

EASTER HOME-COMING

FOR ATHOL FUGARD

Refreshed from Europe's artesian fountains,
the abundant spiritual springs,
reluctant he comes,
winging south
to what Fairbairn called
'the dry nurse of lions'.

Buried somewhere in his baggage
two dozen transparencies:
St Peter's Dome, the Pietà,
The columns of the Parthenon;
the Delphic charioteer . . .
nostalgic beads to tell
in the desolate times ahead.

The quilted countryside of France has fallen away
to hours of moody sea;
the slow set of sun;
then the plane's aluminium propelling pencil
bores blind night; between Saharas of stars and sand
he dozes into oblivion, then dreams on into
the slow rise of sun,
hours and hours pulsing over jungle and bush;
early morning on Highveld grass below in sheets of liquid
gold;

and now, at last, ahead, beyond the Orange River,
drought-stricken
red as a reviving shame,
his ravaged old frontier landscape,
the Eastern Cape Karoo.

Twenty seven thousand feet below
under a fog of heat
rolling in like a breaking sea
the artless earth that bred him
rises to meet him, lifts slowly to his eyes,
one after one, wave crests of watersheds,
the breaking horizons,
eroded escarpments carved by the Sundays River,
the tributaries of the Fish
like the veins in desiccated leaves.

There, to the west,
sharp as black quartz crystal against the blue
rises the Compasberg,
among whose foothills Bethesda's dying village
carries its caravan of immortal dreams to the moon.

Straight ahead is Teebus, clean, out of Euclid,
at whose base
after seventy miles in the tunnelled dark
the waters of the Orange River well
glinting like shivering mercury
into the long clean chutes of cement canals.
To the East the head of Hangklip rises proud
close to Queenstown, so named
when Victoria's global rule was glorious;
and, neat among the tumbled Tarkā crags,
the sacred sisters, Martha and Mary;
then all the Winterberg and the Amatolas,
where Thomas Pringle's pen first gave to these rocky
nothings
a poetic habitation and a name.

Details, names, histories get lost in erosion.
Over the muddy waters of Grassridge Dam,
generalised into a geology
of sandstone scarps of blue-green shales,
intrusive dykes of purple dolerite:
the deep wheel spoors of tented wagons trekking north,
the ghosts and bones of nine wild frontier wars,
the rawhide shields, the scarlet tunics, lost
in alluvial flats;
stripped of the skin of grass and gentle vegetation
earth's pink and cinnamon flesh now basks and blisters,
stippled with an angry scrofula
of drought-resistant scrub.

Appearing now with personal insistence
buildings and fields of farms he could name;
De Keur, Katkop, Salt Pans Drift,
Swinside, Driefontein,
each African farm with its own story, each like a bead
strung far apart on the thin white thread,
a dirt road which runs beside, or crosses the rail or river,
the Fish, the Brak, or the Tarka streams;
strings from a parcel unwrapping in his brain,
seven roads converge in a knot,
knot still intact, uncut,
the bloodknot of his town.

More abrupt than ever before
on any map or photograph
the intolerable paradox:
the separate facilities
of white town and the black:
tar and trees in the streets;
no tar, no trees in the streets,
houses large in various gardens of green;
no gardens, small cottages mass produced;
stone churches, one in the manner and scale of Wren;
chapels of rusty tin and wood;
and on the edges of either area
awaiting the same slow geological oblivion
or dramatic sudden crack of doom
the dead lie in their separate lots:
one, a patient regiment of polished granite and marble
as if on the deck of the sinking 'Birkenhead',
the other a rippled patch of earth
punished by scarecrow crosses;
from which planisphere his treacherous eye selects
the parish church of St Peter,
St Peter standing still,
still standing
amongst those weathering headstones,
those indigo cypress trees.

As the sky and the world turn over and over
into endless night and back into endless dawn
red cockerels in startling relays
signal unending betrayal on always reborn horizons,
and the church of St Peter
stands
still.

In a flash himself he sees,
boy in choir stalls, hearing the lesson read:
a sense of doom and universal shame:
Good Friday looming up, a ghastly shadow
already heavy in that upper room;
and John on Patmos, exiled, old,
after nineteen centuries still Christ's particular friend,
bringing a lump to his stupid throat with the words:
"having loved his own that were in the world
He loved them to the end."

Why, as the plane begins its descent,
the pitch of the engines changing down
near Olive Schreiner's grave on Buffels' Kop,
its shadow plunging into Ganna Hoek,

Why as the plane sheds height over Slachter's Nek,
broken ropes on the makeshift gallows,
lower over the Sour Mountains, that no-man's-land,
where Stockenström Senior met his chivalrous end,

Why, as lower over the Sundays River,
over the orange groves, the desolate salty pans,
stone quarries, brickfields of Coega,

Why, as lower still
over the Ford Assembly Plant out on a wild cat strike
with bitter lessons from Aloes,
the smoke-smearred Swartkops marshes
with footpaths for Boesman and Lena,
smouldering schools in New Brighton,
street barricades up
in the match-box monotony of Kwazakele,
Why, wheeling out to sea
over the blue crinoline of the Bay
shaking its restless frills of surf
on frivolous rainbow beaches,
through which once, an ancestor
ignorant, hopeful, jaunty,
stepped into the dull green
already tragic
terrain,

Why, should the heart beat so
with what can only be joy?

For years he had raged at this intractable country:
sometimes with a shoulder-shrug like Touchstone smirked:
"ill-favoured, but mine own."
But now that is no longer enough,
not anything like enough,
now that a sepulchre breaks open
and the buried love of half a lifetime stalks
shameless and luminous over its grave.

In a place,
in a time,
as restless, violent, remote, provincial as this,
something like that first Last Supper must have happened
and words like those been said.
How dare he then,
the plane touching down,
withhold a simple
avowal of Love?□

Guy Butler
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