

K. A. Nortje

Up Late

Night here, the owners asleep upstairs:
the room's eyes shut, its voices dead,
though I admire it when its mirrors
oblige me with my presence. Looking ahead
needs glancing back to what I once
was, the time that mischance
borrowed my body to break it by terror.

Now the cameras rest in their elegant
leather coffins, having caught
the whirl of streets before the wheels go silent.
Rain trickles as the red biro writes my heart:
time demands no attention of the will,
the clock is yellow with black numerals.
The icebox resumes its purring descent.

This picture opens on the past. I rise
to study a calendar scene from what was home:
an old white mill, sentimental, South African Airways
(the blue lithe buck), peaceful, implausible. Some
fugitive sense holds back the bruising wave:
that gift to spend, my song where I arrive,
didn't I take it from the first dispiriting wilderness?

My mind burned and I shackled it
with squalid love, the violence of the flesh.
The quiet scars over my veins bit
less deep now than the knife or lash
could feel content about:
no longer need I shout
freedom in the house. I sit in light

here, the refugee's privilege. Nor do I want
fruit in a bowl, banana pleasure, the skin
that slides from my fingers, spent
because the soft heart only must be eaten.
Give me the whole experience to savour
who have known waste and also favour:
time to come may find me eloquent

in other rooms, that reminisce
of this one so composed in silence. Love,
the necessary pain, has spurred a search.
Moving from place to place I always have
come some way closer to knowing
the final sequence of song that's going
to master the solitudes night can teach.

A. C. Jordan

YOU TELL ME TO SIT QUIET

*Originally written in Xhosa. Translated
into English by the author himself*

You tell me to sit quiet when robbed of my manhood,
With nowhere to live and nought to call my own,
Now coming, now going, wandering and wanting,
No life in my home save the drone of the beetle!

Go tell the worker bees,
True guards of the hive,
Not to sting the rash hunter
Who grabs at their combs.

You tell me to sit quiet when robbed of my children,
All offered as spoils to the rich of the land,
To be hungered of body, retarded of mind,
And drained of all spirit of freedom and worth!

Go tell the mother hen
Who sits on her brood
Not to peck at the mongrel
That sniffs at her young.

You tell me, a poor mother widowed so young,
Bereft of my husband by mine-dust disease,
To let my poor orphans be ravaged by hunger,
For fear of the gendarmes and swart pick-up vans!

Go tell the mother dove
Who loves her fledglings
Not to dare the fleet falcons
While seeking for food.

You tell me, in spite of the light I've espied—
The light, the one legacy true and abiding—
To let my own kindred remain in the darkness,
Not knowing the glories of learning and living!

Go tell the proud roosters
That perch on the trees
Not to sing loud their praises
To sunrise at dawn.

You tell me, in spite of the riches of knowledge
Unveiled all around, replenishing the earth,
To live here forever enslaved by the darkness
Of ignorance, abject, and empty of mind!

Go tell the drooping grass,
Frost-bitten and pale,
Not to quicken when roused
By the warm summer rains.

Tell the winter not to give birth to spring.
Tell the spring not to flower into summer.
Tell the summer not to mellow into autumn.
Tell the morning-star not to herald the day.

Tell the darkness
Never to flee
When smitten at dawn
By the shafts of the sun.

Mazisi Kunene

To the Proud

In the twirling mountains overhung with mist
Foretell Nodongo the proud name of the subsequent hours
Since, when you beat the loud music of your wings,
The secret night creeps underneath the measured time.

When you behold the fixed bulk of the sun
Jubilant in its uncertain festivals
Know that the symbol on which you stand shall vanish
Now that the dawning awaits us with her illusions.

Assemble the little hum of your pealing boast
For the sake of the reward meted to Somndeni
Who sat abundantly pride-flowing
Till the passer-by vultures of heaven overtook him.

We who stood by you poverty-stricken
Shall abandon you to the insanity of licence
And follow the winding path
Where the wisdom granaries hold increase.

Then shall your nakedness show
Teasing you before the unashamed sun.
Itching you shall unfurl the night
But we the sons of Time shall be our parents' race.