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Poems

John Mateer

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Abstract

THE GUIDE, MY MOTHER'S MEMORY

John Mateer

THE GUIDE

He tells them, 'My name is Milton.'
He drives the landrover like a tank.
He watches the rhino with the eyes
of a lover and the elephant with the eyes
of a husband. The poachers set snares.
He collects them. The tourists take photos.
He allows them. His bosses speak siSwati.
He could mock them. It wasn't he who spoke
the poem of 'grass that grows for sharp teeth
and rivers that flow for us all.' It was he
who stopped the landrover at the dam's edge
and asked the foreigners to look for the python.
It was there he told them, 'They are always basking here,
That is why the grass is sleeping.'

MY MOTHER'S MEMORY

What do they know about the life you lived,
about your friend Juanita with her father from Madeira
and her mother the Kaapie and her pet sheep?
What do they know about your Dad who installed
the first lightbulb in Grahamstown, whose Cockney
songs were as innocent and cheeky as his feeding
dagga to the donkey curling its hair? And what
about his parents and their being a buffer between the Xhosa
and the Dutch, Londoners on the banks of the Fish River?
And what about your Mom, born to a lady from
Tristan da Cunha, reading books on the Royal Family, sitting under
an olden day painting of sinister angels? What can they know
about your uncles who never married? Can they feel the fish that's
used to spank the woman? The banknotes fluttering down
over your heads after months in the desert? Or taste the best
bread in the world baked in vacated anthills by dedicated
Zouth-West-Afrikan tannies who're as reassuring as dawn? Ag,
if only they could imagine you running around pushing a barrow
with the effigy, all screeching, 'Guy het nie hare nie!
Guy het nie hare nie!' If they could only imagine your sister going out
with a Russian spy, or the hawker describing, in his lekker
Cape Malay English, his pink satin waistcoat and yellow umbrella
ready for the Coon Carnival. Even I hear the flowersellers
on the Parade only as an echo and those Limey sailors who
took you and your friend to the Bops only as dummies on a warship.
Maybe what I'm saying is that all life is like your mother
with an eyepatch appearing in a costume of her forebears
and your father's falling asleep in a field and waking
to walk home the wrong way? Maybe the horse your brother
nursed through colic and the mud wall that collapsed
in the Mowbray house and the Italian alpine bells ringing your name
and the country of your destination are all the same, must be forgotten?