

TOGARA MUZANENHAMO

From *Spirit Brides*

The poems in this selection are taken from Muzanenhamo's 2006 volume of poems, *The Spirit Brides*.
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From Nationalist Archives

2. The Servant Girl's Red Hat

The Minister of Home Affairs always played American music on his car radio,
Had an Austrian girlfriend and often thought of living in Krakow or Warsaw;
So it was only plausible then, that he turn right at the traffic lights – onto
The street he usually travelled when leaving the capital for his country house.

As he changed gear, he realised his chauffeur lay curled up on the back seat.
The fucker! he thought, must have fallen asleep the night before - most likely
Up to something with the new servant girl. Suddenly his driver's heavy
Snoring appalled him as the turning to the village of his country house passed.
In forty minutes they would be at the most rural border post, the guards
There could never have known his face.

All morning there had been mass suicides on a grand scale. It wasn't encouraged
But the public felt obliged to show their allegiance to the dissembled crown.
Frederic – the silent man who ran the government – personally assisted
With most of the deaths and had the Prime Minister sign each death certificate.
He also ordered all the burials to be at sea and broadcast live on state radio.

Of course the Minister of Home Affairs had objected to all this, but soon found
His wife knew much more than he did before he could go public. And after his car
Passed through the border he kept thinking to himself as he accelerated down
The narrow country road, How careless to drive so fast and want so much so freely.

3. Liberation

This is how water flies, whole shapes of liquid light, hovering, descending, pulling up and taking
to air – gracefully, without any immediate organic strain

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The iris contracts for the millionth time, a vessel shooting away into quiet, a shape vanishing into
a warm journey, as fluent as water

Views without Buildings

The basil wilts near the rockery where the cactus melted back with disease,
The papaw tree falls in on itself, doubled over near the compost heap.
Heat, and the kingfisher dives to the earth,
The pair of crows shot last week still flood the yard with calls – great black blasts of sound
echoing through the trees,
The sweat of their death rising from the compost.
Last night – a dream of the jackal hobbling through the early hours, not calling but circling a field
where stumps of graves are lost in tall grass, where shadows in the moonlight bear no claws;
The frightened jackal cowering to the wind,
Everything listening, fields of ears.
And after three calves went missing, then found the next morning all torn apart – five jackals
came across the laced meat,
The morning sun carelessly revealed them on the short new growth of grass, on tufts of green
above the black ash of last week's fire. All lay close to each other – a true partnership of the
night, pelts covered in ash, their small bodies dunned by the blunt nocturnal end.

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The blood-crew are always eager for the meat,
They'll find the rope and an adequate tree.
Dawn, and the axe-handler's easy with his steel –
Sharpening the blade on a wet slab of concrete.

The tether slackens when the thud cleaves the meat,
Steel meeting bone – guttural songs of a slit throat
Flushing up dust then flooding the soil with blood
As its hooves stride in the air, sky-walking to death.

And death here is as tender as the new sunlight
Or soft strips of fresh flesh twitching in a plate –
Soon skewered on a makeshift spit and placed
Over a fire. A grave is briskly dug in the distance –

Wet dust heaving out of a hole with gilded breaths,
Women busy around fires with pots of tainted steam;
For now no wailing, the blood-crew skinning the cow –
The axe-handler, axe aside, blade dulling the sunlight.

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They have no names.
For decades and generations tractors ploughed around them,
Harvesters – rumbled their foundations. Wind and rain wiped their names clean.
A whole family clustered beneath the evergreen shade of the karee tree,
Dark as night at mid afternoon, where the odd stray cow strains its neck to reach the leaves
In the blunt gold of a late September's harvested wheat.
No-one really knows who the nameless are, and around these silent stones the seasons pass,
And only once has anyone encountered recent visitors:
Years ago, an urban car with three elderly women dressed in mourning, and a boy about five,
drove down to the site,
All afternoon they shuffled around the headstones, picking leaves from the tree.

The Small Room

The men with the same face are talking all at once,
One is a theorist, another is a theorist,
The rest are all theorists.

Behind the unsealed door a masked man listens –
The sophist with club in hand,
He too is a theorist. And somewhat drunk.

What name shall I give the deaf man
Who closes his eyes and places
His fingers in his ears –
Neither wise nor foolish,
Perhaps intelligent.

He faces the outward view of the same
Street which the blind man, beneath
The balcony, has discovered and rediscovered
Over the years with his hand over his mouth.

And eyes bursting open.

Late Night and the Road

i

From the homestead, after midnight, the faint sound of travelling trucks can be heard – droning up and down the highway. It's easy to imagine the weighted trailers hauled along the empty road; fog lights on, some yellow - others green and a flared silver horn on the top of the truck, silently sucking in the wind, gathering the polished sound for when it's blown.

ii

Drivers eating meat-pies, listening to radio shows hosting phone-ins at three in the morning, or playing games to pass the time - counting the centre white lines or cat's-eyes, trying to figure out how many pass within ten seconds or so, how many pass in a mile.

The dim-lit cockpits sometimes fill with sleep, for some distance drivers doze off then come to – to see tiny emerald globes in the roadside brush, or another truck pass with a stranger also tired at the wheel.

iii

Throughout the night the sound is amplified. Long groans trail in then haul out, the late sound of ghostlike metal expanding and contracting in the dark. The thoughts of shadows travelling on their own, along the shadowed course of the road.

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'Amphibians for tar - fish swimming up and down the road with engine-roar in their slipstream coming off in bubbles of raw noise. Migrating fishes following the order of a path -spawning eggs in a town's belly then re-routing back to the city from where they came. Metal fish with nylon smooth scales carrying young to the creek depot where commerce hatches - the hull an empty womb of trailored iron, the lightness in return; all this to do it all again with the contract of the next season. And perhaps, a goodyear.'

Petals

From a distance, a bundle of branches, leaves and wild flowers: a makeshift hazard-sign when cars break down. A man stood directing traffic to the shoulder of the road. As drivers approached they decreased their speed – some, for a moment, stopped. On the roadside, the chaos of a gathering crowd.

As I drew in, the swaddled colours of green, pink, and brown became the uniform and skin of a child. Her head covered – a stream of blood flowing to the scattered pages of a schoolbook she carried. The wind lifted and tossed the pages on the road. Some white, some red.

Strangers

That we're not here for any short hour he comes to the car,
Leans on the roof,
And thrusts his head in through the window;
Some easy phrases between strangers you'd expect to hear in a bar.

A few questions:
How long we thought we'd wait,
The delivery –
How many litres?
What the individual rationing was,
Whether or not I thought we'd fill our cars.

All tanks here should be on 'E' by his accounts,
And though it seems stupid that we should expect anything,
He says it'll be alright;
His own tank siphoned,
Container and hose in his boot;
Him smelling of fuel.
No questions if he's doing the hoarding-run.

He goes round to the other side,
Opens the door and casually steps in.
Picks the paper off the back seat –
Talks as he's reading.
Not a care.
Says he has a cooler-box packed with beers on the back of his car.
I tell him I have cigarettes.
Says his brother's a good laugh,
And brought him along for the wait.

So we sit –
Two other nameless men,
From another car,
Join us –
Doors open,
Listening to other people's radios;
Drinking,
Laughing –
As the queue slowly moves,
Snaking round the bend to the out of sight petrol station –
All of us taking our turn,
Pushing each other's cars every so often.

The first man's brother,
A travelled man,
Mentions a cookbook with recipes for whole meals prepared beneath the bonnet of any car.
Says it's something you do on a long drive.
Harare to Nyamapanda –
A good stew with fluffy rice.
Someone mentions a journey to South Africa –
Then talk of the cricket,
The World Cup and how the boys are faring,
Then the news.
An awkward silence,
No one says what they're thinking,
Realising we're amongst strangers.

But back to simpler things,
The first man's brother tells us all about his portable four-inch television.

For a long time the cars do not move,
And like a descending flag comes sunset.
Through word of mouth we hear the petrol's all out,
And a truck has been ordered to fill up the station's tanks the next day or the day after that.
Phones come out to call wives.
That night and two nights after that,
Blankets on back seats and packed dinners –
The days spent huddled around a portable screen the size of a fist,
Cold beers in the sun –
And no funny-talk,
Promising to get the garden done.

Oxygen

He had forgotten the old life and felt complete, here in this intellectual cult of oxygen. One day, he thought, I will teach here –
But on this day he was determined to learn as he sat, listening.

His favourite speaker spoke, made him think of the world – and he thought how he'd eventually change everything.
That night he burnt all his belongings, thought purely from then on, not wavering from the texts and teachings.

At meetings they called him Cenotaph because his eyes held the fire of their long lost dead, and the spirit of those still fighting.