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Poems

Landeg White

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Abstract
OXFAM PLC, LETTERS TO MY SON
For once, I knew these people, their
Names and histories. Their children
Suckled or clung to trouserlegs as

The players warmed up with rippling
Arpeggios on the stinkwood xylophone,
its gourds like swollen udders.

They talked of the past good-humouredly
Since the foreigner was interested.
They had their anger. Terrible things

Had been done. But mine was no more
Use to them than yesterday's burnt
Millet stalks, all they had for fuel.

Chords plonked like a signature. Open
Two-handed fifths, the players
Octaves apart on the 8-foot instrument

Summoning the dance. The father-
Drummer, crouching by the charcoal
Brazier, quickened the python

Skin of his cunning and boom,
Boom-bih-bih-boom, commanding,
Boom, the skinny and alert, or fat

And generous, bih-bih, the enchanting
Children, the wide-eyed, boom, children,
To become that bubbling counterpoint

Wrung from the wood slats, sizzling
In the hollow gourds, the sound waves
Hitting vertebrae in body-quakes
Of pleasure. I knew this dance,
These people. In the New World,
4000 miles ago, they

Jumped to the dustbin steelband's
Clangour in the same concentric
Circles, talking in the same manner

Of history and their lives. They had
A terrible, precise anger, They were
Up from slavery. But their dance's

Panorama was an affair of day-break,
Foraging into the boulevards from
The burning cane of their past.

(That was another age, before our banks
Coined under-borrowing, before
Oil became a weapon splitting

Wealth from work and spawning
The blood-dimmed trade in weaponry.
Then the banks called in their debts.)

Today, like X-rays of starvation,
The people stare out from our less
Illiberal journals. We are more

In control than ever. Their dance is
That the second child must die
That the fourth child must die

To save the others. They are octaves
Beyond anger. Watching this alien
Ballet of our dangled

Food Aid, it is their history's
End, to select each other. We are told
The doomed children understand.
I am fifty years old
    and writing to you from high summer.
Wheatfields from the hollow
    to the swelling horizon
Have been combine-scythed
    in swirling parallel strokes.
There are swallows up here
    clicking in African languages.
Black cattle wading
    in the shadows of olive trees
Are barely visible
    so black are the shadow pools.
Cicadas among the cornflowers
    are sawing at their washboards
(A linking image from my '50s bored
t eens to your own, as

Suddenly articulate
    you start your own journey).
Whatever I can give you
    has long been given if at all.
There's little else you will
    draw on beyond occasional cheques.
But I want to write of my love
    for you over seventeen winters,
Both the barren anxiety
    that shadows your present choices,
And my pride in you
    and your emerging designs
Like a carnival of poppies
    crowding the disturbed soil
Of motorway embankments
    with their gift of summer.
My fifty first year, the year's last afternoon,
My son attacked, my wife flown to his bedside,
I am walking the concrete walkway by the estuary
(Rhythm, give me steady feet, this is an emergency).

Imbecile malice! 'You fucking black bastard, go home
Nigger!' as he walked from his friend's home
Home. Panic
Spiralling on satellite
Links, my son's face
Broken by drunks, tickets,
currencies, embraces, flight, and me
Walking the white untidy beach by the white spray.

I've been bloodied in Africa, not mine but his dear
Mother's home and distanced it, an accident,
The malice of thieves, not to be written of till
Horror at their bombed camps could truthfully
Set the tone. But what of Thatcher's indulged
Sons, erect for Britain? And what
Now of that black anger? And how can my fifty
Foolish years sooth his pain in the city
We came home to, secure from hatreds?

Only that

Seven days past we walked together another
Much loved beach between the windblown sand half-
Burying the upturned pleasure crafts of summer,
Funky Lisboa, Valha me Deus, Neptuno, Lucky Luke,
Between them and the ruffled sea darkening to pewter
Was a column of wet sand like the one before me,
Glass-smooth, incandescent with each spent
Breaker. It mirrors the wrecked day. Its frontiers
Shift like Poland, slashed with bloodstains, bruising
To purple, the bridge's evening necklace of traffic,
Shimmering moonrise and the spinning lighthouse.
Like a wet street at midnight, it is open to everything
Between darkness and darkness. It is where to be.