

Consuming desires

by Anne McClintock

Still Waters in Niger, by Kathleen Hill. Evanston, IL: Triquarterly Books, 1999, 216 pp., \$24.95 hardcover.

FAMINE IS A GEOGRAPHY of haunted places. In Kathleen Hill's luminous novel about hunger, *Still Waters in Niger*, the heart too is a haunted and hungry place.

How many of us could find on a world map the sunstruck city of Zinder, lashed by sand and beset by famine in West African Niger? But for the Irish-American narrator of Hill's exquisitely crafted novel, it was there, in Zinder, "floating the seeds of life and death indifferently," that desire fastened.

Zinder was "a case, always, of unrequited love." Seventeen years before, the unnamed narrator had lived in Zinder with her husband, Chris, he doing research, she being a mother. There, in a wedge of sand, stunned by hot winds "that made a nightmare of each new day," she looked sideways at a world she did not understand. At a sky "so dazzling the eye reels backwards," at nights so hot "the sheets run quick as fire."

Now, years later, the narrator's grown daughter, Zara, has returned to work at a clinic, to help the casualties of famine, and her mother has gone back briefly to join her. The plot turns on the narrator's encounters with the mothers and children of Zinder and an almost unnoticed secret: what had happened on Zara's sixth birthday, seventeen years before?

During the harmattan, Zinder was filled with the sound of coughing. The mother, too, was feverstruck. Zara, the child, stood in the doorway; it was her birthday. But through the film of fever, the mother could not recognize her. Now, in Zinder, mother and daughter recall that lost birthday: the daughter's mute sense of betrayal, the mother's helpless sense of guilt. When their reconciliation comes, the moment is as slight as wind on still water, but it bears the force of subtle revelation.

From the still center of the book rise a series of lyrical, pained, poetically pre-

cise meditations on motherhood. Under the mother's fever ran a deeper dread. "Sickness is one thing, but suppose the mother is perfectly well." Suppose she is simply too distracted by her own hungers to attend to the children pressing at the door? The narrator is haunted by the fear that she may never be able to slake her child's thirst or appease her hunger.

Nowhere before have I read such an unsparing meditation on the inadmissible: that motherhood does not come naturally. I am familiar with memoirs in which daughters chastise their mothers, but am unaccustomed to a mother ransacking her heart for her own fearful and consuming desires.

And my own fear? That I shall never recover from her brief tenancy of a body now in decline, that housing her limbs, meeting her thirst, has left me a creature distraught. How am I to forget the frantic cries that night after night jolted me from dreams that gradually took on the dark tones of disaster? The helpless body, limp as life, whose rescue from starvation depended on my renouncing the self sought in sleep and turning to her with full breasts? How is it possible for either of us to recover from an intimacy such as ours? (p. 75)

Perhaps it is one of our fiercest taboos: for a mother to look this deeply at her own ambivalence. Women can seldom admit that motherhood involves not only consuming love, but also shame and bafflement, frustration and rage. When she goes to the doctor—the walls of his office covered with mounted butterflies, "wings spread everywhere poised for flight, wings beating wildly"—she cannot answer his questions. "To have pronounced the word, baby, would have been to admit openly that there was no way back, no way to invite the return of the lightdazzled self so recently betrayed."



Kathleen Hill

BACK IN ZINDER, searching for her own past, the narrator discovers the mothers and children of famine. The novel is threaded with miniature stories rendered in an immaculate prose. Hill has the poet's sense of the vivid, essential detail, the novelist's sense of the human measure of passion and loss. In one of the most moving passages, a near-demented father searches for a lime to save his dying child. In another episode, Marianma, a young woman in her twenties, has borne seven children; all have died in birth. Seven born. Seven dead. Now Marianma has retreated into herself, barely able to recognize the world. *Stabat mater*: this suffering goes beyond comprehension, yet Hill evokes it with a steadfast gaze.

Much of the achievement of the novel lies in its lyrical restraint; not a word

seems too much, or out of place. Quiet epiphanies rise from the story like the bones that keep rising to the surface in the novel: "there they are, bathed in the clean light of the sun, careless, tossing aside the sand that streams from their bland and perfect stare."

Vivid details emerge as forcefully as more tumultuous events might arrive in a different novel, evoking a world of complicated density and joy: women with "legs thin as herons"; a lizard "with an orange head rigid in the sun"; the glass of water ringed with flies. The spareness of the plot becomes itself the plot: the narrator's dawning discovery that the place, Zinder, which she "had thought commonplace, even undesirable, has become as necessary to you as your breath and that without it you will die."

One question courses through the book: "What does one need to live?" A handful of millet? A cup of beans? A breast plump with milk? The frangipani heavy with blossom? "The indispensable potato, rotting in the field?" Now in Zinder, the narrator recalls another great hunger: the Irish famine of her own family past, the starving man, teeth black with hunger, the woman distraught with desire: "It can seem a matter of shame, a hunger as desperate as this. She is sick with desire, she cannot help herself. It is a case of someone lost to the world. But for what is she starved? A turnip? The face of God? A caress?" Hill's quiet exploration of the hauntings and hungers of motherhood makes this novel a work of startling power.

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