



SIDEWAYS BETWEEN STORIES

Frank B. Wilderson III



EDITIONS

Sideways between Stories

FRANK B. WILDERSON III

COMMUNE EDITIONS

PURVEYOR OF POETRY & OTHER ANTAGONISMS

Oakland

2016

communeeditions.com

Jo'burg

nothing of my mother's voice
in the clicks of these women sotho or zulu

now smug and thankful for wounds
sutured by the sea
i answer the rasping of a coloured widow
who enters
behind her asthma and
buys my bread with stories of the sea
and its hunger

Noord Street

Between the ashes of apartheid
and what they say is coming
are the merchant stalls of Noord Street Station
where a woman sells bruised fruit.
Above the rock and tumble of trains her feet
hold down the earth,
her hands,
move over late mangos and pears turning each imperfection
inward against the eye. It is July in Johannesburg.
Winter, where from lampposts politicians wait for the
wet oblivion of night. In the last seeds of daylight
I fill my bag with apple and guava, attempt
nonchalance at the track of stitching under her eye,
say, as always, “keep the change.”

This is not my country.

For years I marked my calendar by two seasons: rain,
when jacaranda petals bleed their purple hue into the soil
and not rain, when waiting for the season of rain.
Now it's marked by days of abstinence from this face of scars,
a spectacle for my optimism,
for though I am aging, the face in my passport

still lays claim to me upon
demand and shares my unclipped skin.
As dusk and the first lampposts flicker and choke like promises,
I wonder which locomotive
en route to which desert
turned its steel into her cheek, and tell her
how I loved the last fruit, spoiled on my kitchen table.

The Lucky Ones with Their Shadows

FOR TEFU AND HEINRICH

sometimes in a country where
torture is rife
I think how lucky the school children whose
denial is truly plausible
whose sleep is dependent on screams
of what they may not become
a nostril punctured by a favourite math pencil
a vulva pinched with shop tools from the floor of seventh grade
testes crushed by new teachers
part pupils part objects of pain
in rooms darkened with sunlight where
they alone are the only students
sponging knowledge free of texts the lucky ones
they may never know this
fraternity of fragments these dim
and flickering lamps at night
truant in the streets
insuring their future their safe return

The Moth

From the outside
 looking in
 a frantic moth
 seeks entry
before the October wind
 chills
 what's left of its life.
In lieu of raising the sill
 I pick up this pen
 and write this poem.
The moth dies.

The Archive

Too much has been made of the southerner's sin and not enough of the negro's place in nature.

Nathanial S. Shaler, "The Future of the Negro in the Southern States"

Popular Science Monthly 57 (1900)

Walls of white stone with gap-tooth slats
where cannons reach for a levee.
Mossed with amnesia lies the town.

Her cataracts fix me with milky misgiving.
Liked it better as a fort, she says, rolling
up at the ceiling's white painted rafters. With spotted hands
too devoted to the box I came for she asks me how
I'd like it if they lined my guts with all this glass.

I drift from anger to the motel road and a morning quail
that plunked and bobbed
in front of my car. The earth spiked under.
Its feathers scotched the air.

May as well, she sighs, the box, sighs again,
all the brouhaha. How the driver asked her nicely then
your aunt's impertinence and the U-turn he made on the
Pontchartrain Causeway
to run her in for sassin.

Civil Rights

Mother never spoke of slavery
she was born and raised in a debutante ball
but when they killed King she wrote every blue
hair blonde eye a letter

like any spring of no reply winter
was late in leaving and we were her
only postage
my sister and I walking end to end

through the seep of slush and the push
of wind
no one dabbed a crystallised eye for
she would have no crying

Meant for the Neighbors

I survived childhood on quotations from film stars
and Chairman Mao

A monk with malachite beads I clenched
the words of others

But of my graceless lurch through white grammar
schools was it Stevenson or Poe

I pledged to memory and took to my mother

*—before a man dies he must write a book
love a woman and kill a man*

She eyed me as though I was a
parcel intended for the neighbors

You mean what does it mean

No

I mean is it true

We were alone the window was open
the drapes were still refusing
to explain why she looked away

Chronicle

Two.

they smile tip their hats lower their
shotguns and let us
cross the mississippi line
legs dangling from the pickup in front i don't recall
the guns mom remembers dad
doing the nothing he could do
up north he'll make it
a career

Six.

for Halloween I washed my
face and wore my
school clothes went door to
door as a nightmare.

Eight.

at night dad builds a fire feeds it with my clippings
castro on parade why does my penis stick out more than most
he stares at the rug where embers fall
lose some weight it'll go
back in

flags nations armies lots of people
get aroused

Twelve.

my sister is six and we don't
like her too cute too
seldom beaten
we're glad her hair's a nappy-nigger-mess
mom hides it with a wig we snatch
that wig right off
she rolls in the dirt holding her head
we stand above her satisfied as stormtroopers

Tet

In a gray veil of drizzle
she clears a space where
tombstone tongues lick wet leaves
lays the wire & cloth poppies
survivors sell.
The last war pushed this graveyard out to the street.

He used to laugh down there down
there the rain never
chills your bones
then hoist his ladder two eyes of stucco
patch them pronto those
eyes bleeding in the rain.

Windshield wipers erase his
face each time he laughs
or cries
or says what's so special
about the dead he'd trade her.

Survivor

Last night the sea belched without
wiping its mouth
As though it had leave to tame mercy
with a life in one color

The Names We Go By

FOR ANITA

In a time too poor for names uncles aunts your
parents and a brother more angelic than
the stars called you sister

I see that past before me as night always
night with flocks of sheep bundling a sky
of red dust and ruin

You are there in the deep incomprehension of your kin
beyond broadcasts of depression or war
knowing how the tails of comets
to be seen
must not be looked upon

From my coast I practice cartography
I trace your voice for trees twisted by wind
I listen to your eyes for a reason
I grope back the way I came through other loves
for a place pulled away by sand and sea that place
our hearts went down for air sister I

am here
amid the useless prayers the names
we go by

Arrival

I drive north along the river
past cane, corn, inland
oceans of wheat
away from a place
where my grandfather gave
his son shoes
that he might lose his accent
and marry my mother
a child kept in school during
the harvest
he opened his face
to words

a cowbird on a fencepost
says yes
it's true all true
as long as you get there first
then flies through
a hole
in my rearview mirror

In Here

Into my courtyard came a
man intoxicated with
sadness and no
more use
for my name
than the names of plants in the yard
lizard tracks lined his face drawn thin
as wrists drawn thin as the last
rail of garden sculpture
unfinished
the eyes forgotten
forgotten as well the humility of hands
one curled to a fist for knocking at the gate
one held open for permission
through room after room of astonishment his
palms empty of gratitude
pushed
what do you want?
we rocked on the stone veranda
where are you from?
the eyes with nothing gave it all
where do you live?
in here with illusions

The Politics of Everyday Fear

FOR KAMOGELO

Since we've parted I've become one
of those people who sat
never more than once a
childhood at our diningroom table
the day after or perhaps two days before
a life in some far off and unpronounced place
I could not imagine
over broccoli, roast beef, and early bedtime
they were all ten years younger
or ten years wiser than their age
they lived sideways
between stories
they laughed the loudest talked the most ate the least and
drank well past
the hour of civilized departure
as though they who'd lived
everywhere had nowhere to go
and would sleep on our doorstep
to not be turned out into the world

The Convocation of Conquest

my chair was missing from the table
an oversight I'm sure
standing there I considered the distance
we'd walked just to arrive and the
horses apathetic to the prey of their riders
gaining in spite of themselves with heads
so enormous cold mist from their nostrils
fell upon the moon upon you and
me and the men and women
we took with us from the corners of sleep
one dream one table one people with one
unnameable loss and no place set
even aside

Law Abiding

FOR OSCAR GRANT

Don't slant the story to fit your needs
Bullets been catching hell from niggers long as I been born
Like apples ok you got your few bad bullets
But most work hard and vote yes they vote
Got wives and sweet kids in the clip
Who cradles them when a nigger vamps who says
What to them
Mrs. Bullet I have some bad news
Then what
It's about your husband Mr. John Fredrick Bullet
Or
May I call you Frieda
Frieda John Fredrick passed this evening
Now Frieda be strong for unsavory
Are the details
He died in a nigger's spine
Crushed on impact now Frieda don't cry
The D.A.'s on it
The judge's been briefed
And your husband's friends are
In the streets