

slanting the light

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by

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Abstract

Through my poetry I attempt to make sense of my encounters with myself by bringing to creative expression my experiences of and felt responses to people, places and situations.

Among the poets who have had a significant influence on my work are Robert Berold, for his quiet assertion of intense, dramatic images; Frank O'Hara for his disciplined sense of mischief; Joan Metelkamp for her meticulous attention to form and the way she makes a poem breathe; Robert Creeley for his ability to create free-floating meaning; and Mangaliso Buzani, for his fierce, honest poetics.

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I

the sum of our parts

am I the sum
 or distillation
 of noses eyes ears
 (skew teeth thread veins dicky valves)
 passed down through generations?

what of the witch of Wookey
 my great-great uncle's second cousin
 burnt at the stake (they say)?

and my children?
 their father's grandparents all sailed from Cobh
my forbears were British, Dutch and Huguenot
 yet our dads looked so alike
 they could have been brothers

so what of O'Higgins
 his head on a pike in Wexford town
 for his part in an Irish uprising?

some things (it seems)
 are passed down
 by proximity
 my mother says she has Oupa's hair
 forgetting he wasn't her father

my ma se half-sus Elsabé
 is met die helm gebore
 maar waar's dit dan nóú
 wil ek weet?*

I have two eyes
 a left and a right
 a nose in the middle of my face
 and below that a mouthful of teeth
 I resemble them all
 I would say
 or take after myself
 (more or less)

* Translation: my mom's half-sister elsabé/was born with a 'helmet'/but where's it now/I want to know?
 (It was an old belief that if a child was born with the amnion, or part of the amnion, still covering its head, it indicated that the child would be clairvoyant.)

in memory of Gran'ma*Jane Evelyn Organe, born Wookey*

Jane Evelyn
 leaping over red earth
 auburn hair streaming
 freckled feet flying
 sun child
 thrilling child
 girl from the Kgalagadi

Jane Evelyn
 Molepolole mission child
 auburn plaits pinned
 freckled feet shod
 sent to London
 for schooling
 aged five

Jane Evelyn
 lodged in London
 with a Methodist family
 blue gloves at Christmas
 for all the children
 brown for Jane
 from Bechuanaland

Jane Evelyn
 Missionary Miss
 sails home at sixteen
 hair pinned
 feet clenched
 mouth pinched
 eyes slate

ouma

mom says you had beautiful legs
 when you were young
 I never saw them
 under your farm-wife dresses and skirts

you held me on your lap
 strong arms and soft
 warm-bread bosoms
 your face in my neck
 your lumpy thighs
 hiding the sorrow
 of beautiful legs

wear trousers
 you whispered
 wear trousers
 whenever you like

* * *

oumagrootjie said
 school's wasted
 on child-bearing hips
 and your face was plain
 another mouth to feed

at 15 apprenticed
 to your uncle-the-tailor
 at 20 married off
 to the first taker
 at 24 widowed
 his mother said get out

you walked the 20 miles
 to daniëlskuil
 with your two small daughters
 and a suitcase

you worked for the jewish tailor
 till oupa saw you
 sitting astride a horse
 and your beautiful legs

you married him
and sewed his suits
fully lined
buttoned and collared
and clothes for seven children

* * *

when your quick clever fingers
started losing their minds
the line of your mouth drew tight
and irons everywhere
made black
triangle windows

oupa moved you to kimberley
tucked you up
peeled peaches
and fed you
all the love that was left
slice by slice

dad

I think of you
like looking through a thick-bottomed glass
 you're far away grey
 blotched with torn light
an old home movie
of someone else's family

a brother's life

when everything stopped
in the incubator
dad breathed
the cold blue pod of you
back to life
tiny butterfly breaths
not to rupture
your papery husk

he died his quiet
unexpected death
when you were fifteen
you're in your fifties now
wanting what he had
a gentle falling asleep
it seems you always wanted
not to be woken

Leon

I remember you
quiet and lumpy
even on the hottest days
you never took off your blazer

I remember your mother
whispering with our teacher
outside the classroom
their eyes looking away

I remember your eyes
always looking away
from our dusty playground
you died before your bar mitzvah

I remember your eyes
always looking away
but I see you now yes
broad-chested and striding

Konstantinos was right

how Kavafis' lament against prudence
makes me wish I'd let you swim
through Hole In The Wall that time

you're dead now
the hollow extinction of cancer
unimagined on that beach

you might have died
fierce and dangerously happy
like a god

or in old age remembered
the splendour
the crashing the sounding
echoing resounding

breaking bread

the slanting beauty
of my daughter's eyes
and enchanting curve of cheek
beneath a fall of titian
flicked away across her shoulder
keep me at bay
among my grandchildren
whose secret smiles
bring the sudden sunlight
of my daughter's laughter
welling up
to widest full-mouthed loveliness

love is reached
with bread and cheese
across the table
reached received
reached back

II

yes darkness

and light

light of your eyes

light of your heart

light of your thinking

and light light

of your myriad soul

speaking with the light of galaxies

along the breede at witsand

I will stay here on this beach
among the oat grass and plovers
till the smell of salt and renosterbos
turns me into the soft grain
of an old sneezewood fence
leaning away from the wind
and planted parallel with love
in domestic surroundings

I will hang my longing
for the warmth of your hollows
and your long brown back
on the drifting lines of gulls and petrels
along this wide
wild-eyed river
my love will stay pure and redolent
and my arms never grow tired

marriage

lifting the upside-down part
of the butter bell
straight up
instead of gently
tilting it sideways
creates a counter-force
which causes a vacuum
which makes the butter
fall into the water

trimming hedge

at night

the noise of next door's TV

mutes the din

of connubial demolition

whilst by day

the geometricity of a hedge

reassures

tea in the garden

the afternoon tipped
over the rim of her cup
and spilt into her lap
splintered light leapt
at her naked eyes

I thought you knew

the scalding spread indelibly
across her thighs

guest

skittering up my walls
my indoor walls
skittering and scattering up my indoors
my doors can't keep you out
you skittering under
my indoors
through cracks I didn't know
but you but you but
you are the gecko of my night
your shadow looming
you said you said
let's play fly
and gecko

love like ants

what bliss when you go away
I leave the marmalade spoon
all week long
congealing bitter-sweetly
 the way I miss you
for the ants
who like you
connect me
with the secret life
of the earth
beneath my feet

breach

we have breached
 the careful spaces
we built between us
hand over hand
here and here
we have forgotten
how to re-member
 re-collect
we almost
but nothing's too late
 not if we

you're not here

beside me is emptiness
but the night's black
is so velvet
its silence so deep
under the clamour of frogs
I don't feel sad
even though

the smell of warm

the smell of warm
between your neck
and jaw

the taste of rough
on your cheek

the long smooth
of your back

warm rough
smooth between

this morning

this morning it seems
the planes of cheek and jaw
have softened

as if your bones
changed their mind
in the night

as if
the wing of a different angel
is slanting the light

I want to play the guitar

I want to play the guitar
dip my forehead to the strings
as though deep in conversation

I want to bow my body
round its warm wooded curves
as though we were intimate with each other

I want to give voice to my good friend
he taking pleasure in my touch
and I in his rhythmic thrumming resonance

III

highveld triptych**i. on the western edge of johannesburg**

jackals call on the early-morning air
along the jukskei
just shy of lonehill

in the blue distance
lies the magaliesberg
its prehistoric rocks
sheltering the secrets
of an ancient seabed
now turned to bushveld
suikerbos klipels kiepersol karee

ii. highveld winter

the leaves are bright and sharp and clear
against the highveld winter sky
thin bright sharp blue light
white-blue thin bright air
the wind that bends and sways
the ash-blond highveld grass
high and pale and gold
against the naked silent trees
still and black and grey
against the swaying pale dry grass
the wind that shakes the last dry leaves
against the highveld winter sky
the last thin wafers
bright and sharp and clear
against the bright thin winter air

iii. winter sunset on the highveld

a thin transparent sun
slowly gathers strength
as it dips earthward
saturating colour
from sinking light
blazing briefly
honey-gold orange
crimson ruby
 vermillion of last light
 against the coming night

Baviaanskloof

below the crumbling ochre cliffs
and the smell of cooling fynbos
the night is loud
with beetles and nightjars

beyond sound
lies the deep
ancient silence
of the Baviaans
stilling our conversation
at the camp fire

migrations

I open my window
to soft grey rain
and I'm in the north of Spain
years ago in early May

white bones of trees
wet green of leaves
the smell of the river Aragón
the euphoric flight of swallows

here the same swallows
paint our wet October sky

the road between grahamstown and port alfred

the autumn grass grows high
and pink and silver
on both sides of the road
cape honeysuckle nods
a profusion of orange

winter will be late this year
no steppe buzzards on telephone poles
they've all left
but not the swallows
they're still here

a *madala* sags on his stick
his trousers held up with string
he waits with a suitcase
and two small children
their faces scrubbed to gleaming
a tiny withered woman
walks away
a cargo of wood on her head

aloe ferox
bitter aloe
in early flower
just one
perhaps the swallows are right

I stop for a girl
with a child on her back
bathurst? she nods and looks away

the grass grows high
on both sides of the road
a silver pink wave on the wind

after the storm

far up the beach
a large white bird rests
its long neck arching skywards
its wings spread wide
waiting to take flight
from the crest of a dune
sculpted and rippled
by last night's gale

as I walk closer
the white shape transmutes
the storm has uncovered
a long-buried vertebra
of a whale
its wings thrown wide
wide as the broadest reach
of a tall man's arms

close up
the lightly sculpted
chambers and archways
curved and cambered
bring to mind
the finely fashioned
inner spaces
of the human ear

the old man and the sea

every late afternoon
he faces the sea
clutching his arms round his chest
he drops his glasses
in the sand
and strides into the turbulence

he plunges through the darkening
until level with the uttermost
reach of the far-off pier
he turns onto his back
and roars at the sky
his beard a billow of foam

his heart flying blind
against the hutch of his chest

reflection

the sky's reflection swirls
in a gleam of sunlit sand
washed smooth and wet
by running waves

I glide through upside-down-ness
gulls and clouds streaming underfoot

the human skeleton

born of star-like
pure intent

construct of light
and space

bearing with platonic grace
the unheadingness of flesh

seal

the spring tide
brought it to rest
high up the beach
in a long glossy curve
its dog face gentle
its flesh intact
except where the sea
had somehow peeled back
the thick grey gloves of skin
from its flippers
revealing two cradles
of thin white finger bones
delicately jointed

IV

passage

my ears won't walk
to the door
at the end of the passage

they can't hear
the colours of the light
or the tones of darkness

they are afraid of the light
streaming under the door
and the wings of shadow

religion

I rise before the sun
light incense
and a candle

I meditate
and write

I make coffee
and later

I turn into a journalist
a wife a bird
a loaf of bread

I meditate
and write poetry
for a long time
disguised as myself
I visit mountains

the soft green silver of the fish across my brow

(for marike)

will you say my shirt is stein
 my shirt is gertrude stein
 will you say my shoes
 two fish
 two fish my shoes
 as sensible as fish
 will you say my seaweed shirt
 the colour of my seaweed shirt
 the colour of what lies beneath
 the colour of the sea
 the colour of what speaks
 and lies beneath
 the soft green flowing of my scarf
 the dark green flowing water weaving
 the soft green silver of my scarf
 the scarf across my ruby brow
 the quick-quick silver ruby fish
 the underneath and deeply flow
 the quick-quick ruby fish
 and deeply flow
 the weaving through my hair
 and through and through

the soft green darkness of my hair
 the dark green silver of the fish across my brow

to robert berold

you are a rock
in my river robert
directing the flow
this way and that
at the point where I widen
in late middle age

birds land on your back
with beaksful of words
don't rush you say
it will be years
before this river becomes
a fecund vlei of fish and frogs

mangaliso

let my flaming heart
burn to the ground
let cat-thorn wind through my ribs
and crows scour the sockets of my skull
but spare the bones of my writing hand
and let them speak
let the bones speak

to seamus heaney

my salt wept over them
the first time your oyster words
rose with the tide
into the hungry estuary of my ear
I felt the weight of your soul
 the wide migratory flight of a snipe

frank

from my lounge window
the sun on my neighbour's
white-washed wall
gives me a deep longing
as if I remember a long-ago life
on naxos or paros
narrow paved streets
the smell of wild rosemary

maybe it's just frank o'hara
the grecian tilt
of his fine aegean face
dreaming on a bookshelf
in my lounge
his lips slightly open
as if he's just been kissed by pan
or joe or vince

testimony

we're sitting outside
in the shade of a banana tree
reading poetry to each other

I lean back and close my eyes
letting david diop's words
strike me like hard rain

as he caresses
"the mobile bronze
of black women"

I open my eyes and see
the bananas have all turned yellow
in the space of a poem

poeming

do you ask a musician why he sings
or a painter why her fingers aren't brushes
don't ask me why

I poem poem poem

I am a tree

growing leaves flowers fruit

even nests birds (words)

and seeds! seeds! seeds!

creative instinct

fluid feral fish-like
 deeply shifting
 drifting gliding
 sinuous and graceful
 sensuous and savage
 swimming swaying
 this way that
 feral fluid ever-moving
 fish-like thing of fin and scale
 smoothly-muscl'd sheer intent

how it rises rises breaks the surface noses air
 and sunlight breathes kisses
 wet-mouthed wide

down it dives
 plunges down
 dives and turns
 hurtles upwards
 surges into air and light
 dances thrashes
 crashes down
 comes to rest
 gently drifting
 comes to rest

comes to where it knows itself breathes itself feels itself
 a thing of will feral fluid fish-like
 beautiful and still