

CROOKED SEEDS

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS

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KAREN JENNINGS



MASOBE

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34 Gbajumo Close, off Adeniran Ogunsanya,
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Tel: +234 813 252 7645, +234 701 838 3286
Email: info@masobebooks.com

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For this is action, this not being sure, this careless
Preparing, sowing the seeds crooked in the furrow,
Making ready to forget, and always coming back
To the mooring of starting out, that day so long ago.

From "Soonest Mended"

John Ashbery

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS

Other Titles by the Author

An Island

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS



PART ONE

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS

DEIDRE

SHE WOKE WITH the thirst already upon her, still in her clothes, cold from having slept on top of the covers. Two days, three, since she had last changed; the smell of her overcast with sweat, fried food, cigarettes. Underwear's stink strong enough that it reached her even before she moved to squat over an old plastic mixing bowl that lived beside the bed. She steadied her weight on the bedframe with one hand, the other holding on to the seat of a wooden chair that creaked at the pressure as she lowered herself. She didn't have to put the light on, knew by the burn and smell that the urine was dark, dark as cough syrup, as sickness.

There was no toilet paper, so she rose without wiping, pulling the underwear back into place, feeling it dampen a little. Usually she would reach across, open the window, empty the bowl over the rockery that lined that part of the building's wall, but there had been complaints, a warning. She took a t-shirt instead that was lying on the floor and covered the mouth of the bowl with it, before sitting down on the chair. In sleep, the plate of her top front teeth had

come loose, protruding a little over her lips. Impossible with her dry mouth to push it back into place. She pulled, snagging it on cracked skin, causing her to switch on the lamp, to feel for blood with her fingertips. None. Then put the teeth on the bedside table next to a mug of tea that had long since evaporated.

She shifted her leg, lazy to reach for crutches where she had dropped them the night before. It was no distance from the chair to the place described as a kitchen, with its bar fridge, sink, counter and microwave. She took hold of the chairback, the chest of drawers, the TV stand, the various items that she had refused to give up and had crammed into this room, making her way slowly across to the fridge. She did not bother to move onwards to the sink, knowing that the taps would be empty. The microwave clock read 05:18. Forty minutes before the water truck came. Nothing until then.

Inside the fridge was a packet of discoloured Vienna sausages, opened a week since; half a tub of margarine; a jar of gherkins. She unscrewed the lid of the jar, drank down the brine, closing her mouth against its solids, then reached for a Vienna to blunt the sting, its puckered ends like plastic. She spat out what couldn't be chewed, ate two more, spat again, then drew her forearm across her mouth, seeing afterwards the smear of grit and slime, and flakes of hideous pink.

THE MORNING'S CHILL reached her as she approached the front entrance of the building. She thought about going back for a jacket, but went on, greeting the security guard as he came across from his hut to open the door for her. "Hey, Winston, here we go again."

"That's right, that's it. Same again."

She could see the queue from where they stood. It ran three blocks deep, extended around the corner. Two armed guards patrolled the outer edges, one more stood near the water truck and collection point. Beyond the truck, a traffic officer had parked his car, the lights flashing hotly in the morning gloom. He had put out cones, directing the few vehicles that passed by. Passengers and drivers looked out at the queue, at the people with their array of containers, in dressing gowns and slippers, wearing jackets and coats over their work clothes and school uniforms, some wrapped in blankets against the cold. Someone was listening to the news on a cell phone, elsewhere music was playing. Most were using earphones though intent on something beyond this slow, shifting wait. Few were interested in conversation.

"How's it looking today?" she said.

"Nothing special. Same as always. I didn't see you yesterday, you okay?"

"Ja, just wasn't in the mood for all this shit."

He nodded. "Ja, I know what you mean."

She eyed the queue, saw a woman with a teenage

daughter, the girl's arms crossed, the mother's too. They wore headscarves and long skirts. Behind them stood a man and his son and daughter. He tapped his foot, leaned forward and said something to the scarved woman. She shook her head, then took out her phone and showed him something on it, the light from the screen highlighting the darkness beneath her eyes. The man frowned, then rubbed hard at his jaw in irritation.

Deidre had already taken a few steps towards the queue, but she came back now, said to Winston, "Give us a ciggie, hey? I'll get you back later."

"When's later? I'm still waiting from last week and last month. Like man, I'm still waiting from last year."

But he took one from his pocket, lit it, handed it across.

She coughed wetly as she inhaled, then spat the wet out. "Ag man, don't be like that. One day I'm going to bring you a whole pack, okay? Like a whole pack, and not just any kind. It'll be the good kind, you'll see."

"Ja, I'm waiting . . ."

She blew him a kiss, adjusted the backpack that she wore slung over one shoulder – an old thing from her daughter's high school years, tearing a little at the seams. "Bye, darling, let me get this over and done with."

A dull sunrise held back beyond the streetlamps and she crunched towards it, into the road, ignoring the cone markers, so that cars had to stop for her, three in a row. She kept her eyes on the water truck, did not acknowledge

the cars, did not look at the queue. She went deliberately slowly, pausing every few steps to remove the cigarette from her mouth, to exhale, inhale again. Before leaving her room she had brushed her hair; applied make-up over the previous day's smudges; sprayed her armpits, crotch and hair; licked toothpaste from her finger; reinserted her plate. She wore now a skirt that came to mid-thigh, showing the blanched scar at her stump, and a t-shirt of cheap black lace that revealed a purple bra, her breasts high and hard.

She tossed the cigarette end at the gutter, moved towards the trestle table at the front of the queue where two water monitors were taking turns to fill containers from a tap in the truck's side.

"Hey, lady," someone called, "there's a line here, you know. Go to the back!"

She made no sign that she had heard, beckoned instead to the armed guard. "A little help, please."

"Sure, ma'am." He was young, his uniform still new, the shoes stiff and bright, causing his steps towards her to be wide-legged, heavy.

"Oh darling," she smiled and shifted the backpack from her shoulder, "just call me Deidre."

He returned the smile, removed an empty three-litre Coke bottle from her backpack. "Well, Deidre, can I have your ID, please?"

She put her hand in her pocket, slowly pulling the

skirt downwards to reveal part of her belly, and took out her card. “Here you go, darling, but don’t look at it. The photo’s so bad.”

“Oh, come on, you look great! Really, it’s a good picture, I’m telling you.” Then, “Hold on a sec; I’ll be right back with your water, okay?”

“Sure, sure, take your time.”

But almost at once she began tapping her fingers on the crutch handles, her throat dry and wanting. She glanced across at the queue, hoping to catch an eye, to ask if someone had a cigarette, but no one looked at her. Nothing else to see in the dawn other than rooftops starting to appear slowly, a series of them, going back and back into the grey light, each straddling something dark and stillborn—the rooms of homes, most of them empty now. So many people had gone away. Yet even in the ones that were inhabited, even in them there was only darkness. Everyone was here now, in this queue. There was no other life.

At her foot a small stream of water was starting to pool. Deidre moved, let the water pass, looking back up along its damp path to the truck where one of the water monitors was picking up a container that had fallen. Both monitors were wet across their bellies and thighs, both frowning as they went between the trestle table and the tap. The woman was filling Deidre’s bottle now, handing it back to the guard, then turned to the next in line, a

young man dressed in a suit and tie. He had an ID in each hand, held them out to the woman and began to speak.

Behind Deidre a car drove slowly past, its undercarriage low, scraping across a speed bump. People winced at the sound, glanced with caution at the driver and his passengers, their arms slung casually from the windows, skin blue with homemade tattoos. Deidre glared at them, wanted to call out and ask what they were looking at, but she knew what they were and what they could do. She glanced away, counted the guards, turned to look at Winston, checked if he had a gun, knowing that he didn't. Yet even if he had, even then it would have made no difference. So, she waited, watched the car with lowered eyes, then saw it speed up, drive on.

When she turned back towards the truck, the man at the front of the queue had raised his voice, "You see, she's sick. She can't come." Then, to a question, "Yes, my mother, she's my mother."

But, "No, that's not true! He's lying!" called a woman, stepping out from the queue. "He's a liar. He's lying to you. His mother died two weeks ago. I was at her funeral, for God's sake. I'm telling you, he's lying."

The man shook his head. "I'm sorry, you're mistaken, lady, my mother's at home, she's not dead, she's just sick. You're mistaken." Then to the monitor, "I can call her, look I'll video call her, okay?"

The woman was crying now. "No, you mustn't believe

him. He's lying. This isn't right. What you're doing isn't right. You're lying. She's dead."

The young guard had Deidre's water in his hand, but he walked over to the woman, held his arm out towards the queue. "I have to ask you to get back in line, ma'am. Leave this to us, we'll sort it out. Let's just all try to be calm, please."

"But he's lying. I'm telling you." Still, she allowed herself to be guided back to where her boy stood. He clutched at her legs and began to wail as she said, "I can't do this anymore, I can't do it. Better to be dead. I'd rather be dead."

Around her, people shuffled uneasily, moving away so that the boy and woman stood alone, each gulping and desperate while the guard pointed at them, "Now, listen, you'll have to be quiet, okay? I told you, we'll sort this out. You can't be like this, okay?"

Deidre waited, grew tired. "Hey," she called, "can I have my water now?"

He turned around, frowning, but smiled when he saw her, coming across with the bottle. "Sorry you had to see that," he said, raising his eyebrows and shaking his head. "It gets ugly like this sometimes, you know."

"Ja, people are shit."

He handed back her ID. "You know, you really do look great, like I'd never guess your age. You're like really sexy."