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Poems

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Poems

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From Nudes: A Sequence of 14 Free-verse Sonnets

Mark O'Connor

THE RAINBOW SERPENT

(A sequence of poems on Hinchinbrook Island, designed to accompany a photographic exhibition by Jeremy Carew-Reid.)

I. TCH'MALA

His mass is mountains. Speed snails the wind.
Roar is elder brother of the sea's blood-purr.
His rumble from Mission Beach down past Murdering Point
is a palm's back-sway, a taipan's long hiss.

His trails are the endless oncomings of mist
low into the water-choked valleys. His mirror
the mountain slopes shiny with rain. His cave
of retreat is dry season's maker; his
accompanist, the wilful drub of rain that greets
the giant-toad's rasping heat-cry.

Though he break the good trees with the wind of his tail,
through him are all hatchlings and fruit. Grass-renewer,
his sperm are the eels that fall from Heaven. He re-stocks
the island, fills the rock-holes above 'falls. Through him
what survives is reborn in water.

His aftersign is the bridge of beauty
glimpsed through shifting cloud.

His faithful are buried in hills and settlements.

* * *

TCH'MALA: The Rainbow Serpent. A monsoonal deity of North
Australian aboriginal mythology.

Randolph Stow
alias
Mikiel tal-Awstralija

THREE MALTESE POEMS

PLAYING WITH MY CORONET

'Mike, Carmelo did not forget you and forget when you stay playing on my steps with your coronet and with the acorion of his mouth'.

Letter from a Maltese farmer's wife

'Your coronet', she would say, and meant by that recorder, then in vogue with English schoolgirls. Through dove-blue dusks, out on the razzett roof, my fingers limped to enchant the empty valley. For Pan, one felt, had not been always dead, and flutes perhaps were heard at $\text{H}\ddot{\text{a}}\text{g}\ddot{\text{a}}\text{r}$ $\text{Q}\ddot{\text{im}}$.

The harmonica in her man's enormous fists shone like a little fish. We played duets intolerably, with joy. And San Ġużepp (Saint Joe the Worker, bearded and be-jeaned) fetched oils and canvas out to set us down: 'Peasant and Poet, Clowning After Wine'.

I write for you, Vittur, though you won't hear and Carmelo hasn't ever known my language, thinking of lamplit meals, when Pastard came

with a sailor's yarn, or to wrestle Ġużepp Ħaddiem.
And of Xidi, with his reliably daft non-news.
And of MALTA TIBKI LILL-PAPA on your door.

Remembering wine-dark dreams in the midday shade
under the weird green asps of the ħarrub,
and insomniac nights of white and distant silver
when the valley seemed agape for the mercury sea.
And the taste of capers fresh from crannied walls
and smell of wiza, that scent that breaks my heart.

The Turks of time have scarred our ramparts now,
but pasts endure. Let us, for us, endure,
stubborn as Malta, stubborn as Mnajdra
– stubborn, Maltin, as you.

razzett: small flat-roofed Maltese farmhouse

Ħaġar Qim and Mnajdra: megalithic temples in Malta

San Ġużepp Ħaddiem: St. Joseph the Worker, patron of labour

Malta tibki lill-Papa: 'Malta mourns the Pope' (John XXIII)

ħarrub: the carob tree

wiza: lemon-scented verbena (*erba Luisa*)

Maltin: the Maltese people

ALOF DE VIGNACOURT SITS FOR HIS PORTRAIT

Malta's Grand Master slightly looks aside,
his pouched eyes shrewd, his mouth, made to command,
not robbed of humour. With that dangerous gaze
that eats him, he can cope. He knows such men.

They will not part, these two; the lord of knights
glancing (could it be scornfully?) forever
away from what one knows is at one's back:
the perilous black stare of Caravaggio.

Not part, nor ever leave this island quite
which brought them for one endless hour together.
How well they chose; how well they march in step
down centuries, each with his glint of steel.

I saw one evening in a knightly house
the silver galley of de Vignacourt
row down the table, motionlessly thrusting
towards faces that were his, and sipped their wine.

As for the other, he haunts village bars.
His voice breaks out; one scents that Maltese danger:
the flashing knife, the blow, astonishment
– and then the dark of Caravaggio's eye.

SIMPLICITIES OF SUMMER

My peace is in this: that vineleaves should shower green glass
on the amphitheatre of orchards whose stage is the sea
and the breeze blow sharp, with thyme from the darkening bluff
where all day you have tramped or lain, till this trace-light came.

My peace is in this: that each nightfall must bring you back,
and the lamplight, under my eyes, die warm on your face,
that your voice must be the last sound I hear before sleeping,
and your breath, asleep, be what I hear if I wake.

My peace and my hope are in this: that giving should be
in the gift of the proud and poor; that the swimmer's power
and potencies of summer, through one stem,
blend, as we ripen, apart on two boughs of noon.

Acknowledgements:

'Simplicities of Summer' appeared first of all in *The Sydney Morning Herald* and 'Alof de Vignacourt' in *The Age*.

Felix Mathali

WRITE. . .

And a voice said to me
'Write,
write in the sands
in which we cavorted
clothed in banana leaves
and the breath of the lake
write in the sands
on which we dreamt dreams
and saw visions
write
that they may also
be blessed who suffer
the lashes of a prison
without walls
who groan at the tread
of jackboots without faces
Write that they may be
comforted. . .
and a voice said to
me
'Write,
write on the sands on which
we cavorted
Clothed in the sands
themselves
And the breath of the lake
Write and then rub

Yes rub and erase all
 this in the waters
of the lake
because they were here
 before
they were here before
 these waters
they were here
before archives began
and the denigration
 our life
write and then erase
 all this
in the waters of the lake
before historians disturb
 what was
while inventing what
 was not'
and a voice said to
 me
'Write. . .'

Jack Mapanje

KABULA CURIO-SHOP

Black wood between carefully bowed legs
– the eyes red over bellows and smoke
the sharpening of axes, adzes, carvers,
the chopping, the whittling and such
carving such scooping and scooping
then the sandpapering and smoothing;

Black wood between carefully bowed legs
– such energy release and the price
bargained away; would you imagine
now a broken symbol thrown careless
in the nook of a curio-shop: a lioness
broken legs, broken neck, broken udder?

REQUIEM

I still remember the songs
The happy songs by the chaperons
Of our village in the middle of the night:
The child is born God bless him,
The child is here Spirits spare him!
And the ululations confirmed
A sure-footed birth
As the village blazed in bonfires,

Dust-bin drums carelessly talking.
How the mother giggled digging up
The child from an anthill!
Mother told us at the fireside.
And if there was blood
In the breaking of the cord,
They must have made sure to hide it.
For I saw, I felt, I smelt nothing
But the happiness of men and women
Reeling to taut drums
Roaring in jubilation of your birth, Son.

Nissim Ezekiel

FROM NUDES: A SEQUENCE OF 14 FREE-VERSE SONNETS

9.

Hills, valleys, swelling river-banks,
all those landscape images;
praise of breasts and buttocks
seen as fruit, thighs as tree-trunks;
flower, moon, fire, bird
of desire, fish of sex
remotely tell a small
fragmented part of the story.

I see you here, stretched out,
not as complex pulls and tensions,
muscle, bone, skin, resilience
but as person, always
human in your naked
unposed poses, resisting form.

10.

I like this little poem, she said,
when did you write it?

My only haiku, that went:
*Unasked, as the day
declined, she brought out her small
breasts, to be caressed.*
I'm glad you like it,
smiling weakly, intrigued.
What exactly is a haiku?
And when I told her,
she repeated, I like it.
*Unasked, as the day
declined, she brought out her full
breasts, to be caressed.*

YASMINE GOONERATNE
