

It is never dark here. We know shadow and grey, but not pitch or black. Sunlight drains from the air; fire on the horizon melts and the flame diffuses into a nebulous twilight. Dusk

by Felicity Williams

## Truth in the Dark

dies but night, under a Toronto moon, is not dark, is not silent. There is only phosphorescent orange, reflected off the cover of clouds, and the hum of street lamps like a chorus of electric crickets. Night is a bad copy of day; the hydroelectric gods play Ra in the city streets throughout the midnight hours. There are no stars and no wonder in Orion's canopy; the broken skyline is littered with concrete towers, whose fluorescent eyes never blink and never sleep. We are the children of Prometheus; stolen fire lights our way through the inexorable rush of business day to business day. There is never dark and never rest.

Epiphany comes in the middle of the night. When I cannot see my hand in front of my face, flooding furious light rushes my reason. I find the dark in Mana and night in Mali. I receive vision in Africa and light in Mana. The walk from the squat pot to my room is long at three am, the malarial mosquito's witching-hour. I swat at this and that in the obscurity, breathing the fear of my colonial predecessors. I trip over roots in the ground and trowels carelessly abandoned from the day's work. The air is thick with sweat and thin with silence, broken only by the stirring of a kid at his mother's side and the ceaseless croak of frogs in the rice paddies nearby. Here the senses perform an

intricate dance, where sight and sound and touch must learn their own steps. There is a new rhythm here, a new balance, a new song; as I negotiate the path back to my room, I am aware of the land's poem.<sup>1</sup> It reveals itself in straw brick buildings and corrugated tin roofs; in tall grandmother trees whose wisdom matches that of the stars; in heat and humidity that trickles in a salty tear down the back; in the gentle and precious breeze that cools the flesh; in the sound of my own footsteps on the earth and through the grass; in the sleepy stalls and animals within; in the wisps of cloud that race between the earth and sky, lit up like ghosts in the moonlight. The moon transforms the lightless land. Where it is not, it is utterly dark. As it rises, it casts shadows on the dirt and the walls, giving enough light to usher me back to my bed. It is as silver as the sun is gold, giving light enough to dream and to sleep. Here there is dark and here there is rest; under my mosquito net I drink deeply of both in the hours before the first flame of dawn.

Every Thursday in the village of Mana, the people meet to pray. They gather in a shadowy, lantern-lit church, light sparkling in their eyes and white smiles like each star reflected here on earth. The room fills with the words from the book, the low voice of pastor Dany Traore uttering words from his heart, his struggle, his toil in the fields. Then comes song, cooled down from youthful ecstasy to prayerful murmuring in the sleepy glow of the lantern. Voices ebb and flow in cadence, unity somehow clamoring in dissonance. Turning to prayer, they all speak at once. There is beauty in the microtonality of their prayer, light refracting and flashing off

every hope and grief lifted in faith and solidarity. Here there is not one voice, but many voices; there is not one prayer but many prayers. All these are received by one who listens and responds; herein lies cohesion and harmony. I do not understand the words in Bambara, but I can decipher the spirit out of which they flow. It is a privilege to be in their midst.

Night in Mali is a mirror reflecting my own light and darkness. My faith and failure are laid bare before me. Here there is real darkness; here I gain real vision. I come from a place that is built for me to forget the happiness and truth I see here. I come from a place that would rather I believe in the misery of the third world, and the mire of poverty. Visions of despair flash across my television screen, to keep me believing that I am happy because of what I have, rather than who I am. The people of Mana have taught me that my people suffer from the worst kind of poverty. We have neither light nor darkness, only a bad copy of both. We do not even know that our lives are counterfeit, that our spirits are starved for the glow of the church on Thursdays. Compared to the neon streets of Toronto, its dimensions are deep as hope is wide. It is never dark here, nor is it ever really light.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Al Purdy, "Return Journey", *Naked with Summer in Your Mouth* (McLelland & Stewart Inc., Toronto: 1994).