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Sonja Besford, *arrivals & departures*. London: ASWA, 2001. ISBN: 0-9541777-0-3

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Sonja Besford's collection of poems *arrivals & departures*, her first in English, takes the reader full circle, from the birth of an individual to the sacrificial death of a nation. It glares with passion and convoluting sin on a journey rich in sound, taste, colour and perfume. The world of imagination thus disclosed reveals an insatiable dreamer and a romantic akin, in the British tradition, only to Byron. As a post-modernist, Besford can be genderless too. Her instincts, those that find a way into her poetry, are ubiquitously human. But when frustrated, they turn into an outburst of adjectives, all of them signifiers of the mystifying depth of the human heart. The enfolding imagery galvanizes all senses and compels the mind to reconcile the rational and irrational, fact and dreams, in a poetic elucidation of the world and its kaleidoscopic manifestations that drive all life along the trajectory of light and darkness.

The fluorescent chamber of Besford's mind opens to let the reader in through the same gate her parents entered her heart once. Alongside them, there steps in dualism that has, in various degrees, shaped thought structures and cultural values of all civilizations, but in this collection it is by no means a binary opposition all the time. The dichotomy of man/woman, of *my mother my father*, is reconciled in complementary spirituality that allows unity in diversity. With the two opening poems of the collection, the poet's whole family, her spiritual background and the images that constitute her memory, those embedded in her identity and explaining her security, are canvassed and the sense of the author's point of departure is established.

When she was born, says Besford, she "listened to everything curved and filmy". And her dreams reflect the same curved and sensual images to this day wedding innocence to passion. The conjured family world gives way to the "sins of flesh" translated into rich fantasy abruptly, with no preparation. Between them there is a black vacuum heightened by the graphic design that punctuates the cycles throughout *arrivals & departures*. This change of perspective is no big surprise, but the signifier of loss, and of squandered dreams and desires is. Titled *an aging prostitute* the poem that opens the new cycle puts an equation between wasted passion and wasted life.



Ill. by John Besford, from *arrival & departures*, p. 36

Its male instrument appears as an even larger grotesque. *The italian pimp* completes the paradigm, but together the two poems only sketch the theme to be explored. Their romantic mood reinforced by exotic settings of all sorts, from the shores evocative of the Mediterranean to Nairobi, breeds rotting flesh and mutilated bodies; that's passion turned trade. Modernity and eternity thus united across meridians are employed on the oldest market of human desires to attract glances into the essence of wo/man.

Although woman and her body are Sonja's focal points of inquiry, she is not a feminist. Her dancing partners are capable of leading her into a trance which turns child-like dreams of "bears and tigers", of "the dark side of the moon" into reality again. She is a goddess giving birth to life, her lovers prophets who suck out *her* divine powers. This boundary-free landscape of the spirit, ignores reason and defies rationality. Hers is the poetry in which there is still place for devils and magicians, where even conjurers get seduced by delusion into wasting their lives. When attendant, reason is transformed into wisdom that stoops to desire managed by fantasy alone. Perhaps this is why the romantic settings of Sonja's poems linger for so long. Their richness saturates the senses, and the images of love and death walk in them unrestrained. More often than not, they even have a metaphysical dimension. In the poem *the angel, the last prophet and death*, for instance, all three Sonja's central symbols are brought together. The stress is, however, on the angel who fulfils "an indelicate Godly fantasy" and finds solace in the body of a heron, capturing through metamorphosis the reality of a woman in mother, of carnality and spirituality accommodated in one body. The illusions of love, yearning and lust, of dreams and ideals flow from one poem to another throughout this collection evoking eternal visitations upon wo/men of libido and delusion. In the oriental profusion of fragrances redolent of desire woman is larger than life, a hero. And the tropes suggest a timeless quality of visions:

I made up his future from the first cell singled
and in the womb it grew to a rosy child
then to emerge into a new life with an old scream
filing a rich claim that life is an ancestral dream
held in my many heads some wise some wild.
From '*goddess conducting rebirth*'

Most of Sonja's poems are about sexuality and life cycle. All are about love, be it a celebration or an astonished gaze at the confused human mind and the self-destruction it is capable of, "but he does fathom love and the rumours that it/always wins unless it's starved by negligent fools". Decay and demise sometimes lived sometimes watched from afar with serene angelic eyes are portrayed without soliciting ready-made answers and solutions to the painful aspects of human condition. The search for meaning goes on without offering closure, just as an elusive and yet evocative signification, that captures amazement at the abrasive forms

human action can take. But the revisitation of the many manifestations of love goes on all the time. Each cycle begins with them. Her lovers are poets, philosophers, prophets, angels and demons. And lust is not inferior to passion. Its resuscitating force is equally powerful. In *the old man's temptation* even an unexpected rhyme appears to convey and drive emotion. And the verses run with the melodic rhythm of an incantation. The harmony is short-lived, though. *[T]he inner demons* burst in all too soon and love, lust, aging, and memories all come together to evoke yet another recollection and another pang of sadness over extreme forms of egotism that lead people into wars and bring the fear of self-erosion caused by otherness onto them. This group of poems ends on the note of nostalgia bread by the sense of loss incurred by politics. The short path from love to destruction is revisited over and over again. In the encounter of a *nun and the terrorist*, universal symbolism of chastity and innocence is stripped of its power and the temple of peace rejected. There is no spiritual redemption for lost souls, no wish for it, the poem suggests. Only the 'frenzied need to kill again' in terrorists, in leaders and the gullible masses they lead. Thus the mind shifts from individual plight to mass-delusion, and from the intimacy of love of another human being to the blind adulation of abusive politicians. The towering personality of a He or a She, recognisable to all those who have witnessed the morbid power of persuasion, brings it to the brink of nothingness. And graphic nothingness there it is - two black pages again. This visual game that appeals to the mind and senses goes on in yet another form, for on the side of most of the poems John Besford's drawings complement imagination. Sometimes allusive, sometimes phantasmagorical in their own right, they smile, sneer, look, frown and dance in various post-modernist guises, never without charm or wit, never assertive.

But the last section, the one in which Sonja's poetry sheds lust and exotic imagery, and assumes the tone of heightened lyricism instead, opens without a drawing. The poem stares bare-boned at the reader: *februaring* is a true gem. It encapsulates a whole life and brings about the sense of arrival to the unwelcome destination. Agonizingly allusive and shrewd, it remains passionate as ever because its author reaches out to the people in the country of her birth and voices empathy with their recent plight. Her indignation is such that in *the phoney rage of the mighty* she uses personal names and makes signification explicit. She is blatantly honest and she makes a point of it. Poetry and prose amalgamate in *serbia talking*, "because life and death are identical twins and confined/ together, no one ever knows who among my people is alive/ and who is dead or indeed whether they exist as people at/ all". Sonja Besford is Serbia, a female-oracle, mother-earth, goddess-poetess who translates into verse her mind and her psyche, and screams with realisation of the truth that her ability "to belong to life and death equally" is her damnation recognised and exploited by philistines. Then all of a sudden the typeset in the collection changes and the title reads: *a mental patient*, with the unequivocal subheading *belgrade during the 1999*

bombardment. Yet the poem is entirely allegorical, surreal. Its striking veracity has a morbid bite. It is ironic, desperate, nourished by the spirit of a war-victim who waits for truth to be made whole again. Sonja mocks reason that has created the categories and stigmas inhabiting the true stories of today, which keep revisiting our tv screens, and inverts post-modernism into “post-experimental” atrocities committed on the pretext of common good. Her last verses plead,

please do not sing or dance at my funeral
for i should like to feel from not so far above
your sadness spread to enter your blood stream
to travel through your body to the skull and hair
then, my essence will descend and it shall comb it out
as if it were a nuisance louse and nothing more.

From '*singing*'

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