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Poems

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Poems

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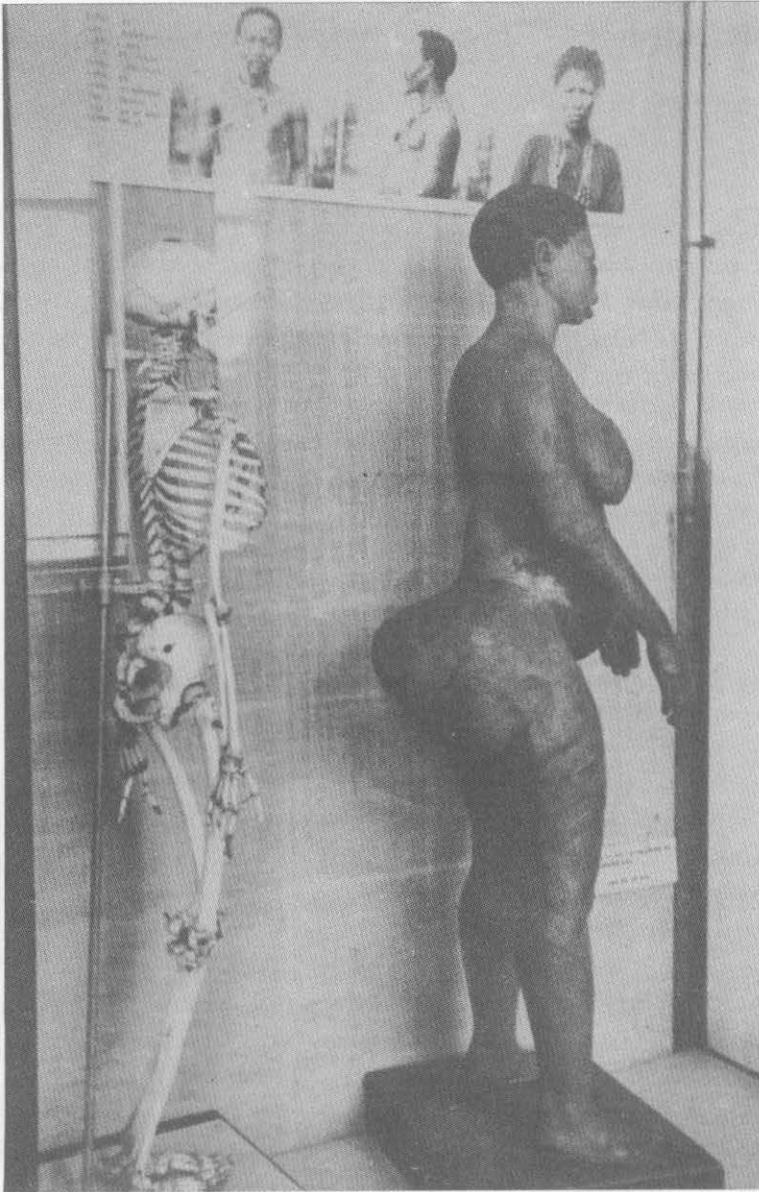
Stephen Gray

HOTTENTOT VENUS

My name is Saartjie Baartman and I come from Kat Rivier
they called me the Hottentot Venus
they rang up the curtains on a classy peepshow two pennies
two pennies in the slot and I'd wind up
shift a fan and roll my rolypoly bum
and rock the capitals of Europe into mirth
I was a special voluptuary a squealing passion
they had never seen anything like it before
Little Sarah twenty six born on the vlei past Grahamstown
bought for a song and a clap of the hands
a speculative sketch come to life a curiosity
of natural science weighed measured
exported on show two pennies two pennies
in the Gallery of Man I am unique
I am lonely now I always was out here
my deathbed a New Year's eve
a salon couch girdled with reporters and I turned
my complexion to the wall and dreamed
of a knife cutting deep in a springbok's hide
and they woke me with brandy for smelling salts
and I wouldn't wake again in their august company
my soul creeps under cairns where
wayside travellers throw another stone in my memory
two pennies two pennies dropped on my eyes
they laid me in state in my crinoline robe
my hands folded coyly as they always were
and I let them bury my body so celebrated so sensational
they could never do while I was alive
what they wanted to do sink me in wax and decant my brain
and put me in a case in the Museum of Man

I stare out at the Eiffel Tower my hands covering
my vaginal flaps my own anomaly
the kneebone connected to the thighbone connected to
the hipbone connected to the spine and the skull
they mounted me without beads or skins or quivers
Saartjie Baartman is my name and I know
my place I know my rights I put down my foot
and the Tuileries Gardens shake I put down
my foot and the Seine changes course I put
down my foot and the globe turns upside down
I rattle my handful of bones and the dead arise.

Saartjie Baartman was bought in 1810 by an English dealer and exported from Caffraria to the fun fairs and circuses of Europe, as an exhibit, the first of many. Billed as the Hottentot Venus the diminutive Saartjie rocked the cartoonists of Britain with her steatopygous buttocks not into idle sympathy but into gross lampoons. In Paris her anomalous figure unchained a series not of love songs but of musical grotesqueries *à la Hottentot*. She died not of adulation but of alcoholic poisoning on New Year's Eve, 1816. One notes her ultimate debasement: instead of being accorded the rights of burial, like an animal she was destined to take her place in the Museum of Man. In the Palais du Chaillot where to this day her rigid skeleton and her decanted brain stare out at the Eiffel Tower, symbol of the age of steel and of progress which was to dispossess her people. This note is taken from Stephen Gray, *Southern African Literature: an Introduction*.



Saartjie Baartman: in the Museum of Man in Paris

Jayanta Mahapatra

THE THIRTEENTH YEAR OF MY DAUGHTER

A little longing
like a piece of disturbed sleep back of her mind
scurrying away the echoes of the startled bees

Now she chases a butterfly
when the whole of her secret sleep spills
the waiting tender voices into the season's honey

BEYOND THE HIMALAYAN RANGES

When darkness falls the stones come closer
toward us, both the written and the unwritten,
and our hearts are thin, with nothing behind,
like facades intact in a movie set
that sway with only blue sky on either side.

Darkness that comes, revealing nothing else;
coming through the clenched landscapes of China
and through the frozen perimeters of Siberian stone,
flying unnoticed with millions of migratory birds
with the shadows of sheathed atoms in their beaks.

Darkness whose meaning escapes our children:
of the leper's mutilated limb that becomes gesture,
of ideology whose words are redeemers of the flesh.
Somewhere, beyond the high Himalayan ranges,
a lost man wears his like a sleep
which goes far down the mind where the red stones stand.
There is no movement in the sky; it is blank
as his face. Only the unseen wings in the air
keep dragging their shadows like nets on the snow.

Zulfikar Ghose

NOTES TOWARDS A NATURE POEM

The object to be described is there, of course: one sees it whether it's the pot of geraniums beside which the cat is asleep, in the back garden, or the yellow and black swallow-tailed butterfly unable to abandon the honeysuckle, which it leaves in a repeated rehearsal of withdrawal only to come back to in a renewed fervour of desire; or it could be there in the imagination, that image of last summer which has stayed in the mind like a clichéd photograph of nature ... it could be one of many with birds, trees, flowers etc. There's no real problem since it's all there and one has not lost the capacity to look.

And yet it's become impossible to stick to a simple point of descriptive certainty, giving shapes their colour and weight: one can't avoid wondering about the subtler textures and the elusive tones, it's not just the bright orange of the marigold petals, it's also the tiny crescent of shade which is nearly black but not really black which each petal makes upon the one below it which has to be included if the description is not to be merely a label.

The felicitous epithet or the inspired metaphor are of no help; unless diversion can lead to a return of focus as when listening to a familiar music the mind wanders and a more deliberate attention makes us hear a phrase we'd missed in earlier listenings.

The desire to catch the thing itself in a simple phrase persists although we know it can't be done, it's like wanting to be that age again when we didn't drink or smoke, so that we could see the world more clearly, or like believing that an intenser sexual experience is possible than what we've known, it's an anxiety for a complete happiness that we're convinced can somehow still be ours. Or a nostalgia, like parading thirty years later in the uniform one wore in Normandy and remembering some glory attached to the event while forgetting the rain, the mud, the fear of death.

There's the creative confusion that comes from a knowledge of the other arts which always seem simpler and more uncluttered by peripheral considerations. One would like the extraordinary rhythm of Webern, for example, or be able to cover a canvas, so to speak, with a solid dark green and be convinced that one has caught a meadow in late evening on a summer's day in Gloucestershire, in July when the hawthorn no longer distracts with its white and pink.

This afternoon the clouds lifted;
the sky was an indescribable blue.

E.G.

For example, the way the swallow-tailed wings of the butterfly open and close with the light throwing a diagonal shadow across the flowering bush in late autumn when the last flowers are weak, stunted and faded, or the way a migrating bird's feathers catch and diffuse the reddish glow of the sun falling towards the horizon: one thing or another is changing position, adjusting itself to warmth or seeking some new source

of nourishment and in the process
unintentionally showing itself in a new light.
But it's not just the instinct for survival in
the late harsh weather or any other persuasion
which involves one in that complex choreography
that, suddenly realizing the seemingly impossible
measure in which the body's extreme contortion
appears precisely natural although it exceeds
the normal limits of tension, brings about

a phenomenal change. The butterfly, for example,
floating in the air just out of reach
of the cat waiting to spring on it engages
one in a double apprehension, the quiet moment
is so charged with drama. The way the wings fold
and unfold, one sees only a throbbing softness of
yellow and black against the reddening autumn leaves,
but a slight descent, provoking the cat to press into the ground
in readiness for its murderous leap, causes the colours

to tremble in a vivid exasperation.
The unfamiliar migrating bird, so distinct
in the autumn light, makes one re-consider
the assumptions held during the summer when
the cardinals, blue-jays and mocking-birds
raised their particular but abstract noise among
the thick leaves. There was, sometimes at sunset,
the occasional song of one which distracted the ear,
but now, this bird, whose form one cannot identify,

rising up in the fresh norther which will take
it far into Mexico, suddenly reveals, as the light
touches its wings from below, that at the point
where perspectives converge is a radiance and
the thing departing, not wanting to be where it is,
gathers about its body a dramatic exuberance,
leaving to us a memory of its flight, the slight twitch
of its wings as they hit the current going south,
discovering there a liberating turbulence.

THE DRAGONFLY IN THE SUN

The afternoon's light is caught
in the dragonfly's wings where
transparency permits no reflections
and yet will not give free passage
to the sun, preserving its surface
brightness of delicate webbing
as a fragile brilliance of gleaming
points which make the wings nearly
invisible and the diagonal markings appear
as tiny irradiations of very faint
pink and blue when the dragonfly
darts up against the sun as if it
plucked colours from the air
and immediately discarded them:
this is the moment of intensity,
of the afternoon's light gathering
in the garden in a brief flickering
of a dragonfly's wings just above
the red blossoms of the pomegranate.

Cyril Dabydeen

THE KING HAS NO CLOTHES

Limp and bedraggled he walks
through the day
without worry or work-troubled

he struts out with a halloo
into the hearts of trees
entering the nest-secrets
of a bramble life

telling the world of the coming
to an end of all things
only the ground swirls
beneath his squirrel-feet

and the birds about-and-about
pick up the refrain
with a crackle-and-crackle

in his woodpecker's ears
he takes note from a bark-edge
being firm

he begins with
a turn-around
and all is well
until judgement comes

his eyes peel open an apocalypse
he rides out a horseman
into the dark-and-darkness world
of the disappearing horizon.

ALL THE ELEMENTS

In this variegated landscape
my life turns topsy-turvy.
I notice the sun once again
in its chameolonic phase

I quickly ask for respite
I am arid in body's heat
I wait for the downpour at my sides

I drip under a tarpaulin
I bend and quiver
from the cambium-chambers of my heart

A growl and hiss. I wait with dim frenzy.
I listen to the buzz in the fevered shape
of night. I am the dried pelt —

it is this cave that I fear most.
I am still in the hinterland,

sun at my side, rain my skin
tongue slaked

all rampant beginnings.

HOW TO SAVE A LIFE

This is the night when
the lungs are intact
the heart is no longer
in frenzy. Bones do not
walk out by themselves

Together we meander along
the corridor of the skin
make designs all across
the body

I offer you solace
with words carved
entrails coiled in.
You give me a tame
life in exchange

I listen at the navel
for the beasts that still
rage, that keep knocking

against flesh

PARTNERSHIP

I continue to give you arms & legs.
Your body holds out against dismemberment.
In the world of the constant grimace, I offer
bandages without so much as an apology.

We continue our old game, looking on
from shadow sockets, still exchanging
lungs & hearts.

I put my trophies in a bag
and sling it across my shoulder

Time for the wandering again.
I leave you behind with a handful of roses.
Not long after you follow —
stretching out false limbs
with octopus-arms to embrace me.

I keep looking back, waiting
for the sun to enter. Your tentacles
are still all around me; I am twisted,
confined —

about to disappear from life altogether.
Your laughter continues to keep my bare bones
firmly on the ground. I hear distantly
the thunder-clap of another disaster.