

## The Enamel Plate

*For my grandmother Chana*

It was light in the kitchen, smooth enamel plates  
on a table, house in the veld, a Dutch interior  
sunlit with square windows, corners  
of a piano and picture frames.

Why this memory over and over?

I could pivot on a thread between this house

and my childhood home in a city of gold:  
dark-skinned nannies with their warm backs  
could disappear in the night – I remember waking  
one morning in the south-facing house – shadowed rooms,  
frosted-glass doors, the green unyielding sofa,  
I ran to the kitchen, barefoot, expecting  
her at the kitchen-sink, glass of milk ready –  
but the kitchen light was off in the morning cold  
'Sarah (or Vyna) has gone'.

No goodbye –

as if her plump presence, her shoulder,

could be replaced like the cat

when it thumped under the wheels of a car:

I lay on the cold floor, its hardness on my back

then the car-ride to the dusty town,

where this sunlit house like a Dutch interior

held me still as a lodestone – hands  
could be trusted to stay: the clatter of pans  
on the coal stove before dawn, the bright  
enamel plate on the table, blue rimmed,  
a call to prayer: my grandmother,  
her arms held wide over the stove  
like wings.

## In Our House

She sang and swayed her hips  
polishing the parquet,  
a tongue-click in her voice like a bell,  
and I crouched at her warm hip,  
our knees on the gritty floor,  
the piney wax-polish in its tin

*she was my nanny, carried me on her back, my face against her  
cotton dress, so clean and washed I breathed the smell of the sun  
and a hot iron on fabric*

afternoons we'd sit on the concrete path  
beside the house in the sun,  
she'd push her white *doek*  
to the back of her head, and I was shy  
to see her naked ears, her hair soft combed wool,  
her lunch on the cream plate,  
brown bread, peanut-butter  
tea in the blue mug:  
afternoon was her tired time  
she'd lean her back against the wall

*she bathed and dressed me, ironed shirts and pants and  
underpants, peeled carrots and potatoes, sliced paw-paws and  
oranges, dusted venetian blinds, stirred pots of beef and chicken,  
folded sheets, swept verandas, dusted bookshelves*

when we crossed the road  
she'd hold me –  
my life in her hands:  
her voice was  
in every room.

## Masque

The forced gaiety of it,  
the mad smiles,  
pot-lid masks, nursery school paint,  
battered, bent and bow-legged  
like children made mad by the lie.

This is a masquerade  
of what we were told to expect,  
that we'd be happy and safe:

when buttons batter noise,  
when grey grimace red tongue  
and teeth rust, the sharp thrust,  
children blind with fright,  
the tear-torn eye –

memories heap upon the pile  
laced with lattices of corrosion –  
the dust balls under the bed,  
leaden hearts, like crushed metal,  
ash fallen from a father's cigarette,  
a mother torn of sex,  
children delivered to it –

the sky was filled with planes  
aiming at our picnic.

No *hoffnung* nor *liebe* –  
the remains were yellow as a cat's eye  
shining through the mud.

## Beetles

Down the passage of a house,  
Picasso's harlequin on white wall,  
kilim rug red-green-blue on wooden floor,  
ink drawings on a whitewashed wall,  
then outside watching beetles in the grass  
beneath the bottle-brush – your hand  
on my shoulder was strong,  
blue wash and harlequin were like nothing  
in this brown land,  
but there was sky and grass  
and watching beetles –  
dung-beetle shiny black carapace,  
one on another's back.

We shivered

not knowing why, your hands grew  
larger on my back –  
children watching beetles  
imprinted on the sand – and I loved  
how your skin was warm.

1971

It was time for a new world,  
against apartheid, our own war:  
it was dagga, rough with twigs, in 'fingers' or 'arms'  
bought from the kid in the township,  
smoked in its brown paper wrapping, seeds popping  
on a South Coast beach, watching an empty bottle  
bashing itself in the foam and rocks.

Police paranoia, threw half an arm from the car window  
into a starlit night,  
Peter going psychotic, getting schizoid,  
his body moving on Largactil,  
his brilliance falling like Icarus –  
then time stopped, threw his watch into the sea,  
ten years later in prison for shooting a guard on a train  
because, he said, he wore a uniform.

Josiah the night watchman in our building,  
'Wise Old Af' in his old greatcoat  
sold dagga on the rooftop, shared his pipe,  
waiting for the struggle to end, *knobkerrie* in his belt,

and we marched through Joburg streets  
against 90 and 180 Days Detention Without Trial Laws,  
and prison even for white boys. Trying to forget  
about John Vorster Square and the SAP,

searched in Durban for DP, and found it,  
eating dope cookies in the car all the way to Cape Town,  
having to stop in the karoo afternoon to have sex,  
wild thorn-bush and shimmering acacias in the heat,  
place of red sunsets and crashing seas,  
swimming naked in the freezing Atlantic at night,  
sunrise eating smoked fish on the rocks at Hout Bay.

Slow time, staying child-like  
when guilt and white privilege could turn you crazy,  
and mostly  
it was driving you, with each drag, closer and closer to your  
country.