m'dear." Last night misspent her charm
On two white-coated men who bore away
In a zipper bag her friend from Number Four.

Room Nine whom death beguiled on Flanders field
Keeps bright braves nothing more in her last stint
Than the gas-lit sagas and the love-swept moors that lulled
Her life, but fade now in small print.

We shout sad ultimatums – “Pat’s chucked her job,
John’s passed Matric. Last week the girl walked out.”
No time for how or why their choice was made.
We sound inhuman with this lack of doubt.
They wonder what it is we’re keeping back
One taps in vain her crackling hearing-aid.

“Black bitch,” Room 7 shocks the guests. Her years
In Kenya goad her to resist her evening shower.
But nursely only smiles – content to wait
For night-shift to dispute her lack of power.

How slowly now Room Eight breathes in and out,
Frail as a foetus tied to her tank of air,
Her blue lips seal her verdict on her days.
There’s nothing we can do. We can’t repair
Despair or find our way past clogging veins
Nor hasten death’s ingenious delays.

Soused in the reek of urine and of meths,
The pallid supper comes to whet their taste.
We gear ourselves to go, regain the sense
That love and aspirations impose upon the waste.

ONE, TWO, THREE

1.

Every year as a child
from that station
couped up in a cityward train
she choked on the taste of sulphur and separation.
She had her last run of the village
through space prescribed by a window.
Waving her hand
she rubbed out the whole of a hill.

Ten minutes uprooted and threw by the way
the farm that gave grounds
for a morning of walking.
A widow-bird's tail in the marshes
gave the last twitch to her summer.
Till the sun went down altogether
all she could see was everything
running away.

2

Years later
she passed through the place not alone.
On the old gravel platform
she turned from his side.
Touching a milk-can she wept.
Could anyone's eyes or arms
or any words
make up for anything?

3

Later still
she stood there again
in her mind's eye.
The man having gone, she had need
of her childhood's pain
to have him laid low
by the landscape
of that departing train.

MRS OGLE'S DESPAIR

You ask anyone in the yard
all they will tell you is the same as I'm telling.
Who's to help me?
One Welfare says he's mad.
The other says he's just old-fashioned bad.
The police?
"You'll have to wait," they always say
until he's really done the things
he keeps on threatening that he'll do."
Then they all have their laugh
knowing they're needing to see me dead
to prove the way how I'm living.
The priest says *he* understands,
God will know I'm doing my best.
But my best would be a different story,
not kneeling to Leonard.
Its only at night that I feel so scared
that my different story will never begin.

"You've had a hard life, Mrs Ogle,"
everyone says that.
But the hard life can't upset me anymore.
Nor Leonard. Nor any amount of his lady-friends.
I've got the hang of them now.
Its the easy life that beats me all the time.
"We've all got to battle," even he says that.
"Where's the life in you?" he wants to know.
He'd never believe it's the life in me
that tells me some days not to put up a fight.
Like at the home where they put me
on our birthdays each of us would stand
to get a golden wishbone with a bow.
The time when I got up I stood and stood.
"Sit down, Vera, sit down."
They thought I'd lost my manners out of fright;
but I reckoned if I stood there long enough
that something new would have to start.
Some days I still pretend there's other plans for me
At night-time when I'm turning on the lights
I say to myself they're tying me up to the posh hotels,
the big-shot dining-rooms, the jolly times.
But all I see is shadows of the kids
jumping up like spiders on the wall —
Battling with their books before he comes.
Then all we do is play at duck and dive.

But to tell you the fact -- there have been times
when me and my life seemed one and the same.
The times I've been expecting one of *them*.
You'd see me, every second week I'd take
a slow walk to the clinic up the hill
just so I'd hear the Sister tell me what I knew.
"You're doing fine. You'll make a perfect mother."
The way she said the words you'd think
I'd won a prize at school.
One time I couldn't keep from telling Leonard that.
"A perfect mess is all *I* think you are!"
That's when he fixed the electric wires round my head.
That's when he got his ruffian friends to prove
in court he hadn't done a thing.
They sent me to the mental then.
They said I got depressed.

Like I feel now in the mornings when they're gone
and I'm standing out under the mango tree --
its the only place you get a view of the sea
not where the sand is or the docks are
not where you could walk out like to swim
just where the water would cover your head --
and I start to think of this friend I had
who couldn't cope up with her husband either.
Some days she'd tell me all the things he did
but then again she'd go into her room.
One day she went into her room
she went and swallowed all the doctor's little pills.
That day she went and killed herself
but all she did was get away from *him*.

I tell myself one day I can clear off
when all the kids are finished up with school.
Nine years to go. So many Sunday afternoons.
And all those long week-ends.
They wait for you like the end of the month;
knock you down like the bills coming in.
The times when other people have their jokes

And in nine years will there be a Vera left to go?

O my thoughts are just no good to me anymore
You're welcome to the lot.

PSYCHIATRIC OUT-PATIENTS

SCHIZOPHRENIA

On quilted hills his mealiefield
Presents the single threadbare patch.
The skinny beams begin to thrust
Out through his hut's show-rotting thatch.
His childrens' bodies swell like gourds;
His wife's complaints collect like dust.

They sit him out to catch the warmth
That fills the aloe-circled yard.
He drags his chair off to the trees
And leans to hear the voice of God.
Without a move he spreads the scene
That tells the tale of his disease.

PARANOIA

How expertly he counters his disaster!
No weeping or complaining or despair.
(As a child he never ran to mother)
Afraid, he'll whistle up his every wit to bear.
Last month he routed out the garden ladder,
Oiled out old screws and strengthened every tread,
Then propped it at the little bathroom window
In that small space against the neighbour's hedge.
On Monday he is off to fetch his pension,
On Tuesday it's the market or the shop
He's up and down that ladder every morning
Though it's tricky with the basket, at the top.
As doorways deputize for Death the Master
How sensibly he dodges his disaster!

WAITING

When he comes in through the door
How glad I'll be I've never moved a foot
Beyond my own desires since I, just as I stand,
Have driven him to draw up at this swaddled palm
That marks my gates along this road of gates,

When he comes in, facing me,
Wanting to hold my life in his hands,
I will find my balance in the double pattern
Of his finger-nails across imperfect fingers.
I shall slowly lift up, like a staring child,
His humid raincoat resting on my chair,

We will wait before we touch
Or speak, though flying-ants will celebrate
Around the musty lights. We will use the rain
Dripping down the balcony's facade,
Drumming on the water of the bay,
To help us drown — a little —
Brushings we have had with other nights.

Is that a car coming or more rain
Along the esplanade?

Is that his car coming, or the rain
Starting up again?

OUT OF WORK

Soapsuds deflated by the sun
subside in rotting grass.
The clothes-line breathes a life-line in
the breeze. The day begun
Harilal steps from his rushing home
his head held high as the rusting roof
clamped down with pensioned parts of cars.
Flicking his hair with carefree comb
he treads the matted footpath down,
by passes dog-eared kannas, scares
the bamboo-skinny hens that skip aloof.
Then leaps a bank and makes his way to town.

At night he may wonder how
one grows old on nothing,
may start to sense that out of work
he's out of half his life. But now
this summer morning nothing
is clothed in shapes of girls that sway
in tinselled saris. Shop displays allow
him dreams he never can wear out.
Now this summer morning
the lure of luck still turns about
at corners, makes him stub his fag-end out
and hold his breath before he risks a throw.

On this summer morning
just not enough summer mornings
have dawned on him to add his name
beyond all hope of doubt
to those who've lost the game
before they threw the six to let them start.

A NATURAL HISTORY OF
THE NEGATIO BACILLUS

Definition of Negatio

The distance between emotion and intellect, or heaven and earth, when such distance constitutes pathogenesis.

Thought to be caused by a gram-negative, anaerobic, spore-forming bacillus, probably growing readily on artificial media, it is known to arrest psychogenesis.

ii. *Origins of Negatio*

In the beginning was a world quite naturally in contact with the principle of its creation.

One man stood up, like a tree, followed by others: their heads in the clouds, feet on the ground, unaware of such facts. Emotion and intellect enjoyed some unification.

One man stood up and held the principle off from the world exactly the height of a man. It is thought this had something to do with the cant or size of his head or fists.

His stance caused unnatural disturbances: adjustment was required in the principle and from the deprived surface: both wreathed themselves in the mists.

iii. *Epidemiology of Negatio*

One man felt that by standing on stilts he could elevate himself further from the common ground.

One man felt that by standing on stilts he could elevate his head to a higher place. Heaven retreated a little without a sound.

One man felt that by otherwise using his stilts he could clear more room for himself, employing them to back up his demands as somewhat unsubtle hints.

Heaven and earth had to get out of range fairly quickly. The Q, or quarantine principle became mandatory and has been applied ever since.

iv. *Aetiology of Negatio*

Natural immunity to the negatio bacillus is exhibited by those wholly of the earth or of the sky as these touch where those are, although this population steadily decreases.

It comprises all animals except the rabid; small children observing fireworks; certain women and a few primitive societies unravaged by starvation or other diseases.

Also by some saints and prophets, except the rabid, and a few isolated and inexplicable souls who have discovered the hidden itinerary.

Onset of negatio usually occurs at puberty and there is no known cure, except perhaps an awareness of itself but this is usually temporary.

Short-term alleviation is obtained by lying very flat upon or under the earth or its natural waters; but this has been known to be hazardous in both execution and function.

The disease is highly contagious as the bacilli are readily absorbed, resisting all modern techniques aimed at their destruction.

Certain older remedies, now under re-investigation, may prove efficacious.

All cases, without exception, terminate fatally, the cadaver invariably becoming doubly infections.

v. *Diagnosis of Negatio*

When the patient's hand curls compulsively: aggressive knuckles up or acquisitively down, in whichever plane it is put.

When heaven is gone forever and earth gathers itself to flinch from the patient's foot.

vi. *Prognosis in Negatio: a Case-History*

There was a man with a soul which had arms holding on to whatever piece of earth he was on to wherever it is that the gods live.

The arms became attenuated as his mind questioned the task of linkage. (Note: linkage is a discipline or it can be instinctive).

He stopped holding, commenced pushing, and failed to grow fast enough to occupy his expanding vacuum.

Vertiginous from the distances at hand, he complained of a terror of drowning. And proceeded to do so, flailing, clutching at nothing in that continuum.

Or at artifacts which do not float in this medium which is nothing at all whatsoever. Besides, his musculature had deteriorated and his grasp, though avid, functioned somewhat weakly.

His corpse is now an important corpse in one of those corporations of lesser importance that deals with corpses obliquely.

vii. *Prophylaxis: "Contra-Negatio" Mantra*

"O father in heaven and my mother earth, love each other and maintain contact with each other through me thy child.

Divorce not over me, condemn me not to the void between, and let me not be by nothingness beguiled."

MY RECKLESS DRAGONS

Poet – as shepherd of dragons leaping
about him, cavorting or sullenly squatting
delaying as boulders – nods to the lone strangers
on the way, hand half-raised.

Black and green, his lashing cohort coils on
gold; some with tender underbellies of pink, blue
or yellow: crevasses of the true white snow glimpsed
between broad armoured folds.

Their backs saw air, hardy as amalgams
of mud and blood-caked dung forged and tempered by
suns
dehydrated by fevers, etched by the tidal
muster of wheeling moons.

A handful shimmer moistly in silver:
unrippled eyes mirroring unearthly landscapes
and impossible stars. All are amphibious;
some of them learn to fly.

Born of the shepherd's skull, sprung from torn yolks
of, now sweet, now galling juices, tumbling about,
they dry their soiled wings, scales rubbing and
drumming in
a resonance of birth.

All have the forked fire in their guts; but with
some it is a perhaps-glint: a locomotive's
firebox occulted by glistening backs or banks
on a still, distant night.

Unleashed and roaring, they fill their own lives:
rutting thunderously behind the crackling dunes,
or rumbling off beyond the hills to return, decked
by medals or bruises.

Improperly attended, some are not
heard of again: dying in deserts or hanged in
swamps. All have balancing trouble; are foolishly
brave; not always equipped.

Several end in professorial
mortuaries, sectioned, differentially
stained, formalized: condemned to crouch in glass
tanks as
salutary lessons.

Some tread gently; others, club-footed, fierce
as the final intrusion of a hurtling cliff-
side to a suicide's cloud-visions eyes, present
tough as ultimate rocks . . .

The shepherd halts, calling the lost away.
At times an alien heeds: crest of a foreign
hue, unrecognized, bludgeons past above, and un-
settles the moving flock.

Hey, my reckless dragons! You who kill me
and give me eternal birth – you are what you are,
as I am: of a restless ephemeral Now,
a peremptory Earth.

And if I nudge or tap thee with my crook
as we jumble our coughing way to that barely-
known shore, it is with a good-humoured disbelief
in your obedience;

Or to steady myself when I must stop
to look up: at the ever-surprising, ever-
virginal shambling of closed leather wings flexing
and fumbling in my head.

AUGUST ZULU

1

The Audi and the Peugeot, unshackled
by major roads, dice ahead.

Parched khaki
cane-leavings, dehydrated by the sun,
set tangled legs to the tarmac's endless
centipede.

Place names are stamped with the tough
poetry of the land's great myth-maker:
general, tactical genius, wry
slaughterer, blood-bent mother's son.

The spears
may be all washed up now, or lightly stained
by faction fights, but this is Zululand
all right : the potter throwing his best : this
clay is on the move.

Bulk-carriers thick
with molasses, crossings for toy trains stacked
with wattle-props or processed planks, over-
loaded trucks, tractors hauling sugar rough
up the traffic.

Girls in minis, braless-
vests, twirl Hong Kong umbrellas; or stand like
Ruth, pangas aloft, among the alien
cane.

The century has less than three decades
to run : can this high-sucrose grass still stand
as food?

The towns where nothing happens in
the street, and everything behind the drawn
afternoon curtains, slump round petrol pumps.

2

Off the tar : game corridors and nothing
much except hills bland from distance; and huts,
some ringed with thornbushes – hangover from
those not so faded internecine days;
a school; a store.

A bullet, dust-trailed, far
up the road : a crammed lurching bus, dipping-
inspector's van, police Ford, game-warden's
jeep, or sagged Cadillac – white number-plates
up and eight illegal fares – heads back to
town or for the hills.

More glimpses of white
among the roadside thorn-trees : impala
showing clean pairs of rumps.

The road abuts
a plated blocked-in bulk of black rhino
like a lately-derailed locomotive
motionless in the steam of his nervous rage.

A flushed traveller in a station-wagon
speeds to the profile of a mission-station's
lovely inmate : twice a year the proffered
Night Out in Mtuba.

Twice a year the
humorous decline waning in resolve.

Reshaping old designs is seldom easy:
how to reconcile enthusiasms
of the younger missionaries looking
forward, bitterness of the dried elders
looking back across the same charred distance:
while the new indigenous teachers, doctors,
conscious of a dialectic victory,
are incisive, unanswerable, quite
aware they are the elite that bloody
revolution would swiftly single out.

3

On the veld-tracks, our Land Rover lives up
its name over rocks, vleis, eroded chasms
and razor-backs – the hills, close to, are far
from bland – , speedo missing, a fistful of
dashlights loll and short in its gap.

Steered by
a slight, mad and pretty English novice
baretoed, foot flat; she knows the peasantry,
language, waterpoints; conducts her scattered
clinics under trees.

The sun has gently
freckled her arms.

And the sun, his allies
thirst, thorn, no birth-control, the few corrupt
chiefs combine to bleach and bludgeon the means
of men and their land white.

The hills are white,
exhausted mauve, ash-grey brick; shell-hit by
unreal fig-greens.

Umsinsi trees (*Kafirboom* – the word is not polite round here) hold up wasp-waisted rib-cages bare but for rags of blood-stained flowers.

Feminine and cool,
the benediction of a dam spreads herself
defencelessly to the kiln of the sky.

It's hard to conceive of armoured terrain
like this, in two months, glazed by rains to greens:
an outcrop from the stone-age sits alone
still as a herdbooy against a hillside;
and birds have yellow eyes, hook-beaks : eagle,
kite, hawk, vulture, crow – the slim white tickbirds
apart who stick closely to their brown or
dappled cud-chewing mountains.

These cattle
insist upon their right of way, while sad-
faced donkeys lurch patiently right up to
the radiator grill.

A stop to argue
unsuccessfully with a runaway
TB patient, the whole kraal on our side
versus the febrile, stick-insect thin, old
absconder.

She outshouts us all : Stick your
bloody hospital.

Blood-flecked phlegm sprays us.
In Zulu, some things sound more vehement.
The coming independence is being
savoured speculatively at grass roots;
only the righteous or wronged find in it
the promised instant intoxicant.

All
but the muttering sick shake hands.

This day
an itinerant venerable stops
to shake hands solemnly with four village
boys.

An angry mother bids him begone
– is he a famous homosexual?
Untended goats bent on inveiglement
led by a plus-foured billy skip by, his
face is a lascivious patriarch's.

Another thirty miles of dust, our right-
hands rising and falling to match those by
the trackside.

This is off-road KwaZulu
where all salute without fear or fervour.

4

A terrible climb down, then up, on foot,
with frantic lungs (I'll never touch another
cigarette : not until we're on the way
home anyway) to sample herd-soiled, suck-
hooved, and human drinking water.

A nation
cracks in the ovens of lost centuries
unless such fouled-up soups are boiled.

My science
has caught up with, begun to chip into
the fused snake's spine of the Manzibomvu
river, coiled like a glass-green mirror now,
which can still race redly with the land's blood
when the rains inject erosion.

A few
adverse bacteriological facts
could start bureaucratic balls rolling.

Buck
pass this way : their baked spoor pit the gut and
muscle-cracking hillside.

Manic winds of
August explode from holes the winter sun
burnt in the sky.

They barrel up this hot
valley, past basket-woven impromptu
huts, thong and lattice walls unproofed with mud,
not yet roofed.

The potter has not revoked
but paused to rethink a handful of cups:
a potential lives longer than a truth.

Sanibona, greetings, peace and good luck!

WOODCUTS

INTERIOR

The handsome man's daughter,
Herself a cupid's bow, bends over his face
In all attention, putting lipstick on his pursed mouth.

In the foreground,
A mother's oblique comfort finds for one second
Its answer here
In line

Where the adolescent girl, her long neck bent,
Stands in fresh sorrow. In one corner

A lion-footed bowl of antique workmanship
Filled with rice like money, chopsticks, a teapot.

Two extra sandals (a glimpse through the doorway) -- Whose?

BEDROOM SCENE

A lady-of-pleasure leaves the tent of nets
Her child has fallen asleep in
Softly, on all fours,
The relieved breasts loose and graceful,
Her hair shining and black and pinned with combs,
-- on all fours --
A billet-doux held clenched between her teeth.

MOUNTAIN LANDSCAPE

Taking the path of this picture,
The ambiguities of bewitchment --

Three budding icicles of girls'-breasts
Against the pyramid scirocco!
The Death-Goddess! Too far for me!

And yet She colours my desire;
These on my path the fallen bodies
Of hills loosening over roads;
Mature forms in overhang,
Shapes overlapping into repose.

ON MINOTAUROMACHY

Two girls like doves
are sitting in the window.
It is evening.

Outside

the retinue of the minotaur goes by.
His hoofs clatter on the cobbles.
He lifts his head as always
and he groans. He moans and bellows.

The blood in his chest chokes him;
not a sinew in his body
but is a whip-lash and a cord:
so muscle-tied. It is not enough
the disembowelling of the horse,
the rickety horse of old age,
the apocalypse —
not enough. Not enough
the violation of the female matadore,
the dancer,
her peace in ecstasy of death-like sleep
and the slender breasts parted with a shawl
Did you make this, Minotaur?

Not enough. He stumbles
and clatters on the cobbles, his one arm
stretched out in front of his lust-blind eyes,
and he groans. O Minotaur, o Minotaur,
what song do you sing?
The man escapes up the ladder;
the little girl with the flowers and the candle,
the miniature statue of liberty,
is cannon-fodder. Only
the girls like doves in a window
hear your song.
Hear the whole of your song.

PETROL DRUM

A sight for sore eyes
as you are now

I see you were also made
to roll as well as stand

You are coloured like a garden carrot
under a fine grey garden dust

The rust might even be garden earth
on your two out-turned regular wrinkles

You might have come out of the earth
if you were more stream-lined and not so squat

Your two positive grooves divide your body
Three balanced cylinders are enough for me

You are more than an armful

PHOTOGRAPHER'S TWIGGY

The bourgeois buildings of this street
Suddenly float with on their backs
Like glaziers on a bicycle
The semi-slanted panes of light

A pensive-looking pavement spins
Your spine thin in a yellow dress
Making a tune

*I see the sunbowls of your eyes
The spirals of their diaphragm
Perfected into radii*

*You move a mirror of your light
Your pupil is a straw that drinks
Your knees are triggered to that dark*

Apple-eating there off the light
And detail unbalanced find some hurt
Finer than glass or merely that
A bus may bruit
Its red-tongued lumber to your feet

Then glance and dip your shoulders
Weasel-turn and veer to hide
In mineral shadow of street-side

THE IRON LUNG

The cooked earth in the garden
Is almost done. It is an oven.

Going into this garden with the children
I have – (more than tasted) – lived
A kind of peace
That has no meaning for past or future
Or what it means to be an adult.

The roses are rigid,
Burnt into cardboard while still a bud.

If I tell that boy,
He will climb into the trees
And throw down oranges for us.

Taps silver and drip,
Smelling of lime.
The water is black
In cylinders of rust.

My right to be here
Is having been, as a boy, in another such garden,
Kept by another such grandmother.

Meanwhile
From the edges there is this sound
Of a heavy rubber balloon filling and emptying,
A hoarse whistle of pines,
Monotone and arresting.
Keeping things going on the big plain.

FORTUNA IMPERATRIX MUNDI

Last night

I caught my glimpse of the Fortune Goddess
Going past on the road two lights of
Motorcycles whining caressed
My windows with their steely
Fingers they her escort

And She

Was sitting at the driver's seat of her
Rolls-Royce wearing a top hat leaning
Back from the wheel as her bony
Fingers turned it and her head
Leant back ecstatically

Her hair

Was orange frizzly no in the wind light
Of passing street lamps it was corny
Yellow her face was eaten pale
By death it was a skull

I saw

In the back seat two gangsters pouring champagne
Them giggling passing the champagne for-
Ward to Her to Her foaming then
Subsiding the lacy light
She turning at that wheel

And so I caught my glimpse of her
The Lady Luck

TRANSLATION

Being here on classical soil — at last this gently
Inspires trust: the ancient world, and, around us,
This present; both speak now with a more distinct
And attractive voice. For once my own instinct
Is keeping me good — and you see I follow
Their advice, and page the ancients through;
Daily with more vivid pleasure. But:

Nightly I work new shifts for Love and his syndicate:
Less tutored but overcome more by joy.
And who's to say I'm not learning as my eye
Spies out the sweet shapes of her bosom, my hand
Moves down her side? Then I can comprehend
New things in the marble; I weigh and compare —
Now it's as if my hand could see, and my eye were
Permitted touch. It's not night-long orgies we keep,
Either: we have sensible talk too.

Comes sleep

To conquer her, I lie at her side then
And think — well, on more than the one theme. Often
Things take shape in her arms, and I measure,
Softly, the gathering beat of a hexameter
Over her shoulders: finger; and finger. Her mouth
Trembles in even slumber; her fetched breath
Rakes at a single glowing coal, now laid
Down deep, in my breast. While Cupid sleepyhead
Watches the lantern, thinking no doubt of the days
When he obliged triumvirs likewise.

LOOKING INTO A CERTAIN KIND OF POEM

The looking in

A window or case
about six inches deep
With your palms you are a lithographer
lifting his print from the stone
Stare past your reflection
Here are exhibits

Relations

They tell me, but
How is this community?
One three
seven no overlaps
no labels no touching

What was in the case

Most are leather or steel
our metaphors of flesh
to smell of human care and kindness
All are kept (by the keeper)
all are kept in that exact
degree of wear and tear (or newness)
that means nostalgia
most automatic
most purely disinterested of all earthly passion.

Sociological considerations

Much loved
they are out of a pocket
they are out of a cave
they are out of a matchbox
they are now in a witch-doctor's shop-front window
they are now in a room

The poem rejects you

Count them before they cover them with a rag
You will not learn to say their names
That room was a place of executions
not of exhibits merely

The after-image in negatives

Someone has arranged flowers
fossil flowers, corn-flowers –
in a bowl of astounding roundness.
Lit from behind they have become
white silhouettes
a bat's silver
shriek and skeleton.

THE TORTOISE

He sought longevity; vegetarian
He cut pale leaves of clover with bony gums
On the hill-side. Having mastered this art,
Found he could feed on invisible influences
In the atmosphere, scent-essences and ghosts.
His membraned nose sucked in the pure ice,
Greyish-blue tinted, aetherized, of mountain air.
Like a fish winter-bound
Hibernated, bloodless.

Next turned to imitate the life of stones.
Brilliant impurities in his clay
Rose streaking to the surface and were combed
To consistent sheens. On the sea's bed
Became inured to pressure, that laid rings
On him, flake pressed down upon flake.
Or in temporary release, uplifted,
Things outside this world, the seven stars,
Aurora borealis, imprinted
Blue flickering strands on his charmed loins.
Learnt to be composite, humped with embedded stones,
Petriified wood, animal skeleton, sand.

Was rock. Only, always,
At the base of his throat,
Like a bubble in purple lava
Rolling, horrible,
Without escape, his pulse.

BOLT

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