Nelson Mandela – Madiba, ‘Infirmary: Another prison... another island’

Lying in a white room - stark and sterile
reflecting on chance, phenomena, existence…
you drift between a world of delirium and clarity,
it’s a shifting collage of contrasting images -
a warden’s footfall, the metallic sound of keys in locks,
the small window in the prison wall -
a dark blot that blacks out the beyond.

Your past drifts like a bubble before you
where a goat balances on remains of a wall,
rain-blown wattles droop like drenched birds
and a vagrant chime from a ruined bell tower
sounds across the valley.

Kaleidoscopic figures rise through the fog, and then fade...
boys dawdling alongside goats and donkeys,
Nguni hounds yelping and snapping on the verges,
crows digging into road kill,
men in ochre blankets and brass bangles stirring languorously
as maidens clad in isishweshwe, lower bundles of wood from their heads,
and tread lightly into a store...

There chickens peck from holes in grain bags,
the heavy smell of sugar, tobacco, rawhide and calico
settles into pinafores, cotton sheeting and scarves;
outside the anti-meridian silver and lilac light
escalades into the hot haze of a gold midday.

Where the ikhamanga like tattered plumes
line the Lusikisiki road and wild hollyhocks grow,
a bare-back horseman
in a tattered trench coat, with a whip in hand
heaves past smoky huts startling maidens
in beaded skirts that flash white, aqua, indigo
as fast beat their naked feet dancing through the dust.

Always in your dreams...the lifting mist, the sounding sea,
and the echoing laughter of Xhosa women
who smoke long pipes, and gaze at the cattle standing
still as stone at the ocean’s edge...

Back in the insensate world, bleak and sanitary,
you sink deeper into darkness...
the soft storm of a Transkei morn
has left its imprint upon your soul...
its fallen sleet lies thick upon your lids,
folding them closed...
Your spirit ascends.

The rain in Aliwal North begins a three-day fall
your benedictions descend upon the living...
Forever they’ll pay homage to Dalibhunga.

Source: This photo is used with the permission of the author and photographer, Patricia G. Maritz

FIGURE 1: ‘Infirmary: Another prison... another island’