

3 Song of the African boy

Leland Bardwell

Oh Sligo, my Africa,
I am black
and my mother
brings home the shopping
in two Quinnsworth bags.

Oh Sligo, my Africa,
I own a donkey
and a pair of runners,
did I tell you I was black
and my mother does the shopping?

Oh Sligo, my Africa,
I knew you my father
from darkest Islington
for as long as it took
to drop your semen
into my mother's womb.

And I shall grow tall and black
in Sligo, my Africa
and the bolen will slip
from the harbour
to the blunting of the sea.

I will let my mother
walk those long miles
from Quinnsworth
while I shrug my shoulders
at the feet
of the continent's shelf.

Oh Sligo, my Africa,
break the long silence
that is my quarter.

My mother doesn't chide me
because the palms of my hands
are pink
but I know how she feels
on the long road
when the yellow iris nods.

Source: Bardwell, Leland (1998) *The White Beach: new and selected poems 1960–1998*, Co. Clare: Salmon.

4 Selling Manhattan

Carol Ann Duffy

*All yours, Injun, twenty-four bucks' worth of glass beads,
gaudy cloth. I got myself a bargain. I brandish
fire-arms and fire-water. Praise the Lord.
Now get your red ass out of here.*

I wonder if the ground has anything to say.
You have made me drunk, drowned out
the world's slow truth with rapid lies.
But today I hear again and plainly see. Wherever
you have touched the earth, the earth is sore.

I wonder if the spirit of the water has anything
to say. That you will poison it. That you
can no more own the rivers and the grass than own
the air. I sing with true love for the land;
dawn chant, the song of sunset, starlight psalm.

Trust your dreams. No good will come of this.
My heart is on the ground, as when my loved one
fell back in my arms and died. I have learned
the solemn laws of joy and sorrow, in the distance
between morning's frost and firefly's flash at night.

Man who fears death, how many acres do you need
to lengthen your shadow under the endless sky?
Last time, this moment, now, a boy feels his freedom
vanish, like the salmon going mysteriously
out to sea. Loss holds the silence of great stones.

I will live in the ghost of grasshopper and buffalo.

The evening trembles and is sad.
A little shadow runs across the grass
and disappears into the darkening pines.

Source: Duffy, Carol Ann (1987) *Selling Manhattan*, London: Anvil.

5 Cow

Selima Hill

I want to be a cow
and not my mother's daughter.
I want to be a cow
and not in love with you.
I want to feel free to feel calm.
I want to be a cow who never knows
the kind of love you 'fall in love with' with;
a queenly cow, with hips as big and sound
as a department store,
a cow the farmer milks on bended knee,
who when she dies will feel dawn
bending over her like lawn to wet her lips.

I want to be a cow,
nothing fancy –
a cargo of grass,
a hammock of soupy milk
whose floating and rocking and dribbling's undisturbed
by the echo of hooves to the city;
of crunching boots;
of suspicious-looking trailers parked on verges;
of unscrupulous restaurant-owners
who stumble, pink-eyed, from stale beds
into a world of lobsters and warm telephones;
of streamlined Japanese freighters
ironing the night,
heavy with sweet desire like bowls of jam.

The Tibetans have 85 words for states of consciousness.
This dozy cow I want to be has none.
She doesn't speak.
She doesn't do housework or worry about her appearance.
She doesn't roam.
Safe in her fleet
of shorn-white-bowl-like friends,
she needs, and loves, and's loved by,
only this –
the farm I want to be a cow on too.

Don't come looking for me.
Don't come walking out into the bright sunlight
looking for me,
black in your gloves and stockings and sleeves
and large hat.
Don't call the tractorman.
Don't call the neighbours.
Don't make a special fruit-cake for when I come home:
I'm not coming home.
I'm going to be a cowman's counted cow.
I'm going to be a cow
and you won't know me.

Source: Astley, Neil (ed.) (2002) *Staying Alive: real poems for unreal times*, Tarsset: Bloodaxe.