



1983

Poems

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Recommended Citation

Cudney, Bruce; McGuire, Irene Gross; Reid, Monty; Markham, E. A.; Berry, James; Watson, Stephen; and Macleod, Mark, Poems, *Kunapipi*, 5(1), 1983.

Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol5/iss1/4>

Poems

Abstract

RIVER OF POEMS

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IDEAL THIRD WORLD NEW MAN

UNDER THE CITY

HISTORY

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THE DARK FROG PRINCE

YOU'RE KISSING ME AGAIN

Authors

Bruce Cudney, Irene Gross McGuire, Monty Reid, E. A. Markham, James Berry, Stephen Watson, and Mark Macleod

Bruce Cudney

RIVER OF POEMS

write no poems to me today
do you write poems to a woman
 crying in rape
you came gently with poems
 once

walked my banks
made love under my trees
swam in my clean body
you wrote poems
as lovers write poems

say nothing to me now
pass over me on your high
 bridges

turn your face
from my dissipation
build your factories about my
 hills

dump your garbage your urine
 your feces into me
cut the flesh from my banks
that you may twist me to your use
tell in your houses of laws
how you will restore me

do not let me hear it
kill me with your poisons
but write no poems to me
the stars sang in me
a thousand years
before the poets came
they will sing again

Irene Gross McGuire

after loving:
we face the night
back to back

behind the reeds
a blue heron
gathers time

rainy morning:
dusting books
I find old tears

dusk
a soap opera
flickers on the snow

Thanksgiving morning
the river carries
a cargo of shadows

New Year's morning:
cold sunlight fills
the empty glasses

snowblind...
a whisper
shatters dawn

dusk on the Rio Napo
a thousand voices
pierce the mosquito net

evening snowstorm
dulls the city skyline —
an icicle shatters

Monty Reid

BIRDS NOT SINGING

We have not yet learned to hate
ourselves well enough. The bird
with pale breast feathers leans
towards a mirror hung in his cage.
A boy is coaxing him to sing.
He taps a bell, whistles, and the bird
flaps against the plastic-coated bars.
Stupid bird the boy says.

In a basement room the boy
is crying. For himself his father
says. For myself says the boy, knowing
nothing he says is true. I hate it
all: school, the meals you cook,
the books you want me to read,
this bird not singing.
Look at how he yanks the feathers
from his chest.

They settle
on the floor, on newspaper covered
with shit and husks and gravel, shapeless
down plucked from close to the body, so
light any movement in the room
catches it and it almost flies.

the bird sleeps, puffed, the air
retained by its body. The father
sits at a window that looks out onto
a street where snow is falling in hard
dry flakes the cars catch and scatter,
only there is so much of it
eventually the traffic stops.

He is thinking of prisoners, those
jailed because there is a world that does
not want to change: Brutus, Ngugi,
Timmerman; for what their words
can do to men who do not hate themselves
well enough, who have pistols and electricity
and say tell us everything. Talk.
The father is thinking of how they
slept, in cold cells, expecting
to be dead. He is thinking
of how they have probably never
seen snow.

Late, he goes to watch his son
sleep, stopping in the doorway
with the hall light on. The bird
flutters in its cage but the boy
is still, his breath steady against
the wall he turned to in anger
as his father walked from the room
earlier, turning the pain in on himself.
What can I do to love you he says,
standing in the doorway. In the morning
there will be snow and you will not know
I stood here, as if I was afraid
you'd escape, as if I could avoid this,
everything I've done, all the old
burdens invented again
and again.

And even the father sleeps, though
he does not expect it, it falls on him
like feathers at the bottom of a cage.
And they have all slept the same
sleep, the bird with its need
to hurt itself, the boy's anger, men
with their words. What can you
say about this sleep except that it
is done and we awoke and dreamed
nothing. We never dream.

Is that what a boy wants on a morning
crisp and white as new sheets
and he is the first one to leave
the house. When the trees are puffed
up with hoar frost and the father
watches him: new boots, new snow.
How last night, his shadow in the square
of light falling into the room, a
feather lifted from the cage by a current
he could not feel come through the open
door, feel silently, relentlessly,
towards him.

E.A. Markham

LATE RETURN

(for Howard Fergus)

'What an odd name, Markham, for a Montserratian!' Canadian tourist
in Montserrat.

'There is no Markham in the Directory.' Telephone Exchange.

i

The ruin, at least, was something, the yard
with face half-rutted, was the boy no girl would kiss
except in retrospect; blotches of soil erupting
like teenage lust: a tangle of green — sugarapple,
mango, sour now, outgrowing the graft of family name;
other fruit, near-fruit...

With no young scamp to lizard vertical for juice,
your nuts are safe: weeds cling
in parody to trunk (like boys born after you, tall.
Or long-abandoned sons made good, defying dad
to wish them better) unharnessed
by Nellie's line on which the great, white
sheets of the house would flap their wings in rage.
Fringed Afro of arrogance:
their better view of the sea taunts us, close
to earth, flaunting fruit too high to get at;
some beyond-the-milk stage bunched as if in decoration.
Well before dark, my challenge from below, half-

remembered, no-more-to-be-taken-up, peters out:
mine is a garden, not of Eden, but of youth.
Suspecting things to be as honest, as accurate as they seem,
that this bit of family, untended, past its best
season, reflects something in me, I reach
for the camera I don't possess. Someone in Europe,
in America, will find this quaint. For me; a tourist-
polaroid to arrest decline.

ii

I am home again, perhaps two generations late.
I think, when the jumble of accusation, of longing,
clears: I am the juvenile not yet exiled.
This rock is a springboard
into water, into sea.
Sea is safe mattress
for the pole-vaulter, beyond sand;
my ocean-liner, vast and reliable, absorbing
shock, proof of completed journeys near to risk,
knowing the way to 'abroad'. The jump
is voluntary as coming to a road which forks:
sudden pressure from behind makes you choose
without benefit of signpost. Now this:
Montserrat has caught up with the world,
impatient of late-comers, of its children, foreign-ravaged,
stragglng home without humility. (High-flying
Concorde boxing people's ears, is enough.)
Others have been unpersoned
through the idiocies of politics. I, who seek no public
cut to advancement, am an economic
not a political dissident.

Familiar picture: Man & suitcase,
contents not from this place; professional migrant
eyeing the landscape. My unpaid guide tells a story
of a potato-patch, a villa-patch cleared
too soon. A riot of green is the penalty.
Less young in energy, we must try again.

Later, second thoughts come to the rescue
 and puncture self-conceit: things affecting you
 affect not only you, etc. 'Most of what matters
 in your life takes place in your absence' is a verdict
 with the threat drained out. (In that absence, woodlice
 ate your house.) But something of you
 lives here, a voice not heard in twenty years,
 stubbornly locked in the present. The mind,
 like a cat's paw, tries to trap stray cloud of memory,
 mists of past, raindrops thrown by an unseen hand...
 Inevitably, it locates you in the third person.

Is he a late developer?

He was sure of it, then, hot afternoons
 stumped by Latin homework, bowled by the Physics
 master before he took guard, before he was ready.

At home, out of the team, without Excursion
 to Antigua to represent the School, he had to make do
 with books; books one day, hopefully, to be swapped
 for passport. Here, he watched the ants

materializing from nowhere

to attack the remains of lunch. He thinks —

Regam Reges Reget...: Such communication systems grow out of...
Amabam Amabas Amabat (Uncomfortable, the imperfect tense)
Amavero Amaveris Amaverit...

(What is the consequence if I do not kill these ants?)

His colleagues half-way to Antigua to play the big match,
 he imagines he sees them, ants on the boat. He can
 advise them. Ivan's late-cut is dangerous. At trials,
 Ivan *twice* cut the ball in the air, and got away with it:
five runs. Ivan will be caught in Antigua before he scores...

Capio Capere Cepi Captum... Were we ants, boys
 from School, we would find a way

to cross sea,

get message to Ivan. These ants, he notices,
 place information above life: what drives them to it?
 Could it be they love one another? Too foolish

a notion for a boy early in his teens
who didn't make the team, and must settle for Latin:
Amavi Amavisti Amavit...

He thinks:

after the bombs, will the ants be here?
(Maybe he has not become a scholar
to sustain such thoughts.) He thinks of a passport
stamped, stamped in Antigua, stamped in the next island,
stamped here; luggage searched, questions asked,
and is not ashamed of the obvious:
Absence of love. We haven't learnt from the ants.

iv

Again the question: do I unpack?
(Releasing echoes of Wanderer, of Seafarer, of Salesman,
1st Generation immigrant hawking nicknacks
at the door? Do I hope to dazzle
for an hour, a week, and move on? Isn't it here
that others, with my history, have under-estimated
their capacity for low goals?)

To unpack or not? The case represents
all the skill I have, success, over the years
of reducing the contents of many into one —
like absorbing disciplines into a single brain
(Nellie must have felt this way, here, after the first
cassava-bread: Reaping the root, peeling, washing,
grinding at the Mill — man & boy treading pole —
the white, poisonous cassava piling up in its box, its coffin...
Over-night Press, sifting, baking on hot plate:
thin, light cassava-bread...) What of this remains
in my case?

The opened case, inevitably, won't close.
A moment of panic: Could the fart of Concorde
on its way to Venezuela, have got into your things?
No, this is man-menopause, faking new consciousness.

I no longer wish to prevent bits of Montserrat
smuggling in

though night sounds of crickets and dogs weigh nothing,
bats no longer have a house to be blind in;
Scots at the Agouti, Canadians at Vue Pointe
travel lightly in my head. The biography that grows
and grows in my baggage, started life a pamphlet, an underlined
name, a literate slave at Riley's reading the declaration
of emancipation. Nimcom has filled the years
since 1834, and my case won't close.

And more: Under the bathtowel, samples of beaches
still free to all. Here and there, memory of kindness,
of beauty, verbs of local colour TO DANCE TO SING — TO LOVE?
They belong here: is it crude of me to smuggle them
into that dark place where part of me still lives?

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James Berry

IDEAL THIRD WORLD NEW MAN (for a Caribbean Leader)

Arms raised he stirs exultation
beyond rotten roots that renewed him
the sad god of poverty who grew secretly
obsessed with strange identities
to risk the shocks of bluffs of blood
man with a thorny head of subjugation
who found himself among low lying hideaways
yet grafted glorious eyes of success
he practised how to breathe in cash
how to move in it and gesture with it
he drilled himself in other languages
drilled himself to saturate conquerors
till every day began to reflect him
as a swordsharp machete
and he strung little victories together
like stepping stones
and this
upsurge of nonconforming
is all-real
to trouble establishments like a flier from Mars
to make actions into polished milestones
and tossed words ride ocean waves
and missions clothe naked absences
to empty banks into empty pockets
and the world knows him a fresh agitator
our eye and target of the nation

Listen
hear him announced: 'Here he is
knower of tracks to every fireside

sound sleeper on bare boards
good company on parched corn and water for dinner
the bringer
of new dimensions
new textures before the eyes
and bodies growing scarless
our sage
who brightens blackness
our floods on dry time
our builder after hurricane
our own man who talks «roots talk»
as well as «professor talk»
who finds the lost
who wakens the dead and all beginners
who is hard transparent glass
with deep reds and blues
our leader
here he is here he is
our man with eyes all round the head'



WLWE

World Literature Written in English

G.D. Killam, Editor

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Stephen Watson

UNDER THE CITY

Under the city
the real life runs
secretly pounding
the blood's old drum;
it's there beneath
that all lives meet
who diverge above,
separate, discreet.

That man who passes,
sidestepping, shy,
there murders all
before his eyes;
the labourers labouring,
exhausted, tamed,
there rape the ladies,
torture, maim

The limbs, the lives
they often curse
but never could
begin to pierce;
and all this flesh
of every sullen hue,
there is bludgeoned
black and blue;

And all lives divided
that stare you through,
there meet their other,
pay what's due

for passing, re-passing,
with their skew stare
past those who cast back
one more dead glare.

— It's this that makes
these streets unreal,
the facades facades,
that makes eyes steal;
it's this, not commerce,
not the traffic flow
that animates these lives,
drives them below

To where the real life
has its secret way,
where the dream behind it
has full sway
and all are coupled
by the same ill:
rejected, rejecting,
man wants to kill.

HISTORY

Perhaps it was some fault in him,
one which he could never fathom,
that he could never once believe
what others said must surely be,
that the dawn at last was coming
and with its millenium bringing
an end to history, that ill time
of repeated misery, perpetual crimes.

Perhaps it was from a fault in him
which he went on and on repeating

that he foresaw the longed-for dawn
as merely prisoner of another dusk,
that he knew only man would prevail
still ignorant, injuring, failing,
that man would endure, like him,
as that creature always ailing.

Perhaps it was this fault in him
that he could never fathom them,
that he saw that dream of others
as mere reflex of a wretchedness,
that he saw that mania for its own
end, history's bloodiest passion,
never leading to a bloodless dawn,
but to a misery, teaching compassion.

Mark Macleod

SUMMER ON A DOUBLE DECKER BUS WITH THE BEAUTY

*You are whistling she says to me You
are beautiful inside.*

Down the centre of the bus
I'm fighting their armpits
sharp as a privet hedge.

You can be outside, too. She tells me
about tissue-firming thought
and how my eyes will sing
for life.

The turbanned and hairless head,
her powdered neck, return
to her notes. I think as I pass
she arranges parcels and legs
around the threadveined knees.

*I am Miss Finland nineteen thirty
three she says, almost breathless
with the heat, and I know.*

THE DARK FROG PRINCE

I have opened my door
to the dark frog prince.
He has eaten at my table.
I have searched out
the crying whites of his eyes
in his cot in the night.

He has slept on my pillow.
I have borne for him,
with no right,
the gush of shopping women
*Come here you gorgeous bar
of dark chocolate: I
could eat you!*
I have kissed him.
I have preferred him
to the surprising
child of my body;
I have thrown him against the wall.
I have forgotten he is a prince;
he is a frog.

YOU'RE KISSING ME AGAIN

You're kissing me again
it's spring and I'm
striding upside down
in ditch water.
All winter long we've killed
the house with our watching silence,
I've been talking
to the soft nails of snow on my tongue.
I've let secrets
blow with the clouds
like a burst of my own language
in a country of strangers,
but now the sky is blue
and pointless and I can't wait:
though you say you're coming out,
I'm going to bring
these words indoors.