Poems

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Poems

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OLIVE SENIOR

WOODPECKER

Women were created from yellow-skin plum trees
transformed by the action of the woodpecker
— Amerindian myth.

O Miss Yellow-skin Plum, Miss Prune-face,
Miss Disdainful One. Rejecting all suitors.
Still waiting for that magnificent descent
of Woodpeckers!

But times have changed, nuh? So wait on
for the eternally absent, the incomparably
selfish one. Or heed Woodpecker’s song,
that barb-tipped tongue:

Plum-tree woman, O my dumb one.
Your secret still sweet as when locked up tight.
My pecker’s eternal drumming I cannot disguise,
My need so intense, my greed so unsatisfied.
Perversity my preference now: dead-wood
to wooden bride.

No virgins anymore anywhere.
Woodpecker doesn’t care.
He’s got what he wanted:
His bright red hair.

O Miss Yellow-skin Plum, Miss Prune-face,
Miss Disdainful One, Miss Wait-a-Bit,
You hear that? You’d better start
transforming yourself.
THE FIRST HOUSE

Homeless, Deminan and his brothers orphaned and wandering forefathers blew hither and yon like Winds of the Four Quarters until Turtle Woman stopped them in their tracks: the first mating. Said: I am ready for nesting. Said: Build me a house. Untrained, but undaunted (in the way of such heroes) they each took a corner of the world, stood like pillars to anchor it and strained and puffed to lift high the roof of sky, which billowed out and in (they had a devil of a time controlling it) until it righted itself and domed into the model of Turtle Woman’s shell. And so we were born in the House of our Great Mother, our crabbed and comforting genitor, who still bears the world on her back.
TAINO GENESIS

We the people of Cacibajagua emerged from the cave the moment Sun’s longest leg splintered the horizon. All went well except that the sentry posted at the entrance at his first sight of Sun blinked. Unwary sentinels cannot go unpunished. With his eyes eclipsed who knows what could have slipped through his grasp? So our maker turned him into stone for his tardiness and there he stands still: Macocael — He-of-the-insomniac-eyes, our petrified eternal guardian. We filed out expectantly, each one trying not to cough and break the spell as Sun’s eye cracked open like guinep shell and released us. We emerged dressed in our naked best, not yet possessed of the feathers and beads or the red anotto paint, the gift of Sun Father, colour of worship and warrior, of Hummingbird’s iridescence. We would come into the world stained black with our sacred juice, guinep, colour of difficult passage and tumescence. We would bleach in the sun for nine days; then to the water to gather the sacred herb digo, for the washing to remove the last traces of our birth passage. Guinep stain running like rain till we reached again bare skin, our palette ready for our first painting. Oh! Before inscribing our names we should mention that there was another cave, that of Amayauna — the others, the people who do not matter (to our story). We were the Taino, the ones gifted with guinep or jagua. With sacred bixa: the herb anatto. The ones shelled out by Sun Father.
Mothers will understand this: The first ones I sent into the world did alright, turned out to be human. But this lot! Okay, perhaps I spoil them. Bearing them now not solitary and naked like the first but many together, gift-wrapped in silky down and swaddling clothes of papery layer. I’ve overdone it, perhaps, in the way of security and comfort. For can I get them to leave? Even when mature they continue to cling for dear life to me and — worse — to each other. Unwrapped, without the light of day, they know they are useless but are still so shy, they are prepared to die — together. To live, they must be forcibly undressed and separated. That’s where my human children come in. Skilled at brutality, they will cheerfully rip these children from me, strip off their clothing, pull them apart. Because I know it’s for their own good. I happily watch as each little one pops out like a pearl. Ivory. Golden. Milky. Not all will stay that way. Some will be dried, popped, parched, ground to be drunk or eaten. But I smile even as I am myself cut down as spent and useless, for I know enough of my progeny will be saved to be planted and nurtured. Become, in their turn, mothers proudly displaying their clinging children in their green array. The little ones still attached to their mother, still clinging to one another; undercover, in the dark. Scared of the single life. Yet dying for exposure. To grow up. To ripen the germ of Sun Father.
Remember when we’d write each other in verse, how often, misreading words, I’d telephone because I imagined the sky’s bleak face, or worse?
Now we drift like clouds under the same sky, alone, you, caught under the hoof-beat of a continent, me, set like a pirogue on a pulsing sea, not knowing what’s beneath, only what’s imminent — like catch before a fisherman sets them free.
Remember when we were children, how the night seemed longer even than the morning’s breath as we waited for the birdsong signalling light?
Innocence takes all things for granted — like the earth after a sleep, bursting with pride in Spring’s new clothes. Unfaltering faith in what the heart already knows!
Their mother’s prayers lay folded in unlikely places: next to common pins, this prayer seeks forgiveness for her sins; on her sewing table, sacred words etched in soiled Irish linen beside her children’s names, rest among her coloured threads, scissors, needles, twisted silver thimbles, and on the wall a faded scroll declares her His alone.

This God of hers resembles no one she has seen. Her children’s hearts are hard against her unfamiliar saviour. Their footsteps spurn the walkways taking them from her to Him; their toys are instruments of death, their playgrounds, killing fields.

Constant as the sunset, their mother whispers details of their lives to Him, certain He will turn her water into wine.

She gave her final words to God, raising up her children for saving one by one, with not a word to them.

They mourned her going with her eyes on Him until her eyelids trembled into stillness and a crumpled prayer slipped between her loosening fingers. Their shoulders fell into a silence pure as a river.

Now, between their ribs, old knots that were unravelling all their lives grow tense.
The memory of my father lies in the garden where the yam vines wound at the foot of the hill; where he worked on his knees, where he slipped into the silent hours, as though into some place else, discovering there were different ways to pray, calling to attention his distracted soul; where he took whatever still lived in the heart of his World War II days into the moonlit dark of the yam hill, the mound of earth, to lay it down: something, as in the dark space behind the moon, that with as he pretended did not exist.

Beyond the garden gate the night moved disquietingly until my fear rippled out into a fiction I thought would stop anything bad happening. Then morning streamed its latticework of shadows onto the wall, as we recited the story of Jesus carrying the cross uphill to save the world, His brow bleeding from its crown of thorns.
NEIL MORGAN

GARDEN SCENE

Outside, the sound of dawn coming is the peeny-wally and the air resting atop things, the dew on grass blades tickling my feet as I run to catch the Blackie mango tree's first fall. The quiet holds the pieces of morning like old women balancing water pails on head-wraps; the dogs yawn and scratch last night's itch; my garden lies, for now, still.

Mornings!
A time to lift the blank veil and rush the thoughts of last night's poems and stories of men going pale at the meaning of words like 'budgetary', words like 'expenditure'. The soil in my side and the salty taste of ill luck mean the garden voices are calling, loud enough to capsize hummingbirds away from making love to a flower's bloom.
A summer pregnant with sunshine smiles while I crush roses, remembering what was love before night fell, with its cold touch.

Night ushers in desperate cries from the city, cries of help answering other cries of help like a siren saying, Tonight there is more mayhem, more plunder, more baseless attrition; tonight, on the backsides of boys and girls too young to flaunt anything but that they're young, more plunder ensues, while the sidelined voices rasp for more fire to heap onto the pile, more fire in the night — but will it burn the city down?

Morning will come and blow on dreams' suffering. Who slouches down from pedestals to intervene? I sift the soil in the garden, never mind its accelerating rotting.
That summer ground lizards gashed viridian
from sockets in the earth, or crackled
through dry aralia leaves
safe from the egrets and the sparrow hawks.

Long summer weeks … the school games …
‘I come to see Janey, where is she now?’
… playing her spectre, undaunted,
death as an abstraction!

Soft armfuls, the rabbits were never linked
to the stews mother urged on us, never savoured;
the pig rooting through the breadfruit peel
bore no connection to the leg of pork
dangling pale above the Caledonia stove.

When night’s marauding packs gutted the goat,
we re-christened her kids:
‘Faith’, ‘Hope’.

One rainy month, a man’s corpse fished from the river
bloated our imagination
for days; then, that, too, passed.

Everything had its season:
the canes springing up, viridescent
(though later came their gleam of armaments:
machete-leaves and silver-tasselled spears).
After the crop-over’s burnt sienna,
that wasteland, replanted, was verdant again.

I remember yellow dandelion, the Spanish needle,
gold and white, the cassia’s clusters in July,
pink boa feathers of the guango at summer’s swooning,
the otaheiti flowers’ fuchsia finale,
flaying ants shedding cellophane wings before the rains,
the ebony’s brief blossoms…

(‘Peel head John Crow,’ the children sang.
‘Sit down ‘pon tree top, pick out the blossom’ …

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(‘Peel head John Crow,’ the children sang.
‘Sit down ‘pon tree top, pick out the blossom’ …
…frail kites nuzzling the milky sky,
ribbon-tails twitching in elation,
and the river, mahogany, that sank
in the limestone of the Cockpit country,
to emerge on its Trail of Tears
slowed by tributaries, by the Great Morass,
on its shining declension to the sea.
I call to mind now differently
those cycles
of planting and reaping, coming and going,
those seasons of loving,
those seasons of loss.
ANDREW STONE

THE MARKET MUSE

It’s a soggy morning in the market,
slippery underfoot, my shoes streaked and spotted.
The air is damp with a heady mixture of mud,
sweat, fresh fruit, rotting garbage
and freshly smoked herb.
This poet walks through this wonderland of sound, searching,
feeling for ripeness and texture,
haggling with higglers, testing my skill.
A mobile haberdasher glides through the chaos,
his goods hanging from neck, waist, arms, wrists,
while a voice strong and free tells his story:
‘Ten dollar store, no window, no door!’
I drift through the morning with that clarion in my head,
sidestepping the urgency of handcart men and smiling
with market women displaying their wares.
I am Saul met by Ananias, I am Osiris remembered,
I am a proselyte in this temple of sound and motion.
The day is warming up. I walk away, my bag full,
and my heart is a store, no window, no door.
Silver flows through my veins
Into my hands when I caress the strings of my guitar
Silver is the moon I swallowed
on a dry dreary night when I willed it so
Silver is the rain in May
wholesome and lithe and falling into me
Our springtime sarabande kisses me sodden
up then I’m happy
down then I’m sad
Silver I cry Silver
Silver encases my heart
like a drunk jeweller quenching a cigarette
Silver is my lips against ice
my tongue upon frost
my sweet staccato
my praline dress
my stuck umbrella on a sunshiny day
Silver is the witty wind
coaxing my eyes to sleep
upon the blurred pastel pages
of a slipshod butterfly
Silver is a legerdemain
legs like a leprechaun that feeds on leer and lemons
a quire of my deepest thoughts
the inkling of my most secret soul
It is the palsied web
of the crestfallen spider
the ugly dewdrop ring
that scars my finger like acid
dusk that brings the sidereal night
resting its echo upon the wing
of a firefly that drinks the silver from my eyes
Silver is my billowing meerschaum
the flicking goldfish fin in the silent sun
Silver are the wispy strands in my hair
lined silver spiralling through the universe
Silver chose me
like starlight to the naked eye
The words I bleed are silver
the time that dances minuets
upon my broken sylvan skin,
is silver in a lancer’s armour
When my stomach bursts
and I disgorge eternity
Silver stands beside me
fondling the viol
My ears are filled with a pixie’s dreams
like honey, only silver
when the days of maiden’s trouble subside
silver peels away
My belly swells
and it’ll be a while
but I know more silver
is welling inside.
She always wondered if the Tuesday jazz singer who dug clean purple notes out of cancers, really knew a place where ain’t nobody crying and ain’t nobody worried and ain’t no men coming in crusted with a day’s leftover of cement, calling her whichever name they chose to invent that day, men who ordered salt peanuts and whites, sitting for the next five hours drinking her with their eyes.

She always hummed to the Tuesday jazz, moving behind the counter like coconut rum was in her waist, smoothing salt waves out from her dress. She wanted to be taken to this place where ain’t nobody crying and ain’t nobody worried and God willing, ain’t no men there at all.
breakfast

my mother ain’t off no cereal box
all house-wife smiles
& wearing some flowered apron frock
all cleaning-cooking-cradling six-a-week
& hallelujah with a hat
on sunday
my mother played leap-frog / play-dough / hop-scotch
taught the crazy cadences of nina simone
jitterbugged & mamboed round our home
she kept no maids
& raised no maids
with every last cent she owned
strong black soul
with dread black locks
& so what
if she ain’t on no kellogs box
home

one half a thousand colours brown
now call the tottenham streets their home
& i
belong
with them
we're brixton beige
burnt carmine black
dark sepia & cream
speaking cockney-aussie-irie
oxymoron
from full lips
we've gone from black
to mixed
to coloured
there's a drumming in our ears that we suppress
bright cars
with reggae stereo
& crazy boom-box beats
modern Toasters
hip new griots
attitude
musty bookshelves
shelves aligned
with religion
nubian style
there's selassie
there's obeah
& there's christ
fat dumpling in the window
of the baker down the street
& waking up to fried banana
every day—
& in our minds
we see sahara in the city-scape around
we could go in search of freedom
but we don't
see / we may substitute a desert
we may never see the sun
we may hold on to chains & shackles
london may not be our mother
but she's home
i used to dance a lot:
the hip-hop tango
the boogie-bronx
funky-town
fox-trot
turn-around
mambo
at clubs
i put on quite a show
the pigeon-toed
harlem-found
shanty-town
girl from the ghetto
burning the floor with her
reggae-rock
samba-style
heel-toe
dancing loud
& bold
& proud
before the crowd
beneath my
black
baaad
afro
the eyes
& sighs
of all the guys
in tow
i was a *diva*
on show
i sit in corners now
camouflaged
incognito
a wall-flower dressed in black
sipping lemon lime & vodkas
on a stool near the back
humming in this blues bar
with aretha franklin
nina simone
& roberta flack
i would like my life back
caliban

i want a
nat-king-dizzy-louie man
it's true
i want a miles
want him baaad
want him blue
i want a cleaver
want a jackson
want an X a-screamin blood
i want a lion
& a leader
& a thug
who wants to liberate my mind
by any means he can
i want a chain-breaking
rights-taking
man
don't want a luther
or a baldwin
or a dub e b dubois
with some college edukayshun pass
from white man's bar
ain't go for no black man
in a white man's suit
all a-buttoned to the jaw
& a salute
don't give me jungle bunny
funky monkey
honey-tipped sultana
be a lover
be a leader
be a father
& give me chocolate dipped
coffee-dripped
strong-hipped sex
i want it ripe
i want it real
i want the best

i want a
nat-king-dizzy-louie man
it's true
i want a miles
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& give me chocolate dipped
coffee-dripped
strong-hipped sex
i want it ripe
i want it real
i want the best
soil brother
land lover
earth mother's son
so sin sufferer
history's other
panther on the run
with a past
with a passion
with a gun
be a legend
be a menace
be a monster of a man
but be not afraid to say
i'm caliban
my caliban

show me
a young black man
who stands:
noise-maker
go-getter
shit-stirrer
dub-whirrer
flesh-tearing
meat-eating
jive-walking
tongue-talking caliban
who says: i am what i am
a dark-conscious
blues-breathing
soul shaking
love-wanter:
teeth-baring
dream-sharing
dread-wearing
black-loving
nubian world-watcher
show me my caliban
& i'll be a black woman
who want a a black man

show me
a young black man
who stands:
noise-maker
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show me my caliban
& i'll be a black woman
who want a a black man
I have learnt that equality
May not mean freedom,
And freedom
May not mean liberation,
You can vote my friend
And have no democracy,
Being together dear neighbour
May not mean unity,
Your oppressors may give you chances
But no opportunities,
And the state that you are in
May have its state security
Yet you may be stateless
Without protection.
You my friend do not have to follow your leader,
The government does not have to govern you,
I’m telling you Mom, you are greater than the law
If you are just when the law is not.
You see, once you are aware that new Labour
Does not care for the old workers
You may also know that change
May not mean revolution,
Once you realise that old conservatives
Are running out of things to conserve
Babylon must burn,
Burn Babylon, burn.
Politics is like dis,
Life is like dis.
Intelligence may not mean intelligent,
The news may not be new.
From where we are
To be awake
May not mean
To be conscious.

BENJAMIN ZEPHANIAH
HAVING A WORD

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CARNIVAL DAYS

On days like these we dance to us,
With the drum beat of liberation
Under the close cover of European skies,
We dance like true survivors
We dance to the sounds of our dreams.
In the mirror we see
Rainbow people on the beat,
Everyday carnival folk like we.

Adorned in the colours of life
We let it be known that our costumes
Were not made by miracles,
We are the miracles
(And we are still here).
These giants were made by the fingers you see
(Too many to count)
Carried by these feet that dance
In accordance to the rhythms we weave.

On days like these we dance like freedom,
Like the freedom we carried in our hearts
When the slave driver was with his whip
When his whip was at our backs,
There is no carnival without us
And without carnival there is no us.
The colours of our stories joyful the eyes
And rhythm wise the body moves.

On days like these we dance the sun
We cannot make dis love indoors,
Or be restricted by the idea of a roof,
Dis soul, dis reggae, dis calypso,
Dis sweet one music we make
Is for all of us who work dis land
And cannot be contained by bricks and mortar,
It is we, the beat and the streets.

The passion has to be unleashed
To rave alone is not toay
Dis is a beautiful madness
Dis is a wonder full place.
Benjamin Zephaniah

So play Mas citizen
Be the immortal bird you want to be
Bring hope and truth and prophecy
Or meet the lover in your mind,
Let us take these colours
Let us take these sounds
And make ourselves a paradise.
On days like these we can.

On days like these the elders say
Astronauts can see us dance
Glittering like precious stones
On dis rocking British cultural crown,
When Rio’s eyes upon us gaze
And Africans are proud of us
With heads held high we say we are
The carnival, sweet carnival.

On days like these we dance to us,
On days like these we love ourselves.
KNOWING ME

According to de experts
I’m letting my side down,
Not playing the alienation game,
It seems I am too unfrustrated.
I have refused all counselling
I refuse to appear on daytime television
On night-time documentaries,
I’m not longing and yearning.
I don’t have an identity crisis.

As I drive on poetic missions
On roads past midnight
I am regularly stopped by officers of the law
Who ask me to identify myself.
At times like these I always look into the mirror
Point
And politely assure them that
What I see is me.
I don’t have an identity crisis.

I have never found the need
To workshop dis matter,
Or sit with fellow poets exercising ghosts
Whilst searching for soulmates.
I don’t wonder what will become of me
If I don’t eat reggae food or dance to mango tunes,
Or think of myself as a victim of circumstance.

I’m a dark man, black man
With a brown dad, black man
Mommy is a red skin, black woman,
She don’t have an identity crisis.

Being black somewhere else
Is just being black everywhere,
I don’t have an identity crisis.

At least once a week I watch television
With my Jamaican hand on my Ethiopian heart
The African heart deep in my Brummie chest,
And I chant, Aston Villa, Aston Villa, Aston Villa,
Believe me I know my stuff.
I am not wandering drunk into the rootless future
Nor am I going back in time to find somewhere to live.
I just don't want to live in a field with any past
Looking at blades of grass that look just like me, near a relic like me
Where the thunder is just like me, talking to someone just like me,
I don't want to love me and only me; diversity is my pornography,
I want to make politically aware love with the rainbow.
Check dis Workshop Facilitator
Dis is me.
I don't have an identity crisis.
I have reached the stage where I can recognise my shadow.
I'm quite pleased with myself.
When I’m sunbathing in Wales
I can see myself in India
As clearly as I see myself in Mexico.
I have now reached the stage
Where I am sick of people asking me if I feel British or West Indian,
African or Black, Dark and Lonely, Confused or Patriotic.
The thing is I don’t feel lost,
I didn’t even begin to look for myself until I met a social worker
And a writer looking for a subject
Nor do I write to impress poets.
Dis is not an emergency
I’m as kool as my imagination, I’m care more than your foreign policy.
I don’t have an identity crisis.
I don’t need an identity crisis to be creative,
I need love warriors and free minds wherever they are,
I need go getters and wide awakers for rising and shining,
I need to know that I can walk into any temple
Rave at any rave
Or get the kind of justice that my folk can see is just.
I am not half a poet shivering in the cold
Waiting for a culture shock to warm my long lost drum rhythm,
I am here and now, I am all the Britain is about
I’m happening as we speak.
Honestly,
I don’t have an identity crisis.