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Poems

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Poems

Abstract

A JAV ANFSE PIETA

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THE WATER HOLE

GALAHAD'S MONDAY MORNING

RAINBOW

TOTAL ECLIPSE

Authors

Mark Oconnor, Michael Sharkey, Agnes Sam, Stephen Watson, Ian Stephen, Sam Maynard, Tony Cosier, Brian Walker, John Agard, and Nora Vagi Brash

Mark O'Connor

A JAVANESE PIETA

I

*In fumes the girl-mother squats,
newest son on lap, hawking
hot bottles of 7-Up
to incurious tourists.*

Cameras snatch for that face which the street
has battered to heavy-lidded peace. She is
expert in heat, dirt, hunger, the arts
of drinking and dunging in public
canals; hides from rain under blue plastic
pieces; knows birth-pangs and suckling
joys, her and her son, *belum orang*. *

**belum orang*: Indonesian phrase for a child, lit. 'not yet a person'.

Lacking hope she lacks fear.
Hatred subtracts; sufficiency
calculates; misery
breed.

Only Nature, say her eyes,
cruel as tigers.

II

What will your child do?
At the going down of the sun
and in the morning
we pray to forget.

So begin, small boy
in hunger to gnaw your mother;
beautiful sad-eyed boy who may
be already past saving;
whose mother already
swells once more.

I would offer her help
and she betrays me
from love to logistics.

III

Yours, mother,
the face nations fear in the night;
the unstoppable tender machine!
For you missiles are launched.
You have never been blamed. You will
scream your complaint in atrocity photos.

So slowly, politely, I find this small coin
take up your gift of tepid gassy water, proffer
this sponge to sustain your pain
with a coward's vacillation.

Michael Sharkey

SUNDAY: WAITAKERE

Morning and two parakeets
walk puriri boughs
and sip the flowers

letting petals fall; above
the rise, a hawk is doing rounds
against a pewter coloured sky

and in the house
where yeast is working in the flour
furry bees hang over wine.

THOUGHTS ON WALKING THROUGH A NORTHERN HIGH- LANDS TOWN

In my thirty-sixth year,
many friends have vanished.
Living in the eighties
isn't meant to be a breeze.
Even the Prime Minister is looking sketchy now.
And what am I?
a mass of energies
accreting small-time honours in the provinces,
or load of earth that bends toward the soil?

Time fleets,
in marble slabs arrayed up on the hill;
clouds pass, a cricket match continues
and cicadas sing in reeds
along the creek.

Each day a little rain,
a little shine and wind;
each day a little pain,
another day behind;

clouds pass, a letter comes,
a friend is far away.

Nights are long,
the cool wind's in my hair
that's turning grey;
in the northern graveyard gate,
a brown snake lies in sun,
and bluebell petals flutter down
where ants and spiders run;

down behind the offices,
the evening drunks appear,
walking through the empty plaza
underneath the clock:
hands point on every side
a different time of night,
and children stand
outside the pizza bar
in neon light.

The fretted ancient hostleries
pull down their blinds
and dim their lights at last,
and publicans collect the glasses
while late trucks roll past.
In parks the willow trees are budding;
eucalypt's in bloom,
and all of this ghost-city
falls asleep below the moon.

Agnes Sam

'WHAT PASSING BELLS'...*

The boy galloped.
Small, dark and wiry, he galloped.
On the pavement
To the corner
A wide arc
Down to his father
Back again.
Gallopig furiously.
Elbows flapping
Tongue clucking
In the sunshine
To the corner
Down to his father
Back again.
Moving rhythmically.
His rhythm infectious.
The distance decreasing as his father neared the intersection.
They held hands and waited.

Once across he galloped ahead —

ya can't come with
ya can't come with

Then turned the corner.

The little girl disentangled her fingers.
Her expression anxious she glanced up at the man for approval before
she dashed after the boy
Her hair and her short skirt billowing around her.

The man followed unhurriedly
Now with a hand clasped around each ankle of the boy straddling his
shoulders.

We're going to the park, jal jal
We're going to the park, jal jal
Ya can't come with
Ya can't come with

The boy darted between the heavy brown gates that stood slightly ajar.
She hared after him.

The boy galloped
Looking back frequently
Laughing at her
On the narrow path crammed with little pebbles winding between the
areas of grass.
She stumbled after him
Crying out
Unable to catch up with him
On the narrow path bordered by two rows of even-sized white-washed
stones.

They crunched to a halt.

Is it our turn?
She shouted above the noise of children playing.
Wait!
He sounded adult.

They stepped forward warily
Onto the grass
Lush and green
Neatly kept with a precise uniformity
And meticulously
Weeded
From the clumps of flowers growing tall and stately on its borders.

Is it our turn?
She shrilled impatiently
Her attention fixed on brightly painted climbing frames
Shaped like space-ships and spiders

Swings, see-saws and slides alive with shrieking children.

Together they stepped

Wide-eyed

Up to the circle of short, stout poles that seemed to grow from the ground

And stood at the edging

Of thick, white rope that linked the poles to each other

Setting the play area apart from the park.

Come on!

She urged crossly tugging insistently at his wrist.

Wait!

He pulled back.

He was equally annoyed.

His eyes flashed from one end of the play area to the other.

A park attendant in navy-blue uniform walked by.

He wagged a playful finger at them.

They edged towards each other.

Her voice dropped to a disappointed whisper,

Isn't it our turn?

The boy put his finger to his lips:

Sh!

As the attendant marched out of sight he sprang to life,

Wowie! Look at 'em go!

I'm tired!

She announced flatly and turned away

Her cheeks puffed out sulkily.

He grabbed her arm,

He's gonna be sick! Looooooooooooook! On the roundabout!

She shook herself free,

I wanna go to Daddy.

What did I tell ya?

He shrieked.

Waah la! He's getting sick! What did I tell ya?

I'm tired

She sighed.

Then she began kicking the pebbles onto the grass at his feet
Pouting her lips sullenly
With each movement she made.

Then go back to Daddy
He retorted over his shoulder,
This is great, just great. Hey! Hey! What's happening? Why all the
screaming? Sissy!
He pointed sharply to a boy climbing backwards down the slide
Look at the great big sissy! Waah la!
Come with
She pleaded.
He ignored her.
His attention was elsewhere.

Old men and women all dressed in white clustered onto the green grass
on the other side of the pebbled path.

She placed herself squarely in front of him, moving her head with each
movement of his, so that she continually blocked his view.
He sighed heavily
Now what?
Did you have a turn?
They turned simultaneously towards the smart tap
Of wood on wood
Her question forgotten as the old men and women commenced their
game of bowls.

Ooooh.....look at 'em go. Swings are best, I tell ya. I love swings
best of all.
Swings make me sick!
And saying this she quickly turned her back on the play area
Lifted her short skirt with a flourish
And pushed out her bottom with an emphatic —
So there!

I can go higher than that! Higher! Higher!
He challenged with his hands cupped around his mouth.

A man walked along the path, formed his grease-proof bag into a hard
ball and aimed it at a 'Keep-Your-City-Clean' litterbin.

Did you go higher than that?

She asked him sweetly.

Hey? Did you? Did you go higher than that?

He replied with a shriek.

He's too scared to stand! Waah la!

Then he began clapping and chanting

Too scared to stand!

Too scared to stand!

Too scared to stand!

When'll't be our turn?

Higher! Higher! Higher!

When is it our turn?

Stand and swing! Stand! Higher! Higher! I can go higher!

How long must I wait then?

There was not much difference in their heights, but he cleverly slanted his head so that he appeared to be looking down at her and said with exasperation in his voice,

Dontcha know even?

He was shouting again

I can go higher than that! Higher! Higher!

How long did you wait then?

She leaned forward tilting her head

So that she could look into his face.

But when she saw that she had lost his attention once more

She angrily clapped her hands to her ears and screamed,

Daddeeeee!

So that the children stopped playing to look at her.

Agh, pipe down nonkie! When ya gonna grow up, hey?

The man walked up to them with the boy still straddling his shoulders.

She moved over to his side and put her hand trustingly in his.

The boy burst out excitedly,

Gosh Dad! You sure missed something!

How many times must I tell you?

He said, his voice evenly soft

Dont — watch — them!

The children skipped away

We're going to the park

We're going to the park

Ya can't come with

Ya can't come with.....

They raced on to the end of the park
Where it overlooked the lake
Where the two metal frames stood singularly alone
Dangling lengths of rusty chain
From which the wooden seats had been hacked when he had been a
child.

Ya can't come with
Ya can't come with
'Cause you're afraid of the dark. Ja!
Ja!

*'What passing bells'... is the opening line from Wilfred Owen's 'Anthem for Doomed Youth'. Agnes Sam's poem which is published in this issue is the prologue to a longer poem.

Stephen Watson

YEARS

I

In those years
I loved the table-land;
I loved, above all,
the mountain skyline
of my city, Cape Town,
and the pines
like ancient sentinels
along its western salient;
I came alive, if at all,
when I looked to the mountain,

when its African gentian
condensed into darkness
smooth as a dune at evening,
when its horizon withdrew
from the great, drawn sky,
and it was once more
the sole centre of a city
whose life, like mine,
knew none.

Siesta years:

pinetrees in the heat
wind always ploughing
the raw blue salt water,
the white cloud blowing
down the forehead
of the mountain...
and the silence
of the great, vacant
skies of those years,
child years,
in the amphitheatre
of southernmost Africa,
in an emptiness already
there like an enemy,
in the homes
unhousing all memory...

The homes
of my kind,
the white suburbs
like coastal resorts
in their off-season air
of colonial decay,
of collapsed deck-chairs,
rain-sodden strands
and trespassing dogs;
the home of days
dry as tea-leaves,
of nights like wash-
lines of wet socks;

a home prefiguring
the further years,
and a dry grief drying
as it tried
for the fertility of tears.

II

Rust in the sand
around a railway line,
sand threshed to dust
across a metalled road;
afternoons of wind,
kiln heat, homesickness;
landscapes of gravel,
khaki hectares, wattle,
gums frayed, men dwarfed
by mountains like sheet metal
and their own midget cries.

Years

rootless as this wind
amidst its foot-loose dust;
the land collapsing
till it had nothing left
to collapse into;
when all seemed falling
and had nothing left
to fall into;
of dust falling
through thin sky,
of thin lives falling
through the dust,
till time and again
nothing human remained,
only the mountain,
unbudgeable, bald, blank,
in its immobile blackening
in the heat-waves of the heat.

And no more
the orange-skin grain
of the African light,
but only its shadow,
ochre earth like old blood;
no longer the hinterland,
innocent, sheep-coloured;
no longer the sun
of adolescent Cape summers,
but the light, wind-blown,
broken to stone on the Island.

III

Years of repression
upon years of rebellion;
years of rebellion
upon years of repression...

Time of contradictions:
of servility in the well-manured suburbs
where the bloated hungered for ideas of
the soul;
of clamour in the locations
where their servants hungered for food;
in which, as before,
half-caste women went bearing
tin cans of cold water to shacks of tin
scrap;
in which, as before,
middle class matriarchs went burdened
in the hysterical styles of their
boredom;
in which, as always,
the white régime dispensed
dispensations
like a pharmacist, prospering and prodigal,
in the heavenly suburbs of the incurably
senile.

And I saw in all this,
in the grief of black women, scarcely able
to breathe,
in a woman's ankles so utterly collapsed —
saw in each image a premonition of war;
sought life and found death,
only these fragments, then the fragments
of fragments;
the pine-lands burnt out, the sun like
a stake,
living corpses bloated on beer and fat meat,
and lean brains grown loveless and hungry
for blood.

IV

Those were years
in which murder was often called
a 'strategic intercession',
in which rape was glossed as
a 'separate development'
in which history was called God, and god was called
History,
and no-one knew what to call man;
and many preferred silence,
the vegetal tongue of Cape autumn wind,
the symmetry of a sheltered pine;
preferred, with no shame,
the flint language of the starlight,
the eternal salt throat of the seas,
to that barbarous and murderous Babel
of men.

And the silence
spread everywhere, marooned like the heat,
like stones asleep on their shadows, and the
skylines asleep;
while the same heated passions produced
their hot air

like the massed keening of cats on heat;
while others uttered their cry till they
 did not know why,
spoke on and on of a fear, and art advertized
 its despair
at the helplessness of humanism
and the pointlessness of poetry.

V

Years
lived in the sun
as if under a stone;
of lie upon lie
quickenning the dead,
of life upon life
forfeiting its head;
and always the solitude
which was powerless,
which was prideless,
painful and preferable...

Those years,
years of my youth,
that once came alive
in the futile memory
of that futile love,
of the mountain blue
in each Cape darkfall,
I would forsake forever;
those were the years
which also are *these*,
now dead beyond memory,
beyond meaning,
dead in me forever,
these years
which are not ended.

1980-1981

Ian Stephen

WAS LIKE

That bird was like one nearer home
but its orange leg and dash were
far removed from muddy shades.
I knew no name to pin it down
so had to think of it and all
familiar foreign things, here
within an arc of aero-stop:
long-grassed ground, potato plot,
barbless fence repaired with
improvising bits of string.
All scheming cultivation in
to scarce green ground but gently
organised. You could progress
along a smiling medium way,
litterless but borderless,
to a playground's fence
made from packing cases
stained with purest orange pink,
more expressive than graffiti;
far removed from muddy shades.

TWO WINGS

I swear I liked this well:
rusting coloured roofs;
piers breaking water
in from crash of seas;
peopled headlands.

But then a turn of neck
across the narrow fuselage.

Glance went through to that
which caused words to stall:
surface or globe,
atmosphere or skies.

So now I doubt
my inward choice
of which way to look
if there was but one.

Sam Maynard

PHOTOGRAPHS

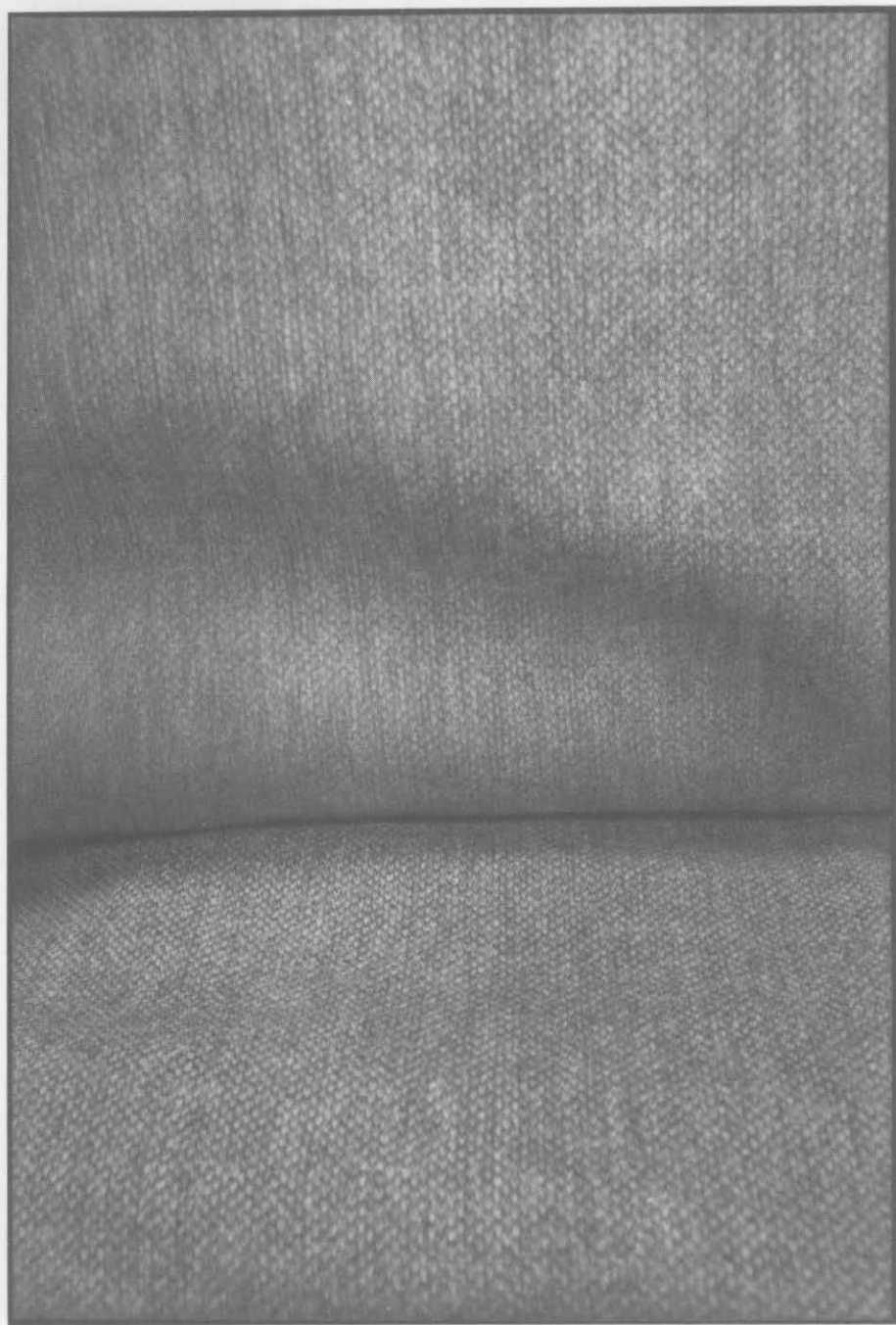


FATHOM OF TWEED

I sit before a moor of tweed;
a narrow gorge and fading ridge
in the treadled folds.

Two ends must be finished but
now I see neither, only
my fathom's reach of arms.

Though I seem to choose this task
there is tyranny in the
needed evenness of weave.



Tony Cosier

THE VERSE MASTER

The verse master, paragon of pedantry,
Neither wived nor daughtered has a heart
Beneath it all and this girl. Though the start
Of each hour with her has her, he

Often overlooks her 'til her straight blue eye
Spares an awkward moment and her voice
In answer lifts a lilt as choice
As ripple over pebble under clear cool sky

With the sun in it. Sometimes he quotes
A passage so few care about he looks
To where her curled fists prop her chin above her books
And almost smiles. Comforted most certainly, he notes,

Not even wondering how many more times
She will turn up a blonde head to him,
There are links more important than rhythm's,
Bonds more essential than rhyme's.

THE WATER HOLE

The force that drives the sun up drives the sun
To batter the red earth flat, crack its skin
And bake it. Not a bird is flying. Zebras

Gather herd by herd in dust. And stand.
Lions loll about the water hole.
A lion drinks. A lion sits in water.
Zebras gather and stand in herds and watch.
Male and female. Young. Their hides are parched
And red with dust. Some tremble. The smallest totter.
The stallions see all this. But the zebras do not approach.
They do not gather together to attack.
They are afraid of lions. Scorched earth congeals
To four horizons. They endure. They stand and wait
For lions in their time to feed upon.

Brian Walker

GALAHAD'S MONDAY MORNING

Waking unawake,
mind tapping along the floor
like a blind man's cane

Just out of focus
day clicking its Timex tongue
behind the ashtray

Mind massaged
by her gentle inner eyes
through the coffee steam

John Agard

RAINBOW

When you see
de rainbow
you know
God know
wha he doing —
one big smile
across the sky —
I tell you
God got style
the man got style

When you see
raincloud pass
and de rainbow
make a show
I tell you
is God doing
limbo
the man doing
limbo

But sometimes
you know
when I see
de rainbow
so full of glow
and curving
like she bearing child
I does want to know
if God
ain't a woman

If that is so
the woman got style
man she got style

Nora Vagi Brash

TOTAL ECLIPSE

Grandmother and the old people
All agree how it happens.
They know they say that
The much desired moon woman
Elopes with an earth man lover
Swallowed by a jealous angry god.

The scientists and astronomers
All agree how it happens.
They know they say
The precise movements of Earth, Sun and Moon
And how the shadow of one masks the other.
Telescopes and cameras ready
They wait at their predicted time
To prove what they say they know.

But a thick curtain of black clouds
obscures their view
and the drama is hidden from their eyes.
But not grandmother, she and the old people
Know about clouds too.
It's very clear to them
the moon embarrassed by too much staring
Hides her face in shame.