Poems

Nii Ayikwei Parkes

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Nii Ayikwei Parkes is a Ghanaian writer of poetry, prose and articles who has published three poetry chapbooks: *eyes of a boy, lips of a man* (1999); *M is for Madrigal* (2004), a selection of seven jazz poems; and *shorter* (2005). He is also a contributing editor to *The Liberal* and runs the African Writers’ Evening series at the Poetry Café in Covent Garden, London. Nii’s poem, ‘*Tin Roof*’, was selected for the ‘Poems on the Underground’ initiative in 2007. His debut novel, *Tail of the Blue Bird*, was released in June 2009 by Jonathan Cape.

Daybreak at Swanlake*

The sun has blown its cover
a clutch of light has escaped
its dark coat. My father loved
this moment; silence and darkness
evaporating in a flurry of seconds.
Now I have claimed it, like I did
his features. Things I would gladly shed
to erase the burden of reminding
my family of his absence. I stand
outside the house I grew up in
treasuring this horizon of solitude
dreading the sliver of time
when our voices will rise with no reason
to scream Daddy; my loud siblings
subdued and waterlogged by grief
my mother’s eyes like beggars.

* Swanlake is the name of the neighbourhood in South Accra, Ghana where I grew up.
Lapse

The Greyhound is late. I’ve been fast asleep too long to know why, but the man beside me — Chinese — tells me what time it is.

He turns to the back-lit maze of his phone, taps a geometry of buttons, gets lost in an exchange about auditions and lost opportunities. I look across the aisle: the big guy with the Yankees cap has struck up a dialogue with the Polish woman beside him. Her dark eyebrows arch an eager pair in sync under her blonde hail; I can tell she’s open; so is he, but he’s fearful, hasn’t yet learned the curved asymmetry of lust. There is already a lapse between her keenness, his lean and the speed of his initiative. Somebody should tell him that if the lapse grows any longer the door of chance will close — snap in his face. It’s already too late. The bus is drifting into Harlem, Connecticut a distant memory: I hear him say excuse me, he calls his Mom. A pink rose blooms on the woman’s cheek, she looks outside. I hang my head, exhale, and close my eyes. The man beside me snaps his phone shut.

Rich Tea

It is an initiation of sorts, I guess the sun already raging in the east, with us — boys and girls — massed in the pre-assembly hour. The heat is new to me, the glow framing my Bata sandals, by a distance, superior to the light I had grown accustomed to in Grange Park. Also unknown is this boy, who, with the boldness of an old comrade, spies a whole biscuit in my right hand and walks up to me, arms outstretched. He is tall — Christian I later find he is called — and one friend more than I expected on my first day at Ann’s Preparatory School. A borderline cockney myself, I am staggered by the sharp, muscled edges of his diction when he speaks: give me the biscuit some and, a heartbeat later, please; his English, like my Rich Tea, is broken for easier sharing.