

Black Dice

Breyten
Breytenbach

The Message of the Sick

1 Ladies and Gentlemen, this is to introduce myself
Breyten Breytenbach
godly and thin in his green sweater
who props and hammers his longdrawn head to
fabricate a poem for you as for example :

*my eyes are much too scared to look
me in the dark in case I should see
the hospitals of Paris are brimful of sallow bodies
they stand in the window and threaten with their hands
like the angels in the oven
it rains the streets apart and slippery*

*my eyes are starved
they/you will dig me in on such a wet day
as the sods are raw black meat
and the leaves and overripe flowers painted and snapped
from the wet before the sun can chew them
the sky is in a sweat of white blood
but I shall refuse to coop up my eyes*

*pick off my bony wings
my mouth is too secret not to feel pain
wear boots at the burial for me to hear
the mud kiss under your toes
the sparrows tip their leaking heads black blossoms
and green trees are muttering monks*

*plant me in a hill near a dam under snapdragons
let the sly and bitter ducks shit over my grave
in the rain
the souls of mad but cunning women travel into cats
fears fears fears with drowned uncoloured heads
and I shall refuse to soothe my blackskinned tongue
look how harmless he is, take pity on him*

2

Suicide

*Was it suicide? Who would know? But it is
all so normal if one drives a bus. The way I
do. In this particular case I had to deliver
a load of tourists in a popular seaside re-
sort. It was dark already a spacious blue
evening when we cut through the last neck in
the chain of mountains and descended all
the u-turns down to the sea. A tall woman
sat on the bench just behind me and every
now and then she leans forward to lick my
earlobe. In the little mirror I could see how
the face of her husband bloats and reddens.
But it's all part of a busdriver's routine. I
unloaded my people in front of the hotel
where we were to sleep that night it was
a huge place. Blackcoated waiters waited
on us like penguins and, perhaps because
all hotel-rooms are identical, the three of us*

*(tall woman husband and I) (but he didn't
know about this) were put up in the same
room. But it's all part of a busdriver's rou-
tine. And by the time he dragged their
heavy suitcases up the stairs the tall woman
and I had already climbed through the
window on to the eave and, lower down on
another roof down the emergency exit
through the hotel's garden and on the beach.
The night was a fantasy of beauty and lit
up by a blue moon behind the mountains
on the other side of the earth. A secret
white city crouches on every mountaintop
the arches shimmer in the light and we can
hear the happy music washing down on us
from the cities. One day says the tall woman
we shall be two black figures on the streets
of one of the cities on the mountaintop.
Then we lie down on the warm sand and
clutch at each other's bodies it's all very
normal when one drives a bus. And when
the night has a long beard we walk back
to the hotel. The blackcoated penguins
wait on us and tell us that a certain husband
came tearfully to ask for his wife and that
he supposedly found a strange man's cap
in his room and he wanted to borrow a
spade because he was going forth to dig in
the bastard's head and he climbed out the
window on to the eave and lower down on
another roof down the emergency exit
through the hotel's garden and on the beach.
I assured the waiters that the man's a fool
and gave the maître d'hôtel a tip and we
all whinnied together. Then the tall woman
and I climbed up to our room and lay down
to warm the bed and clutched at each other's
bodies. It's all part of a busdriver's routine.
The husband did not come back. We found
the spade the following morning next to a
fresh heap of sand. Apparently he dug a
grave there with the intention to plant my
severed head and then he waited for us.
And in the early morning a turtle crawled
out on the beach and mistook him for an
egg and kicked him in and filled the grave
up. We could only see the weak kicks under
the sand. But we had to go on and couldn't
stay. I slipped in a new load of people to
take them over the neck in the mountain-
chain to a popular river-resort. A short
woman on the seat behind me leaned for-
ward every now and then and bit me in
the neck. In the little mirror I noticed how
her husband's face bloated and became blue.
But it's all so normal when one drives a bus.*

3 Dark Dice

Then, when it was all over, all the ache and the pain and the brutality and the sadness and we had nothing more to lose except our lives, they lined us up. Why does the fear devour us then? The people queue down the steel steps deep into subterranean halls, the earth's inwards. Halfway down, on balconies outside huge steeldoors with steam lapping through the seams, a group of tired servants with tindrums and brooms in their hands look at us. They weigh us up. Downstairs in the brightly lit hall the line of people split in two, separated by railings. Our passports lie in little piles left and right. A kind, but dirty, old man looks over his glasses at the names on the passports. Then he orders the people left or right depending on how their passports lie. And those who turn right each take up a tindrum from the neat pile and are directed to a door where men in white overcoats wait for them like wooden dolls. The people around us sigh and moan and whisper. But why?

Then it's our turn, my wife stands in front of me and our passports lie right. The old man looks automatically at the names and intones Yolande Breytenbach . . . Breyten Breytenbach . . . take up your tindrums and report in hall D room no. 5. And suddenly I realize and I shake with fear. The tin is just big enough to contain a human body, forced into the foetus-position. And then you are squashed by a big steamhammer somewhere behind bolted doors and the second-hand tins are then used for other purposes, it's the same dented tins we saw the tired ones use on the balconies. No. Yolande is already halfway through the turnstile and I pull her back and yell no and grab the passports and throw them on the lefthand pile. Then we climb through the railings and join the lefthand queue. My breath doesn't go deeper than my throat and mouth. The old bureaucrat shakes his shoulders and gives us two little cards with the time marked on them and says: Come back tomorrow . . .

We go up some other steps with weak knees, up to the top where we sit down next to each other. It rains grey, it's cold. Other pardoned ones (for to-day, tomorrow condemned, it depends on how the passport falls) surface slowly and put up hands and shout taxi! Taxis stop and drive off with whispering wheels, drive their loads back home for the night. Wet doves come to look for shelter under the roof. The street shines like an army-boot. But there is no laughter, people are quiet with their collars high. I shiver with fear, my wife also. I think I am going to cry, I say. With my head on her shoulder I cry. I am so nostalgic for my past. ●

White Women

Kissing

Black Men

—a choice for film-makers

ARTHUR MAIMANE

WHEN SIDNEY POITIER was awarded an Oscar for his role in *Lilies of the Field*, the event was hailed as a landmark in the progress coloured actors have made. But there was the suspicion that the Academy Award was only a gesture towards better race relations. Then I saw the film and heaved a sigh of relief: Poitier deserved the Oscar simply as a very good actor. For me, though, the best thing about this film was that Poitier's was an "untypical" Negro role. He was simply a foot-loose ex-GI who befriends a group of European refugee nuns. And because he is after all Negro, he teaches them gospel songs—and growls ominous warnings at a road contractor who calls him "boy."

This, for me anyway, was the landmark: that a coloured actor had been freed from "race" or "problem" roles. Of course Poitier had already appeared in another role of a similar nature when he played a longshoreman in *A Man is Nine Feet Tall*. But this one had been unsatisfactory because it went to the other extreme from the "problem" roles: his blackness was never recognised. I don't believe that American longshoremen are that immune to race awareness.

But the black actor—and, more important, the character he portrays—has definitely come a long way from the days of the Tarzan-type movies set in "darkest Africa" when only the good natives could speak pidgin English and the baddies plotted in gobble-de-gook. Those were also the days of "all-Negro"—musicals, naturally!—such as *Stormy Weather*, *Cabin in the Sky* and *Boarding House Blues* (whose worth for me was that they introduced me to Lena Horne, Ethel Waters and Billy Daniels); or *Harlem on the Range*, a fantastic "coloured western" in which all the cowboys were of that shade.

NOW WE HAVE SEEN Poitier fight Tony Curtis in *The Defiant Ones* and Ruby Dee force a white man to lick her shoe in *The Balcony*. But I waited in vain for Harry Belafonte to kiss or at least embrace his white girl in *Island in the Sun*. (More

recently there was the farce by a British television company which could not find a way to handle an *affaire* between an Englishman and a West Indian woman. In trying to avoid a kiss between them, the company almost ended up by suggesting worse (!) goings-on with a fade.)

Even without such "delicate" issues, the movie moguls and television chiefs are still far from coming to terms with coloured characterisations. The "progressives" among them declare with hand on heart that they are prevented from any further "boldness" by the susceptibilities of white audiences. They want their films shown in the Deep South and South Africa, and they don't want to offend some people nearer home. But they are not worried about possible coloured susceptibilities in such films as *The Hill*. I personally did not mind Ossie Davis being called a black monkey and other such names in this film since I know that this does happen in real life (like white women kissing black men or vice versa). It is progress compared to Poitier's longshoreman role, even though some British critics thought the director had leaned too far back in his pro-blackness. But why must this progress only be in one direction?

It is possibly this kind of lop-sided rationalisation which has caused some black actors in Britain to talk of going to Africa to make their own movies and asking Afro-Asian governments to boycott "white films." Apart from any other considerations, this kind of measure would not even begin to solve anything.

A SOLUTION MUST BEGIN with the movie industry deciding whether it wants to be honest or simply make money regardless. I know this sounds naive; but surely if they cannot treat coloured characterisations with realism they would be better off not making fools of themselves and their audiences. The visual fact that Belafonte did not kiss his white girl friend could not have done anything for the susceptibilities of the Deep South. I am sure that even a Mississippi cracker could read between the frames. I know for certain that the South African censor was inelligent enough to do so and, according to his ideological lights, did the only realistic thing: he cut out all the scenes suggesting the black-white liaison.

I have heard it said that this "problem"

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