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Poems

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Poems

Abstract

AMAKURA, THE NATIVE OF QUESTIONS, A POEM AT BARAMANNI, THE PALMS IN LE REPENTIR, CHILD'S PLAY, STREET ARAB, PENELOPE, POEM (for Mervyn Morris)

Mark McWatt

AMAKURA

Spokes of dusty light
descended from a hub above the trees
and pierced the black skin
of the river. Twin engines
of wheel and water
created an interior space
where memory now blooms
like the smell of time
in long-shut rooms.

Blue butterflies stitched the rare sunlight
to the jealous gloom of the overhanging trees
that shaped your womb of silence:
thus visual simplicities
constitute the reality
of rivers one must live by...
the way all of life, sometimes,
is reflected in an orchid – or an eye.

Men, like vivid butterflies, must
end by losing themselves
in the density of thought that surrounds you,
like those men in the beginning
(of my time, not yours) whose crude oaths
broke your silence, not your spirit,
as they searched in vain
your dark veins
for signs of Eldorado.

Yet it can not be true
to speak of silence and of you
in that same breath that stalks
the surface of your dream, like a spider...
I have only to think
of Amakura, and your distant vowels
enter my soul (inter

my soul) – a cold seepage
 from an old, old world – and help shape
 my life-sentence: ever
 to be apart
 from your sacred sibilance
 and the language of my heart.

THE NATIVE OF QUESTIONS

Mist on the morning river
 summons a spirit of questioning
 like the dawn of revolution,
 as your paddle cuts water and space
 like a knife of cold laughter
 opening a vein of memory.

What place is this
 whose shape the mist erases?
 Can it ever be sculpted again
 into the clarity of home?

What drums – no, what wings
 are beating? And how can bird fly
 to a perch no eye can see? – unless
 the world's weave is being unravelled
 just for me.

What fire insinuates
 its damp smoke into the mist?
 Or is it all smoke?
 Is the world's flesh burning?

O God! O Heracleitus!
 What can bone wrapped in smoke aspire to?
 And who asks these questions?
 – Is it I? Or you?

Later, when you look
 for the native of questions
 you find he has already become the answer
 to a riddle that is irrelevant...

as the bright dog of sunlight
tears the morning mist
at the fiery brink of the waterfall:
your final comic twist.

A POEM AT BARAMANNI

In the resthouse at Baramanni
I kept the Tilley lamp
hissing half the night,
trying to write
my poem.
But the light
only gave a million insects
excuse for a rowdy fete;
and during their loud,
instrumental hum
not a line,
not a word would come.

When I tucked myself,
deaf/eated,
into the mosquito net,
its white enclosure mocked me
like the white, empty pages on the desk.

The river next morning
was that inspired page
I had sought to write:
A stark rendering of trees and sky,
the startling image of a bird
leaving a light, alliterative ripple
in shallows near the tall grass;
the nice parallelism of a dragon-fly
mating its own image on the river's glass.

That page, unblotted by morning mist,
was perfectly legible in the young sunshine;
and when the soft splash of a mangrove seed
initialled its near margin

with a flourish, I was no longer blind
to the happy truth
that none of the world's poems
(or that all of them)
are mine.

THE PALMS IN LE REPENTIR

The magnificent palms
in Le Repentir
strut beside the narrow bridge of life,
channelling a city
through the quiet corner of its dead.
Their shadows lengthen over tombs
in the evening.
At night they become the spirits
of those buried there;
our long dead fathers, standing in line
as men here have always stood,
waiting. And the women,
they too are dredged nightly
from the river beds of memory
to flaunt their style
in the impenetrable shade of the palms:
fragile in lace, or massive
in the sackcloth of my conscience –
mothers, all of them,
their endless commandments
now leaking through the fissures of their flesh
into the swamp.

In the morning all is peace
as the palms rock their heads
of sungilt leaves and mock
the fears of life and death
that wring me to repentance:
they have no such cares
as they rejoice in ecstasies of breeze
and morning dew at their planted feet,

and are drunk, drunk deep of the seas
of purest sky-blue
- those great sentinel trees
of my memory.

CHILD'S PLAY

Across the furnace of the sea
there is a land
where we could change our name
with every season.

As brother I would take your hand
in the bright bloom of spring;

and it would be the same
with summer's long days:
as a lover
you could drink my wine.

As my wetnurse in the coldest nights
you could break my body
with any stroke of genius.

There is even a season
when you would own my mind,
locked in its shell of bone
apart from reason;

and you the bride yet
of all mankind.

Such are the unnatural flowers
of a mental rhyme;
but is reality a different land,
a different time?

STREET ARAB

How is the little lover taught
the secrets of an unknown art?
Mummy sends him to the shop
to buy the fish and penny-bread
and, returning idle through the desert,
He stumbles into a lost corral,
and must now tell
of Arab nights after:
in the pastures
where the horses of the moon
feed and gallop away, away...
far (for a hungry child like him)
far, far too soon.
The sailing crescent half reveals
its fields of tangled limbs
and each street-arab comes to know
(secretly) that horses are his kings.

PENELOPE

As a young schoolboy
I always thought
of Penelope as a spider:
all that business of making
and unmaking the 'web'
which – I also thought –
was a sticky trap for the suitors.

Now I know differently:
Penelope threatens whenever I journey;
she becomes as real as any wife
left at home, working the loom
that woofs the filaments of my life
with her warped duties
– mother, stern preserver,
calm centre of all strife.

And now I know the web
is spun for me – a net
(baited with imaginary suitors)
to haul me home,
full of presents and regret
for having left Telemachus,
Penelope.... And yet,
sometimes I think it's all a trick
to wish me away again,
to emphasize my wrong
so that each minor dereliction
might live forever
in her immortal web of song.

POEM
(for Mervyn Morris)

Once, in a strange land,
Something glittered as I hurried by
And I stooped and poked about the sand,
Not thinking 'gold' or 'jewel'
But indulging an old susceptibility to light:

Something glittered
And I had to find the facet
that had fed my eye.

It turned out to be a stone
Ordinary, I thought at first, but worth keeping.
After an age in the soft oblivion of a pocket
It flashed like a sudden memory
Among keys and copper;
And each time since
I have seen a new dazzle
Until I cannot believe the polish,
The perfection of the thing.

It turned out to be a poem
And its light enriches me
(In all the strange lands where I live)
Far beyond the finite wealth of gold.