

The Need for These Things to Be Said

For Donald Woods

The baby grand, its mouth gaping, is robbed of children's practice books.
The police retreat with pens, pencils, and sheet music.
Donald Woods, leaning his elbow beside the keys,
faces the one-way night window.
Wendy, his wife, stands away from the glass, mimes
the daily inquest proceedings—fingers, leg irons, fists, police trucks.
Donald wipes a finger under his glasses,
nods.

For this editor, the Restricted Persons Act tapes his mouth shut,
fuses this writer's fingers with law.
Upstairs, his children fall into sleep, his wife reads.
Across the keyboard, from a childhood Christmas, his uncle
draws on a postcard the three movements of a sonata.
Woods stalls at the keys, a writer with no pens learning
Chopin with no books.

The bullet that entered the living room window last night, that hush
bullet wrapped in the scowl of the neighbours,
made a hole the size of a rand.
Now the wind-filled smells of cooking come in, and go out, in breaths
—a strange asset for the house-bound—a glass tracheotomy.
Donald loosens his tie, heels to the ground,
right foot brushing the sustain pedal.
He centers himself on the stool, back to the window
while they dare not shoot him.

Ninhydrin!
For lifting prints at crime scenes is lifting the skin from his five-year-old.
His child is sedated, but he is awake.
Writing is lifting ninhydrin from his hands and pressing the keys violet. He types:
“No fear can outweigh the need for these things to be said.”
The poisoned t-shirt is in the bag, but
not the one they're packing.

At New Year, the watchers go on the nod, the piano falls silent.
For this escape, each word is learned by heart.
The music has been called up and stored—
a deep breath for an underwater swim. A cassock, the editor's mantle.
Fireworks spark from the watchtower into the night and fizz.
The international audience sits, legs politely crossed at the ankles, waiting for
Woods to play freely
for Biko

MARGARET MCCARTHY