

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/3

Emmanuel Jakpa
Imagining Life

I note there's a space next to the dash
after the birth year in a living
author's biography, enclosed in brackets.
I think it means that there's a pit
hungry to be filled at the end of the road

fenced with wind-bent trees.
But I like this author I am reading very much,
that I picture in my mind
I'm scattering bottle shards on the dark road,
on the dash-short lonely road.

I erect borders tight as steel ziplocks
and place iron board over the pit
after stuffing it with stones. The trees all cut down,
so the wind can blow freely,
or the eyes can see as far as possible.

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Seashells

for Alison Whelan

The sun pours long light down the beach in torrents
and the strand is wet. A man gestures and approaches me.

He is on bare foot and holding a pair of shoes in his right hand,
neatly dressed as if he stops here often after a banquet

or something else. He dips his hands into his pockets
and presents some beautiful seashells he has found

to ask me what I think. And as I tell him they're very fine,
a smile polished in the bright sunshine rolls over his face.

He turns and leaves. Later that evening I picture you and I
on this shore of unbridled marvels and slow time,

our words like those finer things people come here
and look for, but never find.

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Harmattan

after Seamus Heaney

Outside my window the digger is digging.
He plunges his spade into the gravelly ground
that hisses needle-edge-sharp sound
into palpable rhythm as green buds crack in the dry harmattan
that throws dust around.

The land trenches longer & deeper
by each successive glint of the spade.

During the spade's aerial suspension,
he pauses, stares into blue haze
that mirages over on the noon highway.
He thinks of the years he spent
in Kirikiri prison, useless
as free papers in a printing press;

of his friends who disappear like methylated spirit
and his father's tutelage: firewood
is only for those who can take heart,
that is why not all can gather it.

He shakes his head.
Grip, grip, grip hard
& downright down strikes
the vengeful spade.

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2.

In our airtight dragnet, roadblocks everywhere.
Borders tight as steel ziplocks
checkmate every progress.
Yet many people of lesser talent
slip out, unabated, with ease.

The logic of existence replants us in alien soil.
We tear round the hairpin corners of hope.

So, the periodic spade strikes, each stroke
the rasped desolation and anger of the soul.
Tribulations of a black-gold age.
The excavations and makings
of our blood, and drainage.

Before the harmattan and the digger
unmoving I sit;
before their intimate vengeance,
a watcher.

My pen, my spade.
I'll crack with it.
Dig with it.

(revised by Barnwood)

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Bus Trip

for John Ennis

Entering Sligo, I phone to tell you
of my arrival. You ask, if I have seen Ben Bulbin yet.
I say, no. I do not know
it is the mountain in front of me, far off,
hunched like a sleeping camel.

The next day, with Martin, our guide,
we went there. But first we went to an ancient bone's park
among shallow rocks, and hut-like megalithic tombs.

Gazing at them, I drifted back through the corridors of time.
I saw clearly when they were living.
A woman bent down. She is planting stems.

On we went, from stone to stone,
or from tomb to tomb on sunlit green leaves of grass.
I asked, how were they able
to lift such massive slabs of limestone to cap the tombs.
Martin says that no one knows.

We climbed Knocknarea.
We stop after each incline for breath.
I was surprised again and again by beds of flowers.

At the top was a heap of stones
like a mulch. Here, he said, is where the locals believe
Queen Maeve is buried.
He added that there is no archeological fact to prove it,
and no one needs one.
So distant was life below.

We went on to Glencar Waterfall.
It is hidden among green trees.
Then to the much awaited Ben Bulbin, and Drumcliffe
where W. B. Yeats's words are etched on his gravestone.

Close enough and squatting,
I stretched and rubbed my finger over these words,
*"Cast a cold eye
/ On life, on death"*

lightly as people do when trying to read what is blurred.
Perhaps the root of the words is from Ecclesiastes?
As I pondered, a man utters, with raspy voice,
that no one knows what the epitaph means.

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Ink or words will spill over this page
to pick out these echoing places.
I clipped fourteen photographs I took from
different positions of marvel.

We returned by 8.43 pm, though not yet dark, to Connelly's Bar,
where the river flushes down the canal in stairways,
making sounds of rushing water.