

“Histoplasmosis” and Other Poems

Histoplasmosis

If after a few weeks you find yourself coughing,
your chest laced in a corset of steel,
tell your doctor you were here.
Tell him about the bats, their investment in the dark,
their droppings spongy fudge
which you probably tramped on in the cave,
the spores you may have breathed
now inhabiting your lung tissue
taking all your breath
for the growing fungus
inside you.

Don't panic. There is medication for this
if you reach an informed doctor early enough.
Your airways can be cleared again,
lungs restored to normal size.
But remember, a bat flew into your body
out of a cave. Your body is now a cave.
Your breath is the way in and out of the cave
its dark entrance the same as
its only exit.¹

¹ First published in
Illuminations, 25 (Summer
2009).

Donkey cart

At rush hour down Prince George Drive,
chain link between the City and the Flats
(not renamed yet to show who's boss),
a donkey cart and its travail of wood
creaks along, at a slow steady pace
driven by two men, brothers it seems,
their cheekbones are related.

Wiry and thin, they refuse to give way
to cars shooting by like guns for hire
and they look straight ahead
as if they own the road or one unlike it –
a rural track in a flat bosomed land –
or as if they own nothing,
neither this place nor that, and so do not
have to give way to traffic here or there
but just keep moving on.

A man limbers up to the lights
in shiny shorts, flexing oiled muscles.
He frowns at the mothy grey donkey
which blocks his way, slows his century.
But it knows about imprecations,
groaning wood, clattering tin,
and does not turn its head. And the brothers,
whose knowledge is donkeys, deliveries,
the need to get off the road
by sunset, travel on in the cart
at an uninterruptible pace,
as runners and cars pass by.

Notation

Late at night, the promised sputter of life,
birth-release, birth-cry,
seems just an imaginary oasis,
a mirror on the horizon,
and she another camel of indifference.

Could it be that inside her pregnant self
an emerald dial on the body's alarm clock
gives signals and direction,
flashes a semaphore of comfort
to the silent unborn in the filtered dark?

At the beginning, the stillness inside was
a candle wick in a vast station,
one waiting passenger fast asleep.
Then her body donned an apron.
Its big pockets muffled sound.

Later there was muzzled movement
as mute life surfed the veins,
breathing underwater,
soundlessly splashing,
a surfboard's curve against the belly's skin.

Finally a heavy counterpane
lies on her body implacably.
Can life, can song, break from this weight?
Oh becalmed boat in an unsounded sea
will some small body ever gasp or shout?

Shards

Near the Cradle of Humankind
Magaliesberg, South Africa

1. Early

Night's cold spittle
has tipped tall grasses.

Pools of cool light
bathe our eyes for an hour

as reeds weave
baskets out of morning air.

A moorhen's four chicks
are balls of soot across her bow.

The brown hyena was here
but has gone to its lair

its spoor fading fast
on the hardening path.

How still the present is
on this windless day

before heat reverberates
and rain clouds gather,

the only sound so far
the drone of tractors

excavating new roads
out of the past's dusty reservoir.

2. Caught in a thunderstorm

In a sudden gust of wind
a thud of acorns hits the ground
surprising us but not as much as

thunder's warning shot

just before rain delivers
its perpendicular blows

penetrating the rocks
as well as the dam water
and our own thin clothes.

Upright Egyptian geese
don't shiver at all
stolid nursemaids of pharaohs

and of baby Moses
asleep in his reed basket
as he floats through the sedge into history.

3. *Cradle on the ridge*

As the rain falls we think of roofs,
walls, we think about shelter

and the half-discovered cave
on the dolomite ridge nearby,

a crib that rocked our fallen ancestors,
sedimented eyeless prophets

of the land and weather
and what we would end up doing to them.

4. *Dreaming in a new place*

It is not as if old dreams depart
like foot soldiers recalled to another front
while wives knit socks, roll bandages

but new dreams do sunder in a different way,
break into shards – sliver of moon, arrow, ankle bone,
stone rattle, whitened horn.²

² First published in
Illuminations, 25 (Summer
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Thunderstorm in the city

The smell of gunpowder at high noon
warns us of war in the heavens
and by mid afternoon the cloud putti
start pouting, blow and spit
seductively, childishly, whichever you prefer
(which is the cartoon god with the full cheeks?)

Then a local god, say Soho Eckstein,
or a highveld producer with dark jowls,
projects light into lightning shards,
and the razor sharp glass
of comic strips and cut-throats
serrates the clouds

While in the same or maybe the next act
sound machinery behind the stage
becomes the stage: drums roll,
boom and batter

Till stones cast from the sky's slingshot
shatter windscreens, scatter pedestrians,
pile up ersatz diamonds on the pavements
and then rain is a thousand lashes,
flays the skin of the city
burns the hail, incinerates roots
and down jacaranda-purpled streets
washes away soil,
blood and evidence, for a minute, an hour,
no one can ever tell how long

Because the resurrecting sun flares back
through the clouds, a quick change artist
illuminating neon with letters like teeth missing,
golden texts no one can interpret
over the city's buildings and alleys

And from tin roofs and tar
the familiar smell of rusted dust rises
as the city brushes away again
its burning furious tears.