

## **Henning Jonathan Pieterse**

### **Arabesque**

The desert land of your back  
is wistful, like September.

My fingers hesitate on you  
like buck, hovering at the water's edge.

You play the sky at oases  
which always vanish again.

The fog preserves you  
for another night.

You dream like a Moorish steeple  
single against the sky.

Your voice is dust in the passages;  
are you listening for a cry from the mosque?

Around and around my thoughts surround you  
like doves circling a minaret.

Again and again you return  
to the dunes of your youth.

My voice doesn't claim you.  
Every sound sinks into silence.

The passages to the square  
are still

and you silt up into sand dunes,  
wistful, like September.

## **I am still opening doors**

I am still opening doors,  
answering to knocks in the night.

But this is only the wind  
chasing dreams through windows.

I could write: the trees cut the moon  
like a shell from the night,

but to write about trees in this late season,  
with winter hands, helps no one.

The wind entangles herself in branches,  
unwraps herself again and falls silent.

Now I can write these last lines  
with you and about you

and with another, say: Tonight  
I can write the saddest verses.

How you could blow in and out  
and yet not disturb time.

I cannot admit  
that you are here no longer,

and I keep listening for a knock  
with one ear, while I'm writing.

No one sings in the background here.  
I listen and hear nothing.

Hear in a dream but the first notes  
of autumn, on its way between distant trees.

## Welcome to my castle

Welcome to my castle. You look surprised;  
The walls expand, contract again.  
You touch stone, reach for the beginning  
and end of time which breathes through my windows.  
What then remains? You return your gaze.  
Only the echo of the echo of a sigh.

Draw open the curtains of your eyes  
and see the borders of my estate in the sky.  
Water rustles under and through my drawbridge  
to oceans which raze across all continents.  
What then remains? I return my gaze.  
Only the echo of the echo of a sigh.

You seem a stranger; draw near, look around.  
From your dreams you already know this picture,  
and upon whatever my castle's base  
is built, it still remains earth.  
What then remains? We return our gaze.  
Only the echo of the echo of a sigh.

## Wing

There was frosty weather in the Free State.  
Under grey skies, by a hollow of sallow water  
I found the last, kicking African coot,  
one wing and a claw crushed by my trap.

I carried him home, tried to keep him warm,  
fed him maize; he wouldn't eat anything.  
Half-heartedly he pecked and with a webbed claw  
he hooked at my soothing hands.

For two days I sat and looked  
at the strange wildness in his eyes.  
His agitated heart was odd under my hand  
until the films drew ashen over his eyes.

In the grey time right after midnight  
the wind now rasps down the chimney.  
Flocks of rain again wing against the windows  
from behind cold clouds round a lost moon.

I need to still get used to your body,  
you mumble tired and frightened next to me.  
Your head is half hidden under my shoulder,  
you try to soothe my strange heartbeat.

Before the films of sleep migrate too far,  
I clench your floundering heart in my mouth.  
You stroke warmly over my knobbed wing, my whole back,  
wondering who will first have the urge to flee with the flock.

**From: "Sinfonia"**

*Abbess Hildegard of Bingen, 1098-1179*

II Cell

Sometimes I am lonely here.  
Even memories of snow and earth  
are of no help where I lie ill  
in my thirty-third year.

The whole nightlong I sleep within my belly,  
wrapped in my black bear skin,  
silkiily embalmed like the worm  
in his floating cocoon of wind.

At times I comb my hair in front of a dark mirror,  
milk and honey under my tongue.  
My chambers of the universe  
stretch their muscles comforting warm.

Mostly it is dark here,  
but I am not alone.  
The warm darkness and I  
are together in this cell.

By day the floor shines  
as if the wood has been fed with honey.  
When I blow out my candle at night,  
sour fat lingers on the air.

Outside the wind brings in ice;  
ice and longing, snow and rage.  
The earth mourns, my walls decay,  
my shoes blacken with longing.

Every day I sweat You out in my wine,  
remain silent and pray, work and remain silent.  
Once I am completely quiet,  
I go on pilgrimages in my head.

All you sick at my portals  
with your bent backs, torn skin,  
inflamed eyes and nails,  
festering necks and broken teeth.

So many bodies, worn down by children  
borne in this effeminate time.  
I wash your skin, heal your wounds  
with the soothing power of my saliva.

I will like to build new walls,  
but would not forget the portals;

portals which I can unlock  
with keys of wind, light and air.

Then I will be an angel in the cell's snow;  
I am content with this simple abode.  
Here I am safe, here I can roam for life  
in the vibrating bell-husk of my body.

### III Vision

The earth breathes smoke from his nostrils  
around a mountain of steel in the north.  
Day breaks out of a Man's chest;  
He has lion's feet and six wings.

The furious egg of the universe  
blows out my pathetic words.  
Here I'm standing too, a cloud shouts,  
and clenches his fists against the steel.

I see the animals who are always with me,  
the fiery dog, the yellow lion,  
the pale horse, the black pig,  
the grey wolf of the end-time.

Angels with blue wings watch over souls,  
four winds blow planets into disarray,  
saints sing in the cosmic symphony  
with angel choirs and a blue figure.

God's body bears millions of souls  
and disperses them like falling stars  
across towers and pillars of a new city  
where everyone builds on silver walls.

From of a female body a black animal sprouts forth  
with a penis nose and crooked teeth;  
the evil one is bound again in an instant  
by feathered beings and human hands.

Within the cosmic wheel stands man  
and embraces the cosmos' strange elements.  
Fire, water, air and earth  
stream through water behind water in a giant soul.

When I surfaced, I thought this was a dream  
of the cosmos tree which sprouts evil and good,  
but stars still scorch me in their womb of fire  
to You, my flaming writer, Mother God.