

LADIES

How puffed and powdered they looked
those middle-aged ladies of my childhood
who stood chatting on Sundays
outside the Protestant churches of Durban
a growth of flabby fungi on green lawns
decked out in pastel linens and laces and flowery hats.

Not absent either from Catholic congregations
plump cheeks streaked with sweat under tulle veils
as they allowed the wafer to melt on their tongues
pecked at Christ's feet on the Good-Friday crucifix.

How could God love them, I wondered,
so snug and smug in their bungalows
with a black boy to polish floors, water their gardens--
and oh! their church bakings, their morning teas!

In the Catholic cathedral one could sit near
old Indian women with rings in their noses and dirty saris
who muttered Hail Marys with garlicky breath
African matriarchs of tribal proportions
opening their throats to Gregorian chant

God loved them--no doubt about that--
one could see them lining the streets of Jerusalem
shouting Hosannas, weeping along the way of the Cross--
but these prosperous white slugs--
well perhaps they gave praise for their dahlias
blushed before their guardian angels
when accepting a third slice of cake.

I strained my imagination to the limit
("God loves us all") to seize the soul inside them
the purified flame flickering in God's sight,
the wild and lovely bird hovering hidden within--
but floundered on face-powder, over-fed flesh.

Is it age or bourgeois liberal experience
that brings a certain compassion? Whether
or how God loved them I shall never know
but I saw pastel linens give way to grey dressing gowns
the last white sheet wound round the mystery
of even the most complacent flesh.

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that brings a certain compassion? Whether
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of even the most complacent flesh.

Elizabeth Jones