

Thomas Waller

Toll

after Orlando Mendes

The old woman crumpled
To a thin pale mass
On the dusty plain mixed
With the lives of her ancestors
The only one alive
Who remembers the words
Spoken from slave mouths
As a spindle of flame:

This plain is a world, this plain is a world.

When the iron snake came
It swept up the land
In a fever of noise
To make dents in the wind
Now the rocks of the plain
Were lost in the rains
Of wagons and hard earth and white death and
Wage labour.

The old woman remained
In the land of deserters
Her milky eyes dropping
More metres each year
Now crumpled she squints
At the wizened old cashew
At the kidney-shaped drupe
At the plain she won't leave.

She lies crumpled and waits
For the crows on the wind
The hyena packs stalking
With the threat of machines
She looks up to the clouds
At the white screen of death
To hear the wheedling of voices
In a tongue out of reach

Like the hands of the workers

Whose liberated surplus
Comes tumbling down
From the hills at Marandal.

Or Eternity

(for Ruth First)

The yard was deserted
At this time of day —
Only a small hum could ripple
The low quiet of lunch hour.

Patrolling around
In mock of her keepers,
She wades through the rows
Of drying laundry.

Jeans marked Van der Merwe
Some shorts Du Plessis
Shirts, vests and blouses,
Roussow, Potgieter, Prinsloo and Coetzee.

And on the last row three pairs
Of large aertex underwear
One P.K. Le Roux,
The Minister of Agriculture.

Suddenly a shot
In the form of blood-stopping screams
From a near little brick building
Signposted *Isolasie*.

Screams starting low and regular
Mounting steadily in shrillness
Up to a pitch just as dubious
As a blade to the spine.

A body of wardresses
Moves in swiftly to the jail block

And then just as suddenly
The paining pleads stop.

‘And what, may I ask, is the meaning of this?’
Pipes the high-heeled political
From the government briefs

And the answer is cantankerous,
Heat through the snow

‘This is a prison, you know’.