

Aida. F. Santos

BEYOND THE BUSH

(for G.)

1

Beyond the bush
 memories fly
 across the furrowed forehead
 of an ex-exile.
 It is almost spring
 at the limestone shore
 of Cape Town.

'...and I saw through
 the bush, village lights
 in the night
 laughter escaping
 from well-lit homes
 and I wondered
 why they were up, the night
 is full of danger
 but something stirred, I
 touched the joy
 inside me, something burned..'

'...I hadn't seen children
 for a long time, and women, too
 once there was a child
 and I cradled her in my arms
 suddenly, I realized
 what life is all about.'

Beyond the bush, my friend
 and comrade, life is much more
 complex
 than firing a gun
 or paratrooping to bomb
 the enemy's headquarters.
 Your life is held at bay
 frozen by a command:
 'time for negotiations,
 the armed struggle is suspended.'
 And I wonder,
 how does a soldier re-shape
 life beyond the bush?

3

Beyond the bush
 the options are linear
 and traditional: find a woman,
 get her pregnant
 marry her, and in your case,
 take care of a sick father
 look after a younger brother
 attend clandestine meetings
 feel unfrozen in the midst
 of a cycle of pained
 hopelessness, beyond the bush.

4

Comrade, the revolution goes on
 steadfast in its aim,
 and liberation must go on
 in our daily lives.
 But I still ask:
 have you taken time
 to catch a lost childhood,
 to feel other people
 as people, not only as comrades
 in arms, have you mended
 your tattered soul beyond the bush?

5

'I don't own myself
 the revolution owns me
 as it did.'
 I ask, can the revolution
 own a man
 who does not own himself?

- Aida F. Santos, 1992

VAW

in a meeting:

i sit in a corner
 puffing my deadly winston
 chest breathing unevenly
 vaw, all caps
 a synonym for memories

cull data from battered women
 case histories of incest
 train counselors
 train the police
 train the lawyers
 train the men
 train all of us
 to listen
 to the cries of the bodies
 pounded, legs torn apart
 children's moans
 caught between the pillows
 while fathers, brothers
 uncles, kin respected
 hover, unseen knives
 between their legs

my sisters speak of violence
 against women
 'such and such said...'
 'in a book i read...'
 'this woman told me...'
 'oh, what a terrible story...'
 'the conference gave out papers...'
 'i've spoken to one survivor...'
 'we've got to put up a support
 group...'
 'we support each other...'

i sit, a shadow in a corner
 puffing my deadly winstons
 overwhelmed by theories
 i, a living memory
 mother of another
 i go home, silent.

- Aida F. Santos, 1992

Aida. F. Santos

BUREAU OF IMMIGRATION, MANILA

Sitting here on the cheap
vinyl-covered hard chairs
is like being in hell.
"The officer is out,
but will be back soon..."
says the assistant,
a standard line
mockery of time.
Men are napping
on squeaking swivel chairs
foam desperately poking through
the beaten arm-rest.
Sleazy characters
move in and out:
A bureaucrat sits his shoes on a table
suffocating with business cards
imprisoned under a heavy glass;
a lawyer in a beige linen suit
armpits profusely perspiring
chubby hands adorned
by two obscenely-big diamonds
voice booms of tales
of drunken nights in sleazy bars
where he said he had his women;
a travel agent in a greyish barong
is smiling to himself
as he devours the haggard-looking secretary;
another man in a blue shirt
speaks in hushed tones about AIDS
and Filipino nurses in Saudi
prostituted
as they pore greedily through
the semi-pornographic tabloid;
an errand boy
with a big scar across his cheek
tries to undress me with his looks
and I stare back, going through
his coagulated brain and bulging front
quickly, he drops his eyes as quickly as he flicks
cigarette ash on the shabby carpeted floor.

The secretary pounds feverishly
on an old, tired manual typewriter
moved by the songs on Jesus from the karaoke in the lobby, Christmas spirit
and everybody's feeling Christian.
Paper bills are thrust into
her hands, smiles are exchanged
between a slit-eyed man
and the secretary who bows
a little bit, mildly embarrassed
but pushes the bills into her drawers.

Part time, and we sit still.
Bosses come out of their cubicles.
Bureaucracy croaking at its seams
and the posters on the walls scream:
"No bribes allowed."
Robots of poverty, lords of power
greed oozes like pus
women smile through the sexist jokes
powerlessness painfully plastered on painted faces.
The ceiling has one gaping hole
like a hole in the brain
of this monstrous institution.
Christmas is here, said another
but I can't feel the spirit,
making a peso sign.

This is corruption supreme
grafted into each little corner.
Bribes breathe, bastards bribe
my stomach feels sick.
We ask for coffee, sure, sure
and a greasy cup with lukewarm instant appears
and we wait, for that signature
that perhaps will not come today

- Aida F. Santos, 1991

notes on love

if we must say goodbye
it should be like a kiss
gentle and warm
passionate but not pained
we are both women
we know the contours
of our grief

in loving and leaving
we must harvest joys
like blooms in may
lining the alleyways
in places quite unlikely
along the path
littered with rubbish
a bougainvillea shoots up
pink flowers
daring the smog
of this city's mornings

- Aida F. Santos, 1992

Aida. F. Santos is an award winning Filipino feminist poet
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Kathleen Maltzahn

My Mother Tends the Earth

you

In England during the food rationing of the 40s, people were given "allotments" - small plots of land often in highly industrialized areas to cultivate to make up for the food shortages

My mother tends the earth
like her mother before her
a farmer

Once
city-transplanted
my grandmother
borrowed a piece of land
government-given
and tried to grow
greens
and reds
then gone in war-hacked England

She could not

In Manchester
she plowed and planted and waited
and nothing came
No shoots
Until she remembered the last winter
with farmers' eyes and mind

Salt in the slushy snow
to move it on
to melt it down
had flowed into the earth
for countless years
Her allotment was lost
as desert as African tales
So she got another,
again government-given
and dug again
to eat greens
and reds

On the other side of the earth
my mother turns the story over

She yanks greens and reds from dirt
night after night
tending this ungodly grave
keeping it clean and bare, not
green

She has forgotten that her tears
could wash away the weeds
though maybe too his plot

- Kathleen Maltzahn, 1994

If the rough
edges of my heart
chafe you
hand it back to me

and I will weigh it in my palm
like a firm green apple
ripe for the eating
and then, taking this
old fruit peeler
plastic red
I will peel away, slice away
its calloused skin in one long loop
and give it back to you
virgin
soft, stripped of hardness, new
then will I please you?

- Kathleen Maltzahn, 1994

Regenerations

The generations stop with me
They say silence is broken
but it is not
It is peeled away, clawed away with
broken finger nails
The nails heal
The skin might not

- Kathleen Maltzahn, 1994

Kathleen Maltzahn is an Australian working in the Philippines as a co-worker of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP).

The poems by Kathleen Maltzahn are published for the first time, for inquiries please contact Isis International, Manila.