

## **EXTRACT**

### ***STILL LIFE BY ZOË WICOMB***

Sir Nicholas Greene is sick of life, sick as a parrot, he says, and this is not rhetorical; he is also sick of rhetoric. And strangely, he must admit, sick of himself, this self, derivative as it may sound. And yet, if many selves are available to us as they say these days, would that not court disaster? Is there not the danger of a pile of selves, like plates toppling down, smashing into each other, and where would that leave one?

Life, life, life, he sighs audibly, stretching out on the worn chaise longue that creaks under his weight.

He had hoped for a new lease of life from the Pringle project, a rejuvenation of sorts, or at least a change of scene, but he can muster no enthusiasm for it. Well, if the truth be told, he had hoped for reinstatement as a man of letters, a poet, a contributor to culture. He had thought of the foray into colonial culture, even an actual journey to the barbarian fields of Africa if that were unavoidable, as a widening of the immensely long tunnel in which he had been travelling for hundreds of years, a pouring in of light. (He no longer knows whose words those are, does not know why he hears an echo of goatbells, or sees the ghost of a faithless girl in Russian trousers floating by.) He gropes for words, tries to snatch at an image of so many plates – piled are they on a waiter's hand? – he doesn't know; he's been cast adrift. And the old self won't do, is hopelessly inadequate in this new world. Why has he allowed himself to be lured into this? Life has gone on for so very, very long, he all but blubbers.

Trouble is, he simply cannot get the hang of Mary and Hinza, subjects or collaborators; there appears to be no telling. He has lost the knack of sliding effortlessly through time, through history; he cannot comfortably adjust to the twenty-first century. The know-all Hinza says it's a problem of translation, that an excess of sixteenth-century aura clings to him. Well, so be it, he sighs wearily; at least the memory of those halcyon days – of discovery, of Empire, and of England bright and great – could be buoyed up by the tenacious aura of the past. But no, he must prepare to acknowledge defeat. Oh, how he longs to lie down in a hidden nook of this green and pleasant land – somewhere far away from the new, unfathomable London teeming with all sorts – on a mossy bank beneath a great oak tree, and hear in the distance the sound of the twelfth stroke of midnight.

Sir Nicholas has had enough of this fraught world. How could he have known

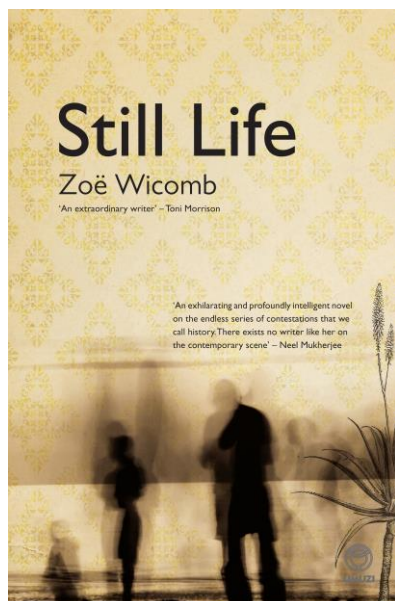
what a minefield he was entering: explosions all about him, kabaah! kabaah! – and he takes his head in his hands for protection, as if another kabaah! were readying itself for attack – with no indication of where terrains of safety might lie. Did Pringle have any idea, could he have foreseen what so-called humanitarian beliefs would unleash in the world? Which one of his selves could have anticipated such a bouleversement? He cannot help feeling that the old adage of give them a pinkie and they'll grab the whole hand holds as true as ever. It is one thing, he concedes, for everyone to be liberated from slavery or serfdom, no decent human being could argue against that, but quite another for people to take liberties, to go on and on about their rights, to go about sniffing out discrimination and tracing inequalities, to demand and demand. Were these native people born without a sense of humour? Above all, where is their gratitude? Here they are in the great city of London and not a sign of appreciation, let alone counting their blessings. And how the deuce can he raise these concerns with his close associates, Mary and Hinza, who themselves appear to have little by way of humour or gratitude? Or rather, their gratitude is misdirected towards Pringle. No wonder he's made little progress with the man's story.

Well, he has had enough of this fraught life, this tiptoeing through minefields. This twenty-first century is more troublesome than all his long life wrapped up together. He has failed to make advantageous connections with men of note; people take a wide berth, as if he is somehow contaminated; the descendants of his old associates are not prepared to receive him. They behave as if he is a ghost, or deranged, so that Mary and Hinza turn out to be all he has. He is sick of it, of the globe spinning so dizzily, throwing everything anyone has held sacred off kilter, up in the air. Never before have both the past and the future seemed so out of reach; he cannot escape the clutches of a bullying present, the sense of having to walk on eggshells. And he is sick of being reprimanded, of being brought to order when he has something humorous to say about all the strange people in London, especially the females.

No one would want to curb your freedom to speak your mind, said Hinza, and it would be pointless to object to your holding unpleasant views, but such freedom has to be measured against civility, the code of politeness that ought to govern the ways in which people relate to one another. Do you and your kind not insist that civility is a timeless aristocratic value? There is nothing new or arcane about contemporary manners.

For all Hinza's misguided notions, he has grown a little fond of the boy. Perhaps he should fight inertia, embrace adventure, and go with Hinza to Africa after all. There is nothing for him in London, and he has a terrible fear that the young man will not return, which is to say leave him to the mercy of that scold, Mary.

Nicholas knows that the rot set in after he had gone to see Mary's plaque in Bloomsbury. What, he wonders, would the bohemian Group have made of it? Mary Prince, Abolitionist and Author! Pah! And that when the wench had not actually written a single word herself. As if any fool can't talk and parrot the views of their betters, which is exactly what the great Scottish philosopher David Hume pointed out about black people's so-called learning. That plaque was the last straw. Nicholas could not have imagined how it would stick in his craw, how it would reveal to him that his efforts with the Pringle history are unlikely to make the grade, not in this world where the actual fine art and hard work of writing are not appreciated. There clearly won't be room for belle lettres if every sad person will rattle off her story. Not that he doesn't believe Mary's tales about slave owners, no doubt the upstarts in the colonies had no idea how to comport themselves, but he does have doubts about the suitability of such grotesque material in print. He for one would not read such accounts, although he does admire Mary's spirit, her determination to throw off that yoke. And a fine cook she is too.



**STILL LIFE**  
Zoë Wicomb

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