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Poems

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Poems

Abstract

THE HUNGER STRIKER, AFTER LIFE

Andries Walter Oliphant

THE HUNGER STRIKER

I hear my voice like the sombre rattle
of a diviner's bones:
After a life of eating porridge
with my hands from a dixie
I dream of waking up at home.

I sit at a table with a knife and fork.
The earth's edible crust
steaming in my porcelain plate.
I drink the sky distilled from a glass.
There is happiness the size of freedom in my cup.

But then I hear the stout voices of men in shorts
washing tin plates up.
The house in which I left a wife and child
is now deserted
and infested with rats and mice.

I go into the street and come across myself
shackled in leg irons
digging a hole in the sidewalk
big enough to hold my shrinking body.
The spade I was given has become an axe.

The baker from my childhood is in his doorway
with flour on his hands.
He speaks and I see
roasted corn spill from his mouth
like a praise poem to labour and productivity.

A girl passes on a bike and waves at me.
It looks like my daughter
in the clothes of my wife.
I cannot free my hands from the axe to wave back.
I try to raise my leg but the irons restrain me.

My neighbour passes in an empty bus.
Through a broken window
he shouts at me:
The earth is full of yellow bones
which you must dig up!

I laugh like one immersed in life's conviviality
amid table cloths and serviettes.
Amid the repertoire of knives and forks,
the bright taste of pain
strikes me like a sharpened axe.

AFTER LIFE

In memory of my father

In the month of your star
the sky teems
with barbels, carp, yellowtail and snoek.
On the banks of the Blesbok
you cast a line.
I cast a line at Dwesa from the rocks.
I see the split cane and the conoflex bend.

Late afternoon my car drones
through the rain.
I drive through the city
with the image of your catch
and our laughter
to the fire in your bed.

The gown they dressed you in
mimics the colours
of my infancy: yellow, blue and red
rectangles on a birthday shirt.
Your hands with which you speak
refer to udders round with milk.

And the truck you drove laden with pumpkins,
tomatoes, carrots, beetroot
and the fruit that kept me out

of other people's orchards.
 When your land was taken
 your right to live was confiscated.

How far did you cycle through that night?
 With brown bread and pilchards
 you kept us all alive.
 While I made wire cars
 with fish tails
 which nobody would buy.

I came with a booth full of memories
 swimming through my head like fish.
 The rain was at the window
 beating out a message which I could not read.
 You said it was your mother, the midwife
 and left me with your taciturn hat and pipe.