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Poems

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Abstract

CORTEGE ON LEYTON HIGH STREET, EATING WITH FINGERS, DIONYSIUS' MIRACLE IN OXFORD CIRCUS,
UMPIRE AT THE PORTRAIT GALLERY

Kwame Dawes

CORTEGE ON LEYTON HIGH STREET

This morning on Leyton High Street
I watched the too quick cortege
of glossy black sedans crowned with
plastic encased flowers. And
for the first time in my life,
I wondered at the incongruity
of carnations and death.
It is so with London for me:
death always seems absurdly comic;
Brit wit, I offer; but then
I am used to the calamity of sirens,
the open shore of mourners,
the wailing, the stench of duppies in the air,
the litany of blood and spirit
caught in the sun's rotting heat.

If I die in this sterile city,
no one, I fear, will know the language
of lamentation, and I will fade simply,
quietly like some nondescript
bookish cleric barely remembered
by stoic friends at the pub over a pint:
He was a nice chap, he was;
wrote fine poems, he did,
so let's have another for him, shall we.
Even the leaves shedding themselves
will smell more thickly
of death and loss than these mourners.

EATING WITH FINGERS

It takes three days and an ocean between
to wash the savoury of Indian
from my finger tips. I finally rely on toothpaste,
a trick I learned so long ago
for killing the aroma of love and onions

in my fingers. Still instinctively
I sniff my hands like I return to poems
to remember the late lunch
sun and shadow, the palate
dizzy with the *mishti-knownta*
of your Bengali magic,
how we tenderly discarded the west
plucking vegetables, fruit,
tearing the bread and sweeping
the pulp and syrup of chutneys,
scooping all into the cup of our fingers
then prodding them with deft thumbs
into our mouths. While we ate
surrounded by the names of poets
and our scrawled and scarred sheets
of verse, I grew morose at the bile
percolating beneath the veiled friendships
between the coterie of poets
trans-cultural, who daub their exotic
scents on the walls of this old
city. I cannot read their eyes, nor can I
thaw the ice in their ritual welcome.
I give thanks in prayer that with you
I've found the space to eat
with fingers, to imagine poetry as music,
not the hustle, the jostle
for ground, for niches, for plots of barren
acres where we all wrestle to eke
a paltry living, our fingernails clotted
with dried blood and blackening flesh.

I've returned to South Carolina
where summer is barefaced and plain-
speaking, no dalliance here in Dixie.
I vow that if I must, I will return
without warning to Marlowe's dark
Thames, this ancient stream
on whose southern banks new world
Kurtzes rave among the natives;
I will come incognito, travelling light,
seeking out the shelter
of your sun-washed loft, there
to make poems and scoop
mouthfuls of *basmati*
souped in your garlic-flecked sauces.

For three days, I am comforted
by the lingering spice of your *daal*
in my fingers, and somehow
while it lasts, it is enough.

DIONYSIUS' MIRACLE IN OXFORD CIRCUS

Oxford Circus, Central Line, five o'clock.

The train is yet to arrive.
He starts at one end of the platform
lightly touching the shoulders
of women, in his wake they are trembling
bodies loosened, arms reaching
for the walls, the vending machines
the bewildered bodies of men
with newspapers and briefcases, trying
to hold it in, this exploding
out of nowhere, these orgasms that break
them, their hips tightening
their faces uncertain whether to weep
or laugh, weep or laugh.
He looks back at the devastation,
the beautiful chaos of it all.
For some it is the first time in years
they had forgotten – for others
it is the music, the music in their heads
that turns and turns; while the men
look on in wonder, amazed, dazed
laughing stupidly at the scent
of the sea that fills this tunnel
as the train comes wailing in.

UMPIRE AT THE PORTRAIT GALLERY

At the Portrait Gallery near Trafalgar Square
I am searched by an ancient umpire
who mumbles his request with marbles or loose
dentures in his mouth. I see my first
portrait: the blotched bony fingers, the warts,
the clumsy overlarge gold ring loosely turning
like it will when he is entombed for good;
that look of boredom around the eyes
he masks with considered politeness

like a drunk man's careful compensations
and this self-important thinning of lips;
the nose, the greenish veins, the cliché
of a mole on his brow. It is too dark here
to study him well, besides he has found nothing
and the natives are restless at my back.

I am looking for the faces of this country
the rustic, the jaundiced, the worn,
sharp tight snaps so close the pores talk;
faces caught in unaware blankness,
the rituals of rocking to numb silence
on the trains; dirty light, the thin
mist of darkness in the underground
making the faces collectors' bits
keepables of a post-nuclear tribe.

I only find the posed stateliness
of another time – the courtly manners,
the clean colours staring from the palette
masking the stench and filth of older ways –
nothing to write about, really, nothing.

I am back in the lobby staring at the native,
his Adam's apple bobbing, his fingers
the thick blackened nails, the stale suit,
the cap, the poem he is – the simple grammar
of another time – the years of the bombs
falling; he must have seen broken bodies
too. Now he fingers my underthings
searching for things I may have taken.
He finds nothing, nods me along.
Still, the globular ring keeps me
from forgetting him altogether,
that and the absence of stories to tell.
It is brilliant outside. A black-faced
Bobby points me the way to the South
Bank where the river reeks of history
and word weavers converge in snotty halls
to flaunt their musings to the world.
Here we are in the carcass of empire
searching in vain for sweetest honey.