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Poems

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Poems

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Stephen Gray

ALL I'M SAYING

All that I'm saying is
 to be wanted is better than
 to want,

when on the beach I tread
 on shiny bluebottles
 they pop

like our used old condoms,
 all washed up and I think
 of you.

Ezekiel said, 'Wherever the river
 flows there will be
 more life'.

So the golden splash on tiles
 of your latest grapple
 reminds.

The desert rain frog may live
 in its foggy dunes
 waterless,

those grouchy fledglings
 feeding have yet to be
 in the pink,

the surfzone throws shark's eggs
 like mermaid's purses
 ashore,

kelp trumpets at my swimmer's
 itch, due to spores of
 jellyfish,

but all I'm saying is how
 I was all on the rocks
 before you.

You're my every dawn and
 after the latest sexy burst
 calm sea.

Now you have me down to quoting
as I tramp the rivermouth
God's word.

but I'm grateful He should ever
have devised one such as
bold you,

whose hearty needs do outweigh
— before expiry date —
my own.

Navigators reached Cape Voltas
meaning where to turn or rather
return.

This is where the continent's
bloody flow meets salty
backwash,

rendering desire and all its
long held together wholeness
undone.

Brought to bursting I sag safely,
in the holding arms of your
desire,

best to be wanted by
the one you really love and
give in.

MARCO POLO DESCRIBES THE GIRAFFE

What piebald beauty, sloped like a hill!
So tall in front, three paces from the ground;
yet behind only one! Small head swivels.
Pretty sight! Never done harm to anyone.

ELAND

Warned by one baboon bark from the cliffside
before you intruded and the seed-eating cheep-cheeps
that will not cease till up the valley your
blue shirt is departed, we are watching
you watching us — three eland; no, five:
yes, the one bull and his cows, the tribe —
like a cavewall frieze, ashy dewlap
into beige, mudstone into quartzite,
with manganese dioxide for flicking tails.
Standing head-on's harder for arrows and bullets
to find, for defence two horns. Mostly we graze,
while Bad Boyz' rattling bakkie of peaches or
shiny 4x4s, littering GPs, flash by on the loop.
Then regurgitate and cud, O booted unrimed poet
of the last day. Remember you too, like us, soon will be
gone.

PLINY'S TALE OF THE DOLPHIN-BOY

In Hippo west of Carthage, under the Pax Romana (he wrote), took place this true story for poets: where the village folk of fishers of the lagoon fed from inland wadis and red hills before desert, where the palms and olives provide, their lads ventured through surf competing into swell, when one curly-headed (unlike Arion) unnamed befriended this striped idle of a dolphin, rode into myth upon its back, sporting in vampish curls and doubling round and tumbling, transported for the tide. This harvester of sun and salt when the tide was full made rendezvous, taming his cetaceous heavy-breather, giving vaulting exhibitions for the tourists crowding the dunes. This exemplary bond. Once the boy retired from waving and tumbling, his shiny mount fell flat upon the shore in pursuit, must be rolled back by the bottlenose and fin into its foamy element. For this spectacle too many assembled: instead of lopping dates or pressing olives, the colony had swimming exhibitions now, the fish-haul down productivity decreased. Of course the tourist potential of spas and dolphinarium would keep the cash local, but where the scattered tribesmen gather they talk of their own ranges turned to plantations and factories. So Octavius Avitus came, poured scented oil on the beloved fish in the slop . . . and for days it slithered about, Pliny says, 'listless and dejected'. Then died, belly up. 'I can imagine how sadly you'll lament this ending and adorn my true story.' We need never add how the boy was flogged and flayed, the frontier-troops searched house to house for shiny mammal memorabilia, while the governor's name was marbled out on half the Atlas Mountains to overlook his subjects, nor why across the rippled reach of a tranquil eve, when the sun just stays there refusing to go down, and you cup your briny hands, emit that gargle call the region amplifies and transmits,

the dolphins continue their passage regardless,
have learnt their lesson and they don't reply.
But still the boy who sat the dorsal of his
oceanic masterpiece peers out, while stringing figs
into boxes at the packery; now he only bellydances
in his sleep. 'This fable was heard on good authority:
make of it what you will, as I have done.'
An archaeologist should give you all the market price
of citizens who solidly eat while millions slave.
But Pliny did not have to hammer out quite why
it hurts when beauty's killed and liberty constrained.

Syd Harrex

THE MATTER OF MIRACLES

I don't believe in the churches,
of whatever persuasion,
authorised fantasies
because without them
the miracles they endorse,
quite frankly, are unfathomable.
But that does not mean
that faith is not
as potent as reason,
nor that the sun, moon, skies
and heavens are not about
illusions, for those of us who live
in hope of better things to come.
But into what labyrinths
of despair does such
optimism lead you, who knows
that what lives also dies.
There's a whispering as
of silk spinning in
airless spaces which reminds me
both of where and when the poem
eludes the silken womb and when it
so intrigues the swallows in
tomorrow's garden.

24TH OF DECEMBER

Trinket raindrops are
blown across
the corrugated iron roof
counterpointed inside the shack
by the annual playing on radio
the day before Christmas
of Ralph Vaughan Williams'
The Lark Ascending while
incongruously as audacious
squabbling magpies
make their claim to ownership
of the weather's symphony,
a curio's fusion of Tin Can Alley
and Handel's *Messiah*
while just as a bush lark sings,
the bloody mobile rings.

PENNESHAW PERMUTATIONS

It was here on a blithely breezy afternoon of mid summer
that other ghosts closed my eyes,
demanding that I see their kinship, their connection
with the ghosts of my birth place, to the spirits
symphonic in the winds of what could be
an admirable death place — you have to ask
what good could derive from a fusion
of barbarism and heroism, which are
the shared archetypes of this island's
excommunicated history,
like Van Diemen's Land, this island
too has its unavoidable stain
which as we know is a colonial commonplace,
a commonplace perversion in the colonial historical record.
Wherever there are insular communities,
and that's everywhere,
the past is a demonic curse as much as it is
a guiding light for similar, no doubt edifying cliches.
History's essential lessons are
Never to Forget and
Don't let Memory preach at the Liar's lectern.
Read the shadows and the stained glass icons
with equal objectivity, humility and scepticism
even if for no other reason than humane pragmatic survival.
Before it's too late, too late.

Olive Senior

FABULOUS EYELIDS

And our fabulous eyelids O
(St-Jean Perse, Éloges 2)

O ma mère, Madonna of the clothes-line
Embrace me, the child cries.

Stiffened against
the breeze, braced against the sun in her
eyes, Madonna the vise grips clothes pins
in her mouth, jabs the line, nappies
endlessly slapping white clothes Jesusing
to blue skies

and khaki pants for sons
1, 2, 3, 4, stiffening in the breeze with
father's workingman's blue that wouldn't
do for Sunday sporting that she pretends
she doesn't know about though she adds
more and more blueing to his whites nicely
ironed for the village rooster's outing.

One day, the sport was left on our doorstep.
She took her in, grudgingly.

*O sister, my sister of the
fabulous eyelids unlocked, you have our
father's eyes. I took your hand. With you,
our house at once grew.*

In the wash, increasingly, much too much blue.

HURRICANE WATCH

Every year we are forced to reinvent ourselves,
growing shabbier. Perhaps uncertainty comes
from the shifty breath of Hurricanes,
their unlocked eyes revolving always
counter-clockwise. Watchful. Unmaking us.

PERSEPHONE

The dark lady in her garden tends her skeletal trees, she's gone underground for this season. It's cold and she needs the sparkle of fire to warm up her body, prepare her green dress

for her coming-out party; she's starving herself for a reason. Who knows when we see her splendour in spring, the cost of this beauty? The gossips who sing: *She wears her clothes*

well. O she always had beautiful bones. Do they still tell of her husband the abductor (or has he been redeemed?). Do they say how her mother's extravagant keening endangered the world?

Of her complaints to her daughter of *i told you so* and *i warned you of dark men of bright flowers beware but even then when you were small did you listen? o no, by impulse you*

always were stricken. The dark lady knows (but she just doesn't say) as she crosses the threshold arrayed in her finery: It's impulse that sparks fire, starts the engine of growth,

drives the green fuse through the flower, sap through trees, brings new verdance to the bower. But at what cost to my lady? She grows weaker by the end of each season in the sun, returns

to that dark room to rest. OH MY HEART (her husband taking over from her Mum). HERE, DEAR, TAKE THIS RED PILL. He opens the box, the door of unknowing. One seed less, yet a thousand

still glowing. Again and again, she yields to temptation for she's seized by both Eros and mourning. The bright red interior opens for him. Yet it's he who's been tricked. From

one seed new life's always growing. So her triumph: Each year he allows her — briefly — to escape the snare of the flower; walk through that door and return to her mother

who — never to forgive that initial loss — is forever glowering. Forgetful now, she leaves her dress rumpled at times, her bed unmade and sour. Says *the heat's worse than it's ever*

been. Says the day he grabbed you was an evil hour. The dark lady endures it all for her secret bliss: the fire she snatches from the jaws of death to ignite springtime in the world.

Yet, beneath her green dress at her coming-out party, who would guess how wildly her pomegranate heart beats to return underground for a taste of that treat: the fruit from the orchard of Death.