

Man Nini

Man Nini was queen of the coal kitchen,
standing within six square feet of soot,
in front of four pits glowing with embers,
churning the bubbling bean sauce, beaming

the yellow kernels of her smile at the chickens
flapping in the loose ashes below, strung
together by the feet with sisal,
their furious claws resembling the old

people's toe nails. She sighed as she sat
on a low straw chair, the heat-lacquered
columns of her black legs folded in a squat,
her soiled apron caught between her knees

forming a valley just below the wrinkled
mound of the belly, to sort out
peas, the good, the diseased, though all
grew round together in the same pod.

When she took off the flowered scarf she wore,
Man Nini's hair resembled rice paddies,
with traced avenues on her scalp that
glistened like the moist red earth

of Kenskoff Mountain in soft fog. The remnants
of frizzy white down were gathered
into inch-long, upright, puffed-up braids
which, in the darkness of the windowless

kitchen, seemed the luminous gathering
of her ancestors' will-o'-the-wisps, filled
with murmurs about the secrets of her strength,
joy, and the sweetness of the food she cooked.

Family House

The house was green and white.
Coconut trees fanned themselves
over the termite-hollowed balcony.
Thus eaten from within,
the house felt unstable.

Under the rafters, bats
huddled upside down.
Fearing for my hair,
I covered my head.

The mirror in the dining room
with its twisted gold frame
answered back the same
mistrustful look.

Mother wore green and lipstick.
She always cried for the bronze angel
we left in the other house,
the angel that pissed water
into the children's pool.
She glued cut-out flowers
from different fabrics
onto the walls and furniture.
She pasted her poetry all over the house
the way other people scrawl
graffiti in public toilets.

Frog

If it could be done, would you want
to be made into a frog?
If it meant having a thin-boned spine,
gray-green humid skin that feels
the sting of any slight insect you might
otherwise gobble and swallow,
sit the world apart
in a wide, four-legged sweaty squat,
the beating of your heart showing in your throat,
and yet be able to leap
a distance many times your own measure.

If it meant you can enter water
more vast than your body can ever swim through and,
nevertheless relaxed, arms and legs stretched open,
like a molecule afloat,
round eyes absorbing the world
through greenish inner screens that draw
towards and within you
the soft slithering silk of water's surface,
the slosh and sway of high palm leaves,
defiant birds gathered in the immense blue and,
even then, still be able to stare at the sun.

And if it also meant you could dive deep in the far depth of the water,
go down, down to where there is no bottom, none to feel or reach,
down to an infinity of movement that requires no breath.

If it could be done and it meant you would
know love, would you come,
to be born a Man? Or even, woman?

Marilène Phipps-Kettlewell

Birds

Sky and dreams share the same limitless screen.
Brave birds live there, they fashion themselves in our image.
Their laughter carries over vast distances.
Like thoughts about the coming Fall, they suddenly
migrate in hordes from the invisible heavens,
flying in uneven strips of dotted black lace.

Luminous clouds gather above, unreachable,
but all can be held in a single drop of rain,
as it falls into the palm of our hand.
Our mind seeks sleep, while we only need
our heart to see
the immaterial face we love.

Is it ever understood
that a family on earth is only birds, partners in play,
shrill and driven by the chance of streams,
held by the strength of their wings?

Is it ever understood
that each one of us is but a bird
choosing, or not, to rest in the dream-thought
of another's heart,
halted in its flight for a while down below?

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On Good Friday

The long black line of livestock in a procession towards the slaughterhouse
resembles that made by monks who walk to the altar in silence,
two by two
like Noah's chosen:
they kneel down three times on the way,
and prostrate themselves each time.

At last, they espouse the earth at the foot of the cross
which they kiss with thin, offered lips,
thus making out of death in which they see themselves,
find and join each other,
the Arch that lifts them,
saves them out of the terrestrial malediction,
and leads them to a place more propitious to true life.

Wild rabbits or mice, we are hardly better—easily frightened,
we flee from all that presents itself as greater than us,
as shadow, as image, as gesture.
Yet we too must go one day
beyond ourselves,
and realize at last what in fantasies and rites we had already
accomplished—to live the death that demands the gift
of a live heart that knows how to expand
within a body that knew only how to shrink.

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