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Poems

Olive Senior

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Poems

Abstract
Colonial girls school
Song of the house
Embroidery
Leaving home
Plants
Peppercorn
Yard fowl-rooster
The songs that it sings
A pointless journey
This country is a fever
Borrowed images
willed our skins pale
muffled our laughter
lowered our voices
let out our hems
dekinked our hair
denied our sex in gym tunics and bloomers
harnessed our voices to madrigals
and genteel airs
yoked our minds to declensions in Latin
and the language of Shakespeare

Told us nothing about ourselves
There was nothing about us at all

How those pale northern eyes and
aristocratic whispers once erased us
How our loudness, our laughter
debased us

There was nothing left of ourselves
Nothing about us at all

Studying: History Ancient and Modern
Kings and Queens of England
Steppes of Russia
Wheatfields of Canada

There was nothing of our landscape there
Nothing about us at all

Marcus Garvey turned twice in his grave.
‘Thirty-eight was a beacon. A flame.
They were talking of desegregation
in Little Rock, Arkansas. Lumumba
and the Congo. To us mumbo-jumbo.
We had read Vachel Lindsay’s
vision of the jungle
Feeling nothing about ourselves
There was nothing about us at all

Months, years, a childhood memorising
Latin declensions
(For our language
— ‘bad talking’ —
detentions)

Finding nothing about us there
There was nothing about us at all

So, friend of my childhood years
One day we’ll talk about
How the mirror broke
Who kissed us awake
Who let Anansi from his bag

For isn’t it strange how
northern eyes
in the brighter world before us now

Pale?

Olive Senior

SONG OF THE HOUSE

House too frail to brace against a hurricane. Any breeze-blow can topple it, a child can tumble over it. Yet let people sing of it. Was made by these hands.

Hands untrained to make like aeroplane, know only reaping cane, planting grain. Let them marvel at the wonder of it. These hands made this house.

(from Talking of Trees, 1985, Calabash, Mona, Kingston, p. 41)
The women of the family took tea all together except for Aunt Millie, Uncle Vincent’s wife. She read books, she wore makeup and jewellery even on weekdays. On Sunday afternoons behind locked door, she had me put colouring (Madame Walker’s, IMPORTED FROM AMERICA) in her hair. She was a blue foot, a stranger, not a born-ya. She had crossed water. They did not know precisely where Uncle V had found her. He was the eldest, family head.

A sly dog and purse-string controller, so no one said anything. Aunt Millie smiled often but her mouth was sewn up. Her reticence offering them few strands, the women of the family enhanced them with embroidery (washing lightly in vinegar to keep the colours fast). From her straight nose and swarthy skin they plucked skeins to compose the features of a Jewess, or herring-bone in the outside daughter of a rich merchant or plantation owner.

Her mother was someone mysterious, whipped onto the scene with a slanting backstitch. She once sang opera? She was said to be of Panamanian or Colombian origin. Something exotic enough — like a French knot — to mistrust but work in. They reviled Aunt Millie’s use of scent. From the few words they extracted they thought they detected a foreign accent. Sometimes they feathered in ‘Haitian’, infilled with dark threads to signify the occult powers of that nation — how else could she have snared such as Uncle V? They thought she kept her distance because she was all of the above and snobbish. My dears, such airs! She and I were What a pair! Myself, orphaned with frayed edges unravelling into their care. Everyone knowing my pathetic history, I could wind myself up in Aunt Millie’s
mysterious air, undulate in the sweet waves (artificially induced) of her hair. She nurtured me on books and reticence. The women of the family fed me cold banana porridge (or so everything then seemed) told me tales of girls who did and men who didn’t marry them. Tried to enmesh me in their schemes to undo Aunt Millie’s disguise.

In the end they embroidered her an elaborate cover when (I could have said) a plain winding sheet would have suited her.

For to me she gave her story, unadorned. The women of the family willed me their uniform tension. Aunt Millie left me her pearls. I sold them, became a blue foot traveller. Kept no diary. Sewed up my mouth. Shunned embroidery.

(from over the roofs of the world, 2005, Insomniac Press, Toronto, pp.78–79)
Olive Senior

LEAVING HOME

one day, strength (from where, you don’t know) to aim for the opening, to say: I am leaving. To walk to the edge of your feeling. To load up with guilt (not a word from the ones at the threshold). Not a word! You keep walking. Down the dirt track, to the lane, to the street, to the highways of the world. You alone. Not yet stunned by the brightness. Not be hardness of stone, of the pavement. No. You say: I could get used To this lightness.

Till the day you’re snared by another sensation: on a hilltop, at that, you find yourself drowning, a movement of ebbing and flowing. You recognize early (or too late) that you failed to detach from that mooring.

Always, cruelty of choice.

Here’s the knife.

Yourself:

Executioner

Midwife

(from over the roofs of the world, 2005, Insomniac Press, Toronto, p. 60)
Plants are deceptive. You see them there looking as if once rooted they know their places; not like animals, like us always running around, leaving traces.

Yet from the way they breed (excuse me!) and twine, from their exhibitionist and rather prolific nature, we must infer a sinister not to say imperialistic grand design. Perhaps you’ve regarded, as beneath your notice, armies of mangrove on the march, roots in the air, clinging tendrils anchoring themselves everywhere?

The world is full of shoots bent on conquest, invasive seedlings seeking wide open spaces, matériel gathered for explosive dispersal in capsules and seed cases.

Maybe you haven’t quite taken in the colonizing ambitions of hitchhiking burs on your sweater, surf-riding nuts bobbing on ocean, parachuting seeds and other airborne traffic dropping in. And what about those special agents called flowers? Dressed, perfumed, and made-up for romancing insects, bats, birds, bees, even you — — don’t deny it, my dear, I’ve seen you sniff and exclaim. Believe me, Innocent, that sweet fruit, that berry, is nothing more than ovary, the instrument to seduce you into scattering plant progeny. Part of a vast cosmic program that once set in motion cannot be undone though we become plant food and earth wind down.
They’ll outlast us, they were always there
one step ahead of us: plants gone to seed,
generating the original profligate,
extravagant, reckless, improvident, weed.

(from *Gardening in the Tropics*, 1994, McClelland & Stewart, Toronto, pp. 61–62)
Olive Senior

PEPPERCORN

Torn from the vine in a place of moist heat and shade where I was growing, skin once plump and reddish, glowing. Suddenly, a job lot. Indiscriminately thrown in, we are jumbled, shaken up, rolled together, little knowing our fate or destination, till black and shrivelled by the sun, looking all alike now, we are tumbled into hold of a ship for forty days and forty nights (we guess — for black is the fenestration).

Disgorged, spilled out, shell-shocked I come parched and dried, my head emptied, till shock-still I come to rest, shelled out, buck naked. In the mad ensuing scramble, who will come who will come sample me, view me, choose, me, sort me out for grade and quality, drive me home to crush me, use me? Know that alone I’m of little value, like a peppercorn rental. All together, we can pepper your arse with shot.

Over time, despite our treatment, you’ll see, survivors stay pungent and hot. You can beat me senseless, grind me down, crush me to bits, to powder. You can never lose my bite on your tongue, my hold on your senses: forever I’ll linger and cling.

In your mad scramble to possess, devour me, remember, if you’d only allow me to do a striptease, slow, peel off my black skin, you’d be pleased — or shocked — to discover: I’m white below.

Olive Senior

YARD FOWL

Rooster

As long as a Rooster somewhere
is angry enough to claw at
the sun blood red rising and
pull it through, day will come:
the world will go on.

(from over the roofs of the world, 2005, Insomniac Press, Toronto, p. 22)
Olive Senior

THE SONG THAT IT SINGS

so far from the sea I find myself
worldless. (Oh, leave it alone, but I meant
to write ‘wordless’.) And sometimes, like
tonight, I feel a hemispheric sadness: the
New World as tired as the rest. And there’s
a waterlogged moon getting ready to burst
like the gourd that spilled an ocean when
the seeker, like myself, disobeyed, took it
down from where it hung by a thread,
dropped and broke it. So how were we
to know that from it seas would stream
forth, bringing three ships with our eclipse:
the Black Sun? Yet how but by disobedience
can we change the world order? So what if
all we are left with is a sieve to carry water?

We can use it to fish up a poem or two
to sail from our flagpoles. Or plant vines
to swim seeking radiate air, colonizing
the light to store it for rebirth: a summer
virgin in lace-mantle
of silver.

So excuse me for interjecting an ode here
to silver: to my vine of such magical growth,
and to moonlight, to starlight, to fish-scales,
to sighs, to sadness and whispers, to the pure light,
to water, to ripples over stone, to veils, to jewels
and cutlery, to tinsel, to glitter, to winners’ cups
and chalices, to the lining of clouds, to watch cases,
to the instruments before steel, to erasures,
to anniversaries, to the snail’s trail, to mother-
of-pearl, to musical notes that are liquid. To our
Earth seen from space, to the light of the fireflies,
to ice, to crystal — petrification of light,
to reflections of mirrors — the soul’s shining.
To luminescence of eels, dust particles,
electricity. To anguish and the colour

of forgetting. To needles and pinpricks,
to the pure heart, the clear conscience,
the firm voice. To the keening that is never ending.

For the ocean is endless, the sea has no corners,
no turnings, no doors. And none can silence this song
that it sings.

(from *Shell*, 2007, Insomniac Press, Toronto, pp. 28–29)
He arrived in a country
To which he was not destined
Only to discover that it was his own home
Where everyone from yesterday’s frenzied farewell party
Made a fuss about his brief absence
And what they called triumphal re-entry.
Although they could remember him very well
They did not address him by name
Which they said he had lost on his way out
And now all the names were for sale.
Then he discovered to his dismay
That he had not a penny to his person!

The future rejected him
By refusing to happen according to his plans
And when he fell down in the fatigue of the present
They quickly buried him in the past
Where although he was not very well known nor welcome
They allowed him
To mingle quietly
With the less significant others of his generation.
THIS COUNTRY IS A FEVER
(POEM FOR J.D. GILES IN THE CALIFORNIA SUN)

This country is a contagious fever
And though you only travelled its veins
Insulated by a thick alien skin
You caught its germ in your blood
And so quiver with the discordant discourse of all who are ravished by it.

I too was a mere passerby
Following the footprints of my fathers
Chasing illusions of sequins in the sand
Only to lose the clarity of vision
Bequeathed by the waters of my ancestral rivers and lakes
Forever through my sweat drops
Feeding the thirsty hot sands of exile and betrayal.

My own shadow is now a sphinx
Whose cryptic questions I cannot answer
To win passage into the horizon, retreat and reprieve
To where the spirits dance
The totemic dance of destiny
Hand in hand with immortality.

Though our congenital trespasses and karmas are different
We are, by complicity, united
Victims of wander mania
The crime of presence, having been here or there once or many times.
Thus even though I melt in this fever here
You cannot escape the rhythm of my death throes over there
For this country is a terrible fever
That afflicts all adventurous birds of passage
To all corners of the world.

(19/10/07)