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Selected Poems

Janet Hujon

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Selected Poems

Acknowledgements

Despite all the evils of colonisation, the author is indebted to the English language which gave her entry into other worlds of the imagination: the St. James Bible, Shakespeare, Marlowe, Donne, Ted Hughes, Gillian Clarke, Robert Macfarlane, Lorca, Machado, Darwish, Raja Shehadeh, Steinbeck, Tennessee Williams and most of all Pablo Neruda. Happily, the list continues to lengthen. Reading, writing and translating helps Hujon to discover the human voice telling of those joys and sorrows common to us all without each rendition losing that unique freshness springing from a certain time and place.

Selected Poems

Janet Hujon

Snatched from Time: A Lizard, a Fox and a Doe

I look...

From the cool dark of the house

Your soft wave flesh of pewter grey

Ease on a leafless branch

Your tapering tail

Pure weighted stillness

A paper knife slit

In a soft wide sky

Silence replete

Contentment stretched out

Fingers of warmth

Stroke the length of your body

Beyond the reach of mist and cloud

In steamy paddy fields below

Long abandoned, running wild

I step out...

You twitch, you turn

Streak down the trunk

Smooth slide into the dense unknown

A country you know

A jungle to me

I turn back to the house which was meant to be

A refuge from failure

A memorial to survival

A house of dreams...

Just a spare construction

A couple of rooms with somewhere to wash

An emptiness hurting so much to be filled

Foundations emerged from soil laterite red

Spaces on walls very soon became windows

Overhead rafters a skeleton hunkering

Strained and taut desiring to be fleshed
But first a prayer to the Maker above
'To set free a path', as so often they say.
An old man intoned the appropriate blessing
'Protect this house from the evil one
From the scourge of wind, the lash of rain
Preserve all those who live in it'
'Those' who are neighboured by the hillside fox
Lying low in the day, but if watchful you'll see
A red-gold silhouette, sunset-framed
A stark frozen moment
Slinking back into black
From whose depths soon arise
A crescendo of howls
A harmony deep in the cathedral of night

'Those' who might see an unlucky doe
Stray into the spaces now denied to her tribe
Tempted by tendrils green teased by the wind
Food for a mother eating for two
Her lips reaching up
Her body full stretched
She was looking for life
Yet what hope did she have
Against men carrying guns who were protecting their crops

I watched her final un-choreographed movements
No easy bounds, no flying leaps
Sinew and muscle now tense and trapped
Skittering legs scratching circles decreasing
Grinding down to a halt as she hit the ground dancing

I turned away then
Not wishing to see
Blood spurting beads
Clotting black in the heat
Dark rubies on pelt
An offering discarded
A torn broken necklace
Forever unstrung
The foetus emerged from the warmth of the womb
Trimmed neatly by knives that were sharpened to carve

I went away then to some other time
In search of new memories to rehouse myself

I Wanted to Bring You...

I wanted to bring you
Each morning's diamond light
The stirring hush of wind in trees
Rising and fading...
Rising and fading...
I wanted to bring you
The black reined-in fury of monsoon clouds
Burgeoning huge over the crests of hills
Darkening out the rest of the world
Until a fanfare of thunder
Crashed them open
Freeing familiar mighty rains
Whipped up by the white goddess
Whose silver sword ripped the sky,
Starting that summer drumming
On the town's tin roofs

I wanted to lift and fold that shawl of mist,
See it hang-soft from your shoulders
Until burned away by the heat of the sun.

I wanted to bring
The tender beams of fireflies
To garland our dark wintry doorways
I wanted you to see
The bamboo's gentle grace
And the dazzle-green of sunlit grass
Enter the quiet secret of pine forests
Tread carefully through rain soaked paths
In tropical jungles wild with living
Feel the yield of clover-dense lawns
Spiked with blades of tough wet grass
Hear cave-caw crows in the high eucalyptus

There where patches of peacock-blue sky
Peer between marble smooth branches
Washed a faint smooth pink

I wanted you to see
A quiet flock of sparrows pecking for food
On ground laid bare by a hand-held scythe
Wielded by one who could not hear
His blade crunch grass
But could smell its fresh unbottled tang
As he haunched his way across overgrown lawns
Without disturbing a pair of visiting mynahs
Dressed in middle-aged composure
At ease with each other
No longer seeking society's assurance
Ignoring the bulbuls' cheeky antics
Those red-bottom flashes
And gleaming black mohican crests
As they turned and spun on the blighted branch
Of the lonely araucaria
Pining for his friends in a faraway continent
While all the time the waterfall bird
Rasps the air with its warning cry

I wished you could have watched
Courting butterflies dance in space
Their pitch black wings stroked peacock blue
Marble-white or yellow
Tapered elegance scallop-edged
Intense quivering of shivers
Thrilling to an ecstasy
Endlessly played out in flight

To strains of beckoning and evasion
So near and yet so far
Yes I wanted to bring you
What I once took for granted
Until the road to the hills
Began singing her song
Dark with bewilderment and sorrow
Telling tales of vanishing forests
Lost rivers and streams
And of waterfalls unknown, unnamed
Dying, dead
Ribbons of white and foaming green
Once tumbling down with the impatient freshness
Of joyful greeting.
I saw gentle green slopes
Being blasted, carved, levelled, crushed
To make way for development
As we rush towards that finishing line
Panting for air along narrow streets
Filled with poison-pumping cars
In a city whose rotting reeking heart
Stays barely alive
To compete in a race
That will never be won
Because children of the 21st century
Have closed their eyes and shut their ears
To the din of earth movers, mining equipment
And shady deals struck by rich local barons
Whose indelible signatures
Slash and scar the countryside.

And yet they preach salvation from the pulpit
While sanctioning death for the land?



Gail de Cordova, *I Wanted to Bring You*. Ink, pastel, and pen on paper, 2016.

King of the Underworld – U‘Seiñiong’

Protected in our metal cage
Secure in our clamour
We were stunned into silence
By a solo performance
Smooth slow silent sublime.

A jet black rope of synchronised muscle
Lowered itself on the tarmac ahead
Gentle neck stretches
Delicate dance movements distilling the air
Drawing in space.

The Greater Black Krait
Oil poured from a tube
Stream-gliding his way
Across the width of the road.

U ‘Seiñiong
Feared King of the Underworld
His name always voiced
With a capitalised ‘U’
Assigned only to beings
Whose might is not measured
Only fearfully imagined
Like those greatest of rivals
Satan and God.

This was his country, we the invaders
Day-trippers on roads parcel-stringing the jungle
Those signatures of ownership, boundary markers

Imposed by inhabitants who can’t simply belong
Like those who still have the freedom to roam
Who seek warmth from the sun, sanctuary in shadow.

Our fingers began mentally girthing his bulk
Our brains recoiled shrinking
From the paralysis of venom
‘Grind him!’ we cried hysterical with fear
‘Grind him!’ we screeched from a terror imagined
The engine breathed deeply, revved to prepare



Gail de Cordova, *King of the Underworld*. Ink, pastel, and pen on paper, 2016.

And four wheels humped slowly over pulsating flesh
Triumphant we turned eager to see
A pulverised tangle of guts laced with blood
But a black U-turn curve, a neat horse-shoe shape
Had decided to go back to his forest retreat
Unknown unmapped familiar safe.

“Again!” we cried “Again!”
Natural born killers lusting to hear
The crunching of bones, the squelching of flesh
Focused on grinding him down into dust
But innocence was spared - he melted away
While our tongues and our mouths vainly twist to spit out
The furtive flat taste of stubborn shame lurking
Waiting as ooze under layers of refinement
The dregs of a fear that poisoned our senses
Clouded our vision, made vicious our hearts
Creatures in thrall to the savagery within
Trespassers in jungles born deep back in time.

Janet Hujon grew up in Shillong when it was still the capital of Assam. She was still there when the tribal homeland of the Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo people was recognised as an autonomous state named Meghalaya. After completing her MA at the North Eastern Hill University (Shillong), she continued her formal education at the Universities of Cambridge and London where she attained a PhD in English Literature. She currently lives in Cambridge with her children, working part-time and writing part-time. Memories of the past both solace and disturb the author’s experiencing of the present. The gentle landscapes of the Khasi Hills have always nourished her spirit and the powerful telling of stories she heard as a child continue to fire her imagination. The Khasi value systems, proudly and poignantly expressed by the Khasi poet Soso Tham, form the foundation of her literary efforts and influence her world view.

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Endnote

1. Bungurus Niger—U ‘Seiñiong—the black snake. The literal translation ‘black snake’ is a tepid description. Only the Khasi use of the honorific ‘U’ succeeds in conveying the awesome dread aroused by this creature who, I feel, justly deserves his title—‘King of the Underworld.’