

Monument to the South African Republic
(on some photographs by David Goldblatt)

The long dry grass collects our history
and every few years burns it off
in a frenzy of memory.

Here it grows for two policemen who died
for the same cause, in Afrikaans and Zulu,
and who lie in heartfelt English
among broken cans and paper scraps
the grass has gathered for them,
for my lovely husband, from his lovely wife and children.

And here, around a modest stone obelisk,
memorial to the dead republic
erected on the day of its birth, the grass sways its long stalks
dried to the colour of biblical corn, sifting the summer wind
that brings grains of brick, cement,
old seeds and dog hairs to form a carpet
for the sparrows that visit, the tramps who sleep here –
for the town has understood to build
its street of chain stores and municipal offices
leading in the other direction, away from this
weathered, semi-literate scrap of older time.

In a graveyard a white concrete arch
loses its letters one by one leaving their grey shadows
behind like stains, vow of the dead soldiers
who came to rest here in a flag-shaped myth,
and the grass leaves a bare gravel patch
naked to the sun lest we forget, lest we forget
how nothing grows from such valour.

But just beyond the borderline of thirsty eucalyptus trees
it grows again, long and soft and ready to catch
someone's cigarette, some beer bottle splinter
smouldering there after a raucous night of farewells
and burn fast, and lay itself down as ash over the past.