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Until The End

par Ruben Mowszowski - Afrique du Sud

They had arranged to meet. She was wearing bangles and beads and her hair was pulled up in a sort of knot. It was not her. A relative perhaps. He could relax. They ordered tea. Is that alright here ?

I haven't been out like this for ten years. I don't eat this food. I live by myself, you see. She laughed and that's when he heard it and felt the terror, the scream, curling up from the well of his stomach, like the « logs » those people experimented on, severing their vocal cords, doing unmentionable things to them. Instead he leaned forward and tried to listen. She must have seen something though. Something in his eyes. You know, she said, I did love you, she said, I really did, and then, almost as an afterthought, I never did love him.

Running along the mountain road, right on the edge. If I run far enough I can scream into the wind, into the sky. Nothing to stop it there. It will curl like the south-east clouds do, all the way down, wrapping itself around icebergs, startling albatrosses. God himself will hear it. Dare I ? Be careful, he thinks, be very careful.

She sits on the edge of his bed, her hair falling in tresses. The light from the window catches her profile, touches her terrible beauty. It is impossible to call her or to attract her attention. She always does what she does. No thought can change it. No thought can reach her. To this memory he is already dead.

It wouldn't have worked, she said. I did it for your sake, she said. I would have destroyed you. You were so sensitive, so vulnerable. You would never have survived. I'm a Virgo, you see, and you're Aquarius.

He thought of making love to her scarred body. He thought of weeping in her arms. He thought even of dying in her arms. He began to think that he might kill her. Should he warn her ?

I spent ten years in my room, she said. They took everything out. I couldn't stand the silicon. I made them take that out too.

She turns to him to make place on the bed. Lie on me, she says, touch me, she says. Her breasts are flat, her skin crossed with scar tissue. Outside a green sun envelopes the palm tree in a lurid twilight.

I've changed my mind, she says. Do you have just plain distilled water ? He notices for the first time how small and flaccid her hands are. I left him you know, she said. I left my children. I had no idea where I was going.

I did love you, she says suddenly, but that day in your house, you were out of the room and your mother said, she asked me... she was right, you know. I would have destroyed you.

She sits on the edge of his bed her hair falling in tresses.

Her voice is trapped within another voice, her form, trapped in another form ; a frozen echo adorned with Santa Fé beads and weeping mascara. He feels the scream curling again, sitting just below his throat. There is a death here that terrifies. Would you like some more tea sir ? the waiter asks. Perhaps you have some mineral water, she says. Something flat. You know, without bubbles. He remembers the ice blocks they used to make as children. Put a cherry in the tray and it comes out in a frozen cube.

The tray of mezes arrives. He is not hungry but he selects a plate of octopus. Another creature trapped in joke form. A karmic punishment, she says, and here I am, eating its legs, he thinks, as I will in turn be eaten ; the entombed eating the entombed, the universe devouring itself in an endless cycle of life swallowing life, and so it goes on, and so it goes on.

On the grass that day he had pleaded, please, please, let me, he had cried, let me out of this body, he had cried, thrashing about so violently that his dog had run up to hold his head between its paws and then, exhausted and drenched in sweat, he had curled up and wept, as she must have wept, out of the sheer sorrow of being. Now she sits here, this woman with the small hands who left him to go to a man she did not love, who stayed in her room for ten years while her children grieved, and entombed alive the one with the long tresses who sits on the bed in the light of a window, caught forever in her terrible beauty. She, who gave her body to the knife to offer breasts, womb and uterus to God yet could not free his memory ; here she sits, repulsed by the dismembered body of an animal trapped in its given form, as we are all trapped, prisoners of the present, staring at the world through octopus eyes.

Once he had wept this way at the mound of earth next to his father. This is for me, his mother had said, and then he had realised there was no place allowed for him, that he would not lie at the foot of this mountain. Well, we want you to be in this country, his children had said. We can't visit you there, they had said, we don't live in Africa, and then, in a spirit of giving he

had said, alright, do with my body what you wish. Christ said that too, didn't he, and then he cried on his cross but it was too late, or was it?

What are the ways out ? Death ? Madness ? And what hope is there of salvation if even God is wounded ?

The light from the window catches her profile.

On Sunday mornings he would listen to the church choirs. Oh God, Nkosi, bless us, bless us, lead us out of our suffering, and had felt the promise of bliss ; had known what was being promised, makube njalo, and wanted so much for them to be released and to rise, oh to rise and be saved, and now the waiter was asking if he would pay the bill. He had not noticed that the restaurant was empty.

He runs through the swirling mist, along the mountainside, his hair streaming in the wind, billows of sound curling from his mouth, swelling out from his throat, bellowing out from his stomach. A stream of sound, rolling across the ocean, reverberating against frozen cliff faces, startling flocks of southern gulls, halting seals in their tracks, releasing icebound breakers, peeling sides off mountains, registering on the Richter Scales and in the New York Times as a world-wide shudder and giving rise to sermons on the imminence of divine intervention. But only in Africa did they say it was the land howling and the tyrants and the fascists and the arrogant and the destroyers all hid in their beds against the day when the earth would claim back its own and with the convergence of Uranus Neptune and Pluto usher in the millenium of love and retribution.

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it must be this way until the end.

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Ruben Mowszowski is an architect turned writer. His writing has been published in literary and other magazines in South Africa and readings of his work have been held at a number of venues including the Natale Labia Museum (SANG). He was a finalist in the 1992 Nadine Gordimer Short Story Awards and a runner up prizewinner for the 1994 Vita Short Story Awards. This piece is from Souls of Ancient Fish, a book collaboration with photoconstruction artist, Lien Botha.