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Poems

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Poems

Abstract

Promised Land, Go home and do not sleep, Women, trespassing in a garden

Kelwyn Sole

PROMISED LAND

Johannesburg dingy overcoat wearing
four million faces, chewing its gum of acid rain
gritting the taste of steel with stone jowls
winking sly glass eyes each frosty dawn
a world fingered by electricity inhabited

by men who say 'If 30 people
want to live in one room
they have the right to do so'
children settling like birds
among the dark, slow minds of father-mothers
they come to love who serve ancestral masters
brains sucked dry as dusty lemons each summer
diseased tongues flaring from the books
scholars burn to please anti-intellectuals

our promised land

poverty giving the rich work to do
as they gather round and discuss the poor
where only banks laugh all the way to the bank
a few neurotic chickens and a leg-lifting dog
the empty plate of the sun drifting
behind the clouds' deceptive tablecloths
children who remember their own funerals
while still buried in their mothers' bodies
and dance at others'
we have changed our blood for petrol
the easier to catch fire
in the half-life of insecure shadows
our ritual tongues must burn

our promised land

pompous figures mouthing phrases continue
to erect themselves on podiums and wave

fingers of moral righteousness
and brave men seek their own murders
to free themselves from any guilt
and the necklaced murderer caught by a mob
jigs as her enflamed body engulfs my words
to give them meaning
the poet ingenue claims the personal is political
it's all the same so what the hell
don't toy-toyi with my heart
it's your promised land

those hung dangling for the freedom they sought
'the wages of sin is death' but sin here always
the courage to say no except for the jobless
who have no option on the wages we others endure
the flaccid smell of breath on trains
squashed full swaying to work each morning
punished by gangs and signified by staffriders
blood of wet bulls roaring in the earth
where descriptions of the real world
startle our eyes away from
the vague words that live in newspapers
prophets who give us a new-found freedom
already as a slogan, an advert for our repeating days

while babies bloat into balloons for Christmas
and marzipan housewives pick 'n pay
and never give a damn
Pholoso and Thandi each night toboggan
down the screens of white-owned showbiz the same
time surreptitious cops prowl outside
inflated conquerors of children and tin shanties
ouma Engelbrechts priming their sons like bombs
of chagrin

for violence

all and sundry speaking in tongues and pamphlets
the baboons laugh at each others' foreheads
and only the eventual bodies are real
in their corruption

as the earth under our feet festers
with its recent history

our promised land our promised land

2

I live in a country where the hunters
are wounded by their own smell
I live in a country where the dead
give birth to their own mothers
I live in a country whose heroes
deliquesce into mirages

will this be our promised land?

and search for my soul
in a night that covers all with fog,
with surrender, with bullets, with bodies
strewn into question marks.

Will this be my promised land?

As I age, tyranny does not.
As I grow shrill, killers whisper
placating words of syrup
in this new age of media hope
as I hope, hope burns

3

Now that the spirit of glasnost
reaches out through the tv screens
and we see the crowds in Berlin and in
Moscow marching, millions strong,
and freedom has ceased to be a swearword
and our own red flags appear
but our hope of people's power's lost to us
now is the time

to think.

Now we are told by social Projection Expert & Son
resplendent in their three-piece lives
that communism can never work,
that the deal that we make with each other
despite our 'different cultures'
must hold fast the sanctity of private property
and the four nations drown the working-class
and the road of the town house and the Mazda

leads to the palace of national reconciliation:

now is the time

to think.

Now that some activists more concerned
with overseas tours and solidarity funding
are seen at fashionable discotheques
now that boycotts of beer instituted by strikers
fail as the country scabs in its collective thirst
now that summer saunters out of hiding
out of skies long resistant to rain and thunder:
now is the time

to think

in this fog this anger of heroes
asking us for a vision so they can die

now that it is possible
to support the workers' struggle from
the command tent of a miss cassidy suit
as we change molotov to idasa cocktails

now

that we are a breeding ground for thieves
soothed by the perfumed rhetoric of priests
from the going down of our oppression
until the rising thereof
now that we do not know or remember
what has happened to us

fascinated, appalled how ugly we are
and always have been, distracted by commerce
as we edge closer to our edge to celebrate
our new nation in its emperor's
new clothes

now is the time to think

truth, an immense star,
scratching like cottonwool, that
which we die to avoid:

now is the time
now is the time

2

I stand behind blade wire always
peering at the plain
stretching a yawn of yellow gums
to where in the distance

a donga slobbers with its tongue

a path there where my legs
will one day take me swaggering

to loll in hopeful grass
captured by a lone tree's shade
and fall asleep
to prophesy myself upright

and watch
the dusk at length catch fire
the horizons run towards me
on tremulous grey feet

3

I can't be seen
until I move

gripping the wall

to you outside
I wave my face
like a handkerchief

4

Tear down the fences:
where they come from:
speak, dance, what you will
who now

like I live
in our ruler's dead fantasies

till we wake that final morning

to find prisoners forgotten
clawing up from out the soil
the graves they suffocate beneath,

parting the wire strand by strand,

through walls becoming dust
becoming water

shedding their homelands the skin
of their fathers' orthodoxies,

awoken to move forward
without speech
to no future that I know

5

Until then
I'll stay here.

I have those eyes
no one tries to remember.

A mouth ready
open

for portents
only the dead can still recall.

WOMAN, TRESPASSING IN A GARDEN

During the week it's empty mostly
except for the hulking shadow
of the gardener, paid (poorly)
hourly, once every Tuesday,
steering his definitions
between hedge and flower bed
with bucket and secateurs.

As soon as he's gone

without fail

a thin form
lurches up the road
stinking of oil and rubber
in her knitted purple earcap
past the sonority of machismo brakes
with a faded crimpoline dress
flapping much too large

picks her way carefully
through the tangled wire fence
as the wind plays with her hem
the way a dog would worry
a tattered toy, to show
her red and bloated legs
to the nobody who might be interested:

her ritual is the same

collapsing on the grass
luxuriously drunk to sleep it off,
she dreams she is in a garden
with flowers shouting a cerise-white
around her

then wakes
to find her dream is real.

Her face remains composed. She
sits with eyes uplifted
to the warmth and the mountain
ridged and runnelled as a crust

