

PROPHETS

KWAME DAWES



P E E P A L T R E E

PROLOGUE

To write her I construct enigma
in my leaping metaphors, for the
poem dictates its own logic and

mystery. I have an investment
in this tale – she is the prophetess 5
whose finger, pointed, stirred bumps

on my flesh; she is the voice that
spoke my name while I sat, eyes closed
in the congregation, secure as

victim, broke and hungry as never 10
before, my stomach growling;
maybe it was the cake of tears

in my eye-corner that she saw,
or the sway of my broken body
which made her prophesy my need, 15

but the miracle of gifts offered,
the promise of a meal and debts paid,
made doubt a sin of ingratitude.

It is this my priestess of the pure,
whose eyes I dared not look into 20
for fear that my constant indiscretions

would be seen and revealed,
this daughter of holiness who fell
so impossibly hard into the thighs

of unbelievers, it is she whose poem
now translates itself here. And I
confess my reluctance to let her go 25

as she was, blue dress and white head-tie
in the corner of the room,
with a soft voice that never 30

lifted beyond the drab monotone,
whose every movement was a sign.
Here, in yet another

of my squalid indiscretions,
having forgotten the overwhelming
sweetness of control over the elements, 35

the dialogue with the supernatural,
having forgotten the security
of sinlessness, the sure path

of daily guidance of the spirit 40
turning in my head – turn left
or right, go forward or back –

here, in this barren city of silence,
I reach for her tarnished flesh,
pull back, afraid to be found out, 45

and then dare to imagine her coupling
in the blackness of the beach,
her coming, that same mouth

saying, "Harder, harder, harder."
I am seeking clues, some explanation 50
that will reveal the sleight-of-hand

of this fundamentalist miracle,
something to make me look
better than a gullible fool.

And yet, from a ladder in the clouds, 55
her memory descends mysterious
and miraculous in its detail.

This poem shapes its own peculiar metaphors,
its own demanding regimen of faith,
and Clarice the prophetess glows the more. 60

I know now that she did have wings,
brilliant multicoloured plumes
that lifted her above the squalor and muck.

PART ONE

CHAPTER I

Introit

Goats chewing almond seeds
daub their sweat into the pale blue wall;
they scamper from the congregation coming

in a wave of perfumes and too much cologne,
in casual brights and patent leather, 5
bibles tucked like swords under their arms.

Clarice's make-up is minimal; the mascara
thin under the red eyelid. She is in
reverie. The visions are already spinning.

In her blue chiffon dress and white head-tie, 10
she carries her virgin body like a saint,
the prayers turning in her bright morning eyes.

It is the journey there that torments her,
through the poverty and squalor beyond the wall
separating this hibiscus-red avenue from the shack 15

and shingle of the spreading ghettos
where her father's dust-worn blackness fades
into the shadow and grey of the smoke yards.

Head forward, it is the reaching only that she sees.
Her mantle of importance is her light. "Good mornings" 20
are guarded; the brothers keep their righteous distance.

The slick “off-the-wharfs” car breathes in Sunday morning’s
blossoming. Poinsettias bleed
on the riot of green. It is the birthing season,

and pregnant sisters pray for a Christmas baby. 25
The brothers who have come to pick her up
and carry her to the gathering know she will

flail them with her revelations of their straying souls,
so no foul imaginings enter their fertile minds
on the slow drive through Kingston’s satellite suburbs. 30

Clarice stands in the spill of shade and light
of the sprawling mango trees which darken the old grey
cement, the leaning tombstone of the Castleberrys,

white landed aristocrats with their St. Andrew
lilt of an accent, who called their souls 35
Jamaican years before the slaves had Africa ripped

from their dreamings and heaven flights.
Sunday strolls casual as this magic of ghosts
wavering in the light dispersal of seed.

The brothers recite their verses to ward off 40
the lust, seeing Clarice like that, her curve of breast
and wet, dipped lips, the glow of moistness

on her ochre soft face. The rolled-down windows
temper the bite of her perfume, and the car noses
silent through the wrought gates, into the city’s 45

Sunday dream. All in silence past the
antennae of steel and babel metal of the madman's
shrine on Hope Road, they eye his red daze

and say a prayer for his tormented soul. Too late
now to stop for the casting out of demons; the congregation 50
is waiting, and Clarice is never late.

ii

The gravel driveway is strewn with goats'
droppings of olive green and black;
cane trash sucked dry-dry and coconut husks

litter the parking lot, spilling from the grilled
doorway of the Guild Building. In the air the stale renk 5
of spilt Red Stripe, curdling vomit, ganja and

sweat is thick as in the drifting carcass of an old slaver
after the liberation of the encumbered souls.
This is the hangover of Saturday night's rites of carnival

release before the righteous glare of Sunday penance: 10
that slow deliberate march to the chapel door
where the congregation rocks its own lamentations.

Inside, the tiles are slippery with brown glass sparkling
under the swelling sun, frothing Guinness and a yellowed
sea of spilled curried goat. Shifting mountains 15

of flies dance around the gnawed remains
of boiled flesh and bones, the finely grained white
rice. The goats bleat their remembrances in the yard.

Before long, the hallelujah chorus will startle
this stale cloud of carnival and the sweep of prophecies 20
will clear the air. With new intoxications, the congregation

will wheel and tambourine away the yawning spirits
who have overslept, hungover like this, wincing at the scream
in the electric air, the knocking of the fans

dangerously turning above the clapping and singing. 25
Clarice picks her way through the debris of sin
and bows in prayer while the brothers broom

the mess into mounds to be burned: pyres of sacrifice
turning in the morning air. Then, singing softly,
Clarice sirens the gathering to its worship. 30

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