

THREE WOMEN, SHE IS ALONE SURVIVAL OF THE STARS 2AM TRANSIT IN ADDIS

Allan Kolski Horwitz

THREE WOMEN: SHE IS ALONE

ZAZAH IS LYING DOWN. The bed stands in an otherwise empty room – there is only a stool and a very small table on which she has placed a kettle, two cups, a pot, a plate and some cutlery. A suitcase with her clothes lies open in a corner. She shares the flat with two other families but is fortunate enough to have a small room to herself. In any case they start work early in the morning and drop their children at a crèche so for most of the day she is the only one in the flat.

She knows some people in this new country; they are distant relatives from where she grew up. But she feels very isolated and alone this morning, and lies, legs sprawled, as if she is drunk, but she is not drunk, just sweating, for the city is hot, not as hot and humid as her old city, but still steamy with sun and rain.

At first it was exciting, and daunting, this very big city compared to her home, this city with a famous name: a place where they said money can be made, where new things can be learned, where you can change your life. And there are many hundreds of thousands from all over the continent who have come here. They fill this suburb; everywhere in the streets one sees their robes and hears their languages, and sees their shop signs.

She has been here six months. Her relatives tried to help, but they could not find her work. It was only two weeks ago that she found a job in a small shop selling vegetables. The owner, though not from her hometown, is from the same region and speaks the same dialect. He pays her almost nothing, but he is polite, and in the evenings after he checks the day's takings and locks up, he gives her a ride back to the flat.

Sprawled on the bed, she is curled into herself. A cheap magazine lies on the floor. Her face is grey with worry. She does not know if it is worth still having hope. Clouds are gathering over her bed. She turns over. She wants to cry but she knows that crying will not help. She has cried too many times already this morning. Why has he fired her? It was not true that she had taken money from the till. It was not her fault that the shop was not making a profit.



Dawn does not wake Monique. She has been to a club. She only took soft drinks. No beer could tempt her. She saw what happened to women who touched beer.

Men danced with her. They pulled her onto the dance floor. Her jiving hips then sucked them in, made them gasp and grab at her. But she did not allow them to touch – not even her waist or her hands. And when one of them offered her money, she shouted 'no' and pushed him away. Other women watched her jealously. But the man she had hoped to see did not arrive. This was the second time he had not turned up. Was he with one of her friends? Another woman from the old town?

When the moon was already dipping, she walked back to the flat. A drunk man crossed the road. She walked faster. And when he came up to her, and lunged at her breasts, she took off her shoes and ran away. Now she sleeps. And when she wakes it is long past noon.

What is happening to her in this new country? Is life here better than at home doing the housework for her parents? She turns over. Maybe she should have gone off with one of the men, the one with the black jacket, the smooth head.

I am under your spell O African woman whom I love

This note lies in her bag; it was given to her by a grey-haired man. He had lingered at her table. Then he had sat down and taken her hand, taken her attention from other suitors. The old man had become an embarrassment. But when he had offered to take her to dinner, she had agreed. And after dinner, when he had dropped her back at the flat, she had sat stubbornly in the car, refused to hold his hand, waiting for 'airtime' money. The next time she had kissed him and he had given her 'grocery' money. But the following night when he had wanted to caress her, she had run out. And afterwards, though he had begged her to accept him 'flesh to flesh', he was not violent, so she had continued to see him and only scolded him if his payments became smaller.

The real problem was the drug. The drug had been given to her by the brother of one of her school friends. He had said it was good for the stomach and made you feel relaxed. And yes, the little white pill had made her feel loose, so loose that she had slept with him and two other men that night. The hot beat of his sound system had made her forget all her problems. There was no doubt: despite the jagged edges of the next morning, the headache and the dry tongue, it had been good, the drug – very good. And she was ready for him the next night. And the next.

But later that week, without understanding why, when they had gone to a flat in an area she did not know well, she had refused to sleep with more than one man, and the bringer of the drug was angry. 'I invite my friends because I want them to also enjoy. Who are you to refuse?' His friends had tried to restrain him but he had beaten her, and she had cried – from the blows and because she had not wanted to believe he was so stupid, this man she quite liked.

It is three months since that night. She is sad. His rejection is petty. She still desires him. The drug makes her feel she can go on till dawn because her body is supercharged liquid, ebbing and flowing with the tides of her skin and blood. But though she bought it from someone else afterwards, and it was as good as before, it is expensive and she cannot afford it.

Now she lies on her bed, sweating, head throbbing. The only compensation is that the older man will be arriving soon. How long will it take till he comes?



The church is not far from the flat. Once Lungi joined she remembered always seeing it but not stopping to really look at it; this church that was an old house with a big sign that read CHURCH OF LOVE. She had laughed at the name. Laughed aloud because it was such a good idea: that a church be devoted to love. It had made her think bitterly of the man who had first rubbed her breasts and made her press them against him. He was a preacher who had a flock of goats and two houses but his teeth were rotten and his dead wife had been a witch. Only her sister has guessed at her secret: she does not want to go back home because she would be forced to marry that man.

Another computer course, that was what she needed – not a husband. The work she wanted to do, in an office making more money than her family had ever dreamed of, demanded such knowledge. Her father had borrowed from relatives and a loan shark to send her to this city. Now she is on her bed in the room she shares with her sister; her older sister who has just arrived in this city and already knows what to do. (Her sister is at work; she is always on time for work and is studying at night for a higher diploma.)

Yes, she lies on her bed crying because she has failed her computer exam and is scared of what her father will say. And her sister has already told her she must go back home and marry. No, she wants to stay in this city. She is sure she will find work soon. She is sure because she does not want to go home. She wants to stay in this city and learn new things that will make her life more rewarding. She wants certain things that home cannot give her. She is not going to sacrifice herself for her parents.

She sits up on her bed. She has made up her mind: she will rewrite the test; she will pass. She will find a man here. They will walk down the aisle of the CHURCH OF LOVE. She will only go back home when all this has come true. She opens the curtains and the sun streams in.

She shivers with knowledge. This city will give her what she needs. But the choices that need to be made are hers alone. Hers alone. She knows this as she waits for her cell phone to ring. It must ring. Someone must ring. Someone must ring and wake up her life.

SURVIVAL OF THE STARS

On the edge of the valley
a muezzin calls to the setting sun
dozing sunday
slow streams of cars

the muezzin sings languid sad songs
urges his god to anoint us
– us to anoint him

the muezzin implores all believers and unbelievers
in the desert and dusty villages
those sprawled by fountains of imperial majesty
on sultanic divans near scented riverbanks
and those bearing scimitars and veils
along busy throngs and market stalls

the muezzin calls piety and respect
into the world of work and profit-taking
as a man and his dogs walk the kopje
pushing forward in the fading light
breathing no panting with the joy of space
of sky and sound carried along the valley and its slopest



the man and his dogs
reach the squat khaki marker
erected by a pious empire
in memory of fallen lackeys
colonial servants of war
brought across the ocean
to fight and die
for another's glory
another's wealth

called by the empire upon which the sun never set
called to render service
then once disease or artillery or horses' hooves
trampled the life out of them
this empire commissioned their memorial pile
recorded their sacrifice
their duty filled per and beyond
expectation

from across the ocean they came
with horses and tents and beds
to serve the white folk:
their masters:
administrators defenders expanders

now the man and his dogs circle the memorial:

TO THE MEMORY OF BRITISH OFFICERS
NATIVE
NCO'S AND MEN
VETERINARY ASSISTANTS
NALBANDS
AND
FOLLOWERS OF THE INDIAN ARMY
WHO DIED IN SOUTH AFRICA
1899–1902

Musalman
Christian
Zorbustrian
Hindu
Sikh

coloured servants and soldiers come to the call of the bugle
come to south africa to serve the white devil:
golden veins running along his arms

(no doubt rhodes dragged the stones for the marker
himself
along the ridges and the rande
of the farm that became the observatory

under which the white veins ran into billions



man and his dogs
smoke column in the east above the last mine dumps
golden hills of jozi sunset
skyscraper colouration ebbs majestic
reflects
wraps up observatory ridge with its peaceful towers
silver globes' exploration of the stars
silent rock gardens with aloe stalks
foreign and native plants greening the ridge flanks
deep space hum in which the blip of guns
or dogs or muezzins
fades
is irrelevant
is impossible to trace



all falls into the time stream

all falls off the slopes

of this kopje
this high holy place
for zionist preachers and their congregants
white robes white doeks staffs plastic bottles
of Holy Water

they bring chickens to behead
sheep heads
they bring their woes and their hallelujahs
ancient voices calling the ancestors
to intervene and bring rain and money and love



zionists light candles in crevices
leave them smoking in rock alcoves
pray for wind to lift flames and purge the hillside
purge devils from the body of the earth
from the stinking body of the sinner

from the drinker the whore the conman the merchant of disease and death
the wanton the wild the one who takes from children
cons beggars into parting with their blind eyes
– wanton mistress who cons street corners

so fire blackens the slopes
savages green shoots of spring
swats the shrubs and stunted trees

and on that scorched earth
the man and his dogs find paper crosses
inscribed with the names
of the dead

dead by diarrhoea
dead by coughing
dead by sweating

names and dates

names and dates
of the dead

anointed with semen
bathed in vaginal fluid
a plague rewarded their highpoints
with a climb
to heaven but first taste
hell
the virus said
first taste hell
have hell rammed up and come out of your arse
clog your teeth
scale your skin
grey you
grey you

first taste hell



the zionists come to the hillside to save
the thin ones
and the thinner ones
the guts aching stream of water
the heavy-breathing ones
the ones with mottled peeling skin

the ones almost too weak to climb the kopje
they bring their water to wash off the semen
the vaginal juice
they bring plastic coke bottles filled
with potent flowing fluid

they spread their arms to the sky
they call out

and the congregants face down
swim in the voice of the chosen one
– the one who will take their pain and raise it high
for the Maker to make light
to carry off and bear away



the man and his dogs pass the zionists
and he requests they preserve the beauty of the slopes
the winding paths
and the zionists their white crisp robes red with the sand of the kopje
smile
and the man smiles in return
and he vows to bring bags to carry off the bottles

and the chicken heads and the sheep heads
and the robes left dangling on the branches
the stumps of burnt bushes

he vows with them to keep
the holy presence
but he knows he speaks
of another holiness
theirs is too close to their flesh
to the other world of the already dead

he knows they do not see his holy mountain
they do not feel
his elation as the sun sets
they do not feel his jubilation
as the horizon lifts and the cityscape
unfolds and the dogs race madly up and down the slopes sniffing and barking and being free



the man walks on the ridge every sunday
he greets the zionists and the vagabonds
who come to wash
and he observes the plastic and the ripped cloths multiply
the fires come quicker and quicker
to burn and blacken

and he prays for the kopje
prays for the holy space
prays for the zionists and the thin people
the frightened people the suffering people

he prays and the blessed light
survives as dusk shelters his eyes

the beauty of the kopje must always survive

always survive!

in order for those who need its beauty to
survive

for beauty enables
the holy to survive

beauty enables . . .

so survive!



the man and his dogs
walk the kopje as sunset shines and rusts the sky
and the valley below
echoes with the muezzin

they walk at ease
uplifted by the high place
walk into the steady evening
but their hearts are light

lighter than any history

they walk knowing that nothing counts beyond
this hour:

soft poetry of the kopje
sad but not mournful
footsteps on the path
paws pattering the dust

joburg at rest

2AM TRANSIT IN ADDIS

Ten hours to kill

in the gleaming tiled transit lounge
like a hotdog
shiny roll spiked with overhanging girders

I want to kill these dead hours

peel Time
nibble Newsweek
to find
half-naked women tortured in fast cars
government press conferences applauding sleek lies
school grounds ruled by steroid bullies

hours to kill

staring at Italian photos
antique scenes of Ethiopia

how I want to kill these dead hours
but not even the waitress who tells me
it's 8 birrs to the dollar
can keep me awake
not even her wistful smile
when I produce empty pockets
not even the ex-minister's memoir
about the Derg's prisoners
or the one exposing imperialist Aid as a racket
or the prayer rooms that give off
an odour of blasphemous pleasure
can keep my eyes open
can keep me from drooping

I want to burn these hours

trapped without birrs without dollars

outside in the dark
fabled city of selassie
toothless lion of Judah
sleeps soundly as dubai and frankfurt
beckon memory and travel

kill these dead hours!

echoing footsteps
new arrivals
rouse me
gaggle of green dresses clinging to thighs

I sway now not from tiredness

stewardesses sweep out the tunnel
this is the land of the long-distance runner
so lithe they must be
high heels clicking new world anthems
dashiki'd musicians play lips like drums
and the hall soars
as shambling bear catches my eye –
bushy-bearded loping poet
from ghana encountered in chad
on his way to delhi
another talkfest
another fixture on the international
trail

I am awake

we greet murmur
then he's gone through the gates
flight via beijing
and I am left to marvel
booming laugh and strong teeth
west african excess
its rhythmic loquacity
but even our ganja-dancing
philosophizing interests
cannot justify
these ten hours outside addis

fabled city of shaggy lions and armed thugs
organized african disunity
running through its alleys
not dead
not quite alive
dawn lightens the overhead girders
the speculated city
a jumble of buildings
in a landscape of stretching plains
jagged mountains
twisting riverbeds

ten hours

captive in the bubble
of transit
surrounded by earthscape fit to be the
high church of a sovereign continent